

# Reading and Teaching the Rainbow

Making Elementary School Classrooms LGBTQ-Inclusive



BY JILL M. HERMANN-WILMARTH AND  
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People are sometimes shocked by the notion that teachers should address lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) topics in elementary schools. Maybe they think children those ages are too young, that those conversations are better had at home, or that the whole topic is simply inappropriate. Such concerns often arise because people assume talking about people who identify as LGBTQ means talking about sex. That is not what we believe at all.

Instead, when we advocate for elementary school teachers to address LGBTQ topics, we simply want them to talk about the diversity of families and relationships and communities in ways that include LGBTQ people. After all, public schools are for everyone, yet many elementary schools are too frequently unwelcoming and unaccommodating of all children, especially children of LGBTQ parents or those who are or may be LGBTQ themselves. LGBTQ people exist in children's lives in myriad

ways. If children themselves don't have LGBTQ parents, perhaps they have a peer with two moms at daycare or a relative who comes out as gay, or maybe they've heard a story about transgender rights on the news. Elementary school students are surrounded by these experiences, but their teachers are often underprepared when it comes to realizing why LGBTQ topics might matter to their work as elementary school teachers and how they might make their classrooms more inclusive.

As queer-identified women and former elementary school teachers who now work in universities as teacher educators, we've spent the past decade developing a range of approaches to help elementary school teachers integrate LGBTQ-inclusive practices into their teaching: *expanding representations* of LGBTQ people, *questioning categories* with regard to gender and sexuality, and *questioning representations* within LGBTQ-inclusive texts. We know that no two states, districts, schools, nor teachers are exactly alike; we know that what works one place might be impossible or ineffective in another. But we also believe that every teacher can do *something* to help make her or his classroom safer and more inclusive to better serve LGBTQ children and families.\* These approaches provide options to help everyone find something that works no matter the context.

Below we explain why LGBTQ-inclusive elementary school instruction matters, outline the approaches we have developed

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\*To learn how schools can help LGBTQ students thrive, see "More Than a Safe Space" in the Winter 2016–2017 issue of *American Educator*, available at [www.aft.org/ae/winter2016-2017/sadowski](http://www.aft.org/ae/winter2016-2017/sadowski).

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and have used in real-life classrooms, and suggest resources for teachers as they do this work. This article draws from our book, *Reading the Rainbow: LGBTQ-Inclusive Literacy Instruction in the Elementary Classroom*, where we also provide examples from our work as coteachers and researchers with second-, fourth-, and fifth-grade teachers in Michigan and Ohio to illustrate what each of these methods can look like in practice.

Including LGBTQ topics in elementary school classrooms is important to do for all children.

### Why LGBTQ-Inclusive Curriculum Matters in Elementary Schools

Research shows that including LGBTQ topics in elementary schools makes a positive difference to the learning environment of a wide variety of students. For example, 75.2 percent of LGBTQ students in schools with an inclusive curriculum said their peers were accepting of LGBTQ people, compared with 39.6 percent of those without an inclusive curriculum.<sup>1</sup> This acceptance is particularly important for the estimated 6 million people with one or more LGBTQ parents.<sup>2</sup>

However, only half of elementary school teachers (49 percent) say a student with a lesbian, gay, or bisexual parent would feel comfortable at the school where they teach, and only 42 percent think that would be true for a student with a transgender parent.<sup>3</sup> Even though most elementary school teachers address family diversity generally, only 2 in 10 elementary students (18 percent) actually learn about families with two moms or two dads.<sup>4</sup> This silence sends a message to children with LGBTQ parents that their families are not “real” families and that their families are not accepted in schools.

Including LGBTQ topics in elementary school classrooms is also important for children who themselves identify as LGBTQ, whether they come out while they are young or, more commonly, later in life. After all, every LGBTQ adult was once a school-age child. Unfortunately, many of those children never see LGBTQ people included in the curriculum. And, too often, they see their teachers fail to intervene when other students use the term “gay” in hateful ways; sometimes they even hear such slurs from teachers themselves.<sup>5</sup>

These behaviors also affect children who are bullied for being perceived as LGBTQ. Because LGBTQ people have historically been feared, hated, and discriminated against, words to describe LGBTQ people are often used by children to shame people of all identities whose behaviors fall outside the norm. What teachers do and say in response can have implications for children for years to come.

