

DEVELOPING RESOURCES FOR PARENTS TO USE WHILE READING
LITERATURE WITH THEIR CHILDREN THAT ENCOMPASS GENDER AND
SEXUAL ORIENTATION TOPICS: A DESIGN-BASED RESEARCH STUDY

by

AMANDA LA POINTE WOWRA

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Oakland University
Rochester, Michigan

Doctoral Advisory Committee:

Julia Smith, PhD., Chair
Gwendolyn Thompson McMillon, PhD., Co-Chair
Adam Crawley, Ph.D.
Greg Bartley, Ph.D.
Jason Moore, Ph.D.

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ABSTRACT

DEVELOPING RESOURCES FOR PARENTS TO USE WHILE READING LITERATURE WITH THEIR CHILDREN THAT ENCOMPASS GENDER AND SEXUAL ORIENTATION TOPICS: A DESIGN-BASED RESEARCH STUDY

by

Amanda La Pointe Wowra

Advisors: Gwendolyn Thompson McMillon, Ph.D. and Julia Smith, PhD.

The goal of the study was to co-create resources with parents to use with their children when reading children's literature that include topics of gender and sexual orientation. The study aimed to address the literature gap by highlighting the importance of parents discussing gender and sexual orientation with their children to foster understanding and empathy. The study used Design-Based Research as the methodology. The three stages included—Analysis and Exploration, Design and Construction, and Evaluation and Reflection. There were two parent participants who each read their child two picture books as part of the study, while the researcher gathered qualitative data from a variety of sources to examine the themes that emerge when parents are having discussions with their children. Additionally, information was gathered during each of the phases of the Design-Based Research, with the key sources being parent journals, video recordings of parents reading and discussing with their children, and semi-structured interviews with the families at different stages of the study. Braun and Clarke (2022) was used to code the qualitative data into themes and

subthemes. Findings revealed that utilizing the resources during shared reading with children's books with topics of gender and sexual orientation yielded rich conversations about identity, empathy, and inclusivity, and helped challenge stereotypes and societal norms. The parents reported feeling more confident and prepared through the use of the co-created resources. These findings suggest that accessible resources that are thoughtfully designed can provide parents with the power to engage in discussions with their children about diversity and inclusivity with literature.

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CHAPTER ONE

OVERVIEW

Introduction

As a parent of four boys ranging from a college sophomore to a four-year-old, I want my children to understand that all people are equal, no matter their race, ethnicity, ability, gender, or sexual orientation. Despite my good intentions, though, what I have discovered is that sharing my egalitarian values with them is easier said than done. Parental values do not naturally transfer to children without some deliberate and even uncomfortable discussions. The key moment that spurred this dissertation study happened one night when I was reading *My Two Moms and Me* (Joosten, 2019) to my then-three-year-old. While I was reading, my then-nine-year-old son interjected, “I don’t think that book is appropriate for him.”

When I questioned my then-nine-year-old further, he shared that the topic of two moms was for older children and not three-year-olds. I was shocked. My husband and I have always taught our boys that it is important to show acceptance and allyship towards same-sex couples. Our boys know that same-sex couples have our unwavering support no matter whom they choose to love, befriend, or connect with since we have had open conversations about accepting others no matter their gender identity or sexual orientation. His interruption at story time was a clear sign that having discussions was not changing his beliefs about same-sex couples as an appropriate topic with younger children. I felt unprepared to discuss why I felt his comment was wrong, and that feeling stayed with me long after story time was over.

I grew up in a conservative, rural community in the Midwest, but I have always been a passionate supporter of people who identify as LGBTQ+. Despite their best intentions, parents may lack the necessary resources to engage in productive discussions about these topics. My ideals and values, as well as this key moment in my parenting experience, inspired me to study how to create resources that parents can use when reading with their children about gender and sexual orientation. It is important in our society because all individuals should feel valued and that they belong, no matter their gender, sexuality, race, religion, ability, or any other marker.

Allies and supporters are essential to building an inclusive society. Since our heteronormative society has conditioned children since infancy, we must teach them how to support those who are different from them. Unless a trustworthy adult in their lives teaches them how to unlearn such indoctrination and take meaningful action to advocate for people with other gender and sexual orientation identities, society will continue to promote a cisgender, heteronormative environment. To take on this position, parents must often unlearn and educate themselves on what they learnt as children, as well as how to become supporters and allies themselves. It is a frequent metaphor to put on your own oxygen mask before assisting others. As allies, parents can model and teach it to their children.

Parents who want their children to support or be allies for people of different sexual orientations or gender identities may struggle to have those conversations. They may not know how to answer their children's questions, explain gender or sexual orientation diversity terminology, or identify and correct their own biases before discussing diversity with them. Furthermore, the internet provides a wealth of

information, and it can be difficult to identify reputable sources and reliable information.

Research on parents engaging in these conversations with their children is scarce, especially when it comes to leveraging children's literature to promote these discussions within the framework of critical literacy and queer theory studies. Without these crucial discussions and instruction, children can become passive bystanders while bullying or harassment occurs. People often ignore situations when unsure what to do. This is harmful because it reinforces heteronormative and cisgender society and causes many problems for gender diverse and LGBTQ+ people because they are ignored, which can lead to mental health issues, disparities in education and healthcare, and an overall unwelcoming environment for them on a daily basis.

Through interactions with other LGBTQ+ supporters and allies who are parents and through my own research, I realized that I was not alone in feeling a disconnect between my views and my capacity to engage in conversations and take action on diversity with my children. Overall, I heard that parents lacked the means and understanding to formally read books and engage in talks with their children about these subjects. This, in turn, inspired me to pursue this topic for my dissertation. There is a need for qualitative research on how parents might use children's books and other resources to facilitate interactions with their children.

In the next sections to provide context there will be an overview of the broader societal and systemic discrimination that LGBTQ+ people experience followed by a more focused examination of how such inequities manifest in educational settings for LGBTQ+ youth. These include a review of bullying, bystander behavior, and the role of

allyship in schools. These sections lay the groundwork for the literature review in the subsequent chapter.

Background of the Study

Raising compassionate and inclusive children is something that parents strive to do, but navigating these complex topics can be challenging. This study examines how parents can effectively utilize children's literature to facilitate discussions with their children regarding allyship and the avoidance of bullying towards peers with diverse gender identities or sexual orientations. The following sections will delve into the significance of diversity issues, bullying, and allyship, parents teaching their children how to be allies, and the need for resources to help them with this.

There are several terms that are used throughout the project in surveys and interview questions that are useful to define:

- Bisexual: A person who is emotionally romantically or sexually attracted to more than one gender, though not necessarily simultaneously, in the same way or to the same degree (Human Rights Campaign, 2023).
- Cisgender: A person whose gender identity and expression are aligned with the gender they were assigned at birth (GLSEN, 2014).
- Gay: A person who is emotionally, romantically or sexually attracted to members of the same gender. Men, women and non-binary people may use this term to describe themselves (Human Rights Campaign, 2023).
- Gender: Gender refers to the characteristics of women, men, girls and boys that are socially constructed. This includes norms, behaviors and roles associated with being a woman, man, girl or boy, as well as relationships with each other. As a

social construct, gender varies from society to society and can change over time (World Health Organization, n.d.).

- Lesbian: A woman who is emotionally, romantically or sexually attracted to other women. Women and non-binary people may use this term to describe themselves (Human Rights Campaign, 2023).
- LGBTQ+: Refers to persons who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer under this general phrase. In acknowledgement of all non-straight, non-cisgender identities, the plus sign (+) is included (GLSEN, 2014; GLAAD, 2018).
- Transgender: An umbrella term for people whose gender identity and/or expression is different from cultural expectations based on the sex they were assigned at birth. Being transgender does not imply any specific sexual orientation. Therefore, transgender people may identify as straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual, etc. (Human Rights Campaign, 2023).
- Queer: A term people often use to express a spectrum of identities and orientations that are counter to the mainstream. Queer is often used as a catch-all to include many people, including those who do not identify as exclusively straight and/or folks who have non-binary or gender-expansive identities. This term was previously used as a slur, but has been reclaimed by many parts of the LGBTQ+ movement (Human Rights Campaign, 2023).

Overview of LGBTQ+ Discrimination and the Need for Allyship

To provide a context for the present study, it is vital to start with a broader scope of the existing systemic discrimination of the LGBTQ+ community in the United States under the current political climate. For this type of study, it is important to acknowledge

how the current presidential administration has already significantly impacted the rights of individuals who identify as LGBTQ+ by rolling back protections through their policy decisions. As examples, executive orders have been given rescinding safeguards for transgender individuals in healthcare, education and the military or in their executive actions which have inspired anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric at state and federal levels (Mulvihill, 2025; The White House, 2025a, 2025b). These decisions have further increased vulnerability for individuals who are already marginalized in our society which makes it even more important for parents to educate their children on inclusion and allyship.

Institutional and historical discrimination toward gender diverse and LGBTQ+ people is deeply rooted in American society manifesting as healthcare disparities, educational disparities, and social stigmatization. Societal norms that prioritize heterosexual and cisgender identities intensify such inequalities, leading to substantial challenges with mental health and obstacles to appropriate access to services for gender-diverse individuals and LGBTQ+ individuals (Lu et al., 2025).

Gender diverse and LGBTQ+ individuals face disparities in mental health due to discrimination and societal stigma, according to research. For instance, Price-Feeney et al. (2020) discovered that marginalization experiences significantly influence the mental health outcomes of transgender and nonbinary youth. In addition, A. Goldberg et al. (2019) reported that many transgender and gender-diverse students at the university level experience feelings of invalidation and invincibility regarding their gender identities, particularly those who identify as nonbinary and express increased resistance to their affirmed gender. Inadvertent discriminatory remarks or actions, referred to as subtle microaggressions, impact unfavorable outcomes in mental health, including increased

rates of depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation among the populations (A. Goldberg et al., 2019; Pace et al., 2021; Price-Feeney et al., 2020). Additionally, when nonbinary identities are not visible or understood in society, the mental health of those who identify as nonbinary is negatively impacted through perpetuating a cycle of marginalization (A. E. Goldberg & Garcia, 2020).

Access to healthcare is another area where systemic injustices are present in our society for gender diverse and LGBTQ+ individuals. Due to the cisnormative societal expectations, gender diverse and LGBTQ+ individuals encounter significant barriers (Holt et al., 2022; Vries et al., 2020). Some barriers which resulted in negative experiences were discrimination and care that was inadequate (Burgwal & Motmans, 2021; Holt et al., 2022; Müller, 2017). Additionally, Vries et al. (2020) discovered that the lack of gender-affirming care in healthcare programs' curriculum may result in a lack of skills and knowledge among healthcare workers, thereby perpetuating the disparity. The lack of training impacts the stigma and quality of care, making gender diverse and LGBTQ+ individuals more reluctant to seek medical assistance (Burgwal & Motmans, 2021; Vries et al., 2020).

Gender diverse and LGBTQ+ youth also experience educational inequities. Like all children, schools play an influential role in their lives. Wilkinson et al. (2021) found that LGBTQ+ students endure substantial challenges such as gender-related victimization, which has a negative impact on their academic performance and emotional well-being. These students also report lower levels of belonging in school compared to their cisgender peers, along with increased feelings of isolation (Wilkinson et al., 2021). Bower-Brown et al. (2021) also found that binary-trans, gender-questioning, and non-

binary students in UK schools had adverse experiences in the form of bullying and discrimination that affected their mental health and educational experience. Schools are pervasively heteronormative, which also leads to feelings of isolation and academic performance because they contribute to the hostile environment that gender diverse students endure (Bower-Brown et al., 2021). It is vital for educational settings, along with their policies and practices, to be inclusive and nurturing of all students, irrespective of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Individuals who identify as gender diverse or LGBTQ+ face many social injustices some of which were named above, but in addition to the harassment, discrimination, healthcare disparities, they also face other challenges. The first being limited representation and inclusion in the media. In a qualitative study that explored media representation from LGBTQ parents' perceptions, Reed (2018) engaged in semi-structured interviews with 30 LGBTQ parents from England and Scotland. The participants shared how narratives within their culture shaped their sense of family identity and visibility. Reed found "The LGBTQ parents who participated in this study felt that the scope of media and cultural images which represented non-heterosexual families was severely limited. This lack of representational diversity generated discomfort and frustration for parents (p. 20). In addition, there is a lack of protections in the workplace for individuals who identify as LGBTQ+ or gender diverse. Ivanovic (2019) states "Our findings show that workplace discrimination, lack of mentorship and sponsorship, bias in hiring and promotion, fear of being out, and lack of inclusive policies and benefits are significant barriers to career advancement for LGBTQ employees" (p.43).

The intersectionality of race, sexual orientation, and gender further complicates societal injustices (Crenshaw, 1991). Reisner et al. (2016) found that transgender women of color encounter compounded effects of both racism and transphobia, which leads to severe health discrepancies. Intersectional discrimination contributes to violence and increased frequencies of oppression within communities along with a restriction of access to healthcare (Soled, 2021). Therefore, when multiple marginalized identities are present, a multifaceted approach is necessary to acknowledge each individual's unique challenges.

In general, disparities in society surrounding LGBTQ+ and gender diversity are multifaceted and profoundly rooted in systemic discrimination. This research in healthcare, education, and societal contexts on a broader scale emphasizes the need for better societal awareness and comprehensive policy changes to further promote inclusion and equity. Addressing these injustices is necessary for our society to value and affirm gender diverse and LGBTQ+ members of our community.

The Role Schooling and Literature in Shaping Allyship

Expanding upon the previous section, the subsequent portion aims to outline how such systemic issues can be reflected in one's childhood through school-related experiences, as well as how literary tools can be utilized in order to aid with one's identity formation and allyship development. Allies and bystanders play a crucial role in mitigating and addressing the bullying issue for LGBTQ+ students. Bystanders can either perpetuate or intervene towards bullying for the victims, according to the research. It makes the bystander role critical in promoting inclusive and safe educational environments. There are three roles that bystanders can assume: passive observers, active defenders, and those who contribute to the bullying (Padgett & Notar, 2013).

Padgett and Notar (2013) assert that active bystander intervention reduces bullying incidents. For example, bystanders provide bullies with an audience, as bullying typically occurs when peers are present and when intervention occurs, it disrupts their abuse. Therefore, we must empower bystanders by taking action and intervening, especially targeting LGBTQ+ people who bear a disproportionate impact from bullying behaviors (Abreu et al., 2022). In addition, Martino et al. (2022) emphasized the importance of allyship in challenging practices that are discriminatory specifically individuals who identify as transgender and promoting acceptance between peers in educational settings. Empowering bystanders and fostering allyship are key strategies in creating educational settings where all students, including those who identify as LGBTQ+ or gender diverse can feel supported, valued and safe.

Children's literature can also become a powerful tool for shaping allyship. LGBTQ+-inclusive children's literature creates powerful educational prospects for advancing social-emotional development while promoting inclusivity within elementary school settings. Leung and Adams-Whittaker (2022) emphasized the intersectional advantages of LGBTQ-themed children's literature in elementary education, showing their function in promoting social-emotional learning for all students. They found that the books they reviewed in their study had themes of diversity, inclusion, anthropomorphism, positive support, stereotypes, and educational goals. In addition, findings demonstrated that the books aid in student's understanding of social emotional skills and these associate with respecting diversity and becoming citizens who are responsible, specifically for LGBTQ students because they see themselves represented positively which also in turn fosters a sense of belonging (Leung & Adams-Whittaker, 2022). The

research of Leung and Adams-Whittaker (2022) shows that inclusive literature helps develop empathy and respect for diversity while simultaneously strengthening LGBTQ students' identity affirmation which leads to an enhanced sense of belonging and responsible citizenship.

Parents as Partners in Cultivating Allyship

Noting that learning about such topics is not restricted to the classroom, the following section also provides an overview of the parental role in children's perspectives and conduct regarding gender and sexual diversity. Parents play a vital role in creating an environment where children can become allies or supportive bystanders for LGBTQ⁺ or gender-diverse individuals. Research indicates that supportive parents significantly impact children's development of positive attitudes towards individuals who identify as LGBTQ+ (Chang et al., 2021; Feinstein et al., 2018; Gonzalez et al., 2013). When parents actively engage their children in conversations about gender and sexual orientation, they cultivate compassion and understanding, which can help to promote allyship in their children.

Though there are multiple effective strategies parents can utilize to help their children develop their allyship, one in particular is keeping open lines of communication with their children about issues that affect individuals who identify as LGBTQ+. Gonzalez et al. (2013) stated that parents can find support from various LGBTQ+ affirmative networks, which can help to increase their acceptance of these diverse identities and personal understanding. This new knowledge and understanding can help

¹ Throughout this dissertation, the acronym LGBTQ+ will be utilized as a broad and inclusive term to refer to this diverse community. However, when directly referencing specific articles or sources, the acronym chosen by those authors will be honored

parents work through their own emotions and provide them with the knowledge they need to provide their children with education about gender identity and sexual orientation diversity. There are also support programs; for example, Chang et al. (2021) suggested that the Parent Support Program can positively influence children's attitudes through increasing the parents' affirming behaviors towards youth who identify as transgender.

In addition, beyond open communication, parents can also encourage their children to join school-based organizations, such as Gay-Straight Alliances. Lapointe (2015) found that through participating in Gay-Straight Alliances there is a link to increased activism and advocacy, which empowers students who participate to engage in behaviors that are supportive and confront homophobic remarks rather than being a passive bystander. Russell et al. (2021) found that students involved in Gay-Straight Alliances can feel a greater sense of responsibility to confront sentiments that would be considered anti-LGBTQ+ in their communities. Therefore, through parents encouraging their children to join such groups, they can support their children's development of the skills necessary to advocate for their peers.

Parents can also, through their own attitudes and behaviors, model allyship for their children. One of the conclusions Parker et al. (2018) uncovered through their literature review was that when parents show their children that they accept and support individuals who identify as LGBTQ, their children are more likely to follow suit. In addition to modeling, Feinstein et al. (2018) found that parents of children who identify as LGBTQ+ showed support of their child's sexual orientation by sharing materials with them or helping them with relationship advice. This is an example of how cisgender parents can create environments for their LGBTQ+ children that are affirming and model

allyship, which in turn may also be a practice that could be used for parents of all children, no matter their sexual orientation.

Parental responsibility also requires considering the broader society in which their children grow up. Educational policies that are supportive and inclusive of school environments play a crucial role in fostering allyships among peers. Teachers should also have necessary training on such inclusive policies for LGBTQ youth because, at the end of the day, inclusive policies are beneficial for all students and help to create an inclusive school environment for all students (Day et al., 2020). Such advocacy coming from parents about school policies is yet another way they can contribute to a supportive and accepting culture.

Addressing family dynamics is crucial for developing supportive allies. In order for youth who identify as gender diverse or LGBTQ+ to feel supported when they face small insults, their parents must have support that fits their needs (Abreu et al., 2023). Parents can also help their children through challenges that they may face in society by fostering supportive and strong relationships within the immediate family as a way to reinforce their allyship. Hall (2018) also found that interventions learned during family therapy can benefit both the children and parents as a means for enhancing acceptance and communication.

In summary, parents significantly contribute to their children's development into supportive bystanders or allies for youth who identify as LGBTQ+ or gender diverse. Through keeping open communication, supporting participation in organizations, their own modeling of behavior that is inclusive, advocating for policies that are inclusive and

fostering strong family dynamics, parents are key role models for their children. They also help create a more inclusive society beyond their own families.

Parent-Focused Allyship Resources

Parental role, however, is often left unsupported due to lack of guidance or resources. For this reason, the concluding section of this review outlines the current climate of available supports and the present study's intended contribution to the existing gap. Resources must be available to parents to help them teach their kids how to be active bystanders or allies for people who identify as LGBTQ+ or gender diverse. They play a key role in shaping their children's understanding and acceptance, especially as attitudes within our society evolve. Research indicates that parents significantly influence their children's behaviors and attitudes, underscoring the importance of parents having high-quality resources and guidance to effectively promote allyship.

Educational settings generally depend on parental involvement as collaborators in their child's education to enhance success. Ullman et al. (2022) found that within educational settings, parents play a key role in endorsing the inclusion of diversity with regard to gender and sexual orientation. Parents' support for this inclusion can result in educational settings providing more care for LGBTQ+ students, and their views can significantly influence school policies and curriculum (Ullman et al., 2022). Given what we know about children's modeling from their parents' behavior, it is imperative that we provide parents with high-quality resources that will equip them to engage in effective discussions with their children's schools and push for inclusivity within that environment. Furthermore, these resources will enable them to engage in discussions with their children about diversity at home.

Parents raising children who identify as gender-diverse or transgender often navigate complex societal expectations regarding gender norms (A. Warner et al., 2021). A. Warner et al. (2021) found that parents who support their children's gender identities in an active manner considerably influence the self-esteem and social acceptance of the child. This further underscores the importance of parents possessing the necessary resources and knowledge to comprehend the challenges faced by individuals who identify as LGBTQ+. This will enable them to share these challenges with their children, thereby better preparing them to be empathetic, active bystanders or allies.

It would be remiss to ignore the fact that it is crucial for parents to discuss with their children the systemic inequality and privilege that exists in our world. Freeman et al. (2022) focused on racial socialization; however, their findings suggest that parents need to engage in conversations about power dynamics that contribute to social inequities and move beyond just exposing children to diversity, which I argue transcends across any group of people who may be considered marginalized. Taking such an approach may cause children to more deeply consider the broader context of issues that individuals who identify as LGBTQ+ endure and it can encourage them to become advocates for equality and justice in our society. Providing parents with resources that facilitate the discussion of these complex subjects can help them raise children who are cognizant of and empathetic to the obstacles faced by members of marginalized communities. This, in turn, can foster the development of more socially conscious children.

There is no one right approach for parenting children who identify as gender-diverse. Gray et al. (2016) highlighted that when parenting children who identify as gender-diverse, it is important to take a multidimensional family approach. Such an

approach includes helping children to navigate expectations within society in addition to parents affirming their children's gender identity (Gray et al., 2016). Resources can also assist parents with this approach by providing strategies to support their child, enabling them to create a nurturing environment where children feel safe to express their identities.

Social media can also shape children's perceptions of gender and sexual orientation. According to Talbot et al. (2022), LGBTQ+ people use social media to explore their identities. This finding means that if parents have access to excellent sites for this kind of exploration, they could then encourage their kids to read and watch diverse online stories. Parents can help to nurture an environment of approval and care by pointing their children toward affirmative depictions and narratives of individuals who identify as LGBTQ. Resources for parents can provide information about safe sites that are reputable and promote critical engagement, therefore further enhancing the understanding of the parents and children.

Parents require the development and availability of resources to guide them in teaching their children about allyship and the importance of being active bystanders for individuals who identify as gender diverse or LGBTQ+. By providing parents with specific knowledge about privilege, inclusivity, and the experiences of marginalized groups in our society, we can cultivate a generation of empathetic allies. Not only can parents feel more empowered with the support that resources can provide but it can also begin to contribute to a shift in society more broadly surrounding understanding and acceptance of individuals who have diversity in gender and sexual orientation.

Theoretical Framework

I used two theories to support my work. The first is queer theory, and the second is critical literacy theory. The overall topics of gender and sexual orientation directly relate to queer theory because the aim is to promote social justice, not only through the resources and literature that the parents share with their children but also more globally through the development of allies for both the children and the parents. Critical literacy theory shaped this project, as the foundation of the resources that the parents and I co-created and used with their children is the ability to read texts in an active, reflective manner to better comprehend power, inequality, and injustice in human interactions. The sections below provide an explanation of each theory.

Queer Theory

Queer theory developed from mid-1970s advancements in lesbian and gay studies (Jagose, 1996). Lesbian and gay studies began by working to establish homosexual identities as valid and visible while promoting civil rights and representation alongside a fight against systemic discrimination (Miller, 2022). Early theoretical approaches highlighted stable and proud gay and lesbian identities which stood in opposition to dominant societal norms that treated these identities as pathological or nonexistent. These foundational theories provided empowerment yet depended on rigid identity categories without considering gender and sexuality fluidity and intersectionality (Jagose, 1996; J. M. Ryan, 2020).

In the early 1990s queer theory emerged as a critical response to the limitations found in identity-focused lesbian and gay theoretical frameworks. The development of queer theory combines feminist theory's examination of gender norms with

poststructuralist perspectives to challenge consistent and unified identity models (Jagose, 1996). Drawing on Michael Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* (1978/1990), queer theorists analyze how dominant societal and institutional discourse defines what is considered normal versus behavior that is considered deviant. Foucault argues that sexuality is constructed socially and that historical frameworks then shape the foundation for how both heterosexual and homosexual categories were formed. Judith Butler became a pivotal figure in queer theory through her development of gender performativity. According to Butler (1990), gender identity emerges from repeated actions rather than being a static state which disrupts conventional binary perspectives of gender and sexuality.

In *Fear of a Queer Planet* (M. Warner, 1993), Michael Warner established important groundwork in queer theory through his focus on anti-normativity and politics of difference which opposed the prevailing assimilationist strategies in mainstream gay and lesbian activism. As he wrote in his introduction:

Every person who comes to a queer self-understanding knows in one way or another that her stigmatization is intricately with gender, with the family, with notions of individual freedom, the state, public speech, consumption and desire, nature and culture, maturation, reproductive politics, racial and national fantasy, class identity, truth and trust, censorship, intimate life and social display, terror and violence, health care, and deep cultural norms about the bearing of the body. Being queer means fighting about these issues all the time, locally and piecemeal but always with consequences. (p. 6)

The combined efforts of Butler and M. Warner helped to transform queer theory. They steered its focus away from identity validation towards examining power dynamics and normative structures along with desire and self-fluidity.

Teresa de Lauretis formally introduced the term "queer theory" as a distinct field of study apart from Lesbian and Gay Studies (de Lauretis, 1991). de Lauretis (1991) identified problems with Lesbian and Gay Studies, particularly its failure to consider transgender issues. As described by Pennell (2020), queer theory extends beyond queer subjects since it encompasses the potential for critiquing all individuals and phenomena from a queer perspective. In order to broaden our perspective on educational practices and research, queer theory asks for the deconstruction of heteronormativity and other limits (Pennell, 2020).

Queer Pedagogy

One important way to challenge the norm in the classroom is to get students to think about heteronormativity and the oppressive systems in their environment, as well as ways to fight these systems (Blackburn & Pennell, 2018). Pennell (2020) discussed the concept of queer pedagogy alongside the broader construct of social justice education that piqued my interest due to its application in educational research. Other scholars have developed new frameworks for considering schooling and teaching through a queer lens since queer pedagogy research gained traction in the mid-1990s (Britzman, 1995). Pennell (2020) observed that queer pedagogy revolves around the act of queering. Deborah Britzman's (1995) work encompasses significant insights pertaining to queer pedagogy which includes questioning norms, limits, boundaries and reading practices

The specific mention of reading practices in Deborah Britzman's work drew my attention, as it aligns perfectly with my topic.

Additionally, Britzman (1995) emphasized that reading practices should challenge heteronormativity in educational settings. The interrogation of the limits, ignorance and discursive constructions that underlie dominant understandings of sex, gender, and sexuality should be a result of the focus of queer reading practices (Pitt & Britzman, 2003; Sifeldeen, 2018). Spaces for marginalized voices, experiences and ways of being that have been excluded or rendered unthinkable historically can be granted space in educational frameworks using queer reading practices as highlighted by Britzman's work (Sifeldeen, 2018; Sumara & Davis, 1999).

Queer reading practices extend beyond the text (in a broad sense) to include views on the world, one's location within it, and how societal norms impact one's prejudices and preferences (Pennell, 2020).

Critical Literacy Theory

The framework of critical literacy theory emerged from the work of the important work of Paulo Freire (1970), in which he emphasized that it was important to develop critical awareness about the connection between social inequities, power and language. According to Freire, education must serve as a liberating force enabling students to understand and change the sociopolitical realities that influence their existence. Through conscientization and critical consciousness development, learners gained the ability to analyze dominant ideologies and resist oppressive structures via reflective dialogue (Freire, 1970).

The theoretical framework of critical literacy developed by Freire received further extension through the work of scholars Peter McLaren, Jean Anyon, and Henry Giroux (1988, 1990). Peter McLaren (2015) studied educational resistance against neoliberal ideologies while Jean Anyon (2017) investigated how socio-economic disparities affected educational opportunities and knowledge creation. Henry Giroux's research (1988, 1990) determined that schools serve as cultural environments that foster the development of students into active critical citizens. Following the foundational scholars' work critical literacy developed into a pedagogical approach that examines texts and social practices to reveal and challenge power systems and inequalities (Luke, 2012).

Critical literacy refers to reading and thinking about texts in a way that helps people understand power dynamics, differences, and unfairness in how they interact with each other better (Coffey, 2008). The connection between language, power, social practice, and access to social goods and services is the subject of critical literacy theory (Coffey, 2008). The express goal of critical literacy is to challenge and change the dominant ideologies, cultures, economies, institutions, and political systems (Luke, 2012). The application of literacy for social justice in disadvantaged and marginalized areas is the emphasis of critical literacy (Luke, 2012). By demonstrating to students how language affects and influences social interactions, critical literacy theory supports the notion that education may aid in achieving social justice (Behrman, 2006).

The acquisition of critical literacy abilities helps people analyze contemporary communications critically and question the power dynamics included therein (Coffey, 2008). Scholars working in the field of social critical theory who were passionate about dismantling social injustice and inequities developed the idea of "critical literacy"

(Coffey, 2008). These scholars assert that uneven power connections often occur, with those in power typically deciding which facts receive privilege (Coffey, 2008). Groups and institutions that have power over the establishment of society's structures, such as parts of government and education, are the entities that support and reinforce ideologies by prioritizing one set of narratives and thoughts over another (Coffey, 2008). It is not true that all of the people in these systems share similar viewpoints, and these systems can uphold the existing systemic inequalities unless they are examined and broken down by its key stakeholders (Coffey, 2008). There are many ways to include students in becoming critical citizens of their society since critical literacy theory concentrates on the connections between language, power, social practice, and access to social goods and services (Coffey, 2008).

Fundamentally, critical literacy theory suggests that books are never neutral but rather they portray and reproduce ideologies and structures of power that are dominant in society (Freire & Macedo, 2005; Janks, 2013; Luke, 2012; Morrell, 2015). The theory seeks to empower learners to develop counter-narratives, question the texts, unpack assumptions and biases that are underlying, and challenge the status quo by empowering learners (Freire, 1970; Janks, 2013). I believe that my project will encourage parents and children to become critical citizens because they will read and discuss literature on diverse topics.

