

A Visit with Princess Boy, Jazz, Kyle, Morris and Jacob: Analyzing Recent Picture Books with Transgender and Gender

Nonconforming Characters

*This manuscript has been peer-reviewed, accepted, and endorsed by the
North American Community: Uniting for Equity.*



North American Community: Uniting for Equity

Journal of Interdisciplinary Education

Darryn Diuguid, Ph.D.

McKendree University

Tadayuki Suzuki, Ph.D.

State University of New York at Cortland

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to motivate the K-12 school community to incorporate gender nonconforming and transgender children's literature in their curricula. The researchers used seven criteria to evaluate twelve recently published texts about this culture, and key instructional suggestions for implementation of the books are suggested. The instructional suggestions include reading a wide range of genres, modeling acceptance, becoming more aware of the culture, discussing tender topics, and expanding resources.

**Journal of Interdisciplinary Education, Vol. 15, No. 1 – February, 2019
ISSN: 1092-7069 © 2019 North American Community: Uniting for Equity**

During this time of political uncertainty, most school districts do not include lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) materials in their curricula. Who is at fault regarding this omission? According to Fisher (2013), “every member of the school community must be held to the standard of equitable and ethical treatment of students” (p. 4). In other words, it is those of us who work with children who must be held accountable: K-12 teachers, librarians, administrators, school board members, and teacher educators. In fact, McGarry (2013) stated that many schools participate in a “transgender excluding” type of curriculum; schools might be LGB-inclusive at times, as they go “beyond heterosexuality” in their curricula, but they often “exclude transgender people, negating their existence and value” (p. 29). Miller (2016) maintained that schools and teachers have agentic roles of disseminating complete information about gender identities to their students. If they transmit “heteronormative” gender ideologies to their students, that is, a viewpoint denoting a worldview that promotes heterosexuality as the normal or preferred sexual orientation, students will unconsciously ignore or even reject gender identities that do not align with their beliefs. They will instead embrace biased gender ideologies, thereby contributing to creating unsafe and non-intersectional learning environments. As teacher educators, we believe that children’s literature incorporating controversial issues such as how transgender children are treated can provide beneficial insights for students about cultures and people different from themselves.

Although teachers select good books and plan reading lessons using those books for their students, transgender issues can be controversial topics. Most teachers are not familiar with evaluating the quality of transgender and/or gender nonconforming books for their students. Mankiw and Strasser (2013) reminded readers that “It is important to

view tender topics not as problems, but as subjects that are part of the everyday lives of children and families” (p. 85). In addition, Beam (2014) contended that “providing LGBTQ novels in classrooms and libraries has proven to be an effective way to inform students and promote discussions on gender and bullying in secondary schools” (p. 84). We suggest that it is just as appropriate to use picture books on “tender topics” with younger students in order to discuss many of the same issues in all educational levels.

Educators are becoming aware of the need for books that have transgender characters and themes. According to Saint-Hilaire (2014), “The changing demographics in the United States demand that teachers adapt their pedagogy and curriculum to facilitate meaningful learning for all cultural groups represented in their classrooms” (p. 27). Specifically, LGBT families live in every state, and close to 6 million children have LGBT parents (Gates, 2013). Since the needs and interests of these children vary like those of all students, then all educators must realize that each individual student with LGBT parents is different in his or her own way. Therefore, if we want our students to “transact” with a text in ways that Rosenblatt (1982) referenced in her seminal reading response theory, we must connect our students with characters similar to the students’ backgrounds and experiences in areas such as ethnicity, religion, gender, and age (Saint-Hilaire, 2014).

Transgender Themes in Trade Books

In an online article entitled, “Hollywood Has More Gay Characters but Still No Transgender Roles,” (Robhmed, 2015) examined and explored Hollywood’s conservative attitude and viewpoints toward transgender roles in television shows and movies. This conservative approach is pervasive in children’s literature as well. Although more gay and lesbian characters and families appear in children’s books now than in the past,

transgender characters are still kept behind the curtain. Identifying and delineating all of the possible reasons for this situation is difficult. Issues surrounding transgender people may easily confuse people who were not properly informed and educated regarding these issues; educators cannot offer students an in-depth understanding of equity if they simply turn a blind eye to the existence of transgender people. Even though teachers may be confused or uneducated about this culture, education is needed at the earliest possible age, since gender identity occurs even before the age of two (Evans-Santiago & Lin, 2016). In order to create a safe learning environment for students in today's diverse school communities in the United States, educators must transmit accurate information and a broad cultural awareness to children. Evans-Santiago and Lin stated that "although in some communities, teachers have had much experience working with openly LGBTQ families, there are other communities where teachers need guidance as they strive to support children of openly LGBTQ families in their programs for the first time" (p. 56). According to Singh (2013), "school educators themselves lacked important training on these topics (gender, sex, and sexual orientation) during their own studies and thus feel ill-prepared to engage parents, students and other educators in these discussions" (p. 57). One part of correcting this deficiency is for teachers, librarians, and parents to take the initiative by utilizing and reading quality trade books with transgender themes to children. Selecting these books requires consideration and guidance. Therefore, we offer an evaluation process for finding quality books featuring transgender characters.

