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Queering the ABCs: LGBTQ Characters in Children's Books

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Queering the ABCs: LGBTQ Characters in Children's Books

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presented to

the faculty of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology

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by

Lindsay Toman

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ABSTRACT

Queering the ABCs: LGBTQ Characters in Children's Books

by

Lindsay Toman

Over the past 30 years, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) groups have called for children's books to include LGBTQ characters and themes to help children understand our multifaceted social world. Few LGBTQ characters have appeared in children's literature. This qualitative study analyzes the text and images of 29 children's books published between 1972 and 2013 that have any LGBTQ characters. Books featuring lesbian and gay characters often presented them as conforming to heteronormative standards to find fulfillment. The majority of books with gender-deviant characters focused on boys harassed by other characters for their conventionally feminine behaviors. Surprisingly few books in this inclusive sample depicted any non-white characters. This study concludes by offering recommendations for how authors of children's books could approach this genre without reinforcing other long-standing inequalities tied to gender, race, class, and sexuality.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

When I was a child, my favorite books to read were Nancy Drew mysteries. I would spend hours in a small corner of the library, flipping through the pages with excitement and anticipation of where the young sleuth would lead me next. I was in awe of Nancy Drew because I saw parts of myself in her. She was a white female, who, like myself, was not afraid to be different. Reading these books about a fearless heroine sparked my imagination to visualize the type of woman I wanted to become. It helped open my eyes to an alternative lifestyle for a woman, one that was not based on getting married and being a stay-at-home mother. The fictitious role model I identified with and aspired to emulate provided me with an opportunity that every child deserves but may not have.

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) groups have advocated that children's books should contain LGBTQ characters and themes (Casement 2002). Such inclusive stories, along with those featuring people of color and people in lower socioeconomic statuses, are still poorly represented in this medium (CCBC 2013). The relative absence of LGBTQ characters in children's books can lead younger generations to believe that gays or lesbians are devalued or invisible (Casement 2002).

Parents and teachers use children's literature to socialize, educate, and support children when they are first beginning to understand themselves and the world around them (Collier 2001). Children's books inspire the imagination and influence the internalization of everyday norms (Brugeilles et al. 2002). By the time children are five years old, they already can form rigid stereotypes; the pictures and texts in their literature aid in this process (Schlossberg and

Goodman 1972). Children's books have the power to help children develop their identities by providing images that reflect their place in the world as valid and important (Collier 2001).

In addition to books, children gain exposure to many different forms of media during their primary years of socialization. Movies, television shows, games, and literature that target children have begun marketing sexuality, which may be one of the factors leading children to think about their sexuality at a younger age (Dunne, Prendergast, and Telford 2002). Previous research indicated that people typically did not identify as lesbian or gay until the age of 20 (Herek et al. 1997). Younger generations have now become aware of feeling same-sex attractions earlier in life, at an average age of 10 years, and go on to inform their family members between 12-14 years (D'Augelli et al. 2005). Have the media begun to reflect this change in childhood same-sex identification? And if so, how?

After searching for children's book titles that included LGBTQ characters, I identified 29 books that fit the criteria. Although lesbian, gay, and gender nonconforming characters were incorporated in these books, most of their presentations lacked luster. The majority of the authors included negative associations for gay, lesbian, and gender nonconforming characters. Even though children's book authors highlighted LGBTQ characters, the emphasis was typically on their characters' desire to conform to heteronormative standards.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Charles Cooley (1902) theorized that the individuals' concept of self is formed out of the responses and reactions they observe and internalize from their social surroundings, commonly known as the looking-glass self. External sources may influence our personalities because individuals reflect and internalize their environment (Gecas and Schwalbe 1983). The roles that characters play in children's literature serve as symbolic representations that provide sources of identification and inspire moral behavior (Tetenbaum and Pearson 1989). The texts and images that appear in children's books reflect the conventional values of a society (Fox 1993). Because children show an early awareness of their sexual identity, it is important to understand what meanings and images appear in children's books with "homosexual" or same-sex oriented characters.

Because parents, teachers, and caregivers are concerned for children's futures and view reading as an attribute of success, one of the major sources of socialization is children's literature. Currently the children's literature industry is booming (Brugeilles et al. 2002). According to the Children's Book Marketing and Research Report (IBIS World 2012), publishing companies that produced children's books in 2011 made an estimated $3 billion in the United States alone. Children's books have been made more widely available to audiences as young as newborn babies because they are made with inexpensive materials such as plastic and cardboard (Brugeilles et al. 2002).

While some publishing companies include diverse family structures in their line of children's books, research has shown that characters in children's books have typically exemplified traditional, stereotypical gender roles (Taylor 2003). In 1972 the majority of award-

winning children's books described and portrayed young boys as very active and typically outdoors, while girl characters were usually passive and stayed inside. These children books also portrayed girls as followers and boys as heroic and demonstrating leadership capabilities (Weitzman et al. 1972).

Later studies indicate that not only do characters' personalities change to fit stereotypical gender roles, but the plots do as well (Tetenbaum and Pearson 1989). Characters are often placed in specific themes and plot lines based on their gender. Leading male characters were more likely to face dilemmas focusing on situations that influenced them to think exclusively about justice and moral orientation, reinforcing patriarchal views. Children's books that have females as the leading character typically had plot lines inferring that girls or women should primarily orient themselves with a selfless and caring attitude (Tetenbaum and Pearson 1989).

Adult female characters are much more likely than male characters to portray nurturing or domestic roles (Hamilton et al. 2006). For example, in *Mr. Willowby's Christmas Tree* (Barry 2000), the predominant female character is a maid. Female characters are usually stay at home mothers who cook and clean, while the father figures in the household work outside the home to support the family's needs (Crabb and Bielawski 1994). Adult female characters, similar to young female characters, are portrayed as passive, dependent, and caring, while the male characters are independent and strong (Weitzman et al. 1972).

