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To cite this article: Susan Trostle Brand & Susan L. Maasch (2017) Updating Classroom Libraries and Cross-Curricular Activities: Celebrating Gender Identity and Diversity Through LGBTQ Books, *Childhood Education*, 93:5, 430-439, DOI: [10.1080/00094056.2017.1367240](https://doi.org/10.1080/00094056.2017.1367240)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00094056.2017.1367240>



Published online: 06 Sep 2017.



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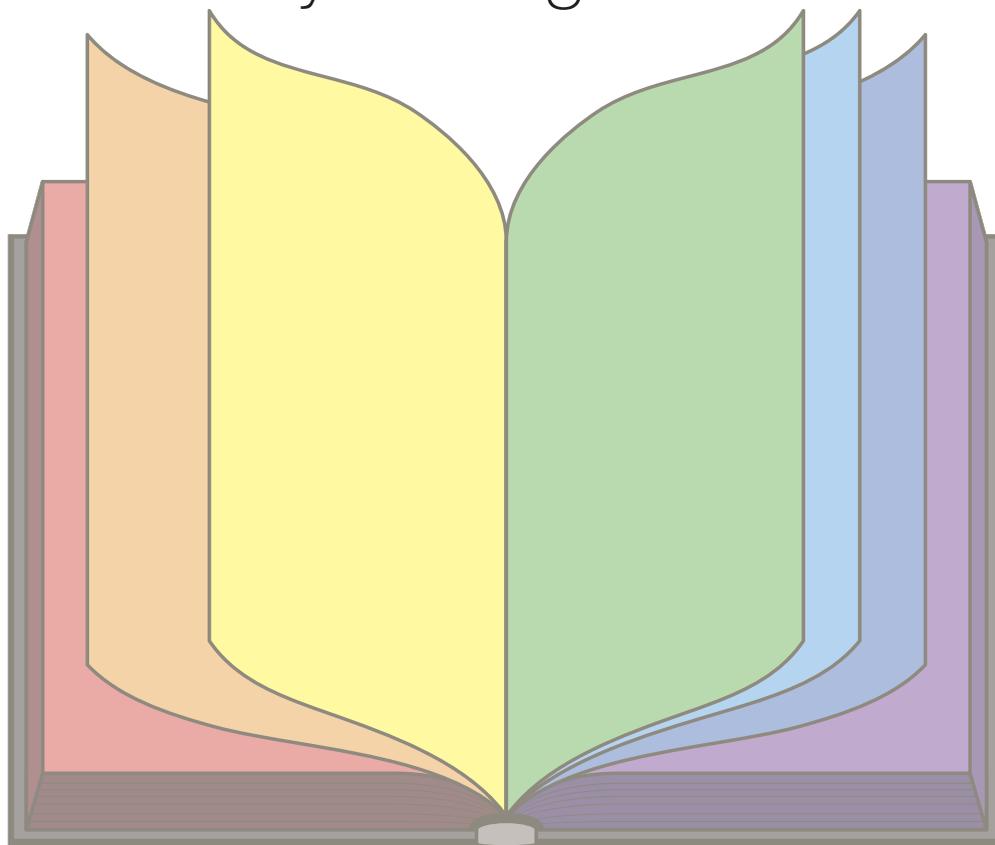
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Updating Classroom Libraries and Cross-Curricular Activities:

Celebrating Gender Identity and Diversity Through LGBTQ Books



by Susan Trostle Brand
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Ten-year-old Phillipe, beaming, enters his new St. Louis home proudly holding hands with his two adoptive dads. What does the future hold for Phillipe? How can schools provide a welcoming and safe place for a child with LGBTQ or single parents?

Six-year-old Alexander is transgender, but is terrified of telling her parents, teachers, and classmates that she is a girl and wants to be called Allie. How can schools establish a firm foundation of acceptance and support that enables all children to safely live as they identify?