Vasquez et al. (2019) published an article titled "Critical Literacy as a Way of Being and Doing" which focused critical literacy around the world. The article discussed key tenets in critical literacy and a couple particularly stood out as being relevant to my study. First, when what students are studying is relevant to their daily lives, they learn

more effectively. Teachers can learn more about how students read and problematize their worlds by paying attention to their worries or their reactions to picture books (Vasquez et al., 2019). In addition, Vasquez et al. (2019) pointed out that texts are never neutral because they are constructed socially from someone's perspective. "Critical literacy practices can be transformative. They can contribute to changing inequitable ways of being and problematic social practices" (Vasquez et al., 2019, p. 307). This idea means that students who practice critical literacy from a young age are better equipped to 1) make informed decisions about matters like power and control, 2) participate in democratic citizenship, and 3) develop the capacity to think and act morally, which in turn makes kids more capable of helping to make the world more equitable and socially just (Vasquez et al., 2019).

In this dissertation research, the objective is to engage learners as active participants who possess knowledge and skills to challenge prevailing norms. This involves conducting thorough research, analyzing, and critically examining various perspectives on a given issue. The focus is on pinpointing issues that stem from the socio-political realities present in the learners' lives. Furthermore, people encourage learners to design and implement actions that promote social justice beyond the classroom. Finally, learners are expected to reflect on their actions and develop visions for future projects. I have established a set of guiding principles to assist me in resource development, project implementation, and data analysis.

Research Questions

The dissertation explored the following research questions:

- 1. What characterizes parents' responses to children's literature that includes topics of gender and/or sexual orientation?*
- 2. When parents share children's books with topics of gender and sexual orientation with their children, what themes arise?*
- 3. How do parents feel the resources supported (or inhibited) conversations with their children and what changes do they recommend?*

Significance and Rationale

My study aimed to address a critical gap in the literature which will further discussed in the next chapter regarding the importance of parental discussions with their children about diversity in gender and sexual orientation as a means for developing understanding, empathy, and supporters/allies that they will send to school to combat the grim statistics that exist. Through conversations and reading together, parents can help their children explore the topics of gender identity and sexual orientation and become supporters and allies of their diverse classmates. There are many reasons why having conversations with children about diversity and inclusion is necessary, beginning in elementary school (Kosciw et al., 2022).

Though the struggles of LGBTQ+ youth in school settings have been extensively documented (Kosciw et al., 2022), the literature is sparse about parents' involvement in facilitating the understanding of gender and sexual orientation through literacy-based strategies. People can empower children to promote inclusivity and confront discrimination if we equip parents with resources to engage in meaningful conversations about diversity. My study not only seeks to contribute to a broader societal change

towards acceptance and understanding, but also aims to boost the well-being of all students.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This literature review investigates topics related to gender and sexual orientation, with a focus on the perspectives of parents and educators in addressing LGBTQ+ inclusivity in educational settings. It also highlights research on inclusive literature that addresses gender and sexual orientation. Lastly, it examines literature on the role of children's books in fostering conversations about diversity and addresses a gap in existing research.

In searching for literature for this review there were three main search engines that I used: Library One Search, Google Scholar, and JSTOR. Overall, I reviewed over 100 articles reviewed for inclusion in the literature review. At the beginning of my research, I explored a wide variety of subjects that overlap between gender identity sexual orientation educational settings and family structures. My review started by examining parental reactions to LGBTQ+ content in educational environments and how these reactions affect educational decisions. The research revealed that parents function as key players who either support inclusive school programs or stand in opposition to them. The position parents take determines how educational institutions handle dialogues about gender and sexual orientation. Through my research I observed teacher strategies for managing complex educational dynamics by responding to parental resistance and promoting inclusive learning environments.

Additionally, my research concentrated primarily on LGBTQ+-inclusive children's literature therefore my review of the research examined text representations of

gender and sexual orientation alongside the educational benefits they provide including identity development support and empathy enhancement as well as the obstacles educators encounter through censorship pressures and public examination when using these books. The power of queer children's literature to transform perspectives drew me because it validates individual identities and contests existing societal standards.

Furthermore, I researched the ways LGBTQ+ families manage school settings and express their identities at home. The review of my study highlighted both positive and negative experiences faced by LGBTQ+ families in educational settings while advocating for more inclusive school environments and policies. The research studied the methods LGBTQ+ families use to preserve their family identity through their conversation patterns and decisions about disclosure as well as how they respond to external questions and assumptions.

From that large bank of research only three literature review topics were selected because they match my study's central elements and address the research gap I targeted. The research needed to examine how cisgender parents view and interact with LGBTQ+ content in educational environments because their perspectives shape the home discussions about these topics. I needed comprehensive knowledge about the creation, depiction, and reception of LGBTQ+-inclusive children's literature because of its effects on identity development and promoting empathy and inclusivity. Research about children's books functioning as conversational tools demonstrated how theoretical concepts connect with practical applications while validating shared reading as an initial discussion point for exploring gender and sexual diversity. The combination of these

three subject areas established an extensive framework which enabled me to design and conduct my study as well as analyze its results.

The study of Parental Perspectives on LGBTQ+ Topics in Educational Settings examines family viewpoints regarding the integration of LGBTQ+ topics within school environments. This research investigates the ways parents perceive LGBTQ+ topics in schools and their reactions to curriculum inclusion while examining how they impact these educational decisions. The research investigates parental support or resistance to educational materials and explores the connection between family-school communication and community beliefs which influence curriculum choices. In elementary education the parental perspective gains importance because parents often choose suitable educational content for their children. Understanding the various roles that parents play in relation to curriculum topics involving diverse genders and sexual orientations was beneficial to me. I was able to recognize that I desired to find supporters and allies rather than resistant parents and to be more aware of the numerous causes of parental resistance. This process enhanced my comprehension and my capacity for empathy, allowing me to comprehend why some parents may not support inclusion. It also helped me understand the difference between supporters and allies. Finally, it allowed me to focus on crafting my resources toward developing parent allies rather than settling for parent supporters.

LGBTQ+-inclusive children's literature defines books which represent various sexual orientations and gender identities as well as different family models through supportive narratives that acknowledge LGBTQ+ people's real-life experiences. LGBTQ+-inclusive children's books function as mirrors for LGBTQ+ children and those from LGBTQ+ families and as educational windows for others to gain insight into

diverse perspectives. Although studies prove this literature supports identity development and helps overcome stereotypes and enhance empathy, it appears less in educational settings because of censorship and access challenges as well as educators' discomfort. My dissertation established LGBTQ+-inclusive literature as the primary medium for parents and children to connect through shared reading activities. Through my study of the educational and emotional roles of these books I gained the necessary knowledge to choose books and create resources that support identity validation and start meaningful dialogues.

This research area investigates how picture books together with children's stories function as tools to start important discussions between adults and children. Intentional use of children's literature enables discussions about complex social themes such as diversity and identity by presenting these topics in ways that resonate emotionally and are appropriate for young readers. My dissertation research demonstrated shared reading's effectiveness as both a learning tool and a means of fostering connections. This conclusion revealed that children's books function as interactive texts which enable parents to direct discussions about gender and sexual orientation diversity through the use of thought-provoking questions and discussion methods.

Table 2.1 on the next page shows examples of the search terms used to identify possible research in each of the three main areas.

Table 2.1*List of Search Terms Used in Literature Search*

Main Topic	Search Terms¹
Parental Perspectives on LGBTQ+ Topics in Educational Settings	Perspectives AND LGBTQ+ AND curriculum LGBTQ+ AND inclusive education Parental roles in school curriculum Parental support LGBTQ+ topics Parental resistance LGBTQ+ AND literature LGBTQ+ inclusivity in schools Teacher-parent collaboration LGBTQ AND LGBTQ+ AND children's literature advocacy LGBTQ+ AND children's literature Parental allies LGBTQ+ AND education Resistance to LGBTQ+ AND curricula Navigating parental objections in schools AND LGBTQ Teachers managing parental resistance AND LGBTQ AND
LGBTQ+-Inclusive Children's Literature	LGBTQ+ AND representation in children's literature Inclusivity in children's books Diversity AND LGBTQ+ themes in children's publishing LGBTQ+ inclusive curricula in schools LGBTQ+ AND characters in picture books Gender diversity in children's literature Transgender representation in children's books Political challenges AND LGBTQ+ children's books Book bans and censorship AND LGBTQ+ topics Controversial books in education AND queer children's literature
Using Children's Literature to Facilitate Conversations	Parents reading with children AND LGBTQ Parents using children's literature to discuss hard topics Parents using children's books to discuss difficult topics Parents using children's literature AND discussion Parents using children's books to discuss LGBTQ AND Parents using children's books to discuss AND racism Using children's books to discuss AND ableism Using children's books to discuss AND homophobia Using children's book to discuss sexism Using children's books to discuss transphobia Using children's books to discuss antisemitism Using children's books to discuss Islamophobia

¹ The word AND in all capital letters indicate a Boolean operator.

Parental Perspectives on LGBTQ+ Topics in Educational Settings

Parents play a variety of roles when it comes to the decisions and curriculum used in the classroom. Some parents support the use of LGBTQ+ curriculum, resources, and

books with students, whereas other parents show resistance and objections (Crawley, 2020; Hermann-Wilmarth & Ryan, 2019). As a result, researchers and teachers have different approaches for navigating these situations. This issue is essential to comprehend because the role that parents play in the school curriculum is likely directly related to the attitudes that exist at home.

This section of the literature review focuses on three central themes that emerged from research on parental perspectives regarding LGBTQ+ topics in educational settings: The literature review identifies three main topics about parental perspectives on LGBTQ+ content in schools which include parental book allies who support LGBTQ+-inclusive resources as well as parental resistance and efforts to negotiate such resistance. Research findings show that there exists a parent group who supports LGBTQ+-inclusive children's literature and assists classroom educators. Parental allies become essential figures who validate diverse educational materials while simultaneously boosting teacher self-assurance. Research findings indicate that parents show opposition to LGBTQ+ educational material because their objections stem from personal beliefs, community norms, and ideas about age suitability. The implementation of inclusive educational practices faces difficulties due to parental resistance. Through the application of proactive communication techniques educators who engage in professional development and collaboration with colleagues manage to overcome resistance according to research findings. Research shows that parent participation creates difficulties in implementing inclusive curricula because of their significant authoritative role.

Parental Book Allies

The research on cisgender parents reviewing children's books that included LGBTQ+ or gender expansive topics is extremely sparse. There were two key articles that I was able to locate. I discuss each of these studies in detail.

The first was Crawley (2020) which was central in the development of my study. Some parents play a unique role as allies who increase an educator's confidence to provide and use children's literature that is inclusive of lesbians and/or gays (Crawley, 2020). For example, Crawley provided one parent's experience with six lesbian and/or gay (LG)-inclusive children's books reviewed to potentially be read in their school, including *And Tango Makes Three* (Richardson & Parnell, 2005), *King & King* (de Haan & Nijland, 2003), *Molly's Family* (Garden, 2004), *Orca's Song* (Cameron, 1987), *The Harvey Milk Story* (Krakow & Gardner, 2001), and *The Day in June* (Pitman, 2014). Crawley found that the parent transitioned from supporting and using the books in elementary classrooms to considering school selection processes of books and self-initiating action by reading *And Tango Makes Three* to her daughter's class.

As a result of this study, the particular parent approved the use of all six of the children's books in elementary school settings (Crawley, 2020). After merely supporting the books, the parent began to ask how books are normally chosen—or censored—for those places. In addition, the parent ended up taking the initiative to read *And Tango Makes Three* in her daughter's classroom. Crawley (2020) made the point that “...educators should also consider and explore the stances and possibilities of parents and other stakeholders to support such work.” (p 40). Utilizing allies as co-facilitators to come into the classroom and share LG children's literature is yet another volunteer role

that teachers may consider when wanting to share diverse texts with their students (Crawley, 2020).

The other key article, by Hartsfield and Kimmel (2020), collected research from a community book club about the participants' perceptions of challenged children's literature. The findings suggested that there were some adults that viewed the literature as having value and they were flexible regarding their beliefs about what was appropriate for children. In addition, some participants mentioned that they would want communication with their child's teacher ahead of time so they could discuss the topics with their children if questions arose (Hartsfield & Kimmel, 2020). Interestingly, both Crawley (2020) and Hartsfield and Kimmel (2020) found that adults support literature with LGBTQ+ topics to be read to children. This point of commonality informs the positioning of parents in my research project because I view the parents as supporters or allies in this project who will help with the content included in the resources, with revisions, and with evaluation after using the resources with their child. They will have the opportunity to take an active role, just as Crawley's parent ended up doing in the study when she shared *And Tango Makes Three* in her daughter's classroom. Additionally, I would argue that his findings move beyond just LG-inclusive literature to include LGBTQ+ and gender expansive children's literature, as well.

In general, this study on parental book allies suggests that some parents actively support and advocate for the inclusion on LGBTQ+ children's literature in schools. Through identifying parental allies the confidence of educators could be increased when parents take the initiative to read inclusive books in their child's classroom or review children's books with these topics. In addition, parents have the ability to question the

school's book selection and become co-facilitators in introducing diverse texts to students.

Parental Resistance

Additionally, there was research that examined parental resistance as a perspective on the use of LGBTQ+ children's literature in the classroom. Clark (2010) found that the sample of preservice teachers did not feel ready to teach about heterosexism and homophobia and they named a lack of resources as one of the main reasons along with seeing parents as a possible obstacle. Similarly, research by Thein (2013) highlighted language arts teachers' argument that their communities who were conservative and parents who were considered rigid would not approve of LGBTQ children's literature. Both studies identified teachers' concerns about potential parent resistance as a barrier to providing inclusive instruction. On the other hand, Sieben and Wallowitz (2009) highlighted the opposite of parental resistance that they received when implementing antihomophobia and queer theory into the classroom. Parents called to share their support for instruction surrounding queer theory (Sieben & Wallowitz, 2009). Parental resistance does remain a concern for educators according to these findings, however there is research to support that some parents support curriculum that is inclusive, which highlights the complex nature of parental involvement in LGBTQ+ curriculum and education.

One of the most recent studies on this topic is worth examining in more detail. Hermann-Wilmarth and Ryan (2019) explored the parental resistance teachers encountered when reading LGBTQ+ children's literature within their curricula in the elementary classroom in an ethnographic case study of two elementary teachers and the

kind of parental resistance they encountered and how they navigated it. On the whole, only a few of the interactions that the teachers in the study experienced were negative (Hermann-Wilmarth & Ryan, 2019). The vast majority of parents showed no resistance or objections to their teaching about accepting LGBTQ people (Hermann-Wilmarth & Ryan, 2019). In fact, there were parents in the room while the teachers were sharing the literature, and they were impressed and surprised at the students' ability to have conversations and deep discussions about issues (Hermann-Wilmarth & Ryan, 2019).

Research on parental resistance suggests that while educators fear opposition, it occurs far less frequently than they anticipated or actually experience. As with any controversial topic, there is also evidence of parental support for educators incorporating LGBTQ+ topics into the curriculum and having discussions with students about such topics.

Negotiating the Resistance

Researchers also examined how educators manage parental opposition to the incorporation of LGBTQ literature and curricula in the educational setting. Hermann-Wilmarth and Ryan (2019) found that proactive communication as a means for alleviating concerns from parents is key. When teachers and parents engage in open discussions about the benefits of using LGBTQ literature in the classrooms, they described reduced opposition and more positive interactions (Hermann-Wilmarth & Ryan, 2019). Flores' (2014) findings emphasized the significance of transparency and discussion in building trust with parents, which is also echoed in Hermann-Wilmarth and Ryan's (2019) research. Flores (2014) highlighted that effective communication assists in creating an environment that is seen as collaborative, which in turn fosters acceptance

and understanding from the parents because they feel informed and involved in discussions about LGBTQ themes.

Both studies emphasized the dire need for professional development for teachers to equip them with the necessary skills to effectively address parental concerns (Flores, 2014; Hermann-Wilmarth & Ryan, 2019). When teachers who received training on LGBTQ issues felt more confident in advocating for inclusive practices and navigating discussions with parents that may be difficult (Hermann-Wilmarth & Ryan, 2019). Flores (2014) supported professional development programs which train educators about LGBTQ issues to build necessary skills for productive conversations with parents. Professional development for educators ensures they have the necessary skills to create inclusive classrooms and handle parental concerns with expertise and confidence.

The need for educators to join forces with one another is another critical finding that emerged from both studies. When parents resisted teachers' inclusion of LGBTQ practices Hermann-Wilmarth and Ryan (2019) found that teachers often looked to their fellow teammates for assistance, which in turn created a more unified front to promote such practices. Flores (2014) notes that mutual efforts among teachers can improve the implementation of LGBTQ themes in the classroom and provides a more cohesive support system for tackling parental resistance.

The findings on how to navigate parental resistance suggest that resistance is not a strict barrier to this kind of shift in education. Professional development and proactive communication are highlighted as keys to address parental concerns which include open discussions about LGBTQ literature which can reduce the opposition and help to promote positive interactions. Educators who receive professional development also feel more

confident in advocating for inclusive practices with parents. Lastly, collaboration with colleagues can assist educators in upholding a united front so they can advocate for the LGBTQ-inclusive practices.

In summary, the perspectives that parents have about LGBTQ+ topics in their children's' educational settings vary. Some parents support curriculum that is inclusive and others resist it according to the research. The research highlights the importance that the perspectives of parents are understood due to the fact that many times their perspectives can influence the decisions that are made within schools. Some studies indicate that parents actively support and advocate for LGBTQ+ literature being used within the classrooms which can help with the confidence of educators as they are making their educational decisions. However, there was research that highlighted the concerns that educators have about implementing such literature. Although these concerns exist there is research that highlights strategies for managing resistance.

LGBTQ+-Inclusive Children's Literature

LGBTQ+-inclusive children's books help build identities and teach empathy which advances social inclusion but they still encounter mixed acceptance in educational and household environments. According to Bishop (1990), children's literature serves as both reflections of readers' diverse realities and windows into unfamiliar lives and experiences. Scholarly research has focused more on LGBTQ+-inclusive themes and characters within children's literature during recent decades because they demonstrate potential benefits for identity exploration and empathy development alongside promoting inclusivity. This part of the literature review investigates how LGBTQ+ identities are depicted in children's literature, as well as research on the educational benefits and social

impacts of these depictions alongside the obstacles these books encounter. This analysis reveals which advancements have been achieved and which challenges persist toward establishing fair and welcoming literary environments for every child.

LGBTQ+-inclusive children's literature serve as essential educational resources by providing students opportunities to investigate personal identity while building empathy and supporting social inclusivity. Four primary topics presented in the research illustrate its outcomes as well as its practical applications. The research review begins by presenting findings on representation and inclusion while emphasizing increasing LGBTQ+ visibility combined with calls for positive depictions in children's literature. Second, it investigates the educational benefits of inclusive literature, including its ability to support social-emotional learning, validate student experiences, and foster inclusive classroom environments. The research highlighting both the challenges and discussions generated by political social resistance through book restrictions with educator and family concerns is then featured. Next, the research presented demonstrates how LGBTQ+-inclusive literature acts as a powerful transformative force which redefines societal norms by offering novel perspectives on gender and sexuality while developing critical understanding among various age groups.

Representation and Inclusivity

Research studies have repeatedly focused on how children's literature portrays different groups through reviews of a variety of books throughout different research studies. Izienicki (2024) found a steady progression in the representation of diverse characters, such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer characters and themes in children's literature from 1972 through 2018. According to Farley (2017), dominant

societal norms play a role in the underrepresentation of the experiences of transgender and gender-variant character representation in children's books. Crawley (2017) discovered that narratives which reflect transgender youth experiences help young readers discover and embrace their identities. The findings stress the fundamental requirement to increase transgender and gender-diverse characters in children's books which enables all children to see their experiences represented and validated in literature.

Studies of children's literature track gender and sexual identity development through exploration of supporting characters situated outside the main story arc. Olson (2024) performed a comprehensive review of over 80 children's books featuring non-parental LGBTQ characters to explore different family structures and relationships in order to better understand how these portrayals contribute to children's perceptions of belonging, identity and normalization of family identities that are diverse. In addition, DePalma (2016) discussed both current progress and outstanding barriers in achieving widespread acceptance for gender and sexual diversity while criticizing traditional norms. This research examined how children's literature represents gender and sexual identity while discussing progress toward inclusivity alongside existing constraints that shape these stories. Findings from this study included sharing the participants experiences on selecting literature which breaks heteronormative norms by featuring characters who do not conform with sex/gender/sexuality expectations and exploration of underlying values and family structure. Improvements in children's literature demands consistent efforts toward inclusivity so every child finds their identity and experiences portrayed in their reading choices.

Research on representation and inclusivity shows that children's literature functions as an effective instrument to teach children about diversity. The research studies in this area demonstrate advancement in LGBTQ+ representation while recognizing persistent societal barriers that create limitations. The integration of LGBTQ+ narratives into mainstream literature shows advancement but faces ongoing difficulties.

Educational Benefits

The integration of LGBTQ+-inclusive children's literature into educational environments presents significant possibilities for nurturing students' awareness of diversity and social emotional capabilities. Second-grade classrooms benefited from LGBTQ+-inclusive read-alouds which fostered diversity discussions as shown by Papola-Ellis and Hollenberg (2024) through educator and administrative support. The research demonstrated that these read-alouds promote student acceptance and understanding while they address societal norms challenges and potential pushback (Papola-Ellis & Hollenberg, 2024). LGBTQ+-inclusive children's books demonstrate transformative potential through enabling inclusive discussions which challenge societal norms and foster acceptance and empathy within educational settings.

Bos and Gartrell (2010) reinforced these findings in their study exploring the buffering effect of LGBTQ-inclusive curricula in mitigating the stigmatization experienced by school-aged adopted children with LGBTQ parents. They discovered that stigmatized youth, referring to children who were school age who were facing exclusion or bias because of their family's LGBTQ identity, who attended schools that taught about LGBTQ individuals and events were less likely to exhibit problem behavior than

stigmatized youth whose schools lacked LGBTQ-inclusive curricula (Bos & Gartrell, 2010). The study demonstrates how LGBTQ-inclusive curricula help protect marginalized youth by creating inclusive school settings which affirmed their identities.

The studies conducted by Chick (2008) and Miller (2022) demonstrated that this literature combats stereotypes while it validates children's experiences and portrays diverse family structures as normal. Children's books with gay and lesbian themes help to break stereotypes and support LGBTQ+ children as they promote diverse family structures and acceptance. Similarly, Miller's study revealed the research of Miller's study demonstrated how modern queer children's literature transforms queer representation by emphasizing queer happiness while opposing conventional stories and delivering positive representations that confirm LGBTQ+ identities and experiences. The research from both studies demonstrated how LGBTQ+-inclusive curricula create supportive educational settings which validate student identities leading to reduced stigmatization alongside improved student behavior. Educational environments benefit from LGBTQ+-inclusive literature because it enables the promotion of diversity and acceptance and supports social-emotional development while challenging established norms to support inclusive experiences for every student.

In summary, the research findings in this area suggest the powerful tool that children's literature plays in fostering children's social emotional development, promoting diversity and creating educational spaces that are affirming to all students. In addition, it provides students with opportunities to learn about topics that may be different from their own lives but also provides opportunities for students who identify as LGBTQ+ to have validation which helps to create a sense of belonging. By celebrating

diverse identities and family structures, the children's literature can help contribute to a reduction in stigmatization and rather foster acceptance, which can aid in helping the well-being of students. Lastly, learning environments become more supportive and equitable for all students when LGBTQ+-inclusive curricula is present.

Challenges and Controversies

Though there are certain advantages of reading LGBTQ+-inclusive children's literature in educational settings, the literature does face noteworthy challenges.

Buchanan et al. (2020) discussed elementary preservice teachers' hesitation in using LGBTQ-themed picture books due to their perceived controversy, which would affect discussions about diversity within the classroom negatively. Their study found that preservice teachers reported varied experiences with LGBTQ families while showing mostly positive responses to the provided family reading materials (Buchanan et al., 2020). The participants showed mixed feelings about LGBTQ-themed books because they faced perceived conflicts along with religious beliefs and standards for appropriate youth literature. These tensions demonstrate the important need for resources that are planned intentionally to support families, like those explored in my study, which assist parents and educators to engage with diverse children's literature despite external pressures.

More recent research has highlighted the implications politically of banning books regarding being able to get access to children's literature that is diverse and inclusive. Goncalves et al. (2024) focused on the political aspects of book banning, noting that children's literature with diverse characters, such as LGBTQ+ were most likely to be banned. These concerns were reiterated in Dawkins (2022), which highlighted how

censorship stifles marginalized voices and limits access to literature that fosters empathy and understanding.

Tensions were revealed between concerns from parents and the value of exposing children to diverse perspectives. For example, Hartsfield and Kimmel (2020) delved into community views of literature that was challenged. Their study found that some adults see the benefits of reading literature that is challenged and their ideas about what is appropriate for children to read can change. Similarly, Fanetti (2012) explored the educational need for engaging with controversial books, and suggested that such literature promotes critical thinking and empathy in students and without this literature meaningful discussions and valuable learning opportunities would be prevented for students. These studies underscore the necessity of acknowledging the educational significance while understanding parent concerns in literature that is considered contentious.

In summary, the research findings about challenges and controversies suggest that controversy is present and prevalent when it comes to LGBTQ+ topics in children's literature. Book banning has been a rampant topic throughout the country with LGBTQ+-inclusive books being frequently challenged (source needed). These challenges emphasize the constant battle to navigate societal resistance while also promoting inclusivity in educational settings, which stresses the necessity of diverse literature as a means for supporting student development. This is especially useful for my study as it demonstrates just how important it is to equip parents with resources, tools and language to navigate these tensions as they are reading at home with their children.

The Transformative Potential

The transformative influence that LGBTQ+-inclusive literature has on broader societal norms and individual identity development has also been explored by researchers. Miller (2019) explored the surfacing of “new” queer children’s literature, which actively centers queerness and challenges traditional norms. These narratives, while affirming LGBTQ+ identities, also reveal gaps and limitations in achieving true intersectional representation. Similarly, Ryan and Hermann-Wilmarth (2013) explored the potential for queer readings of award-winning children’s literature, arguing for their role in fostering critical conversations about identity and inclusivity. Finally, Miller’s (2022b) genealogical analysis of LGBTQ+ picture books further emphasized the capacity of such books to shape children’s understanding of gender and sexuality while advocating for continued innovation in publishing practices. Together these studies center the transformative potential that children’s literature can have on the development of individuals and more broadly on norms within our society.

In general, research on the transformative potential suggests that LGBTQ+-inclusive literature can assist in fostering empathy, societal acceptance and critical thinking as well as supporting identities of marginalized individuals. Children’s literature can assist with creating opportunities for deeper discussions about diversity and inclusion by challenging narratives that are considered dominant and expanding representations of gender and sexual orientation.

In summary, the reviewed literature underscores the multifaceted role of LGBTQ+-inclusive children’s literature in enhancing representation, fostering inclusivity, and promoting critical thinking. While significant progress has been made in

diversifying narratives, challenges such as censorship and community resistance persist. To fully realize the transformative potential of LGBTQ+-themed literature, educators, policymakers, and publishers must address these barriers and continue to advocate for more inclusive and intersectional storytelling.

Using Children's Literature to Facilitate Conversations

Children's literature assists parents and educators in initiating meaningful conversations with children therefore it can be considered a powerful tool. Books offer an entry point for discussion which may include gender and LGBTQ+ identities or other important topics that may increase social awareness and empathy. Shared reading is the mechanism that is often utilized when using children's literature to facilitate conversations with kids because it involves interactivity and discussion about the book. The following section explores research concerning three relevant threads in the use of children's literature to facilitate conversations: Exploring Gender and LGBTQ+ Identities, Social Awareness and Empathy, and Discourse During Shared Reading.

Exploring Gender and LGBTQ+ Identities

One way that children's literature can be used is to explore gender and LGBTQ+ identities that are present within the books. Van Horn (2015) found that children's literature with LGBTQ+ topics can be utilized to help have discussions about challenging heteronormativity because such literature provides exposure to diverse family structures and identities with children. Similarly, Morgan and Kelly-Ware (2016) found that children's literature can also introduce children to family structures that may be different than their own as well as diverse representations of gender. Such books can serve as a catalyst for meaningful conversations about inclusion and identity (Morgan & Kelly-

Ware, 2016). In addition, Hill Jr. and Bartow Jacobs (2020) found that when reading children's literature children rely on their previous experiences, classroom norms, and text choice to influence their response to gendered characters which may include binary thinking or misconceptions. They suggested that educators should consider listen to student conversations about gender and identity and consider more diverse representations to counter heteronormativity in the classroom (Hill Jr. & Bartow Jacobs, 2020). These findings demonstrate that LGBTQ+-inclusive literature can initiate significant discussions and assist educators in confronting heteronormativity by providing more inclusive depictions of identity.

Beyond the children's literature encompassing the opportunity for discussion there is also research combining how adults react to such literature and how children react to these books. Malins and Whitty (2022) found that families were comfortable with the children's literature with topics of gender expression, gender identity, gender harassment and family compositions and that these books served as entry points into family discussions about diversity in gender and sexual identity. The participants found that the books facilitated their discussions with their children about these topics (Malins & Whitty, 2022). LGBTQ+-inclusive literature serves as a crucial tool because it both encourages children to participate and helps adults feel comfortable while starting meaningful conversations about identity and diversity within families.

In general, the research on exploring gender and LGBTQ+ identities with literature suggests that books are a valuable tool for fostering conversations about identity, inclusion and diversity. The research indicates that stereotypes can be challenges children's understanding of family structures can be broadened and gender and identity

conversations have more opportunities to occur with exposure to this literature. The importance of intentional book selection and well-crafted discussion questions are key for adult and child engagement to be productive. By using representations that are diverse, parents and educators can aid children to develop more expansive and accepting views of gender and LGBTQ+ identities.

Social Awareness and Empathy

Beyond gender and LGBTQ+ topics, there are other research studies that present how books can be used to develop social awareness and empathy for other groups who may be considered marginalized or topics that may be considered controversial.

Bazemore-Bertrand (2020) conducted a study using children's literature to discuss social issues in the classroom including sexual orientation/LGBTQ+, but also topics of immigration, racism, racial bias, social movements, poverty, social class, homelessness, and systemic inequities. She argued for the use of children's literature with these topics to be used with elementary students as a means for prompting their participation around social issues both socially and democratically (Bazemore-Bertrand, 2020). The study shows that children's books can promote understanding and awareness and motivate young readers to explore critical conversations about justice and social responsibility.

Educators benefit from children's literature because it helps them to teach complex social topics while enhancing students' emotional and cognitive development through active engagement. Newstreet et al. (2019) found that children's literature text sets can be a powerful tool for teaching students about diversity and literacy by exploring complex issues such as Islamophobia. They found that discussing texts and multimodal responses inspired a pen-pal exchange with students in Bangladesh in which the students

developed critical literacy skills as well as empathy with diverse students, lessening the likelihood for Islamophobia in classrooms and society (Newstreet et al., 2019). Vetri, et al., (2022) shared results from an interpersonal psychotherapy-based book targeting children living with a parent with mental illness. They found that the book was highly appreciated, deeming it a useful tool for supporting children who had a parent with mental illness through the use of story as a therapeutic tool and the relevant strategies that were taught through the stories (Vetri et al., 2022). Research shows purposeful book selection can develop empathy and critical literacy skills and offer emotional support during students' real-world challenges.