Along with the text describing the character's roles and personalities, the imagery in children's books is important because the age of the audience. Parents are much more likely to read picture books to their 3-5 year olds because that is age-appropriate (Hamilton et al. 2006). One image emphasizing female dependency on their male counterparts is found in *Pigs at Odds* (Axelrod 2000) when a male character is shown holding a car door open for the female character

while she clutches her purse. Many books assign roles that are perceived to be devalued to female characters or leave them out altogether.

Children's books have been criticized as sexist and for their omission of female characters (Turner-Bowker 1996). The top selling children's books in 2001, along with a seven-year sample of award winning Caldecott picture books, had male characters appearing in illustrations over 53 percent more often than female characters (Hamilton et al. 2006). In other words, of those 200 children's books, there were twice as many male characters as there were female characters (Hamilton et al. 2006).

While researchers do believe that the gender roles associated with characters in children's books have improved by including more girls and women, as well as providing those characters with more power, females and males are still left vastly unequal (Diekman and Murnen 2004). These binary and unequal gender roles contribute to the socialization process by teaching children how to function in gendered structures (Lorber 1994), learn the recurring conventional performances that establish gender (Butler 1990), or learn how to interact and how to avoid "doing gender" incorrectly (West and Zimmerman 1987). Children's recognition of gender differences begins at a very early age, and by the time they are three years old they are able to differentiate between males and females (Jacklin and Maccoby 1978). Unpacking gender socialization helps us expose the construction of gender inequality (Martin 2009).

"Heteronormativity is the systematic privileging of the heterosexual couple as the social and sexual ideal" (Fields 2001:166). When referencing an individual's sexuality, research has shown that children understand and participate in heterosexual lifestyles in the early stages of elementary school (Martin 2009). While there has not been much research demonstrating how individuals come to understand and perpetuate heteronormative behavior, certain aspects of

everyday life have been explored. One way heteronormativity has been studied is through parenting styles and the impact of communication between adults and their children. When adults, mainly mothers, speak with their children about love and romantic relationships, it is assumed that their child is heterosexual because heterosexuality is the "natural" avenue (Martin 2009). Of course, mothers are not the sole influence on heteronormative behavior, but mothers do feel pressured by their families and peers to raise children who are stigma free (Martin 2009). When children begin to show signs of gender nonconformity, fathers are more likely to feel pressure to raise heterosexual children, especially if they have sons, and more likely to have a negative response to gender nonconformity than mothers (Kane 2006).

Parents of lesbian and/or gay children also attempt to "normalize" and "normify" their children's identity, as well as their own. "Normalization refers to when a "normal" individual swears on behalf of a stigmatized other, while mortification is the social process where a social deviant testifies for their own identity" (Fields 2001:166). Even many parents of gay and/or lesbian children who argue on behalf of LGBTQ rights, still hold heterosexual values to which lesbian and/or gay people should adhere (Fields 2009).

Compulsory heterosexuality is an institution and ideology that influences gender inequality by defining what are acceptable and legitimate sexual expressions and identities (Rich 1980). One detriment to the sexual hierarchy that exists today is the constant need to create a sexual dichotomy between heterosexual and homosexual people (Fields 2001). Even individuals who do not self-identify as homosexual but deviate from expected gender behavior are labeled because people find comfort in social marking. Social marking is a intricate, asymmetrical classification process that highlights one side of a contrast as unnatural, thereby implicitly naturalizing the unmarked side (Brekhus 1996). In addition to parent and child relationships,

many of the popular themes found in children's books continue to center on heteronormativity, excluding LGBTQ characters or stories. Children's books supply children with examples of acceptable behavior, what is expected of them and what is right and wrong (Turner-Bowkeer 1996). Children's books that exclude LGBTQ characters deny children the ability to learn about the homosexual community. A majority of children's books have stories centered on hetero-romantic fairytale couples, especially books geared towards little girls (Do Razario 2004; Martin, Luke, and Verduzco-Baker 2007; Tobin 2000; Witt 2000.)

Authors who provided children's literature with homosexual characters in the past have often related gay and lesbian characters to negative stereotypes that the LGBTQ community rejects. Their secondary roles as characters in children's books are typically emphasized and their sexuality plays a major part in the plot (ALA 2012). Children's literature reinforces homophobic attitudes by including negative clichés and common misconceptions about gay and/or lesbian people (Casement 2002). Although there are now more books including LGBTQ characters, they are still strongly underrepresented (Casement 2002).

Expressing diversity in children's books can help children to more accurately understand the variety of life (Stewig and Knipfel 1975). Children's books that contain LGBTQ characters have been thought of as controversial and inappropriate (Schall and Kauffmann 2003). Evidence of this can be found in the American Library Association's Office of Intellectual Freedom's (OIF) list of the most challenged books. The OIF releases a yearly list of the most challenged children's books in the United States. From 2006 to 2012, a book about two male penguins that fall in love, *And Tango Makes Three* by Justin Richardson and Peter Parnell, has been the most challenged book.

CHAPTER 3

METHODS

Sample

This thesis is based on a content analysis of children's books that contain LGBTQ characters. The purpose of this content analysis is to ascertain how LGBTQ characters are portrayed, as well as any other themes that may be related to or influenced by the characters. I was unable to find a coding scheme created prior to this study, which is likely due to the more recent emergence of children's book authors including LGBTQ characters. I conducted open and focused coding (Charmaz 2006) to be thorough, as well as to capture unexpected themes. Building off of these emergent themes allowed me to create and analyze concepts using the texts and images. The sample of books selected for this research was developed through the use of websites ranging from the San Francisco library, The American Library Association's Office of Intellectual Freedom, as well as Amazon.com searches.