During the past decade in the United States and abroad, the media has exploded with images and stories about the diverse looks of transgender and gender variant children and youth, as well as less controversial and more widely accepted images of gay adults. While homophobic and transphobic attitudes and practices persist in some schools and communities, advocates and legislators have been successful in bringing non-discrimination, anti-bullying, and hate crime laws into effect. Gender-inclusive restroom laws, flexibility in sports team composition, and acceptance of name changes on transgender students' school records all reflect progress in alleviating discrimination.

However, teaching about or alluding to homosexuality remains controversial in many elementary schools. In fact, *And Tango Makes Three*, by Justin Richardson and Peter Parnell, an illustrated true story about same-sex parents of a penguin, is still banned today from many

classrooms and libraries. It appeared at or near the top of the list of Most Challenged books from 2006 until 2010. Critics describe the book as being disingenuous and inaccurate. Even more controversial, perhaps, is a teacher or librarian offering children's books with transgender or gender-fluid protagonists. The resultant paucity of information, discussion, and representation of gender variance in the curriculum and in children's books conveys a clear message to the child who is transgender or living with LGBTQ parents: "I have a shameful condition." "I need to hide my true identity or that of my parents." "If I reveal who I really am, I will be ridiculed or made to feel unworthy." "There is something wrong with me or my family." Many schools, where children spend almost half of their waking time between the ages of 5 and 18, do not currently reach out and provide active and enthusiastic support, beyond mere acceptance and restroom law compliance, for this group of youngsters who face tremendous physical, social, and emotional burdens. Gender non-conforming children and youth often go through this process in secrecy and isolation.

In fact, silencing the identities of transgender students and those who have same-sex parents feels the same to them as

blatant rejection. The curriculum in most schools does not reflect the wide range of individual uniqueness. The true acceptance that can be found in open acknowledgment is powerful. When lesbian, gay male, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) individuals are aware of, and engage with, other LGBTQ individuals in their schools and communities, they become more resilient; their risk for depression, low self-esteem, and self-harm, including suicide, is reduced.

Before they can provide critically needed support systems, teachers and administrators require a basic working knowledge and understanding of gender identity. A growing body of research indicates that, for some individuals, gender identity is not binary (male and female), but, rather, exists on a spectrum. *“Gender identity exists on a continuum, rather than in narrow dichotomized groups. In essence, trans people (have) brain chemistry approaching the middle of the gender spectrum—inherently different from their biological sex and closer to their identified gender”* (Koehn, 2015).

It is an unfortunate fact that many teachers and administrators take the *path of least resistance* when dealing with children and youth who are non-binary. Realizing that parents and administrators may frown upon their efforts to integrate inclusive lessons and activities into the curricula, they claim to accept differences without taking an active stance or changing the curriculum in relevant or meaningful ways. Through teacher and parent training, significant adults can be prepared to meet the needs of all children and youth in their care.

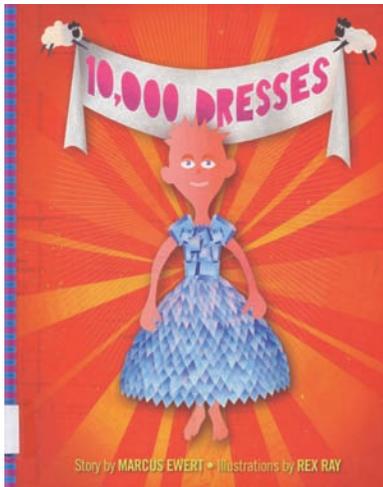
Given such professional training and relevant experiences, parents, teachers, authority figures, and community leaders can begin to recognize the many unique differences among all children and youth and the ongoing need to educate and celebrate

diversity in all its forms. Through in-service meetings, service learning, reading current literature, and joining groups with like-minded members, teachers can become pro-active in advocating for the rights of marginalized groups, acquiring the necessary skills to identify and meet the needs of children who may require intervention.