For book selections, we used both the Rainbow Book Lists produced by the American Library Association's (ALA) Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Round Table (GLBTRT) and Good Reads (www.goodreads.com). For analysis and discussion, we selected twelve trade books (see the table below) published in the last six years that

include transgender characters. In determining the theme in each picture book we read, we referenced Lukens’ (2007), *A Critical Handbook of Children’s Literature* as we read each picture book. She stated that “theme in literature is the idea that holds the story together, such as a comment about society, human nature, or the human condition” (p. 131). In our opinions, the theme in each picture book below is explicitly illustrated by the main character’s actions, the parents’ comments, or the words of a secondary character.

Table 1.

Literature Resources

Title	Bibliographic Information	Genre	Theme
<i>Red: A Crayon Story</i> (2015)	Authored and illustrated by Michael Hall. New York, NY: Greenwillow Books.	Picture Book	Self-identity
<i>Worm Loves Worm</i> (2016)	Authored by J.J. Austrian and illustrated by Mike Curato. New York, NY: Balzer + Bray, an imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers.	Picture Book	Marriage equality
<i>Gender Fairy</i> (2015)	Authored by Jo Hirst and illustrated by Libby Wirt. Publisher: Johanne Hirst, Oban Road Publishing, www.thegenderfairy.com	Picture Book	Gender identity
<i>My Favorite Color is Pink</i> (2015)	Authored and illustrated by Nina Benedetto. Publisher: Nina Benedetto, www.wonderwisdombooks.com	Picture Book	Gender nonconforming children
<i>About Chris</i> (2015)	Authored and illustrated by Nina Benedetto. Publisher: Nina Benedetto, www.wonderwisdombooks.com	Picture Book	Gender nonconforming children
<i>My Princess Boy: A Mom’s Story About a Young Boy Who Loves to Dress Up</i> (2011)	Authored by Cheryl Kilodavis and illustrated by Suzanne DeSimone. New York, NY: Aladdin.	Picture Book	Acceptance of differences
<i>Jacob’s New Dress</i> (2014)	Authored by Sarah and Ian Hoffman and illustrated by	Picture Book	Gender identity

	Chris Case. Chicago, IL: Whitman and Company.		
<i>When Kayla Was Kyle</i> (2013)	Authored by Amy Fabrikant, and illustrated by Jennifer Levine. Lakewood, CA: Avid Readers Publishing Group.	Picture Book	Gender nonconforming children
<i>Not Every Princess</i> (2014)	Authored by Jeffrey and Lisa Bone and illustrated by Valeria Docampo. Washington, DC: Magination Press.	Picture Book	Gender role expectations
<i>I Am Jazz</i> (2014)	Authored by Jessica Hearthel & Jazz Jennings and illustrated by Shelagh McNicholas. New York, NY: Dial Books for Young Readers.	Picture Book	Gender identity
<i>I Love My Purse</i> (2017)	Authored by Belle DeMont and illustrated by Sonja Wimmer.	Picture Book	Gender role expectations
<i>Morris Micklewhite and the Tangerine Dress</i> (2014)	Authored by Christine Baldacchino and illustrated by Isabelle Malenfant. Toronto, Canada: Groundwood Books.	Picture Book	Gender identity

Evaluation of Trade Books for Transgender Characters

When selecting appropriate Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer or Questioning (LGBTQ) books dealing with transgender characters for elementary students, we believe it is critical for teachers, librarians, and parents to utilize appropriate criteria. In *Children's Books in Children's Hands: An Introduction to Their Literature*, Temple, Martinez, and Yokota (2011) suggested evaluating the appropriateness of the book title, the character development, the settings, the plots, and the target audience as criteria for multicultural literature. Naidoo (2012) also provided criteria for evaluating LGBTQ children's books in *Rainbow Family Collections: Selecting and Using Children's Books with Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Content*. For this discussion, his criteria was somewhat too specific as we focused on picture books in this analysis. The GLBTRT provides six simplified criteria for the quality evaluation of

LGBTQ representation in an article entitled, “What to DO Until Utopia Arrives: Guidelines to Evaluate the Treatment of Gay Themes in Children’s and YA Literature” (ALA, 1976). As these criteria are more open-ended than Naidoo’s and provide us with a certain degree of flexibility for the book evaluations we offer in this article, we adjusted the GLBTRT criteria based on the theme of this article and selected the following seven criteria:

1. The book title portrays transgender characteristics, settings, and plots;
2. A transgender character is clearly depicted;
3. The role of a transgender character is credible and age-appropriate;
4. The illustrations of a transgender character are clear and not biased;
5. The story explicitly presents the lives of transgender characters and family;
6. The story has a positive impact on the reader; and
7. The author’s attitude toward and perception of transgender issues are positive

Some people differentiate the terms transgender and gender nonconforming.

Transgender means one’s gender identity is different from the sex he or she is assigned at birth or what is technically referred to as “cisgender.” The gender nonconforming child dresses and acts as he or she wants regardless of the assigned sex at birth. A gender nonconforming child does not follow stereotypical gender ideas. Since discerning these differences only through the information provided in these books is often difficult, we have used these two terms interchangeably in this article.

