A Queer Approach to Addressing Gender and Sexuality through Literature Discussions with Second Graders

Utilizing queer theory, this study examines the promises and challenges of addressing gender and sexual identities through literature discussions with second graders.

During a read-aloud discussion on a cold winter afternoon, the second graders in my after-school group were settled on the rug in their usual read-aloud spots. As we discussed the first few pages of our book, several students began to move from their seated positions to their knees, their hands waving as if the one whose hand reached closest to the teacher would get called on first. It was clear the children had much to say about the book we were reading.

Under discussion that day was King and King (de Haan & Nijland, 2002), a picturebook that tells the story of a prince who, after realizing there are no princesses he would like to marry, falls in love and marries another prince. At the point in the story when the reader first learns that the prince actually marries another man, the following discussion ensued:

[February 18, 2015]

Mr. Hartman: Well, let’s read . . . “The wedding was very special. The queen even shed a tear or two.” So, you’re right, they did get married.

Tariq: <screaming, as if shocked> Ah!

Myra: Yea, but it shows two boys . . .

Donald: There is a husband marrying a husband?

Mr. Hartman: Yes, look. That’s what we just read.

Sara: Ah! Oh no!

Tariq: Is it allowed to marry a man? Like a man to marry a man?

Myra: That is illegal!

Mr. Hartman: You can do that in our state. It is not illegal.

Javon: Yea, because my friend’s mom. My friend’s mom, like, married another woman.

Myra: Um, when you marry another man, does it mean that . . . like a man can marry another man, or another woman can marry another woman? Can you marry another man or another woman in our city?

Mr. Hartman: Yes, you can.

Apart from Tariq’s interjection, the discussion was seemingly benign, and it was clear the children were trying to make sense of the marriage between two male characters. Even after the first point of clarification, Myra rephrased her question to make
Paul Hartman | A QUEER APPROACH TO ADDRESSING GENDER AND SEXUALITY

1. What happens in literature discussion groups when children respond to representations of gender and sexuality?

2. How do children reinforce or challenge gender norms and heteronormativity in discussions of LGBTQ texts or texts that encourage a discussion of gender norms?

First, I will explain the impact of anti-LGBTQ bias in schools and the need to address gender and sexuality in schools. I will then discuss related literature and explain how the findings from these studies help to form the theoretical underpinnings of this project. Then I will explain the framing of this project, introduce the participants, and describe the data collection and analysis processes. Finally, I will discuss the findings of this project and offer a discussion of them.

Addressing Sexual Identity in Elementary Schools

Anti-LGBTQ Bias in Schools

The need to include and to affirm LGBTQ identities in elementary classrooms is pressing. A significant amount of research has shown how anti-LGBTQ bias negatively impacts LGBTQ students in schools, correlating with lower attendance rates, lower grade-point averages, and strong links to depression, substance abuse, and suicidal thoughts (Kosciw, Greytak, Giga, Villenas, & Danischewski, 2016). Additionally, a 2012 Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network (GLSEN & Harris, 2012) school climate survey found 56% of students who do not conform to traditional gender norms in grades 3–6 are regularly bullied in school.

Though these statistics point to the dire need to address such realities, discussion of gender and sexuality is usually absent in elementary schools. The absence of this “discourse of desire” (Fine & McClelland, 2006)—the discourse that provides crucial knowledges and understandings regarding gender and sexuality—acts in powerful ways. The exclusion of LGBTQ identities in elementary classrooms sends the message that these identities do not exist or that they are wrong or strange.

Hermann-Wilmarth and Ryan (2015) suggest three approaches to introducing LGBTQ topics in language arts classrooms. Two of their suggestions are to include/contextualize LGBTQ texts in literacy classrooms and to read “straight” books through a queer lens. I took up their suggestions and documented the results in this article. Specifically, I sought to answer the following research questions:

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Gender and Sexuality in Schools

One way to counteract the trends described above and to affirm and sustain nondominant expressions of gender and sexual identities is through the incorporation of literature discussions in classrooms. The bulk of such documented attempts have occurred in high school settings. Blackburn (2012), for example, documented the ways LGBTQ youth asserted their agency through the use of reading, both in and out of school. She also explored the ways non-LGBTQ-identified youth can act as allies and the ways youth can use literature as a tool for both activism and to combat homophobia.