By using carefully selected children’s literature and related curricular activities, and including parents and community members in information sessions and newsletters, teachers can make a positive difference in the lives of individuals who are transgender and/or those who live in diverse families. A teacher’s and administrator’s sensitive handling of individuals’ unique identities not only affects children who are non-binary or living in a home that is non-traditional, but also serves as a critically important form of role-modeling for all children and establishes a firm set of life skills based upon equality and respect.

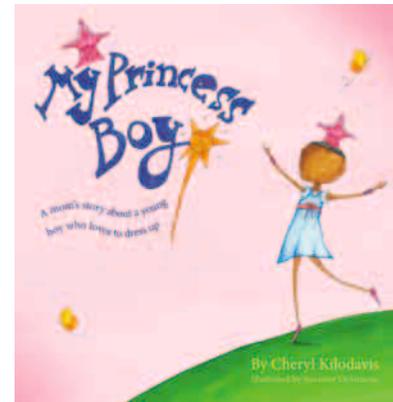
As children see positive depictions of children in literature who are gender variant or who live with a single parent or LGBTQ parents, they become better equipped to combat hatred, marginalization, and stereotypes. The following eight children’s literature selections can be valuable tools for celebrating diversity in the home and at schools. Additional recommended LGBTQ children’s literature titles can be found at the end of this article. Because young children are concrete, hands-on learners, the related activities actively and creatively extend the books’ messages into many curricular areas. Collaborating with your school’s guidance counselor, superintendent, principal, librarian, nurse, and parent-teacher association before reading LGBTQ books and implementing related activities will help to ensure everyone’s readiness for and acceptance of these timely additions to the ongoing curriculum.

Young Children's LGBTQ Trade Book Selections and Activities



10,000 Dresses (by Marcus Ewert): Bailey dreams of nothing but pretty dresses, but the dreams do not come true until, one day, he meets an older girl. Together, they create beautiful dresses that have only been dreamed about before.

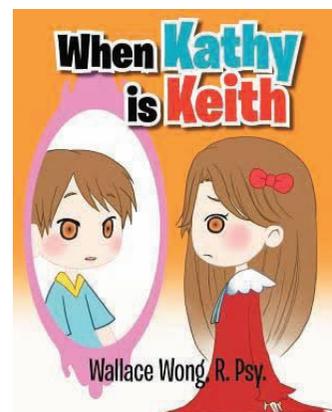
Activity: My Ideal Me. Why not wear the look that makes you feel like YOU? To reinforce the theme that we all have choices in life, try the following activity. Provide child-size butcher paper, glue, scissors, assorted fabrics, yarn, crayons, colored pencils, and liquid markers. Children lie down on the floor on the paper while a classmate or teacher traces around their bodies. With sensitivity and encouragement from the teacher, children then create three-dimensional, life-size images of their ideal selves by adding colorful media to the butcher paper figures. They may even choose to make up a new name for themselves on their images and add speech balloons. Children may add paper props they create, such as baseball bats, fairy wands, fireman hats, and cooking utensils. Figures depict ideal selves involved in sports, games, dancing, or other activities that make children feel happiest and most like “themselves.”



My Princess Boy (by Cheryl Kilodavis): A 4-year-old boy who likes to dress up in dresses (preferably pink) and dance like a ballerina claims that there is nothing better than being in nature.

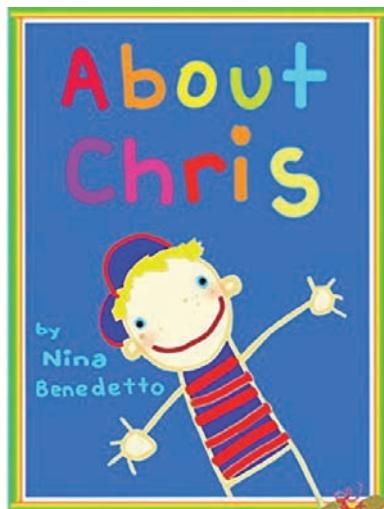
Activity: Nature and Self Discoveries.

