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Wendy Keyser & Alyssa Whitford

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Plot, Characters, and Representation: Patterns and Gaps in Award-Winning LGBTQ Children's Books

Wendy Keyser ^a and Alyssa Whitford^b

^aEnglish Studies, Fitchburg State University, Fitchburg, MA, USA; ^bEducation Department, Hope College, Holland, MI, USA

ABSTRACT

Children's books representing LGBTQ identities are a vital part of elementary school classrooms and libraries, as well as family resources, and more of these diverse books have been published over recent years. While existing research on these books catalogs how many of them represent traditionally marginalized groups, our research examines the diversity of narratives within these books. In this study, we used narrative critical content analysis to examine 51 books from three award lists: the Lambda Literary Awards, the Rainbow Booklist, and the Stonewall Book Awards for Children's and Young Adult Literature. These books are age-appropriate for read-alouds for all elementary grade levels based on their text complexity and storylines. We categorized books with identity-based conflicts and conflicts not based on identity. Overall, we found that books rely heavily on LGBTQ identities as the main source of conflict, using repeated plotlines of coming out, resisting bullying, love stories, and LGBTQ rights. In most cases, these repeated plotlines limit representation of LGBTQ people's complex, multifaceted lives. We discuss the implications of these repeated plotlines, and we provide a list of recommended books that represent LGBTQ characters with more multifaceted lives and provide more unique stories.

KEYWORDS

Children's literature;
children's books; LGBTQ;
diversity; content analysis

Introduction

Picture books are a staple of any elementary school. Read both within and outside of lessons, these books allow students a valuable entryway into better understandings of the world. But whose worlds are these, and how well are they represented? Recently, this question has become the center of national attention and controversy as educational policies across the United States target classroom books, with particular attention to books with LGBTQ characters. Florida's Parental Rights in Education law, also known as the "Don't Say Gay" law (Laviertes, 2022) bans instruction related to gender and sexuality. In fact, teachers may face the threat of losing their employment if they include books that represent LGBTQ identities. According to the Zinn Education Project (2023), "In 2023, not only are books being banned, but also the right to teach about racism and LGBTQ identity – essentially placing thousands more titles off limits" (p. 1). In this context, it becomes both more difficult and more important to create inclusive classrooms that represent diverse and multi-faceted identities.

CONTACT Wendy Keyser  wkeyser@fitchburgstate.edu  English Studies, Fitchburg State University, 160 Pearl Street, Fitchburg, MA 01420, USA

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To create a literacy classroom affirming all identities, teachers need access to books with quality representation of LGBTQ characters. Yet, most research related to LGBTQ books focuses on the quantity of such books available. In this study, we examined the conflicts within award-winning children's books to answer the following research questions: 1) What, if any, recurring plotlines do award-winning LGBTQ stories depict? 2) What plotlines are included less frequently or not at all, despite an increasing availability of LGBTQ texts? 3) When examining the diversity of stories, are the same stories told repeatedly, or are varied stories available?

Theoretical framework

We base our study on the theoretical framework of critical multiculturalism, which is a multi-layered lens attending to the discourse of narrative fiction and the "social processes among the characters" (Botelho & Rudman, 2009, p. 120) as these relate to race, class, and gender. We adapt this framework to examine social processes relating to LGBTQ identities. A focus of this theory is identifying ideologies suggested by the story, both deliberately (often didactically) and passively (Hollindale, 1988). Passive ideology is "the individual writer's unexamined assumptions" (Hollindale, 1988, p. 12), which are nonetheless communicated through the story. Hollindale (1988) suggests asking the following questions, among others, to identify ideologies which may not be readily apparent: "What happens if the components of a text are transposed or reversed?" (p. 19); "Is it a noticeable feature of some . . . children's books that they test and undermine some of the values which they superficially seem to be celebrating?" (p. 20); and "Who are the people who 'do not exist' in a given story?" (p. 21).

Critical multiculturalism also draws on the concept of mirrors, windows, and doors. According to Bishop (1990), every child needs books that reflect themselves and their experiences (mirrors) alongside books that immerse them in the experiences of others (windows) and books that provide a transformative experience (sliding glass doors). Reese (2018) cautions that books might also include curtains as well, as authors may protect their cultures and/or identities by shielding them so they are not misappropriated.

However, not all mirrors and windows are equally beneficial; students need holistic, complex representations in order to connect to stories in authentic ways, not limited to a single story (Adichie, 2009; Tschida et al., 2014). In a theoretical critique of fictional gay male characters, Crisp (2018) proposes evaluating whether books provide thorough, intentional, and authentic depictions of their lives with attention to stereotypes and tropes, such as gay characters being depicted as victims of violence, or living lonely, solitary lives.

Literature review

Both quantity and quality of LGBTQ books are instrumental in creating an inclusive classroom environment. While several theories explain how views of gender and sexuality develop, the role of the social environment is largely accepted as an important component (Martin et al., 2002). Studies indicate that the surrounding environment can shape both explicit and implicit biases and perceptions (Bandura, 2008), including those about gender and sexuality (Olsson & Martiny, 2018). In fact, Crocco (1997) argues that classroom curricula portray cultural truths. Thus, the lens of critical multiculturalism becomes

increasingly important as the ideologies represented in books not only showcase the writer's assumptions, they influence the way young children see the world and can contribute to harmful biases and stereotypes.

High-quality LGBTQ texts allow students to engage with and discuss counter-stereotypical narratives regarding gender and sexuality. Teachers may feel uncomfortable directly addressing "others" or areas of difference, as shown by Garces-Bacsal and Tupas's (2021) interpretation of preservice teachers' discourse regarding navigating the concept of "the other" in educational settings. Thus the role of children's books becomes increasingly important. Unfortunately, books featuring LGBTQ characters often rely on tropes that simplify the characters' identities and experiences (Miller, 2022). In fact, Lee et al.'s (2021) analysis of transcripts from teacher instructional planning indicates that multiple quality texts are needed to emphasize different lived experiences in a way that is multi-faceted rather than reductive.

Book bans and the we need diverse books movement

Two social movements within the past decade have affected the availability of diverse books. Since the We Need Diverse Books movement began in 2014, more books featuring traditionally marginalized characters have appeared on bookshelves (Crawley, 2017); in fact, between 2015 and 2023, the number of books for or by people of color sent to the Cooperative Children's Book Center has more than tripled (Social Justice Books, 2023). Yet, inequitable representation still exists. Children's books tend to center white, cisgender, heterosexual characters (We Need Diverse Books, n.d.). According to Crisp et al. (2016) examination of 21 preschool classrooms, less than three percent of classroom books included marginalized voices. Conradi Smith et al.'s (2022) study of classroom read-alouds discovered that, while teachers valued diversity in literature, read-alouds often used dated books without traditionally marginalized identities.

