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Gender-Inclusive Children's Literature as a Preventative Measure: Moving Beyond a Reactive Approach to LGBTQ+ Topics in the Classroom

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Gender-Inclusive Children’s Literature as a Preventative Measure: Moving Beyond a Reactive Approach to LGBTQ+ Topics in the Classroom

Shelby Brody

I began my teaching career as a fifth-grade English Language Arts (ELA) teacher at a no-excuses charter school. Despite my lack of formal training, I was hired as a head teacher and thrown into the proverbial deep end with only a week’s worth of “behavior management” training under my belt. A side effect of the paucity of training was the impression that a teacher’s responsibility was to “tell” students what they should know rather than guide them toward new understandings. This dictatorial model of teaching resulted in a tense environment where teachers, myself included, stood at the ready, eyes peeled for opportunities to correct, to “tell” students where they had erred, rather than adopting a more responsive approach.

Once, during an ELA class, a student named Brendan¹ remarked that the task I had assigned was “so gay.” I lost my temper. Cartoon steam shot out of my ears. I pulled Brendan aside at the end of class and *told* him, in no uncertain terms, how wrong he was to call an assignment “gay.” I *told* him that “gay” did not mean “stupid” and that his word choice was offensive. I *told* him that he did not know who in his community might identify as gay and how harmful his language was. I *told* him never to use the word “gay” as an insult again.

I feel certain that this interaction had little effect on Brendan’s attitude toward the LGBTQ+ community. It is unlikely that he walked away from my irate lecture considering how his comments may have harmed LGBTQ+ members of our school community who had yet to come out or who were grappling with their identity, as many middle school students are. He probably walked away thinking that I was mean and that I had overreacted to what he likely perceived as an inconsequential comment.

During the year that I taught Brendan, I still identified publicly as a heterosexual cisgender woman, despite my needling sense that neither of these labels was accurate. I ached for words that matched how I perceived my own gender. When I found those words a year later, I still hesitated to refer to myself as “non-binary” or “queer” in classrooms where relatively more common words like “gay” were weaponized with such regularity. When I look back on that interaction with Brendan, what strikes me is how I failed to recognize a teachable moment. Yes, Brendan’s comment was harmful, but it also represented a misunderstanding around LGBTQ+ topics and identities. At the time, I assumed that all fifth-graders knew the dictionary definition of the word “gay.” Now I’m not so sure.

In their book, *Reading the Rainbow: LGBTQ-Inclusive Instruction in the Elementary Classroom*, former elementary teachers Caitlyn L. Ryan and Jill M. Hermann-Wilmarth (2018) illustrate the need for LGBTQ-inclusive instruction through a series of case studies. One case study describes the experience of fourth- and fifth-grade educator Gloria Kauffmann. She noticed that her students often used LGBTQ+ terminology as a way of insulting one another, but upon further investigation, discovered that they did not actually know the meaning of the words:

1 Pseudonym.

They reported hearing these words as insults from other youth, but they had no adult sources of information explaining these identities. They just knew that calling someone “gay” was powerful, negative, and meant to regulate the behavior of students who didn’t fit in. (Ryan & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2018, pp. 26)

Kauffman determined that her students were using these words as insults because that was the only context in which they had encountered the words before (Ryan & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2018). It seems possible, if not probable, that Brendan’s understanding of the word “gay” was similar to that of the children in Gloria Kauffman’s classroom.

Words have power. LGBTQ+ vocabulary, in particular, has the power both to affirm and to vilify. Educators, in our position as gatekeepers of information, have the opportunity to provide the context behind LGBTQ+ vocabulary. It is our responsibility to seize the opportunity and provide all children with the language necessary to understand and empathize with the queer experience, particularly the experience of non-binary trans people and gender nonconforming people.

I identify as a non-binary queer educator. For most of my life, I harbored the sense that I was neither girl nor boy, man nor woman. Only recently did I come out personally, and then professionally. It is important to note that while I claim the terms “non-binary” and “queer,” these terms cannot be universally applied to all gender-expansive people. I also must acknowledge my privilege in being able to claim these terms without fearing for my personal safety.

