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Clint D. Whitten

Virginia Tech, cdw615@vt.edu

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Eating the Earth: The Poetic 'Coming Out' Journey of One Middle School Teacher

Author Biography

Clint Whitten is a first-year Doc student at Virginia Tech in the Foundations of Education program. His research interest includes the intersections of Queerness and rurality in schools. He taught English and Creative Writing for three years and Theatre Arts for one year at the middle school level.

Keywords

Queer, representation, coming out, middle school, identity

Before I came out as an openly gay man, I would hand select novels to fill my classroom bookshelves because I wanted to represent marginalized voices. I would carefully select short stories, poems, and folktales that celebrated the human condition while exposing my students to the inequalities historically marginalized folks encountered every day. We discussed power balances, biases, microaggressions, and privilege as we learned about figurative language, plot structure, and characterization. I shared with them how some systems were never made to help certain people. For example, Black students being disciplined at disproportionate rates, whitewashed curriculums, or transgendered student being forced to go by their dead name. At the same time, I silently battled with my own sexuality.

After two years of discussing identity and being who you are (that ever-popular middle school theme) I learned, from my students, that I need to be authentically myself. What I soon learned by being an openly Queer educator wearing shirts that say, “Love Wins,” was sometimes that was exactly what my students needed to see. Representation is more than just books on a shelf; it was me existing in heteronormative spaces and still choosing to love who I want to love regardless of my colleagues’ opinions or school policies. I recognize that my whiteness and ability to ‘present straight’ grant me privileges that other marginalized groups might not have. These privileges allowed me to share with my students the celebrations and struggles of Queerness. Whether that be allowing Drag Queens to teach us about makeup or students simply not assuming I have a wife just because I identify as male. The systemic heteronormative power that schools possess and replicate hindered my ability to love myself sooner in life. By being my authentic self, many students found acceptance and comfort in my classroom. Books, curriculum, posters on the wall, and policies all matter to schooling experiences; however,

representation is also who the teacher is in the classroom. Schools must be places that protect both teachers and students living their authentic lives to create a culture of love and acceptance.

Here, I share a series of poems that navigate my own experiences of coming out while teaching middle school students.

Each year students viewed,
“A Place at the Table”
by Teaching Tolerance
to help them see the boa constrictor
that suffocates the dreams of
oppressed humans in America.

at one point in the video,
a gay youth states:
“I am a white Christian male middle class American,
why on Earth would I ever choose to put myself
in a minority group.”

For the first two years, I sat
viewing from a closet
listening to the demonic voices
from my own schooling experience:

*The locker room echoing
“you’re just gay”*

*the evergreen suicidal thought
of being outed*

*asking a friend to
fake date me in the 7th grade*

Until one day, I listened to
my students more than the voices:

*Imagine never being able
to love who you want to love.*

That year I came out.

My students gently saved me
while drinking strawberry milk

eating chicken legs
and playing *Fortnite*.
---7th Graders broke my universe

a teacher told me,
“You shouldn’t teach
that short story with the two
boys kissing”
my first semester in the classroom.

a colleague said,
“I love you but
I just don’t support your lifestyle”

a student said,
“I didn’t know he was gay,”
and walked out the room

one girl inquired if I had a girlfriend
then quickly stopped herself and said,
“Oh well I guess maybe a boyfriend?”
---reconsideration

Dear grandma,

Seventh grade English,
room 7C-6, was my home
for three years.

a girl ate a munched on Doritos
while I lectured on society’s
idea of “norms.”
a boy threw pink milk
at my bookshelf, walked out,
then returned to clean it.

a few came out,
a few needed a side hug,
a few liked the music I played,
a few just felt “comfortable.”

Many just needed me to love them.

When the neighboring teacher said,
“it just really goes against my religious beliefs”

I sprinted to teach theatre
while keeping creative writing.

I visited the counseling department daily
because students felt they could clip
the toenails of trauma in my classroom.

Overarching themes:

Whose voice is missing?

How is power leveraged by different people?

How do we learn about the human condition from minority groups?

What systems of oppression influence our characters?

How do we celebrate the human lived experience?

The Black Social Awareness club,
Youth Coalition for Peace and Justice,
and Project LIT taught me
kids will change the future.

My faculty book clubs
reminded me that many adults
have not drunk Grey Goose
with Toni Morrison.

and when a teacher said,
“Clint’s just on that liberal agenda again.”
I laughed and said,
“Yes, ma’am”
as I wore a shirt that said,
“Black Lives Matter
Love Wins
No Human is Illegal...”

Grandma,
education wasn’t made
for everyone.

Love ya,
---*the apple of your eye*

Nowadays,

Drag Queens taught my students
contour and highlighting

Patrick Roche reads his
poetry to the class.

Jacqueline Woodson reminds the kids that
society placed extra weight on some identities

we share pronouns

books on Queerness are displayed
for independent readings

we attend school board meetings
to speak out on harmful trans policy

while I walk around with a
rainbow shirt that says “Love Wins”
while students say,
“Mr. W, I want that shirt”

refusing to deem Queerness
as controversial
---representation

“I love all my students but”
didn’t taste right.

The sourness made
my stomach sink into
my big toe.

Something was out of date
spoiled

I didn’t want my students
to check out early with an
upset stomach.

I finished the dish
brought her a cursive handwritten
recipe from my grandma because
the first ingredient was always

Love.
---no buts

Someone told me
“Schools are a petri dish”
and I better work on my immune system.

adults projected fears were growing
rapidly and creating a pandemic.
---my interpretation

my soul nearly jumped to all seven continents
because boundaries are social constructs.

a teacher said, “You can’t go there.”
there are oceans in the way
and “you can’t swim.”

so I walked on the bottom.
you get used to drowning
when you haven’t found your place.

and when the Earth crumbled a little bit
into the universe

I said, “now we build our own world”
as I ate the Earth’s core
the cherry on top.
---Dismantle