Towards Queer Literacy in Elementary Education
Always Becoming Allies

Selena E. Van Horn
LGBTQ social, cultural, and political issues have become a defining feature of twenty-first century life, transforming on a global scale any number of institutions, including the institution of education. Situated within the context of these major transformations, this series is home to the most compelling, innovative, and timely scholarship emerging at the intersection of queer studies and education. Across a broad range of educational topics and locations, books in this series incorporate lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex categories, as well as scholarship in queer theory arising out of the postmodern turn in sexuality studies. The series is wide-ranging in terms of disciplinary/theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches, and will include and illuminate much needed intersectional scholarship. Always bold in outlook, the series also welcomes projects that challenge any number of normalizing tendencies within academic scholarship, from works that move beyond established frameworks of knowledge production within LGBTQ educational research to works that expand the range of what is institutionally defined within the field of education as relevant queer studies scholarship.

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Towards Queer Literacy in Elementary Education

Always Becoming Allies
This book is dedicated to Drew and Lua. Thank you, Drew, for your love and partnership, and for supporting my work and me, in everything I do. Thank you, Lua, for your love and patience that made this book happen.
You are my favorite reading buddy.
This book is also dedicated to queer children and youth. You make for a better world.
Teacher-researchers are among the most influential people in our lives. They have the great privilege and responsibility to teach young people to think critically while challenging their own thinking along the way. This book is for the teacher-researcher who believes the purpose of education is to work for equity and social justice; however, they might be searching for more clarity about how their beliefs can and should be practiced in their elementary classrooms.

As a teacher-educator and literacy researcher, I have worked with many pre-and in-service educators across the country who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer+(LGBTQ+) allies. Many can reference a friend and/or family member who is LGBTQ+. They believe in marriage equality, may attend Pride events, and/or post on social media about their views on equality and social justice. When asked about how they include LGBTQ+ topics, literature, and so on in their classrooms, many of these same educators are at a loss. Some say they believe their personal and political views shouldn’t be in the classroom. Some feel their views would be unwelcome. Many reference fear of how parents will react. Teachers of primary-grade students (K-3) say, “maybe if I taught 5th or 6th grade,” while teachers of intermediate-grade students (4–6) say, “maybe if I taught middle or high school”. These responses share a separation of personal and professional identities. At the heart may be fear, unquestioned biases, and/or a lack of knowledge about the hxstories of LGBTQ+ people, what it means to practice allyship and our role in dismantling or maintaining inequities both in school and beyond.
This book blends multiple research studies, historical and current events, reflective teaching examples, and guidance for the next steps for LGBTQ+ inclusion and queer pedagogy in elementary schools. When I was a classroom teacher and during my doctoral studies, I searched for books that provided a look into how teachers discussed LGBTQ+ topics with their students, their reflections on their own tensions, and ways to support me on my own journey to LGBTQ+ inclusion. I found Letts’ and Sears’ (1999) edited book, *Queering Elementary Education: Advancing the Dialogue About Sexualities and Schooling*. From that point, my research focused on working with teachers and students to question taken-for-granted assumptions, engaging vulnerable reflections of our identities, questions, hopes, and resistance to LGBTQ+ and queer inclusion in the elementary classroom.

The contents of this book are organized into three sections: Schools and Communities, Educators and Curriculum, and Children and Literature. It is divided into three sections to guide the readers from a broad understanding of the histories of LGBTQ+ discriminations, rights, and some communities’ resistance to LGBTQ+ children, teachers, and curriculum to a focused invitation into my own reflections, teaching, and readings/discussions with children about LGBTQ+ literature and topics. Theoretically/methodologically, I think with Foucault (1972, 1970/1981, 1957/1977, 1978) and Butler (1990/1993, 1993, 1996) to engage in poststructural/postqualitative and arts-based inquiry. Across each section, I employ a co-reading and/or weaving of power/knowledge throughout school district decisions and policies, teachers’ understandings and resistance to LGBTQ+ inclusion, and understanding the discourses of an after-school book club of second-grade girls reading LGBTQ+ children’s literature.

I invite readers to take a look inside work that has been done with LGBTQ+/queer literacy, how teachers/researchers grappled with school districts, how that made them feel, and examine how district and/or community resistance to LGBTQ+ inclusion was always the purpose (through discourses of power/knowledge). I theorize what power/knowledge means and produces with regard to LGBTQ+ inclusion and how it has been socially constructed to be this way. This book provides a look at how poststructural theories, postqualitative and arts-based methodologies can be applied in educational contexts.

The chapters in this book highlight multigenre writing (including poetry), arts-based research (paintings/collages), and vulnerable
reflecting on their own identities when they “knew” or identified with their gender and sexualities, and how this type of reflection can lead to more nuanced understandings and classroom planning. An empowered teacher/researcher asks, “what now? what can I do?” The final chapters of this book walk readers through discussions with young readers, LGBTQ+ children’s literature, reflection questions (e.g., guiding readers through their own identity reflections), and resources for planning their next steps. Although not a workbook, this book includes resources and support for planning the next steps toward LGBTQ+ inclusion and/or Queer Pedagogy in classrooms/schools/etc.

