

## Teaching Tough Topics

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## Book Review/Recension d'ouvrage

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### **Teaching Tough Topics**

by Larry Swartz, Pembroke Publishers, 2020, \$28.95 (paperback)  
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Swartz's *Teaching Tough Topics* addresses teaching 'sensitive' topics that span across different marginalized populations such as students with diverse gender and sexuality. It is important to differentiate the term 'sensitive' as the topics themselves are not 'sensitive' as *Teaching Tough Topics* presents topics that are crucial to promote an inclusive and safe classroom for all students. For example, LGBTQ topics are effective to teach students diversity in the world and promote basic human rights and good citizenship (Hermann-Wilmarth & Ryan, 2019). The term 'sensitive', then, is associated with sensitive people who are resistant to broadening their existing beliefs with topics that are necessary to understand the diversity in the world (Forrest, 2008; Hermann-Wilmarth & Ryan, 2019). As a teacher educator who teaches inclusive classroom management, I have encountered teachers who find it difficult to manage their classrooms in an inclusive manner for their LGBTQ+ students. This book, accordingly, presents itself as a concrete, evidence-based resource for both teachers and teacher educators to tackle ways to open up the topic of homo/bi/transphobia in classrooms.

Given that one of the common issues with teaching tough topics is a lack of theory translated into action (Taylor et al., 2015), this book is a key resource that incorporates not only theory but also in-depth examples and model lessons that can serve as a concrete guide for teachers. The chapters are structured to clearly address each 'sensitive' topic by

first providing the underlying theoretical importance of each topic. Then, each chapter bridges the theory with evidence-based practices and activities to visualize how to incorporate the ‘sensitive’ topic into classroom lessons and discussions. Examples include worksheets on appropriate language (e.g. matching definitions on the language of sexuality and gender identity [homophobia, androgynous]), critical thinking lessons (e.g. understanding and facing homophobic behavior), and model lessons incorporating a diverse number of LGBTQ books for each topic.

The parts of the book that address gender identity and homophobia are crucial for teachers who aim to foster an inclusive classroom climate for all students. It is well documented that LGBTQ students and students with LGBTQ families face many negative outcomes (e.g. anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, truancy, helplessness) in school due to incidents of gender-based and homophobic bullying (Ancheta et al., 2020; Goldstein, 2021; Hatchel et al., 2019; Watson & Russell, 2015). According to students, they perceive that teachers purposefully ignore gender-based bullying and homophobic incidents (Snapp et al., 2015). Similarly, teachers report their lack of intervention attributed to their lack of LGBTQ knowledge and comfort towards discussing LGBTQ topics in their classroom (Taylor et al., 2015). However, research has shown that incorporating LGBTQ topics in classrooms have been effective to foster an inclusive classroom climate for not only LGBTQ students but also heterosexual students, minimizing the aforementioned negative outcomes (Snapp et al., 2015). Swartz’s approach to addressing gender identity and homophobia is a critical resource to open the discussion for teachers to understand its importance and model ways to incorporate LGBTQ topics in their classroom.

Swartz describes a situation that concretely highlights the power of literature to open up discussion around LGBTQ topics such as gender scripts and clothing. In the example, a picture book, *Morris Micklewhite and the Tangerine Dress*, shows Morris being verbally harassed for wearing a dress. What is exceptional in this example are the responses from nine-year-old students to whom the book was being read: “I don’t know why the kids were so mean to Morris...they probably don’t know why the dress was so important to him...I am afraid of what might happen to Morris when he gets older...where was the teacher in the story...maybe she was just watching Morris to see if he could solve problems on his own (p. 116).” The example highlights how LGBTQ literature can be an opening to critical discussions that are authentic and relevant in current society. As Setterington (cited in Swartz, p. 117) suggests, using picture books and literature as a jumping off point

can provide students with an opportunity to see through other perspectives besides their own, a concept known as *mirror and window*. This concept, defined by Bishops (1990), describes students' opportunities to see themselves reflected in the literature (mirror) and for other students to expand their understanding of other perspectives (window). "Books dealing with gender identity will help girls and boys who are questioning their own identities navigate their journey (Settingington, cited in Swartz, p.117)." LGBTQ picture books and literature can present themselves as opportunities for LGBTQ students to see themselves in literature and allow them to see ways of understanding their LGBTQ identity experiences (Blackburn & Miller, 2017). It has been shown that incorporating LGBTQ literature has significantly reduced homophobia and fostered an inclusive space to discuss diverse genders and sexualities, a topic that is increasingly common in society where there are increasing number of students identifying as LGBTQ or students with LGBTQ families (Blackburn & Miller, 2017; Goldstein, 2021).

Lastly, beyond using LGBTQ literature to promote an inclusive classroom climate for both non-LGBTQ and LGBTQ students, the diverse literature resources the author presents touch upon *Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) skills*, an overarching aspect of inclusive education that benefits all students. Social-emotional learning (Jagers et al., 2019) is the process whereby individuals develop the knowledge and skills to manage their emotions, show empathy, maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions. While teachers understand the importance of SEL skills and would like to incorporate them into their lessons, they frequently report not feeling competent or comfortable to address these topics due in part to the potential backlash (Taylor et al., 2015). The authors mention the need to provide support for teachers from teacher organizations, legislation and policies, colleagues, and school administration to feel safe and supported to address these topics in their classrooms (Taylor et al., 2015). Most importantly, 59% and 64% of teachers reported the lack of preparation to address sexual diversity and gender diversity topics respectfully (Taylor et al., 2015). 74% of teachers reported not receiving formal instruction on ways to approach LGBTQ topics in their classrooms (Taylor et al., 2015), further reinforcing the need for *Teaching Tough Topics* as an evidence-based resource to provide concrete ideas for teachers to implement in their classroom. *Teaching Tough Topics* provides actionable solutions for teachers to overcome the knowledge and comfort barrier, to better understand how to incorporate a LGBTQ curriculum and how this is beneficial for all students to foster an inclusive classroom climate and improve SEL skills.

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