Blackburn and Clark (2011) analyzed the talk of a group of adolescents and adults at an out-of-school LGBTQ youth center as they discussed queer-themed books. Their findings are particularly useful as they explored the complex relationship between texts, talk, and context. Given that their study took place in an explicitly named LGBTQ space, they explored how the discourse from their discussions combated homophobia and/or disrupted heteronormativity. They concluded that these discourses operate in complex and contradictory ways and that no single kind of discourse is wholly liberatory or oppressive.

There is, however, a large gap in understanding how gender and sexuality operate in primary and elementary school contexts. Dutro (2001) examined the gendered reading behaviors of fifth graders. In her study, she highlighted the ways children actively construct rigid borders related to gender and reading behaviors (i.e., boys should read stereotypical “boy” books) and called for classrooms to be spaces where children can easily cross and disrupt these constructed borders. Ryan, Patraw, and Bednar (2013) described how the inclusion of discussions of gender diversity could encourage elementary students to question restrictive social systems and to be more inclusive of gender diversity.

Blaise’s (2005) seminal work is also pertinent to this study. Her ethnography captured the ways kindergarteners actively constructed and reinforced gender norms through their talk and actions and how these norms are linked to discourses of heterosexuality. She highlighted the ways children who disrupted or deviated from these norms were marginalized and stigmatized within the classroom.

Developing a Queer Perspective

Queer theory is helpful in understanding how norms surrounding gender and sexuality are constructed, normalized, and perpetuated, and how they can be challenged and disrupted. Queer refers to an identifier and is “inclusive of any variety of experience that transcends what has been socially and politically accepted as normative categories for gender and sexual orientation” (Miller, 2015, p. 38). Queer also refers to the ways binary understanding of gender and sexual identities can be interrupted and interrogated.

To understand the power of gender norms, Connell (1987) described how the norms that dictate the most desirable ways to be a boy/man in a particular context and a girl/woman in a particular context cast individuals with expressions of gender who do not fit within this binary to the margins (e.g., feminine-acting men, masculine-acting women, and gender-creative and transgender individuals). Transgender may refer to someone who identifies with a gender other than the one they were assigned at birth, while some transgender and gender-creative individuals identify outside of the male/female binary. Transgender depends largely on historical and cultural context (Stryker, 2008).

Queer theorists, like Butler (1990), described the ways gender norms become linked to the dominant understandings of sexuality that undergird heteronormativity—the belief that masculine-acting men fall in love with feminine-acting women and vice versa—and that any arrangements that fall outside of these norms are also marginalized and viewed as wrong, strange, or lesser. The strong and continual linkage between dominant gender norms and heteronormativity is what reinforces a binary understanding of gender and sexuality and normalizes heterosexuality.

Heteronormativity can surface in many ways in the elementary classroom, from only reading books with heterosexual-headed families to the
double standard wherein straight teachers are free to openly discuss their spouses or partners with their students, while queer teachers may be disciplined or questioned because of similar disclosures. Dividing boys and girls into separate lines is another pervasive way in which binary understandings of gender are reinforced in schools. Queer theory is exciting and useful because it helps to expose this binary and unravel dominant and marginalizing understandings of gender and sexuality, revealing a multitude of possibilities for the expression of one’s gender and sexual identity.

Blaise and Taylor (2012) assert that a queer perspective can be cultivated by anyone and can help to begin the process of questioning the “assumption that there is any ‘normal’ expression of gender” (p. 88) and, therefore, sexuality. Miller (2015) offers a queer literacy framework that can be used across preK–12 school contexts. As a teacher, the development of a queer perspective and the use of a queer literacy framework helped me to understand how gender norms are directly linked to heteronormativity and how I might begin to engage my students in similar explorations.

Table 1. Focal texts: LGBTQ-themed books that encourage an exploration of gender norms