LGBTQ Books with Transgender and Gender Nonconforming Characters

Teaching children about transgender and gender nonconforming issues requires careful attention, because some children may easily build prejudicial views if teachers fail to inform them successfully of the significance of the message. Some authors prefer using nonhuman characters in their stories. For example, *Red: A Crayon Story* written by Michael Hall (2015) is a story about a blue crayon labeled with red color. Red worked very hard to be red but always failed. His teacher asked him to draw strawberries, but the

strawberries he drew turned out to be blue. His mother sent him out on a play date with a yellow classmate. He drew a nice orange color with his classmate but this attempt failed to work. In spite of the support he received from his teacher, his mother, and his friends, Red struggled with his identity as a red-colored crayon, and he felt miserable. One day, however, Berry, a berry-colored crayon friend, asked Red to draw an ocean for his boat. Although Red was initially doubtful of his ability to accomplish this task, he drew the ocean for his friend. This innovative suggestion from Berry helped Red realize his identity was as a blue-colored crayon.

The primary theme of this book is the acceptance of self-identity and awareness of not fitting into a particular type of social group or society. The story implied that transgender people struggle daily to adjust themselves to society's expectations and to fit into the roles expected of them. Additionally, this story teaches readers that being humble to suggestions from others is important. However, identifying transgender characteristics, settings, and plots from this book was a little challenging, because the general concept of this story was applicable to any individual who daily experienced dissonance between his or her true self and societal expectations of that self. On his homepage, author Michael Hall explains that he was a dyslexic child and had never thought of himself as mislabeled; the supportive community around him helped him identify himself. Through this experience, he developed personal connections with Red, the protagonist of this story.

J. J. Austrian (2016) also uses non-human characters in *Worm Loves Worm*, the story of the marriage of two worms. After two worms fell in love, Cricket suggested they find someone to marry them. Since the worms did not have fingers, they wore rings like belts. They wiggled around instead of dancing together. They also decided which of them

would be the bride and which the groom at the wedding ceremony.

Austrian wrote this book based on the questions his four-year old son posed to him after a party. His son perceived that Austrian's two female friends were in love; he did not understand why they were not married yet. The primary theme of this book is the real meaning of marriage equality. At a glance, perceiving the transgender characteristics from the title of this book can be a little difficult, but many invertebrate animals like earthworms are hermaphrodites and have both male or female reproductive organs. Therefore, these two worms could be either the bride and the groom in the story. Teachers could introduce the non-gender binary child through this book and also use this book for teaching their young students the basic biological concepts such as the differences between vertebrate and invertebrate animals.

Many people are sensitive about gender identities and their clarification. Most parents expect their children to dress in certain ways, such as a male child wearing a pair of jeans, or a female child wearing a dress. Many parents do not expect their male children to wear a dress, like a female, in public. They expect their children to act based on their biological sex. This biased parent viewpoint implants in children stereotypical concepts. For creatures like worms, however, gender clarifications are less critical. Teaching elementary students different types of gender clarifications and configurations definitely helps them understand sexual orientations and/or gender diversities, and also imparts sophisticated and complex scientific knowledge about biological, neurological, and psychological functions of the human body. Using no explicit language, Austrian conveys a critical message to readers, which is "love is love."

Another biased concept easily imposed on children is the assignment of colors based on genders, such as blue for boys, and pink for girls. In the *Gender Fairy*, Jo Hirst

(2015) compared the lives of two babies, a girl who was wrapped in a pink blanket, and a boy who was wrapped in a blue blanket. Although the assignment of colors is not the center of the discussion in the story, it is stereotypical that a blue blanket is assigned to the boy and a pink one to the girl. The girl in the pink blanket began to identify herself as a boy as she grew up. The boy in the blue blanket began to feel that something was wrong inside as he grew up and insisted that he wanted to live as a girl.

One day, the Gender Fairy appeared separately to these two children and told them “Only you know whether you are a boy or a girl. No one can tell you” (p. 20); then, the fairy encouraged the two to live according to who they were and what they wanted. The term “gender” in the book title implies the story is about the issues of gender nonconformity. As the book title is short, it may be difficult for some readers to visualize the story settings and plot clearly and accurately. The story theme is acceptance of differences in others. The story described two children’s confusion and frustration about their gender preferences and about the expectations with the clothing they wore, the gifts they received from others, and the sports in which they were expected to participate. One unique feature was that the girl who wanted to be a boy was referenced by the pronoun “**he**,” and the boy who wanted to be a girl with the pronoun “**she**.” Hirst did not focus on the relationships among the families and friends of the nonconforming characters in this book. When the little girl asked, “Does this mean there is something wrong with me?” (p. 21), the Gender Fairy responded to her, “It is very normal. Some children feel no one can see who they really are” (p. 21). The author positively addressed and educated readers about some aspects of the confusion and frustration that transgender children encounter in their lives.