Encourage children to wear a favorite color and go outdoors. Appreciate the beauty and diversity nature gives us just by being itself! Take photos or sketch findings on papers mounted onto clipboards. Return to the classroom and share the discoveries and artwork. Hold a conversation about the beauty of nature in its diversity and reflect about how people are also interesting and beautiful in their uniqueness and differences.



When Kathy Is Keith (by Wallace Wong): A girl struggles with her realization that she wants to look like and be a boy. The dilemma of biology versus choice arises when her body assigned at birth doesn't match her brain.

Activity: A Book About Me. Implement written or oral exercises that may help trans youth to privately and publicly reveal the identities they are seeking: (1) What is your ideal name for yourself? (2) If you could look like someone other than yourself, who would it be? Why? (3) If you could be someone other than yourself, who would it be? Why? (4) What dreams do you have for yourself? (5) What activities and games make you happiest? Why? (6) Which friends make you feel happiest when you are with them? Why? Encourage children to illustrate their books and share them, if they like.

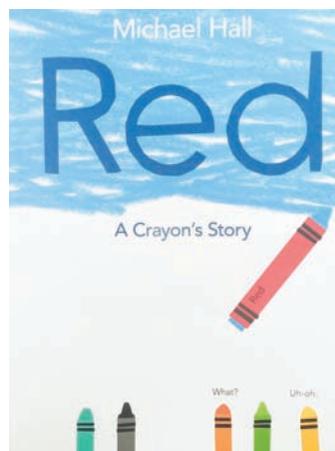


About Chris (by Nina Benedetto): A pre-kindergarten teacher recognizes that one of her students is transgender and demonstrates how she helped him to be his real self instead of the person that others perceive him to be.

Activities: Puppets, Dolls, and Dress Up.

Take time to really observe and talk with your children or students. Note their favorite colors, playmates, games, and toys. If you notice a pattern of the child's gender preferences not matching their assigned sex, talk with the child and, later, the parents and school guidance counselor about these preferences. Display

male and female dolls representing many occupations, races, and genders. Provide dress-up clothing in a large chest in the dramatic play area of your classroom or home. Observe and take anecdotal notes regarding language and roles as children play with puppets and dolls and dress up.



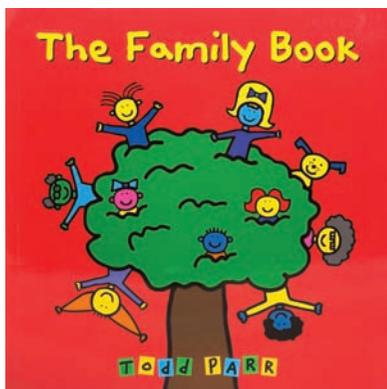
Red: A Crayon's Story (by Michael Hall): A crayon that is red on the outside is really blue on the inside. Everything it tries to color red is blue. Using scissors, tape, and a pencil sharpener, classmates try to "fix" Red, but to no

avail. Finally, an understanding friend comes along who helps Red to realize that he is really Blue. Once he becomes himself, he is able to make beautiful artwork and gain self-confidence.

First Activity: Crayon Collages. Provide crayons of all different colors and invite children to create a class collage of activities, event, and people that make them happiest and most at peace.

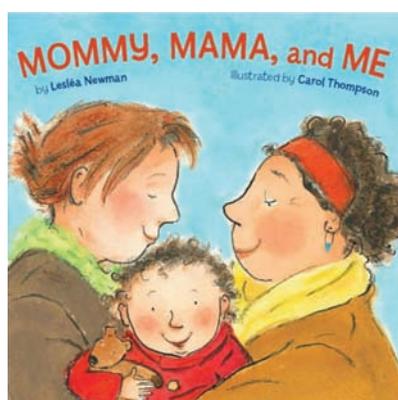
Another Activity: Crayon Press Quilt.