This lack of access to diverse books is exacerbated by book bans throughout the United States. Libraries and schools have received record numbers of book challenges as recent laws limit books about racial, gendered, or sexual identities in classrooms (Harris & Alter, 2022). It therefore becomes vital that the books teachers bring into their classrooms authentically represent identities.

Need for quality representation

As researchers investigate the quantity of books featuring LGBTQ characters, we must also focus on quality. Classroom literature should include thoughtful, multi-faceted representation of LGBTQ identities, as children use books to make sense of the social world (Crocco, 1997). Nichols' (2006) study indicates the importance of creating such an environment. In a survey of over 200 practicing and preservice teachers, teachers emphasized the value and impact of creating environments that are affirming and empowering, as students must feel seen and valued in order to feel safe and motivated to learn. This finding is supported by Feger's (2006) analysis of classroom culture and student work, which demonstrates that literature in which children genuinely see their own identities supports reading skills and motivation. In addition, Souto-Manning's (2009) teacher action research discovered that that diverse literature supports complex,

culturally responsive, and critical thinking about the world with even early elementary students. Specifically, Souto-Manning analyzed responses to diverse literacy and discourse in a first-grade classroom. Student discussion indicated that culturally sustaining literature served as an effective vehicle for thinking deeply and critically about social issues through a lens of justice and equity. Thus, the characters included in classroom texts can affirm students' own identities or help them better understand the identities of others. However, passive ideologies that transmit biased messaging can disrupt students' access to authentic, sustaining windows and mirrors (Bishop, 1990; Botelho & Rudman, 2009).

Children benefit from seeing authentic representations of LGBTQ people in books. When children feel personally connected to texts, they become more motivated and skilled readers (Crawley, 2017). As shown in a study of over 700 LGBTQ youth, student experiences of well-being at school, academic outcomes, and school safety were significantly associated with student perceptions of teachers' positivity toward LGBTQ people and topics (Ullman, 2017). However, the majority of LGBTQ children's literature targets a straight audience, intending to teach inclusively to heterosexual children (Macleod, 2014).

Children's books with complex, multi-faceted characters and stories veer away from didactic, one-dimensional writing. Didactic literature, or literature designed to teach "right" from "wrong" though instructional, moralistic writing, is typically unconcerned with engaging the reader or creating thoughtful, complete representation (Kvisvik, 2023; Lesnik-Oberstein, 1998). A shift away from merely educating children through books allows authors to include creativity and enjoyment. While didacticism is intended to educate students, leaning away from didacticism allows for a story that delights and engages through complex characters who are not all bad or all good (Kvisvik, 2023). In fact, in their analysis of text translation, Al-Daragi (2016) established that texts with translations that increase didacticism may decrease entertainment. Didactic stories within LGBTQ literature may therefore be uninteresting and confining.

Analyses of representation in texts

Researchers have examined various elements of LGBTQ representation in literature, including intersectionality with race and disability, as well as representation of the subgroups of LGBTQ. Crawley's (2017) critical content analysis of books published from 1900 to 2016 featuring transgender child protagonists revealed a lack of intersectionality with race, social class, and gender performance. Young's (2019) content analysis of 28 award-winning LGBTQ children's books showed limited diversity in terms of race and gender identity. A more recent study showed some shifts toward the intersectionality of LGBTQ identities and race, although intersectionality was still limited. Specifically, within 185 picture books that included LGBTQ characters, Vaandering and Rosenzweig (2023) discovered that while over 60% of the books included racial diversity, few showed LGBTQ characters with a disability. Additionally, nonbinary and bisexual identities were largely invisible. These findings support the argument of Knopp-Schwyn and Fracentese (2019), who noted that the lack of bisexuality in books is a limiting form of erasure. Miller (2022) found that most LGBTQ adult characters in children's literature were family members to child protagonists, rather than protagonists themselves.

Together, these studies provide an important examination of LGBTQ characters in children's literature. However, scant research looks beyond the characters to examine the stories themselves. Our narrative critical content analysis turns from quantity toward quality of such texts, examining award-winning children's books from three LGBTQ-focused award lists: Lambda Literary Award, Rainbow Book List, and Stonewall Book Award. We seek to add to existing research by investigating central conflicts and resolutions, patterns of plotlines, and how stories diverge from these patterns.

Methods

We used narrative critical content analysis to examine conflicts and resolutions in award-winning LGBTQ children's books. Content analysis is the "systematic, objective . . . analysis of message characteristics" (Neuendorf, 2002, p. 1). Narrative analysis specifically examines formal narrative structure (Neuendorf, 2002, p. 5). Critical analysis is a "multi-layered lens that is focused and refocused through a recursive process of analysis" (Botelho & Rudman, 2009, p. 119), which considers ideologies and social positions in the context of culture (Botelho & Rudman, 2009). Initial descriptive codes were developed prior to analysis and emergent codes were used in the second phase of analysis. After coding the books, we examined overt and implicit messages against the backdrop of plotlines identified through emergent coding, coding each book as either identity-based conflict or non-identity-based conflict, and coding the identity-based conflict books as one of the following: coming out, love story, resisting bullying, LGBTQ rights, and outliers.

Data sources

We selected award-winning picture books from three national award lists and compiled a list of all books from award years 2013–2022. Books were required to have a conflict and resolution, so those without a conflict, such as books with a simple message or explanatory books, were eliminated. We included both fiction and nonfiction books, but we eliminated biographies, because this genre is structured around a series of obstacles rather than one central conflict. This process left us with a total of 51 books.

The three award-granting lists are: the Lambda Literary Awards (Lambda Literary, 2022), the Rainbow Booklist (American Library Association, 2022a), and the Stonewall Book Awards for Children's and Young Adult Literature (American Library Association, 2022b). The Lambda Literary Awards have been given since 1989, with the purpose to "identify and celebrate the best lesbian and gay books in the year of their publication" (Lambda Literary, 2022). The Stonewall Book Awards, sponsored by the American Library Association Rainbow Round Table, have been in place since 1971; the Rainbow Booklist, sponsored by the American Library Association in coordination with the GLBT Round Table and the Social Responsibilities Round Table since 2008, is much more extensive. Taken together, these three lists guide librarians and educators in book selections, influencing books children and parents are most likely to read.

Coding and analysis

Both researchers independently read and analyzed all of the books, and an undergraduate research assistant read and coded 24 books; thus, all books had at least two readers and

about half of the books had three readers. Initial analysis was set up as open, descriptive responses to the following categories: category (sub-group of LGBTQ people represented), conflict(s), resolution(s), stance(s), and representation.