Elementary schools are also affected by the increased awareness about the lives and needs of transgender children. Trans-

gender children are those who, having been assigned a gender at birth, consistently and persistently insist they are actually a different gender.<sup>6</sup> Sometimes children identify as a different gender as young as age 3.<sup>7</sup> Pediatricians and psychologists suggest, and recent research findings confirm, that supporting the gender identity a child asserts is an important part of healthy development.<sup>8</sup> This means elementary schools should be ready to affirm transgender children and their families in order to support children’s mental health and development.

Lastly, including LGBTQ topics in elementary school classrooms is important to do for all children because we all live in a world with LGBTQ people. Children—even if they have a mom and a dad, identify as straight, and fit gender norms—will



encounter LGBTQ people in their families, schools, workplaces, and communities. When teachers implement a curriculum that ignores these realities, students are left on their own to process what they hear about LGBTQ people in popular culture and to learn respectful language for talking about LGBTQ topics. Just as white people must be invested in ending racism and men must stand up for women’s rights, non-LGBTQ people have an important role to play in making the world safer for and more inclusive of LGBTQ people. Schools teach children about the world and equip students to live in it; that world includes people who identify as LGBTQ, and therefore schools should include LGBTQ topics. The following approaches will help educators understand how to do that.

#### 1. Expanding Representations with LGBTQ-Inclusive Texts

One of the best and most direct ways to make your classroom safer for and more inclusive of LGBTQ people and families is to have books that feature LGBTQ characters. As author Rudine Sims Bishop<sup>9</sup> first argued decades ago, books serve as “windows and mirrors.” “Mirror books” validate for readers that they are not alone, that their identity or life experience is not strange, and that there is a community of people just like them out there. When readers receive mirrors for parts of themselves, they get the message that their experiences are worth writing about and are worth being read. “Window books,” on the other hand, give readers insight into another person’s experience. Rather than show readers more of themselves, these books show the way into other worlds that readers haven’t seen firsthand but can learn from nevertheless. They remind students that not everyone is exactly like them, and they help prepare students for the complexity and diversity of the larger world.<sup>10</sup>

As teachers, we need to remember that all readers deserve a



balance of windows and mirrors. It is this balance that helps us feel affirmed while also moving beyond our own experiences. It helps children recognize they are not alone while at the same time reminding them that they live in a world with other people who are different from them. Both sides of this equation are important. Therefore, when we bring books with LGBTQ people and families into our classrooms—much like when we ensure we have books in our classrooms representing different races, ethnicities, and life experiences—we expand the number of mirrors available for LGBTQ students or children of LGBTQ families, while also expanding the number of windows available for everyone else.

So how does a teacher include a book with LGBTQ characters in her teaching? The short answer is just like you'd include any other book! You could put it on your shelf for a child to find on his or her own. You could recommend it to a child who you think would enjoy it or offer it as an option for literature circles, book clubs, or paired reading groups. Or you could read it aloud, maybe even highlighting it in your teaching. Reading a book can be a wonderful way to open up conversations about topics we don't often discuss in schools because the book can do so much of the work. You'll likely find that your adult worries about reading LGBTQ-inclusive books in the classroom are rarely shared by your students. After all, in addition to sending important messages about who belongs and who is worthy of being represented, many LGBTQ-inclusive books are also compelling and interesting reads that students and teachers alike truly enjoy. When Jill cotaught with a fourth- and fifth-grade teacher who read Alex Gino's *George* aloud, every time the teachers closed the book at the end of the day's reading, students would groan loudly and beg for "just one more chapter!" In a classroom Caitlin visited regularly, Patricia Polacco's *In Our Mothers' House*, Cheryl Kilodavis' *My Princess Boy*, and James Howe's *Totally Joe* were popular choices during silent reading time.