This research on children's literature playing a role in social awareness and empathy suggests that it can be used to facilitate discussions about challenging social issues such as systemic inequities, Islamophobia, racial bias and mental health. In addition, the texts have been found to help children become more active with their participation in creating an inclusive and socially aware society, developing empathy and developing a deeper awareness of experience and perspectives that are diverse through engaging in discussions, multimodal responses and interactive activities.

Discourse During Shared Reading

There is also research about shared book reading between children and parents that supports the use of children's literature for discussions. Schapira et al. (2021) found that repeatedly reading a book with children and engaging in post reading conversations can improve discourse between the children and parents and thus increasing the participation of the children. Parents tended to talk more than the children in the

discussions but the more times the children read the book the more their involvement increased.

Discourse can also include topics related to gender and sexual orientation. Malins and Whitty (2022) conducted a study that supported the findings by Schapira et al. (2021). In their work, the children and parents willingly shared and discussed gender and sexual identities within the books they shared together. These researchers found that this process helped parents have discussions about gender variance, who you can love and what hobbies, games and clothes are acceptable. These studies demonstrate that shared reading can be an entry point for meaningful family conversations about gender and sexual orientation diversity to occur.

The research about discourse during shared book reading also included other topics beyond gender and sexual orientation. Park and Ostrosky (2014) specially researched the discourse that occurred between parents and children. Their study found that when parents and children read books that included characters with disabilities the themes that were most prevalent were conversations about the difference in abilities and similarities between the children and the book characters with disabilities. This shows how parent-child shared reading and dialogue can help support empathy and understanding around disabilities.

The research about discourse during shared reading when reading books that include various types of diversity shows that children's literature supports facilitating discussions between parents and children. No matter what the type of diversity is there is a resounding sentiment that children's books play a key role in serving as an entry point for having these discussions and conversations between adults and children. This research

highlights what a powerful role that children's literatures play in fostering meaningful dialogues through shared reading allowing children to explore and build their understanding about identities and experiences that are diverse.

Conclusions

Existing research presents extensive studies focused on parental perspectives regarding LGBTQ+ subjects within schools according to the literature review. Research investigates which elements teachers take into account about LGBTQ+ material integration while considering parent reactions. Research demonstrates the presence of gender and sexual orientation themes within children's literature. Research literature shows how children's books act as tools for initiating discussions about diversity and various social challenges related to identity and inclusion.

The research highlighted the diverse perspectives that parents have about LGBTQ+ topics in educational settings. It showed that some parents desire an inclusive curriculum for their children in classrooms and actively support using LGBTQ+ themed children's literature, while others oppose the inclusion of these topic, which can influence choices and policies made by schools and educators. The research presented strategies for managing resistance if educators face challenges when implementing these materials. However, though there are concerns presented about censorship and pushback from the community, LGBTQ+-inclusive literature plays a vital role in nurturing critical thinking, inclusivity and representation. Additionally, the research on discourse during shared reading emphasized that diverse children's literature functions as a valuable tool for opening discussions between parents and children about identity and diverse experiences that are meaningful. Finally, the research highlighted how crucial it is for continued

advocacy from stakeholders, such as educators, policymakers and children's book published to overcome hurdles and maximize storytelling which is inclusive and has transformative potential.

However, a significant gap exists within the existing body of scholarly research about cisgender parents in the United States sharing children's literature with topics that include gender and sexual orientation with their children when they are being provided with support for engaging in discussions. This particular practice serves as a tool for enhancing their children's understanding and promoting conversations surrounding diversity. The present dissertation aims to contribute to the current body of study. It is my hope that students who engage in such discussions with parental support inside their households and acquire information about diversity, as well as cultivate empathy, would subsequently transfer these attributes to their educational environments. Consequently, the duty for fostering these values is shared by parents at home and teachers within the educational setting.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

Overview

This research study examined cisgender parents' engagement with LGBTQ+-inclusive children's literature as they read to their elementary-aged children. The research study employed a design-based research framework to develop and assess literacy tools for facilitating family discussions about gender and sexual orientation. The research emerged from a growing national conversation about inclusive literacy practices while emphasizing family influence on children's comprehension of identity and diversity as well as the development of empathy. The research examined parents' reactions to LGBTQ+-inclusive texts while exploring the potential of developed resources to enable caregivers in creating affirming and age-appropriate conversations at home. The study investigated parents' experiences when using these texts and analyzed their evaluations of the effectiveness of the provided support materials.

Research Questions

As provided in Chapter One, the dissertation explored the following research questions:

- 1. What characterizes parents' responses to children's literature that includes topics of gender and/or sexual orientation?*
- 2. When parents share children's books with topics of gender and sexual orientation with their children, what themes arise?*
- 3. How do parents feel the resources supported (or inhibited) conversations with their children and what changes do they recommend?*

The first research question explored parents' first reactions to LGBTQ+-inclusive literature and assessed emotional, cognitive and behavioral responses. The study investigated how prior experiences alongside beliefs and knowledge shaped parents' interactions with the texts. The inquiry provided essential information about how parents positioned themselves toward literature that challenges traditional gender and sexuality norms while uncovering the emotional and cognitive entry points or obstacles parents faced during shared reading experiences.

The second research question examined what themes developed from parent-child interactions during shared reading sessions. The third research question addressed the practical usefulness and successful outcomes of the jointly created literacy materials. The study examined whether parents believed the discussion prompts, vocabulary supports and reflection tools were effective for facilitating conversations about gender and sexual orientation.

Role of the Researcher

I served as the lead researcher for this study. I am a White, straight, cisgender woman in my mid-40s and would be considered part of the upper class. Formerly, I was an elementary school teacher in South Florida and mid-Michigan. I taught elementary school, primarily the third and fourth grades. Additionally, I earned my master's degree with a concentration in literacy and my K–12 Reading Specialist endorsement. As a doctoral student, I am continuing my love for literacy, curriculum development, and social justice to develop the resources within this project.

My background potentially influenced me in a variety of ways which I will discuss below and follow up with what I did to try to minimize any potential biases. First,

as a straight, cisgender woman I do have limited personal experiences with the challenges faced by LGBTQ+ individuals which could have potentially led to an incomplete understanding of reality and perspectives they face. To mitigate this, I engaged in an extensive literature review, sought guidance from LGBTQ+ mentors, and actively sought out diverse perspectives through many hours of online research within my courses in my graduate program. Next, my experience as an elementary teacher in South Florida and mid-Michigan provided me with valuable insights into the educational experiences of children. However, it may also have shared my perspectives based on those specific regions, which may not be representative of the experiences that youth face who identify as LGBTQ+ or gender expansive.

Before this study began, I already knew the families who participated since they were acquaintances. The familiarity between myself and the participants helped establish trust and made them comfortable with the study materials but created a potential bias. The existing connections between families and researchers possibly affected participants' openness to express particular opinions or indicated a subgroup more supportive of gender and sexual orientation affirmation discussions.

To mitigate potential bias, I sought to broaden my understanding by reviewing the literature from diverse geographical locations and throughout my program consulted with educators from diverse backgrounds to gain a more comprehensive perspective. Finally, my background in literacy and curriculum development aligns well with the development of resources for the families in my study, however, it was crucial to focus on ensuring that the resources honored and shared accurate information pertaining to those individuals. To mitigate this, I integrated a holistic approach to my curriculum

development spending extensive hours evaluating the content included on the resources. I also engaged in consultations with scholars who identify as LGBTQ+. Lastly, during the study I stayed self-aware and analyzed the impact of my relationships with participants on both data gathering and its subsequent analysis.

Research Design

The qualitative research study adhered to the principles and framework of Design-Based Research (DBR) as outlined by McKenney and Reeves (2019). According to McKenney and Reeves (2019) the iterative development of solutions to practical and complex educational problems in educational design research provides the context for empirical investigation, which in turn yields theoretical understanding that can inform the work of others. This genre of research is defined as educational design research. It is comprised of three stages: analysis and exploration, design and construction and evaluation and reflection. During analysis and exploration, a targeted learning problem is identified by means of a literature review, analysis of context and analysis of needs and constraints of the most important stakeholders. A resource or intervention that is grounded in theory and practice is developed and improved upon during design and construction. Design is tried out in realistic situations during evaluation and reflection, with data on its use and usefulness gathered and analyzed. The implications for both theory and future design are deliberated.

According to Ivey (2021), there has been a notable increase in the number of pleas made by various scholars over the past decade to develop a symbiotic and indissoluble relationship between research and practice within the realm of education. The above methodology sets a clear educational goal, creates and carries out an

intervention that increases the chances of participants reaching that goal, and then changes it after careful assessments of how well it worked (Ivey, 2021). According to Easterday et al. (2014), the concept of DBR involves the integration of design and research methodologies. This approach enables researchers to develop educational interventions that are practical and successful in addressing both individual and communal challenges within the field of education.

DBR has primarily been implemented within educational contexts, such as classrooms involving interactions between teachers and students or in higher education settings with in-service teachers (Cobb et al., 2003). In their study, Wang et al. (2014) employed DBR to tackle the pressing issue of enhancing vocabulary practices in early childhood classrooms. There were three goals for the design experiment that the researchers wanted to complete: making a complete model for teaching vocabulary to young children, testing how well this model works, and finding out what factors in the environment help or hurt its implementation. Rowe and M.E. Miller (2016) undertook a two-year DBR investigation to examine the digital composition practices of bilingual/biliterate four-year-olds. In that work, the researchers utilized child-friendly digital cameras and iPads that were loaded with several applications for writing, sketching, and bookmarking. Further, Moore et al. (2018) provide a case study of how a three-year initiative to create Systematic Functional Linguistics-based ways to facilitate language discussion among English language learners resulted in data, resources, and instructional theory. DBR provides a strong yet adaptable structure that allows for continuous development and improvement of educational interventions based on real-world practice while meeting genuine learning requirements.

Although DBR is primarily utilized in educational settings, I argue that it may also be successfully applied in home environments, particularly in the context of parent-child interactions, in conjunction with a researcher (Cobb et al., 2003). There were three phases within my project: Phase 1: Analysis and Exploration, Phase 2: Design and Construction, and Phase 3: Evaluation and Reflection which followed the three stages in DBR (McKenney & Reeves, 2019). Figure 3.1 below shows the phases in visual form.

Figure 3.1

Phases of Design-Based Research



When parents read children's literature that includes sexual orientation and gender diversity, this overall design enabled the informed development of the resources for the parents to use.

During Phase 1: Analysis and Exploration, design principles were developed, which served as the mission and vision for the project throughout all of the phases. In addition, this phase functioned as a stage for gathering information from the parents in order to make informed book selections for use within the project. Parents then reviewed the books and captured their thinking in preparation for book selection meetings with me. I used the *Reading Diversity: A Tool for Selecting Diverse Texts by Learning for Justice* to evaluate several books on the topic that I had chosen for the parent in order to

ensure the initial texts the parent was reviewing were diverse in quality. The final stage in this phase was finalizing the books that will be used to develop resources for Phase 2:

Design and Construction.

During Phase 2: Design and Construction, resources were developed for the parent to use with their child for each of the books selected for use. Feedback from parents was gathered after Construction but prior to use which allowed for revision. The resources were setup as landscape in design with multiple sections, such as key vocabulary for the book and in general for sexual orientation or gender terms, before, during, and after discussion questions, and activities for extending allyship, to name a few. The parents met with me prior use to review the resources and provide feedback and recommendations for revisions. Lastly, video and audio recordings of the parent reading with their child and using the resources were collected during Phase 2.

Finally, during Phase 3: Evaluation and Reflection, semi-structured interviews were conducted as a means for gathering additional feedback on the resources to use for further revision. In addition, data was gathered about the parents' feelings and confidence using the resource. This data not only contributed to the redesign of the resources themselves but also provided a sense of whether or not the design choices were actually living up to the theoretical underpinnings of the design. To ensure that the design principles were grounded in actual theory, as well as application, the project explicitly referenced key ideas from queer theory and critical literacy theory.

The theory connection indicators in the table below demonstrate the ways in which these guiding principles incorporate tenets of queer and critical literacy theory.

Table 3.1*Design Principles Connected with Queer Theory/Pedagogy and Critical Literacy Theory*

Design Principles	Theory Connection Indicators
Parents and children will grow their knowledge about individuals who have different sexual orientations and/or gender identities than them	Read texts in an active, reflective manner to better understand power, inequality and injustice in human relationships (Coffey, 2008) Restructure their own knowledge base and challenge accepted societal norms (Coffey, 2008) “Queer encompasses sexual orientations including lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, and gay and gender identities including transgender, non-binary, genderqueer, and gender fluid” (Pennell, 2020, p. 2293).
Parents and children will gain empathy, respect, understanding, and connection for people of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities.	Read texts in an active, reflective manner to better understand power, inequality and injustice in human relationships (Coffey, 2008) Look at texts through other perspectives and recreate them from the standpoint of marginalized people (Coffey, 2008) In order to understand and comment on the things it ignores or avoids, queer theory provides pedagogical tools (Britzman, 1995). Norms, boundaries, and reading strategies are all up for question in queer pedagogy (Britzman, 1995).
Parents and children will learn to identify biases and stereotypes regarding sexual orientation and/or gender identity, as well as how to relate to people as individuals rather than members of certain groups.	Read texts in an active, reflective manner to better understand power, inequality and injustice in human relationships (Coffey, 2008) Have a critical lens (Coffey, 2008) Question issues of power (Coffey, 2008) Read and critique messages in texts in order to better understand whose knowledge is being privileged (Coffey, 2008) Restructure their own knowledge base and challenge accepted societal norms (Coffey, 2008) Look at texts through other perspectives and recreate them from the standpoint of marginalized people (Coffey, 2008) Critique and transform dominant ideologies (Luke, 2012) Examine how heterosexuality becomes normalized as natural (Britzman, 1995). Norms, boundaries, and reading strategies are all up for question in queer pedagogy (Britzman, 1995).
Parents and children will be able to discern between individual injustice (such as prejudiced speech) and institutional or systemic injustice (such as discrimination) based on sexual orientation and/or gender identity.	Read texts in an active, reflective manner to better understand power, inequality and injustice in human relationships (Coffey, 2008) Have a critical lens (Coffey, 2008) Question issues of power (Coffey, 2008) Read and critique messages in texts in order to better understand whose knowledge is being privileged (Coffey, 2008) Restructure their own knowledge base and challenge accepted societal norms (Coffey, 2008) Critique and transform dominant ideologies (Luke, 2012) The role of social institutions in inequity emphasizing the need for teachers and students to utilize literacy to address these inequities in their communities. (Handsfield, 2015).

The design principles and theoretical connection indicators suggest that parents and children can build empathy, respect, understanding, and connection. They may also

be able to spot biases and stereotypes and tell the difference between wrongdoings done by individuals and wrongdoings done by institutions. Power, inequality, and injustice in human interactions are investigated using critical literacy theory and pedagogical practices. It encourages active, reflective reading, critical lensing, wrestling with power issues, and changing knowledge from minority perspectives. Queer pedagogy investigates how heterosexuality is accepted in society, challenging society's conventions, boundaries, and reading strategies. These design principles and theory connection indicators will serve as the foundation for the construction of my research project, data collection, and analysis.

Setting, Sample, and Participants

Setting

My research represents the home as a key literacy space where cisgender parents engage their children with children's literature that have LGBTQ+ or gender diversity present within the stories. During Phase 1, analysis and exploration, the parent interviews took place over Zoom with the parents residing in a quiet place within their home, then parents previewed and selected books and accompanying resources within their homes, allowing for authentic, individualized preparation. The shared reading activities and discussions occurred at home during Phase 2, design and construction while parents used the jointly created literacy materials to direct their conversations. The home environment emerged as a responsive site for literacy learning and inclusive dialogue when parents participated in post-reading surveys and follow-up interviews from their homes during Phase 3's evaluation and reflection period. The home is positioned as a central space

where parents and children engage with the literature and discuss the topics as a means for developing their understanding of sexual orientation and gender identity.

Sample Criteria

The objective of the study was to identify parents who were 18 years of age or older and had at least one child in kindergarten through fifth grade and were open to reading books and having conversations with their child about gender and sexual orientation topics. By virtue of their willingness to participate in this research, the parents were at least at some level amenable to discussing gender and sexual orientation issues, both with their child and with myself as the researcher. The objective was to establish a diverse group with a wide range of characteristics. The families were acquainted with the study and were contacted on an individual basis. The study was designed to assist parents who desired to engage in discussions regarding these subjects; however, it may have limitations due to its primary focus on parents who embrace diversity in terms of gender and sexual orientation. Additionally, my goal was to create a group with a diverse array of characteristics, despite the limited sample size, by incorporating individuals with a variety of qualities. I considered variations among family structure such as single and multiple children along with differences between parochial and public-school systems and regional distinctions between suburban and rural environments as well as personal participant backgrounds related to parenting styles and literacy practices.

As mentioned above in the Role of the Researcher, the families were people with whom my family was acquainted and with whom I individually contacted to participate in the study. This purposeful sampling method was utilized so that I could best understand my problem and my research questions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The

rationale for the selection was that the goal of this study was to work with interested parents. It was not the intention to convert parents who were against sharing and discussing these topics with their children, but rather to help parents who did want to have these discussions. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that this approach may have its limitations since it primarily targets parents who have a positive attitude towards embracing variety in terms of sexual orientation and gender.

Participants

There were two parent and two child participants in this study: Rachel (pseudonym) with Gabe (pseudonym) and Stephanie (pseudonym) with Henry (pseudonym). Rachel is a 35 years old straight, White married woman. She attended college for two years and currently works as a labor and political organizer. The family's income is more than \$79,900 per year. Her son, Gabe, is nine and a half years old and an only child. He is also White and in third grade. Gabe attends a parochial school, though the family does not identify with any religion outside of what is provided in school. English is the primary language spoken in the home.

During this interview Rachel shared that her and her husband Daniel are raising their son Gabe, who attends ballet and plays soccer. Gabe is an only child by choice due to Rachel having a difficult pregnancy and child-birth along with post-partum depression. They love their family of three and enjoy spending time together and their main goal in parenting is highlighted in the following excerpt:

Gabe's 9 and a half. And we're in this groove as this, like we call ourselves a triangle family, cause it's the 3 of us, and it feels really good. And we, you know, we all really enjoy each other, and you know we're playing the long game as far

as parenting like we want Gabe when he's an adult to be, you know, fully independent, but also to. We want him to want to be in relationship with us when he's an adult. And however, that looks like. So that is like our main objective as a parent, of course, like teach him, and you know, guide him, but that when he's an adult that he can look and say like, oh, I can't wait to see my mom.

In addition, Rachel shared that she and her husband, Daniel (pseudonym) are both working through generational trauma and using tools such as therapy to help them navigate parenthood and their relationship. They have a guarded relationship with Daniel's family with clear boundaries and Rachel is estranged from her family. Gabe and his father are clinically diagnosed with ADHD and Gabe takes medications daily which help with his stamina, especially when reading

Rachel is a life-long reader, but Daniel was not read to as a child due to his mom not enjoying reading. Rachel has made it a point to read aloud to Gabe from an early age. He had a wonderful kindergarten teacher who taught him how to read and though he does not enjoy it as much as other subjects, Rachel has made it a point to find books that he enjoys and she reads aloud to him. As a child, Gabe would bring books to Rachel and would climb up into her lap and though that has changed as he got older reading is still a shared activity that Rachel and Gabe engage in together by reading chapter books. She wants more than anything for Gabe to be a life-long reader.

Stephanie is a 36-year-old straight, White married woman. She attended college for two years and currently works as a radiographer. The family's income is more than \$79,900 per year. Her son, Henry, is six years old and she has two older sisters who are in the third and sixth grades. He is also white and in kindergarten. Henry attends a public

school in a rural town. English is the primary language spoken in the home. The family identifies with the religion of Christianity.

Stephanie wanted to discuss sexual orientation and gender diversity with her youngest child Henry even though these topics were not part of their previous shared reading sessions. She expressed her desire to educate her child about sexual orientation and gender issues but stated that she required direction to respond to children's questions effectively. Stephanie underlined the importance of teaching respect and normalizing differences since her family maintains close relationships with same-sex couples. She admitted that teaching about gender diversity including non-binary and transgender identities posed a challenge because of her limited background knowledge and Henry's early developmental stage. Stephanie viewed this experience as a collective educational journey and valued the provided materials that delivered vocabulary definitions alongside conversation prompts and background information. She embraced the opportunity to demonstrate acceptance and inclusion to her children via books and dialogue.

Data Sources

Overall, I collected data from multiple sources throughout each phase of the project. They included:

Analysis and Exploration:

- Initial Parent Interviews
- Reading Diversity: A Tool for Selecting Diverse Texts by Learning for Justice
(Extended Edition)
- Parent Journals

Design and Construction

- Resource Review with Parents
- Video Recordings

Evaluation and Reflection

- Semi-structured Parent Interview

Each of these data sources is described more completely below.

Initial Parent Interviews

I interacted with the parents by having two interviews with the parents in January and February 2024. The first interview was designed to collect demographic data and gather information about their thinking about gender and sexual orientation. In addition, this initial interview was to help me identify the topic they would like to focus on so that I could choose titles of children's literature for them to review that would be meaningful for them. Also, I collected information to inform books I would pick to review and gather their thoughts about elements they would like to see on the resources that I developed. The material covered in this interview is provided in Appendix A. The goal of these initial interviews was to learn more about the participants and their families. One of the main goals of these initial parent interviews according to Seidman (2019) was to further establish a rapport with the parents so that we could work harmoniously with them throughout the project. I asked open-ended questions in order to gather insight for the purpose of identifying the confidence of the parents on gender and sexual orientation, and I used their answers to aid in making a determination about the specific topic(s) that were used for book selection (Appendix B).

Text Selection

In March, April, May, and June 2024 I designed the resources and gathered feedback from the parents in preparation for them using the resources with their children during the read aloud sessions. *Reading Diversity: A Tool for Selecting Diverse Texts* (Extended Edition) by Learning for Justice was used to evaluate multiple books on the various topics that the researcher identified as potential children's literature for use between the parent and the child in order to make an informed selection of quality children's books. *Reading Diversity* encourages a multifaceted approach to text selection and offers suggestions for teachers to give text complexity, critical literacy, and cultural responsiveness the highest priority (Learning for Justice, 2016).

There are four dimensions of text selection that are present within this tool: Complexity, Diversity and Representation, Critical Literacy, and Reader and Task Considerations (Learning for Justice, 2016). Complexity assesses a text's fundamental components quantitatively and qualitatively (Learning for Justice, 2016). Diversity and representation take into account the ways that a text's author and characters help to include varied voices in the curriculum (Learning for Justice, 2016). Critical literacy encourages readers to analyze messages, question power dynamics within those messages, and engage with texts actively and reflectively (Learning for Justice, 2016). Lastly, finding texts that both represent your students' identities, experiences, and motivations and offer insight into the identities, experiences, and motivations of others is all part of the culturally responsive text selection required by Reader and Task Consideration (Learning for Justice, 2016).

Parent Journals

The parents were provided with four potential children's books as possible options to read with their child. They were asked to read the books and complete an open-ended journal response where they recorded their thoughts about the books in order to prepare for a meeting with the researcher where the parents reviewed the developed resources (Appendix C). The purpose of these journals was to collect the parents' rich interpretations and thinking. The method of journaling is a well-established method utilized in qualitative research for allowing participants to share their perspectives in their own voice, eliciting reflective and emotionally resonant responses at their own pace (Ortlipp, 2008).

The question they reflected on was, "What were your experiences when you were reading this book?" They could choose to handwrite, video, or audio record their thinking as a means to honor diverse preferences. This question was designed to collect and document their current thoughts and the approach aligns with best practices, which emphasize how important it is to offer parents agency and choice in how they share their thinking (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Finally, they were asked to select the two books for which they would like resources developed. During this data collection Rachel chose to video record her responses and Stephanie chose to type her responses.

Resource Review with Parents

The parents reviewed the created resources and we met with the purpose of them providing me with feedback. The goal of this review time was for the parents to study the resource, ask questions, give feedback, or make suggestions for any additional revisions that could be made prior to engaging with the resource and using it with their child.

Using resource review interviews as a data source allowed me to obtain meaningful feedback from parents about the clarity and usefulness of the co-created literacy materials as well as their accessibility. I was interested in understanding parent reception of the resources, identifying helpful versus challenging elements, and measuring their confidence in using the materials to discuss gender and sexual orientation with their children. I employed a semi-structured interview protocol (Appendix D) which allows researchers to gather in-depth information from participants while retaining flexibility to explore insights that come up during the conversation (McKenney & Reeves, 2019). I asked parents for their thoughts on the resources as a whole together with their most helpful components and elements they found confusing or missing and whether they considered the content developmentally appropriate. I asked parents about their comfort level when using materials to discuss these topics with their children. Parents provided essential information about the resource's vocabulary elements and multimedia features and indicated where they exhibited curiosity or required further assistance. The next iteration of materials was developed using parental feedback which demonstrated the essential iterative nature of design-based research.

Video Recordings

Parents recorded themselves reading two different children's books with their child while using the created resource to aid in discussions before, during, and after reading. Video recordings allowed for me to observe not only verbal discussions and responses, but also gestures, tone, emotional reactions, and the use of the books and resources in real time (Heath et al., 2010)

Final Semi-structured Parent Interviews

Parents engaged in a final, semi-structured interview after they had used the resources with their child. The purpose of this was to engage in a final reflection of their experience and revisit one additional round of feedback for the created resources. I used a semi-structured interview protocol (Appendix D) which is where researchers are able to acquire in-depth data from interviewees and it also provides flexibility to probe any insights that may occur during the conversation (McKenney & Reeves, 2019).

Data Collection Procedures

Initial Parent Interviews

The initial parent interviews were conducted over Zoom between myself and the families and in the families' homes between the parent and the child. The meetings were video recorded using Zoom's built in feature as well as transcribed using Zoom's transcription tool. Video recordings allowed me to see as well as hear the verbal discussions and responses, gestures, tone, emotional reactions, and use of the books and resources in real time (Heath et al., 2010) In addition, I also collected Rachel and Stephanie's thoughts about what they would like to learn and what kinds of resources they would find helpful when finding, choosing and reading books with these topics to their child. Lastly, this initial conversation also helped me determine their interest in topic so I could find children's literature for them to examine later in this phase.

Text Selection

Following the initial parent interviews, I engaged in the book selection process where I chose four books for both Rachel and Stephanie for their review as potential selections to read aloud to their child. Over the past two years I had been reviewing

children's literature on published book lists that were recommended to me by my committee members and through Google searches. The two main sites that housed book lists that I purchased selections from were Social Justice Books: A Project of Teaching for Change and the Rainbow Book Lists published by the American Library Association. I utilized the *Reading Diversity: A Tool for Selecting Diverse Texts by Learning for Justice: Extended Edition* to analyze the final selections.

Parent Journals

During the Analysis and Exploration phase I was curious also to understand the themes that emerged from Rachel and Stephanie's Parent Journals as they reviewed the four books that I provided to them as possible choices for Phase Two where I would design the resources for the books that they chose to read with their child. The Parent Journal data were collected asynchronously and the method in which they provided said data was their choice. Rachel chose to video record her responses and Stephanie chose to journal her responses in script. The books that Rachel reviewed were as follows: *A Costume for Charly* (Malone, 2022), *Payden's Pronoun Party* (Jaryn, 2022), *Strong* (Kearney & Rosswood, 2022), and *The Mother of a Movement: Jeanne Manford: Ally, Activist and Co-Founder of PFLAG* (Sanders, 2022). The books that Stephanie reviewed were as follows: *Jacob's New Dress* (Hoffman & Hoffman, 2014), *Our Subway Baby* (Mercurio, 2020), *Calvin* (Ford & Ford, 2021), and *Strong* (Kearney & Rosswood, 2022).

Resource Review with Parents

The resource review was conducted as semi-structured parent interviews over Zoom between myself and the families and in the families' homes between the parent and

the child. The meetings were audio and video recorded using Zoom's built in feature as well as transcribed using Zoom's transcription tool.

Video Recordings

The data from the video recordings was converted into text using Zoom's transcription feature where the data were coded and preliminary themes were produced according to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Transcription is one of the foundational steps in thematic analysis, enabling me to engage deeply with the data by reading, coding and interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2022). There was one modification made during this phase of data collection in regard to the video recordings for Stephanie and Henry due to their second video not recording. After talking through various options and considering a variety of components (e.g., the child's age, what the family was comfortable with, etc.), it was decided that given the circumstances, it would be best for me to meet with Stephanie over Zoom and have her recount the discussions she and Henry had while reading and provide details about how he responded during all the various points where they engaged in conversations. Our conversation was recorded and I used the new recording, as well as the other recording I had for coding purposes.

Semi-structured Parent Interview

The final semi-structured parent interviews were conducted over Zoom between myself and the families and in the families' homes between the parent and the child. The meetings were audio and video recorded using Zoom's built in feature as well as transcribed using Zoom's transcription tool.

Data Analysis Description

For my study design I used Design-Based Research so my data collection was organized chronologically by phase to highlight the iterative nature of the design process. During Phase 1 I sought out to understand the parents' perspectives so I could select the children's books. The Design and Construction Phase 2 was where I developed and refined the resources through feedback from the parents and where they implement the resources through shared reading with their child. Finally, Phase 3 was Evaluation and Reflection where I assessed the implementation of the resources and gathered data from the parents about their experience.

During each phase I used Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) was utilized to analyze the qualitative data collected from various sources. The first step I took was to familiarize myself with the data. After I collected each data source, I spent time immersing myself in the content by reading the responses and transcripts and listening to the recordings repeatedly. This process assisted me in understanding the parents and children within my study. During this step I also kept a journal to record my thinking and wonderings about the data as a way for me to reflect as the study progressed. In the following sections I break down the analysis by section.

Analysis and Exploration

During this phase I conducted Initial Parent Interviews over Zoom. These were not coded and strictly utilized for gathering preliminary information from the parents to assist with choosing books for the children and to aid in developing the resources. For the Parent Journals there were two different ways the parents submitted these to me. Rachel video recorded her Parent Journals so I utilized to develop transcripts for Rachel's

videos and the transcripts were edited by myself as I relistened to the recordings and made the necessary changes to the provided transcripts prior to familiarizing myself with the data. Stephanie typed her responses so I was able to move straight to familiarizing myself with the data and journaling. Upon completion I engaged in an inductive coding approach in which my codes were resulting right from the data, not from predetermined categories. The initial codes were concise labels that summarized key ideas within the data.