My Favorite Color is Pink by Nina Benedetto (2015) is another picture book

about a gender nonconforming child who likes to dress and act as a girl. She liked playing dress-up, picking flowers, playing with baby dolls, having tea parties, and ballet dancing. Her daddy told her that she was a pretty girl, and people could not tell whether she was a boy or a girl. However, the author also informed the reader that some people did not like the way she dressed and acted as a girl. Although she tried fitting in, she often felt lost because she did not understand why some people chose to tease her. Although it often required courage, she wanted to be her true self. This self-published picture book was “dedicated to people with huge hearts and opened minds” (unpaged); the theme of the story also centered on acceptance of others and their differences.

As general readers might believe that pink is a feminine color, visualizing transgender or LGBTQ characteristics through the book title might be possible, but no information related to the color is found in the story. As one of the unique characteristics, Benedetto did not introduce the main character’s name at the beginning of the story. Instead, she revealed it in the middle of the story. “When somebody asks me my name... ‘I’m Patrick but my friends call me Patty’” (unpaged). Although the target audience of this book is early elementary, the main character also addressed, “Sometimes I get beat up” (unpaged), which indicated violent behavior from some people. Thus, we understand the author’s purpose for writing this book was also to teach young children the meaning of “justice.” The author provides “I wonder” statements in the section of “Wonder and Wisdom,” which encourages children to think about sensitive issues and to critically discuss social justice in a friendly manner.

About Chris, also by Nina Benedetto (2015) is a companion book to *My Favorite Color is Pink*, and another story about a gender nonconforming child. The story was based on the author’s experience as a kindergarten teacher. Chris was an awesome child

who loved trucks, cars, Legos, mud and art, and cowboy boots. When other children painted flowers and rainbows on their faces, Chris loved to draw scars on his. His given name at birth was Christina, but he chose to call himself “Chris.” He explained to Ms. Nina (his teacher), “‘from my belly button down – I’m a girl.’ ‘But from my belly button up – I’m a boy’” (unpaged). He further explained to Ms. Nina that he believed himself to be a boy and wanted to live as a boy.

This story is about a gender nonconforming child who wanted to act and look as a boy although the child was born a girl, which made this story unique because most of the books we found for this review are about gender nonconforming children who want to act and look as girls although they were born as boys. Because the book title is unclear, it is probably difficult for many readers to understand that the story is about a gender nonconforming child. Unlike *My Favorite Color is Pink*, Benedetto introduced Chris’s name at the beginning of the story and also clearly addressed that Chris was a real kindergarten child whom she taught. As in *My Favorite Color is Pink*, Benedetto also provides “I wonder” statements in child friendly language at the end of this book.

In *My Princess Boy: A Mom’s Story About a Young Boy Who Loves to Dress Up*, Cheryl Kilodavis (2010) narrated the story of Dyson, her four-year-old son. Dyson loved girly dresses, his cool brother, and his dad. In stating “Pink is his favorite color” (unpaged), Kilodavis implied that pink is a feminine color. At his birthday party, Dyson wore a dress with jewelry. Although he was happy to be who he was, he wondered why some people laughed at him when he was in a princess dress. Mother explained to him that some people thought it was funny for a boy to dress like a girl.

The story implied there was nothing wrong with a boy who dresses and acts like a girl. The primary theme of this book is acceptance of differences. The important message

that Kilodavis conveys through this book is that it is a wonderful thing for a child to be “who he is.” Although there was no particular storyline in this nonfiction picture book, one idiosyncrasy was that no character had a face. Although some readers may feel faceless pictures are odd, we inferred it is probably Kilodavis’ intention that other Princess Boys can place their own or their family members’ faces into the story when they read aloud together. Kilodavis cherished Dyson’s uniqueness in a very positive manner and was never judgmental to any readers who saw her son in a critical manner. Rather, she gave them opportunities to learn about her Princess Boy at the end of the story as she asked: “If you see Princess Boy... Will you laugh at him? Will you call him a name? Will you play with him? Will you like him for who he is” (unpaged)? On her homepage (<http://myprincessboy.com>), Kilodavis also provides readers with an acceptance curriculum in order to teach adults and educators how to create a safe space when they have conversations with children about accepting differences.

Jacob’s New Dress by Sarah Hoffman and Ian Hoffman (2014), much like *My Princess Boy* (2010), offered main character, Jacob, who loved to wear dresses in the school’s dress-up corner where students were allowed to use their imaginations. At home, Jacob tried on his witch’s Halloween costume, and he loved the feel of the black lace as it swirled around him. After Jacob made a homemade “dress-thing,” one of Jacob’s classmate’s questioned why he liked to wear dresses, and then he pulled the “dress-thing” off of Jacob. With the help of his mother, Jacob made a purple and white dress to wear to school the next day. His friend Emily and his teacher, Ms. Wilson, supported Jacob at school.

While Jacob’s mother was supportive, his father questioned why Jacob would want to wear a dress to school. The authors clearly have experienced this issue since their

son Sam “had long hair, wore dresses, and loved the color pink, and they called him “pink boy” (unpaged) to acknowledge his differences. The parents sought to educate themselves about Sam’s gender nonconforming characteristics; they recognized the need for other parents to be supportive, since these characteristics often resulted in teasing and bullying by other children. The illustrations provided a way for the viewer to see Jacob’s demeanor when Christopher pulled off his “dress-thing,” but they also showed Jacob’s pride when he wore his new dress to school.

