

Building Emotional Intelligence Through LGBTQ Children's Books

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Abstract

Educational settings tend to hold a heteronormative status quo; however, this study asks the question of how LGBTQ children's books are being used in early childhood education settings, and how do they influence the children being exposed to them. Research shows that opening conversations about LGBTQ family structures is important for building children's world view and challenging heteronormativity in early childhood classrooms has been proven to help build children's emotional intelligence. However, many early childhood educational settings do not include LGBTQ literature on a regular basis. This study aims to dive deeper into the perspectives and opinions of administrators in childcare centers about LGBTQ children's literature. As a part of this study, anonymous Qualtrics surveys were sent to administration of four- and five-star childcare centers to determine their view on LGBTQ literature in early childcare centers. Preliminary results show that some childcare center administrators do not recognize the LGBTQ community in their definition of diversity. These results also showed that participants were unfamiliar with popular LGBTQ children's books, but mostly had a positive response when exposed to them later in the study. Some recommendations for moving away from a heteronormative classroom include professional development related to diversity and inclusion with a focus on the LGBTQ community, and the use of LGBTQ booklists when adding to the classroom library. Providing childcare center administration with information on how to make an inclusive classroom, will allow access to a more diverse worldview and promote the growth of emotional intelligence in their children.

Introduction

My beginning studies of the topic taught me that there is a wide variety LGBTQ children's books, and even a lot of research on why these books are beneficial. So, then the question becomes, why aren't administrators of early childcare centers taking advantage of such books? As I began trying to answer this question, I started to look back at my own childcare teaching experience. I did not have access to LGBTQ children's books or many diverse books in general in the classroom. This theme began to become evident through the literature review, and even our own data analysis.

Educational settings usually advertise a goal that involves diversity and inclusion, but tend to leave the LGBTQ community out of this definition. The literature shows that many people in charge of picking out books for classrooms are not taking advantage of LGBTQ book lists that already exist (Digid, et al. 2021). The literature review shows that inclusion is important to parents (Digid, et al. 2021) and our research shows a similar importance to

childcare center administration. With that being said, it is important to figure out why the disconnect exists and why it is important. With an overall goal of supporting children's emotional intelligence and their ability to develop into worldly citizens, it is important to research the thoughts and opinions of the people responsible for building the layers of foundation.

Literature Review

Emotional Intelligence

The term emotional intelligence was coined by Mayer and Salovey (1990). Mayer and Salovey "define emotional intelligence as the subset of social intelligence that involves the ability to monitor one's own and others' feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them and to use this information to guide one's thinking and actions" (1990, p. 189). With that being said, emotional intelligence plays a big role in building a child's self-esteem and even the basis of their world view. Accurately assess emotions and how they impact others plays an important role on building a welcoming society. Mayer argues that "Emotions communicate basic feeling states from one individual to another..." (2004, p.9). Having the ability to effectively communicate one's emotions to not only themselves, but to the outside world can have a major impact on acceptance in society and a person's self-worth.

Garces-Bascal (2020) found that diverse children's books have a positive influence on developing a child's emotional intelligence. They argue that in order for children to become emotionally intelligent they must be comfortable with themselves. By providing students with accurate knowledge of themselves, they have higher self-esteem, and better regulated emotions. Directors show an understanding for the importance of emotional intelligence, but may not realize how LGBTQ books play a role.

Several researchers help solidify the importance of including LGBTQ characters in the childcare setting (Brand & Maasch 2017; Chang, et al., 2021). They explain that excluding books with LGBTQ characters automatically makes students with connections to these communities feel rejected. If directors have a goal of creating an inclusive environment, it is important to include all groups, not only books they know. Directors need to understand that by choosing to do nothing in relation to specific communities they are in turn having a negative impact on the children are a part of these communities.

Defining Diverse Books

Once understanding that LGBTQ books can have a positive impact on children in early childcare centers, it is important to define what a diverse book is. For this study, Bishop's (1990) mirrors and windows are the best way to define diverse books. Bishop explains that for children to have a well-rounded worldview, they must have both mirrors and windows.