Another crayon activity involves creating a class or family quilt. Provide each child with a 5" x 5" white fabric square. Ask them to press crayons firmly onto the fabric to make a picture of themselves as they would ideally like to look. When squares are all colored, place them face down upon a lighter colored square of muslin or bed sheet and iron wax images onto the background. This colorful quilt makes a treasured gift for a teacher, parent, or other loved one.



The Family Book (by Todd Parr): Families come in many different sizes, shapes, and colors. Some families are neat, and some families are messy. Some families have two moms, and some have two dads. All families are unique and special.

Activity: Family Web. Children, seated in a large circle, throw a ball of white yarn to each other to create a family web. When they hold the ball of yarn, they say one special or unique thing about their families. Then, holding onto their section of yarn, they toss the ball to another child across the circle. The complex, finished web reveals the fact that we are all interconnected and that, together, we create an interesting and beautiful pattern.

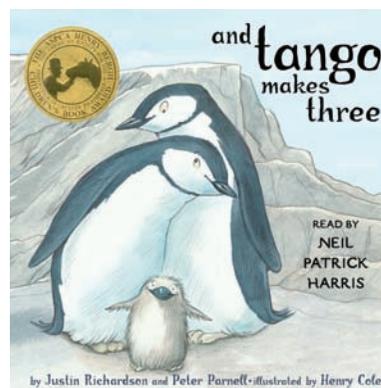


Mommy, Mama, and Me (by Leslea Newman): Told through rhythm and rhyme, this book for children ages 3-5 depicts a day in the life of a happy family.

Two moms and their toddler play Hide and Seek, dress up together, and share bath preparation time.

Activity: Revolving Stories. Using white paper plates divided into pie-shaped sections,

youngsters draw their day in each section, coloring sequential pictures with liquid markers. Encourage them to reveal both positive and challenging events involving how they felt about themselves as a result of the day's events. From a second paper plate, cut out a same-sized pie shape and attach to the bottom paper plate with a circular paper fastener. Children write their names and story titles for their revolving stories on the top plate. Children rotate their paper plates to reveal one section at a time, while telling the illustrated stories of their days. Alternatively, transgender children in private group meetings may depict one scene from their gender transition on each of the paper plate pie shapes for a total of six or eight scenes, complete with captions. Invite them to share if they like.



And Tango Makes Three (Justin Richardson and Peter Parnell): The setting for this true story about two male penguins, Roy and Silo, is Central Park. A

resourceful zookeeper provides Roy and Silo with an extra egg from a penguin couple. Roy and Silo take turns sitting on the egg until, one day, it hatches. Their new baby girl penguin is named Tango (based upon the adage that "It takes two to tango"), and the penguins thrive as a unique and special family of three.

Activity: Today's Families Display. Find magazine photos of traditional and diverse families, such as families with a mom and a dad, two dads, two moms, transgender

parent(s), grandparent-headed families, and single-parent families. Mount the pictures on individual pages and write captions about the types of families that are represented beneath the photos. Create a class or hall display from these photos for children to admire and share with their families at Open House.

Every child is entitled to an *equal and safe* learning environment, and safety includes children's *emotional* as well as *physical* safety (Title VII, Americans With Disabilities Act). Schools can promote health and safety among LGBTQ youth in many important and far-reaching ways. Teachers and administrators can contribute to such an inclusive environment by developing an LGBTQ-inclusive collection of children's books. The availability of diverse children's literature will convey to the community that the school is a welcoming one that embraces diversity. The following suggestions, adapted from The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (www.cdc.gov/lgbthealth/youth.htm), will pave the way for acceptance of high-quality LGBTQ books into libraries and classrooms. These recommendations will encourage respect for all students and prohibit bullying, harassment, and violence against all students:

- Identify "safe spaces," such as counselors' offices, designated classrooms, or student organizations, where LGBTQ youth can receive support from administrators, teachers, or other school staff.
- Encourage student-led and student-organized school clubs that promote a safe, welcoming, and accepting school environment (e.g., Gay-Straight Alliances, which are school clubs open to all LGBTQ and straight youth).
- Ensure that health curricula or educational materials include information that is relevant to LGBTQ youth (such as ensuring

that curricula or materials use inclusive language or terminology).