When Kayla Was Kyle by Amy Fabrikant (2013) is another story about a transgender child. Fabrikant intentionally avoided using non-human characters in this book because the story was written based on the real experiences of one transgender child. Although Kyle was interested in playing with Barbie dolls, his dad always encouraged him to play basketball. During recess, boys played with other boys outside, and the girls played at the dollhouse together; Kyle could not find a place to fit in at school. Boys were often cruel to Kyle and called him “Loser” or “Girl.” Kyle finally talked to his parents about the boys not wanting to include him in their group. When he told them, “I can’t live like this anymore. I don’t belong here. Everyone hates me. I want to live in heaven” (p. 18), his mom finally asked Kyle, “Is it because you feel like a girl?” (p. 18). Soon after that, Kyle decided he would live as a girl, Kayla, and not return to school. Kyle’s parents were at first hesitant about their son’s decision. However, the more Kyle shared his feelings with them honestly, the better they understood his identity as a girl. Both Kyle and his parents ultimately received more support from others, and the day arrived when Kyle went back to school as Kayla.

Since the title clearly depicts the story theme, many readers will easily visualize the story settings and plot. The important message to readers is the acceptance of and

difference in others. Gender nonconforming children are often subjected to a form of discrimination and bullying at school, and getting full support from their parents and close friends is often unlikely. Fabrikant included in this story more explicit derogatory language such as the terms “loser” and “girl” than many authors do. As a result, the conflict that Kyle faced in the story was clear. However, there was no information about what happened to the bullies who gave Kyle a hard time at school or about how Kayla ended up getting three supportive friends.

It is our opinion that more specific descriptions of the transformational process from Kyle to Kayla should have been addressed. Although the author’s initial intention in writing this nonfiction picture book was superb, the text could be a bit too wordy for early elementary readers, and it lacked specifics that would be appropriate for intermediate or middle-grade elementary readers.

Jeffrey and Lisa Bone (2014) challenged gender stereotypes in the book *Not Every Princess*. The poetically written picture book allowed the writers to reference classic children’s literature characters such as princesses, fairies, pirates, ballerinas, and superheroes. In the authors’ notes, they referred to a female referee in an NFL game who challenged traditional gender roles, which appeared to be one of the motivating factors that led them to write this book. Magination Press, the book’s publishing company, is the imprint of the American Psychological Association, and in the Note to Parents and Caregivers section of the book, the authors provided tips on how the caregiver can “encourage your children to challenge stereotypes and gender roles, and grow into the person of their choosing” (unpaged).

The words were important in this text as the narrative flowed well, but the illustrations were what challenged the reader. As the authors referred to each character,

the illustration challenged the gender role expectation. For example, the princess wore a horned helmet, the knight was in armor with a long red cape, and a superhero was someone who saved a cat from a ledge. The point was that there are endless possibilities, and society should not set gender expectations that are rigid and fixed.

One possibility of gender choice is to live a completely and unselfishly open life. Jessica Herthel and Jazz Jennings (2014) explained in the autobiography *I Am Jazz* how she felt she was a girl trapped in a boy's body. Jazz spoke about her favorite color and activities, but she noticed she was different than the other females. Early on, she referred to herself as transgender since she "has a girl brain but a boy body." Her parents expressed confusion since they always thought of her as a boy, and her brothers insisted that her daily activities were only "girl stuff." As Jazz stated in the book, she never gave up trying to convince them that she felt being a boy was really a lie.

Jessica Herthel's background is connected to the LGBTQ community. She is the director of the Stonewall National Education Project, and has strong beliefs about including diversity in school curricula and programs. Through Herthel's retelling, Jazz was first introduced to the term transgender when she and her parents met with a new doctor who was able to fully explain what Jazz was feeling and experiencing. The illustrations showed how Jazz saw herself: dressing in high heels and princess gowns, wearing girls' clothes to school, and cheerleading. The only tense times in the book were when other kids teased Jazz, and when the teachers showed confusion about which bathroom Jazz should use at the school. Jazz is one of the honorary co-founders of TransKid Purple Rainbow Foundation, and she continues to educate the community through her website, various conferences, and her television show on The Learning Channel.

In *I Love My Purse*, Belle Demont (2017) also depicts childhood gender nonconformity and gender role expectations. The illustration on the cover page shows a boy on a skateboard carrying a red purse. Through the title, in a stereotypical sense, readers might assume that carrying a purse is for girls but not for boys. It is possible to imagine that the plot is about a gender nonconforming boy and his behavior. One day, as Charlie headed off to school, he decided to carry a red purse that his grandmother left for him. At first, people around him such as his father and his friends all reacted negatively and asked him questions about his “strange choice,” because they believed that boys should not carry purses. Charlie did not compromise his determination and continued bringing it to school. One day, a crossing guard told Charlie that he also loved Charlie’s purse, and he also shared with him about his favorite pair of sparkling shoes that he liked to wear. Charlie’s bringing his red purse to school opened many people’s eyes. Charlie’s father began to wear his favorite Hawaiian shirts to his work, his friend Charlotte painted her face and came to school, and the crossing guard also wore his favorite sparkling shoes on duty. The story tells readers that it is not always necessary for people to conform to social norms. The theme of this story is about the significance of developing gender identity and self-expression. In a humorous and entertaining manner, the story teaches readers how to express themselves honestly and openly and helps children discuss roles of gender in a classroom setting.