Having made the decision not to medically transition, I am perceived as a White woman by most, which affords me the privilege of safety that many visibly transgender and gender nonconforming people do not have, particularly transgender and gender nonconforming people of color (National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs, 2016, as cited by Rajunov & Duane, 2019). My experiences as a non-binary teacher and human being made me wonder how we can make our world safer for and more accepting of transgender and gender nonconforming people, and I believe that begins by explicitly teaching all children about transgender and gender nonconforming identities, beginning with establishing a shared vocabulary.

When considering the development of gender-inclusive curricula, I acknowledge that my position is somewhat problematic. The act of “defining” non-binary trans identities and gender nonconforming identities reinforces the male-female gender binary, because we define these identities in relation to the binary concepts of “man” and “woman.” I wonder, then, if it is a fool’s errand to explicitly teach gender-inclusive vocabulary to children in schools. If we insist, for example, on one definition of “non-binary” or “gender nonconforming,” are we simply imposing more parameters on people’s gender identity and expression (Keenan, 2017)? I believe the answer to this question is a resounding “yes” if we fail to acknowledge the limitations of these labels as we teach them.

The unfortunate reality is that we educators participate daily in a system that reinforces the gender binary. Some of the ways in which the American education system perpetuates the gender binary include “record keeping, facilities (bathrooms), and activities (like sports)” (Keenan, 2017, p. 545), but this is hardly the beginning of the gender binary’s influence on the lives of children. Children begin to use culturally defined gender labels at around two years old (Gender Justice in Early Childhood, 2017). They are entrenched in the binary gender system long before they cross the threshold into their pre-kindergarten classrooms.

To ignore the existence of the gender binary when teaching children about gender identity would be a missed opportunity. Leading children to examine and question the gender binary is a perfect example of meeting children at their zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978, pp. 79-91). In order to effectively teach children about the lived experience of transgender and gender nonconforming people, we need to help them make the connection to their prior understandings of gender, particularly to the dominant cultural understandings around gender that they have internalized.

It is not just a missed opportunity, however. The failure to normalize these identities is a form of violence, and the lack of LGBTQ-inclusive curricula in schools is dangerous. Students who identify as a part of the LGBTQ+ community are at higher risk of dropping out, being bullied, and completing suicide (Kosciw, Greytak, Zongrone, Clark, & Truong, 2018). Researchers at the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) found that more than eight in 10 LGBTQ+ students experienced harassment or assault at school (Kosciw et. al, 2018). However, the most recent GLSEN School Climate Survey found that: “LGBTQ students in schools with an LGBTQ-inclusive curriculum are less likely to feel unsafe at school because of their sexual orientation (41.8% vs. 63.3%) and gender expression (34.6 percent vs. 47.0 percent)” (Kosciw et. al, 2018).

We cannot afford to be simply reactive to LGBTQ+ topics when the physical and emotional safety of children is at stake. Normalizing LGBTQ+ topics by explicitly teaching them and then by folding them into our elementary school curricula is one preventative measure all educators can take to stave off the gender- and sexuality-based bullying and harassment reported by middle and high school students.

Adults treat LGBTQ+ identities as difficult topics. There is a great deal of uncertainty on the part of educators about how best to address the LGBTQ+ community in a way that is both respectful and informative (Ryan & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2018). Even teachers with the best intentions are paralyzed by their fear of misspeaking or offending, resulting in the low percentage of LGBTQ+ curricula that we see in K-12 schools (Ryan & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2018).

The easiest course of action is to brush LGBTQ+ concepts under the rug until an “issue” arises. We have a student with gay parents, so we read *Heather Has Two Mommies* (Newman & Cornell, 2016). We have a gender nonconforming student, so we read *Sparkle Boy* (Newman & Mola, 2017). A student comes into school wondering what the word “transgender” means, so we read *Introducing Teddy* (Walton & MacPherson, 2016) or *I Am Jazz!* (Herthel, Jennings, & McNicholas, 2014).

The danger of adopting this reactive approach to the appearance of LGBTQ+ topics is that it turns the LGBTQ+ student that catalyzed the inclusion of these texts into a “special guest” (Malatino, 2015, p. 398). The “special guest” approach has the opposite of the desired effect, because it trains the spotlight on what makes LGBTQ+ people different from their cis-hetero² peers. Additionally, the reactive approach to LGBTQ+ topics in the classroom increases the likelihood that there will be only one transgender narrative shared with students, and often, that narrative is of the “if you come out, people will still love you for who you are!” variety (Adichie, 2009; Malatino, 2015). This is not to say there is no value in texts centered on the narrative of acceptance, but educators must take care to share a wide range of LGBTQ+ narratives, including narratives that address gender-based harassment and discrimination as well as narratives that feature characters of color.