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<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>LGBTQ Representation?</th>
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<tr>
<td><em>King and King</em> (de Haan, L., &amp; Nijland, S., 2003)</td>
<td>Story of the marriage of two adult White male princes</td>
<td>Gay male identity, though not explicitly stated</td>
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<td><em>10,000 Dresses</em> (Ewert, M., 2008)</td>
<td>The White main character, Bailey, is of middle childhood age. She was assigned male gender at birth, but identifies as a girl. The story captures both the struggles and positive encounters she has with her family and community. The pronouns for Bailey shift from feminine to masculine through the story.</td>
<td>Transgender identity, though not explicitly stated</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>The Sissy Duckling</em> (Fierstein, H., 2005)</td>
<td>Main character, Elmer, is a boy duckling who faces struggles because of his stereotypical feminine expressions of gender.</td>
<td>No, though gender nonconformity (i.e., “sissy” identity) is a major theme.</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Elena’s Serenade</em> (Geeslin, C., 2004)</td>
<td>Main character, Elena, is a Mexican young girl who wants to partake in a male-dominated profession (glassblowing) and challenges gender norms to achieve this goal. The setting of the story is Mexico, and the story contains Spanish words.</td>
<td>No, though gender norms and stereotypes are major themes.</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Jacob’s New Dress</em> (Hoffman, S., &amp; Hoffman, I., 2014)</td>
<td>Main character, Jacob, is a White kindergarten boy who faces struggles as he follows through with his desire to wear a dress to school.</td>
<td>No, though gender norms and stereotypes are major themes.</td>
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I dispersed these 5 focal texts throughout the 15 weeks and read them respectively in sessions three, five, eight, ten, and twelve. I pre-read these texts several times, developed comprehension, analytic, and critical thinking questions, and anticipated moments I thought would engage children in discussion. During the read-alouds, I remained flexible and allowed the children’s comments and interactions to drive the discussion.

The Participants
I am a National Board Certified teacher and had been an elementary teacher for 12 years within a large, public, urban Midwestern school district at the time of the study. I am White and identify as a gay man. I have observed and experienced the overt ways some young children and adults are stigmatized and marginalized in schools because of their non-normative expressions of gender and/or (perceived) non-heterosexuality. I have also experienced the subtler nature of heteronormativity and how it silences and erases queer identities. This recognition has promoted my resolve to develop a pedagogy to work against the stigmatization, silencing, and marginalization of such identities.

The district where I taught did not allow teachers to conduct research in their own classrooms, so I created an after-school literacy club with a group of six second graders from my classroom. All students in my class were eligible to participate, and I selected the first three boys and three girls to get permission from their parents/guardians to participate. Once the six children were identified, I explained the nature of the study in more depth to participants and their parents/guardians. I then formally obtained parental permission and child assent using IRB-approved permission and assent forms.

Though I did not officially declare myself as gay to this group of students, there were moments when I talked about my male partner. I do not know whether or not students picked up on this, nor do I know the influence my gayness had on the children’s responses during the literature discussions. I do, however, recall moments in literature discussions when students made heterosexist, homophobic, and transphobic remarks. These moments were difficult and reminded me even more of the need to engage students in developing a nuanced and inclusive understanding of gender and sexual identities.

The children were either seven or eight years old during the study. Students in the school spoke over 50 languages, 91% of students qualified for free or reduced lunch, and 51% were classified as English Learners. None of the students in the study identified as LGBTQ, none had LGBTQ-identified parents, and none of the children expressed having LGBTQ-identified family members, though one child mentioned having a gay family friend. Refer to Table 2 for specific biographical information.

Data Collection and Analysis
The data came from the literature discussions of the five focal LGBTQ texts (texts with explicit LGBTQ characters or themes) or texts that encouraged fruitful discussions of gender norms as described above. These discussions were audio-recorded and transcribed. To answer my research questions, I paid careful attention to how the children talked about

<table>
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<th>Table 2. Child participants</th>
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<tr>
<td>Name</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sara</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tariq</td>
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<td>Myra</td>
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<td>Javon</td>
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<td>Aliya</td>
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<td>Donald</td>
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gender norms and how their talk reinforced, challenged, and/or disrupted heteronormativity.

The coding scheme is represented in Figure 1. The numbers on the left represent each round of analysis, while the boxes/circles on the right represent the categories into which the data were coded during each round of analysis. The arrows represent the ways the discourse categories relate to one another.

During my first round of analysis, I sorted comments into two categories: Rejections: Homophobic/Heterosexist Responses and Challenges (of Heteronormativity). Some comments in the second category originally seemed to be explicit challenges to heteronormativity. Upon further analysis, though, I noticed that other comments were neither explicit rejections of non-normative gender/sexuality, nor did they seem to completely challenge heteronormativity.