When defining mirrors, Bishop explains that people enjoy reading books that represent themselves and their experiences. When children see books about them in their classrooms, homes, and libraries, they feel valued. Books that are mirrors are important because "books are not only mirrors, they are socializers" (Bishop, 1990, p. 5). The books that are available for students tell a story about societal norms, values, and appreciation. They are one of the first steps to building a child's worldview, and it is important for them to see themselves represented in that. Books that are mirrors are especially important for children that are part of the minority group as they have a history of not being valued in our society.

Windows are different from mirrors and take on many shapes just like real ones. They allow students to see worlds that are different from their own. "Students from dominant social groups need to be able to look through the window of books to come to know people whose cultures are different from their own" (Bishop, 1990, p.7). This is important in building a

welcoming and open-minded society. Children need to understand that their experience is not everyone else's. Windows help promote acceptance and an open-minded worldview for children. A book that is a window should mimic what it would be like if you were looking through a window at another family. You can see their life and interactions even though you are not a part of it.

More recent articles show that Bishop's (1990) mirrors and windows still play an important role for students. Cahill, et al. (2021) argues that mirrors and windows allow students from marginalized groups to have a sense of importance within society. This directly aligns with Bishop's (1990) views. Directly solidifying that allowing students to have mirrors and windows helps to build their emotional intelligence.

LGBTQ Children's Books

For the purposes of this study, it was important to get a baseline idea of not only what a diverse book is, but specifically what LGBTQ children's books look like and what kind of stories are inside. Diuguid, et al (2021), takes time to summarize several of the titles that are included on the [2020 Rainbow Book List](#). In the summary of *Pride Colors* written by Robin Stevenson, Diuguid, et al. explains that "without using explicit words, the author introduces Pride Day family structures and the LGBTQ+ community to young readers" (2021, p.3). While there are LGBTQ children's books that are not about family structure the style of *Pride Colors*. It is important to understand what an LGBTQ children's book includes so that assumptions are not placed upon them with no prior knowledge.

Status Quo

Although LGBTQ children's books can have a positive impact on children, they are not commonplace in educational settings involving children. Digid, et al. argue that when picking out books for story time at the library, many librarians are not taking advantage of the Rainbow

Book List. They open discussion about the need for inclusion of the LGBTQ community in story time settings. As discussed earlier they also go into detail about the common context of LGBTQ children's books. When libraries are aiming for an inclusive environment, but are looking over LGBTQ book lists, they are losing an important part of their potential population. The same scenario can be applied in early childcare settings. Aiming for an inclusive environment but excluding LGBTQ children's books, skips over an important step to inclusivity (Brand & Maasch 2017; Chang, et al., 20217).

Tschida, et al. (2014) argues the importance of breaking up the narrative of single stories related to family structure. They work to create an understanding that by presenting only a heteronormative family style in children's books, teachers are denying students access to their mirrors and windows. While this study focuses on undergraduate preservice student teachers, the same information can be applied to childcare center classrooms.

Continuing a heteronormative status quo in classrooms not only impacts the students, but can have an impact on the parents. Butac (2016) explains that by leaving heteronormativity unchallenged other sexualities become silenced. Butac's study focuses on LGBTQ parents with children ages 0-6 years who had recently sought out early year environments (EYEs). Butac "explicitly asked them how important inclusivity of the LGBTQ community in EYEs was to them, to which all parents indicated that it was significant" (2016, p. 42). This caused some of the parents to have trouble finding an EYE to send their children to. The study also explains that the participants were mostly middle-class white women. This brings up the concern that LGBTQ parents that are in the lower class may not get the privilege of denying an EYE because of lack of inclusivity. In this instance their family's structure may not be included in their children's classrooms. As stated earlier, this can cause feelings of rejection in children and erasure for the parents.

Methods

In this section I discuss the methods used for the larger mixed-methods study. For this report, I focus on the qualitative portion of the study.