We described the conflict and the resolution for each book; for those with multiple conflicts and resolutions, each was numbered and listed. The stances category describes whether parents, teachers, peers, or society are supportive, and whether and how the stance changes throughout the story. The categories of conflicts and resolutions are the primary focus of this study, and the category of stance is important, as conflicts are often intertwined with the LGBTQ character's experience of actual or perceived stances of others.

To ensure validity, we individually coded all of the books using the open-response categories described in this section. In our initial, descriptive coding, we had complete interrater reliability in the categories of conflict(s) and resolution(s), due to the concrete nature of these categories. The two researchers then sorted the books into two broad categories: those with identity-based central conflict and those with central conflicts without an identity basis. Coding for the two types of conflict yielded interrater reliability for 49 of the 51 books (96%). For the remaining two books, we noted "not sure" and used collaborative discussion to determine the most accurate codes.

After the first two steps of coding described above simplified and reduced the data, we used our next phase of coding to "interrogate [the data] further, to try to identify and speculate about further features" (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996, p. 30). We used emergent coding, in which we "immerse[d ourselves] in the world of the message pool and conduct[ed] a qualitative scrutiny" (Neuendorf, 2002, pp. 102–103) of the content to categorize recurring plotlines within the books with identity-based conflicts. We then coded all books with identity-based conflicts in one of these categories: coming out, love story, resisting bullying, LGBTQ rights, and outliers. While 39 of the stories (76%) fell neatly into one of these plotline categories, upon which we agreed, we labeled 12 (24%) that were less clear "not sure," along with the two competing possible categories. We then collaboratively discussed and refined definitions of each plotline category, until category definitions clarified appropriate designations for these books. We also used the question: "What is the central conflict?" to clarify plotline categories for books with multiple conflicts.

We defined coming out as including coming out to oneself, family, friends, and/or society about either one's own identity or the identity of one's family member. We recognize that a character may be out in one setting but not out in another setting, leading to possible multiple coming out events. We identified love stories as stories about characters pursuing a love interest, rather than stories about already-coupled pairs. In the category of resisting bullying, we differentiated lack of understanding from derision and exclusion. While many books include peers asking questions about the main character's or their family member's identity due to lack of understanding, we did not code these stories as bullying when peers were open and accepting while learning about LGBTQ topics. We coded derisive and excluding behaviors as bullying in instances such as: pointing and laughing; running away from or refusing to play with a character; or banishing a character from the society or making them feel so uncomfortable they choose to leave the society. The outlier category contains books that are identity-focused but with a conflict that does not fit into the other categories.

After sorting identity-based conflict books into the plotline categories, we recursively examined each group of books by category, identifying overt and implicit messages about

LGBTQ identity, bullying, acceptance, coming out, and love. We identified commonalities and differences in the messages of books in each category. We further analyzed the books without identity-based conflict to look more closely at messages about LGBTQ people's lives, in the context of community, family, and society.

Our final step was to identify books we recommend to families and educators as exemplary in presenting LGBTQ lives as complex, layered, and inclusive of experiences that go well beyond identity-based conflicts (see [Table 1](#)). We recognize that “critical and aesthetic response can exist together” (Botelho & Rudman, 2009, p. 10), and we included our aesthetic responses in selecting books to recommend. We looked for books with interesting stories that would be compelling whether or not the characters were LGBTQ, and we offer suggestions to readers searching for these types of stories. Each of us had favorite books that stood out, not only among these award-winning lists, but among all children's books (see [Table 1](#)).

Other books had strengths and weaknesses in our aesthetic experiences as readers, and we discussed these to find consensus. As criteria, we returned to our premise, that non-identity-based central conflicts best represent LGBTQ people as whole human beings. We considered storytelling, including a compelling plot, well-chosen details, and diction. Additionally, we considered books with identity-based plotlines when these books diverged from predictable, simplistic storylines and offered strong storytelling qualities. We understand that our recommended book list represents our own personal leanings, and we wholeheartedly suggest that readers explore books on their own, taking their own tastes and interests into account.

Findings

Of the 51 books evaluated, 42 contain identity-based conflicts, and only nine do not. Within those with identity-based conflicts, most fall into one of the following plotline categories, with the number of books in each category indicated: coming out (21); resisting bullying (seven); love story (six); LGBTQ rights (five); and outliers (three). In each category, we describe at least one representative story, and we describe books that diverge from the pattern. Next, we discuss books with non-identity-based conflicts.

Conflicts based on LGBTQ identity

Within the collection of 51 books from the three award lists (Lambda Literary Awards, Stonewall Honor Books, and the Rainbow List) between 2013 and 2021, 82% of books (42) have an identity-based conflict. Of these, we sorted books by recurring plotlines (39) or outliers (three). Below, we describe recurring plotlines of: coming out, resisting bullying, love story, and LGBTQ rights.

Coming out plotline

In the coming out plotline, an LGBTQ or gender nonconforming character, or one with LGBTQ family member(s), begins the story with some awareness of their identity and fears sharing this identity with others. We found 21 books in this category. In some of these stories, the character comes out to themselves, which entails gathering observations about themselves, posing and answering questions of uncertainty, to come to a conclusion about

their own identity. The character then finds the courage to share their identity, after which their chosen audience is either immediately accepting or initially confused before becoming accepting. In response to others' confusion, when it occurs, the main character educates them about experiences and feelings of being LGBTQ or gender nonconforming. Supportive characters, usually parents, teachers, or friends, help the character adapt to their new reality of having come out. In some stories, the character comes out through showing rather than telling, with the character using clothing or a costume to express themselves.

In another version of this plotline, the character is unafraid of sharing their identity, but others are initially resistant to accepting the character's identity. However, once the character explains their experience, the others become accepting. Both versions have distinct before-after frames, in which the conflict is resolved after the character comes out.

Notably, most of the books depicting trans, nonbinary, or gender nonconforming children follow this plotline. Examples include: *I am Jazz* (Herthel et al., 2014); *Introducing Teddy: A Gentle Story About Gender and Friendship* (Walton & MacPherson, 2016); *Phoenix Goes to School* (Finch & Finch, 2018); and *I'm Not a Girl* (Lyons & Verdi, 2020). The book *Calvin* (Ford & Ford, 2021) is typical of books in this category. In this story, Calvin is nervous to come out to his parents and grandparents as a trans boy, after which his parents express unconditional love and acceptance. He worries about returning to school in his new identity, but when he does so, he is supported. While stories, such as *Calvin*, have only the coming out conflict, others include subplots. For example, in *Born Ready: The True Story of a Boy Named Penelope* (Patterson & Barlow, 2021), after coming out to his family, Penelope participates in a karate tournament and wins; in *When Aidan Became a Brother* (Lukoff & Juanita, 2019), after Aidan comes out to his parents, he worries that his parents will pick the wrong name for his unborn brother, considering the uncertainty of gender.