Reading LGBTQ-inclusive books doesn't have to be done on a special day or otherwise separated from your curriculum. When writing a book report on *In Our Mothers' House*, for example, a fifth-grade student we know read it independently, summarized the text, identified themes, evaluated the author's writing, and made both text-to-self and text-to-world connections. Because his teacher had included LGBTQ content in classroom discussions prior to his writing of this report, he was able to critically think about that content in sophisticated ways.

When teaching the expected content standards for your grade level, there are many opportunities for this kind of integration. LGBTQ-inclusive stories like *Asha's Mums* or *Donovan's Big Day* can be incorporated into language arts units on literary elements like understanding characters, comparing and contrasting, sequencing, understanding descriptive language, or finding the theme of a text. You could add *King & King* to genre studies of fairy tales and explore *Lumberjanes* or *The Popularity Papers* in investigations of graphic novels and/or series books. You could incorporate books such as *And Tango Makes Three* or *Daddy, Papa, and Me* or *The Family Book* into an exploration of family structures in social studies. In all these cases, you can teach required content while still providing important representations to your students.

## 2. Questioning Categories with Books You Already Use

If it's difficult for you, given your school or district, to read books with LGBTQ characters in them, you can make your classroom safer

and more inclusive of LGBTQ people and families by discussing gender and relationships generally in broader ways, even when reading books you already teach. After all, gender is relevant for children of all ages. While gender and sexuality are not the same things, an idea called the heterosexual matrix<sup>11</sup> shows how they become interrelated in our culture. We expect that women will have female bodies, will act feminine, and will want to date and partner with men. We expect that men will have male bodies, will act masculine, and will want to date and partner with women. Of course, in reality, all these categories are much more complicated, but we continually revert to these basic ideas. Ask almost any young child to draw a picture of a girl, and she will have long hair. We might know plenty of girls and women with short hair and boys with long hair too, but culturally, we teach that a way to distinguish boys from girls is, among other characteristics, to look at hair.

Reading LGBTQ-inclusive books doesn't have to be done on a special day or otherwise separated from your curriculum.

By expanding our ideas about any one piece of this puzzle—how boys or girls should look and act, for example—we make space in the whole system, creating more room for people who live any part of it differently than our stereotypes suggest. If we help students see there aren't strict rules about what girls and boys can do or how girls and boys should be, then we help to blur those divisions between categories. This blurring can help students learn to respect people who live those categories differently. When

people disrupt any of the matrix categories through their gender identity, through their gender expression, or with whom and how they might fall in love, they are queering—disrupting and expanding—the heterosexual matrix to make more kinds of lives and loves visible.

Teaching in this way, a method that we call "questioning categories," means helping your students investigate how both people in the real world and characters in books disrupt the heterosexual matrix and to what effect. We believe such questioning helps students become aware of and more sensitive to the multiple ways of "doing gender" or being in relationships.

Why, for example, does Kate DiCamillo's *Despereaux* make his mother so disappointed that he isn't big and strong? Why does he get in so much trouble for being a mouse who doesn't act like other mice and who falls in love with someone he's not supposed to? Why is it a big deal for Charlotte Zolotow's *William* to have a doll? Why does his dad care so much and get so angry about it?





Why is Jacqueline Kelly's Calpurnia Tate so worried about having no interest in "female" jobs such as cooking and sewing as would be expected of her, recognizing instead that her "nature" was leading her to be a scientist?



Books like these, as well as others, including Michael Hall's *Red: A Crayon's Story* and Tomie DePaola's *Oliver Button Is a Sissy*, provide indirect yet important opportunities to reflect on what we think about and how we treat people who don't behave in ways society expects. Such conversations can easily be connected to students' lives and real-world experiences in ways that can broaden their understanding of LGBTQ people and families, even without reading terms like "gay" and "lesbian."

It's particularly helpful to identify books that show characters of different races, classes, religions, and gender expressions.