In the second round of analysis, data was reorganized and reanalyzed using first cycle methods (Saldaña, 2013) to better understand its nuances. Two new categories emerged: Reinforcing Gender Norms and Queer (Disruptions of Heteronormativity). Again, I noticed nuances within these categories and recognized the need for another round of analysis. In the third round of analysis, data was further divided into four categories. Emerging from the Reinforcing Gender Norms category were Policing Gender Norms and Anti-bully Discourse. Emerging from the Queer category were Interrogating Gender/Heteronormativity and Foregrounding Gender/Sexual Identity.

These separate rounds of analysis allowed me to more precisely understand the ways the children’s words reified, challenged, or disrupted heteronormativity. In the sections below, I provide examples from the data that represent the respective (sub)categories represented in Figure 1.

**Findings**

My findings begin with what I consider the most negative comments. I then move through the range of responses and end with comments that exemplify a nuanced and inclusive understanding of gender and sexual identity. The process of coding and representing data in this article is not meant to oversimplify the kinds of talk that surfaced in our discussions.
The data was complex and sometimes even contradictory. Indeed, in some vignettes, there are elements of talk from more than one of the categories.

Rejections: Homophobic/ Heterosexist Responses
At times, students explicitly rejected non-normative expressions of gender and sexual identities. These comments appeared to derive from transphobia, homophobia, and heterosexism. Not only were they difficult to hear, but as a teacher, I struggled with how best to address them. Though such moments are difficult, it is important for teachers to think through how they might handle them in their own classrooms.

One example of this is from our twelfth session when we discussed *Jacob’s New Dress* (Hoffman & Hoffman, 2014). The main character, Jacob, struggles with his desire to wear dresses and eventually builds enough courage to wear one to school. As he arrives to school in his dress, Jacob receives both support and disapproval from his peers. I asked the students to consider something like that happening in their own lives:

[April 29, 2015]
Mr. Hartman: What if this happened in your life and you saw a boy student who came to school in a dress? I want you to think about it.
Myra: I can’t imagine that happening.
Tariq: I would get a yardstick and whack his head off.
Students: <Laughing>

Myra cannot even imagine that this—a boy choosing to wear a dress—would be a real possibility. And it is clear that Tariq rejects the gender-creative expression of the main character, even suggesting that a boy who wears a dress to school should be physically harmed because of it.

The next vignette highlights the same book. While it shows a response that rejects non-normative expressions of gender, it also demonstrates how such a comment is challenged. At this point in the story, Jacob wears “girl” clothes during playtime in his kindergarten classroom. Some of Jacob’s classmates have a problem with his decision, so I asked the students to weigh in:

[April 29, 2015]
Tariq: Yea, well I disagree. Cuz I think it’s nasty. When a boy wants to act like a girl or a boy does act like a girl, I think it’s nasty.
Mr. Hartman: Nasty? Wow, that is a strong word. Wow. Does someone want to respond to that?
Aliya: I agree, because boys do not wear dresses.
Sara: In Hawaii boys wear a dress.
Javon: We not in Hawaii.

Sara: Well, I disagree with Tariq cuz anyone can be anything they want to be. Like he isn’t nasty, I think. Like nobody can tell them how to be. Like your teacher can’t tell you to be a boy and your mom can’t. Just . . . <pause> just be yourself.

In this excerpt, Tariq and Aliya explicitly reject Jacob’s choice to wear a dress. Sara offers an alternative to their responses and expresses a more expansive understanding of gender expression.

Challenges (of Heteronormativity)
In the first round of analysis, comments that were not rejections were placed in this category. Some of them clearly challenged heteronormativity, while others needed to be more closely examined, which I explore below.

Reinforcing Gender Norms
On the surface, the statements in this category seemed to call for a more expansive understanding of gender and sexuality. However, upon closer examination, they were firmly rooted in heteronormative thinking. The two subcategories that emerged during the third round of analysis—Policing Gender Norms and Anti-bully Discourse—operate similarly in that they encourage a strict adherence to dominant gender norms.

Policing Gender Norms. These examples demonstrate the ways the children policed gender
norms and made explicit judgments and recommendations for characters who expressed their gender in non-normative ways. One instance occurred during the discussion of *Elena’s Serenade* (Geeslin, 2004), which was read during our tenth session. In this story, the main character, Elena, lives in Mexico and wants to take after her father and become a glassblower. She encounters a problem because in her context, girls are not allowed to become glassblowers. Elena decides to disguise herself as a boy and to run away to Monterrey, where she can learn to be a glassblower. I asked the students to share their thoughts about Elena’s decision:

[April 15, 2015]

**Mr. Hartman:** Ah, ok. But remember at the beginning of the story, you thought it was a bad idea for her to disguise herself as a boy. Everyone except Sara. Why do you think it’s a good idea now?