While most of these books depict coming out as an absolute turning point, after which acceptance is universal, *It's Okay to Sparkle* (Jackson, 2017) depicts supportive friends but unsupportive friends' parents. The main character has enough support to confidently be herself, despite lingering instances of not being accepted. Another book depicts critical questioning from otherwise supportive peers. *Call Me Max* (Lukoff & Lozano, 2019) shows friends questioning Max's initial reasoning about being a boy, pointing out that girls can enjoy tree climbing and that boys can enjoy wearing dresses. These conversations help Max figure out that he just feels like a boy on the inside. In this story, other peers make Max feel uncomfortable in the bathroom by giggling and pointing, but after he comes out as transgender to his classmates, they stop.

A few books represent coming out through personal appearance. Books in this category include: *Fred Gets Dressed* (Brown, 2021), *Julian is a Mermaid* (Love, 2018), and *Auntie Uncle: Drag Queen Hero* (Royce & Chambers, 2020). In the first two, a character wants to dress in gender nonconforming ways, with Fred wearing his mother's clothing and Julian dressing as a mermaid. After a moment of possible disapproval from a caregiver, shown only through an illustrated facial expression, the child receives the adult's support; Fred and his parents dress up together, while Julian joins a parade of drag queens. While not necessarily representing gender nonconforming children, these stories represent children who challenge gender norms.

In *Auntie Uncle: Drag Queen Hero* (Royce & Chambers, 2020), Uncle Leo/Auntie Lotta rescues a puppy during a drag parade and is invited to publicly receive a prize, facing the

tough decision of how to dress for the ceremony: in drag or in conventional business attire. Uncle Leo/Auntie Lotta has two personas and two communities that have not previously come together, but eventually creates an outfit that is a mixture of a dress and a suit. In this way, the character comes out to both the drag and work communities about their previously undisclosed alternate personas.

Other books represent characters coming out in regards to sharing their LGBTQ parents or siblings. These books are primarily set in schools, and characters are nervous about upcoming heteronormative events, such as inviting parents to school for parents' day or creating cards for Mother's Day or Father's Day. In these stories, the character expresses fear, and then another character states that there are many configurations of families. Examples include: *Heather Has Two Mommies* (Newman & Cornell, 2015); *Stella Brings the Family* (Schiffer & Clifton-Brown, 2015); and *A Family is a Family is a Family* (O'Leary & Leng, 2016). Some books are written from the perspective of a sibling who makes the transition from being confused to supporting and understanding the sibling who comes out. These books include: *My Sister Daisy* (Karlsson & Curci, 2021) and *Sam is my Sister* (Rhodes-Carter & Haley, 2021).

Resisting bullying plotline

In another identity-based plotline, the main character faces bullying based on their LGBTQ identity, frequently at school. We found seven books in this category. Bullying is derisive and unaccepting, without an interest in learning more about the LGBTQ character. It can take various forms, including mocking; avoiding or refusing to play with a character; or banishing a character from the society or making them feel so uncomfortable they choose to leave the society. In contrast, some of the coming out stories begin with other characters expressing confusion or disbelief about the LGBTQ character's identity, but once the characters are educated, they become accepting. Their initial stance of not accepting the character may be difficult for the character, but it is not intentionally malicious.

As the plotline progresses, the character finds ways to counteract the effect of bullying. This coping strategy can take several forms, from finding supportive friends or family members to standing up to the bullies. In some stories, the bullying continues, but the character finds a way to cope with it, while in others, the bullying stops in response to the coping mechanism. Notably, none of these stories include peer bystanders standing up to the bullies on behalf of the bullied children, despite the current practice of educating children to be supportive bystanders. One example is *Jacob's Room to Choose* (Hoffman et al., 2019), in which an educator teaches children to be more accepting, and the bullying subsides.

Additional examples of resisting bullying books include: *Morris Micklewhite and the Tangerine Dress* (Baldacchio, 2014); *My Footprints* (Phi & Tran, 2019); and *Love is Love* (Genhart & Min, 2018). In *Morris Micklewhite and the Tangerine Dress*, Morris is comforted by his mother after being bullied for wearing an orange dress, after which he returns to school with a greater level of confidence, and some of his peers then want to play with him. He no longer is dismayed when some do not want to play with him. In *My Footprints*, Thuy is bullied for having two moms, but she and her moms imagine that she is a powerful animal as she makes big footprints in the snow. She does not return to school or face her bullies in the story. In *Love is Love*, the main

character is bullied for having two dads and wearing a rainbow shirt, but after considering no longer wearing his rainbow shirt, he expresses pride in the face of peers' disapproval.

In an extreme version of bullying, the bullied character is banished or excluded from their community. This is the case in *Bunnybear* (Loney & Saldaña, 2017); *Neither* (Anderson, 2018); and *Prince & Knight: Tale of the Shadow King* (Haack & Lewis, 2021). All three of these stories take place in imagined lands. *Bunnybear* features a character who looks like a bear and acts like a bunny, but when he tries to join the bunnies, he is told to leave. One bunny, who feels like a bear, understands him, and the book ends with a party of animals who act like other animals, such as a bluejay who meows. *Neither* features a world of blue bunnies and yellow birds, in which the main character is a mixture of the two types of animals; after being excluded from group games, they wander off and discover a land where all animals are unique and accepted. In both stories, the main characters are banished and their conflict is solved by finding others like them elsewhere; the characters who exclude them never learn or change. The bullied characters are only accepted when they find others like them, rather than finding acceptance in their original community. Similarly, in *Prince & Knight: Tale of the Shadow King*, the Shadow King has been banished from his kingdom for loving a man, but is invited to live in Prince and Knight's kingdom, where he finds acceptance and love.

Love story plotline

The love story plotline, found in six books, has two varieties: a twist on the prince or princess fairytale, and a child's crush. In the fairytales, familiar components include the king searching for a spouse for his child, fighting a dragon, and rescuing a love interest from danger. We consider these stories to be identity-based, because plotlines are predictable except for the twist that the main character desires a same-sex relationship. In both *Prince and Knight* (Haack & Lewis, 2018) and *Maiden and Princess* (Haack et al., 2019), the main character falls for a love interest, defying society's initial heteronormative expectations; however, society immediately adapts and accepts the relationship.