Participants

Participants in this study included directors or administrators of four- and five-star childcare centers in counties across North Carolina (NC). Participant centers were located in rural, suburban, and urban counties. Most of the participants self-identified as heterosexual, white, females.

Data Sources

The primary data source was an anonymous Qualtrics survey including a variety of closed and open-ended questions. This report focuses on 3 of the 4 open ended survey questions. All four questions are listed below:

- AGQ2 Based on your opinion, justify why or why not books are important in your child's life.
- AGQ4 Based on your opinion, justify why or why not diverse books are important in your child's life.
- AGQ5 In your opinion, what does it mean to have a "diverse children's book"?
- AGQ7 Do you want to add anything else?

In this study, data analysis was focused on questions AGQ 2, 4, and 5.

Data Analysis

As previously stated, this qualitative report analyzed data from 3 out of the 4 open questions. These responses were analyzed by two members of the research team, including myself. Each researcher independently coded the data by using Straus and Corbin's (1998) constant comparison method to triangulate the data. Then the two members met to discuss

commonalities, discrepancies, and finalize themes. Themes were then shared with the full research team and updated as needed. More details about the data analysis process are included in the next section.

Steps in Qualitative Data Analysis for Larger Study:

1. Met with lead researcher to plan for analysis process.
2. Individually read through all the questions and their corresponding answers.
3. Individually made a separate document with all the questions.
4. Independently read for common words or themes.
 - a. Words or phrases that showed up 3 or more times or themes that seemed important to note were added to the document.
 - b. Repeat for all 3 questions.
5. Recursively read through document of themes.
6. Met with lead researcher to discuss emerging themes.
7. With lead researcher collapse themes that fall under the same overarching category.
8. Pulled initial quotes for each theme as exemplars.
9. Met with additional researchers to share and discuss current findings for larger study.
10. Finalized themes.
11. Pulled additional quotes that highlight finalized themes.
12. For AGQ 5, differences were added to a list and tallied for multiple similar responses.
13. Began noting which themes are most usable for this report.
 - a. Development [social/emotional]
 - b. Differences
 - c. World view
14. Finalized quotes for this report.

15. Met with lead researcher to identify negative cases.
16. Shared negative cases with entire research team for discussion.

Results

Results from the qualitative analysis of the 3 open-ended questions produced 7 themes. The most relevant themes to this research report are mirrors and windows, emotional development, acceptance, and defining diversity. This section provides illustrative quotes from the analysis with explanations for each finding.

Mirrors and Windows

Mirrors and windows were quickly identified as a theme of importance to the administrators when responding to AGQ 4. One participant explained that "Children need 'mirrors' to reflect them/their culture and 'windows' to see the outside world -- outside their experience". Although many participants did not use the language "mirrors and windows" when discussing why diverse books were important, most used examples of mirrors and windows in their explanation. Participants responded similarly to the following:

We live in a diverse society and children should have access to developmentally appropriate reading material that depicts this diversity so that they can align or identify themselves or family members with characters that resemble themselves. This helps to provide culturally responsive educational experiences. Its [sic] also an opportunity to expose them to people, places, cultures that are different from their own. (Participant Response)

This participant did not use the words mirrors or windows, but they clearly show an understanding of the importance of them by providing examples that align with the idea of mirrors and windows.