The next step that I took after coding was to review the codes that I developed to begin to identify patterns or shared meanings within each data set. During this stage, I grouped similar codes into preliminary themes. To do this I actually printed out my codes, cut them out and put them into groups tangibly so that I could easily move them around and see all of my codes spread out on the table in front of me. Within the themes I started to identify subthemes within the broader theme which captured more nuanced insights within the larger patterns. Next, I refined my themes by comparing them to the original data to be sure they captured the meaningful patterns. During this stage I revisited transcripts and parent journals to ensure that my themes accurately reflected the parents' thoughts and feelings.

Design and Construction

First, during this phase I conducted Resource Review Interviews over Zoom with the parents after I created and presented the resources to the parents for review. These were not coded and strictly utilized for gathering their impressions and thoughts for revisions to the resources that I created for them to use while reading with their child. At

the conclusion of these interviews, I revisited the resources and continue to make updates before presenting final versions to the parents.

Next the parents each engaged in reading two books and recording these with their children. The video recordings of the parents using the resources and engaging in shared reading of the books with their children were recorded using Zoom and transcripts were provided using Zoom's transcription feature. I then engaged in refining the transcripts prior to familiarizing myself with the data and journaling. Upon completion I engaged in an inductive coding approach in which my codes were resulting right from the data, not from predetermined categories. The initial codes were concise labels that summarized key ideas within the data.

The next step that I took after coding was to review the codes that I developed to begin to identify patterns or shared meanings within each data set. During this stage, I grouped similar codes into preliminary themes. To do this I actually printed out my codes, cut them out and put them into groups tangibly so that I could easily move them around and see all of my codes spread out on the table in front of me. Within the themes I started to identify subthemes within the broader theme which captured more nuanced insights within the larger patterns. Next, I refined my themes by comparing them to the original data to be sure they captured the meaningful patterns. During this stage I revisited the videos and transcripts to ensure that my themes accurately reflected the parents' thoughts and feelings.

Evaluation and Reflection

During the final phase I conducted semi-structured parent interviews. The data from the video recordings was converted into text using Zoom's transcription feature. I

then engaged in refining the transcripts prior to familiarizing myself with the data and journaling. Upon completion I engaged in using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) an inductive coding approach, in which my codes were resulting right from the data, not from predetermined categories. The initial codes were concise labels that summarized key ideas within the data.

The next step that I took after coding was to review the codes that I developed to begin to identify patterns or shared meanings within each data set. During this stage, I grouped similar codes into preliminary themes. To do this I actually printed out my codes, cut them out and put them into groups tangibly so that I could easily move them around and see all of my codes spread out on the table in front of me. Within the themes I started to identify subthemes within the broader theme which captured more nuanced insights within the larger patterns. Next, I refined my themes by comparing them to the original data to be sure they captured the meaningful patterns. During this stage I revisited the videos and transcripts to ensure that my themes accurately reflected the parents' thoughts and feelings.

Ethical Considerations

The Oakland University Institutional Review Board (IRB) examined and approved a number of ethical issues that pertained to my project. The process of obtaining informed consent and parental permission was conducted with the parents participating in the study, along with procuring verbal child assent from the children who collaborated with their parents. To maintain confidentiality and privacy, data was de-identified and pseudonyms were used to refer to both parents and children. In addition, when I was conducting interviews with the parents, I was in a private location in my

home. Parents and children were also encouraged to be in a private location within their homes. The parent's own device was used to record parent-child interactions, which were then uploaded to a secure and password-protected Oakland University Google Drive folder. Access to this folder was limited to the parent and myself. The information was stored on a password-protected hard drive and locked in a file cabinet in my residence. I intend to keep and archive the documents associated with this investigation indefinitely.

Summary

An overview of the research questions, data collected, and analytic approach for each phase is presented in Table 3.2 on the following page.

Table 3.2*Overview of Phases, Data Collection and Analysis*

Research Phase	Data Collected	Purpose of analysis and other notes	Analytic tool
<i>Analysis and Exploration</i>	<i>Interviews of parents</i>	To gain insight regarding the confidence of parents regarding topics of gender and sexual orientation in children's literature. In addition, to learn about their confidence in discussing gender and sexual orientation with their children. Lastly, what they would like to learn about gender and sexual orientation through children's literature that they can share with their child.	N/A
	<i>Reading Diversity: A Tool for Selecting Diverse Texts by Learning for Justice</i> Data completed by the researcher	To gain insight about the complexity, diversity, and representation, critical literacy, reader and task considerations, and the decision about whether to select the text to use with the families.	
	<i>Parent Journals</i>	To gather parents' thoughts about the books they reviewed on the selected topic, which stemmed from the initial interview.	RTA
<i>Design and Construction</i>	<i>Resource Review</i> <i>Semi-structured interviews</i> with parents	To understand parents' thinking about the books and talk through final selections for which the resources will be developed To gather feedback on the created resources and prepare parents for using the resources and books with their children.	N/A
	<i>Video and audio recordings</i> of parent and child reading discussions	Describe the conversation that occurs between parents and their child while reading. Identify how the resources support the reading and discussions.	RTA
<i>Evaluation and Reflection</i>	Evaluation feedback through <i>semi structured interviews</i> with parents	To gain insight and feedback on the resource and identify areas for improvement. Understand parents' rationale for changes. Identify parents' feelings after engaging with the book and resource with their child.	RTA

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

Introduction

As described in Chapter Three, the purpose of this study was to explore what can be learned over the course of developing resources for two parents, Rachel and Stephanie, to use before, during and after reading children's literature with gender and sexual orientation topics with their child. I used qualitative Design Based Research (McKenney & Reeves, 2019), including thematic data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022), to develop my resources and answer the research questions. I present my findings related to each research question as they unfolded across my three research phases.

Phase 1: Analysis and Exploration

Phase one explored the following research question: *What characterizes parents' responses to children's literature that includes topics of gender and/or sexual orientation?* In order to determine the parents' level of confidence regarding gender and sexual orientation, I asked open-ended questions in the Parent Interview (Appendix B) to elicit information. I then used their responses to help me decide which topic or topics were used to choose the books they would read and respond to in their Parent Journals. In addition, I gathered their thoughts on elements that they would like to see present on the resources that I create for the books they would read with their child.

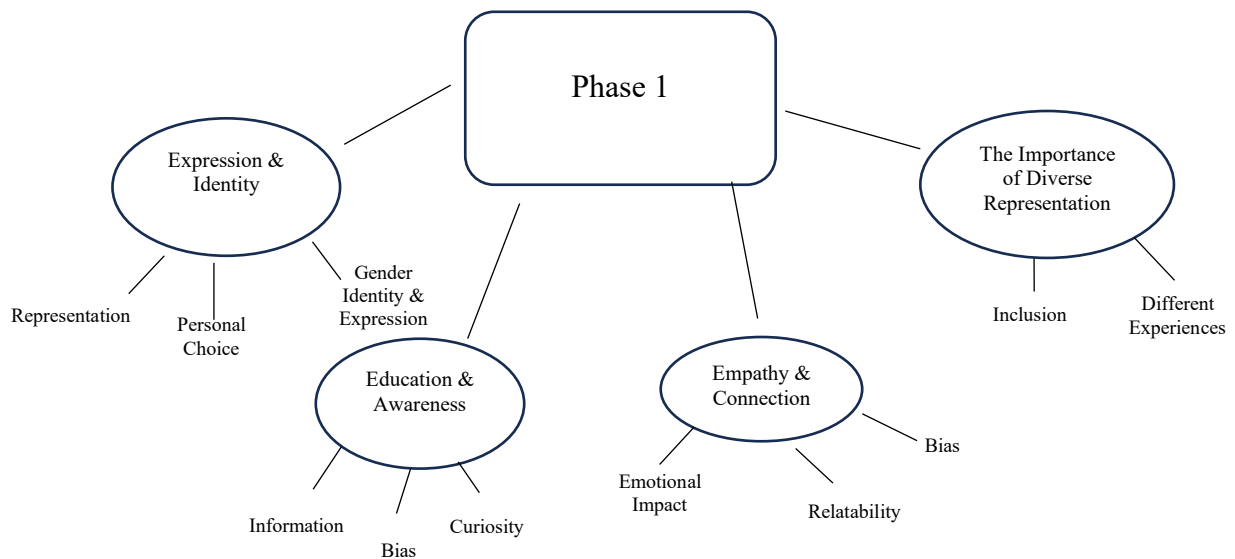
The books that I selected for Rachel and Stephanie to read and compose their journal responses about can be found in Appendix E. After reviewing each book Rachel and Stephanie completed a journal response for each book which directly addressed

research question one. The themes that emerged from Rachel and Stephanie's journal responses to the four children's books they reviewed as potential selections for their children, and as a guide for future resource design, were: 1) Expression & Identity; 2) Education & Awareness; 3) Empathy & Connection; and 4) The Importance of Diverse Representation. Full explanation of these themes and how they relate to the research question will be discussed in the subsequent sections.

Each of these five themes shown in the ovals below also had subthemes represented by the lines stemming from the ovals. Figure 4.1 shows a visual of the themes, and subthemes for Phase One:

Figure 4.1

Thematic Map for Phase 1



Theme 1: Expression and Identity

One element that emerged as a theme in reviewing the parents' responses to this type of children's literature could be characterized as "expression and identity." I use this label to refer to parent responses about both parents' views about the specific characters'

effort to explore and develop their identity in this manner, and parents' own thoughts about expressing diverse identities in response to these books. For example, Rachel shared her thoughts about Payden's expression and identity (Jaryn, 2022) and about Rob's gender expression and identity (Kearney & Rosswood, 2022). These expressions would fit the first aspect of this theme, wherein parents discussed what the characters' experiences were. On the other hand, Stephanie was focused on what she personally thought about the expression and identity that she read about in *Strong* (Kearney & Rosswood, 2022) and *Our Subway Baby* (Mercurio, 2020). In this case, while still an aspect of "expression and identity," the focus was more on the second aspect concerning her own views about diverse identity and expression.

Within the *Expression and Identity* theme, three subthemes emerged: representation, personal choice, and gender identity and expression. Each of these subthemes is described in the sections that follow.

Representation

When discussing the children's books they reviewed in their parent journals, Stephanie and Rachel both brought up responses that led to the development of the representation subtheme. In this context, I use the term "representation" to mean "the description or portrayal of someone or something in a particular way or as being of a certain nature." (Oxford Languages, n.d.) Their emphasis on how the books' characters represented diversity in gender and sexual orientation is highlighted by this subtheme. For example, in response to Payden's Pronoun Party (Jaryn, 2022), Rachel shared the following in her journal: "I *appreciated how Payden the main character, talked to a lot of friends and community members, and was able to settle on a pronoun that fit "em"*

(Payden's new chosen pronoun) *best*." This entry shows that Rachel noticed that Payden (the main character) took time to explore pronouns that may be options, but in the end settled on "em" (the pronoun that Payden chose) as the best fit. Rachel utilized Payden's new pronoun in her answer which demonstrates that she was open to using different pronouns when discussing the main character in the book.

Rachel also discussed representation in regard to intersectionality when reflecting on the book *Strong* (Kearney & Rosswood, 2022). She highlighted the main character's intersectionality as a member of the Strongman community and his expression of queerness within that context as her illustration of this concept. Rachel shared in her video journal entry the following:

Um, I love that this (the book Strong) is by a real person, um, who this is kind of like their story about, um, you know, their role in the community of like Strongman and weightlifting competitions and how, um, he was able to bring a lot of like, intersectionality of just, um, queerness and, um, being gay into that community.

In this quote, Rachel demonstrated knowledge of intersectionality and how it is present within the book combining the identity of being a part of the "Strongman" community and being gay as her example. Intersectionality was not directly discussed within the book therefore it demonstrates Rachel's desire to bring in her knowledge and demonstrates her ability to identify examples as she's reading children's literature.

Rachel's response to a question that asked how confident she would feel reading books with her son that included topics of sexual orientation and diverse gender identity further support this goal. She stated:

I would feel again pretty confident. And these are I think I'm able to say I feel confident, too, because if we've already had discussions and talked about these things, so I'm able to speak just on like real-life experiences so far. And I feel comfortable and confident talking to him about sexual orientation, gender identity and the spectrum—you know all of that.

Rachel stayed focused on the books characters' gender identity and expression sharing her knowledge for how the books represented these characters' gender identity and self-expression specifically within the books *Payden's Pronoun Party* (Jaryn, 2022) and *Strong* (Kearney & Rosswood, 2022). She seemed to read these books specifically with a critical lens, bringing in her knowledge of using preferred pronouns and intersectionality when analyzing representation as she was reading as evidenced by her comments (Coffey, 2008). She stated, "...*I thought it did a really good job of explaining pronouns not only for children, but also for adults who might be, uh, new to the idea of changing your pronouns to better fit who you are as a person and how you identify.*" She added:

Um, I love that this is by a real person, um, who this is kind of like their story about, um, you know, their role in the community of like strong man and weightlifting competitions and how, um, he was able to bring a lot of like, intersectionality of just, um, queerness and, um, being gay into that community.

This quote highlights her background knowledge and share her acceptance around gender fluidity and intersectionality when looking at children's literature that she is considering reading to her child.

Rachel's response to a question which addressed how she would feel reading books with her son about sexual orientation and various gender identity, reinforced the idea that she is open to sharing diversity with her son, as indicated by the following:

I would feel, I would feel glad to bring Gabe books with those topics. We have explored books with those topics and usually I feel, I don't know, I also feel this kind of like sense of responsibility, you know, of raising a white boy like that. He's born into all of this privilege. So, it's my responsibility to show him that, like walks of life, look very different for other people. And someday you might need to know when to make space, and when, to use your privilege to, you know, uplift someone else. So that starts with just teaching you that, teaching Gabe that there are people who look and think and live a different life in existence than the one that you are experiencing currently, so I think glad. Really, I would feel glad.

This quote suggests that she is not only open to it but feels it is her responsibility as a parent to expose Gabe to the wide representation of individuals who are part of our world. It also demonstrates an action-oriented perspective in that she connects this responsibility that she feels to a broader goal of empowering Gabe to uplift others, demonstrating that there is broader social learning that can occur when showing representation within books beyond just being theoretical.

In contrast, Stephanie's focus on representation was focused more her own feelings about the representation regarding sexual orientation as portrayed in *Our Subway Baby* (Mercurio, 2020) and *Strong* (Kearney & Rosswood, 2022). The following excerpts from Stephanie highlight those examples: *"While it [Our Subway Baby] isn't a book that I would have typically sought out, I think that it could be a great read for children to*

show them that families come in all shapes and sizes.” Stephanie was referring to the characters Pete and Danny who were partners and eventually married after adopting Kevin the baby that Danny found in the subway terminal. In addition, her comment seemed to demonstrate that she did not regularly seek out books with diversity in regard to sexual orientation to read to her children. She was still focused more on the family structure and less on the topic of sexual orientation in this example.

In the above quote Stephanie also addressed the issues in more general, indirect ways, for example referring to sexual orientation as “family structure.” This tendency could indicate that Stephanie was not as comfortable with the topic of sexual orientation and therefore was thinking about them in relation to her children and her own values. She seemed unsure about the topic within the book because it was atypical of what she usually seeks out. However, in the end she seemed to focus on the larger concept of it being a story that represents different families. She stated, *“I honestly feel like the real pictures of the family this book represents are helpful in making this story feel as real as it is.”* In this quote, she did not specifically mention gay marriage and adoption, but rather the broader concept of diverse families. However, she did appear open to reading books that included the topic more tangentially. She stated,

I liked that this book was based on a true-story. What started off as an unfortunate situation ended beautifully for Kevin, Danny and Pete.

This finding demonstrates that she likely focused on what was more comfortable for her and avoided discussion about what may have been uncomfortable.

On the other hand, when Stephanie reviewed the book *Strong* (Kearney & Rosswood, 2022) she did specifically discuss the main character’s sexual orientation. She

was contemplating the role of Rob's boyfriend in the book and whether it was a necessary part of the story or one that should be the focus. In the end, she did come to the conclusion that his boyfriend was integral because he helped Rob with representing his gender identity and sexual orientation. She stated, "*I do think that Rob's boyfriend is integral to the storyline though and is the one who helps Rob realize that it's ok to be yourself in any situation.*" In the except, she does share that the topic of being gay was important, which seemed to contrast that it wasn't as important as the fathers being gay in *Our Subway Baby* (Mercurio, 2020). Because the main character Rob's boyfriend, Joey, has a role in Rob realizing it was important to express himself, the boyfriend had to be discussed.

Rachel seemed to value representation as a way for the characters in the books she reviewed to express their authentic identities. She stated, "*...this man was gay and that he ended up wearing whatever he wants and whatever he feels most comfortable in, even in front of other people who think like, you know, weightlifters don't wear colorful clothes.*" She also stated, "*I appreciated how Payden the main character, talked to a lot of friends and community members, and was able to settle on a pronoun that fit em best.*" In these examples, she showed appreciation for how Rob and Payden were able to explore and express their gender identity and pronouns.

Stephanie on the other hand was more hesitant initially about explicit representations of sexual orientation. She stated,

I know that this reading will spark questions for my kindergarten son. Mainly because his classmates are already filling his head with their opinions on homosexuality. His friend told him recently that boys can't marry boys. While we

are trying earnestly to explain to our son that this is an opinion, not reality, he may benefit from seeing a book that normalizes this topic.

This quote indicates that she felt her son may benefit from reading this book, but the use of may still seemed to avoid a definitive affirmation. However, she eventually recognized the importance of representation in helping characters like Rob express their identity. She stated, *“I believe that it is telling a great story about how Joey encouraged Rob to be himself and be comfortable with his untraditional style. It breaks the mold that someone has to look a certain way to fit in a certain box.”* She expanded her view to include the idea that representation is a way that people can express their identity.

Rachel's thoughts that she shared about the books highlighted the importance of characters expressing themselves in their most comfortable manner. She stated, *“I thought it was a really sweet story about, um, how someone can kind of empower themselves by, um, creating their own, uh costume for, to represent themselves in the best way that they see fit.”* Stephanie however, seemed to still be hesitant about the representation. She stated, *“I find it important to whole-heartedly support children and adults in whatever way they identify, but I also don't know that the book is an accurate representation of how parents, grandparents, teachers and kindergarteners would respond to this scenario.”* However, she did appear open to it, and possibly was still grappling with how she is going to feel sharing books with diverse gender or sexual orientation with Henry and having discussions during Phase 2. She stated,

I believe that it is telling a great story about how Joey encouraged Rob to be himself and be comfortable with his untraditional style. It breaks the mold that someone has to look a certain way to fit in a certain box.

In general, Rachel fully embraced the messages of self-expression within the books and Stephanie seemed to processing potential implications, mainly in relation to how she might handle discussions with Henry about gender and identity during Phase 2.

This contrast may indicate that both Rachel and Stephanie value and believe that children's literature that feature characters that are diverse are of value. However, their experiences personally with sexual orientation, gender identity and diversity may influence how they read the books and how they understand representation.

Personal Choices of the Characters

For this study, the sub-theme of Personal Choices of the Characters refers to how the characters in the children's books exercised their ability to make personal choices about their gender expression and sexual orientation within the stories. During their discussion of the children's books reviewed in their parent journals, Stephanie and Rachel both gave replies that contributed to the emergence of this subtheme. Here, Rachel and Stephanie discussed their thoughts on the characters' individual decisions that were closely tied to how the characters' gender identity and sexual orientation were expressed. Additionally, there were some discrepancies between Rachel and Stephanie's perspectives regarding the characters' personal choices within the children's literature.

Rachel commented on how the main character Charly in *A Costume for Charly* (Malone, 2022) made personal choices about what they chose to wear within the text which she shared in her video reflection as follows:

Um, what I really liked is how the character [Charly] really took matters into their own hands by creating their own costume that they felt the most comfortable in. That they weren't um, they didn't allow themselves to be put into one category,

boy or girl, um, or, you know, pretty or scary, with the Halloween costume. They were able to um, create their own costume that represented the way that they wanted to be represented.

In this quote, Rachel shared how identity and personal choices were interwoven through the act of self-expression when Charly demonstrated their rejection of predefined binary categories and chose to create a Halloween costume that felt authentic to them.

This sentiment also came up when Rachel responded to the text *Strong* (Kearney & Rosswood, 2022) and the personal choices that the main character Rob was making in the following example:

But I do think he will think it's really neat that, um, that this man was gay and that he ended up wearing whatever he wants and whatever he feels most comfortable in, even in front of other people who think like, you know, weightlifters don't wear colorful clothes.

Once again Rachel was expressing her deep thinking and empathy towards how the characters made Personal Choices within the books and how their personal choices made them feel. She maintained a consistent perspective on the characters as they were depicted in the novels, refraining from comparing them to her own beliefs and values directly.

Stephanie also described thinking deeply about how the characters' actions aligned with her thinking and values more explicitly. In the following example Stephanie is sharing about the character Jacob, in *Jacob's New Dress* (Hoffman & Hoffman, 2014) and the personal choices about clothing that were made:

What stood out to me most about this particular book was the line where Jacob's dad said, "Well, it's not what I would wear, but you look great." I think that's the line from the book we can learn the most from. While I wouldn't necessarily choose to express myself in that way, I support that you do, and you look great doing so.

Here she seemed to be putting herself in the role of the parent and thinking about how she may react in comparison to Jacob's dad. She seemed to agree with the way that Jacob's dad reacted to his son wearing a dress, with support and acceptance

However, when Stephanie responded to the book *Calvin* (Ford & Ford, 2021) she questioned the idea that a five-year-old child would identify as transgender. She stated, *"I also found it interesting that a child around kindergarten age would identify as transgender. Perhaps this is my own mind and opinion getting in the way."* This response seems to illustrate her skepticism that young children are transgender and that they are able to verbalize that they are transgender at that young of an age. She mentioned that while she agreed with the value of friends and family being supportive of Calvin's personal choice to transition, she still was not sure that reflects reality, therefore demonstrating a lack of knowledge about people who are transgender and their families. This did not seem like a topic that Stephanie was comfortable with and one that she was still contemplating. As a result, it was no surprise that she did not choose *Jacob's New Dress* (Hoffman & Hoffman, 2014) or *Calvin* (Ford & Ford, 2021) to read to her child for Phase 2 of the study.

Within this subtheme of Personal Choices of the Characters both Rachel and Stephanie explored the children's books and shared how gender and expression were

interpreted by each of them. Rachel valued personal choice consistently, both in her exploration of the characters and in her own parenting. In contrast, Stephanie supported personal choice in theory but revealed ingrained gender norms and skepticism about young children identifying as transgender. Their differing perspectives reflects the complexities of gender identity in not only children's literature, but in real life, shaping their understandings based on personal beliefs.

Gender Identity and Expression

The last subtheme identified in the theme of Expression and Identity was Gender Identity and Expression which emerged from both Rachel and Stephanie's Parent Journals. This label is intended to refer to parent responses about both parents' views about the specific characters' effort to explore and develop their gender identity in this manner, and parents' own thoughts about expressing diverse gender identities in response to these books.

Rachel's writing demonstrated her knowledge in the area of Gender Identity and Expression. Her writing indicated that she was extremely familiar with and knowledgeable about as this topic. Similar to other subthemes, Rachel stayed focused on the main characters within the books and their gender identity and expression without explicitly referencing her own thinking or values explicitly. For example, she stated, "*I thought it was a really sweet story about, um, how someone [Charley, the main character] can kind of empower themselves by, um, creating their own, uh, costume for, to represent themselves in the best way that they see fit.*" Here Rachel used the term "empower" and "represent" in her response which suggests her understanding that clothing is a way that individuals gender identity and expression is expressed.

Stephanie's writing in her parent journal again reflected less comfort with the gender identity and expression topics within the books. Her observations compared what she was reading with her own family and her values. For example, in *Jacob's New Dress* (Hoffman & Hoffman, 2014) she shared:

What I thought about while reading this text was that my son has grown up with two older sisters. It was never out of the ordinary for them to play dress up with him and put him in a beautiful princess dress and crown.

Here she was making a distinction about boys wearing dresses when it came to dress up in the form of pretend play and how that was not something that was out of the ordinary. However, in Jacob's case his desire to wear a dress was not in the realm of pretend play, it was him expressing his gender identity. It also may suggest that Stephanie was struggling with seeing gender expression outside of pretend play in real life.

Similarly, when Stephanie responded to *Calvin* (Ford & Ford, 2021) she stated, "*I find it important to whole-heartedly support children and adults in whatever way they identify.*" When responding to Calvin, she stated her value is to support children and adults in whatever way they identify, but here she seemed to be confessing this view more on a global level and not directly related to her own children. Given her previous comments and level of comfort with young children identifying as transgender, it made sense that she did not directly relate it to her own children.

Summary of Expression and Identity Theme

Within the theme of Expression and Identity and the subthemes of representation, personal choice, and gender identity and expression, there were several important points raised. First, the importance of representation in children's literature was highlighted by

both Rachel and Stephanie. However, Rachel embraced diversity in gender and sexual orientation representation to empower her son, while Stephanie expressed some hesitation in discussing the topics despite her sentiment that representation is important.

Next, both Rachel and Stephanie discussed the personal choices that the characters within the books were making. Again, Rachel focused more closely on the beauty of these personal choices, appreciating autonomy and upholding an open view on the choices of the characters. Stephanie's responses exposed some tension between her support for personal choice and her struggles to reconcile the characters' gender and sexual orientation diversity with her own values.

Finally, Rachel and Stephanie both discussed the characters in children's literature within the subtheme of gender identity and expression. Rachel's comfort and proficiency in investigating the characters' gender identities and pronoun usage were underscored in the way she discussed the topics in her parent journal. In contrast, Stephanie's responses were characterized by unease as she connected these themes to her own family and values, despite her support for the identities of individuals.

Theme 2: Education and Awareness

The next theme that was uncovered within the Parent Journals was that of Education and Awareness. This theme was more heavily prevalent for Rachel compared to Stephanie. Throughout this entire theme of Education and Awareness, the parents shared that they learned new information, increased their awareness about diversity in regard to sexual orientation and gender, and had their biases challenged by the children's literature that they read.

Information

One means for educational and awareness can be the inclusion of additional information meant to supplement the actual story for the reader. The sub-theme of *Information* refers to this aspect of the books. This subtheme was evident in Rachel's responses, due perhaps related to the fact that the books that she reviewed included more informational resources. She shared her thoughts about the informational additions when reading *The Mother of a Movement: Ally, Activist, and Founder of PFLAG* (Sanders, 2022): as evidenced in the following response:

I also really enjoyed how, um, let's see, at the end it has like a, a discussion guide, which I thought was really neat to kind of dig into more of allyship, um, for parents and supporters and, and loved ones of, of queer people. Um, I thought that was really neat and really responsible.

This observation indicates that she took the time to explore the additional information found within the book and did not just read the story, ignoring the additional important pieces that the author chose to include as a means for exploration.

Rachel also explored the additional resources in the book *Strong* (Kearney & Rosswood, 2022) and shared the following response:

I learned that at the end of the book when the author talks about kind of his story within that community. And there's also a lot of resources at the end, just about even like the Strongman competition itself, about the author. It has like further reading and more resources, which I thought was really responsible and wonderful and just a great thing to add.

In both excerpts she referenced her thought about it being “responsible” of the author to include additional information to the reader. The reference of responsibility to provide information to others is a value that Rachel seems to hold and came up many times in her responses. Perhaps, given that she feels that Gabe is on the queer spectrum she has a passion for learning more to better support her child. She values providing information to others.

In addition, calling back to the initial interview, Rachel may have this response in part because that she feels responsible to raise Gabe, who is a White male born into privilege, the importance of understanding and respecting different identities and perspectives. In her initial interview she shared the following when asked what might be helpful for a parent who wanted to read books to their child with topics of gender and sexual orientation:

I think them having access to information and materials about the topics [gender and sexual orientation]. You know. And there, you know, there are a lot of people who are adults who don't understand the spectrum of gender. And you know, or identity, or that even like sex and gender are different things. So just some people need to vary, like basic education of the you know, the differences in there. And that, I yeah, I think, like helping them get resources or education about just about those topics for them before they can take it in a kind of a condensed version to their children, because kids will ask questions. And if you're like well, I don't know how to answer this, because I don't know for myself what it what that means. Then you probably avoid books like that with your kids to avoid having those kinds of questions.

This is an example of the belief that Rachel holds about the importance of educating Gabe about gender and sexual orientation and further her belief that all parents should engage their children in these conversations reinforcing the responsibility she feels that her child grows up with perspectives that are inclusive and informed.

Within the information subtheme Rachel really took additional time to focus her attention on the pieces of the book that included education and resources. She took the time to explore those and evaluate the quality and effectiveness of including them within the children's literature. She was exploring the information for herself but also thinking about other parents who may encounter these resources and how they would increase their knowledge and help them to gain information too. Overall, she expressed that she found author's adding resources and providing education within the books worthwhile. Given Rachel's level of comfort with seeking out and finding read aloud options for Gabe she took full advantage of exploring all pieces of information that were provided within the books she reviewed. To her the books aren't just the story that's presented, it's everything that's present between the front and back cover.

Bias

In this study, the subtheme of Bias refers to how both implicit and explicit assumptions along with preconceived notions about gender identity and relationships influence personal perspectives in Rachel and Stephanie's Parent Journal responses. The subtheme of bias was present in Both Rachel and Stephanie's responses which surfaced within their own thinking about the topics within the books. It presented itself in multiple different ways throughout Rachel and Stephanie's responses. Rachel shared in her

response to the book *The Mother of a Movement: Ally, Activist, and Founder of PFLAG* (Sanders, 2022):

As a mother of a son who is very feminine and, um, different than his typical male peers, um, just hearing about another mom who not only stood up for her child, but really, um, was a force in the queer community and in, in the, in the movement for other parents of queer children.

Rachel's use of the term "feminine" and "typical male peers" in the above response seems to reflect a view that there are certain behaviors, traits or interests that are attached to a specific gender, which therefore implies that Gabe's characteristics are unusual for his gender. Moreover, the use of "typical male peers" seems to suggest that boys should behave in a certain way, reinforcing binary thinking about gender. Although, Rachel's son Gabe is only nine years old, she realizes that bias from others is starting to present itself even at his young age and she is also perpetuating that bias in her response. However, she is putting herself in Jean Manford's shoes and already starting to think about how moms stand up for their children.

Rachel also raised the issue of gender bias when she responded to the book *Strong* (Kearney & Rosswood, 2022). She stated:

Okay, the last book I'm going to talk about is Strong by Rob Kearney and Eric Rosswood. Uh, I enjoyed this book at first when it was, uh, they were describing the main character as this very, um, traditionally masculine presenting man. I was kind of like, where is this going? [laugh].

This statement seems to evidence that Rachel experienced some confusion in the beginning of the story when Rob was being introduced as a Strongman and was not yet

sharing his sexual orientation and gender expression. Rachel felt that Rob was presenting as traditional masculine, which seems to also suggest more evidence that she too has some binary thinking about gender.