The American Library Association's Office of Intellectual Freedom's (OIF) compiles an annual list of the most challenged books in the United States. "A challenge is defined as a formal, written complaint, filed with a library or school requesting that materials be removed because of the content or appropriateness" (ALA 2012). In addition to the ALA list, I also consulted and chose books from Amazon.com's and San Francisco Public Library's web pages. Amazon permits searches for books that share similar themes. The San Francisco Public Library has a broad list of updated children's literature, specifically books with LGBTQ characters.

Half of the books chosen for this analysis are identified as suitable for ages three and up, while the other half have specific age ranges, for example three-five year olds. Books that are labeled as acceptable for children over the age of nine have sometimes been categorized as a

young adult books. I dismissed books targeting readers older than nine, for example 9-12 years old, in order to only consider books written for children, as opposed to adolescents or young adults. Aside from the age requirement, the books had to include a lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer character or theme. I identified 29 books total that make up the sample (See Appendix).

After compiling the list of children's books that include LGBTQ characters, I requested the majority of them through the Johnson City Public Library's Interlibrary Loan system. While this particular library, along with East Tennessee State University's Charles C. Sherrod Library, were able to provide 10 titles, the other books had to be ordered from the Bristol Public Library, Kingsport Public Library, and the Nashville Public Library.

<u>Analytic Strategy</u>

The children's books selected form the database of the project. I scanned all of the books into a pdf, which was then imported into NVivo. NVivo's software program permits researchers to categorize, code, and analyze different forms of material. This allowed for any relevant themes, in addition to those expected, to emerge from analyzing the children's books. For my first step, I read through all of the children's books and immersed myself in the text and images. Once I was comfortable with the material, I categorized examples into themes and sub-themes and assembled an overall coding scheme. The themes and sub-themes were developed over time and required a repetitive process of reading the books, taking notes, and interpreting the data.

These themes involved patterns of character behavior or consistent presence of specific LGBTQ-related concepts or images. Primary codes included (a) adversity, (b) LGBTQ character's age (child, teenager, or adult), (c) author's message, (d) based on a true story, (e) LGBTQ character's gender (female, male, or transgender), (f) LGBTQ character's relationship

status (in a relationship, married, or single), (g) LGBTQ character is a human or animal, (h) LGBTQ character's identification (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer), (i) heteronormativity, (j) tone of plot, (k) stereotypes used in plot, and (l) other.

One of the emergent themes found in the data is whether or not characters policed heteronormative behavior. An example can be found in *William's Doll*, when the father urges his son, William, to play with a basketball instead of a baby doll. I also created an "other" theme where I categorized images or texts that needed further analysis, but may not necessarily have been persistent throughout the sample. An example of this is found in *The White Swan Express*. There were many images of heterosexual and lesbian couples, except the lesbian couples' faces were rarely seen. While this was not apparent in other children's books in the sample, I found it important to dissect.

I then created sub-themes to further analyze the data coded in the major themes. An example of a sub-theme would be further analysis of what kinds of adversity the LGBTQ characters dealt with. These sub-themes for adversity were categorized as being either directly dealing with LGBTQ-related issues or not. An example of this can be found in *Our Mother's House* when a neighbor yells at a lesbian couple because she disagrees with their lesbian relationship.

After I created the first set of themes and sub-themes, I continued to code the books taking thematic notes in the margins. This provided the opportunity to analyze emergent thoughts and questions about what the notes may mean to the overall research and outcomes. Once I wrote these notes I searched for any additional major themes that might differ from or contradict the initial codes and identified those clearly as well. The only pre-determined codes included all characters and how they were portrayed, whether their sexuality was left implicit or made

explicit, and if they were central or secondary characters. These themes were categorized by how they relate to sexuality or gender-deviant behavior and whether they were problematized, neutral, or normalized. The only theme quantified was the number of gay characters vs. lesbian characters vs. bisexual characters etc. and whether or not the use of any LGBTQ terms were present in any of the books.

CHAPTER 4

INTERPRETING LGBTQ CHARACTERS AND THEMES

Initial Patterns

The beginning of this analysis covers characters' surface-level similarities. One major

parallel running through the children's books involved characters' race. Almost all of the

characters from the sample were white. They also appeared to be middle to upper class. Only 3

out of the 29 books depicted a person of color (one Hispanic and two African American

characters). The nearly homogenous white characters may reflect the lower level of LGBTQ

acceptance in the African American communities (Fullilove and Fullilove 1999; Kennamer et al.

2000). However, it seems more plausible that this overrepresentation of white characters fits the

larger media pattern that overlooks racial diversity (Common Cause 2008; CCBC 2013).

Moreover, the media at large also feature little sexual diversity (Common Cause 2008). White,

heterosexual families are depicted as the "ideal" type of American family, and the target

audience may still be thought of as white and heterosexual by default (Ryan 2009).

When lesbian and gay couples were represented, they were almost always presented as

being in a relationship, except for when their sexuality was implicit, which I will discuss later on

in the analysis. Many of the lesbian and gay couples depicted in my sample suggested a higher

socioeconomic status. Many of the lesbian characters had either high paying or highly skilled

occupations, like a doctor or carpenter, or one of the partners was a stay at home mother,

indicating that the other individual in the relationship could provide enough income to support

the entire family. Many of the lesbian couples were portrayed as possessing the ability to adopt a

child, and in some cases more than one, which would be prohibitively expensive for most

families. It was evident that gay individuals were also relatively well off because they attended

events like professional ballets and baseball games or in two extreme cases were a part of a royal family.

Although the characters from the sample seem quite similar on the surface, their stories offered some variety. In re-reading and analyzing the 29 children's books, my sample fell into three broad categories: books that emphasized gender deviance, stories that included lesbian and gay couples, and educational books about diverse families. The majority of the primary characters in all three categories of my sample were young children. One feature that authors attributed to several young characters was gender-deviant behavior. They portrayed gender deviance two different ways that relate to childhood: characters either wanted to play with toys or wear clothing deemed socially acceptable for members of the other gender. One example illustrating this behavior was when a young boy wanted to play with a baby doll instead of a football or basketball. Only one book featured a young girl who wanted to play with fire trucks instead of tea sets; the other six books highlighted boys' gender deviance.