The second subcategory involves a child's romantic crush on another child. In one version, the main character dwells on their feelings, but is hesitant to communicate these feelings. Once they are brave enough to do so, the love is reciprocated. *From Archie to Zack* (Kirsch, 2020) and *Love, Violet* (Wild, 2021) are remarkably similar: in both stories, the young person harbors a crush for a same-sex friend and writes a love note, but is afraid to deliver it. Once the note is received, the friend returns the feelings. In another version of a child-crush story, the main character finds a way to express love, but we do not read about the love interest's response. In *Cuando Amamos Cantamos/When We Love Someone We Sing to Them* (Martinez et al., 2018), the narrator asks his father for a song to sing to the boy he loves, and the father teaches him a song.

Only one love story includes outsiders' disapproval. In *Jerome by Heart* (Scotto & Tallec, 2018), Raphael's parents express negativity about his feelings for Jerome. Despite their response, Raphael goes to his room, affirms privately that he does love Jerome, and plans to find him a gift. This book stands apart across all identity-based books as depicting

disapproving parents who do not change their minds, yet the main character strengthens the resolve to be true to himself.

LGBTQ rights plotlines

Another plotline category depicts standing up for LGBTQ rights, through an organized struggle or individually. Within this category, books have fewer repeated plotline patterns compared to other categories of identity-based conflicts. Five books fall into this category.

Two are fiction books in support of gay marriage. In *Worm Loves Worm* (Austrian, 2016), two worms want to marry, but a group of bugs opposing their marriage concoct many requirements to be satisfied before they may marry, many of which presuppose heterosexual gender roles, including declaring one a bride and one a groom. However, other supportive insects solve each obstacle, and eventually the lead antagonist, Cricket, is convinced. Similarly, *A Day in the Life of Marlon Bundo* (Bundo & Twiss, 2018), ostensibly written by Mike Pence's rabbit, depicts a male rabbit who wants to marry another male rabbit but faces opposition from a Stink Bug, until other animals stand up for the rabbits' rights.

In three nonfiction books, the stories and the individuality of the descriptions of real people and their lives create unique stories. *Love Around the World* (Pierets & Ramos, 2019) tells the true story of two women who decide to get married in all 28 countries in which same-sex marriage is legal, while *Two Grooms on a Cake: The Story of America's First Gay Wedding* (Sanders & Cathro, 2021) tells the story of two men who find a way to get a marriage license in 1971 when one changes his name to the ambiguously gendered name Pat. Lastly, *Stonewall: A Building, An Uprising, A Revolution* (Sanders & Christoph, 2019) tells the story of the Stonewall uprising from the perspective of the buildings themselves.

Outliers

Three books are outliers, falling into none of the categories above. *Big Bob, Little Bob* (Howe, 2016) is about two friends who enjoy playing together, although Little Bob does not adhere to stereotypical gender play styles. *Ho'onani: Hula Warrior* (Gale & Song, 2019), based on a true story, is about a young girl dancing a role in a traditional dance that is typically danced by a male. Lastly, *My Rainbow* (Neal et al., 2020) features a trans girl with autism who desires long hair and her family's support in making her a rainbow wig.

Conflicts not based on LGBTQ identity

Some books include conflicts outside of recurring, identity-based plotlines. We found nine books, 18% of the award-winning books, in this category. In these texts, LGBTQ and gender nonconforming characters face obstacles that are not based on identity, although their identities are included in the story.

Five fictional stories revolve around gay family members, including grandparents, parents, and uncles. In *Grandad's Camper* (Woodgate, 2021), a grandchild listens to happy stories of their grandfather traveling with his husband, but now that his husband has died, he is sad and has stopped traveling. At the grandchild's suggestion, the two travel

together in Grandad's camper. In *A Plan for Pops* (Smith, 2021), one of two grandfathers (a couple) has a fall and must use a wheelchair, after which he becomes reclusive and no longer builds playful contraptions with his grandson. His grandson creates a ramp and releases paper cranes, reminiscent of the Pops' contraptions; Pops then agrees to get out of the house, and they all go to the library together. Both stories depict grandchildren making a positive difference in grandparents' lives. *Our Subway Baby* (Mercurio & Espinosa, 2020) is about fatherhood, telling the true story of two men who adopt a baby one found in a subway.

Two stories depict relationships with gay uncles. In *Uncle Bobby's Wedding* (Brannen & Soto, 2020), Chloe worries that she will lose her special relationship with her uncle when he gets married, but discovers that she enjoys time with him and his husband. In *Willie and Uncle Bill* (Schwartz, 2012), Willie enjoys fun times with his uncle, such as mixing together random foods to make a surprise dish, or joining a band's practice session.

Two stories revolve around unusual and charming pets, whose owners are gay. In the fictional story *The Adventures of Honey & Leon* (Cumming, 2017), two dogs do not like being left behind when their owners go on vacation. The pets go in disguise and secretly follow their owners on their next trip. In the nonfiction book, *The True Adventures of Esther the Wonder Pig* (Jenkins et al., 2018), two pet dads adopt a teacup pig, who is expected to stay small for her entire life; however, this pig continues growing until she gets quite large.

Lastly, two stories depict struggles of childhood. In *The Little Library* (McNamara & Karas, 2021), Jake has trouble reading and does not want to pick a book from the library, but the librarian Beck, who uses they/them pronouns, notices his interest in carpentry and finds him a carpentry book; their relationship continues throughout the school year, at the end of which Jake builds a little library so he can still access a library over the summer. *In Home at Last* (Williams & Raschka, 2016), Lester is adopted by two dads, and he struggles with feeling unsafe due to the loss of his parents and grandmother prior to his adoption. Compounding the issue, one of his dads yells when he gets upset. Over time, the loving family finds that sleeping with the dog, Wincka, can comfort Jake, and his dad works on yelling less. This book is unique in the way the parents are depicted as loving while still having flaws.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to analyze the central conflicts of award-winning children's books from three LGBTQ book lists in the ten years between 2013 and 2022, with attention to identity-based conflicts. Our research questions ask: What recurring plotlines do award-winning LGBTQ children's books depict? What plotlines are included less frequently or not at all? Are the same stories told repeatedly, or are varied stories available? After coding and analyzing each book for its central conflict(s) and resolution(s), our findings describe recurring, identity-based plotlines as well as non-identity-based plotlines and unique conflicts within LGBTQ children's picture books. In this section, we discuss implications for selecting high-quality children's books, as well as ideologies supported by the most prominent plotlines and conflicts.

Lastly, we share recommendations of books that portray multifaceted characters and conflicts within compelling, unique storylines (see [Table 1](#)).