She was also unsure about how Gabe would think about the story as evidenced in the excerpt below:

I'm interested to see, um, you know, once I read it to Gabe, how he'll feel about it, because he really is, does not, um, like really identify with like the traditional, typical like male presenting, masculine presenting, um, stuff like, I mean, he, I don't know, he does a little bit like, he likes to play soccer and stuff, but I don't think he would like read about a weightlifter and feel like, oh, that's like me [laugh], because he's not a weightlifter.

Rachel was not sure about Gabe relating to the book because Gabe does not identify as much with typical male or masculine things. This demonstrates very strongly that for Rachel there are feminine and masculine activities and ways of presenting which does perpetuate gender bias within her thinking. The book *Strong* (Kearney & Rosswood, 2022) does challenge that thinking by showing an openly gay man participating and winning Strongman competitions.

Stephanie also presented some bias in her Parent Journal responses when reviewing the book *Calvin* (Ford & Ford, 2021). She stated “*I found this book [Calvin] to be a bit harder for me to enjoy.*” This statement may have been due to the topic of transgender and her bias towards the fact that a kindergarten aged child is too young to desire to transition when she stated

While I like the concept of this child's [Calvin] family and friends being supportive, I also found it interesting that a child around kindergarten age would identify as transgender. Perhaps this is my own mind and opinion getting in the way. I also don't know that the book [Calvin] is an accurate representation of how parents, grandparents, teachers and kindergarteners would respond to this scenario. I truthfully think that there would be far more discussion involved in this situation.

She did not seem as familiar or comfortable with this topic and therefore found it harder to enjoy. She also did not choose this as one of the books to read with her child due to how the topic was presented.

Stephanie also shared about the book *Strong* (Kearney & Rosswood, 2022) “*I don't however think that I would generally read my kindergartener a book [Strong] about people falling in love.*” The specific people that she was referring to were Rob and Joey, two males. Bias seemed to be emerging here concerning the possibility of two males falling in love may not an appropriate topic for a kindergarten age child, however she did follow up with the observation, “*I know that this reading will spark questions for my kindergarten son. Mainly because his classmates are already filling his head with their opinions on homosexuality. His friend told him recently that boys can't marry boys.*” Furthermore, Stephanie and Henry have familiarity within their own family as she shared in the initial interview:

But he's also grown up in a family, I mean, obviously with [his cousins who are gay] I mean, he's, he's just seen that, like it's not ever been a question. And his cousin's dad is also gay, and so he's it's just Uncle Bob and Uncle Tony like

there's never been a question there. However, with my middle child, when our cousins told us they were getting married, they called and did a Facetime, and they were like, "Hey, we are engaged. We're going to get married," and we were all yay, that's great! My son, he, you know he was younger, everybody was excited. We hung up the phone, and my daughter said they can't do that they're both girls. It was like, okay, I missed the mark here. I so yeah, we've had to have a few more conversations as far as that goes. But now it's just become normal to them.

This experience may have caused Stephanie's bias to be challenged and she did end up choosing to read the book *Strong* (Kearney & Rosswood, 2022) with her son, Henry.

Curiosity

The next subtheme that emerged was *Curiosity*. In this study, the term is used to indicate a strong desire to seek out additional information about the topics and to engage with that new information that is found. It came mainly from Rachel's Parent Journal responses. For example:

It [The Mother of a Movement: Ally, Activist, and Founder of PFLAG] um, also caused me to do like some more digging about Jeanne Mansford or Manford. So, I, um, spent some time reading articles and listening to some interviews, um, that she was part of when she was alive. Um, so that was neat. So that book kind of, uh, sparked that for myself as well.

This observation may reflect the connection that she felt between herself and Jeanne Manford. Rachel was extremely curious about Manford's life and listened to interviews and podcasts to learn more about her which in turn increased Rachel's education and

awareness about the work and role that Jeanne Manford played in not only society, but also in her son's life. Rachel described herself as curious about books in general mainly due to the fact that Gabe and her read aloud on a daily basis. She described spending time seeking out books with topics of sexual orientation and is always looking for new books to read.

Theme 3: Empathy and Connection

The third theme concerned empathy and connection. For this study, empathy and connection is used to indicate how participants connect emotionally and support both the identities and social issues present in the books which leads to an increase in understanding and camaraderie with groups that may be considered marginalized. The recurring theme appeared in both Rachel's and Stephanie's responses through several books. The books allowed them to connect as well as express their feelings toward the characters and various groups including marginalized people. The codes within the Empathy and Connection theme grouped into three subthemes: emotional impact, relatability, and social justice. Rachel and Stephanie explored the theme of Empathy and Connection through multiple ways they connected with the books during their discussions. The participants' comments showed the diverse experiences and viewpoints revealed in the stories which built empathy and connection through the inclusion of social justice themes that supported advocacy for marginalized communities.

Emotional Impact

Emotional impact is used to indicate the ways in which the book content impacted the Rachel and Stephanie on an emotional and personal level by evoking feelings in them. This subtheme was highly in evident in Rachel's Parent Journal responses for all

the books that she reviewed, but was also present in Stephanie's responses, as well. The deep emotional responses both Rachel and Stephanie displayed indicate their strong connection with the books where Rachel's interaction was deeply reflective yet Stephanie showed true appreciation despite her less intense response.

The following excerpts fit within the theme of the emotional impact because the books caused the parents to be impacted emotionally due to the content and in Rachel's case, she was able to form connections with the book *The Mother of a Movement: Ally, Activist, and Founder of PFLAG* (Sanders, 2022). Rachel shared that she experienced an emotional connection to the book. The book moved her perhaps because she could see Jeanne Manford in the book taking action and becoming an ally for her gay son. Rachel may be preparing to take on a similar role on behalf of her son and the book showed her another mother who became an ally and pushed against the bias that is present within our society. "This book moved me <laugh> in a lot of really meaningful ways. Um, this book really moved me and, um, it made me feel, um, emotional, but in a really good way."

Rachel was again likely moved emotionally by this book and the character Jeanne Manford due to the personal connection that she felt with Manford, due to her feeling that Gabe is likely on the queer spectrum somewhere. Due to the personal connection, it likely yielded emotional connection too.

Rachel also referenced her appreciation, surprise and enjoyment of the books she read. Overall, Rachel was someone who internalized the content within the book and allowed her emotions to shine through during her reflections. Her reading went beyond just the words on the page to touch her expressively. She was extremely passionate about the books she reviewed and that was evident in her responses and the emotions that she

shared. This provided me with reinforcement that the books that I selected were a good fit for Rachel and ones that she could foresee reading to Gabe. Rachel highlighted a great deal of emotions that she experienced throughout reading these texts and her passion for the topics within these books was evident by her inclusion of said emotions. Overall, it was also obvious that the books provided were ones that yielded an emotional connection, albeit stronger for Rachel, Stephanie did still connect on an emotional level to the content specifically the genre as evidenced: *“I liked that this book [Our Subway Baby] was based on a true-story.”*

The emotional impact was less intense for Stephanie, and more simple. She used terms such as “interesting” or in excerpts not chosen for inclusion the words “liked” and “enjoyed” which just is more surface level emotional impact. This falls in line with her sharing that when she reads aloud to Henry, they just read the story and she does not ask many questions or have discussions, which all directly align with a more surface level read aloud experience.

Relatability

Relatability is used to indicate the degree in which the participants could see themselves, their experiences or their perspectives reflected in the books. Both Rachel and Stephanie’s Parent Journal responses highlighted ways in which the concepts and people within the children’s literature were relatable as they were reading and responding to the texts. Rachel immediately was able to relate to Jeanne Manford in the book *The Mother of a Movement: Ally, Activist, and Founder of PFLAG* (Sanders, 2022) due to the fact that Rachel feels that she has a commonality with the Manford and could see herself in Manford’s shoes in the future as evidenced by the following response *“And, um, and*

like a, uh, like there's solidarity between, um, us parents of kids who, um, are presumably queer will fall in the queer spectrum at some point." Rachel is prepared for the fact that in the future she may need to take on a similar role to Manford and she was able to see a role model within this book. Someone that she could look up to, use as a model, and find resources from in her parenting role in the future. This book was powerful in relatability for Rachel and her confirmation of that relatability was more evidence for me that my book selections were on point for my participant.

Stephanie connected a bit differently with one of the books by comparing her children to the children in *Jacob's New Dress* (Hoffman & Hoffman, 2014) and how Henry and his sisters played dress up with dresses and crowns, which was similar to Jacob playing dress-up in the beginning of the story, though he moved beyond playing dress up to wearing dresses. Stephanie also felt more of a connection to *Our Subway Baby* (Mercurio, 2020) when seeing the actual photographs in the book which depict the family that the book was written about. Therefore, relatability moves beyond just being able to personally relate with the books but can also mean relating to events or artifacts presented.

Social Justice

Social justice is used to indicate how the books may have challenged societal norms, showed advocacy, or inclusion to support people or communities who may be considered marginalized. Within the subtheme of social justice both Rachel and Stephanie highlighted ways that books promoted social justice and advocacy topics in their Parent Journal responses for marginalized groups. This subtheme was evident in the Parent Journal responses from Rachel and Stephanie. Rachel was focused on how

Payden's Pronoun Party (Jaryn, 2022) provided information for people, she especially mentioned adults that are “*newer at this*” in the quote below meaning that they do not have as much experience with using preferred pronouns and how the book highlighted the different pronouns as a way to promote social justice. “*I think it's a really informative way. Um, a fun but informative way of explaining pronouns, like I said, not only to children, but also to adults, especially adults who are, uh, newer at this.*”

In addition, she once again highlighted the social justice work of Jeanne Manford in *The Mother of a Movement* (Sanders, 2022) and how the book promoted the queer community and how parents can stand up for queer children as another means for social justice work.

Um, and, uh, as a mother of a son who is very feminine and, um, different than his typical male peers, um, just hearing about another mom who not only stood up for her child, but really, um, was a force in the queer community and in, in the, in the movement for other parents of queer children.

In addition, Stephanie made a suggestion based on one of the books in regard to better promoting social justice and she thought the book *Jacob's New Dress* (Hoffman & Hoffman, 2014) could have done a better job being more explicit about pushing back against societal norms in regard to the clothing that kids wear as evidenced “*I think that perhaps this book could reiterate that boys and girls can wear whatever makes them comfortable, despite the traditional expectations put forth by society.*” She also highlighted that *Strong* (Kearney & Rosswood, 2022) did effectively communicate the message to encourage peoples’ self-expression based on clothing and appearance as a means for promoting social justice within society. “*This book also speaks to encouraging*

self-expression based on clothing and appearance.” This evidences that she was able to pull out the message from the book and how it related to promoting social justice for the reader.

Theme 4: The Importance of Diverse Representation

The fourth theme that emerged concerned the importance of diverse representation. In this study, this theme indicates the significance of representing identities, perspectives and experiences that are diverse in children’s literature in order to promote inclusion, show differences and promote appreciation for people and communities that are unlike one’s own lived experience. The theme of the Importance of Diverse Representation was recurring in the responses of both Rachel and Stephanie across multiple books. They both emphasized the inclusion of the diverse characters in the books and discussed their diverse experiences. They emphasized the characters' actions that represented diverse perspectives in order to emphasize the importance of their inclusion in the stories. Furthermore, each of the books emphasized a variety of characters and subjects, which facilitated the positive aspects of these subjects for the parents. This demonstrates that both Rachel and Stephanie are able to look outside of themselves and show appreciation for what for is diverse and different compared to their own lives. There were also two subthemes in which the codes grouped into for the Importance of Diverse Representation theme in the Parent Journal responses: Inclusion and Normalizing Different Experiences

Inclusion

Inclusion is used to indicate the visibility and representation of identities and experiences that may be different from the reader of the book. The subtheme Inclusion

was present in both Rachel and Stephanie's responses and highlighted the diverse characters and stories along with the importance of diverse individuals being represented. Rachel focused on Charly, the main character in *A Costume for Charly* (Malone, 2022) and discussed the inclusion of the bigender character as evidenced in the following excerpt: "*They were able to, um, create their own costume that represented the way that they want, represented themselves, the way that they wanted to be represented.*" Rachel definitely lifted the character and their bigender identity to discuss. She shared her desire to teach Gabe about individuals that are different from him and this book included a new to them gender identity for her to learn about.

In addition, Rachel discussed the main character Payden, in *Payden's Pronoun Party* (Jaryn, 2022) in the following excerpt: "*I appreciated how Payden the main character, talked to a lot of friends and community members, and was able to settle on a pronoun that fit em [Payden's new chosen pronoun] best.*" The pronoun "em" was included in this book along with many other pronouns that people use. Again, this book allowed for Rachel and Gabe to see the inclusion of many characters who use different pronouns than they use and some that were new to them. This again, supports Rachel's desire to expose Gabe to individuals that are different than him.

The book *Strong* (Kearney & Rosswood, 2022) was also discussed in Rachel's Parent Journals where she highlighted the inclusion of Rob, the main character and stated:

I do think he [Gabe] will think it's really neat that, um, that this man was gay and that he ended up wearing whatever he wants and whatever he feels most

comfortable in, even in front of other people who think like, you know, weightlifters don't wear colorful clothes. I think I do think he will like that.

So, while Rachel and Gabe have already had discussions and read books with characters who identity as gay, the new element she lifted here is the fact that Rob is part of the Strongman weightlifting community and chose to wear bright and colorful clothing, which was not prevalent in that community prior to Rob choosing to debut that clothing during his competitions. Therefore, this is a new form of inclusion that she could bring into her discussions with Gabe. Though this was not one of the books she chose for Phase 2, she was going to read it with Gabe after the study was over.

Likewise, Stephanie also highlighted the main character, Rob from the book *Strong* (Kearney & Rosswood, 2022) about shared about his inclusion in the Strongman community in the following response: *“I believe that it is telling a great story about how Joey encouraged Rob to be himself and be comfortable with his untraditional style. It breaks the mold that someone has to look a certain way to fit in a certain box.”* Here she focused on Rob’s choice to wear bright and bold colors which was not something that Strongmen did prior to Rob debuting this style as a form of inclusion. In addition, she also discussed Rob’s boyfriend Joey and the role that he played in Rob’s decision to wear what made him feel comfortable. This response and her highlighting this inclusion patterns previous responses where she seemed more comfortable discussing characters who were gay, compared to those that were transgender or gender diverse. Which perhaps is due to the fact that she has more familiarity with that sexual orientation due to her close family members’ who share that sexual orientation.

Different Experiences

The last subtheme for Diverse Representation is that of Different Experiences. This term indicates how the children's literature contributes to diverse perspectives and experiences being highlighted for the reader by introducing differing perspectives, identities, and life experiences. Both Rachel and Stephanie were able to identify multiple different examples of where the characters and/or concepts within the book were different from their own experiences and perspectives but were seen as positive or important. The following excerpt from Rachel is an example:

I thought it did a really good job of explaining pronouns not only for children, but also for adults who might be, uh, new to the idea of changing your pronouns to better fit who you are as a person and how you identify.

Rachel discusses the idea of changing your pronouns to better fit who you are as a person as a positive outcome of reading the book. It also is a different concept from her and Gabe's experience with their pronoun use. She clearly had her pronouns listed on her Zoom screen which demonstrates that she finds that important. Given that she has familiarity with pronouns she was able to share her thinking about the book being a good resource for people who are not as familiar with this concept and who may not have experience with pronouns or changing their pronouns.

A different experience that Stephanie discussed was that of gay marriage and adoption in *Our Subway Baby* (Mercurio, 2020) which she highlighted as a positive outcome and different experience within the book as her response highlights: "What started off as an unfortunate situation ended beautifully for Kevin, Danny and Pete." She clearly states here that she believes that the individuals ended with a beautiful experience,

so though it is different from her own experience she was able to judge their experience as not only acceptable, but also beautiful. This directly falls in line with her accepting and loving her family members who are gay and also married similarly to the individuals in the book.

Summary

The themes and subthemes discussed above that were derived from the Parent Journal data coded within Phase 1 of the study which all support the overall theme of growth, both personal and societal, that emerged from the data collected to answer research question one. Self-expression and identity are both integral to growing personally because they aid the parents in this study to consider their own thinking about gender identity, representation and personal choices of the characters in order to expand their thinking.

Education and Awareness is additionally integral to personal and societal growth because it fosters the parents' ability to gain knowledge and understanding of the world around through the topics within the children's literature and therefore empowers them to contribute to society by making informed choices. The theme of Empathy and Connection connects with the overall theme of growth, both personally and societally because both are necessary for growth to occur within people and they help to foster relationships, especially within communities that encompass compassion and cooperation with others.

Lastly, the two themes of Challenging Expectations and Importance of Diverse Representations support the overarching theme of societal and personal growth because in order for societal and personal growth to occur people do have to break down biases

and consider their own biases. In addition, inclusion of people who are diverse and normalizing different experiences need to be present to move forward and grow.

Final Book Selections and Informing Resource Development

Prior to moving on to Phase 2 Rachel and Stephanie emailed me their book selection after completing the Parent Journals. Rachel's book selections can be found in Appendix G. Both books were on the topic of gender fluidity, identity and expression and *Payden's Pronoun Party* (Jaryn, 2022) also focused heavily on pronouns.

Stephanie's two books that she chose can be found in Appendix H. Both books included topics of sexual orientation more specifically characters that identified as gay and male.

Phase 1 data was used to directly inform the design of the resources the parents used in Phase 2. The resources underlined the importance of developing and scaffolding the discussion prompts around identity, representation and personal choice in accessible and age-appropriate ways. Both parents revealed a need for affirming vocabulary supports and guided discussion prompts. The discussions also helped in the construction of tools to support learning. These included definitions of terms that were commonly used or more complex, questions at each tier to pause, discuss, and reflect, and prompts that are specific and intentionally seek to focus on empathy, respect and real-world application. The varying responses of Rachel and Stephanie, in particular, illustrated a need for access points in the conversation that provide varied levels of comfort but that still invite the discussion in ways that are inclusive and focused on equity.

Phase 2: Design and Construction

This section reports findings from the parents using the resources I created to share the books and have discussions with their children. Phase 2 answers the following research question: *When parents share children's books with topics of gender and sexual orientation with their children, what themes arise?* During Phase 2 of my study, I used the data from the initial Parent Interview and from the Parent Journals to help with designing and creating the resources for the parents to use with their children. After resource creation that parents were asked to review them. The findings from the parents' review of the resources are described below. In addition, the findings from Rachel and Stephanie reading the books and having discussions throughout their shared book reading will be discussed in this section.

Resource Review Parent Interview Findings

For this section I gathered information about why Rachel and Stephanie chose the books they decided to read with their child and also gathered their feedback on the resources that I created for their identified books. These interviews were short and I report the findings in a summary form in the coming section. I asked eight questions (see Appendix D).

The overall impression from both Rachel and Stephanie was that they thought the resources were thorough. Rachel specifically enjoyed the TedTalks that I provided and shared the following thought:

I watched the Ted Talks this week, and I really like those. Those were really moving to me. It didn't share any new information for me. But I thought, that is a good like, those are such a good, like succinct and personal way for people to get

information, especially about a new topic. You know, they're like 15ish minutes long and palatable.

She went on to share that the TedTalks moved her to tears and that she felt they were extremely informative. Rachel also mentioned that they are great for people like her husband who would rather watch something on the shorter side as opposed to read an article. Stephanie specifically shared that she appreciated the questions provided that she could ask Henry and then also ways of explaining the concepts and information. She also mentioned the definitions of terms, and extra resources such as websites and books present. She thought it was all good.

Stephanie also revealed during this interview about how she typically conducts read alouds in the following vignette below:

This is my fault as a parent. So, my biggest question is, I don't generally go through like after we've read and like, for instance, the Strong resource like I wouldn't generally be like, how do you think that made him feel? So, that's my shortcoming, as far as I haven't, haven't really like gone through and questioned him after reading a book. So, I'm curious to see how he's gonna react.

This is where I first learned about Stephanie's apprehension with having discussions with her children about books they were reading. It was evident that this was not as comfortable for her and that she was not sure how Henry was going to react to her all of a sudden asking him questions or wanting to have a discussion. She did not indicate here that she would like additional resources about interactive read-alouds or how to conduct them with her child, therefore I did not add information about this topic. However, I will

discuss recommendations surrounding this topic in Chapter Five in the Implications section.

During Phase 2 Rachel engaged in read alouds with Gabe using the books *A Costume for Charly* (Malone, 2022) and *Payden's Pronoun Party* (Jaryn, 2022). She shared with me that she presented the front covers of all four books she reviewed and allowed Gabe to choose which ones he would like to read by looking at the covers because she could not decide which two to choose. Stephanie engaged in read aloud using the books: *Strong* (Kearney & Rosswood, 2022) and *Our Subway Baby* (Mercurio, 2020). In the following excerpt Stephanie explains her rationale for the two book selections:

I feel like the Strong one was one that Henry would be interested in just because he's it's more like, I don't want to say macho, that's the wrong word. But do you know what I, I feel like? It would be this alley for him to be like, any sports related type, boy activity, you know, that's, that's really what he's into. So, I thought maybe it'd be one that he would be more interested in.

[Our Subway Baby] That one I just like. I don't know. We know a lot of families that are have 2 moms or 2 dads or whatever, and I just wanted, I thought that could be a fitting story, and that it would like he might just, I don't know, I thought he could maybe relate to those ones a little bit more, I guess

Stephanie's rationale for her book selections was her belief that Henry could relate to those two choices more positively than to Jacob's New Dress (Hoffman & Hoffman, 2014) and Calvin (Ford & Ford, 2021). In my view, the two books she chose aligned with

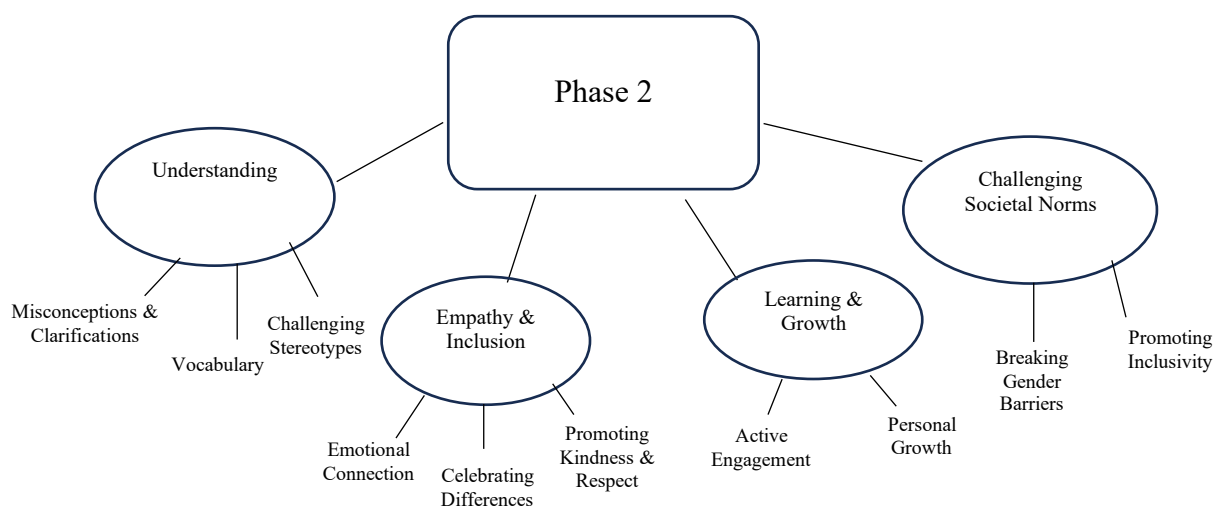
content that Stephanie was more familiar with and felt more comfortable discussing. She exhibited apprehension regarding Calvin's transgender identity, the family's response, and the capacity of a kindergarten-aged child to recognize their transgender status. She frequently referred to Jacob wearing a dress, likening it to pretend play and dress-up rather than genuine gender expression, which led me to infer that clothing and gender expression might also be an uncomfortable subject for Stephanie.

Parent and Child Read Alouds and Discussions

The overarching theme that emerged from the Rachel and Stephanie reading the children's books with Gabe and Henry was transformation, both personal and societal. The results from the data analyses emphasized four different themes that emerged: 1) Understanding; 2) Empathy and Inclusion; 3) Learning and Growth; 4) Challenging Societal Norms and will be discussed below, along with the subthemes. Figure 4.2 depicts the thematic map for Research Question 2.

Figure 4.2

Thematic Map for Research Question 2



The themes emerged more heavily from Rachel and Gabe's discussions during the Parent Read Aloud data collection for three main reasons. The first was that Rachel and Gabe were very comfortable with read alouds and having discussions about the books they are reading together, while Stephanie shared that she was not as comfortable with the discussion piece of reading books aloud to her children (as discussed in the earlier section). Stephanie also stated that she just mainly reads the text and does not engage much beyond that typically. In addition, Stephanie did not engage in the before reading vocabulary and pre reading questions for one of her books because she forgot. Lastly, one of Stephanie's videos did not record so she recounted Henry's answers to the questions in an interview with me.

Theme 1: Understanding

In this analysis, the theme of "understanding" is used to mean the process of acquiring awareness and clarity about sexual orientation and gender identity through asking questions, having discussions and being exposed to new concepts. The codes within the understanding theme fell into three different subthemes: misconceptions and clarifications, vocabulary, and challenging stereotypes. The theme of understanding weighed more heavily with Rachel and Gabe because there was some rich discussion that occurred during their two-book reading session. Gabe was working through learning and understanding new pronouns and had many misconceptions that his mother clarified. The learning was evident though throughout the sessions as he began to use the preferred pronouns of the characters and also tried using new-to-him pronouns when speaking specifically about the character Payden in *Payden's Pronoun Party* (Jaryn, 2022).

Misconceptions and Clarifications

In this analysis, the idea of “misconceptions and clarifications” is used to mean identifying misunderstandings about gender identity, followed by support and clarifications to correct the misconceptions using a positive and supportive manner. There were several misconceptions about gender that occurred and sometimes subsequent clarifications that followed as demonstrated through Gabe and Rachel’s discussions. In the following excerpt, she was going through some of the “Before Reading” section on the resource. Gabe presented a misconception about the term “bigender.”

Rachel: If I added the prefix bi- to gender, what do you think that means?

Gabe: Ummmm, it means like you like love like a boy and a girl?

Rachel: It could. Yup, if I said bi- gender, what do you think that means?

Gabe: Like, um, I, I don't know, hang on, I don't remember what you said. Hang on! I forgot what it means again, I forgot.

Rachel: Well, bi- means, two.

Gabe: Yeah. Oh, yeah. And two people love each other.

Rachel: It could. So, are you thinking of the term like bisexual? Is that what you're thinking of?

Gabe: Yeah, yeah.

Rachel: That's okay. So bi- gender is people who feel like they are two genders.

Bigender people have exactly two gender identities, which can happen at the same time, or it can change over time. These two gender identities could be male and female, or they could also be non-binary.

Rachel clarified his thinking about the term, and it was clear that Gabe understood the prefix bi- and was identifying two genders, just attributing it to romantic attraction rather than gender identity. In addition, the discussion also demonstrates that Gabe had previous knowledge and he was attempting to connect this new knowledge with his existing knowledge: Rachel provided clarification on the misconception and provided the child friendly definition of bigender that was presented on the resource. She validated Gabe's thinking and then gently provided the correct definition of bigender.

In the following discussion Rachel again clarified an error that Gabe made when he continued to misgender Charly, the main character.

Rachel: I noticed that you used "he" sometimes [Child used "he" when talking about Charly who identified as "they"]

Gabe: Oooops, sorry

Rachel: So, we just correct it. And we move on, right? Okay.

Gabe: Yeah

She normalized the mistake and used it as a teachable moment rather than something to be ashamed of. In addition, she acknowledges that mistake occur and we just acknowledge and correct it: Throughout the discussion Gabe continued to misgender Charly and Rachel issued the correct pronoun as a clarification to Gabe in a low-pressure way with her brief, one-word corrections,

Gabe: Ummm. Like he means like, for someone can't be like, like, why, you wearing a girlie costume, and like he just feels like, like he wants to.

Rachel: They

Gabe: I mean they [laughing] want to like almost like fit in. But, like be them like they want to be them and be themselves

This example showed how Rachel worked to help reinforce the correct pronoun use effortlessly, preventing the interaction to seem punitive. In addition, Gabe's laughter demonstrated the relaxed, encouraging learning environment that Rachel created, where missteps are met with correction but not shame.

In the following conversation, Gabe once again misgendered Charly and was corrected by Rachel as they were discussing questions from the resources "After Reading" section. When he was attempting to use Payden's selected pronoun "e," which was completely new to him:

Rachel: At the end of the story Payden chooses e, em and eir. How do you think it made Payden feel having made a decision on pronouns?

Gabe: That he felt just like

Rachel: e

Gabe: That he

Rachel: e

Gabe: e?

Rachel: Hmmm mmmm (yes)

Gabe: It's hard

Rachel: It's okay, yep

Gabe: It's hard to say e

Rachel: It's a different way of speaking. It's new to you. That's okay.

In this exchange, Gabe was struggling to pronounce the pronoun correctly and voiced his difficulty to Rachel. She continued to clarify and reassure Gabe. This interaction provided an example of challenges that occur when individuals are trying to learn unfamiliar structures of linguistics. Here Gabe was able to identify his struggles and voice it to Rachel, showing his investment in his learning process. Again, Rachel was encouraging, and supportive, affirming that it takes time to learn new things.

Overall, these exchanges demonstrate how misconceptions about gender and identity occur inherently in a child's learning process and how clarifications from a supportive adult help improve their knowledge. Rachel's persistent and encouraging approach allows Gabe to participate with new concepts presented in this book without fear of being wrong, reinforcing the importance of open discussion in addressing misunderstandings.

Vocabulary

In this analysis, the idea of "vocabulary" is used to mean discussion that is explicit, clarification and application of terms that are related to sexual orientation and gender in order to deepen understanding and promote correct usage in discussions. This subtheme emerged for both Rachel and Stephanie as they were asking questions from the created resources focused on vocabulary terms. They both intentionally discussed and clarified terms related to gender and sexual orientation with their children. The following discussion between Rachel and Gabe was shared in the section about misconceptions; however, it also fits within the vocabulary section because it demonstrates Gabe learning a new term that he did not already know.

Rachel's discussion with Gabe in the following passage provides an example of her use of questioning to activate his prior knowledge. She asked him first what he remembered about the term non-binary before she offered him the definition from the resource:

Rachel: And you know what non-binary means?

Gabe: Yeah

Rachel: What do you think it means?

Gabe: Like they/them pronouns.

Rachel: Yeah, It, it could mean that. People feel like both a boy and a girl, or they don't feel like a boy or a girl. They feel like neither.

Gabe: Mmmm Hmmm (yes)

Rachel was able to build on to Gabe's prior knowledge that he shared to extend his learning about term nonbinary which supports the use of recalling and reinforcing vocabulary for comprehension.