The American Library Association provides educators with a tool for finding award-winning literature for children and young adults through the annual Stonewall Book Award. *Morris Micklewhite and the Tangerine Dress* was a Stonewall Honor Book of Children’s and Young Adult Literature Award in 2015, which means it was recognized for its “exceptional merit relating to the gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender experience”

(ALA). Christine Baldacchino (2014) explained how the character Morris loved to do many things such as paint, drink apple juice at snack time, and complete puzzles. The theme of the book is that Morris also liked the dress-up center at school where he selected the tangerine dress to wear because it made fun noises like “swish, swish, swish” and “crinkle, crinkle, crinkle.” Although the boys and some of the girls made fun of Morris when he wore the dress, he pretended he could not hear them. As one would expect, Morris began to feel sick due to the mean things his friends said about him.

Isabelle Malenfant’s illustrations brightly showed the importance of Morris’ tangerine dress as he moved around the school and community. Although he was unsure how to explain his tangerine dress to his mother, he illustrated a dream in which he was riding a big blue elephant while he wore his tangerine dress. Due to his intense depictions of his dream, Morris began to feel more comfortable with wearing the dress to school because it “reminded him of tigers and the sun and his mother’s hair” from the painting. As his confidence soared, his friends noticed it did not matter what Morris wore during play time. In fact, others became jealous and expressed an interest in wearing the dress as he “swished, crinkled, and clicked.”

Instructional Suggestions to Teachers and Librarians

Pleasure Reading—More Please

Teachers may have worries about whether books that students read will have an impact on state assessments such as Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) and other standardized tests. Wilhelm (2016) found that students still used the traditional reading strategies, even when exposed to a wide range of genres, so they would probably do the same with the above-mentioned trade books. Still, he found that “pleasure reading is an underutilized tool for addressing issues of social

equality and opportunity and should not be neglected by teachers, educational institutions or policies” (p. 37). Students need a chance to “reconstruct” themselves, and pleasure reading is just the right setting for this. Because they expose children to new topics, cultures, and thoughts, trade books have a chance to be transformational (Galda, Sipe, Liang & Cullinan, 2014). Teachers can use these materials to help students to explore new topics, and to make choices for future reading. Providing a pleasure reading “safe space” for students in the classroom might help them negotiate any questions they have about their gender.

Model Acceptance

Reading is still reading, no matter what cultures or experiences are depicted therein, and it is important for the educator to model how to be accepting of any culture. Wanless and Crawford (2016) stated that “children’s literature offers an engaging vehicle for generating these conversations” (p. 9), and educators should embrace these times as a chance to have meaningful conversations about topics that come up in books. Galda, et al., (2014) stated that “books play a significant role in the life of our youth, but the extent to which they will do so depends on the adults surrounding them” (p. 28). With the assistance of the adults in the “it takes a village to raise children” society, these books can do much to enlarge the boundaries of the lives of educated youth. Educators must model acceptance and show students that we read books which include characters from various cultures, and this in turn will help the students develop into lifelong readers. It is a goal of all teachers. In addition, “books that provide readers with opportunities to see different aspects of themselves, their communities, and the people they love” (Wanless & Crawford, p. 12), allow the adult reader a chance to model a caring practitioner, a loving caregiver, and a person who shows respect for human differences.

Awareness of the Culture

In addition to using reading effectively as a teaching tool, educators must also have a true understanding of the culture in which we live. For instance, transgender individuals have unique experiences and feelings just like any other social group in our culture. One such experience is “gender dysphoria,” which is the scientific term utilized by medical and clinical experts to denote a condition in which there is a conflict between a person’s physical or assigned gender and the gender with which that person identifies. Those who experience gender dysphoria often have a strong feeling that they were born in the wrong body, and that their bodies do not truly conform to their true genders. They are not comfortable with the physical makeup of their bodies. Due to the inner conflicts they experience and express, they are often targeted for bullying by their peers and feel distanced from their families and society simply because they were born in the wrong body.

As a resource for helping anyone struggling with appropriate gender-related language and terms, Teaching for Tolerance offers a Gender Spectrum Glossary (<http://www.tolerance.org/LGBT-best-practices-terms>). When in doubt, it is appropriate to consult the glossary to make sure terms are used correctly. Another point to consider is that some LGBT families and individuals may want privacy as they navigate gender issues with their loved ones. Naidoo (2012) observed that “privacy is important to both parents and children in rainbow families” (p.9). For librarians, “the form of confidentiality [that] can take place in patron records,” and “discretion when helping children and parents in rainbow families locate materials” (p. 9) should be considered when providing service to such children and parents.