Conflicts based on LGBTQ identity

It is noteworthy that most of the books, 42 of the 51, have conflicts intertwined with identity. While we applaud the growing LGBTQ and gender nonconforming representation in children's picture books, we advocate for books that present characters with multi-faceted lives who encounter conflicts that illustrate the fullness and variety of their experiences. Depicting LGBTQ identity as the source of conflict gives the passive ideology that being LGBTQ creates problems so all-encompassing that other conflicts do not exist or exist only as side stories. It flattens the representation of LGBTQ people, who live multifaceted lives with an array of conflicts, creating a lack of the windows and sliding glass doors needed to fully reflect complex identities (Bishop, 1990).

Further, most of these identity-based conflicts support stories with recurring plotlines and little variation. We identified the following recurring plotlines: coming out, resisting bullying, love story, and LGBTQ rights. Within each plotline, most stories follow remarkably similar plots. However, some books within the common plotlines nonetheless tell unique, detailed stories.

Coming out plotline

The preponderance of award-winning books (21 out of 51) are based on the coming out plotline, supporting research that LGBTQ characters in books often rely on oversimplified tropes (Miller, 2022). While coming out is an important process for LGBTQ individuals and family members, this level of emphasis on one aspect of life is disproportionate to the varied experiences of LGBTQ people. This emphasis also impacts the tone of the stories, making stories more serious than playful.

These stories are told in before-after frames, in which a character's life is difficult and misunderstood prior to coming out, but harmonious and understood after coming out. However, coming out is an ongoing and recurring event; LGBTQ people come out in multiple settings and in different ways over time. While most of the books oversimplify coming out, one explores its complexities. In *Auntie Uncle: Drag Queen Hero* (Royce & Chambers, 2020), Uncle Leo plays the drag role of Auntie Lotta, but when he must decide what to wear to accept an award at a ceremony where his work friends and drag friends will both attend, he comes out again and in a new way, using clothing that combines his two personas to show multiple sides of himself.

In most of the coming out books, the central character is the only LGBTQ person in the story, and it is their responsibility to educate others about their experience and needs. The passive ideology is that being LGBTQ is a solitary, unshared experience. If these stories are used as learning tools for children, it would be helpful to include stories in which the child is not the only one responsible for educating others about their identity, nor the only LGBTQ person.

Resisting bullying plotline

Who is responsible for addressing bullying? Educators recognize the importance of bystanders standing up for their peers as “upstanders” (Ansary et al., 2015), but this recurring storyline depicts characters who are bullied or their teacher as the sole persons responsible for standing up to bullies.

Within the five bullying books with human characters, four show bullying in school. In analyzing the role of allies in these books, one book, *Jacob’s Room to Choose* (Hoffman et al., 2019), shows the teacher educating the students, acting as a supportive ally to two trans students in her class. Two books, *Morris Micklewhite and the Tangerine Dress* (Baldacchio, 2014) and *Love is Love* (Genhart & Min, 2018), show the bullied student standing up to the bullies on their own. One book, *My Footprints* (Phi & Tran, 2019), shows a bullied student who finds comfort in pretending to be a big animal with her two moms, but she does not transfer this experience to the school setting in which she has been bullied. Considering that the majority of LGBTQ literature targets an audience of straight children (Macleod, 2014), we would like to see upstanders taking an anti-bullying stance in these books. While it is helpful to see examples of students standing up for themselves, these books portray the passive ideology that bystanders are not responsible for standing up to bullies on behalf of their peers, that standing up to bullies is solely the task of the bullied person. The concept of sliding glass doors (Bishop, 1990) shows how readers may take action in the world in response to stories; representation of upstanders would set an example of allyship.

The two books with animal characters are more confusing than helpful in representing LGBTQ children. Both *Neither* (Anderson, 2018) and *Bunnybear* (Loney & Saldaña, 2017) depict animals who are mixtures of two animals: in *Bunnybear*, a bear feels he is a bunny; in *Neither*, the main character is part-bunny and part-bird. These animals are told they do not belong in their societies and only find belonging when they leave their society and find other “misfits” like themselves. These books attempt to use animal metaphors to show human experiences, but the stories are confusing. A bear cannot join a family of rabbits in the wild, for example. On the figurative level, these books depict the ideology that people who are “different” will not be accepted unless they are surrounded by other people like them. While LGBTQ children may feel comforted to know they can find others like them, it is disheartening to suggest that the only way to fit in is to leave one’s community in search of another. Again, the characters who are not bullied or “different” do not take any responsibility to improve the situation.

Love story plotline

Most of the stories in this category follow a simplistic plot structure in which the main character has a crush, works up to opening up about it, and then the crush is requited or the character finds a way to express their love; there are no unrequited crushes. In this way, we found most of these books unoriginal. Taking up Hollindale’s (1988) question, “What happens if the components of a text are transposed or reversed?” (p. 19), imagining the characters to be straight eliminates any interesting aspect of the books and exposes their didacticism. The two books that feature parents introduce the element of parental hesitancy or disapproval, and *Jerome By Heart* (Scotto & Tallec, 2018) is unique within identity-based

conflict stories in that it shows the main character deciding to pursue his true feelings despite the lack of parental approval.

Conflicts based on LGBTQ rights

Of the five books in this category, the three nonfiction stories include unique details and plotlines, while the two fictional stories are more predictable. The right to congregate without being harassed by police is told from the unique perspective of the Stonewall building in *Stonewall: A Building, An Uprising, A Revolution* (Sanders & Christoph, 2019). The other LGBTQ rights books address the right to marry, with the nonfiction books introducing unique ways that historical couples found to protest and resist the prohibition on same-sex marriage. In *Love Around the World* (Pierets & Ramos, 2019), culturally diverse recognitions and celebrations of marriage are described as two women travel the world to marry in all countries in which it is legal.

Patterned and unique plotlines within identity-based conflict stories

We found that most stories in these award-winning lists have identity-based conflicts, and within these, most stories rely on recurring and predictable plotlines. Descriptions and examples of the plotlines in the categories of coming out, resisting bullying, and love story demonstrate the extent to which these identity-based stories represent LGBTQ people without offering a diversity of plotlines. This narrative structure depicts LGBTQ people as having one overarching characteristic, their identity, to the exclusion of living more multifaceted lives. We would like to see books that represent LGBTQ identity as *an* aspect of a character's experiences rather than *the* aspect of a character's experiences.

Some stories with each of the identity-based conflict categories offer more unique plotlines and specific details. As we discuss in the Recommended Books section below, stories in which the central conflict aligns with the category but which have unique details and plotlines, as well as aesthetic appeal, stand out among this collection of books. Although it would seem that outliers would contain more unique and compelling narratives, only some of them do.