Stephanie also recalled her discussion about vocabulary terms with Henry in our interview. She shared Henry's simple answer and then when probed elaborated on her discussion that she had with him surrounding the term "gay." The following excerpt suggests that definitions are shaped through social context as Henry has a simple definition for gay which Stephanie then builds upon by sharing real-world examples, specifically using familiar people in his life:

Mandy: How did he respond to what he, what you think it means to be gay?

Stephanie: This is my favorite answer. In love. That's what he thinks that it means to be gay. And he I know we had talked about this before, and it wasn't like I had

brought it up that earlier in the year someone at school had called someone else gay. And you I, he said, you know so and so is, is gay. And I said, oh, well, what does that mean? You know? And he said, oh, they're just in love with whoever, and it was no like ill to it. It's like, oh, they're just in love Like oh, Buddy, I love it! Well, they are.

Mandy: So, was there anything else that you recall explaining to him when you talked about what it means to be gay?

Stephanie: So, we had talked about like my husband and I, Then I said, like, there's other people that are gay like for example, it always comes up and I know it's probably bad to use them as an example, maybe, but you know, like Emma and Maggie [my cousins] and their uncles. So, we talked about that, you know, and then, just to kind of like make that make more sense to him because he, he doesn't, doesn't have much more exposure beyond that to anybody that's gay. You know what I mean that he knows about. So, we talked about that. He knows that are gay and that it's okay for there to be different, you know, different types of relationships.

In addition, Henry's simple definition of gay as in love demonstrated how children may simplify complex terms into digestible meanings. Stephanie offered examples of people in his life as a way of reinforcing that these identities are part of real-world relationships and not just abstract concepts.

The vocabulary learning reveals that having intentional dialogue is important for children to understand gender and sexual orientation. Rachel and Stephanie used questioning, recall, and contextual reinforcement from the resources to help their children

navigate complex terms in an assessable and meaningful way. The previous dialogues show that learning vocabulary is a developing process that necessitates recurring exposure, explanations that are child-friendly and scaffolded as well as using personal connections as a means for deepening understanding.

Challenging Stereotypes

The subtheme of “challenging stereotypes” is used to refer to the process of identifying, questioning, and ultimately rejecting societal norms that enforce limits on individuals based on their gender. It highlights dialogue that occurred between Rachel and Gabe which illustrated the process of identifying, wrestling with and pushing back against gender-based stereotypes. Gabe was grappling with some societal stereotypes specifically in regard to gender expression and self-acceptance and how these stereotypes could be challenged through self-acceptance, allyship and open discussion. Rachel played a key role in supporting Gabe’s understanding through her reinforcement of the idea that gender should not be seen as a limitation in personal expression and opportunities.

Rachel (she/her): Okay. What else are you thinking, after listening to this story?

Gabe: that it doesn't matter what you are like. It doesn't matter who you are or what you are. It just matters for, like to matter who you want to be or what do you want to be like like, like, let's say someone was like someone was like a boy, and they want to be a like, like a ballerina, let's say, they want to be like, a volleyball coach let's say. Because mostly a lot of times volleyball would be like, you know, for like girls. But like it doesn't matter. Just do volleyball if he wanted.

Gabe’s initial reaction to the story suggested that he was actively challenging the idea that certain activities or professions are tied to certain genders. This discussion may also

suggest that Gabe understood that society has beliefs about particular activities such as ballet or volleyball being associated with specific genders. However, he shared that he feels individuals should be able to engage in their interests regardless of these expectations. His use of the phrase “*it doesn't matter*” suggested that not only had he recognized that these norms exist but that he was also rejecting their significance.

Gabe also shared his personal experiences with his own gender expression being questioned by his peers along with their specific reactions. In the following response Gabe shared an example of gender norms that were imposed by his peers about what is acceptable for boys and girls:

Rachel (she/her): Can you think of a time when you've seen someone treated differently because of how they looked or acted?

Gabe [head moving vertically up and down] Hmmm mmm

Rachel: Will you tell me about it?

Gabe: I actually had it to me one time like I was when, like I was in this like summer school. It was like fun summer school thing, and we were like the arts and craft, and one girl so like, like cause I think I had my nails painted, and she said, “Why do you have your nails painted? That's like what girls do?”

This example shows that Gabe understands gender norms and directly experienced them being enforced by his peers. This description of his peer questioning his painted nails demonstrates how societal norms tend to determine what is customary for different genders. Here Gabe was not only recognizing that there is a stereotype present, that painting nails is only for girls but he is also challenging that notion by implicitly expressing himself in his own way.

Gabe also noted in the following response that his peers also immediately came to his defense which demonstrated peer advocacy in challenging stereotypes. This defense from his peer that came immediately demonstrates that not all children accept societal norms passively regarding gender expression. His peer in the following excerpt demonstrated the ability to disrupt the stereotype with her comments:

And one part another girl, the two people, two people stood up for me. They said, "well, Gabe can have whatever like he wants on his finger like fingernails. You don't have to be rude about it." And then another friend said, like, why do you have to be really rude to him? He just wants his nails painted, and I think they're really nice."

In addition, this example highlights how allyship has power to foster a more accepting and inclusive environment. His peer could have remained silent but instead the peer confronted the peer who was enforcing the gender stereotype and they made it clear that policing gender expression should not happen. This is an example of a direct demonstration of challenging stereotypes by using your words to advocate for individuals to have personal agency over their gender expression.

Rachel also played a role in validating Gabe's experiences and reinforcing his challenges to gender stereotypes. In the nail polish example above Rachel affirmed the importance of peer support in the excerpt below rather than dismissing or downplaying its significance:

Rachel (she/her): Yeah, that was nice of your friends to stand up for you, wasn't it?

Gabe: Yeah

Rachel: Sometimes it's, it's hard for people to see things that they're not used to seeing

Rachel's response here demonstrates challenging stereotypes because she is validating Gabe's experience and reinforcing the notion that rather than gender norms being absolute, they are socially constructed. She acknowledges how important having peers is and that people sometimes have difficulty accepting ideas that may be different from their own. Throughout this exchange though she never minimizes his experience or leads him toward conforming to societal expectations.

Similarly, Gabe also recalled an instance where he was questioned by peers for his use of makeup.

Gabe: and like, I just put like a little like just a little skin makeup, because, like I accidentally, I've had a little tiniest little like cut or something. I just put a little makeup there, and I like, like kind of told them that I just have to put on a little makeup. So, I feel nice. And but like she also said like, "that's kind of like a girly thing, and like girls do that only" ...

But when I do the dance and stuff I have to put on makeup and they're like, like "You get to put on like makeup?" And they're like, "Oh, Oh, that's cool! I thought only girls had to do that and stuff." But I was like, "no, it's gonna be fine, like boys have to like wear makeup." So, like even the little, like some little boys that do dance have to put a little makeup on like a little lipstick, or the eyeliner, or a little blush and stuff.

In this excerpt Gabe not only educated his peers, but also defended his own gender expression. Gabe's pushing back against constricting gender norms in these examples

suggests his self-confidence. He took the opportunity to reframe that makeup in not something characteristically gendered but a purposeful tool for individuals in dance performances which serves a specific purpose. Here he also showed his developing ability to educate others about gender inclusivity by normalizing expressions of gender that society may deem as nontraditional.

It was evident in the Challenging Stereotype subtheme that Gabe was thinking back on some points in his life where things that he did cause his peers to question his gender expression and he was recounting those experiences with Rachel during their discussion. In addition, he provided examples of stereotypes that may be present in society that should be challenged when he referenced that people can have jobs and engage in activities no matter what their gender is and that it does not matter what people think.

It is evident that Rachel reinforces that Gabe needs to continue challenging those stereotypes that come up and Gabe was providing examples of times that his friends were coming to his aid and challenging said stereotypes. In the following response Rachel framed the exchange in a positive manner by normalizing the use of makeup and providing the practical reason behind it:

Rachel (she/her): yeah, everybody on stage has to wear some stage makeup because the stage lights just wash out their features, don't they? [laughing]

Her response helped to remove the gendered assumption around makeup presenting it as a neutral necessity for performances. She also provided Gabe with reasoning and language if he found himself in similar situations that he could use in future discussions.

All of these examples within this theme demonstrate that Rachel and Gabe are actively working on increasing their understanding in regard to gender expression and identity.

Theme 2: Empathy and Inclusion

In this analysis, the theme of “empathy and inclusion” is used to mean recognizing, understanding and appreciating the identities and feelings of other individuals while encouraging an atmosphere of support and acceptance. The codes within the empathy and inclusion theme grouped into three subthemes: emotional connection, celebrating differences and promoting kindness and respect. The theme of Empathy and Inclusion was one that was a strength for both Gabe and Henry. Both boys were able to put themselves into the characters’ shoes and discuss their feelings or how they might be feeling, which provides evidence of their ability to empathize with others.

Emotional Connection

When discussing *A Costume for Charly* (Malone, 2022) Gabe expressed empathy with Charly’s difficulty in finding a costume in the following response:

*Gabe: Upset that they can't find the like, a good costume, cause they just can't.
Like it's hard for them.*

His statement “*Like it's hard for them*” suggests that he is placing himself in Charly’s shoes which is an important step in developing empathy and internalizing Charly’s frustration by articulating their struggle. In a subsequent response Gabe recognizes the significance of feeling like oneself:

Gabe: I mean, they want to feel like themselves, and like cause. Mostly Dracula is a boy, but it could be a girl, cause they could choose whatever that costume they wanted. I hope he

Rachel: They

Gabe: Finds a costume

Here Gabe is grappling with personal expression and identity, highlighting that he feels that Charly should have the freedom to define themselves in the way they see fit.

Gabe also responded to Payden's parents supporting their child's shift in gender identity with a deep emotional response when reading *Payden's Pronoun Party* (Jaryn, 2022) in the following example:

Rachel: [Read text from the book] "But Payden also puzzled about who he really was. One day, holding tightly onto Ruffles, Payden tried explaining to his parents, "I'm not sure I'm a boy... so maybe he is not best for me." "We'll call you whatever you're comfortable with," said Payden's mother with a hug. Payton's father nodded. "Your friends use different pronouns. Why don't you ask them for advice?" "Once you decide, we'll throw a big party to celebrate!" said Payden's mother."

Gabe: That's nice of them!

Here Gabe had a very spontaneous reaction in his exclamation about Payden's parents' kindness. It shows that he recognized and valued the parents' emotional support for Payden. This example further suggests that he comprehends the importance of affirmation and validation, supporting the function of acceptance in fostering self-identity.

In a later response Gabe again showed his ability to feel joy for Payden in the following exclamation:

Rachel: [Read text from the book] “As the party paraded on into the evening, Payden hugged Ruffles close and whispered, “Now I’m really much more me.”

Gabe: AWWWWW

He shows his ability to emotionally connect with Payden’s relief and happiness as a form of empathy.

Shifting to Stephanie and Henry, Henry was able to recognize sadness and disappointment in others. His engagement in the books he read with his mom was different, but an equally important form of emotional connection. The emotions he expressed were more basic feelings compared to Gabe. For example, when reading the book *Strong* (Kearney & Rosswood, 2022) he shared the follow in response to his mom’s question during reading:

Stephanie: What do you think about what they said to him [Rob, the main character] or about him?

Henry: He feels sad

Though his response was brief it illustrated his ability to pick up emotional cues within the story. Stephanie used the prompt from the resource to probe deeper asking why he may feel this way and Henry struggled to articulate why the character felt this way as evidenced in the excerpt below:

Stephanie: Do you think that’s how Rob’s feeling right now?

Henry: Hmmm, mm

Stephanie: Why do you think he’s feeling that way?

Henry: Hmmm. I don’t know

This exchange may indicate that though Henry was able to recognize sadness he may not yet have the vocabulary and ability cognitively to explain it further. However, the discussion continued and he did begin making some connections in the following response:

Stephanie: Why would he be feeling sad and gloomy?

Henry: That he didn't win [the strongman competition]

Stephanie was attempting to assist Henry to develop his ability to reason through his emotions using a prompt which was meant to scaffold Henry's understanding, possibly attempting to move his emotional development past just the recognition of the emotion to reasoning.

When I recalled with Stephanie her reading of *Our Subway Baby* (Mercurio, 2020) Henry made an intuitive connection when discussing the feelings that Peter and Danny as evidenced below:

Mandy: When you asked the question, how do you think Peter and Danny are feeling as they're saying goodbye to the baby when it's in the police officer's arms?

Stephanie: He said they felt sad.

This moment provides additional indication of how Henry was able to detect and interpret emotions from the story using inferencing based on his understanding of the events that were occurring in the story. It is a skill in social-emotional learning and even though Henry does not expand on why they felt sad, his capability to identify the situation as one that was sad suggests that he is internalizing emotional cues from the story.

The examples within this section demonstrate how children's literature can be a catalyst for fostering emotional connection in children. Through the support of the resources and the books Gabe and Henry were able to empathize with the characters by considering their perspectives. The books prompted emotional expressions from Gabe and Henry's observations strengthened recognition of the emotions in others. Lastly, the books and resources provided discussions that were scaffolded which helped Gabe and Henry articulate and process emotions.

Celebrating Differences

In this analysis, the idea of "celebrating differences" is used to mean recognizing, appreciating and embracing diverse identities alongside experiences and expressions to advance inclusion and counter social exclusion norms. The differences of others can be celebrated as a means of challenging the notion that people should be excluded based on the way they choose to express their gender or sexual orientation. The discussions between the parents and their children highlight how differences that are celebrated help to promote a mindset that is inclusive, challenge norms of exclusion and reinforce kindness and respect. Through the use of children's literature and discussion both Gabe and Henry showed an understanding of why acceptance matters, though Gabe's reasoning was more detailed, while Henry offered meaningful responses that were simpler. This variation was likely due to their developmental stages and Gabe being older than Henry.

First, Gabe shared his enthusiasm and support for the interests and identities of others recognizing and encouraging individuality in the following response:

Gabe: Like if someone like, if I met someone, they said, I really wanna be a nail painter, I'll be like, Oh, my gosh, that's so cool. Maybe you would paint my nail

someday like you have to be kind like it's like you wanna encourage something like, like you could say, like. "I believe in you. I know you can accomplish your dreams."

This response not only shows his awareness of differences but demonstrates his energetic encouragement and celebration of those differences. It suggests that he actively respects diversity which goes beyond just passive acceptance. Also, he shared his enthusiasm to participate in others' self-expression by offering to have his nails painted which suggests his openness in embracing new perspectives and identities.

After reading Payden's Pronoun Party (Jaryn, 2022) Gabe expressed his understanding of identity beyond binary classifications when he shared about diverse pronouns in the following response:

Rachel: Let's see, so what else are you thinking after listening to this story, Gabe?

Gabe: That anybody can have any other pronouns, like she/her, he/him, they/them, e/em or something.

Rachel: Hmmm, mmm (affirmative)

The response further exemplified how the story and discussion may have played a role in Gabe's expanded awareness, as he shared a diverse list of pronouns, possibly demonstrating further understanding of gender diversity.

In the following response Henry provided a brief but insightful reason for celebrating differences:

Stephanie: Do you think it's important to celebrate the differences that everybody has?

Henry: Hmmm mmm (affirmative)

Stephanie: Why?

Henry: Cause if you didn't, they might feel sad.

Here Henry demonstrated an understanding of exclusion and when people fail to acknowledge and respect differences it can lead to negative emotional consequences. Additionally, in an exchange during the recollection interview with Stephanie, she stated:

Mandy: If someone doesn't think Pete and Danny should be dads because they are gay, do you think that's fair? Why or why not?

Stephanie: Henry responded with "No, because that's not nice."

This description suggested that Henry may be developing empathy for people who experience exclusion or discrimination based on those differences.

The discussions between Rachel and Gabe and between Stephanie and Henry demonstrated that the children were able to recognize the importance of celebrating differences within others. Gabe was definitely explained his thinking more by sharing and discussing his knowledge and how we should celebrate differences in others, while Henry just realized that it was important. This difference is likely appropriate for the ages of Gabe and Henry.

Promoting Kindness and Respect

The subtheme of "promoting kindness and respect" is used to mean fostering behaviors and attitudes that support and elevate people through considerate interactions by respecting their gender identities and self-expressions. Gabe and Henry both exhibited an emphasis on respecting others by being kind and respectful toward them, regardless of

their gender expression or identity. In the following excerpt Gabe articulated the necessity for using correct pronouns in the following response:

Gabe: You should respect all people's identity, no matter what, even if they look like a boy or girl like? Is it just cause like if someone had like shorter like and kind of like, like crazy kind of hair like I do and but they were like girl. They said, you're so cool that's the coolest, boy ever but they said, no I'm a they/them. And I said like, but you just should respect all pronouns.

This explanation suggests an awareness of the concept that the outward appearance of others does not dictate their identity and an essential part of affirming someone's personhood is respecting and using their pronouns. He reinforced this message by rejecting the idea of people ridiculing the pronouns other' use in the following discussion:

Gabe: They/them like, never make, don't make fun of other people's pronouns, because it's not nice.

Rachel: Right

Gabe: If like, if someone was named like they/them or they/him, I'd be like they're super cool or he's super cool.

Also, throughout this discussion his choice of words suggests he not only recognized the concept of gender identity but that he may embody an ethical stance on the subject.

He also recognized the harm that misgendering or mocking can cause for individuals. Rachel reinforces Gabe's understanding by asking the question from the resource about how we can show respect to others in the following discussion:

Rachel: And then how can we be respectful of people who use different pronouns than us?

Gabe: To just be kind.

Rachel: Yeah, how can we be respectful of people who use different pronouns from us, though?

Gabe: To use their pronouns.

Rachel: Absolutely, Yep, absolutely.

The previous statement from Gabe demonstrates his understanding that people play an active role in respecting and affirming others.

Henry's responses also reflected the subtheme of kindness and respect, although his answers were simple when asked a question from the resource as seen below:

Stephanie: Can we treat others with kindness when they look different from us?

Henry: Hmmm mmmm (Affirmative)

Stephanie: Yeah, what could you say that would be kind to somebody that dressed different than you?

Henry: Mmmmm. Cool clothes!

Stephanie: Cool clothes, yeah! That's a great way to say something kind to somebody to make them know they're not any different than us.

This discussion suggests that Henry has the early important step in his learning to identify and encourage individuality in others.

Lastly, Gabe and Henry both also recognized that kindness and respect were important and even shared ways that they could promote kindness and respect to others, regardless of their gender identity or expression. It is evident based on their ability to

emotionally connect with the characters in the books, celebrate their differences and repeatedly discuss the need to extend kindness and respect to individuals regardless of their gender expression, identity or sexual orientation that this is a strong family value within their households. In addition, Gabe and Henry both show that celebrating differences is not just about tolerance, but rather about taking an active role to embrace and uplift others.

Theme 3: Learning and Growth

In this analysis, the theme of “learning and growth” is used to mean the process through which individuals expand their understanding and perspectives by engaging with literature and discussions about identity, inclusivity and self-expression. Within the theme of learning and growth there were two subthemes that emerged specifically in the data from Rachel and Gabe: active engagement and personal growth. The theme of Learning and Growth was evident for Rachel and Gabe during the shared reading and discussions that occurred throughout

Active Engagement

I defined the idea of “active engagement” to mean deep involvement with the content in the children’s literature in the form of curiosity, questioning, thinking critically, and creating meaning during the shared reading experience. This subtheme was demonstrated in the excerpts below where Gabe showed his active engagement with the books by demonstrating curiosity, personal connection and critical thinking. His eagerness to read the synopsis at the front of *A Costume for Charly* (Malone, 2022) showed his engagement with the text and interest in reading the book:

Gabe [Begins to read synopsis in the front of the book] Halloween is always tricky for Charly, and this year they are determined to find a costume that showcases both and the feminine...

He attempted to take ownership in the reading experience with his mom which suggested his engagement and excitement for the content that was present in the book. Gabe also made real-world connections to the text in the following statement:

Gabe: I already know what I'm going to be for Halloween.

As evidenced here, he shared his personal investment in the topics within the story by connecting the costume theme to his own experience which may create a more meaningful connection to the content.

In the following response Gabe demonstrated his ability to use a puzzle piece metaphor to explain the process of finding the right pronouns that feel right after reading Payden's Pronoun Party (Jaryn, 2022):

Gabe: It's like the puzzle piece that fits [choosing your preferred pronouns] cause like sometimes it's really hard to find, like a puzzle piece that like fits like. "Is it this piece?" "No, it's that piece?" "Which piece is it?" I don't know? [said in very animated rushed frantic type voice]

His statement suggests active engagement because he not only understood the concept, but could explain it in his own way. His metaphor also suggests his ability to go beyond surface-level comprehension to internalizing the theme within the book.

Gabe also showed his active learning in the following discussion when he commented on pronouns that were unfamiliar to him:

Rachel: [Read text from the book] “‘I want to be called e, em, and eir, at least for now,’ Payden announced to eir parents. They were delighted, and began to organize the party: a dress-up pronoun party!”

Gabe: You never hear those pronouns [smile on his face]

Rachel: Yeah, they’re not as common, are they?

Gabe: No

This exchange suggests that Gabe was reflecting on new structures of language and is actively absorbing the content within the book. He stated that the pronouns were unfamiliar and not as common which suggests he is thinking about the significance of and noticing language variation. In addition, the smile that was present on his face can be interpreted as a sign of his openness to learning and his curiosity when learning new concepts. It also may suggest he has a growth mindset because he was willing to discuss and engage with new concepts as a means for increasing his understanding.

The level of comfortability of reading aloud and discussing was demonstrated by Gabe’s active engagement with the texts. First thing during the first book they read he was curious about the synopsis of the book and wanted to read it to his mom. His active engagement continued throughout the sessions as he tied the content of the book to his personal life and came up with metaphors for the content as well with his puzzle piece example. He was also reflecting on the content he was learning as he commented on not being familiar with the new pronouns that he learned about. This participating went beyond just listening as he questioned, connected, interpreted and reflected, which were all examples of deep learning and comprehension. His active engagement also suggests

his more advanced understanding of gender identity, use of pronouns, and self-expression within the literature.

Personal Growth

In this analysis, the idea of “personal growth” is used to mean the process of an individual growing their understanding, acceptance and application of new knowledge, specifically in regard to identifying and accepting perspectives and identities that are diverse. Throughout reading the books Gabe’s understanding of gender identity and expression expanded and grew. In the following discussion Gabe recognized and affirmed the author of *A Costume for Charly*, C.K. Malone (2022), which suggests a broadened understanding of gender expression:

Gabe: They look very pretty and very handsome. Whatever they want to feel. But they look very fabulous. [Comment came after reading about C.K. Malone, the author of the book who identifies as bigender]

That response affirmed C.K. Malone’s bigender identity because he acknowledged that someone can feel both pretty and handsome. Gabe validated self-expression here also when he noted that people should feel however they want to feel. It may also suggest that Gabe may understand and respect that gender can be fluid. He also used inclusive language when he referred to C.K. Malone by using “they” which showed awareness and affirmed their chosen pronouns which he learned while reading the author’s biography.

Gabe also began actively using new pronouns that he learned after reading Payden’s Pronoun Party (Jaryn, 2022):

Rachel (she/her): How do you think it made Payden feel to have made a decision on pronouns?

Gabe: to feel nice, and that e felt nice to have those pronouns, and that e felt nice to like be him

Rachel: to be em

Gabe: em

This interaction suggested his personal growth with his use of the pronouns, his openness to being corrected by Rachel, and his progression to a deeper understanding of gender identity. Rachel shared with Gabe the following example from the resource about how to respectfully ask for pronouns when you meet someone new which was presented on the resource as an additional learning opportunity

Rachel: I think that is a good book to talk about pronouns. And also, another thing is, it's really easy. If you're not sure to like know what someone's pronouns are, I find that what I like to do is I always introduce myself and give my pronouns when I introduce myself, so I like to say things like Hi! I'm Rachel. I use she/her pronouns and then then often not all the time, but people will usually share then what they'll what their preferred pronouns are. And so that's a good way. To find out someone's pronouns. Pretty cool, huh?

Gabe: Hmmm mmm (Affirmative)

This description from Rachel was useful as an example of personal growth because it provided Gabe with a practical tool that he could use in future social situations. Rachel also reinforced the importance of learning someone's pronouns, and Gabe's affirming response suggests that he values the significance and understood the new learning.

Theme 4: Challenging Societal Norms

I identified the theme “challenging societal norms” to mean interrogating and opposing expectations that society deems as traditional, specifically in regard to gender roles, inclusivity and identity, as exhibited through dialogues and reflections. There were three subthemes in which the codes grouped into for challenging societal norms: gender stereotypes, breaking gender barriers, and promoting inclusivity. The theme of Challenging Societal Norms and the subthemes stemmed mainly from the discussions between Rachel and Gabe

Gender Stereotypes

In this analysis, the idea of “gender stereotypes” is used to mean expectations of society that are predetermined in regard to how individuals should express themselves, act or engage in interests based on gender, and how personal expression and choices can be limited by such norms. Gabe was aware of the fact that gender stereotypes exist and that they can have a negative impact on both his personal experiences and in society. Gabe shared as evidenced in the following discussion that he recognized stereotypes but also how he struggled with how behaviors and perceptions shape people:

Gabe: Ummm. Cause they want to like feel themselves. They want to like, feel them or on the yeah. Like they can [inaudible] whatever costume. And but like, like nobody [inaudible], it's just like Halloween. It's just a costume like so, is it? Is it matters for them, or that I mean, they, they can like feel whatever they want like. It doesn't really matter well, like it does matter to they

Rachel: To them

Gabe: To them. To figure out what costume they want.

In this discussion Gabe shared that people regardless of societal expectations should be able to express themselves in the way they see fit. He stated that it is more important for individuals to have their individual identity and express themselves in the way they would like to rather than follow societal norms. Gabe also acknowledged that expectations of gender can influence personal choice as exemplified above when Charly was selecting a Halloween costume. He also self-corrected the following statement “*it doesn't really matter...well, it does matter to them*” which suggested that he may still be struggling with balancing personal identity and social norms. Finally, this discussion suggested Gabe's developing critical awareness that personal decisions should not be dictated by gender expectations.

In the following statement Gabe used a hypothetical scenario which showed his understanding of gender stereotypes:

Gabe: But and like someone was like, “no, you can't be a like a nail painter that's for girls.” But like, say Bill said that, but Bill was just being like me, cause like they're they might be like jealous or like, but they just they're or this might like they might be jealous, or they just think that's like over the shouldn't do that like why, they just don't. They don't think like, like pride, rights and stuff.

This example showed that he identified that individuals might relate certain jobs, such as a “nail painter” to certain genders, “*for girls*,” which suggested that he may recognize the social construction of gender roles in jobs. Gabe also critiqued people who enforce gender stereotypes and suggested a lack of understanding about equality or jealousy as a possible reason for why this may be the case. In addition, he mentioned “*pride, rights and stuff*” which may suggest that he is beginning to connect broader topics of fairness,

inclusivity and identity to gender stereotypes. Lastly, this quote showed that Gabe is beginning to analyze why individuals may enforce gender roles along with his understanding of gender-based discrimination.

In the following discussion Gabe showed that his understanding of gender stereotypes moved beyond just hypothetical examples to his own personal experiences as seen in here when he discussed whether or not he should change his Chromebook cover:

Gabe: Yeah, cause they might think, Oh, my gosh, that's weird! I, I just need...Search up like a new like screen cover, for, like my Chromebook at my school, and I was like I shouldn't do this cause maybe someone might see it. And think that's a girly thing. I just kept it to like the original cat one I had.

Rachel: What did you want to change it to?

Gabe: A Lady Bug and Cat Noir one.

Rachel: Okay, but you thought maybe someone might say "That's for girls"

Gabe: Yeah, And then but like,

Rachel: But that's for everybody.

Gabe: But, there's like some friends that I know that like kind of like it. And like, I know, some friends that don't. But like I'm mostly I know more friends that don't like it, and less, I know less friends that do like it.

The concept of gender stereotypes was one that Gabe was well aware of and commented on while reading. He also created a hypothetical example of a person who wanted a certain job that society considers more for women, compared to men, for example, someone who paints fingernails. In addition, he himself is grappling with gender stereotypes within his own life in regard to a cartoon that he watches that he

would like personal items, namely a new Chromebook cover which would have the characters from the cartoon on it, however, it's deemed by his peers to be more of a cartoon for girls. At nine years old he already seemed to perceive and understand that gender stereotypes exist and that it is something he personally will encounter within his life.

Breaking Gender Barriers

I identified the idea of “breaking gender barriers” to mean challenging gender roles and expectations that are deemed traditional by society either by literary examples, personal actions, or encouraging the right of people to freely express themselves. The characters in Rachel and Gabe’s books *A Costume for Charly* (Malone, 2022) and *Payden’s Pronoun Party* (Jaryn, 2022) broke free from traditional expectations and Gabe’s discussions indicated that he supported them. His strong understanding and support for breaking gender barriers in the following discussions are illustrated by his statements which suggest his ability to challenge norms within his own life, recognize and support the characters within the books who were going against gender expectations and also advocate for personal choice in gender expression.

One way that Gabe seemed to challenge gender norms within his own life was to openly enjoy *Lady Bug and Cat Noir* which he shared was a show that was often perceived “for girls” as he shared in the following statement:

Gabe: and I don't have a ton of friends, but I don't. I told one of my friends that I really like it and I know that she really likes it I actually really like Lady Bug and Cat Noir. So, this is like one of the dolls that I have [Showed Lady Bug doll to the camera]

This quote also indicated that Gabe is resisting societal norms and resisting peer pressure that certain toys, such as his Lady Bug doll is “for girls.” During the interview he left to go get his Lady Bug doll to show the camera which suggested a level of self-assurance and pride in his interests which also could indicate that he finds confidence in shared interests because he also shared with a friend that he liked the show

When reading *A Costume for Charly* (Malone, 2022) Gabe also shared his support for breaking gender barriers when discussing Charly’s costume—a combination of Little Red Riding Hood and Dracula in which he realized that traditional expectations were being challenged as evidenced in the following statement:

Gabe: The people say [Charly’s costume] was wacky like, cause they never probably like seen that kind of costume before, and like acting a little strange., Because I said, that’s a wonderful, not so cool, cause they might thought, Oh, my, gosh, that’s the coolest costume ever. Like it’s, Red Riding Hood and Dracula

Gabe’s comment that Charly’s costume appeared “wacky” to some people indicated his understanding that people feel differently about gender non-conformity because some find it uncomfortable. Gabe showed his support for gender expression when he expressed his excitement about the costume saying “Oh my gosh, that’s the coolest costume ever.” Gabe chose to see Charly’s costume as an original and courageous act which indicated that he values individualism and creativity.

Rachel: [Text from Payden’s Pronoun Party] “So Zoe said, ‘oh, well, mostly I feel like I’m a girl, but sometimes I don’t feel like I’m any gender. Both she and ze feel much more me, and make me want to dance.’ What do you think about Zoe using both she and ze for pronouns?”