I recommend this book to teachers/administrators/leaders interested in forming reading/working groups around LGBTQ+ inclusion, examining their own identities, practices, and decisions for their own schools. Workgroups may be interested in extending the work beyond their group and look to offer additional professional development in their schools/districts. Next, I recommend this book to instructors in graduate programs for students to critically engage with the theories, methodological blends, and practical applications. Finally, I would recommend this book to elementary school teachers interested in digging deeper personally, to sit and think with our teacher/researcher group, and envision and plan for LGBTQ+ inclusion and queer literacy pedagogy in their classrooms.

I understand many of the tensions teachers experience as I experienced them early in my elementary school teaching career. This is the book I wish I had as a teacher-researcher over a decade ago. In that time, there have been many changes socially and politically, but pre-and in-service teachers continue to question how their personal beliefs about their LGBTQ+ allyship converge with their teaching. This book provides histories, theoretical and methodological inquiry, resources, and encouragement for teacher-researchers ready to engage LGBTQ+ inclusion and queer literacy pedagogy in their classrooms, schools, and communities.

Fresno, CA, USA

Selena E. Van Horn
REFERENCES


Writing this book was a labor of love. I am incredibly grateful for the amazing teachers, students, and community members who have taught me what it means to follow our inquiry and work for equity.

Thank you, Nora and Jennifer. You two were brilliant, reflective, dedicated, compassionate teachers who opened your hearts for a personal and professional journey and became advocates and allies to the LGBTQ+ community. It is our hope that all children and families will one day have teachers who honor and celebrate their diverse identities and families, for a more just and peaceful world.

Thank you to the second-grade readers in our book club. Although no longer little ones, you filled me with joy for the future. You lead with love and empathy and I am a better educator for knowing each of you and learning from you.

I am grateful for the entire Midwestern, university community where we researched and worked together. You all were fighting for LGBTQ+ equity long before our work and will continue to long after. Your constant presence makes the lives of LGBTQ+ youth safer and more joyful each day.

I am grateful to Palgrave Macmillan and Senior Editor, Milana Vernikova, for valuing LGBTQ+ and queer scholarship and viewing my work as contributing to the amazing scholars I admire.

Finally, I am grateful for the many mentors and friends who have supported me as an educator and work in solidarity with equity and social justice. I am always becoming an ally and will continue to learn, reflect, grow, and practice in allyship.
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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

I am always in awe of the brilliance of children. They take in the worlds around them and often live among multiple. Through play and imagination, they are often able to live out their truest identities. They are brave and inquisitive, free to envision a world where their identities and dreams are honored and celebrated. From the beginning, children are socialized into discourses that tell them who they are, should be, and will be (Butler, 1990). Many times this begins before they are even born. Parents will go to an anatomy screen when the baby is in utero and may ask or be told the sex (assigned at birth) although they will be given a gender (i.e., girl or boy). This pattern may continue to a gender reveal party decorated with blue (to signify boy) or pink (to signify girl) and the identities of the children, unbeknownst to them, begin projecting.

I wonder, when do children learn to hide parts of themselves and/or to ignore or deny parts of others? Does this come from the repetitive discourses, images, and assumptions of those around them? When they step outside the bounds of acceptable performance of their assigned sex/gender, what do the adults and other children in their lives do to (dis)honor them?
Welcome to Readers

How You May Have Come to This Book

I assume that if you are reading this book, this is not your first introduction to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer+ (LGBTQ+) identities and topics. However, your pre-service teacher education programs may not have prepared you to teach for LGBTQ+ inclusions and/or how to navigate the structures of PK-12 school districts, administrators, colleagues, and families. In this book, you will learn about how LGBTQ+ identities and topics have been included and excluded in schools across the US, how one school district in the Midwest handled LGBTQ+ in/exclusions, how a teacher-researcher collaborative engaged in personal and professional reflections on gender and sexuality, and how I facilitated LGBTQ+-inclusive literature discussions with an afterschool book club of second-grade readers.

If you are facilitating and/or taking part in a teacher-researcher book club/workgroup, I invite you to pair your own readings and group discussions of the LGBTQ+ children’s literature along with the chapters in which we read and discuss them. This will provide you with a variety of text exposures and connections. When you reach the Pause and Jot sections, consider reflecting individually and then returning to your group to share together. Finally, review the additional resources throughout the chapters and at the end of the book to further your reading. And of course, contact me, Selena. I would love to hear about the amazing work you are doing in your school and community.

My Hope for Our Time Together

I invite you to share in our teacher-researcher journeys, to sit with my book club of second graders, and to explore the texts of possibilities for your LGBTQ+-inclusive and queer literacy teaching. I hope you will ask questions of our research together and engage in personal and professional reflections of your own. Throughout the chapters and in the Conclusion of this book, there are some Next Steps to get you started on your own journey.
WHY TIME AND PLACE MATTER

Throughout the last 20 years, there have been many changes socially, politically, and through media that have played a larger role in shaping how LGBTQ+ identities are honored and celebrated. There have also been strategic efforts made to discriminate against LGBTQ+ people, specifically with regard to children’s academics, athletics, and health.