Conflicts not based on LGBTQ identity

Overall, we found that non-identity-based conflicts tend to offer more compelling and unique plotlines, as they portray characters with fleshed-out characteristics going beyond their LGBTQ identities. However, not all books in this category are recommended, due to aesthetic appeal and overall narrative quality in our experiences as readers. We were pleased to find nine books that fall into this category, but these are only nine out of 51 books; a preponderance of the award-winning books are built around identity-based conflict, which is a concern for the overall messages shared with children and other readers.

In terms of representation of different groups within the LGBTQ community, eight of the nine books feature gay men, and one book features a nonbinary person. There are no lesbians, bisexual people, or trans people in this category. Therefore, this category of books contains less representation than it may first appear, highlighting the need for books in

which lesbians, trans people, and bisexual people are presented as multifaceted characters with non-identity-based conflicts.

Implications of the study for selecting books

As more children's books have been published in the last ten years that represent LGBTQ people (Cooperative Children's Book Center, 2023), deciding which books to select for personal use or school classrooms and libraries has become a welcome challenge. Understanding that the social environment helps children develop their views of gender and sexuality (Martin et al., 2002), we offer this research to help people make informed reading selections.

Some families or educators may seek books to act as a mirror and to support young people in their self-discovery or in sharing their family member's identity with others. In this case, books with a didactic or simplistic plot may show a child they are not alone and reflect their experience. While we do not recommend books with predictable plotlines, suggest those looking for books for this purpose consult our findings section, in which books are described by plotline. We also omitted books without a central plot, including both biographies and simple picture books, but we encourage readers to explore these independently.

Our purpose was to find books that hold up beyond didactic purposes as unique, compelling stories that present characters with multifaceted lives, as expressed through conflicts not based on identity. Additionally, some books with identity-based conflicts have unique stories and specific details, and we recommended them as well. We also considered our personal aesthetic response to the narratives presented.

Gaps in the selection of LGBTQ books

Looking at the intersection between categories within the LGBTQ community and plotlines of books in this collection, we found several gaps in the selection of LGBTQ books. Examining the stories for omission, we asked: "Who are the people who 'do not exist' in a given story?" (Hollindale, 1988, p. 21). Primarily, plotlines with unique stories and without identity-based conflicts are missing. Most of the books use simplistic plotlines, are repetitive within their plotline categories, and include identity-based conflicts; these gaps reduce stories about LGBTQ people to a few topics and reduce the characters to identity-based characteristics rather than multifaceted, unique personalities. Within recurring plotline categories, the coming out category includes 21 of the 51 books – almost half. The resisting bullying plotline includes seven books. Between these two categories, the collection of award-winning books transmits the message that LGBTQ people's lives revolve primarily around coming out and resisting bullying; if these books serve as mirrors (Bishop, 1990) to children's experiences, there is a drastic gap in representing the full, unique lives of children and their families. If the books serve as windows (Bishop, 1990), they provide limited descriptions of LGBTQ people's lives.

Within books we recommend for their original storylines and multifaceted characters, subgroups within the LGBTQ community are not equally represented; in fact, nine out of 14 feature gay characters. On a positive note, senior citizens are represented in two books about gay grandparents. Only one book features lesbian characters, and importantly, none

features lesbian moms. No books identify characters as bisexual, confirming previous studies (Knopp-Schwyn & Fracentese, 2019; Vaandering & Rosenzweig, 2023). Two books have nonbinary characters, and one has a gender nonconforming character. Notably, despite the abundance of books about trans children, all of these books have identity-based conflicts with predictable, recurring plotlines. We would like to see children's book authors and the publishing industry move beyond simple representation of LGBTQ characters to include unique, original plotlines that represent LGBTQ characters with full and interesting lives, with attention to the gaps in current offerings.

Recommended books

We recommend 14 (this is the count in [Table 1](#)) books in total (see [Table 1](#)). First, we recommend eight books that position LGBTQ characters as multifaceted and include original, creative conflicts that are not identity-based. We found these books enjoyable to read, with interesting and surprising plotlines. They are not didactic, and they range in tone from light and fun to serious and thought-provoking. Some books on this list resonated with both of us as clear favorites, and others made the list after a discussion of perceived merits and weaknesses from our aesthetic stance as readers. When we were unsure, we used the criterion of central conflict and included stories with conflicts that are not identity-based.

Second, we recommend books that have identity-based conflicts from the identified plotlines, but do not follow predictable plotlines. Each of these books breaks away from the recurring plot trajectory in its category in an important way. The books in the coming out plotline do not represent coming out as a simple before-after process, with a character feeling fearful, coming out, and then being easily accepted by themselves and others. Rather, the complexities of coming out are expressed through subtlety, and it is presented as a process that is different for everyone. The books in the LGBTQ rights category show examples of individuals and groups standing up for rights in creative and courageous ways. Lastly, the book in the love story category balances the feeling of love with countering a lack of acceptance. All books on this list offer uniqueness in plot and storytelling. [Table 1](#) presents the recommended books, the category(ies) of LGBTQ characters, conflict and plot categories and descriptions, and our rationale for recommending each one.

While teachers may feel concern regarding the use of LGBTQ books in the times of book banning, expanding the focus of the texts beyond a singular identity allows for teachers to use inclusive literature while continuing to focus on other important reading and writing standards. As reading LGBTQ texts becomes an integral part of a holistic classroom, teachers may simply utilize these books as a part of their usual instructional strategies. We especially suggest interactive read-alouds and discussion-based pedagogy as a vehicle for including these texts. If questioned about their use of LGBTQ texts, we recommend that teachers 1) emphasize the importance of supporting all identities to create a welcoming and inclusive environment, which can often be directly linked back schools' mission statements (Naidoo, 2017); 2) ensure that they can link each lesson to standards so that they can show a pedagogical purpose as well as social (Luecke, 2023); and 3) seek administrative support when possible.

Table 1. Books recommended for multifaceted characters and original plotlines.