When queer identities are not embedded within the curriculum from day one, our reactive attempts at remedying the lack of inclusion with a single picture book transform queerness into a disruptive spectacle.

2 Cis-hetero is short for cisgender and heterosexual.

These attempts at educating around this perceived difficult topic are better than nothing. However, one read-aloud about queerness is like a band-aid: it may answer children's questions in the moment but it's only a temporary fix, a single reference point. And assuming that we can wait until a topic arises in our classrooms to address it relegates the queer community to non-essential status. If standard early childhood curricula are any indication, then queer people are optional fixtures in daily life, whereas planes, trains, and automobiles are not.

I do not assume any ill intent on the part of educators who have adopted this reactive approach. However, most educators lack the critical gender literacy to adequately address the complex world of LGBTQ+ topics (Woolley, 2015). Therefore, it stands to reason that the safest course of action is to exclude this community from curriculum, addressing LGBTQ+ topics only when they are immediately relevant to the classroom.

It goes without saying, I hope, that this practice is damaging to the LGBTQ+ community. Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop (1990) posits that books are "windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors," yet it is rare that LGBTQ+ children see themselves in the curriculum, let alone in a read-aloud. What might happen if LGBTQ+ people were featured casually throughout the classroom and curriculum? What would it be like if we welcomed queerness into our classrooms without making it into something "difficult," something to tiptoe around, something best saved for the moment when the adult in the room feels confident enough to address it without the fear of making a mistake?

The irony in all of this is that the earlier we introduce children to these topics, the more receptive they appear to be. In his essay describing coming out as a transmasculine non-binary person to his 4- and 14-year-old children, CK Combs (2019) writes, "The easiest part of this coming out process was talking to my kids" (p. 96). His 4-year-old child had no difficulty referring to him using "he/him" pronouns while also calling him "mommy" (Combs, 2019, p. 96). Combs writes that his 14-year-old needed more support in order to understand the transition, suggesting that the binary gender Kool-Aid works very quickly to limit our perceptions of what is acceptable. As educators, it is our responsibility to prevent rather than to react. In this vein, consider LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum as powdered Vitamin C and regular handwashing rather than as band-aids or emergency surgery.

While I am advocating for making a more concerted effort to normalize the LGBTQ+ community by including a range of LGBTQ+ narratives in our classroom libraries and embedding our experiences into existing curricula, I also feel it is essential to explicitly teach elementary-age children about gender expansiveness. Therefore, as the culmination of my graduate coursework at Bank Street College of Education, I designed a curriculum about gender expansiveness for children ages 8 to 11. The decision to focus on these ages was intentional. In middle childhood, children deepen their understanding of "behaviors associated with assimilation of the sex role assigned to males and females in society" (Cohen, 1988, p. 217).

It is significant at this age, therefore, to introduce the concept of "transitional models" within the gender spectrum, in order to challenge the developmentally typical notion that there is one way to be a male and one way to be a female (Cohen, 1988, pp. 231-234). My curriculum seeks to develop critical gender literacy by first naming and examining the gender binary and then by sharing a diverse range of stories about transgender and gender nonconforming people, both real and imaginary (Woolley, 2015, p. 391).

Toward the middle to end of fifth grade, many children have begun puberty and are more self-conscious than they were at 8, 9, or even 10 years old (Wood, 2015). At age 11, children spend more time on social media and the internet, where they will invariably be introduced to gender nonconforming or gender expansive

identities (Wood, 2015; Wortham, 2018). They also begin to form cliques and to judge their peers more harshly than at younger ages (Wood, 2015). Before children become centered on the concept of “belonging” to their social group, it is essential to educate them about the truth of gender: that it is not fixed but, rather, fluid (Wood, 2015; Keenan, 2017; Gender Justice in Early Childhood, 2017).