Children's books also included gay and lesbian adult characters, but they played supporting roles or were tertiary characters. These books centered on young children who were related to the lesbian or gay couples. The children's gender or sexuality was not an important part of the story, but their various reactions to the lesbian or gay relationships were vital to the plot.

The third grouping in my sample reflected educational family books that celebrated diverse families. These books did not necessarily involve an in-depth storyline; instead, they presented a series of traditional and non-conventional modern families. These simple books provide adults with the materials to initiate discussions with children by introducing LGBTQ

individuals. Including LGBTQ characters in family books normalizes their relationships and commemorates various forms of what it means to be a family today.

<div align="center">Scripting Sexuality</div>

After taking an inventory of the characters' surface characteristics and the books' main groupings, I focused my analysis on how book authors addressed sexuality. The authors scripted sexuality in direct and ambiguous ways. Nine stories featured female same-sex relationships portrayed by humans, while three books that featured male same-sex relationships involved animal characters. To convey same-sex couples' relationships, the authors incorporated conventional milestones in adults' committed relationships: getting married and becoming parents. Readers are made aware of relationships existing between two female characters because those plots typically involved adoption, whereas weddings signaled stories with gay couples.

The children's books that openly scripted gay characters used animals rather than humans to represent these characters. For example, one storyline featured two male hamsters getting married, while in another, two male penguins fall in love. By telling stories about male same-sex relationships with animal rather than human characters, the authors seemed to deliberately sidestep any controversy about human sexuality. It may be easier for an adult to read a story to a child about animals having a homosexual relationship and avoid questions about gay human relationships. The animal characters may be more compelling to the children than stories about their relationships. Other than celebrating gay animals falling in love, most other storylines that included gay characters kept their sexuality implicit or ambiguous.

Many times authors employed euphemisms or made subtle hints to communicate that a male character was gay. Gay human relationships were almost never acknowledged through text

or directly explained to the audience. For example, in Jeannine Atkins's book *A Name On the Quilt*, a family mourns the loss of Ron who died of AIDS. While the family is quilting a blanket in his memory, Ron's friend Michael discusses the intimate details of their relationship. Although they refer to Michael as an "old friend", it is evident that he was Ron's partner. Michael brings Ron's clothing over to the family from their shared apartment so that they can have some of his belongings. This example also hints at a gay relationship because the author attributed feminine characteristics to Michael. Michael knows how to sew and speaks more like Lauren, the young girl, than Uncle Ron. This reinforces LGBTQ stereotypes by associating gender nonconforming behavior with a gay relationship. Unlike Michael, Ron's mother explains that her husband, Ron's father, could not attend the quilting memorial because "he cannot sew." This statement possibly insinuated that the father was heterosexual and rejected Ron because he did not approve of him being gay.

> "You know, Lauren [Ron's niece], when Ron got too sick to leave the house, he still asked if the ice on the pond was thick enough for skating." Michael's voice was slow and quiet, more like Lauren's than Uncle Ron's…Lauren's thread slipped out of her needle. Her eyes watered as she thought of the feel and smell of Uncle Ron's wool jacket. "It gets easier," Michael whispered, threading her needle. (Atkins 1999:21)

I found another clear example in Leslea Newman's book *Too Far Away to Touch*. In this story, Uncle Leonard goes with his niece and an adult male character named Nathan to a planetarium, baseball game, and lastly a beach. Leonard wants to spend time with these characters because he is dying of AIDS. Although Leonard and Nathan's relationship is never addressed in the story, Newman gives hints through the text and images. When Leonard first

goes to pick up his niece, she immediately asked the whereabouts of Nathan, supporting the idea that they are typically together.

> "Hi, Uncle Leonard." "Hi, Zoe." Uncle Leonard squatted down to hug me, but he was wearing a black beret…. "Where's Nathan?" I asked, putting my marbles back in my pocket as Uncle Leonard stood up. "He had to work today," Uncle Leonard said, "so it's just you and me. (Newman 1995:8)

> A cool breeze blew and I snuggled up close to Uncle Leonard. Nathan took off his jacket. "Put this on," he said to Uncle Leonard. "I'll go back to the car and see if we have another blanket." (Newman 1995:26)

As the two preceding examples also indicate, some children's books incorporated the tragedy of the AIDS epidemic. In addition to building subtle hints to imply that a male character who died of AIDS was gay, the authors excluded any references to female partners. The absence of a wife or female partner spending time with the dying character or mourning the loss of his passing helps suggest (to adult readers) that the male character was not heterosexual. Although these two authors and one other attempted to educate younger generations about AIDS, homosexuality, and the loss of a loved one, they reinforced the "deviance" of homosexuality by shying away from a more open approach and also perpetuate the stereotype of all gay men having AIDS. These books, published in 1995, 1999, and 2005, mark a tragic time when many gay men sadly passed away because of the spread of HIV. The authors need not be so timid about these connections because they are important to the story.

<u>Adversity</u>

Another central theme that emerged in the entire sample was adversity. Adversity was displayed through heteronormative policing, the feeling of being incomplete or unfulfilled, and various forms of harassment.

<u>Heteronormative Policing</u>

The majority of the gender-deviant characters faced opposition from either their family members or peers. I refer to this as heteronormative policing because it consisted of one character trying to deter the child from gender-deviant actions and, by extension, acting in a non-heterosexual way. Androgyny was not an option for any of the characters. They either had to act feminine or masculine. In most cases if there were any hint of a young boy acting feminine, the father figure in the story disapproved and attempted to control his son's behavior. The father characters tried to police their sons' behaviors through verbal harassment, disapproving body language, or in one case through abandonment. This reflects real world pressures in that fathers feel pressured to raise heterosexual children (Kane 2006). A father may feel that if his son does not grow up to exhibit heterosexual masculinity, then his own masculinity and competence as a father is questioned (Kimmel 1994). This suggests that only father figures are responsible for modeling masculinity during the socialization process that is popularly thought to determine sexuality and gender expression. The gender-deviant characters were harassed because they did not reproduce the heterosexual standards or comply with the gender binary. Gender non-conformity in these stories is being treated as a proxy for homosexuality, which reinforces LGBTQ stereotypes. Americans popularly assume that gender roles are precursors for sexual orientation (Pogrebin 1997). If men act feminine, then they might be labeled as gay, while lesbians are equated with masculinity (Kleinman n.d.).