Reflection takes place across time and place. Over time, our understandings change and grow. This can come from meeting new people, reading new books, and having new experiences. Sometimes, when we least expect it, we are positioned to make a choice—one to honor the identities of others, or to ignore and/or silence them. I imagine in some form, you serve as an educator. I used to be an elementary school teacher in the Midwest—that time and place mattered to who I was then. I am now a researcher, teacher-educator, and parent—this time and place matter for who I am now. When you think about yourself across time and place and through relationships, consider how who you are matters for your students. I always tell my students (pre-and in-service educators and administrators) you have power—you can choose to use your power for good or for evil. Choose to use your power for good! We have the power to decide whose voices will be heard and silenced, who will be (un)safe, and who will be (dis)honored.

TERMS AND ACRONYMS: SELF-IDENTIFICATION, REFLECTION, AND EVOLVING TIMES

In this book, I use different variations of the acronym LGBTQ+. When I am referring to LGBTQ+ people and topics, I will add the plus sign to signify that there are many more identities than lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer. When quoting or citing specific information from a source, I use the acronym according to the source (e.g., LGBT or GLBTQ). At times I use the coupling sex/gender, not to subsume that sex and gender correspond to each other or that they are interchangeable, but to use the slash to mean or. For example, when referring to the binary ways adults categorize children and their friendships, I may refer to the child as having different or same sex/gender friends. This is used to identify either different or same sex or different or same gender friends.

When referring to a relationship, I may write same sex, same gender, single gender headed family, etc. While the definitions of these terms are
not interchangeable, they may be used interchangeably as the sociopolitical discourse currently maintains language for couples, specific to legal marriage recognition, as same sex couples. While not all same sex couples are also same gender couples, the marginalization of same gender parents includes an assumption that same gender couples are also same sex couples. For the sake of this book, same sex, same gender, and single gender headed families all denote two moms, two dads, or the possibility for two parents of the same sex or gender.

**Self-Identification**

It is important to note and to always remind ourselves that more important than knowing every possible identity (as if it were possible), pronouns, etc., is the importance of honoring self-identification. When a person tells us their identities and/or pronouns, we should use them. If the language the person uses to describe their identities and/or pronouns changes, we should change and use them. This honors individuals and places their self-identification, respect, and safety above our own in-progress learning and/or discomfort with new terms.

I always find it funny to hear someone say that they cannot fathom using they/them pronouns for a singular person when using they/them pronouns in their example:

*If a teacher wants to use they and them pronouns for a single individual rather than “he or she”, they need to review the rules of grammar.*

When someone cannot understand the use of non-gender-specific terms for our siblings and partners, I like to remind them of the many endearing names children have for their parents. If this is a new concept, one might think about the many terms used for grandparents (e.g., grandma, granny, nana, mema, etc.) and these are just some of the names used in English.

**Reflections**

In the past, I have added an “A” to LGBTQ+ (i.e., LGBTQA+) to include asexual identities, but at times (and no longer) I referred to the “A” to signify allies. Asexuality should be included and therefore can be considered part of the Q+, to connote the many genders, sexual identities, self-identifications, and terms we don’t yet know, and those that will be. Including allies in the acronym is problematic for a few reasons:
• Allyship is a verb, an always-in-process. One does not achieve allyship and stop listening, learning, and working in solidarity.
• Identifying with one or more LGBTQ+ identities does not automatically mean that a person is an ally to other LGBTQ+ identities, nor the intersections of LGBTQ+ identities with race, ethnicity, culture, language, socioeconomic status, etc.
• Including an A for allies, specifically straight allies, moves to take space from the LGBTQ+ community and thus silences them—the opposite of allyship.

Alternative Spelling
Throughout the book, I use the terms *hxstory, hxrstory, hx(r)storical*, etc. The reason for these spelling differences is to illuminate and disrupt/resist cis/heteronormativity within the American English language/spelling. *History is his + story.* Throughout this book, we are not only looking at the stories of many folx who are women (i.e., cisgender women), but also those of trans and nonbinary folx. For this reason, I will use the spelling *wxmen.* The “x” signifies ALL wxmen.

Theoretical Foundations
Gender and sexuality are both social constructions (Butler, 1990; Foucault, 1978) that hold multiple meanings across time and contexts. Butler wrote about the ways that gender is performative, created and maintained through repetition, and works to unsettle the ways that binary understandings of gender (woman/man) attempt to regulate people’s choices, actions, and ways of being. The process of regulating people, or creating a normalized view of gender and sexuality, maintains power/knowledge that is passed on as *truth* (Foucault, 1978). The concepts of social construction and discourse affect the ways that schools and their societal roles are viewed. Physical spaces and the *normalized* practices of school appeal to cis/heteronormativity (Warner, 1993), a binary categorization of gender (woman/man) and sexuality (homosexuality/heterosexuality; gay/straight). Physical spaces, such as restrooms and locker rooms, are cis/heteronormatively separated. Normalized school practices are built on socially constructed views of gender and sexuality, and the practices are maintained through power/knowledge.