**Myra:** Nope, it’s a good idea. A little bad of a idea, too. She’s a girl so she shouldn’t wear that clothes like a boy. But she couldn’t do it. Be a glassblower. Like what she wants to do if she didn’t dress like a boy.

**Tariq:** Yea, she had to do it. But she like stopped wearing boy clothes when she got home.

Though Myra recognized that disguising herself as a boy was Elena’s only option that would allow her to be a glassblower, she simultaneously expressed disapproval of that choice, leaving Elena and others like her in a precarious position. Both Myra and Tariq accept Elena’s transgression of gender norms, but only because it provided her with access to something that she could not have.

**Anti-bully Discourse.** Responses in this category proclaimed that it was wrong for a person to be treated unfairly or bullied. However, these statements stopped short of identifying the root cause of the mistreatment/bullying and of advocating for a more fluid understanding of gender and sexual identities. They operate similarly to the comments in the above category, but differ in that they make explicit reference to bullying.

The following example comes from our eighth session when we discussed *The Sissy Duckling* (Fierstein, 2005). At the end of the story, Elmer, the main character, reclaimed the word “sissy” and used it in a self-affirming manner. I asked the students to think about this:

[March 25, 2015]

**Mr. Hartman:** What do you think about sissies? And that word *sissy*? That word is in the title, so it’s kind of important in the story.

**Donald:** Well, that word’s mean cuz they made fun of him. It was bullying that they did.

**Myra:** Yea, that is rude!

**Mr. Hartman:** Right. But, remember at the end when Elmer said, “I am a big sissy and proud of it!”? Remember? Did he think that word was mean then?

**Javon:** No! He thought that word was cool . . . . He was proud and happy.

**Sara:** Yes. He liked doing . . . wearing the girl things. Like hearts and things like that.

**Mr. Hartman:** So what exactly is a sissy?

**Javon:** Like a boy who kinda acts girlish.

**Mr. Hartman:** Ah. Okay. So that word can be used in different ways, hmmmm. That’s kind of interesting. What about being a sissy? Elmer calls himself a big sissy. Isn’t that kind of cool? What do you think about Elmer being proud to be a sissy?

**Sara:** Yes, yes. I think he liked it. He can be like that. Boys can like hearts and things.

**Donald:** <Yelling> Well, that’s weird. That’s just weird!

**Myra:** Well, it’s not nice to make fun of sissies.

**Mr. Hartman:** We know it’s not nice to make fun of sissies. What about being a sissy? What do you think about a boy being a sissy?

**Myra:** No, no! That’s kinda funny, I think. I don’t like it. <laughing>

**Sara:** <irritated> Yes! I think it’s okay. Yea. I think Elmer was nice.
At the beginning of the excerpt, both Donald and Myra expressed that it was mean that the other characters in the story made fun of Elmer by using the word “sissy” in a derogatory manner.

Myra simultaneously thought it was wrong for Elmer to be bullied, but unacceptable for a boy to be a sissy. Her comments highlight how bullying is often identified as wrong, but the root of the bullying—in this case, a narrow understanding of gender—is rarely addressed and interrogated.

**Queer: Disruptions of Heteronormativity**

These examples fall into two subcategories: the children disrupted heteronormativity and called for a more nuanced and expansive understanding of gender and sexuality, or our classroom operated as a space in which historically ignored identities were named, legitimized, and discussed.

**Interrogating Heteronormativity.** In the following vignette, students discussed the possible intentions the author had for writing *Jacob’s New Dress* (Hoffman & Hoffman, 2014):

[April 29, 2015]

**Mr. Hartman:** Why do you think the author wrote this story? Do you think a reader can learn something from this story? Did you learn anything from reading it?

**Myra:** Oh, I don’t think anything.

**Javon:** Thinking, thinking.

**Sara:** Don’t tell someone how they have to be. You’re not the boss of them.

**Mr. Hartman:** Ah, I like that. Anyone think something else?

**Sara:** Oh yea, also, there’s more than one way to be a girl or a boy?

**Mr. Hartman:** Yea. I think that’s a good lesson. Yea, there’s lots of ways to be a boy or a girl.

**Javon:** There’s a million thousand, million thousand ways.

Both Sara’s and Javon’s responses disrupted heteronormativity and called for a more nuanced understanding of gender expression.