Emotional Development

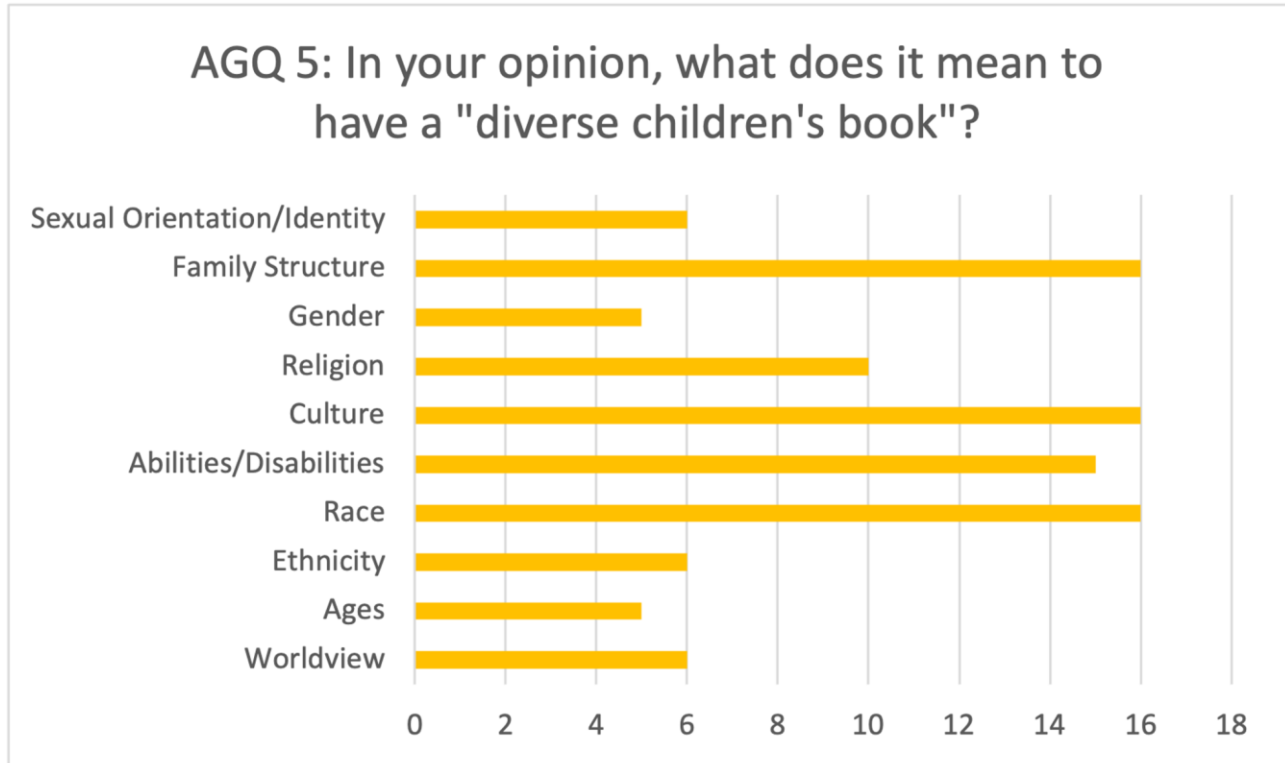
When answering AGQ 2 and 4, several participants brought up the importance of books in development for children. Furthermore, many specifically mentioned emotional development in their responses. One participant does an exceptional job elaborating, "Books give children the ability to see different people, places, and things not in their everyday life. They also reinforce daily images, encourage language development, fine motor skills, and social-emotional development, and can increase positive adult-child interactions" (Participant Response). Not only is emotional development important to early childcare administrators, but LGBTQ books are an excellent way to build emotional intelligence.

Acceptance

Acceptance was a major theme throughout AGQ 2 and 4. Administrators said that "In order to help children be the best they can be we must help them develop a healthy sense of self and an openness and acceptance of others" (Participant Response). Many other responses included acceptance as a reason that diverse books are important, alongside building a solid world view.

Defining Diversity

When asked "In your opinion, what does it mean to have a 'diverse book,'" participants had a common way to respond. Most answers were "a diverse book means different [insert list of differences]". Out of 46 responses, with multiple differences listed, the table below includes the top 10 most popular responses. It is important to note the numbers in the graph represent the frequency in which each category was used in a participant response and not to signify one participant included only one item. For example, "Any book that covers different religions, races, nationalities or sexual orientations" (participant response).



Family Structure, Culture, and Race all tied for the top response when asked to define what a diverse children's book means. This shows that when defining diversity, family structure is important to early childcare center administration.

When asked to define a diverse children's book less than half of the participants included race or culture in their definition. Also, multiple participants included zoo animals or colors in the definition of a diverse book, but zero participants explicitly said the LGBTQ community. Opinions on what diversity means to the participants in this study was widely varied.

