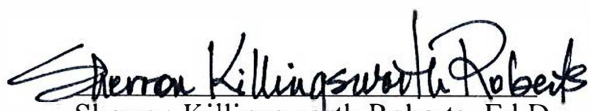


Honors Thesis Proposal

For

Representations and Impacts of Transgender and Nonconforming Ideals in Children's Literature

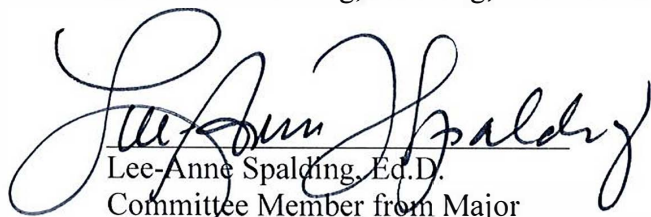
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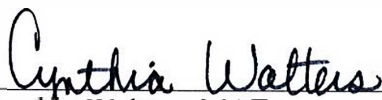
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# Representations and Impacts of Transgender and Nonconforming Ideals in Children's Literature

## INTRODUCTION

The desire for a more inclusive society has been increasing steadily, although not rapidly, alongside the increasing visibility of lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgender individuals (LGBT). Understanding and acceptance of the lesbian, gay, and bisexual community has come a considerable way from the times of Don't Ask, Don't Tell (DADT) and Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA). Progress is still being made both politically and socially creating an environment that is ever changing and adapting. One group of the LGBT community that is often neglected and still highly misunderstood is the one labeled transgender. Just two years ago, April 29, 2014, the Office for Civil Rights within the Department of Education declared that Title IX, a federal civil rights law that prohibits discrimination based on sex, applies to transgender individuals (Margolin, 2014). Florida's Principles of Professional Conduct for the Education Profession in Florida (2016) states that teachers should not discriminate on the basis of many different characteristics. Gender identity and gender expression are often not included in the long list of characteristics protected against harassment or discrimination. In fact, North Carolina held a special session in March, 2016 to rush a bill that not only targets transgender individuals by forcing them to use bathrooms aligned with their sex at birth, but also prevents local nondiscrimination laws from including gay and transgender people (Kopman, 2016).

Diversity in the classroom is growing more important as classrooms becomes more and more diverse. More preservice teacher education programs are identifying the need for providing diversity instruction. A focus on transgender and gender nonconforming individuals is often

barely covered or overlooked all together. This leaves teachers ill-equipped to handle the unique challenges that may occur with these individuals. The notion that elementary teachers will every have to encounter transgender and gender nonconforming children lessens the pressure to make them a focus. However, there is an importance of allowing the concepts of transgender and gender nonconformity during elementary school because elementary age children are at an age where their views and attitudes are constantly shifting.

Children's literature has always played a crucial role in how children view themselves and the world around them. Although the benefit of reading outside school is tremendous, much of a child's exposure to literature is done with the help of a teacher in the classroom setting. Therefore it is crucial to analyze the content of children's literature for use in the classroom and how that content impacts children. There is an abundant amount of research on gender in literature, but very little of that has delved into the realm of transgender representation. Both gender expression and gender identity need to be discussed as the visibility of both transgender and gender nonconforming children increases. With bullying, a shortage of supportive staff, and a lack of understanding being a problem, children's literature allows for a way to address these issues through an increase in empathy and knowledge. Children's literature that features transgender and/or gender nonconforming characters has the capacity to both improve attitudes towards the outgroups, but also the self-image of the individuals reading about them.

The purpose of this thesis is to perform a content analysis of current children's literature for elementary age children that contains a strong transgender and/or a gender nonconforming character. By using the patterns observed from this in-depth analysis, a series of related lesson plans containing appropriate discussion questions will be constructed and provided. The potential benefit of these materials are highlighted by the included studies that show how children's

literature positively affects attitudes, empathy, knowledge, and self-image in both teachers and students. The necessity of positively molding these characteristics is shown through the review of related research literature including studies that state the current hostile environment often surrounding transgender and/or gender nonconforming children have to experience while at school. An analysis of available material is crucial as these characters are often lacking in multicultural textbooks, children's literature textbooks, and preservice training materials and textbooks. Hesitation to include transgender and gender nonconforming literature in the classroom, especially elementary, stems from a view that young children are too innocent and the concept of transgender is too mature and complex for children to understand combined with teachers and staff also misunderstanding the intricate relationship with gender, sex, and sexual orientation. Gender and sex are often clumped together with interchangeable definitions and an association among them and sexual orientation are created when that is not the case.