An example of this heteronormative policing was found in Charlotte Zolotow's *William's Doll*. The grandmother, however, reassures the father that William will grow up to be a "normal" man, however he sexuality identifies because he will be a father. This guidance from the grandmother reinforces pro-natalism, which insinuates that "normal" means having children. The main character, William, wants to play with a baby doll and his father objects:

> But his father was upset. "He's a boy!" he said to William's grandmother. "He
> has a basketball and an electric train and a workbench to build things with.
> Why does he need a doll?" William's grandmother smiled. "He needs it," she
> said, "to hug and to cradle and to take to the park so that when he's a father
> like you, he'll know how to take care of his baby and feed him and love him
> and bring him the things he wants, like a doll so that he can practice being a
> father." (Zolotow 1972:18-19)

Another example was found in *The Sissy Duckling*, by Harvey Fierstein (2002). Elmer, the main duck character, disappointed his father because he ran away from a classmate who tried to fight him for being "different." His mother, however, stood up for her son:

> "He ran away instead of fighting," Papa bellowed. "He was being chased,"
> Mama argued back. "In a few weeks we will all fly south for the winter. It will
> be every duck for himself. Only the strong will survive." "If you'd stop
> thinking like a sneaker commercial, you'd see that Elmer is just as strong as
> any other duckling." "Elmer is a sissy!" "Elmer is your son!" Mama pleaded.
> "He's no son of mine!" declared Papa. Poor Elmer heard his father's words,
> and his heart crumbled to pieces. What do you do when your own papa calls
> you names? (Fierstein 2002:20)

In the stories that include gender-deviant characters, the mother or grandmother accepted their "deviant" child and humored their behavior. Although they pleaded with the disapproving father to accept the young boy, fathers typically ignored the guidance and continued to expect their child to show masculine traits. Again, this reinforces the standards that have been set for women by perpetuating the culture of motherhood. Not only are women expected to become mothers, but they are also expected to always nurture and love their children. This theme was also supported in Leslea Newman's *A Fire Truck for Ruthy*, which was the only book that included a female character who deviated from stereotypical gender roles for girls.

The character of Ruthy was a young girl who was turned off by the idea of playing with "girl" toys. Although she asked to play with fire trucks and helicopter toys, her grandmother assumed she wanted to play with tea sets and dolls. It was easier for Ruthy to convince her grandmother to allow her to play with "inappropriate" toys than it was for the boy characters to persuade their fathers. Even when the young girl asked her grandmother about the gendered toys, her grandmother was not angry, just initially confused. By the end of the story the grandma admits to how much fun fire trucks were. This is unlike the other stories because most of the father characters never ended up accepting their sons. Outside the world of books, young girls are applauded when they succeed with "masculine" activities because they are perceived as identifying with the dominant, higher-status group.

The stories that included gender nonconforming characters typically did not have common resolutions, but they did somehow incorporate love. While *William's Doll* concludes without any closure between the disappointed father and son, William's grandmother accepted him. Elmer's father in *The Sissy Duckling* grew proud of his son for being "different" after spending quality time together during the winter. The author in *My Princess Boy* directly

questioned the audience about how they would react if they saw a "Princess Boy," and concluded with loving their princess boy for who he is. Although not all of the characters involved in these stories learned to appreciate the gender nonconformist, there was usually a happy ending.

Characters' Need to Fill a Void

Many of the books, including those that had lesbian, gay, and gender-deviant characters, told stories about characters making changes in their lives. The stories thus begin with characters who lack fulfillment. Gender-deviant characters may feel unfulfilled because they want to engage in activities outside their stereotypical role. By the end of the story, most of the characters achieve their goals and are happy. However, authors who create storylines committed to resolving a lesbian or gay couples' desires with marriage or adoption present a rosier picture of reality than exists currently. Not only is it more difficult for gay and lesbian couples to adopt and get married, in some states neither is legal.

One example of this theme was found in Linda de Haan and Stern Nijland's, *King and King and Family*. After the male newlyweds arrive home from their honeymoon in Africa, they, along with their mother the Queen, are surprised when a little girl from the jungle snuck into their luggage and came home with them.

> Soon the travelers were home again, and they brought with them a very heavy suitcase. All at once, the suitcase burst open. "Oh my, it's a little girl from the jungle!" said the Queen. "You're the child we always wanted," said King and King. She told them all about her adventures. To make it official, King and King adopted the little girl who had traveled so far to be with them. This took lots of documents and stamps. (Haan and Nijland 2004: 27-31)

An example of a gender-deviant character who wanted to do something out of the ordinary to feel fulfilled appeared in *My Princess Boy*, by Cheryl Kilodavis: "I love my Princess Boy. When we go shopping he is the happiest when looking at girls' clothes. But when he says he wants to buy a pink bag or a sparkly dress, people stare at him" (Kilodavis 2009:13).

In the following example from *Uncle Bobby's Wedding*, by Sarah S. Brannen (2008), a gay hamster couple are planning on getting married so that they can "become a family." A niece of one of the hamsters, Chloe, does not want her uncle to get married because she fears that she will not see him anymore.