Other considerations might also be useful when questioning categories and expanding the heterosexual matrix. For example, when reading nonfiction, students and teachers can consider how there are different expectations and assumptions made about a person based on gender, and how those expectations inform how we understand gender as a culture. Likewise, teachers can ask students to think about the kinds of relationships between people in the texts they are reading. Are they based in assumptions about who is "allowed" to be connected to each other? What knowledge does the author assume the reader has about how men and women or boys and girls act and relate to each other? Is a story shaped by the character's refusal to conform to social norms? How so? Does the way the character looks to others match the way he understands himself? What happens to people who don't fit in? Whose relationships do people make fun of and why? Questioning categories in these ways provides an important lens through which your students can engage with the characters in books, as well as develop critical reading and thinking skills.

### 3. Questioning Representations in LGBTQ Books

In her now-famous TED talk, Nigerian author Chimamanda Adichie<sup>12</sup> discussed what she calls the danger of the single story: the stereotype or surface-level picture of a person, place, or event. The problem with relying on such stereotypes, Adichie says, isn't that they're incorrect necessarily, but that they're *incomplete*. By treating a single representation of the story as the full story about a particular identity category, people create limited, ultimately inaccurate portrayals. Therefore, even though

expanding representations by including even one book with an LGBTQ character provides new "windows and mirrors" for readers, the danger of the single story reminds us that it is only one specific portrayal and not a representation of an entire community.

One way to address this is to try to layer different representations in order to provide students the most nuanced, complex, thorough picture of a community. Therefore, the third approach, questioning representations, brings together the first two; it helps you include representations of LGBTQ people while still questioning norms and silences involved in those representations. In other words, this approach helps us move away from asking simply if LGBTQ people are represented and instead turn our attention more specifically to how they are represented and what the overall message is of those representations. This questioning of categories even within LGBTQ-inclusive texts can help students see more possibilities for other people and for themselves.

This work is especially important because many of the LGBTQ representations in children's books are of white, cisgender, partnered, middle-class adults. Helping students notice the (relative) absence of other, more diverse LGBTQ experiences within the books they read expands students' worldviews about who LGBTQ people are. In addition to books, you can layer representations with text sets, videos, newspaper articles of current events, and guest speakers. Such work also supports standards related to research skills, reading from multiple perspectives, the use of textual evidence, and comparing and contrasting to build understanding.

It's particularly helpful to identify books that show characters of different races, classes, religions, and gender expressions. An example we love and have read with students is Jacqueline Woodson's *After Tupac and D Foster*. When reading that text, we help students explore how the queerness of a black character like Tash informs that character's life in different ways than does the queerness of a white character such as James Howe's Joe in *The Misfits* and *Totally Joe*. Both Tash and Joe, like all of us, have intersecting identities<sup>13</sup>; they are not just gay or just male, but are gay and male and belong to a specific race and class all at the same time in one body.

Because these books give readers the opportunity to enter the lives of very different people, students more easily see how multiple identities intersect. Just as important, the single story of being gay, too often understood in terms of how white wealthy people experience it, is interrupted. The richness of these texts deeply engages students and stimulates a desire to understand the worlds that the characters live in, while simultaneously supporting connections to their own lives.

### Getting Started

Because including LGBTQ topics in elementary schools is still somewhat rare, we know you might have concerns about how it will work in your classroom. For that reason, it can be good to think through what concerns you have so you can brainstorm ways to meet those challenges. Sometimes teachers are worried about saying the wrong thing, or what will happen if they don't know the answer to a child's question. Trust us that *everyone* feels this way sometimes. Knowing all of the right words is not the goal. The willingness to try, to be open to continually learning, to revise the ways that we speak or label or present an idea,



is what all good teaching is about, including LGBTQ-inclusive teaching. It's always OK to tell a child that you don't know something or that you aren't sure but that you can look up the answer together. It's also OK to say something like, "That's a better question for you to ask your families at home."