Discussing Tender Topics

Transgender and gender nonconforming issues are very personal, but everyone should be aware of them and sensitive when dealing with these matters. Mankiw and Strasser (2013) provide instructional suggestions for teachers who want to discuss these tender topics with their students during and/or after reading aloud pertinent books. Many teachers avoid discussing tender topics in their classrooms due to their unfamiliarity with the sensitive issues they raise, and because they are afraid of negative reactions from students and their parents. As previously pointed out, Mankiw and Strasser argued that tender topics are not problems to avoid, but rather subjects to explore creatively as part of our life events. They suggest two instructional approaches: bibliotherapy, which is using books as a therapy tool (Thibault, 2004); and critical literacy, which involves examining and analyzing language, texts, and illustrations while exploring the meanings, expressions, and social issues related to particular situations and conflicts in a story. Thoroughly understanding the unique experiences of transgender children may be hard for many children. In addition to reading about transgender people and culture, inviting them and their families to the classroom and having them share their unique experiences with the .classmates may help remove negativity and confusion toward transgender people and increase the mutual understanding.

Know Your Resources

Appropriate and meaningful resources can make conversations about tender topics less awkward, but educators need to know where to go for appropriate and meaningful resources which can make these conversations easier. Wyatt (2014) stated that No Child Left Behind (NCLB) has become a “boon” for scripted curricula due to the pressure to reach higher test scores and meet various academic needs, yet “advocates of culturally responsive teaching assert that the education of children, particularly those who

are culturally diverse, cannot be standardized” (p. 448). Therefore, we offer the following websites and organizations as “go-to” sources of information about the transgender culture.

1. American Library Association’s Stonewall Awards honors the year’s best children’s and young adult literature about the LGBTQ community.

(<http://www.ala.org/rt/glbtrt/award/stonewall/honored>)

2. *The Advocate* provides a well-developed list of twenty-one picture books to use in the classroom.

(<http://www.advocate.com/books/2016/1/29/21-lgbt-picture-books-every-kid-should-read>)

3. GLSEN (Gay, Lesbian, Straight, Education Network)-provides a curriculum guide among many other items for the community.

(<http://www.glsen.org/educate/resources/curriculum>)

4. Teaching for Tolerance is a site which provides professional development, blogs, lesson plans, webinars, and film kits to use in the classroom.

(<http://www.tolerance.org/gender-spectrum>)

5. Ten Tips for Facilitating Classroom Discussions on Sensitive Topics offers a simple yet thoughtful framework for educators to think about---before you approach sensitive topics.

(http://bento.cdn.pbs.org/hostedbento-prod/filer_public/SBAN/Images/Classrooms/Ten%20Tips%20for%20Facilitating%20Classroom%20Discussions%20on%20Sensitive%20Topics_Final.pdf)

Conclusion

The quality of the books that we reviewed for this article varied, but more books

about transgender and gender nonconforming characters are published each year. Teachers and librarians should raise their awareness of and sensitivity regarding transgender issues by reading these books. This is especially important because children self-identify about gender identity early in their lives, society is becoming more accepting toward the culture, and the current transgender civil rights movement is active and strong.

Learning about differences should be a worthwhile and meaningful experience. In reality, however, acceptance of others often becomes a major obstacle for both teachers and students in schools. Learning about differences requires patience, because many people often perceive this process as an uncomfortable experience. Additionally, teachers using derogatory terms prevent students from learning about gender identities outside of their gender norms. Adapting and adopting language suitable for students should be carefully and collaboratively done with other personnel including the community, parents, and administrators (Miller, 2016).

Social justice is not a goal of learning. It is rather a concept that educators should value, practice, and implement in classrooms so that all students can learn without feeling any restrictions or oppressions from others. All children should be able to see their lives reflected when they open some of the children's books they read. Continuing to read and discuss these books will help students raise their awareness of transgender and gender nonconforming culture, but it is important for the educator to treat these topics with respect and to show an understanding of the characters depicted in the books included in this article, as well as in others like them, some yet to be written.

References

American Library Association. (n.d.). *Stonewall Book Awards list*. Retrieved January 12, 2019 from <http://www.ala.org/rt/glbtrt/award/stonewall/honored>

- Austrian, J. J. (2016). *Worm loves worm*. Illus. by Mike Curato. New York, NY: Balzer + Bray, an imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers.
- Baldacchino, C. (2014). *Morris Micklewhite and the tangerine dress*. Illus. by Isabelle Malenfant. Toronto, Canada: Groundwood Books.
- Beam C. (2014). Identifying effective trans* novels for adolescent readers. *Bookbird*, 52(1). 83-86.
- Benedetto, N. (2015). *About Chris*. Illus. by Nina Benedetto. Publisher: Nina Benedetto, <http://www.wonderwisdombooks.com>
- Benedetto, N. (2015). *My favorite color is pink!* Illus. by Nina Benedetto. Publisher: Nina Benedetto, <http://www.wonderwisdombooks.com>
- Bone, J. & Bone, L. (2014). *Not every princess*. Illus. by Valeria Docampo. Washington, DC: Magination Press.
- Demont, B. (2017). *I love my purse*. Illus. by Sonja Wimmer. Toronto, Canada: Annick Press.
- Evans-Santiago, B. & Lin, M. (2016). Inclusion with sensitivity teaching children with LGBTQ families. *Young Children*, 71(2), 56-63.
- Fabrikant, A. (2013). *When Kayla was Kyle*. Illus. by Jennifer Levine. Lakewood, CA: Avid Readers Publishing Group.
- Fisher, E. S. (2013). Supporting lesbian gay, transgender and questioning students and families. In Fisher, E. S. & Komosa-Hawkins, K. (Eds.). *Creating safe and supportive learning environments*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Galda, L., Sipe, L., Liang, L., & Cullinan, B. (2014). *Literature and the child*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Garmon, M. A. (2005). Six key factors for changing preservice teachers' attitudes/beliefs about diversity. *Educational Studies*, 38(3), 275-286.
- Gates, G. (2013). LGBT parenting in the United States. *Williams Institute--UCLA School of Law*. Retrieved January 19, 2019 from <http://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/research/census-lgbt-demographics-studies/lgbt-parenting-in-the-united-states/>
- Gilmore, N. (2015, May 25). Transgender titles for young readers--Titles aimed at young readers address the transgender experience. *Publisher's Weekly*. Retrieved January 12, 2019 from <http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/childrens/childrens-book-news/article/66750-lgbtq-publishing-books-for-every-body.html>
- GLSEN. (n.d.). *LGBT-inclusive curriculum: Incorporate LGBT history, themes and people into*