The next vignette is from our fifth session during which we held our culminating discussion of *10,000 Dresses* (Ewert, 2008). Bailey, the main character, was assigned the gender of boy at birth, but self-identifies as a girl. The story traces Bailey’s experience of understanding her gender and finding supportive allies in her life.

[March 4, 2015]

**Mr. Hartman:** Okay, well the parents told Bailey that she is a boy, but she didn’t feel like a boy. So how did Bailey overcome this problem? Remember, Bailey went to her parents, then her brother . . .

**Sara:** That girl, Laurel, helped her make a dress. And it makes her feel good.

**Mr. Hartman:** Why do you think that made Bailey feel good?

**Aliya:** Cuz he liked dresses.

**Sara:** Yea, and she wants to be a she so Laurel helped her be a she, too.

**Tariq:** But Bailey is a boy.

**Sara:** But Bailey said she felt like a girl, though. So, maybe Bailey is really a girl, I think.

**Mr. Hartman:** Hmm. Yes, exactly. It was important for Bailey that other people saw her as a girl, too.

Sara’s comment points to the importance of Bailey’s agency and her ability to self-determine her own gender. Bailey’s gender operates quite differently than Jacob’s in the previous vignette. Jacob does not express that he wishes to be or that he is a girl. Rather, he identifies as a boy who desires to wear dresses. Bailey, on the other hand, was assigned the gender of boy at birth, wishes to wear dresses, but also wishes to be a girl. Sara picks up on this element in the story and calls for an affirmation of Bailey’s self-identification.

**Foregrounding Gender/Sexuality.** Comments in this section highlight the ways the discussions provided a space for children to think about marginalized and minoritized gender and sexual identities. Though the comments neither explicitly reinforced nor disrupted heteronormativity, they did disrupt...
the discourse of what is considered acceptable for young children to talk about in elementary classrooms. These examples demonstrate how the reading of LGBTQ texts can bring such identities into being and, therefore, be legitimized and affirmed in elementary classrooms.

In the following excerpt, the students discuss Bailey from 10,000 Dresses (Ewert, 2008):

[March 4, 2015]

**Mr. Hartman:** Do you know what that is called? When someone like Bailey, who was born a boy but does not feel like a boy, wants to be a girl?

**Donald:** What?!! Hmm.

**Sara:** I have never heard that.

**Mr. Hartman:** It’s called transgender.

**Sara:** I didn’t know that.

Here, students encounter the term *transgender* for what seems to be the first time. The inclusion of 10,000 Dresses (Ewert, 2008) expanded the children’s understanding of gender identity and expression and gave them language that they did not seem to possess prior to this reading. It is important to note, though, that some transgender individuals prefer to identify as male or female, without the term transgender, while others identify outside of the male/female binary (Stryker, 2008).

The final vignette came from our third session as we discussed King and King (de Haan & Nijland, 2002). Even before the page is read aloud, Javon makes sense of the pictures on the page where readers first learn that the two men get married:

[February 18, 2015]

**Javon:** So like, what’s happening is that they are at the bride place. And then he’s sayin’ <pointing to a minister> “Do you take him as your wife? And do you take him as your husband?” And then they say, “Yes,” and then I think they gonna kiss.

**Mr. Hartman:** Yep, that’s what it looks like, right?

**Javon:** Yes, I think those men are gay. That is gay.

The read-aloud created a space for Javon to name an identity—gay—that is usually absent and actively ignored in elementary classrooms.

**Discussion**

A wide variety of comments came up during the children’s discussions of books that confront gender norms and LGBTQ topics. Some called for a more nuanced understanding of gender and sexual identity, others for a more oppressive and narrow understanding. Many of the discussions were complex, containing conflicting discourses and demonstrating how the children either built upon one another’s remarks or refuted them—in both liberatory and oppressive manners.

At the same time, it is important to note the developmental nature of the children’s responses. Some students may not have had positive exposure to non-normative gender and sexual identities, which may have elucidated oppressive and restrictive comments and understandings. These discussions, though, reveal that children at this age are more than ready to engage in such conversations and that reading such texts provided an important space for students to begin to grapple with genders and sexualities that have too long been ignored in elementary classrooms.