Another concern that we hear from teachers is that they fear resistance from parents of their students and/or from their school administrators. Each situation is different, of course, but at schools we've worked with, resistance has come from a very small number of parents; the vast majority have not minded and have even supported this work.<sup>14</sup> But the fear of parental resistance is real. Therefore, it is useful to have thought through and to be able to articulate to others why you are doing this work. We suggest relying on research, including the findings cited in this article and other statistics from GLSEN ([www.glsen.org](http://www.glsen.org)), about the power of inclusive classrooms. You may decide to send home a statement at the beginning of the year about how you are committed to ensuring that all students have a safe space to learn or about how your class will read and discuss a variety of identities and communities over the year. Responding to resistance may also involve understanding and communicating the ways the LGBTQ-inclusive teaching that you do connects to your mandated standards or is in keeping with district policies, particularly antibullying or nondiscrimination policies.



It's important to recognize that states have different laws with regard to LGBTQ inclusion in schools. You can learn more about your state's laws by visiting the Human Rights Campaign's website ([www.hrc.org/state-maps](http://www.hrc.org/state-maps)). There, you might note what protections are available in states that have LGBTQ-inclusive antibullying and nondiscrimination laws as well as any legal restrictions that apply to your state. If you teach in one of the seven states (Alabama, Arizona, Louisiana, Mississippi, Oklahoma, South Carolina, and Texas) that currently have some kind of "No Promo Homo" law that doesn't allow teachers to say the words "gay" or "lesbian," it might make more sense for you to use questioning categories (approach No. 2) to LGBTQ inclusion rather than expanding representations (approach No. 1). To ensure that you are up to date on your specific context, consult directly with organizations like GLSEN, the Human Rights Campaign, the American Civil Liberties Union ([www.aclu.org](http://www.aclu.org)), or a state-level LGBTQ advocacy group.

No matter where you teach, it will be helpful to build your knowledge and locate sources of support. Finding parents and other teachers who are interested in LGBTQ-inclusive teaching

can be a way to build networks and generate new ideas. In addition to research, GLSEN offers lesson plans, professional development opportunities, and other resources for educators. The Human Rights Campaign's "Welcoming Schools" project ([www.welcomingschools.org](http://www.welcomingschools.org)) is elementary-school focused and offers book lists, training opportunities, and lesson plans.

Many professional organizations also have statements that speak to the importance of LGBTQ inclusion and resources for teachers doing such work. The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), for example, has an Intellectual Freedom Center ([www.ncte.org/action/anti-censorship](http://www.ncte.org/action/anti-censorship)) to help teachers should any book they use be challenged or censored. NCTE's website contains policy statements, a rationale for reading banned books, and activities to use when teaching books that are frequently challenged. And, of course, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) is another important source of support as you begin doing the work of LGBTQ inclusion in your classrooms. The AFT's website ([www.aft.org/special-populations-resources#LGBT](http://www.aft.org/special-populations-resources#LGBT)) offers many such resources.

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**E**lementary schools are a microcosm of our larger world, full of diverse identities, ideologies, and approaches to teaching and learning. Of course, this can cause messiness, false starts, redos, and unintentional errors, just like it does in the world outside of schools.

But when that diversity is recognized, incorporated, and celebrated in elementary schools, it can create learning spaces that teach all students how to treat one another and that are welcoming to all students and families, including those in the LGBTQ community. These are the elementary schools that students and families deserve. Let's work together to make them a reality. □

#### Endnotes

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Looking for ways to teach and support your English language learners? Visit [www.colorincolorado.org](http://www.colorincolorado.org), the most widely used online resource for educators and families of ELLs for over a decade. Whether you need book lists, information on what works in the classroom, or tips to make kids feel welcome, **Colorín Colorado** is here for you!

### New on Colorín Colorado

Across the country, immigrant students and families are facing great uncertainty. We've been hearing from AFT members looking for ways to ensure that schools and preschool settings remain safe, welcoming places for kids and their families. Our newest guide, "How to Support Immigrant Students and Families," includes more than 50 strategies that educators can use and share with colleagues, families, and community partners: [www.colorincolorado.org/immigration/guide](http://www.colorincolorado.org/immigration/guide).



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