Discussion

Mirrors and Windows

Results show that Bishop's (1990) mirrors and windows are an important topic for early childcare administration. Participants continually provided examples of mirrors or windows in their reasoning for why books or diverse books were important. Participants explain that children should be able to see themselves in books (mirrors) and should also be exposed to lives different

from their own (windows). Giving children access to their mirrors and windows not only empowers them as people; it also develops acceptance for others in their life (Bishop, 1990; Cahill, et al., 2021). Recognizing that for some children an LGBTQ children's book is a mirror is key when deciding what to include in the classrooms. Even if there are no children with LGBTQ experiences in the classroom, LGBTQ children's books can still serve as a window to other students to build their emotional intelligence about LGBTQ people.

Emotional Development

Emotional development is a major aspect in both current literature and the opinions of the administrators. Garces-Bascal (2020) explains that diverse children's books have a positive influence on developing a child's emotional intelligence. Administrators have shown an understanding for the importance of emotional intelligence and consistently include developing emotional intelligence in their explanation of why diverse books are important, but may not realize how LGBTQ books play a role. Diversity and inclusion should include the LGBTQ community and, in this way, can also have an impact on a child's emotional intelligence by providing them with either their mirrors or windows. It is important to remember that to have a truly developed world view, all aspects of diversity must be included, not just hand chosen communities.

Acceptance

Participants answered with a common opinion that diverse books are important for creating accepting members of society. Brand and Maasch (2017) explain that excluding books with LGBTQ characters automatically makes students with connections to these communities feel rejected. Administrators need to realize that by choosing to ignore the LGBTQ community, they are making children that have a relation to it automatically feel dismissed. Essentially, by doing nothing or failing to include LGBTQ children's books, administrators can create a

negative impact. This is important to note because acceptance was consistently brought up by administrators when asked why diverse books are important. If acceptance is something that is valued in the early childcare setting, then remembering to accept and include all communities is important.

Defining Diversity

It is interesting that in a study about LGBTQ children's books, none of the participants included the LGBTQ community in their diversity definition. Participants of the study were aware of the topic beforehand, and had just read books with LGBTQ themes. This clearly shows a misunderstanding in the link of the LGBTQ community to diversity.

On the other hand, the fact that family structure was tied for the number one response when defining what diversity means is groundbreaking for this research. This is a major finding because LGBTQ children's books are largely about different family structures. Part of the disconnect with early childcare center directors and including LGBTQ children's books is that they are not familiar with the material inside. Causing a misunderstanding or fear about the message behind said books. If early childcare centers can read and understand that LGBTQ children's books largely talk about different family structures, it will make it easier for them to be implemented into settings where they may have originally been denied. LGBTQ children's books are a great example of family structure as many of them even include structures that are not inherently related to the LGBTQ community i.e. grandparents, step parents, and adoption (Diuguid, et al., 2021). Making the connection between family structure and LGBTQ children's books makes it a much more approachable topic for those that may be wary.

Conclusion

Analysis and discussion of the data produced three recommendations. The first is that administrators of childcare centers need more professional development related to LGTBQ

inclusion in classrooms. The research shows that many administrators are not aware of how to include the LGBTQ community in their childcare centers or that they should. Teaching administrators the importance of including the LGBTQ community in their classrooms and providing them with information on diversity and inclusion will give them the tools to make changes in their centers. Furthermore, administrators of childcare centers should re-evaluate their definition of diversity to include a more realistic scope. As shown in AGQ 5, less than half of the participants included race or culture in their definition of diversity and no one explicitly included the LGBTQ community. If administrators cannot recognize that they are missing critical communities that define diversity, they may not realize they are doing things wrong in the classroom. Finally, when administrators are ready to add LGBTQ children's books to their classroom libraries, they should take advantage of LGBTQ children's book lists because they are a great example of diverse family structure. Researchers in the future may want to investigate the parents' view of LGBTQ children's books or a deeper study on the material included in LGBTQ children's books.

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