> "Let's go for a walk," said Uncle Bobby. He and Chloe took their path through
> the field. "Why do you have to get married?" asked Chloe. "Jamie and I want
> to live together and have our own family now," said Bobby. "You want your
> own kids?" "Only if they're just like you," said Bobby. (Brannen 2008: 15)

Understandably, these books are written for a very young audience and families play a critical role in a child's primary socialization. Many children's books include families because they are so important.

Harassment

Another form of adversity found in the children's books was physical and verbal assault. These kinds of problems were frequently presented to LGBTQ characters, as well as gender-deviant characters. In many stories young characters who strayed from gender-appropriate behaviors were subjected to bullying. Family members along with peers verbally harassed the gender-deviant characters. However, bullying did not just stop with younger characters. Bullying was also found in books with gay and lesbian secondary characters. One example of bullying was in Harvey Fierstein's, *The Sissy Duckling*:

Because everyone blamed Elmer for having to stay late, he decided it would be

wise to let them leave school first. He took a good look around before stepping

out from behind the door. "Alone at last!" he said to himself and started down

the path. "See?" There's nothing to worry about. "Wanna bet?" came the

thundering reply. Drake sprang from his hiding place, his fists raised for a

fight. (Fierstein 2002:20)

Angry bullying was demonstrated through text and images. One example of this is found

in Patricia Polacco's (2009) *In Our Mothers' House*, when a lesbian couple's neighbor confronts

them at a community block party.

She planted her feet squarely in front of our mothers. "I don't appreciate what

you two are!" she snarled at Meema and Marmee. Will and Millie came

running up. I froze where I was. Mrs. Lockner wheeled and stalked off.

"What's the matter with her, Momma, what's the matter with her?" Millie kept

saying. All the neighbors closed in on us. "She is full of fear, sweetie. She's

afraid of what she cannot understand: she doesn't understand *us*," Meema

quietly said (Polacco 2009:36)

<u>Normalizing Same-Sex Couples</u>

Another theme found in the children's book sample was authors comparing same-sex

couples to heterosexual couples. The books included plots about young children who realized for

the first time that their gay or lesbian parents are different from heterosexual couples. The main

character typically became upset after being confronted about not having both a mother and a

father. This either prompted the main character to start comparing his or her homosexual parents

to heterosexual parents or become sad and angry that his or her parents were different. An

example of this theme is found in *Heather Has Two Mommies* by Lesle Newman (1989). This book is considered the first children's book ever to include LGBTQ characters.

> After nap time, everyone sits in a circle, and Molly reads them a story about a little boy whose father is a veterinarian. He takes care of dogs and cats and birds and fish and hamsters when they get sick… "My daddy is a teacher," David says. "Once I went to his school with him." "I don't have a daddy," Heather says. She'd never thought about it before. Did everyone except Heather have a daddy? Heather's forehead crinkles up and she begins to cry.
> (Newman 1989: 19-20)

Later in the story, Heather's teacher, Molly, discussed that it does not matter who is in your family, as long as everybody loves one another. Threading the commonalities between different types of families serves to normalize "unconventional" families.

Authors also compared same-sex couples to heterosexual couples without including any situation to prompt the conversation. One example of this theme was found in *And Tango Makes Three* by Justin Richardson and Peter Parnell (2005). The story is about two male penguins that lived in a zoo together and fell in love. The penguins felt incomplete at first because they did not have an egg like the other heterosexual penguins. Noticing this hardship, a zookeeper gives the couple an abandoned egg to adopt into their family. Once the egg hatched and the penguin couple added one more to their family, they felt happy, "like all the other…families." The authors wrote, "At night the three penguins return to their nest. They snuggled together and, like all the other penguins in the penguin house, and all the other animals in the zoo, and all families in the big city around them, they went to sleep (Richardson and Parnell 2005:33).

Using phrases that suggest "they are just like everybody else" encourages the readers to assume that same-sex couples/families are "just the same as" heterosexual couples/families, with heterosexuals as the standard for comparison. This kind of "just the same as" comparison, although well-meaning, glosses over stark differences. For example, LGBTQ people often face harassment and are granted fewer rights (Stacey 1998). Comparing LGBTQ families to mainstream heterosexual families only further creates an ideal family type that is unrealistic and outdated.

<u>Language</u>

There were only three books out of the sample that included LGBTQ-related terminology. If the author did include an LGBTQ- identified word, it was most likely the word gay. The term gay has sometimes been mistakenly used as an umbrella term when referencing any LGBTQ individual. This is unhelpful because gay is a "male-generic" that minds males as the default or standard and lesbians as the exception, which unintentionally reinforces sexism (Hofstadter 1991).

Another language pattern common to family oriented books describe a lesbian or gay couple in terms of their parental roles, not their intimate relationship to each other. Instead of using the word gay or lesbian, they write statements like "two moms" or "two dads." Many families have two moms if there is a divorce in the family and the husband gets remarried. Polygynous families also have two mothers. Saying a family has two mothers or two fathers could refer to many different kinds of families without reference to the parents' sexuality. Even so, these euphemisms for lesbian and gay relationships provide adults with the platform to broadly discuss families with children, as well as offer children the chance to identify with characters from the book if they have two mothers or two fathers.

It is also important to keep in mind the target audience, three-eight year old children. Using ambiguous or vague language confuses children. If these books function as educational tools, primarily for introducing LGBTQ individuals, then authors should use the appropriate language that explains what a gay or lesbian couple is. If authors seek to introduce diverse characters to help children make sense of the social world, then they should strive to present them clearly. It is likely that vague language raises more confusion than clarification.

Another book that inaccurately implemented LGBTQ terminology was *Rough, Tough Charley* by Verla Kay (2007), which was the only book from my sample that included a transgender character. The plot included a female character that passed as a male stagecoach driver during the 1800s. The author used the pronoun "he" and "him" whenever the character was referenced, until the other characters found out that Charley was actually a woman. The author concludes the story using both "he" and "she" when describing Charley at the end of the book: "Women were not 'Rough and tough.' They weren't 'smart or strong enough.' They were bound by Petticoats. Couldn't drive or cast their votes. Charley did though, as she would. Drive and voted, cause 'he' could" (Kay 2007). After the story ends, the author explained that she described Charley's adventures as a stagecoach driver because the character was based on a real person. Although Charley wanted to be known as a man, the author continued to refer to Charley as a "she."