Book Citation and Award(s)	Category(ies) of LGBTQ Characters	Conflict and Plotline Categories and Description	Why We Recommend it
Brannen and Soto (2020). <i>Uncle Bobby's wedding</i> . Little Bee Books. Rainbow Book List, 2021 Grades PreK-3	Gay uncle and fiancé	Conflict: not identity-based Chloe worries that she will lose the close relationship with her uncle once he gets married, but she discovers she enjoys time with him and his fiancé/husband.	This story represents a special relationship between a child and adults who are not her parents, as well as navigating changes in this relationship.
Cumming (2017). <i>The adventures of Honey & Leon</i> . Random House Books for Young Readers. Rainbow Book List, 2019 Grades PreK-3	Gay pet owners	Conflict: not identity-based Honey and Leon, two dogs, wear disguises and sneakily join their owners' vacation.	This book is playful, light, and fun.
Gale and Song (2019). <i>Ho'onani : Hula warrior</i> . Penguin/Tundra Books. Rainbow Book List, 2020 Grades PreK-3	nonbinary child (she/her pronouns)	Conflict: identity-based, outlier plotline The main character wants to be chosen to lead the traditional hula dance, despite being the only contestant who is not a boy.	This book is based on a true story, and the main character navigates her sister's rejection as she prepares for the audition.
Jenkins et al. (2018). <i>The true adventures of Esther the wonder pig</i> . Little Brown Books for Young Readers. Rainbow Book List, 2019 Grades PreK-3	Gay pet owners	Conflict: not identity-based Esther is supposed to be a mini-pig, but she keeps growing, until her pet owners move to a farm to accommodate her.	This true story is surprising, funny, and heartwarming.
Love (2018). <i>Julian is a mermaid</i> . Candlewick. Rainbow Book List, 2019 Stonewall Honor Books, 2019 Grades PreK-3	Gender nonconforming boy, drag queens	Conflict: identity-based, coming out plotline Julian wants to be a mermaid, so he dresses up and walks around with his abuela, eventually joining a drag parade.	This book handles coming out with subtlety and imbues everyday scenes with a child's magical interpretations.
McNamara and Karas (2021). <i>The little library</i> . Schwartz & Wade. Rainbow Book List, 2022 Grades PreK-3, 3-6	nonbinary school librarian (they/them pronouns)	Conflict: not identity-based Jake has trouble reading and resists picking a book until the librarian, Beck, finds him a woodworking book.	This book addresses learning struggles creatively and includes Jake building a Little Library so children can access books over the summer.
Mercurio and Espinosa (2020). <i>Our subway baby</i> . Dial Books. Lambda Literary Awards, 2020 Rainbow Book List, 2021 Grades PreK-3, 3-6	Gay adoptive parents	Conflict: not identity-based After finding a baby in a subway station, two dads face obstacles in their journey to adopt. They are helped by a judge and extended family.	This amazing true story captures universal fears of new parents layered with fears of legal discrimination due to being gay. Community and family support buoy the new parents.
Pierets and Ramos (2019). <i>Love around the world</i> . Six Foot Press. Rainbow Book List, 2020 Grades PreK-3, 3-6	Lesbian couple	Conflict: identity-based, LGBTQ rights To protest worldwide bans on gay marriage, the couple decides to visit all 28 countries where marriage is legal and get married in each one.	This true story includes cultural wedding traditions around the world.

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued).

Book Citation and Award(s)	Category(ies) of LGBTQ Characters	Conflict and Plotline Categories and Description	Why We Recommend it
Royce and Chambers (2020). <i>Auntie uncle: Drag queen hero</i> . POW! Kids Books. Rainbow Book List, 2021 Grades PreK-3	Drag queen uncle	Conflict: identity-based, coming out After saving a puppy at a drag parade, Uncle Leo/Auntie Lotta is unsure what to wear to accept the award and creatively decides on clothing that integrates work attire with aspects of drag.	This book addresses the complexity of coming out in various contexts with different people.
Sanders and Christoph (2019). <i>Stonewall: A building. An uprising. A revolution</i> . Random House Children's Books. Rainbow Book List, 2020 Grades PreK-3, 3-6	Gay, lesbian, transgender, and drag queen patrons of Stonewall	Conflict: identity-based, LGBTQ rights In response to police raids on Stonewall, the patrons resist and assert their right to gather.	Told from the personified perspective of the Stonewall building over time, this nonfiction story shares the origins of the LGBTQ rights movement with well-phrased descriptions and specific details.
Scotto and Tallec (2018). <i>Jerome by heart</i> . Enchanted Lion Books. Rainbow Book List, 2019 Grades PreK-3	Gay boy	Conflict: identity-based, love story plotline. Rafael loves Jerome, but his parents are not supportive; Rafael decides to be true to his feelings.	This story includes Rafael's inner decision to follow his heart despite lack of parental approval. The language and details are original and specific.
Smith and Kerrigan (2021). <i>A plan for pops</i> . Orca Book Publishers. Rainbow Book List, 2020 Grades PreK-3	Gay grandparents	Conflict: not identity-based After having a fall that leads to needing a wheelchair, Pops is less social, until his grandson, Lou, builds a ramp and they go to the library together.	This story includes playful contraptions that Lou and Pops build together within a touching, unique relationship.
Williams and Raschka (2016). <i>Home at last</i> . HarperCollins/GreenWillow. Rainbow Book List, 2017 Grades PreK-3	Gay adoptive parents	Conflict: not identity-based Lester is newly adopted and needs additional comforting, because his parents died in a car accident, and his grandmother died as well. The family dog begins sleeping with Lester, and one dad learns to stop yelling.	This layered story captures the challenges of losing one's parents and adapting to a new family structure from both sides. It represents flawed parenting and people's ability to solve problems lovingly.
Woodgate (2021). <i>Grandad's camper</i> . Little Bee Books. Rainbow Book List, 2022 Stonewall Honor Books, 2022 Grades PreK-3	Gay grandfather	Conflict: not identity-based The main character's grandad has stopped using his camper, because his husband has died; the grandchild initiates a camping trip with him.	The relationship between grandchild and grandad is compelling and touching. The memories and the camping trip are joyful, but loss is recognized.

Conclusions

We hope this study will encourage authors and publishers to recognize current gaps in LGBTQ children's books, looking beyond simple representation toward a diversity in plotlines. While other researchers have identified gaps in children's book offerings based on characters' identity, including race, social class, gender performance (Crawley, 2017; Young, 2019), and disability (Vaandering & Rosenzweig, 2023), we analyze the narratives themselves, with a focus on conflict. Specifically, we encourage more books with LGBTQ characters with non-identity-based conflicts, demonstrating that LGBTQ people live full, layered lives. Concurring with other researchers, we would like to see more stories that feature bisexual (Knopp-Schwyn & Fracentese, 2019; Vaandering & Rosenzweig, 2023) and nonbinary (Vaandering & Rosenzweig, 2023) characters, but we extend their work to advocate for unique plotlines including not only these groups, but lesbian and trans characters as well. We look not only at which groups are represented, but how they are represented and how their stories are constructed. Opportunities for future research include examining in more granular detail either the representation of a sub-category of LGBTQ people or one of the identified plotlines in these books, including analyses of diction and visual images.

We hope that educators looking for books for their classrooms, as well as librarians considering book adoptions, will consider using our research in evaluating books, searching for books that represent LGBTQ people while telling stories with original plotlines. We hope that our recommended book list may prove useful in selecting books, as well.

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ORCID

Wendy Keyser  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1543-4018>

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