In *The 2017 National School Climate Survey*, roughly 25 percent of respondents identified as transgender or non-binary, and 11 percent of respondents identified as genderqueer (Kosciw et al., 2018). With more than one-third of high school students identifying outside the established gender binary of “male” and “female,” providing middle-childhood students with a shared vocabulary and understanding of gender expansiveness is one way of educating more accepting and empathetic students (Kosciw et al., 2018).

Understanding gender expansiveness requires students to think outside of themselves. At 8 years old, children are interested in issues of fairness and justice (Wood, 2015). Around this age, children also develop the ability to be more objective in their reasoning and to think beyond their lived experience (Cohen, 1988). Between the ages of 8 and 11, children become more aware of society’s expectations, while developing their own sense of morality (Cohen, 1988). As children of this age are exposed to more subtle social dynamics, adults are in a powerful position to model anti-biased attitudes toward diverse cultures and identities (Cohen, 1988).

This curriculum responds to the 8- to 11-year-old child’s developing sense of morality by emphasizing the wide range of LGBTQ+ lived experiences and by fostering empathy for transgender and gender nonconforming people in particular. Throughout the curriculum, students define LGBTQ+ vocabulary and use it to ground discussions about sometimes abstract, likely unfamiliar topics. As each new vocabulary word is introduced, the teacher reiterates that these terms are not one-size-fits-all and reminds students that every person has the right to choose the words used to describe them. The textual and visual media used throughout the curriculum intentionally includes a broad range of gender-expansive narratives in order to avoid the oversimplification of trans and gender nonconforming experiences and identities.

I spent a great deal of time searching for books that would help me achieve the goal of including a spectrum of gender-expansive narratives. One of my most valuable discoveries was the recent picture book *It Feels Good to Be Yourself! A Book About Gender Identity* by author Theresa Thorn and illustrator Noah Grigni (2019). Thorn offers kid-friendly definitions for essential terms, using fictional characters as a vehicle for defining words such as “cisgender,” “transgender,” and “non-binary.” Thorn takes care to speak to the range of identities that can be captured under a single umbrella term. For example, there are two simple definitions for “non-binary.” One of the non-binary characters in the book, Alex, is “both a boy and a girl” while the other non-binary character, JJ, is “neither a boy nor a girl.” Toward the middle of the book, Thorn writes: “Just like there are many different ways to be a boy or a girl, there are many different ways to be non-binary—too many to fit in a book” (Thorn & Grigni, 2019). Thorn’s child-friendly exploration of gender is brought to life by Grigni’s jewel-toned illustrations, which depict people with a range of gender expressions, skin tones, and abilities.

This past year, I served as the co-facilitator of my school’s third- and fourth-grade Gender Spectrum Alliance (GSA), an optional interest group where students could come to learn more about the gender spectrum and gender expansiveness. Before winter break, I shared *It Feels Good to Be Yourself!* with the students in our GSA. When we reconvened after winter break, we reviewed the definitions we had learned. To my delight, students were able to recall the two specific definitions of “non-binary” that Thorn offers in the text. When we finished recording those definitions on the board, another student chimed in to remind everyone that these were not the *only* definitions of non-binary.

Before moving on to our next discussion topic, I asked the students if they had any questions about non-binary identities. I was met with shrugs and silence. They were not deterred by the concept of gender expansiveness, so simply captured by Thorn when she writes, “And even with all these possible ways to be, some kids don’t feel any of the words they know fit them exactly right. There are a never-ending number of ways to be yourself in the world” (Thorn & Grigni, 2019). Perhaps, I thought, gender expansiveness isn’t such a difficult topic to teach to children after all. These children seemed willing to accept that, despite our attempts to slap labels on people (and on ourselves), words used to describe gender identity are rife with limitations.

In the first week of my curriculum, I use *It Feels Good to Be Yourself!* as a jumping-off point for discussing gender, because it provides students with a common vocabulary around gender as well as an understanding that the vocabulary presented is far from an exhaustive list. As I sought out other books to include in the curriculum, however, I noticed a number of trends—narratives that appear over and over again and that, when presented in the absence of books featuring non-binary or gender nonconforming characters, perpetuate the single story of being transgender (Adichie, 2009).

In the past 10 years, trans-inclusive children’s literature has become more readily available. There are plenty of books that tell stories of transition. In particular, there are books that tell stories about White transgender girls who were assigned male at birth or about male children who are experimenting with a more stereotypically feminine gender expression. From picture books to middle grade books to young adult books, these stories are available in relative abundance.