your curriculum! Retrieved January 12, 2019 from
<http://www.glsen.org/educate/resources/curriculum>

- Hall, M. (2015). *Red: A crayon's story*. Illus. by Michael Hall. New York, NY: Greenwillow Books.
- Hearthel, J. & Jennings, J. (2014). *I am Jazz*. Illus. by Shelagh McNicholas. New York, NY: Dial Books for Young Readers.
- Hirst, J. (2015). *The gender fairy*. Illus. by Libby Wirt. Publisher: Johanne Hirst, Oban Road Publishing, www.thegenderfairy.com
- Hoffman, S. & Hoffman, I. (2014). *Jacob's new dress*. Illus. by Chris Case. Chicago, IL: Whitman and Company.
- Kilodavis, C. (2011). *My princess boy: A mom's story about a young boy who loves to dress up*. Illus. by Suzanne DeSimone. New York, NY: Aladdin.
- Lukens, R. J. (2007). *A critical handbook of children's literature*. Boston, MA: Pearson.
- Mankiw, S., & Strasser, J. (2013). Tender topics: Exploring sensitive issues with pre-k through first grade children through read-alouds. *Young Children*, 68(1), 84-89.
- McGarry, R. (2013). Build a curriculum that includes everyone. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 94(5), 27.
- Miller, S. J. (2016). *Teaching, affirming, and recognizing trans and gender creative youth: A queer literacy framework*. London, England: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Moore, A. & Deshaies, M. (2012). *Ten tips for facilitating classroom discussions on sensitive topics*. Retrieved January 12, 2019 from http://bento.cdn.pbs.org/hostedbento-prod/filer_public/SBAN/Images/Classrooms/Ten%20Tips%20for%20Facilitating%20Classroom%20Discussions%20on%20Sensitive%20Topics_Final.pdf
- Naidoo, J. M. (2012). *Rainbow family collections: Selecting and using children's books with lesbian, gay, transgender, and queer content*. Santa Barbara, CA: Libraries Unlimited.
- Robehmed, N. (2015). *Hollywood has more gay characters but still no transgender roles*. Retrieved January 12, 2019 from <http://www.forbes.com/sites/natalierobehmed/2015/04/15/hollywood-has-more-gay-characters-but-still-no-transgender-roles/#daf6afa5ea1c>
- Rosenblatt, L. M. (1982). The literary transaction: evocation and response. *Theory into Practice*, 21(4), 268-77.
- Saint-Hilaire, L.A. (2014). Multicultural literature for elementary science classrooms. *Ohio Journal of English Language Arts*, 54(1), 27-41.

- Singh, A. A. (2013). Transgender and intersex students: Supporting resilience and empowerment. In Fisher, E. S. & Komosa-Hawkins, K. (Eds.). *Creating safe and supportive learning environments*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Southern Law Poverty Center. (n.d.). *Teaching for tolerance: A gender spectrum glossary*. Retrieved from January 12, 2019 <https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/a-gender-spectrum-glossary>
- Symons, A. & Freeman, J. (2015). Serving everyone-welcoming the LGBT community. *American Libraries*, 46(6), 30.
- Temple, C., Martinez, M., & Yokota, J. (2011). *Children's books in children's hands: An introduction to their literature*. New York, NY: Pearson.
- The Advocate. (n.d.). *21 LGBT picture books every kid should read*. Retrieved January 12, 2019 from <http://www.advocate.com/books/2016/1/29/21-lgbt-picture-books-every-kid-should-read>.
- Wanless, S., & Crawford, P. (2016). Reading your way to a culturally responsive classroom. *Young Children*, 71(2), 8-15.
- Wilhelm, J. D. (2016). Recognizing the power of pleasure: What engaged adolescent readers get from their free-choice reading, and how teachers can leverage this for all. *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy*, 39(1), 30-41.
- Wyatt, T.R. (2014). Teaching across the lines: Adapting scripted programmes with culturally relevant/responsive teaching. *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*, 22(3), 447-469.