- Encourage school district and school staff to develop and publicize trainings on how to create safe and supportive school environments for all students, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity, and encourage staff to attend these trainings.
- Inform parents in advance about LGBTQ workshops and curriculum enhancement. If parents question these more inclusive school policies, remind them in a positive way that your school is welcoming and supportive of its diverse population of students.

Summary

Using appropriate LGBTQ books supplements and enhances the existing health, social studies, arts, drama, and language arts curriculum. Carefully selected children's literature titles can serve as catalysts for positive change in children's thinking. Specifically, through children's literature and related cross-curricular activities, children (1) gain a better understanding of themselves, (2) build confidence as they realize they are not alone, (3) discover coping and socialization strategies to combat their insecurities, and (4) acquire a foundation for good citizenship and a lifelong respect for diversity in others and in our world. When children who are gender non-conforming are freed from the isolation and marginalization that all too often accompany their uniqueness, they will open the gates of promise for themselves and for all students, teachers, and families—present and future.

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On-line Resources

- Are There More Than Two Sexes?* Morgan Freeman, as narrator, discusses the biological and cellular level roots of gender. www.sciencechannel.com/tv-shows/through-the-wormhole/videos/luck-is-from-a-physicists-point-of-view
- In This Life, Becoming Me.* Stories of eight families with transitional youth, age 5-25. www.youtube.com/watch?v=IxzKIPVceWg
- The Whittington Family: Ryland's Story.* Jeff and Hillary Whittington realize the true gender of their child after ear surgery when their

5-year-old child declares he is a boy. www.youtube.com/watch?v=yAHCqnuX2fk
Trans Youth Equality Foundation (TYEF). This website advocates for trans-youth, families, and allies, providing up-to-date legislation, resources, a blog, and community outreach opportunities including a camp for trans-youth. www.transyouthequality.org
Welcoming Schools. A comprehensive, Common Core Standards-based approach to creating respectful and supportive elementary schools with resources and professional development to embrace family diversity, create LGBTQ-inclusive schools, prevent bias-based bullying and gender stereotyping, and support transgender and gender-expansive students. www.welcomingschools.org.

Documentaries

I Am Jazz – A Family in Transition. A television series that shows the life of an extraordinary family and their young daughter who is transgender. Tvgo.xfinity.com
Teaching Respect for All. This film helps parents, community members, and teachers

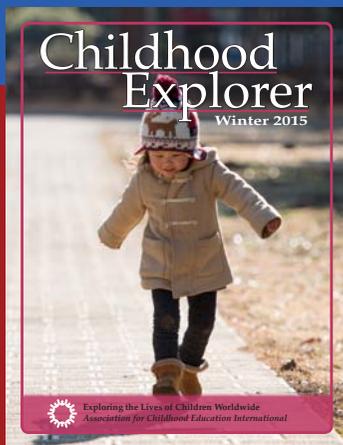
understand why schools need to address anti-gay bias and discrimination to fully achieve excellence in educating all children.

Organizations and Conferences

Gay, Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD):
www.glaad.org
 Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN):
www.glsen.org
 Lambda Legal:
www.lambdalegal.org
 National Center for Transgender Equality (NCTE):
www.transequality.org/issues/non-discrimination-law
 Philadelphia Trans Health Conference:
www.mazzonicenter.org/trans-health
 Transgender Law Center:
www.transgenderlawcenter.org
 TransKids Purple Rainbow Foundation:
www.transkidspurplerainbow.org
 Trans Youth Equality Foundation (TYEF):
www.transyouthequality.org •

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We are seeking submissions on:

- Daily life of a child in a particular geographic location, culture, life circumstance
- Initiatives that support children's well-being and education
- Programs/approaches and how they work through real-life application
- Global trends in education
- Global trends affecting childhood