Gabe: She says that it's her body so she can choose what she wants to feel.

Gabe also expressed that breaking gender barriers is something that he can do and that the characters in the story have the power to do as well as a means for challenging societal norms. He shared his Lady Bug doll to the camera which demonstrates that he still is eager to break down the gender barrier of the show being for girls and has a doll of the main character. He also shared about how the children reacted to Charly's costume on Halloween night being a mix of Dracula and Little Red Riding hood to fit their bigender identity, therefore breaking traditional gender norms. Finally, he realizes that people's bodies are their own to make decisions about and that everyone has the right to make their own choices about how they choose to express their gender.

Promoting Inclusivity

In this analysis, the subtheme of "promoting inclusivity" is used to mean creating an environment of respect and acceptance for all individuals by valuing diversity and advocating for equal treatment, no matter their gender identity, the pronouns they use or the structure of their family. As evidenced by the excerpts below both Gabe and Henry share about wanting to promote inclusivity by respecting and accepting all individuals no matter their gender expression or sexual orientation.

Gabe: Cause if, if you didn't know like what your pronouns are but like, if you didn't know someone's pronouns, like you didn't know someone's pronouns and someone was like, OH, You're super cool! You're a really cool boy but they didn't know what pronouns I use and they could have just said "you're a really cool person." "You're a really cool kid"

Rachel: How can we treat everyone with kindness and respect, even if they are different from us?

Gabe: To be kind to like everyone you know. For everybody, or like anybody just be kind to anybody.

Mandy: Danny said. That I know adopting a baby isn't always easy for two dads, Judge Cooper responded with "where there's love, anything is possible." Why do you think he and Danny wanted to be a family with Kevin.

Stephanie: Henry responded, because they wanted to take care of him

Mandy: And what did he say when you asked "what do you think makes a good family?"

Stephanie: He said love.

In these excerpts, both Gabe and Henry both highlighted that promoting inclusivity is another way that societal norms can be challenged. Gabe specifically spoke about being kind to how to respect someone even if you do not know their pronouns as a way to be inclusive right from the moment you meet someone. He also stated that being kind to everybody and anybody is a way we can promote inclusivity. Henry spoke to inclusivity in regard to gay adoption and that the two characters Danny and Peter should be parents because they loved baby Kevin and they wanted to take care of him.

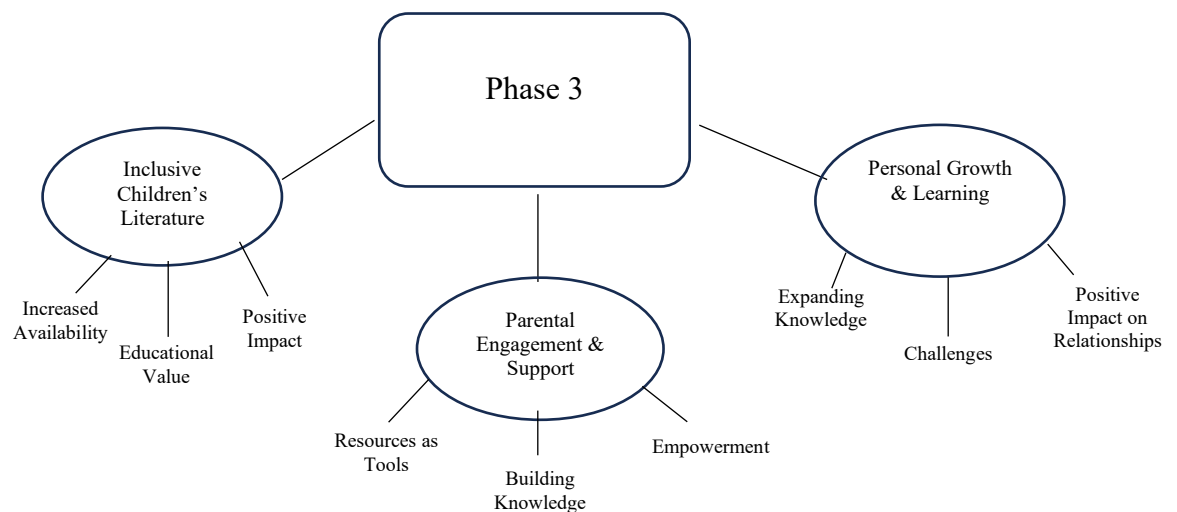
Phase 3: Evaluation and Reflection

Phase three addressed the following research: *How do parents feel the resources supported (or inhibited) conversations with their children and what changes do they recommend?* Within Phase 3 there were three different themes that emerged: 1) Inclusive

Children’s Literature; 2) Parental Engagement and Support; 3) Personal Growth and Learning. These themes will be discussed below, along with the associated subthemes. The following map (Figure 4.3) depicts the overarching theme, themes and subthemes for this research question.

Figure 4.3

Thematic Map for Research Question Three



Inclusive Children’s Literature

I defined the theme of “inclusive children’s literature” to mean books that focus on themes of gender and sexual orientation that represent a diverse range of experiences, backgrounds and identities. The codes within the inclusive children’s literature theme fell into three different subthemes: increased availability, educational value, and positive impact. The theme of Inclusive Children’s Literature was one that was prevalent with both Rachel and Stephanie.

Increased Availability

The idea of “increased availability” is used to mean the growth of accessibility and availability of children’s literature that have topics of gender, sexual orientation and inclusivity present. It emerged from discussions from both Rachel and Stephanie concerning the growing number of inclusive texts and referenced in the following examples:

Rachel: First of all, that some picture books have come a long way, even in the short time that Gabe's been alive, because I feel like initially, when he was younger. I tried to. I feel like it did a decent job of like trying to find inclusive books and things, and what wasn't available on the market then versus even just a few years later, like there are a whole another. There's a whole other sleuth of books out there, which is great, you know, like slew of books, not sleuth but which is wonderful. So, I was surprised to, to see how many books that you know you proposed to me that I had not even heard of, because I was initially like I don't know. We might have read all of these, but come to find out we haven't not even close. So that was my probably my biggest takeaway was that, you know, children's literature is becoming more expansive and more inclusive, which is really wonderful to see.

Stephanie: I think the biggest one [takeaway] is that there there's even books like that that exist truthfully. I I've never seen like in a traditional setting, or a library or bookstore, like that kind of, of a book that includes LGBTQ like at all. So, to

even know that there were books out there like that. I think that was the biggest thing.

Both parents were surprised at the increased number of available titles which included topics of gender and sexual orientation. This subtheme emerged based on the books I provided to them that they reviewed but also there were additional titles and book lists included on each of the resources provided to them so that they could easily seek out additional titles on their own if they so choose.

Educational Value

In this analysis, the subtheme of “educational value” is used to mean the capacity of children’s literature and the created resources to provide enriching learning experiences by introducing and discussing new and challenging topics. It emerged from Stephanie’s views, demonstrated as follows:

Stephanie: Plus, I think it kind of helped me after, especially after the fact. I thought, okay, there's different ways that I can take a book like this and make it an opportunity to explain something that might have been a little tricky to explain without.

For Stephanie the entire experience caused the Educational Value subtheme to emerge because she learned that books are a means for use to introduce new or in her words tricky topics to kids and have discussions with them when prior to this experience she illuded to not thinking about using children’s literature in this manner.

Positive Impact

In this analysis, the idea of “positive impact” is used to mean the effects that were beneficial that stemmed from the use of the resources and discussions the parents had

with their children and how the parents' confidence, knowledge and relationships were affected in regard to promoting inclusivity and acceptance. Both Rachel and Stephanie referenced the positive impact of the books and the project. Rachel specifically shared *"I'm grateful for the work that you're doing. It's awesome. I'm grateful to have been a small part of this."* Stephanie, shared a similar sentiment, *"I'm glad that you asked us to be a part of it, and that it worked out the way it did, because it was an eye opener for me."*

Furthermore, both Rachel and Stephanie expressed their appreciation to me for the chance to participate in this project and actively participate in reading the books with their child. The clear sentiment was that they regarded the experience as valuable and derived benefits from it thus creating a Positive Impact.

Parental Engagement and Support

I defined the theme of "parental engagement and support" to mean the active involvement the parents took in their child's learning process through the use of the resources which were designed to help them discuss complex topics in an approachable and age-appropriate manner. The codes within the parental engagement and support theme grouped into three subthemes: Resources as Tools, Building Knowledge, and Empowerment. The theme of Parental Engagement and Support focused heavily on specific aspects of the resources, especially on the subtheme of Resources as Tools.

Resources as Tools

The resources that I created were seen as helpful tools as demonstrated by the following responses from Rachel:

But the resources were really comprehensive, and I really enjoyed them, and I also liked the resources for that one that I was able to show to Gabe. You know. I don't think he at his age will get a lot of Ted Talk, necessarily. But the videos that we showed that I showed him were perfect for him.

No, I, I can't think of any like critiques or additional information that should have been included in the resources. Again, I felt that they were really comprehensive, and did a good job for the parent reader as well as for the child reader. There was a, you know, a little bit of everything, for, for both.

Rachel really enjoyed them and though she did not provide any critiques for improvements after using them she did highlight specific elements that she found extremely useful. She called attention to the diversity of the videos that were included on the resources. There were TED Talks that were chosen for the parent to aid in building background knowledge surrounding the topics, but also there was a video that was age appropriate and kid-friendly that was for Gabe to watch as a means for introducing gender pronouns that he really enjoyed. Rachel also commented on the variety of information included on the resources and how comprehensive they were for both adults and children. Her overall sentiment demonstrates her extreme satisfaction with the final versions of the resources that she reviewed and used.

Building Knowledge

There was an emphasis in building knowledge that emerged from the use of the resources that Rachel and Stephanie spoke about in the following selections:

Yeah, I think I think it helped me. Help me do a better job of like framing some of these new, maybe new terms for Gabe. I don't say appropriate, but like child friendly language. You know a, a good refresher course for Gabe, you know. He doesn't confront a lot of these things every day in his life right now. So just a good way to kind of refresh like this is what nonbinary means. And this is, you know. So, I, I really, I thought that did a good job of that, and that was helpful.

Rachel: Oh, tremendously, I think you know, especially if you're a parent, that hasn't, that hasn't, isn't familiar with some of these ideas and concepts. It does a good job of laying the groundwork for you.

Stephanie: I don't know where I probably would have started. I don't know how I would have segued into some things; you know. But I think, having that the topics of discussion, it just those little questions, even just to kind of prompt something. That's helpful.

Empowerment

The following excerpts revealed that the resources were perceived as assisting parents in gaining confidence and feeling more prepared to engage in discussions with their children, thereby empowering them. Rachel shared the following:

So that way. When you are introduced to this literature with your children and introduce it to your children. You can have conversations about it. I think that's I think that's why, like sometimes parents, even if they're not like, even if they are, they consider themselves to be inclusive. They just don't know how to talk about it

with their children, and so these resources do a good job of priming that for them? And then they can use the literature to open up conversations with their kids, and then feel ready to have those conversations.

Stephanie echoed the sentiment that the resources were helpful in the following:

I truly think they'll think the same thing. If they hadn't. If I didn't have those, I don't know how you'd start conversations or, or explain things, or what what's age appropriate, or you know all of those kinds of things. I think it's just a good. It's a good tool to have some sort of guidance cause for tricky such. It's just tricky subjects and things that kids that don't know about yet, that you're trying to teach them without being biased, and all of that. I think it's helpful to have that.

Empowerment was another subtheme that emerged for both Rachel and Stephanie as they were reflecting back upon the resources. Rachel felt comfortable having conversations with Gabe about gender, so when she reflected, she spoke from the perspective of thinking of parents who may not be as comfortable as she considered herself. She felt that the resources did a great job assisting in gaining relevant and comprehensive background knowledge surrounding the topic in which they were developed. She illuded to some parents identifying as inclusive but being unsure how to talk to their children. It seemed as though the resources, in her eyes would help adults build that level of confidence and feel empowered to be able to share the children's literature and also have discussions with kids about the topics within the books.

The very parent that Rachel was speaking about fit the way that Stephanie felt as she was reflecting about the resources. Stephanie was speaking in the first person and explaining that she would not have known how to share the books and have discussions

with Henry without the resources. She found the resources extremely helpful and in turn it is evident that she felt that empowerment within herself based on the reflections that she shared.

Personal Growth and Learning

The codes within the personal growth and learning theme fell into three different subthemes: Expanding Knowledge, Challenges, and Positive Impact on Relationships.

Expanding Knowledge

Overall, both families felt that the project increased their knowledge in different ways as evidenced below. Rachel shared:

Oh, I think it. I think it did a good job of showing him, too, that these ideas and things are becoming more mainstream, and he's able to see kids. He, he already kind of falls somewhere on this spectrum. I we don't really know how we're where yet, but I think it just shows him that, like there are other kids who are not in the, you know, gender normative box that we that most children are in and that there are, you know enough to where we're, we're now including it in children's literature. And then stories. And I I think that's probably the biggest takeaway for him, I would say.

Stephanie shared the following:

I don't know where I probably would have started. I don't know how I would have segued into some things; you know. But I think, having that the topics of discussion, it just those little questions, even just to kind of prompt something. That's helpful.

She also shared:

I think we're. I think we're gonna go. You had on both of the resource pages the different ones, the different books you know. And I think we're gonna probably go through those. Well, I think that even though we're not gonna ask questions about them and go through all of it, I think we may the other 2 books that you sent to just read them, because I mean we have them, and it's a good resource. So, looking into more books, that, and not just into this section. I think of being inclusive and all different lifestyles and things like that, too. So yeah.

For Rachel in regard to expanding knowledge she spoke about knowing that Gabe falls somewhere on the spectrum of not being gender normative and that books like *Payden's Pronoun Party* and *A Costume for Charly* showed him that there are characters in books that also do not fit in the “gender normative box” therefore increasing his knowledge of gender expression and gender identity. Not only does it increase his knowledge of different gender identities and ways of expression but the texts could also help Gabe to see himself portrayed in the books he is reading. Stephanie spoke about the resources expanding her knowledge by giving her prompts and information about how to ask questions to Henry and discuss the topics that were present within the books. This is something that she alluded to earlier in our conversations throughout the project where she stated that she did not have experience asking questions to her children while reading. In addition, Stephanie stated that she wants to seek out more books and read the additional books that she reviewed as part of the project with her children due to her knowledge being expanded of the vast array of books that are available. However, she did mention that she likely would not ask questions while reading which illustrates that this is still an area she is not as comfortable with or confident with.

Challenges

The experience did present some challenges that Stephanie overcame and some she is still grappling with as she recalled using the resources with Henry, as demonstrated in the following excerpt:

No, not I mean not really, I, I think he did pretty well answering those questions, and being I mean I, I wish that I would have done better at doing the before reading part for that one. But I think he did really well with it, and there wasn't missing truthfully on either of them. I don't think there was anything missing. I think it is hard for him to explain and this is probably just the age range. But like when you say, how do you feel that? You know Danny and, and Peter felt. "Sad." Why or what makes you think that? Or like things like that. It's hard for him to like. He might just be well, there, you know, there's baby, and it was cute or whatever. But it's hard for to get more out of that.

Next, Stephanie specifically spoke about how the project caused her to overcome some challenges but she also alluded to some that still exist. When she read aloud the first book, *Strong* (Kearney & Rosswood, 2022) she omitted using the first section of the resource and did not go through the “Before Reading” questions and vocabulary items that were on the resource. This turned into a teachable moment where I just called attention to the resource developed for the second book *Our Subway Baby* (Mercurio, 2020). and showed her where she’d begin her conversations with Henry before beginning to read the book. Calling attention to this for her resulted in her engaging in the “Before Reading” section of the resource for the second book, *Our Subway Baby* (Mercurio, 2020). Omitting the “Before Reading” was likely due to the fact that she did not have

experience with using books for discussions as she stated that usually they just begin reading books from beginning to end without conversation. This challenge still lingers as she discussed Henry's short responses and the difficulty, he had in sharing his thinking. Stephanie attributed it to his age, but felt the resources were comprehensive and that there was not anything missing from her perspective.

Positive Impact on Relationships

The following responses by Stephanie highlight the positive impact that the project had on her and Henry:

Well, it gave me things to ask him because, like I said, not a lot of times, we'll just read a book and we'll be okay. Well, we read it, and that's it. But when it's on a subject like that trying to get more out of him.

I truly think they'll think the same thing. If they hadn't. If I didn't have those, I don't know how you'd start conversations or or explain things, or what what's age appropriate, or you know all of those kinds of things. I think it's just a good. It's a good tool to have some sort of guidance cause for tricky such. It's just tricky subjects and things that kids that don't know about yet, that you're trying to teach them without being biased, and all of that. I think it's helpful to have that.

And then it, it opens the door for Henry for, and, and my, my other girls on things that I'll read to them more because it's, it's incredibly near and dear to my heart on them, accepting everybody for who they are. So, I think it opens more

opportunities for me to, to give them more. [Stephanie was tearing up and wiping tears from her eyes]

When Stephanie spoke about the positive impact that the project had on her and Henry it was specifically evident when she started to tear up when she spoke about the said impact. She highlighted the fact that the resources gave her ideas of questions to ask to spark conversations and followed up with her trepidation of not knowing where she would have started in regard to beginning conversations with Henry about the topics of gender expression and sexual orientation that were present in the books. She felt that having guidance from the resources was helpful and that in the future she wants to seek out more diverse books to read to her children because it is a topic that is “near and dear” to her heart. She wants her children to be inclusive and accept people for who they are. The books that she plans to seek out can only continue to have a positive impact on her family to promote that sentiment that she so deeply conveyed to me.

Summary

Phase 3 results demonstrated that LGBTQ+ and gender-inclusive children's literature and co-created resources substantially aided participants in both starting and maintaining discussions about LGBTQ+ and gender identity and inclusive practices with their children. Both Rachel and Stephanie expressed surprise at the growing number of inclusive books while understanding their educational benefits in teaching complex topics to children at suitable developmental levels. The books received recognition for their informative content and powerful effects which produced enduring memories in the participating families.

The Parental Engagement and Support theme demonstrated that literacy resources served as necessary tools to support discussions and develop adult confidence. Parents reported that the educational resources strengthened their grasp of important concepts which helped them better engage their children and enabled them to conduct meaningful dialogues about identity topics that they would have otherwise struggled to address.

The Personal Growth and Learning theme demonstrated that Rachel and Stephanie both achieved learning and reflection but did so through different methods. Rachel noticed that the literature reflected her family's inclusive principles and understood its significance for reinforcing those values for her son. Stephanie embraced her personal growth yet encountered difficulties during discussions and interpreting her younger child's emotional responses. Stephanie found the experience to be profoundly emotional and impactful which helped initiate continuous inclusive discussions within her family. The participants realized that the books and resources alongside the entire project were valuable because they supported important home conversations about empathy, inclusion and acceptance.

CHAPTER FIVE
SUMMARY, LIMITATIONS, IMPLICATIONS, FUTURE RESEARCH AND
CONCLUSION

Introduction

My study addressed a gap in research exploring how parents can use children's literature as a means to begin conversations with their children about gender and sexual orientation diversity and allyship. The research in this area was lacking, especially within the critical literacy and queer theory frameworks. My study also explored how LGBTQ+ and gender-inclusive children's literature can serve as an entry point for discussions with children and how thoughtfully designed resources can support parents in having these discussions.

The study also aimed to provide insight into how co-created resources can assist parents by providing them with information about how to accurately explain vocabulary and key terms, pose questions for discussion, answer difficult questions and even increase their own knowledge and recognize biases prior to reading and discussing these topics with their children. When parents do not have resources to assist them it becomes much easier to avoid having the discussions which then creates a void for the child in understanding these topics. The goal of this study was to increase awareness and aid in combating societal norms to avoid marginalization of individuals who may be different from us.

Summary and Implications of Findings

Findings from my study are summarized and implications explained through its three distinct phases. The results provide valuable insights into family interactions with

LGBTQ+ and gender-inclusive children's literature and demonstrate how reading together at home creates transformational experiences. The study's implications are structured by each phase and demonstrate how findings relate to existing literature while identifying areas of agreement or difference.

Phase 1

Findings from Phase 1 of my research showed that parents examined LGBTQ+ and gender-inclusive children's literature by applying their individual perspectives which were shaped by personal values and family dynamics. Children's literature serves dual purposes as it educates young readers while simultaneously providing adult readers with opportunities for reflection and instruction. Parents engaged with texts through careful analysis by forming emotional connections and matching narrative components to their own life experiences which allowed them to appreciate the diversity found in the stories. The participants exhibited strong commitment to their collaborative responsibilities in the Design-Based Research framework through their responses. Through their personal family stories Rachel and Stephanie demonstrated how they interpreted and interacted with the books.

Rachel shared how her personal life experiences and core values shaped her perspective when interpreting the texts. She also explained how together with her husband Daniel they are purposefully teaching their son Gabe values that differ from those of their extended family members. Her family environment which values intentionality, inclusion and openness shaped her perspective on children's literature and its role in forming children's identity concepts. She confirmed that discussing gender

identity with her son was essential because they had already had these conversations and found reinforcement through books like Payden's Pronoun Party (Jaryn, 2022).

In contrast, Stephanie's reflections offered a more complex interplay between personal values and perceived social norms where she appeared to maintain conventional gender-based expectations regarding behavior and interests according to this comment. She showed support for Jacob's choices in *Jacob's New Dress* (Hoffman & Hoffman, 2014) and his father's positive feedback in the book yet her description of her child's gendered interests reveals her acceptance of binary gender roles. Parents demonstrate public support for diverse identities but continue to work through their deep-rooted personal beliefs. This suggests a form of conditional acceptance where people support diverse expressions in others but feel uncomfortable with similar choices appearing in their own families.

The parents showed continuous learning by reading and reflecting on their beliefs about gender and sexual orientation while expanding their understanding in ways suitable for different developmental stages. In this way, LGBTQ+ and gender-inclusive children's literature became a dual-purpose tool: supporting children's learning and fostering adult reflection. Parents who feel knowledgeable and empowered create nurturing spaces that promote honest communication and acceptance which support inclusivity both at home and in the community.

These findings align with previous studies. Crawley's (2020) research showed that parents took on dual roles as reading partners and teaching assistants when they involved themselves with varied children's books. In my research project the parents read exclusively within their homes unlike the parent in Crawley's study who read with her

child's kindergarten class. Parents remained significant contributors to discussions alongside resources support and resource development which reached outside their own families. The research by Hartsfield and Kimmel (2020) shows how parents function as effective reviewers of inclusive literature which highlights the importance of parent participation in choosing and discussing diverse children's books.

Phase 1 results demonstrated ways that parents critically examined LGBTQ+ and gender-inclusive children's literature using perspectives deeply rooted in their personal beliefs and family values. All participants acknowledged their responsibility for reviewing the texts seriously while they approached the books with careful consideration and reflection. The research indicates that parents can effectively evaluate inclusive literature and offer valuable insights which help create educational resources that support both families and educators.

Phase 2

Shared reading sessions took place in Phase 2 where parents used LGBTQ+ and gender-inclusive children's literature alongside custom-designed literacy resources to read with their children. Each parent-child pair completed two shared readings. The objective of this exploration was to determine how texts combined with intentional discussions and prompts could help children learn about identity diversity and inclusion. These sessions yielded strong research results which showed children's literature as an effective medium for educational growth and social-emotional learning.

Participants learned new vocabulary and corrected misunderstandings during shared reading sessions which focused on gender stereotypes. The main interaction between participants was characterized by continuous inquiries along with committed

work to resolve misunderstandings. Through Rachel's structured teaching method and clear explanations Gabe understood how to use "bigender" correctly. Gabe demonstrated his dedication to learning gender-diverse identities by practicing new pronouns such as "e/em/eir" and maintaining his focus despite initial struggles. During shared reading sessions participants encountered new vocabulary and had the chance to correct misunderstandings while developing a deeper comprehension of gender dive.

The development of emotional empathy together with inclusive attitudes became the second major thematic element. The act of reading together and interpreting character emotions allowed Gabe and Henry to build emotional connections through their discussions about character motivations and support. Henry connected to feelings of sadness displayed by characters when he learned about two dads saying farewell to their infant in *Our Subway Baby* (Mercurio, 2020). Through adult-guided conversation young readers demonstrate the ability to resonate emotionally with others and develop compassionate reactions to their experiences. The way Gabe interacted displayed noticeable indicators of personal development along with active participation. He demonstrated real-world connections while asking questions and using metaphors to clarify new ideas. His description of selecting pronouns compared to searching for a perfect puzzle piece showed his grasp and support of the concept. He used the new pronouns accurately while demonstrating a strong desire to understand unfamiliar terms. Structured shared reading activities simultaneously teach students content knowledge and foster personal development. In addition, these experiences help develop emotional empathy helping them to understand the experiences and viewpoints of others.

The last theme revealed the ways children confronted or examined societal standards about gender roles and expression. Gabe openly discussed his personal encounters with gender-based teasing when others questioned his nail painting and makeup preferences. He explained how his friends stood up for him during tough times and those experiences validated his personal identity. When discussing character experiences Gabe persistently encouraged self-expression while rejecting societal gender norms. Through his reflections children learned about societal expectations while demonstrating their readiness to challenge them which marks the practical application of critical literacy. This demonstrated that children are fully capable of examining social standards of gender and sharing their thinking in ways that reflect personal empowerment and critical engagement.

Phase 2 results demonstrated how shared reading becomes transformative when combined with strategic resource design. The research shows that a small selection of children's literature, co-created resources and structured discussions is enough to create valuable conversations regarding gender and sexual orientation identity and inclusive empathy. The research demonstrates that shared reading enables parents to develop critical thinking and acceptance skills in their children. Educators and researchers discover in this phase how dialogic engagement with inclusive texts demonstrates its power. Authors and curriculum developers must prioritize creating children's literature that showcase various identities while offering resources to help guide discussions.

The Phase 2 findings showed substantial agreement with earlier research indicating that LGBTQ+-inclusive children's books build empathy and break down stereotypes while helping with identity formation as shown by Leung and Adams-

Whittaker (2022), Van Horn (2015) and Papola-Ellis and Hollenberg (2024). The research findings align with Malins and Whitty's (2022) discovery that children's books stimulate family conversations about gender and sexual identity. This research addresses an important gap in existing literature by investigating how cisgender parents help their children understand gender diversity through structured reading sessions and conversations about the topic which previous research has largely ignored. Even with limited participants the research shows children's literature combined with carefully constructed resources encourages engagement that aligns with critical literacy frameworks (Bazemore-Bertrand, 2020; Ryan & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2013). This phase provided clear examples of allyship and home learning implementation without addressing parental resistance issues.

Phase 3

Results from Phase 3 revealed that inclusive children's literature and collaboratively developed literacy resources functioned as effective resources enabling parents to start and maintain meaningful discussions about gender identity, sexual orientation, and inclusion with their children. A number of important discoveries surfaced which assist in understanding these findings and relate them to the broader academic environment.

Both parents expressed their sincere surprise and gratitude when they discovered the expanding selection of LGBTQ+ and gender-inclusive children's literature. A considerable knowledge gap continues to exist among accepting parents about the extensive progress made in publishing material that showcases gender-diverse and LGBTQ+ narratives. The result supported Crawley's (2020) finding that parents shifted

to active allyship after reading inclusive books. Rachel and Stephanie discovered that reading inclusive books enabled them to become proactive in their homes just as Crawley's parent read *And Tango Makes Three* within her child's classroom.

The participants noticed these books held significant educational benefits. Stephanie realized that these books provided her with a straightforward method to describe difficult topics to her kids which she would have otherwise left unexplained or found hard to express. The work of Papola-Ellis and Hollenberg (2024) along with Leung and Adams-Whittaker (2022) demonstrates that LGBTQ+-inclusive literature provides pathways to academic learning and social-emotional development. Accessible books provided children with opportunities to enhance their vocabulary while challenging gender norms and cultivating empathy.

The literacy resources functioned as key supports which strengthened parental confidence and enhanced their participation. Rachel who felt at ease with gender identity topics discovered that the resources were thoroughly designed and comprehensive. Stephanie relied on prompts and vocabulary supports as her primary methods due to her lack of experience leading discussions while reading. The study findings validated Flores (2014) and Hermann-Wilmarth & Ryan (2019) conclusions about the crucial role that tools and proactive communication methods play in facilitating family discussions about sensitive topics. The resources delivered knowledge alongside structure which served to diminish apprehension and trigger empowerment. Both parents shared overwhelmingly positive feedback about the experience they had while expressing their gratitude for participating and acknowledging that the provided books and resources created significant and enduring effects on their families.

The study results demonstrated definite signs of personal development coupled with academic progress. Rachel felt empowered by the readings because they exposed her son to diverse identities through characters including Charly and Payden who served as representation. Stephanie went through deep emotional changes and encountered major life-altering moments as a result of her experience. The mother began with doubts but faced multiple challenges to prepare herself for educating her children inclusively. Malins and Whitty (2022) discovered family reading activities initiated real conversations about identity and inclusion while Schapira et al. (2021) demonstrated that children's engagement improves over time when reading sessions are combined with discussions.

Stephanie's emotional reaction through tears and heartfelt comments about nurturing inclusive children showed how children's literature paired with well-chosen resources can lead to not just educational outcomes but also meaningful connections and emotional responses. Research on social awareness and shared reading discourse (Bazemore-Bertrand, 2020; Newstreet et al., 2019) establishes literature as a tool to develop critical conversations that go beyond the book itself.

Findings from this research phase demonstrated that children's inclusive literature combined with well-crafted resources holds transformative power for children and their caregivers. The program provides tools that fill knowledge gaps and normalize diverse identities while creating opportunities for empathy development and personal growth. The study demonstrated ways that developing resources intentionally and providing access to inclusive literature can enable more families to engage in these conversations. The beneficial outcomes observed by Rachel and Stephanie demonstrate how essential it is to engage parents as both supporters and co-facilitators in LGBTQ+ and gender-

inclusive education because they also learn through the process as Crawley (2020) and Hartsfield and Kimmel (2020) recommended.

This research demonstrated how supplying children's literature and resources transforms family discussion from avoidance into meaningful affirmation and empowerment thereby promoting active engagement which benefits both home and school environments.

Additional Notes in Considering the Findings

The research process revealed important observations alongside the findings that authors of children's literature should take note of. The practical challenges faced during resource development resulted in reflections that provide useful information on how to improve children's literature usability and accessibility for educators and parents who support young readers.

The development and implementation of the resources brought forth design and structural challenges related to the chosen children's books. The problems encountered during resource creation prompted important suggestions for writers and publishers to consider when producing children's books meant for educational purposes and family reading sessions.

Authors and publishers should make page numbers a standard element in children's books. Directing parents to specific reflection or discussion points during resource development proved difficult because the books lacked page numbers. Creating brief illustrations and textual cues as prompts for discussion points proved more time-consuming than the straightforward practice of including page numbers. These books

would become much more useful for guided reading or resource-based activities in classrooms and homes if they included page numbers.

