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### **The Importance of LGBTQ+ Education in Elementary Schools**

Elementary school is a pivotal time in childhood development, where children are socialized while finding self-identity and seeking belonging. Elementary school is the first time children begin developing an understanding of themselves and the world around them. As children form complex peer relationships, inclusion, acceptance, and awareness of different identities are essential. Thus, LGBTQ+ inclusive education needs to be implemented across elementary schools to foster inclusion and a sense of community for LGBTQ+ youth while validating their identities. An inclusive curriculum is vital for the health, safety, and overall well-being of LGBTQ+ children. Comprehensive LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculums include books and projects and training educators on how to use gender-inclusive language and address homophobic behavior effectively.

The current lack of adequate LGBTQ+ education in elementary schools has had grave implications on LGBTQ+ youth, including the perpetuation of bullying and harassment. LGBTQ+ youth are nearly twice as likely to be called names, verbally harassed, or physically assaulted at school than their non-LGBTQ+ peers (“Bullying: LGBT Youth”). Furthermore, LGBTQ+ youth face higher risks of depression, suicidality, substance abuse, and self-harm than non-LGBTQ+ counterparts. LGBTQ+ students who reported facing frequent harassment had also missed more school and had lower grade point averages than those who had not reported facing harassment.

LGBTQ+ inclusion and visibility need to be incorporated in elementary schools to foster long-lasting acceptance and respect for others. Furthermore, LGBTQ+ inclusive education is imperative in protecting queer youth. An essential part of this education includes LGBTQ+ children's literature in classroom libraries to represent diverse people and identities. There are many age-appropriate books that could be used to foster acceptance and inclusion of the LGBTQ+ community in elementary schools. Some books include "I am Jazz", "Julián is a Mermaid", and "In Our Mothers' House". "I am Jazz" is an autobiographical picture book highlighting the story of a transgender girl based on the real-life experiences of activist Jazz Jennings. This story explains what it's like to be transgender in a straightforward yet transformative way. "Julián is a Mermaid" focuses on breaking gender stereotypes while increasing representation of the Afro-Latinx community. In this book, a young boy named Julián loves mermaids and dreams of becoming one. He decides to dress himself up as a mermaid in a beautiful portrayal of breaking gender stereotypes while receiving love and acceptance from his grandmother. Lastly, the story of "In Our Mothers' House" celebrates a diverse family with two mothers and their wonderful adopted children (France 2019).

Another way to foster inclusivity of LGBTQ+ youth in elementary education is by rethinking practices that reinforce the gender dichotomy. An example of this could be starting the day off with "Good Morning Everyone!" instead of "Good Morning Boys and Girls" to stop reinforcing the gender binary. In addition, it is essential to avoid using gender to separate students into lines, teams, groups, and seating arrangements. It is also crucial to address any behavior that intentionally or unintentionally offends LGBTQ+ youth. This is critical in teaching children the implications of their harmful actions while preventing future incidences. In elementary schools, the phrase "that's so gay" is frequently repeated and is detrimental because it

uses "gay" as an insult. Educators need to have an informative discussion with students about hurtful words and phrases such as these.

Schools could further foster inclusivity by inviting families into conversations about the importance of LGBTQ+ visibility and acceptance. This allows schools to communicate to families how they can best support their children and foster a safe environment.

Over eighteen elementary schools have implemented a comprehensive, LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum curated from the Welcoming Schools Program. This curriculum includes professional development training and suggested books and activities to foster LGBTQ+ and gender-inclusive classrooms. These programs have been successful in instilling safe and affirming spaces for LGBTQ+ youth. The Welcoming Schools Organization awarded a Seal of Excellence to three elementary schools in the Boston Public School District for their outstanding work and dedication to “creating and sustaining welcoming and inclusive environments” (“Boston School Earns Welcoming Schools Seal of Excellence,” 2019). This includes the John F. Kennedy School, Gardner Pilot School, and Curtis Guild Elementary School. More elementary schools around the nation need to adopt LGBTQ+ inclusive programs to best support queer youth.

## Works Cited

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