Many of the books include popular tropes. Usually there is a supportive mom character and a reluctant (or even blatantly transphobic) dad character who comes around at the end. These are usually transition stories or coming out stories that end with a sense of acceptance and safety. Generally speaking, they play one note, addressing the culture of misogyny that makes it socially unacceptable for boys to wear dresses or play with dolls and assuring the reader that this widely held view is not the truth. Of course, there are children who see themselves in such narratives, and for that reason alone, these stories are valuable additions to the children’s literature scene and to our classroom libraries (Bishop, 1990). However, educators need to ensure that our classroom libraries reflect a wider range of identities, including characters who identify as gender-expansive or who identify as people of color.

Another popular mode of depicting transgender and gender nonconforming characters is through fantasy and anthropomorphism. Trans-adjacent tales such as *Neither* (Anderson, 2018) and *Red: A Crayon’s Story* (Hall, 2015) can be shared as analogies for the transgender experience. But if these are the only stories that children are exposed to, transgender and gender nonconforming identities are once again relegated to the world of fantasy. This trend continues into middle-grade literature, such as in the graphic novel *Witch Boy* (Ostertag, 2017), the story of a boy who wants to be a witch rather than a shifter like the other men in his community. I wonder about the effect of conflating transgender experiences with fantasy. What if a child only sees their identity represented as something unfit for the “real” world?

There are even fewer stories about transgender boys assigned female at birth, which speaks to our cultural reality that people with female bodies have more license to wear pants and play sports than do people with male bodies who want to wear skirts and be ballerinas. Regardless, it is much harder for transgender boys to find themselves in the available literature. Thankfully, there is the profound *When Aidan Became a Brother*, recent winner of the Stonewall Award (Lukoff & Juanita, 2019). *When Aidan Became a Brother* is revolutionary in that it addresses in no uncertain terms how convoluted the concept of gender can be. It tells the story of a transgender boy and his anger and distress at being misgendered as a girl. When he

learns that his mother is pregnant, he attempts to make the world a safer, more gender-inclusive space for his sibling-to-be. It is an excellent follow-up to *It Feels Good to Be Yourself!* as a means of examining the ways in which Western society maps the gender binary onto children before they are even born.

When Aidan Became a Brother invites conversation about the freedom of gender expansiveness, but when I attempted to find books that explicitly address a non-binary lived experience, I came up short. I found very few children's or middle-grade books with a non-binary protagonist. One of the few I found is Thom, Li, & Ching's (2017) *From The Stars in the Sky to the Fish in the Sea*.

The protagonist Miu Lan was born when both the sun and the moon were in the sky, so they are neither a boy nor a girl. They can change their shape at will, occasionally sprouting a tail, fins, wings, and thinking nothing of it until they attend school and are mocked by their classmates. Although this book contains fantasy elements and reads, in some ways, like a folktale, it is unique in its depiction of the anxiety, fear, frustration, and occasional pockets of joy that characterize the non-binary and gender-expansive experience. I saw the confusion of my childhood reflected in the pages of this book and imagine that it will inspire cisgender children to adopt a more empathetic stance toward their gender-expansive peers.

Not every teacher has the time in their calendar to add in a six-week study of the gender spectrum and gender expansiveness. But I hope that reading about the work I have undertaken inspires educators to teach explicitly about gender identity in all of its nuance and messiness. As long as our society is steeped as it is in the gender binary, we will need to teach children that language matters and that it is ever-changing. We can provide some vocabulary as a means of anchoring discussions while acknowledging that putting labels on other people is not the purpose of learning vocabulary.

Sharing and making available books about a wide spectrum of gender identities and expressions is an essential step in normalizing gender expansiveness. I hope that by reading about the trends that characterize children's literature concerning transgender and gender nonconforming identity, teachers feel better equipped to evaluate and choose a range of books to facilitate discussion on these issues. The earlier we move away from the reactive, one-off approach that treats LGBTQ+ topics as issues to be solved, towards a preventative approach that normalizes the existence of all gender identities and expressions, the more harm we can prevent and the closer we will come to making our schools truly safe for transgender and gender nonconforming youth.

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