Also, I recommend that authors include all explanatory and supplemental materials like author's notes and resource guides at the start of their books instead of placing them at the end. Placing this information at the beginning of the book makes it accessible right away and improves the reading experience when dealing with sensitive subjects or complex themes like gender identity or cultural diversity.

The purpose of these recommendations is to help families use children's books more effectively as learning and connection tools through improved accessibility.

Limitations

This study shares the common research characteristic of having certain limitations that require recognition. The data collected during each stage of this project may have been shaped by limitations affecting its depth and scope as well as how it was interpreted. The study brought forth valuable insights about parental involvement with LGBTQ+ and gender-inclusive children's literature but faced limitations regarding participant feedback and data collection methods as well as sample diversity and technological issues.

The first limitation of the study was the absence of participant feedback regarding resource revisions throughout multiple review stages. Despite the parents showing high satisfaction and acknowledging the completeness and design quality of the resources they reviewed they failed to give specific recommendations for improvement in the later stages of the research. Rachel and Stephanie gave thoughtful recommendations during the early design phase which enabled their perspectives to become part of the resource's initial iterations. After the resources reached their final distribution stage for review

Rachel and Stephanie did not offer any constructive feedback nor suggested any revision areas. This lack of feedback may be interpreted in two ways: The absence of feedback suggests that they found the resource fully satisfactory and approved its quality or that process of giving feedback was not effective. The review process was constrained by the lack of critical feedback which limited comprehensive revision opportunities and failed to uncover both minor hindrances and potential areas for improvement that structured questioning can reveal. Using structured feedback approaches such as focus groups or directed prompts could have lessened this limitation while allowing for a more comprehensive evaluation.

Another limitation was Stephanie's omission of the "Before Reading" section in Strong (Kearney & Rosswood, 2022) during the second research phase which created methodological problems before her reading session with Henry. The opening section provided essential thematic background details and vocabulary explanations helping readers develop their foundational understanding of the book. Their reading session lacked foundational preparation which may have resulted in both a less engaging discussion and a reduced quality of shared reading experience although I still was able utilize the collected data without this initial groundwork.

A technical malfunction disrupted the second recording session of Stephanie's shared reading activity with Henry. The video recording did not record their shared reading experience. I scheduled a follow-up Zoom interview with Stephanie to review and discuss the important moments and themes of their conversation. This method enabled essential data recovery while aiding coding but failed to capture the detailed nuances and emotional depth present in real-time recordings. Some details of Henry's

responses together with their genuine interaction dynamics were possibly lost. Data reconstruction from participant memory leads to potential bias and unintentional omissions because researchers gather this information after the fact instead of during the actual event. While this alternative method produced enough data for thematic analysis the lack of a direct transcript restricted my ability to perform discourse-level analysis and study body language and tone which would have enhanced the study findings.

Even with its limitations the study maintains valid findings which help establish its scope and boundaries through essential contextual information. Research moving forward should address these obstacles through structured feedback systems and improved participant preparation as well as rigorous data collection protocols and purposeful sampling methods.

Directions For Future Research

Researchers aiming to enhance participant feedback quality and depth in future studies might consider including focus groups with guided questions throughout their resource review phase. Structured focus groups enable participants to engage in focused reflection and discussion as opposed to open-ended feedback methods that generate general insights. When researchers create specific questions that match each section of the resource, they can obtain detailed feedback that leads to practical insights. Participants use this method to critically evaluate the resource's content along with its structure, tone and how it relates to their individual experiences. Researchers can obtain feedback which offers detailed insights that help better inform the continuous improvement of educational resources.

My research study employed a broader open-ended approach for collecting parental feedback. Participants produced insightful reflections which mainly revolved around broad impressions instead of providing specific recommendations for improvement. Although certain parents expressed favorable opinions about the book themes and recounted personal stories related to the content they read, their reviews lacked consistent assessments of the accompanying resources' structure, language elements, and usability. The incomplete data I gathered from feedback was valuable but it hindered my ability to perform more comprehensive revisions on the developed resources. Structured and targeted evaluation methods like focus groups would probably produce richer and more precise insights.

Future researchers should incorporate a formal training session for participants before they engage in the shared reading experience with their children. This session would serve several purposes. First, it would be an opportunity to provide information to the parents about shared reading and how to best engage discussions while reading books with their children. Participants would learn through this session how to interact with the resources effectively by mastering section navigation, discussion prompt use and content adjustment based on their child's prior knowledge. The training session would also establish an opportunity for parents to ask questions that need clarification while allowing them to voice concerns and discover where they require further assistance. If we address these questions before they arise, we can boost parental confidence and involvement during shared reading sessions.

The training session could be available as an asynchronous, flexible program through options like pre-recorded videos or interactive tutorials to enhance accessibility

and reduce participant burden. This training approach honors the diverse schedules of participants who manage parenting duties along with work and other commitments. In addition, all participants would receive the same information through this system. The integration of a training component will lead to improved data quality because participants will gain familiarity with the resource and be able to use it as envisioned by the research design.

Future research should focus on expanding participant sample diversity alongside methodological advancements. The development of this work's resources requires diverse perspectives to ensure they remain inclusive and culturally responsive to many different family backgrounds. Including participants from multiple racial, cultural, linguistic, religious and socioeconomic backgrounds in the sample enables researchers to investigate how various communities interact with LGBTQ+ and gender-inclusive children's literature and to assess necessary supports and adaptations. Cultural settings lead to varied understandings of gender and identity themes along with particular concerns about how accessible and suitable books are.

The research findings will become more applicable and useful across wider contexts if the overall sample size is expanded. When more participants take part in research their varied perspectives generate richer dialogues and stronger development of resources through an expanded and dynamic idea landscape. Researchers can identify hidden patterns or tensions in larger samples while detecting both agreement and conflict among different demographic groups. When more participants are involved in the review process the risk of bias is reduced because it stops a small group from controlling the educational resources' structure and content.

A wider sample of participants would enable opportunities for collaboration and collective interpretation among those involved. Researchers who create opportunities for diverse group discussions will learn how inclusive resources perform across various family settings. Collaborative efforts can help stop dominant views from dominating educational resources while ensuring resources represent diverse family experiences today.

Future studies on this topic will experience significant benefits through the use of guided question focus groups, structured parent training programs and by increasing both participant sample size and diversity. Through the implementation of these improvements the quality of feedback and resource development results will be elevated and educational resources will become more relevant and usable. Creating supportive resources for LGBTQ+ and gender-inclusive literature in family settings demands contributions from varied perspectives and requires adherence to clear standards during extensive inclusive assessment processes.

Conclusions

The research examined how LGBTQ+ and gender-inclusive children's literature along with co-created resources could enable cisgender parents to discuss with their children about gender identity and sexual orientation while working to build inclusive values and allyship. Being grounded in critical literacy and queer theory frameworks, this research responds to a clear gap in the literature: Limited resources and guidance currently exist for families who want to develop knowledge and understanding of these important topics together at their homes.

The study participants showed sincere dedication and open-mindedness towards their role which suggests parents become prepared and enthusiastic participants in productive discussions when they obtain suitable support. Inclusive children's literature develops into effective educational resources through shared reading sessions followed by reflections when combined with intentional resources that are designed to explore building empathy and critical reflection. Research conducted on a limited sample size demonstrates home-based shared reading as a highly effective method for inclusive educational practices.

The study revealed inclusive children's literature serves two important purposes as it educates children while simultaneously promoting parental development. Through home shared reading sessions parents taught their children about vocabulary and social topics while they themselves expanded their knowledge of gender and sexual orientation diversity and examined their own beliefs. Rachel's confident participation demonstrated how affirming stories strengthen existing home values of openness and belonging. Stephanie began with uncertainty but began sharing her vulnerability while learning and continuing her commitment to raise her children to embrace inclusivity. These individual journeys demonstrate the ability of children's literature to act as a transformative influence across multiple generations.

The results of this study carry major consequences for future research and practice in this area. When used correctly with supportive guidance LGBTQ+ and gender-inclusive children's literature develops emotional intelligence and inclusive language and helps eliminate gender stereotypes. The study demonstrates that specialized resources tailored to high-quality children's books which represent varied identities must also

include parental guidance to facilitate meaningful narrative interactions. Researchers, authors and publishers need to create resources that assist parents with engaging in purposeful dialogues with their children.

The research findings demonstrated strong support for parent involvement as active collaborators in educational programs that promote inclusivity. Current conversations about LGBTQ+ school inclusion concentrate primarily on teacher instruction and academic programs but overlook the crucial role families play in shaping children's perspectives. The study positions parents as competent individuals to steer these discussions which challenges previous assumptions about their readiness and underlines the requirement for resources that support families based on their current situation. The study developed co-created resources including vocabulary and discussion prompts which functioned as educational tools and confidence builders for parents who participated. Parents who receive effective resources to succeed demonstrate a greater willingness to build inclusive values in their homes and communities.

Participants' positive feedback suggested that this project has the potential to expand and adapt to additional contexts. The successful use of limited resources by parents such as Rachel and Stephanie across various experience levels validates the potential for broader application of these methods. Educators along with researchers now have an accessible powerful opportunity to integrate home-based inclusive reading into comprehensive educational programs. The research proposes that educational institutions pursue inclusive education through the development of take-home literacy kits and family literacy events centered on identity while building library-community partnerships to broaden parental access to diverse books and resources.

The limitations of the study discussed above highlight current obstacles that future research needs to tackle. Educational resources must represent the distinct ways different communities experience both gender identity and sexual orientation. The participants praised the co-created resources yet it is recommended that future versions need structured feedback mechanisms to maintain continuous improvement and encourage community participation. Despite these limitations, this study offers a hopeful vision: Everyday activities such as reading bedtime stories become the foundation for change when appropriate support helps them develop into significant changes in children's self-awareness and social understanding. Accessible and inclusive resources empower parents to become social justice advocates within their homes.

The research validates that children's literature serve as a transformative tool which builds connections between readers and promotes both reflection and inclusion. Parents guide their children towards gender and identity comprehension by participating in shared reading experiences that build empathy and develop allyship skills. It also shows how knowledge can increase by incorporating inclusive education and discussion amongst family members using shared reading when it occurs outside the traditional classroom setting. Children bring this knowledge to school and community settings where they contribute to build safer environments that support justice for all.

Appendix A: Demographic Survey Protocol

This 18-question survey will be administered to participants chosen for the interviews. Notes in blue are to explain the question types for IRB reviewers. Only text in black font will appear on the survey.

[Exclusion criteria- 3. If participants respond “no” to any of these, they will not be invited to receive the demographic question survey.]

1. Are you at least 18 years of age?

Yes

No

2. Do you care for at least one K-5 grade child who lives in your home?

Yes

No

3. Are you open to having conversations with your child about gender and LGBTQ+ topics?

Yes

No

[Demographic questions -14]

4. What is your relationship with the child you care for?

Mother

Father

Aunt

Uncle

Grandmother

Grandfather

Step-parent

Other _____

I prefer not to answer

5. Please indicate the number of people (including yourself) in each age group living in your home:

____ 0-2 years

____ 3-5 years

☐ 6-8 years
☐ 9-12 years
☐ 13-17 years
☐ 18-up
☐ I prefer not to answer.

6. What is your age?

If you prefer not to answer, please write “prefer not to answer” as your response below.

(short answer)

7. What is your gender?

Please choose all that apply (checkboxes)

Male

Female

Transgender

Non-binary

Other (Specify) _____

☐ I prefer not to answer.

8. What is your sexuality?

Please choose all that apply (checkboxes)

Asexual

Bisexual

Gay

Lesbian

Queer

Questioning

Straight

Other (Specify) _____

☐ I prefer not to answer

9. Which best describes your current marital status?

(multiple choice - choose 1)

Divorced

Married

Never Married

Separated

Single

Widowed

Other (Specify) _____

I prefer not to answer

10. Which race or ethnicity best describes you?

Please choose all that apply (checkboxes)

American Indian or Alaskan Native

Asian/Pacific Islander

Black or African American

Hispanic

White/Caucasian

Multiple ethnicity/Other (please specify) _____

I prefer not to answer

11. What are the grades of the children you care for?

(checkboxes-check all that apply)

Infant

preschool

K

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

10

11

12

I prefer not to answer.

12. Which best describes where your child attends school?

Check all that apply (checkboxes):

A public school

A charter school

A private school

A parochial school

I homeschool my child

Other:

I prefer not to answer.

13. What language/s do the children you care for speak most at home?

(multiple choice - choose 1)

English

Spanish

English and Spanish equally

English and Another Language Equally (Specify) _____

Another language (Specify) _____

I prefer not to answer

14. What language do you speak most at home?

(multiple choice - choose 1)

English

Spanish

English and Spanish equally

English and Another Language Equally (Specify) _____

Another language (Specify) _____

I prefer not to answer.

15. What is the highest level of education you have completed?

(multiple choice -select one)

Did not attend school

Elementary school

High school

1 year of college

2 years of college

3 years of college

Graduated from college with a bachelor's degree

Some graduate school

Completed graduate school with a master's degree

Completed graduate school with an M.D., J.D., or Ph.D.

I prefer not to answer.

16. What is the occupation(s) of the adults in the household?

(Specify) _____

I prefer not to answer

17. What is your household's typical yearly income?

(multiple choice - choose 1)

Under \$26,500

\$26,501-\$50,000

\$50,001-\$79, 899

Above \$79,900
I prefer not to answer.

18. Do you identify with any of the following religions?

(Checkboxes: check all that apply.)

Protestantism

Catholicism

Christianity

Judaism

Islam

Buddhism

Hinduism

Native American

Inter/Non-denominational

No religion

Other (please specify) _____

I prefer not to answer

Appendix B: Initial Interview Protocol

[Introductions]

Hello! My name is Mandy, and I am a PhD student at Oakland University in the Literacy, Culture, and Language program. I would like to thank you for your time today to help me with my research. I will gather your views on sexual orientation and gender topics related to children's literature and your child. I will use this information to choose 3-4 children's books for you to review at a later time.

[Interview Questions will be asked of the participant.]

I have 13 questions that I would like to ask you.

1. Rapport building questions:
 - a. Tell me about your child
 - b. Tell me a little about your family
 - c. Tell me about a time when you were reading with your child.
2. Imagine that you are reading children's literature that includes sexual orientation topics or characters (gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer, etc.) with your child. How would you feel?
 - a. How confident do you imagine you would be?
3. Imagine you are reading children's literature with various topics about gender (gender binary, gender non-binary, gender fluidity, or transgender) with your child. How would you feel?
 - a. How confident do you imagine you would be?
4. Imagine you read a book with your child that included topics about sexual orientation. Tell me about your confidence in having a discussion with your child or answering a question they may have?
5. Imagine you read a book with your children that included various gender topics (cisgender, gender binary, gender non-binary, gender fluidity, or transgender). Tell me about your confidence in having a discussion with your child or answering a question they may have?
6. What might be helpful for a parent if they want to read books with topics about sexual orientation (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, asexuality, intersex, and questioning) with their child?
7. What might be helpful for a parent if they want to read books about gender with their child?
8. What discussions do you wish families would have with their children about sexual orientation and gender?
9. What would you like to learn about sexual orientation and gender in children's literature?
 - a. What kinds of resources would you find helpful when finding, choosing, and reading books with your child that include sexual orientation and gender?

[Potential follow-ups to participants' responses to each interview question may be as follows to gather more information]:

- Tell me more about that.
- Can you tell me more about that?
- Do you have anything more to add?

[Closing the interview]

Thank you so much for taking the time today to participate in this interview.

Appendix C: Reflection Protocol

[The parents will complete their reflections and email them to me or upload them to a secure Google Drive folder along with their final book selection (2 books).]

Thank you so much for reading and reviewing these children's book options that will potentially be used for resource creation. Immediately following your reading of each book, please take some time to complete an open-ended parent journal where you will record their thoughts about the books in order to prepare for making your final book selection.

The question I would like you to reflect on is, "***What were your experiences when you were reading this book?***" You may choose to handwrite, video, or audio record your thinking. This is intended to document your current thoughts right after reading. Once you have read and reflected on each of the books, please make your selection of the two books you would like to choose for resources to be created and to read with your child.

To aid you in your reflection, you may want to consider the following questions:

What did you think of the text?

What characters, themes, or issues stood out to you in this book?

What surprised, intrigued, or challenged you the most about this book?

What feelings emerged for you when you were reading this book?

Appendix D: Resource Review Interview Protocol

[Opening]

Thank you very much for reviewing the resources. These resources are changing, and the intention is for them to continue to improve, so this is not the final round of input you will provide. Thank you for your honest feedback.

[Interview Questions will be asked of the participant.]

I have 8 questions that I would like to ask you.

1. First, I'd like to hear from you about how you chose the books that you chose and why?

Great, now we will switch gears to chat about the resources

2. What was your overall impression of the resources?
3. What parts of the resource are most helpful for parents and why?
4. Is there anything that you would like to see included that is missing in the resources?
5. Is there anything you found confusing or unclear within the resources?
6. How comfortable do you feel using these resources and talking to your child about gender diversity?
7. Are the activities or discussion prompts in the resources age-appropriate for elementary children? Why or why not?
8. Is there anything else you would like to add?

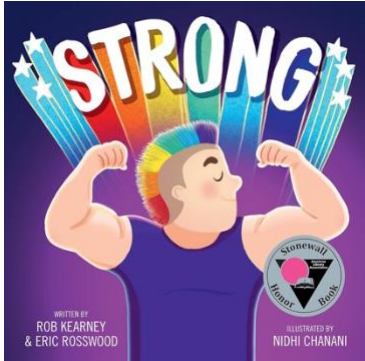
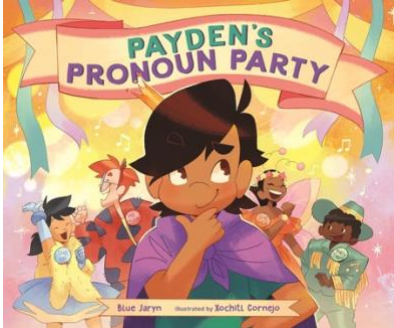
[Potential follow-ups to participants' responses to each interview question may be as follows to gather more information.]

- Tell me more about that.
- Can you tell me more about that?
- Do you have anything more to add?

[Closing the interview]

Thank you so much for taking the time today to participate in this interview.

Appendix E: Books Reviewed by Parents

Reviewer	Book	Synopsis
Rachel and Stephanie	Strong by Rob Kearney and Eric Rosswood Illustrated by Nidhi Chanani 	Rob dreams of becoming a champion strongman. He wants to flip huge tires, lug boulders, and haul trucks -- and someday be the strongest man in the world! But he feels like he can't fit in with his bright leggings, unicorn T-shirts, and rainbow-dyed hair. Will Rob find a way to step into his true self and be a champion (Kearney & Rosswood, 2022)?
Rachel	Payden's Pronoun Party by Blue Jaryn illustrated by Xochitl Cornejo 	Payden always used he/him pronouns but one day realizes they might not fit. Payden's parents promise to throw a big party to celebrate whatever pronouns Payden chooses—but which pronouns <i>are</i> the best match? On a colorful quest, Payden visits friends around town to talk over a whole rainbow of possibilities: he, she, they, ze, and more! The right pronouns are just waiting to be discovered. Put on your party hats for this warm and thoughtful story that glows with enthusiastic support for questioning identity and celebrating difference (Jaryn, 2022)
Rachel	A Costume for Charly by C.K. Malone	Halloween is always tricky for Charly, and this year they are determined to find a costume that

illustrated by Alejandra Barajas



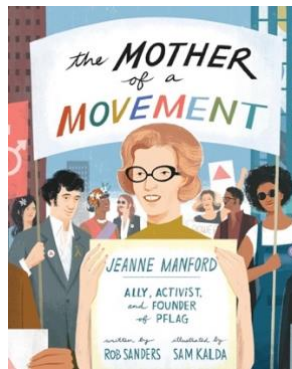
showcases both the feminine and masculine halves of their identity.

Digging through their disguise trunk, they explore many fun costumes. Some are masc. Some are femme. Some are neither. But all are lacking.

As trick-or-treating looms, they must think outside the box to find the perfect costume—something that will allow them to present as one hundred percent Charly (Malone, 2022).

Rachel

The Mother of a Movement: Ally, Activist, and Founder of PFLAG
By Rob Sanders
Illustrated by Sam Kalda



What does a mom do?
She could listen.
She could learn.
She could speak up.
She could lead.

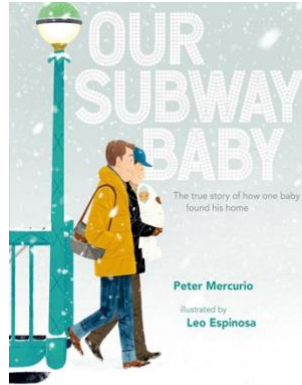
This is exactly what Jeanne Manford, the co-founder of PFLAG, did when her son Morty was attacked and beaten for handing out pro-gay leaflets. Manford wrote a powerful letter to the *New York Post* to speak out about how Morty was treated. In the letter she came out as the mother of a gay son, something not many parents shared at the time. She showed her support by marching side-by-side with him in the June Christopher Street Liberation Day March. While marching, she had the idea to form a group to help parents and families of LGBTQ+ people. That was the beginning of PFLAG.

Stephanie

Our Subway Baby
by Peter Mercurio

Some babies are born into families. Some are adopted. This

Illustrated by Leo Espinosa



is the story of how one baby found his family in the New York City subway.

One night, on his way home from work, a man named Danny saw something in the corner of the subway station. At first he thought it was a doll, but it wasn't. It was a newborn baby, wrapped up in a sweatshirt.

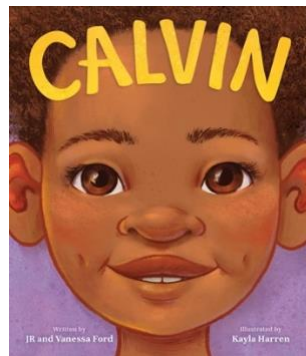
Fate changed three lives that night. Because that tiny newborn—that subway baby—ultimately became Danny and his partner Peter's son (Mercurio, 2020).

Stephanie

Calvin

By JR and Vanessa Ford

Illustrated by Kayla Harren



Calvin has always been a boy, even if the world sees him as a girl. He knows who he is in his heart and in his mind but he hasn't yet told his family. Finally, he can wait no longer: "I'm not a girl," he tells his family. "I'm a boy--a boy in my heart and in my brain." Quick to support him, his loving family takes Calvin shopping for the swim trunks he's always wanted and back-to-school clothes and a new haircut that helps him look and feel like the boy he's always known himself to be. As the first day of school approaches, he's nervous and the "what-ifs" gather up inside him. But as his friends and teachers rally around him and he tells them his name, all his "what-ifs" begin to melt away.

Stephanie

Jacob's New Dress
By Sarah and Ian Hoffman
Illustrated by Chris Case



Jacob loves playing dress-up, when he can be anything he wants to be. Some kids at school say he can't wear "girl" clothes, but Jacob wants to wear a dress to school. Can he convince his parents to let him wear what he wants? This heartwarming story speaks to the unique challenges faced by children who don't identify with traditional gender roles.

Appendix F: Final Interview Protocol

[Opening]

Thank you so much for your participation in this study and in this final interview.

[Interview Questions will be asked of the participant.]

I have 10 questions that I would like to ask you.

1. What were some of your primary takeaways from this experience?
2. What do you intend to do next, following this experience?
3. What did you discover about the topics covered in the books you read with your child?
4. What did your child discover about the topics covered in the books you read together?
5. What suggestions for revisions, edits, additions, or deletions do you have for _____ (insert name of book 1 resource)? Please explain
6. What suggestions for revisions, edits, additions, or deletions do you have for _____ (insert name of book 2 resource)? Please explain
7. How did using the resources benefit you?
8. How do you believe the project has benefited your child?
9. How do you see these resources assisting other parents?
10. Is there anything else you would want to share about your involvement in this project?

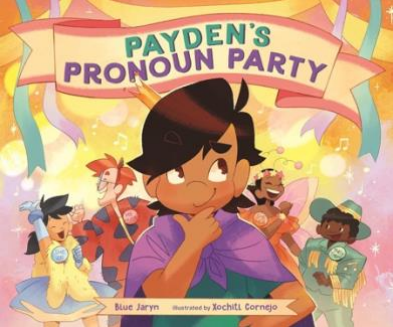
[Potential follow-ups to participants' responses to each interview question may be as follows to gather more information.]

- Tell me more about that.
- Can you tell me more about that?
- Do you have anything more to add?

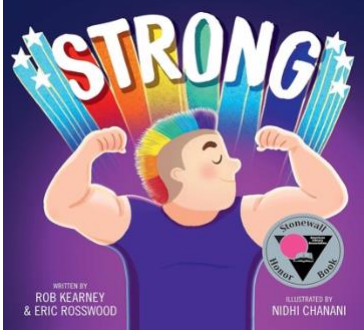
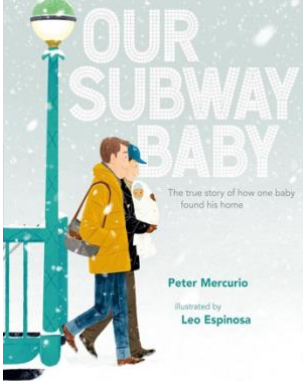
[Closing the interview]

Thank you so much for taking the time today to participate in this final interview. It has been a pleasure to work with you during this project, and I sincerely thank you for all the time that you put in with [child's name]. Your time and the data that I have collected will be such a valuable contribution to the field. Thank you so much again!

Appendix G: Rachel's Book Selections

Book	Synopsis
Payden's Pronoun Party by Blue Jaryn illustrated by Xochitl Cornejo 	Payden always used he/him pronouns but one day realizes they might not fit. Payden's parents promise to throw a big party to celebrate whatever pronouns Payden chooses—but which pronouns <i>are</i> the best match? On a colorful quest, Payden visits friends around town to talk over a whole rainbow of possibilities: he, she, they, ze, and more! The right pronouns are just waiting to be discovered. Put on your party hats for this warm and thoughtful story that glows with enthusiastic support for questioning identity and celebrating difference (Jaryn, 2022)
A Costume for Charly by C.K. Malone illustrated by Alejandra Barajas 	Halloween is always tricky for Charly, and this year they are determined to find a costume that showcases both the feminine and masculine halves of their identity. Digging through their disguise trunk, they explore many fun costumes. Some are masc. Some are femme. Some are neither. But all are lacking. As trick-or-treating looms, they must think outside the box to find the perfect costume—something that will allow them to present as one hundred percent Charly (Malone, 2022).

Appendix H: Stephanie's Book Selections

Book	Synopsis
<i>Strong</i> by Rob Kearney and Eric Rosswood Illustrated by Nidhi Chanani 	Rob dreams of becoming a champion strongman. He wants to flip huge tires, lug boulders, and haul trucks -- and someday be the strongest man in the world! But he feels like he can't fit in with his bright leggings, unicorn T-shirts, and rainbow-dyed hair. Will Rob find a way to step into his true self and be a champion (Kearney & Rosswood, 2022)?
<i>Our Subway Baby</i> by Peter Mercurio Illustrated by Leo Espinosa 	Some babies are born into families. Some are adopted. This is the story of how one baby found his family in the New York City subway. One night, on his way home from work, a man named Danny saw something in the corner of the subway station. At first he thought it was a doll, but it wasn't. It was a newborn baby, wrapped up in a sweatshirt. Fate changed three lives that night. Because that tiny newborn—that subway baby—ultimately became Danny and his partner Peter's son (Mercurio, 2020).

Appendix I: IRB Approval

Mandy Wowra <amandabladzik@oakland.edu>

IRB-FY2024-137 - Initial: Expedited Decision - Initial

1 message

do-not-reply@cayuse.com <do-not-reply@cayuse.com> Tue, Dec 19, 2023 at 9:19 AM

To: amandabladzik@oakland.edu, jasonmoore@oakland.edu

Date: December 19, 2023

Study #: IRB-FY2024-137

Study Title: Developing Resources for Parents and Children When Reading Literature About Gender and Sexual

Orientation: A Design-Based Study

Submission Type: Initial

IRB Decision: Approved

Research Team:

Amanda Wowra

Jason Moore

Based on applicable federal regulations, the above referenced study has been determined to involve no more than

minimal risk to participants and to be Approved, with the following expedited categories:

6. Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.

7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception,

cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research

employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance

methodologies. (NOTE: Some research in this category may be exempt from the HHS regulations for the protection of

human subjects. 45 CFR 46.101(b)(2) and (b)(3). This listing refers only to research that is not exempt.)

This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a project design wherein the risks have been minimized. All

research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

Letter and Consent Documents:

This letter along with the three IRB approved (date-stamped) consent documents can be found in Cayuse in the

Submission Details page under Letters and Attachments, respectively.

The IRB approved version of the consent documents must be used in consenting participants. Federal regulations require

that each participant receive a copy of the consent document unless a waiver is granted by the IRB.

Signed consent

forms must be retained for a minimum of three years after the completion of the project. Please

remember that informed

consent is a process that continues throughout the project, starting with recruitment and assurance of participant

understanding of the project, and followed by a signed consent form when applicable.

Permission from Research Sites:

Please note the following:

This IRB approval letter means that the research has met the federal criteria for approval per 45 CFR 46.111

Criteria for IRB Approval of Research.

7/9/25, 7:27 PM Oakland University Mail - IRB-FY2024-137 - Initial: Expedited Decision - Initial

<https://mail.google.com/mail/u/3/?ik=9cdc00b556&view=pt&search=all&permthid=thread-f:1785720270890848072&simpl=msg-f:1785720270890848072> 1/2 Before the research is initiated, permission to conduct research at a given site

must be obtained from all research

locations listed in the IRB submission. You must keep copies of all such permission letters for your records.

It is the responsibility of each researcher to follow all applicable policies and procedures of any outside institution

where the research will be conducted.

Modifications:

Any changes to the approved project must be approved by the IRB prior to initiation by submitting a MODIFICATION

request. Do not collect data while the changes are being reviewed. Data collected during this time cannot be used in research.

Incidents:

All unanticipated problems involving risks to participants or others, serious and unexpected adverse events, non-

compliance issues and/or serious complaints regarding this project must be reported promptly to the IRB by submitting an

INCIDENT report.

You are approved to start the research. Please retain a copy of this notification for your records.

If you have any questions, please contact the IRB office.

Thank you.

The Oakland University IRB

7/9/25, 7:27 PM Oakland University Mail - IRB-FY2024-137 - Initial: Expedited Decision - Initial

[https://mail.google.com/mail/u/3/?ik=9cdc00b556&view=pt&search=all&permthid=thread-f:1785720270890848072&simpl=msg-](https://mail.google.com/mail/u/3/?ik=9cdc00b556&view=pt&search=all&permthid=thread-f:1785720270890848072&simpl=msg-f:1785720270890848072)

f:1785720270890848072 2/2

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