The transgender community continues to work toward transgender awareness and accurate representation. One element frequently missing from children's books, and the media in general, is representation of transgender characters (Ryan 2009). Although transgender individuals are not as common as other member of the LGBTQ community, I set out to find any children's books that included transgender characters and found only *Rough, Tough Charley*

(2007). The main character displayed masculine characteristics and was well respected by his peers. In only one scenario did another character in the story point out that he sometimes acted "fancy" and wore blue "ladies'" gloves. The author hints at the character's asexuality by stating that he did not date and kept to himself.

Avoiding Sex

One theme that emerged after analyzing the sample multiple times was the idea that authors seemed to avoid any suggestion of procreation and sex when writing about the lesbian and gay couples. Although there are a few ways a lesbian couple could have a child, children's book authors only wrote about lesbians and a few gay couples adopting. In only one of the books from the sample, an author vaguely mentioned one of the lesbian mothers as being the birth mom and the other mother as the adoptive mother but ended the conversation after that. Authors also avoided discussing sex when they wrote stories about gay couples. As I previously stated, many of the gay couples were only hinted at as having an intimate relationship. The gay couples came off as close friends and the validity of their relationship was left up to the reader to explain or affirm. However, since many times the authors recognized their two male characters as being "close," it would be more beneficial to the future of LGBTQ community for the authors to openly acknowledge these relationships instead of hinting at them.

The authors are able to avoid controversy if they only hint at a sexual relationship between two men or two women. An example of sex avoidance was found in *It's Okay to Be Different* by Todd Parr (2001). The author described that it is okay to have "two moms," or "two dads." While the parental roles were highlighted in this book, their relationships were muted. Hints and euphemisms are one step away from the closet. Since children's media usually depicts traditional heterosexual relationships (Martin and Kazyak 2009), only in children's books that

have heterosexual couples are characters able to reproduce their own children. Children explained how babies are made in *Mommy Laid an Egg: Or, Where Do Babies Come From?* by Babette Cole (1996). The children characters in the book draw pictures of naked women and men, pointing out male and female sex organs. They accompany the descriptions with childish drawings of men and women in different sex positions or how "mummies and daddies fit together." All of the pictures that the children in this story illustrated were of heterosexual couples having sex, excluding same-sex couples.

> "Mummy does have eggs. They are inside her tummy." "And daddy has seeds in seed pods outside his body." "Daddy also has a tube. The seeds from the pods come out of it." "The tube goes into mummy's tummy through a little hole. Then the seeds swim inside using their tails." (Cole 1996: 17-20)

Authors' Messages

Some of the children's books came with a message from the author. Some letters to readers shared a message about adoption or AIDS. It seemed that when the books included concepts that might be hard for children to understand or difficult for parents to discuss with their young children, the authors tried to provide extended information about the subject. Children's books that were about true stories also included short biographies about the main character. Authors' efforts to connect their stories with actual historical figures could positively influence child ideas about the LGBTQ community. Such stories help them understand that real LGBTQ people have led compelling, valued lives.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

On average, children seem to recognize same-sex attractions around age 10 (D'Augelli et al. 2005). To explain children's earlier sexual identity development, some researchers assign partial responsibility to media sources that expose young children to sexualized content (Dunne, Prendergast, and Telford 2002). It is also possible that age of sexual identity development has not altered as much as the climate surrounding it. Rather than investigate the questions of when children's sexual identities develop, this thesis analyzed how children's media deal with the topic of sexual identification. I focused on children's literature that includes LGBTQ characters and I assessed how authors portrayed them in texts and images. My data analysis explored how the LGBTQ community is currently presented and how heteronormative behavior is reproduced through children's literature.

Although authors of children's literature have diversified the characters they write about, the LGBTQ community is still underrepresented, echoing Casement's (2002) findings from over a decade ago. Out of the 29 books I identified for the sample, few characters represented any sexualities and identities other than lesbian and gay (that is, no bisexual, transgender, or queer-identified characters appeared). All of the lesbian and gay characters were white, upper to middle class, and in committed relationships. Most of these characters held secondary roles. Children's book authors varied how they revealed characters' lesbian or gay sexuality. Many authors used subtle hints and euphemisms in place of clearly defining a same-sex relationship, perhaps in hopes of sidestepping controversy. For example, many of the gay characters were not identified as partners or lovers, but as "roommates" or "friends." Unless characters got married or adopted a child, their sexuality was ambiguous, leaving it up to adults reading the story to explain the

characters' sexuality or gender identification. Children's book authors have the ability to educate readers about delicate issues, which also means balancing age appropriate material and reality. When referring to lesbian and gay characters in these books, sex may be the topic, but it must be disguised so as to prevent dispute.

The absence of central LGBTQ characters and lack of clarification about them is detrimental because books represent one of the best ways children can learn about the different kinds of sexuality and identities that populate our world. Parents may feel threatened by discussions of sex because of our cultural definition of childhood defines children as sexually pure and innocent. Mentioning sexual identities may seem inappropriate, and therefore euphemisms may appeal to authors. However, this timid attempt to introduce LGBTQ characters does not allow children to gain an understanding of who composes the LGBTQ community.

Most of the books with LGBTQ characters typically included an LGBTQ-related problem, like harassment or physical violence. These sources of conflict in fictional stories accurately reflect real-life social problems that continue to take place today. These books may help children understand the hardships that members of the LGBTQ community struggle to overcome and validate the readers' feelings if they identify with any of the characters. However, if most stories are conflict-based, then readers (children and adults) may reinforce the sexually "deviant" status of LGBTQ people and perceive them as cultural outlaws and outliers.