Teachers of young children know how quick children are to identify and name bullying (and tell the teacher about it). As the findings in this study reveal, however, these actions usually miss the root cause of bullying. In the case of gender and sexual identity–based bullying, teachers can use literature to engage students in exploring and disrupting the basis of this behavior, which is usually located in narrow understandings of gender and sexual identities.

Rymes (2009) posits that new student identities can be constructed through discussion and by examining the ways students and teachers interact. Some students, like Javon, brought words like “gay” into the group discussion. “Transgender” was another term that surfaced in these literature discussions, this time from the teacher. Both of these words/identities are commonly and actively avoided in elementary classrooms, but the inclusion and discussion of
LGBTQ identities can provide students with expansive ways of not only conceptualizing gender, but also choosing to do gender.

Martino (2009) explains that the inclusion of LGBTQ content can create some unintended consequences, particularly the entry of homophobic/transphobic language into classroom discourse. At times in this study, students challenged such remarks. Unfortunately, this might not always be the case, and teachers must develop strategies to counteract such comments. Additionally, as the teacher, there were times my own comments, or lack of comments, inadvertently reinforced dominant gender norms. The complexities of these discussions present a dilemma for deciding when to continue to push and when to move on.

Conclusion

A common anxiety I hear during my interactions with fellow teachers, teacher-educators, and preservice teachers is that they do not know how to “appropriately” respond to comments that might surface in discussions of texts that discuss gender and sexual identities. Far too often, this fear halts teachers from even attempting to include LGBTQ texts and/or discussions of gender in their curricula. The impetus to ensure safer and inclusive schools for LGBTQ people is not something that should fall on the backs of LGBTQ individuals alone. The development of a queer perspective—a perspective that can be developed by anybody (gay, straight, transgender, etc.)—assists teachers in cultivating a more expansive understanding of gender and sexual identities in themselves and their students. Without such a perspective, students with nondominant expressions of gender and sexuality will continue to be silenced, marginalized, and harmed.

Hermann-Wilmarth and Ryan (2015) emphasized the importance of context when elementary teachers attempt to include LGBTQ topics in their curricula. Indeed, teachers in some contexts who wish to embark on this work often run the risk of being alienated from their peers or even fired from their jobs, among other horrible realities. It might be impossible, unsafe, or even illegal in some contexts for teachers to engage in this work. Therefore, it is imperative for teachers who are in safer contexts to include explicit discussions of LGBTQ identity and gender norms in their classrooms, and to support each other as they do. Teachers must engage children in thinking about gender and sexuality norms, including the ways these norms can be harmful. This is not just important for LGBTQ-identified individuals: it is with this perspective that classrooms, and a world, can be created that promote children’s self-determination and that embody Javon’s thinking that “there’s a million thousand, million thousand ways” to be a boy or girl, or someone else.

Author’s Note

Pseudonyms were used to protect the privacy of the children in this study. Also, same-sex marriage became legal in all states in June 2015, a few months after this study took place. Statewide same-sex marriage was legal at the time of the study.

I would like to thank my students for reading the world with me and for helping me become a better teacher.

Endnote

For teachers interested in incorporating LGBTQ children’s literature into their curriculum, here are additional texts to consider: George (Gino, 2015), And Tango Makes Three (Richardson & Parnell, 2005), Morris Micklewhite and the Tangerine Dress (Baldacchino, 2014), Julián Is a Mermaid (Love, 2018). The Stonewall Book Award (http://www.alaw.org/rt/glbtrt/award/stonewall) also recognizes highly regarded LGBTQ children’s and young adult literature each year and contains an archive of past winners.

References


**Children’s Literature Cited**


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**Into The Classroom**

Whether or not your school reader identifies as LGBTQ, the social justice issues surrounding the characters in LGBTQ fiction will be motivating and generate opportunities for discussion and writing. This activity includes a list of age-appropriate books, a discussion-starter guide and ideas to extend beyond the books.


Tune in to this podcast episode to hear about the many ways in which contemporary authors are including gay, lesbian, and transgender characters in their novels for teens, and listen for recommendations of additional titles on these topics.


The traditional autobiography writing project is given a twist as students write alphabiographies—recording an event, person, object, or feeling associated with each letter of the alphabet. Students are introduced to the idea of the alphabography through passages from James Howe’s Totally Joe.


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