## **REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

A review of the research literature on transgender and gender nonconforming individuals highlights the stigma and lack of understanding that surrounds them. This fog is likely thicker when discussing these individuals in the classroom setting, growing as the age of the individuals being discussed gets younger. The majority of research puts acceptance of transgender and gender nonconforming characters as their focus. There is the hurdle of unsafe environments and negative attitudes that must be overcome. Much less research exists in the area of going past social struggle these individuals have. The following review of literature concentrates on the availability of transgender and gender nonconforming children literature and the possible impact children's literature has on children while highlighting the negative view of these individuals and the possible reasons why those views exist.

### **Answering “What is Transgender and Gender Nonconformity?”**

To fully understand what transgender means, the concepts of gender identity and gender expression must be discussed. Gender expression is how we show our gender. This could be shown through adopting masculine or feminine characteristics. Gender identity is the gender, boy or girl, which a person identifies with internally. It should be noted that gender is referred to as either boy or girl while sex is referred to as male or female and is based on sexual anatomy. These are two concepts that are commonly mistaken to be the same. The relationship between gender identity, gender expression, and sex is complex. The relationship between the three is affected by the dominant cultural group's presumption about sex and gender and “that there is an expected “congruent” relationship between one's sexed body and their gender identity and expression” (Rahilly, 2014, p. 341). This connection between sex and gender strengthens the notion of the gender binary, the view that there is only two genders, because there is only two

sexes, male and female. Strict expectations of gender and sex creates the opportunity to transgress from those expectations. It is far easier to transgress from two polar positions than it is from a fluid spectrum of gender and sex. If an individual is born as one sex but feels they align more with the gendered characteristics assigned by society for the other sex, that person could be considered transgender. Transgender should not be confused with transsexual. While transsexuals typically seek genital surgery, transgender individuals usually have little to no intention of pursuing genital surgery (Nagoshi et al., 2014).

A stigma and a cloud of misunderstanding surround the concepts of both gender nonconformity and transgender. Still today, many transgender individuals are diagnosed with gender dysphoria, formerly gender identity disorder, which is a psychological disorder that has its own set of symptoms, causes, and treatments. The labeling of nontraditional gender identity as a disorder adds a negative connotation to it. The visibility of transgender individuals, especially children, is difficult to measure. According to Boskey (2014), gender identity is not included in national surveys of the United States. Not many resources are being directed towards identifying people who identify as transgender. This combined with the negative backlash causing individuals to not express their gender identity makes it difficult to accurately know how many people within the United States identify themselves as transgender. There is no national survey or resources going towards the identification of individuals that express themselves in a nonconforming way. This may change, however, with many celebrities coming out publicly as transgender, gender nonconforming, or both. Caitlyn Jenner, previously known as Bruce Jenner, had her transition publicized, criticized, and celebrated. However, she was already famous for being an Olympic gold medalist and reality television star. After her transition she was featured on the cover of *Vanity Fair*, received ESPY's Arthur Ashe Courage Award, and was awarded

*Glamour's* Woman of the Year Award (Lee, 2015). The nation's response to *Glamour's* decision made news headlines with many congratulating her and many extremely outraged at the idea. Her choice to announce that she was transgender divided the nation with those who viewed her in ways such as disgusting, weird, and confused and those who viewed her in ways such as inspirational and courageous. Public figures are not necessarily perceived and received in such a way, especially when those figures are male. Jaden Smith, Will Smith's son, was hired to represent Louis Vuitton's womenswear. Of course Jaden Smith is not the first celebrity to push the boundaries of gender nonconformity yet society's response to such transgressing done by female celebrities such as Lady Gaga and Madonna were mild in comparison to their reaction to a boy wearing a skirt. Even Jaden Smith's dad reportedly had difficulties at first accepting his son wearing a dress (Verhoeven, 2016).

### **Gender Stereotype and Gender Flexibility in Children**

Attitudes towards gender expression and identity that fall outside the normative set by society are formed at an early age. According to Banse et al.(2010), by age three, children are already freely distinguishing between male and females while also assigning an association of gender to objects (e.g. girls play with irons while boys play with trucks). Children are not born with a genetic predisposition to associate objects to one gender or another (Banse et al., 2010). This view on gendered items is a result of outside influences and changes as they interact with those around them. As much as gender stereotypes exist at such an early age so does gender flexibility, the ability to challenge and reject social stereotypes. Gender flexibility increases significantly between the ages of 5 and 11 and starts declining after 12 (Banse et al., 2010). However, society's enforcement of the gender binary works against a child's ability to use their heightened gender flexibility to accept a more fluid concept of gender identity and expression.