Children's books also included young male characters who did not conform to the conventional gender binary. The gender nonconforming boy characters usually wanted to play with toys that were considered appropriate for girls. In many of these stories, father figures disapproved and tried to police the boys' actions. Such plots mirror how narrowly gender may be enacted in American culture (Lorber 1994). After gender is ascribed to an individual, he or she is

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socialized to uphold a gender binary role. If gender is indistinct or ambiguous, interactions may become fraught because the person does not precisely fit into the "male" or "female" category (Lorber 1994). In addition, Americans commonly believe that gender determines one's sexuality; thus gender nonconformity is treated as a problem because it implies that noncomformists cannot be heterosexual (Kimmel 1994; Kleinman n.d.; Pogrebin 1997). This could be one of the reasons why authors created angry authority figures who disagreed with gender-nonconforming behavior, which can ultimately reproduce our culture's heterosexist beliefs in young readers.

The majority of the LGBTQ characters attempted to fill a void. Whether it was playing with "inappropriate" toys or adopting a child, characters sought fulfillment. Lesbian couples often adopted a child to feel more complete. However, by focusing on gender-normative behavior for women, like motherhood, authors could again avoid controversy by not mentioning that lesbians are not the same as straight women as sexual beings. Lesbian characters become mothers, and although being a mother is a valued identity, it is distinctly asexual. It is a moral identity, not a sexual identity.

> A moral identity is an identity that people invest with moral significance; our belief in ourselves as good people depends on whether we think our actions and reactions are consistent with that identity. By this definition, any identity that testifies to a person's good character can be moral identity, such as mother, Christian, breadwinner, or feminist. (Kleinman 1996:5)

Children book authors take two very different approaches when framing lesbian and gay characters. One theme that stood out was the emphasis on gay males' deviance compared to lesbian women. While the gay characters either died of AIDS or were portrayed as animals, the lesbians were well-off human characters who adopted children and led steady lives. Although

monogamy was highlighted for lesbian couples, gay characters seemed to be treated as a more serious violation of gender deviance. The women characters from my sample were permitted to be lesbians who faced less adversity, whereas gay male characters were problematized.

My sample also lacked any gay or lesbian characters who were single or young. Although younger generations are identifying awareness of same-sex attractions around age 10 (D'Augelli et al. 2005), the only lesbian and gay characters were adults, never children. While the books from this sample geared for three-five year olds, children's book authors teach lessons that are remembered and treasured for a lifetime. This implicit age requirement for gay and lesbian characters denies children who may have same-sex attractions to identify with a story that is relative to their situation. Readers may gain an understanding of what the future could hold for lesbian and gay people from these books, but if so, the future seems quite grim. If the only LGBTQ characters children see have AIDS, are harassed, or face other adversities, they might feel discouraged or fearful about sharing their feelings with family members.

Authors should try to include these characters without making the entire plot revolve around facing adversity or filling a void in their life. Consistently including stories about adoption and marriage also perpetuates the idea that a family is incomplete without a marriage license or a baby to nurture. The authors make it seem as if there have to be legal ties between individuals for them to be considered a proper family. One great example of LGBTQ character inclusion is in *The Different Dragon* by Jennifer Bryan. In the story a young boy dreams about a dragon that does not want to be scary like other dragons. When the boy wakes up from the dream he is comforted by his two mothers. The main focus of the story is not some problem centering on the two women being lesbians and mothers; the story's focus is a modern family. Children's

book authors should improve their representations of LGBTQ characters, characters of color, and characters of diverse socioeconomic backgrounds to reflect present-day America.

As I call for more open discussions in books that are nevertheless appropriate for young children, here is an example of a book that should not be threatening, but was, and has been repeatedly attacked. From 2006 until 2012, excluding 2011, *And Tango Makes Three* has been one of the most frequently challenged books, according to the American Library Association. This children's book, which is based on a true story, has been challenged for being "anti-family," "unsuitable for the intended age group," and for including "homosexuality" (ALA 2012). Many opponents felt that the book was radical, even though there was not any LGBTQ-related terminology or sexual behavior. Although the authors did not openly define the two male penguins as gay, they playfully demonstrated a same-sex couple using male zoo animals who met and fell in love.

In 1990 Leslea Newman's *Heather Has Two Mommies* was republished by Alyson Publications and had gained more publicity than its 1989 release. It was passed around at anti-gay rallies as evidence of "the militant homosexual agenda" (Newman 2000). At the time, this children's book was progressive because it had a lesbian couple that was married with children, which also reinforces heterosexism by having unconventional characters enact traditional ideals. I urge authors to write books that rid their gay and lesbian characters of heteronormative behavior, therefore allowing readers to understand that there are options and avenues that couples can follow other than a marriage between a "masculine" person and a "feminine" person.

This research was limited due to a lack of time and resource constraints. It was difficult to find access to the 29 children's books that met the research criteria. Many of the books had to be ordered from different regions. Recently, more children's books including LGBTQ characters

have been released that could have added important themes to the analysis. Future research should continue to analyze recently released children's books and/or other forms of children's media that include LGBTQ characters. Another limitation is that only one researcher coded the children's books. A second researcher analyzing the sample may have identified additional patterns in the data.

This research provides an important assessment of the changes made in children's literature with regard to sexual and gender identity. Since same-sex relationships and civil rights have gained national attention and increasing public acceptance (Pew Research Center 2013), analyzing children's literature and the messages these books convey is particularly timely. Although children's books authors aim to introduce and educate their readers about LGBTQ people in hopes of normalizing same-sex couples and gender nonconformity, they fall short. As these children's books stand right now, they are not really helping guide their readers to think in open-minded ways about progressive topics. Authors continue to set up heterosexuals as the norm and emphasize conventional standards of manhood. Although they broach difficult topics, they do not necessarily challenge readers to strike new paths and avoid those that offer least resistance.

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