

Assignment 1 – LGBTQ Struggles and Equality in the United States

I tuned in for a morning of Sunday jazz on NPR but instead I heard a discussion about a school district's decision in Maryland to deny parents the right to opt out of LGBTQ+-related book readings to young children. I was fascinated not only by the interesting debate but because it is a real-life situation on this week's topic of discussion. What I thought was a "no-brainer" issue and which is why the school district probably felt strongly it was mandatory with no option to choose otherwise, turned out to have interesting points on both sides of the issue. Or did the school district just fail to see how some people might look at the situation differently? On the surface, LGBTQ+ acceptance is becoming more and more integrated in education and awareness of LGBTQ lifestyles fits well from a perspective of diversity & inclusion for all sexual orientations. However, this liberal view may not be shared by parents with deep religious faiths or traditional values. Do they not have the opportunity to opt out, just as people should have the opportunity to not sing the Star-Spangled Banner, excuse themselves from saying "Under God" in the pledge of allegiance, or choose not to participate in a prayer after a football game?

The school district in question is in Montgomery County, Maryland (a bellweather blue state). It is considered one of the most diverse and religiously diverse counties in the country (S. Ventre. 2024)! They pride themselves in diversity and welcoming people of different backgrounds. So, imagine such a diverse population questioning whether it is religiously ethical to have books with LGBTQ characters. Apparently, for some it is in violation of their faith. Or is the benefit to be gained that of respect and tolerance for other lifestyles and thereby developing the children to be more culturally diverse? In addition, one parent said it was too "heavy" for her child. If so, at what age is it appropriate to introduce such themes and how should they be portrayed with the goal of fostering understanding and respect?

My takeaways and learning moments come from these five questions:

1. What percent of students in the classroom represent the LGBTQ community? Multiple sources point to a CDC report stating that over 25% of students identify as LGBTQ+. 12% have attempted suicide and 39% have considered it. Nearly half have experienced bullying (thetrevorproject.org. 2024).
2. How do different religions view homosexuality? A study done in 2015 shows that different religions around the world differ widely in terms of accepting homosexuality as a way of life in society. U.S. Catholics are generally more accepting of homosexuality except for Traditional Catholics and Catholics differ between different denominations. Nearly all Unitarians, Buddhists, and Jews are accepting while Evangelicals and most black denominations were the least

accepting. Clearly, there is a wide variation of how religious groups view homosexuality (religionnews.com. 2015).

3. At what age is it appropriate to introduce homosexual content in the classroom? A bill was passed in 2022 prohibiting instruction concerning sexuality or gender from grades K-3 and “any instruction on LGBTQ issues” in a way that is not appropriate for the child’s age or development. The bill is ambiguous with regard to higher grade levels. This ambiguity could have been the reason for the debate in Maryland. The controversy is between a belief that LGBTQ themes bring on discussions about sex instead of acceptance about others who are different and inclusivity. There doesn’t seem to be clear cut rules but how LGBTQ ideas are introduced clearly vary depending on the age group (Singer. 2022).
4. How do school districts make decisions? At least in Washington State, citizens elect their school board. The Board conducts strategic planning, hires the Superintendent, and creates policy. Board members basically serve four-year terms and represent “the interests of students in the whole district (Washington State Governor’s Office on the Ombuds. 2017). Therefore, there is no assurance that the school board fairly represents diversity religious groups or that it mirrors the diversity makeup of its student bodies or population.
5. How does the Supreme Court impact LGBTQ policies? The Supreme Court is politically leaned to the right. There are six justices affiliated with conservative views and three are considered liberal (Bonventre, Vincent. 2023.). Now, I see the ramifications of the political tendencies of the judges at the highest level of law. It remains to be seen how the Supreme Court will reinstate an opt-out policy for parents.

Honestly, I was quite surprised to learn about the percentage of students who identify at LGBTQ+. In today’s reality, we are faced with a changing ethnic makeup of our student population. Gender identity is just another dimension. We must be transparent, welcoming, and understanding. At the same time, I think we have to be open, respectful, and receptive to different viewpoints and change. As mentioned in previous discussions, we have to educate ourselves about our students.

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