

Saraswati Vadnais

Portfolio

Writing Sample 1: Excerpt from case study on the integration of LGBT history into the high school classroom.

The FAIR Act: What are students' rights to LGBT representation in the classroom?

Topics centering LGBT people in the public school curriculum are not yet nationally standardized or studied as a key aspect of multicultural education. Currently, only four states have bills requiring the teaching of LGBT history—California, Colorado, New Jersey and Illinois—and six states have laws that explicitly prohibit the promotion of LGBT people or topics. These laws, often colloquially known as “no promo homo” laws, either completely prevent teachers from approaching subjects of LGBT people or require teachers to present them in a negative or inaccurate manner (GLSEN, 2018). Inaccurate teaching and lack of proper LGBT representation can lead students who identify as queer to feel out of place and uncomfortable in the classroom. A lesson plan from LGBTQhistory.org, entitled “The FAIR Act: What are students' rights to LGBT representation in the classroom?”, attempts to combat this issue by having students directly examine the 2011 FAIR Education Act passed in California (SB 48), which requires public schools to teach LGBT history, as well as the history of disabled people, in the social sciences. It additionally prohibits educators from using materials that inaccurately portray LGBT Americans and people with disabilities. This case study applies James A. Banks' framework for multicultural education to examine the extent to which the lesson plan fulfills its goal of providing students with the language and historical context necessary to communicate their rights both in the classroom and in the lawmaking process.

The lesson plan in question, aimed toward 11th or 12th grade students, was created by Eunice Ho of the organization Out for Safe Schools. During the class sessions, students take on multiple activities encouraging them to reflect on their personal identities before turning their attention to the bill itself. First, students free write for five minutes in response to a Junot Diaz quote about feeling like an outsider, a “monster”, in a society that does not reflect his own identity. The students then share their responses in pairs. There is then a gallery-style discussion, in which students walk around to different places in the classroom to talk about their relationship

with specific identities such as sexuality, socio-economic status, faith, or disability. After this period of discussion centered on the self, the students perform a close-reading and group annotation of the original legislature. Finally, the students are shown two videos, an interview with concerned parents about the potential negative impacts of the FAIR Act, specifically the section on LGBT content integration, and an excerpt of youth advocating for LGBT history in schools during the 2011 Senate Judiciary hearing. The students discuss these videos through a framework of critical media literacy, examining the perspectives and biases present in the videos. [...]

The “FAIR Act” lesson plan makes a distinct effort to openly tackle topics of identity and sexuality in the classroom, with an emphasis on speaking openly with other students about the way one sees oneself in the surrounding society. Many activities on topics of LGBTQ schooling, discrimination, sexual orientation, race and other identities, precede the bulk of the lesson, which focuses on the FAIR Act. This encourages an open and welcoming classroom environment in which students may feel more comfortable sharing their experiences in the context of the lesson. In her work *Sexuality in School: The Limits of Education* (2014), author Jen Gilbert emphasizes that it is key to address sexuality in school as a central part of “inventing a self, making friends, and learning about the world” (p. 82), rather than focusing on avoiding controversy and curing homophobia through band-aid methods such as the creation of LGBT student groups. As Gilbert and other educators state, diversity clubs are not enough for schools purporting to embrace LGBT students, who often remain marginalized in the classroom (Gilbert, 2014; Fowler, 2017). Gilbert additionally frames LGBT teaching as a form of hospitality: recognizing the strangeness that might be present in the acknowledgment of gender identity or sexuality but welcoming it nonetheless, as it can manifest itself in many different and unexpected areas of the curriculum (p. 85). In order to truly create room for the LGBT community in school, those topics not only must be integrated into the curriculum but must also be welcomed when they appear in unplanned contexts. The teacher’s response therefore becomes especially important—it is key not to shy away from those discussions, or to avoid terminology such as “gay” or “lesbian” when speaking with a student who brings up such subjects. The “FAIR Act” lesson plan encourages these conversations within the classroom and prepares both the students and the teacher for discussions of those topics when they arise.

Writing Sample 2: Excerpt from analytical essay exploring the use of language and dialect in the short stories "Invierno" (2012), by Junot Diaz, and "The Lesson" (1972), by Toni Cade Bambara.

Language in Constructing the City

In Junot Diaz's "Invierno" (2012) and Toni Cade Bambara's "The Lesson" (1972), the authors engage the perspective of the child learner to explore issues of marginalization, particularly in terms of language. As Mami turns on the TV to have her sons learn English, as Yunior and Rafa teach themselves to communicate with their neighbors, and as Miss Moore instructs the neighborhood children about class differences in New York City, the children in these stories learn to become equipped to shift between the linguistically-bounded worlds of the margins and the mainstream. In his writing, Díaz engages a retrospective point of view in which the adult is speaking through his child self. This allows for more deliberate play with language and code-switching, reflecting not only the narrator's identity as a Spanish-speaking Latino immigrant, but also eventually as an Anglophone who remains in touch with his mother tongue and his origins. Bambara, however, uses the present tense, engaging in a narration that grapples with the question of whether or not to code switch, and presenting a protagonist who actively resists abandoning her own way of expressing herself. Díaz and Bambara engage the first-person perspective of the child to illustrate the personal conflicts inherent in learning linguistic codes at a young age, and the protagonists' respective relationships with the city's cultures of power.

In "The Lesson", Bambara engages two major linguistic codes in her construction of New York City life—African American English (AAE, also called African American Vernacular English or AAVE) and Standard American English (SAE). The relationship between these two dialects is one that reflects a legacy of colonization and dehumanization of African Americans, and, according to Katy Wright, "the years of 'postcolonial denigration and stigmatization' of AAE following the abolition of slavery in the 1860s entrenched the dialect in a swamp of social prejudice and politically motivated rejection" (74). Wright continues to detail the way in which African American scholars and writers who have wanted to reach a mainstream American audience have chosen to write using SAE, "despite the perpetuation of historical power structures through such consent" (74). Bambara, however, makes the conscious decision to

narrate her short stories using AAE, incorporating “informal and AAE pronunciations” into her writing to replicate the speech style of her protagonist and thereby rejecting the oppressive power structure imposed by and implied in the use of SAE by speakers of AAE. “The Lesson” therefore becomes a particularly interesting case in which the tension between the usage of AAE and SAE are directly treated as a topic in the story itself, with the narrator and protagonist Sylvia deliberately resisting the use of the same sort of “proper speech” as Miss Moore (87) and resisting notions of hierarchy and power in spoken language. [...]

Language in Junot Díaz’s “Invierno” serves a similar purpose as in “The Lesson”, delineating the margins of the city from the mainstream, this time through the use of Spanish and English in both the story’s dialogue and narration. The use of Spanish emphasizes Yunió’s family’s status as immigrants in the city as well as their marginalization caused by their lack of fluency in English. Like in the relationship between AAE and SAE, the conscious use of Spanish by Díaz in his writing denotes a pushback against the prescribed expectation that American writing and expression must be in English—despite the United States never having had an official language, and “the Hispanic community being the largest minority in the U.S. and with projections of growth at a fast rate” (Arrieta 110). In an interview with Diógenes Céspedes and Silvio Torres-Saillant, Junot Díaz states that when he “learned English in the States, this was a violent enterprise. And by forcing Spanish back into English, forcing it to deal with the language it tried to exterminate in me, I’ve tried to represent a mirror-image of that violence on the page” (904). His seamless integration of Spanish words into his text, without italics or translations, therefore engages a sense of ownership over the linguistic heritage of Latinos, and exacts a sort of “revenge” upon the impositions of English on immigrant families.