The idea of boys being masculine and girls being feminine are often reinforced by parents, teachers, and even the literature children read. When these gender role expectations are not only not challenged but eagerly accepted they strengthen and persist into adulthood. This creates an issue when introducing the concept of transgender into the discussion of gender stereotype knowledge and flexibility. Transgender individuals are still labeled as one gender or another within the binary which only allows them to exist within the two fixed gender identity possibilities (Lester, 2014). Little acceptance for any identity or expression lies outside of these two societal norms.

### **Current Attitudes Towards Transgender and Gender Nonconforming**

The majority of a child's exposure to outside influences occurs in the school setting. Since these outside influences are critical in the shaping of a child's commitment to gender stereotypes, how schools view these stereotypes is an important issue to monitor. According to a study by the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) of K-12 students 72% of students reported hearing sexist remarks "frequently" and 65% reported derogatory homophobic remarks at school (Kosciw et al., 2008). Both sexist and homophobic comments are an issue with gender nonconforming and transgender individuals. Gender and sex are often associated with a specific sexual orientation and transgressing from one often causes the perception of transgressing from both. The presence of negative comments and bullying is a reoccurring issue that students, teachers, and administrators have to mitigate. Many studies have researched the negative effects of harassment and bullying in schools. Various methods have been tried to lessen these effects. These methods, however, do not seem to be achieving the desired results. The study by Kosciw et al. (2008) showed that not only did only 28% of students reported frequent teacher intervention for homophobic remarks, 49% heard sexist remarks and 39% heard



homophobic remarks directly from teachers or other school staff. The lack of intervention promotes the idea that these comments are acceptable and comments by the teachers and school staff themselves reinforce that the statements are true.

Sometimes, often, the combination of actions taken by teachers, school staff, and fellow students creates a hostile environment. Kosciw et al. (2008) surveyed students and found that 51% reported “feeling unsafe in school because of a personal characteristic, such as their actual or perceived sexual orientation, gender, or race/ethnicity. It is key to note that the feeling of being unsafe was created by not only actual characteristics, but also by perceived characteristics. This shows the impact of associating sexual orientation with gender identity and gender expression.

To reduce the amount of derogatory comments and unlikelihood of intervention, the causes of these issues must be taken into consideration. Multicultural education textbooks exist for the purpose of preparing teachers and pre-teaching students to teach a diverse student population. Jennings and Macgillicray’s analysis (2011) states that in many of these multicultural education textbooks the concepts of sexual orientation and gender identity were either incorrectly defined, blended together, or both. How teachers are prepared to teach transgender and gender nonconforming individuals is affected by many aspects, such as policies and exposure, and varies among the states. Disparities in the level of attention given to teaching about gender identity and expression in the classroom occur even from university to university within the same state. Nearly half of teachers in the United States may receive little if any information on sexual orientation and/or LGBT families during their preservice training (Jennings & Sherwin, 2008). In addition to lack of training, teachers also face other issues in regards to teaching transgender and gender nonconforming individuals. Combining the idea of LGBT individuals with elementary

school setting can cause outrage within a community. Teachers fear that being perceived as either LGBT or an advocate, often known as an ally, can lead to them becoming a victim of personal violence (Allan et al., 2008). Since transgender is often associated with sexual orientation, advocating for transgender individuals breaks the asexual characteristics society places on children. Misconceptions, lack of training, and fear of backlash all work against the creation of an inclusive and accepting school environment.

### **Presence of Transgender and Gender Nonconforming Literature**

Teachers wishing to positively impact their views of, attitudes towards, and treatment of transgender and gender nonconforming individuals might turn to literature about multicultural teaching. Therefore, the availability and accuracy of such material should be examined. An analysis by Smolkin and Young (2011) found that LGBT-related topics in top-selling children's literature textbooks was inconsistent, scattered, sometimes hidden, and even sometimes missing completely. Erasure of LGBT individuals reflects the attitudes of society and do not go unnoticed by LGBT individuals themselves. Publishers, focused on making a profit, influence textbook authors and sometimes leads the authors to include LGBT-related topics in the form of stealth inclusions, inclusion that is not easily found and may not be included in the table of contents or index (Smolkin & Young, 2011). Gender nonconformity was not a topic highlighted by this study. The lack of representation of gender nonconforming individuals can be inferred from the absence of research on the topic of gender nonconformity inclusion into multicultural textbooks.

Another aspect that is important to understanding transgender and gender nonconforming individuals is through fictional literature. In 2008, the American Library Association (ALA) created an annual bibliography, named the Rainbow Book List, of books with LGBT content for

youngsters between birth and 18 years old. A study by Williams and Deyoe (2015) showed that over the course of five years (2008-2013) only 237 titles made the *Rainbow Book List* with only 12% being elementary titles. A greater percentage of elementary books with LGBT content would take advantage of a child's increased stereotype flexibility during that time. However, the small amount of Rainbow List books that are at the elementary level is overshadowed by the fact that these books often don't find their ways into the libraries of institutions tasked with teaching future teachers. According to Williams and Deyoe's study (2015), 46.6% of universities with National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) accreditation had less than 10 of the 273 Rainbow List titles within their juvenile literature collection. The ALA also created an award in 1986 to recognize books with gay topics. However, not until 1999 did this award cover the topic of transgender and not until 2010 that it expanded to also cover books for children and young adults, birth to 18 years old. Books that fight the gender binary and discuss the topic of gender nonconformity have yet to get their own national award. Much has been accomplished in regards to recognition of books that highlight transgender individuals but much can still be done in both the areas of transgender and gender nonconformity.

### **The Power of Children's Literature**

The availability of children's literature with transgender and gender nonconforming characters becomes increasingly important when one considers the power of reading children's literature. According to research, empathy can be produced by reading stories about individuals belonging to stigmatized groups or outgroups (Galinsky, Ku, & Wang, 2005). Transgender and gender nonconforming characters qualify as an outgroup and thus reading about them could possibly promote empathy. According to Johnson's study (2012), transporting readers into the story greatly increases affective empathy for the characters in the story which almost doubled the

reader's likelihood to engage in prosocial behavior. The influence reading has on a reader is not only affected by how much the reader is transported into the story but also what characters they can relate to. In Vezalli's study (2015), readers who identified with Voldemort, the main villain, while reading the *Harry Potter* series also were aligned with more negative attitudes toward outgroups. How readers view groups that are not like them is not the only possible positive impact children's literature has.

What children read also influences how a child views themselves, their level of comprehension, and motivation to read. Hefflin and Barksdale-Ladd states (2001) that "one primary motivation for reading fiction involves the pleasure that can be taken in relating to characters, their lives, their problems, and their experiences (p. 810)." If this is true then the shortage of transgender and gender nonconforming children's literature greatly effects the motivation to read in children who can relate to and identify with the characters within the text. Hefflin and Barksdale-Ladd continues (2001) that "when readers do not encounter characters who are like them, reading is likely to be frustrating rather than pleasurable (p. 810)." The importance in how much reading is pleasurable to students has led to many teachers to use motivation and interest surveys to try and improve a student's ability to read. Having characters to relate to in text goes beyond motivation to read. It also affects a child's ability to comprehend what they are reading. Bell and Clark's study (1998) found that although when readers read text that featured characters who shared their cultural background, the ability to recall information was not affected. However, comprehension greatly improved the more the characters that the children were reading about mirrored the sociocultural traits of the reader.

## METHODOLOGY

This study used a qualitative content analysis that focuses on the themes and main ideas of the selected elementary children's literature (Mayring, 2000). Because the goal was "establishing the existence and frequency of concepts," a conceptual content analysis was selected as the most effective approach (Busch, 2012). There are many things to consider when using a conceptual content analysis. These include choosing how many concepts to look, or code, for, whether to look for the existence or frequency of a concept, and how to distinguish among concepts (Busch, 2012).

### **Selection of the Target Population of Children's Literature**

The focus of this study was to examine children's literature appropriate for K-6 students with various reading levels and formats. The selected text was identified as having a transgender and/or gender nonconforming character. Various resources exist for highlighting children's literature with LGBT content, few focus on transgender and gender nonconforming content. In order to find children's literature that contained the required content, the American Library Association's *Rainbow Book List* was referenced. Since the *Rainbow Book List* covers 2008 to present, children literature experts were consulted for titles published before 2008. Selection of text started with children's literature that had won either a *LAMBDA Literacy Award* or a Stonewall Book Award, awards for books that contain LGBT content, and broadened to contain books that had not received awards. 20 books were selected and are listed in the appendix.

### **Selection of Concepts to be Examined**

1. The purpose of this study is to highlight and assess trends and themes observed in the selected literature. As stated earlier, children responded more positively to literature containing characters that reflect the reader's own characteristics (Bell & Clark, 1998).

The availability of literature with diverse characters is needed to match the diversity of potential readers. Therefore, the character concepts selected for examination cover a broad view of reader demographics: gender, race, and family status. In addition to annotating trends in character characteristics, more imbedded concepts were selected to be analyzed. An author's word choice impacts the way their story is received. The prevalence of loaded words such as "sissy" was added to the list of concepts being observed. Within the selection of characters and author's word choice is how these two concepts are presented via the story's plot. The final concept that was selected relates to the actions the characters take by observing the protagonist's family and how they reacted to his or her being either transgender or gender nonconforming. These concepts were annotated a category for books containing multiple similar concepts was created.

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