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I, Becky L Bridgman, hereby submit this original work as part of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education in Literacy and Second Language Studies.

It is entitled:
Critical Literacy: Exploring Topics of Sexuality and Gender with Young Children

Student’s name: Becky L Bridgman

This work and its defense approved by:

Committee chair: Connie Kendall, Ph.D.
Committee member: Caitlin L. Ryan, Ph.D.
Committee member: Cheri Williams, Ph.D.
Critical Literacy:
Exploring Topics of Sexuality and Gender with Young Children

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by

Becky L. Bridgman

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Committee Chair: Connie Kendall Theado, Ph.D.
ABSTRACT

This qualitative study grounded in critical literacy and queer theory investigated three elementary students along with myself, assuming the role as teacher to explore how topics related to sexuality and gender could occur through literary conversations. The first purpose was to focus on how young children respond to LGBTQ-themed representations within children’s texts via critical literacy. Three participant responses were noted toward LGBTQ-themed children’s literature and to the topic of sexuality and gender in general: (1) Student Rejects, (2) Student Replicates, or (3) Student Recreates. The second purpose was to examine how the researcher, assuming the role of teacher, could enact critical literacy with a focus on sexuality and gender. Two findings were noted: (1) Focusing on Power, and (2) Teaching Critical Language. Focusing on Power included recognizing the significance of incorporating diverse texts as well as directing the participants’ attention to the various representations in the texts. Teaching Critical Language entailed the importance of modeling critical language through posing questions and encouraging participants to make personal connections. A cross-case analysis underscored that participants produced four similar responses: (1) family is not heterosexually or homosexually limiting, (2) questioning the concept of not marrying, (3) resisting representations of princesses, particularly boy princesses and (4) using critical literacy to insert individual and meaningful topics. The differences among the participants were: (1) the individual and unique vies about family structures and (2) the participants’ views according to color preferences and gender. This study has implications for future research as well as demonstrates how schools, including teachers and students, can assist each other in exploring subjectivity by questioning the normative practice and ideologies portrayed in text through literacy conversations and thus support equity and social justice.
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Chapter 1

Introduction

The first time I enrolled my daughter, Emma, into daycare at the age of 18 months I pondered how she would navigate herself as a young child with two mothers in this learning environment. Within six months, one of her classmates similar in age announced while standing in the middle of the room: “One of Emma’s moms is here.” This classmate then proceeded to move toward the exit gate seeking confirmation about my daughter’s family structure, glaring directly at me, and asserting, “She has two mommies?” By the age of three, my daughter could effortlessly articulate that she had two mommies. As she continued to develop, I observed how she managed to make sense of her family structure while mainly being offered heteronormative representations within the school environment and within society in general. At four, she resorted to using animals to construct her pretend family. I was the “Mommy” but in play, I became Mommy Giraffe, Mommy Pig or Mommy Crocodile. The other mother, referred to as “Mama” became Daddy Giraffe, Daddy Pig, or Daddy Crocodile. Emma would often adopt the role of “baby” and would request to be called Baby Giraffe, Baby Pig or Baby Crocodile. The need to define the role of Daddy persistently presented itself through Emma’s play even though this presence did not exist in her home environment. These roles remained consistent and we did not challenge the representations placed upon us. Although Emma was exposed to diverse representations at an early age within the home, she continued to demonstrate her awareness of how society categorized men and women both in regards to sexuality and gender.

It was apparent that the heteronormative representations offered to her via school and society affected how she sought to align herself and her family. In view of the fact that I believe that education can play an important role in either reproducing or challenging unequal structures of power in society, I designed this collective case study with the desire to explore literary
conversations between the teacher and students focused on sexuality and gender as a way to encourage curriculum change that supports equity and social justice practices at the elementary school level.

**Situating Sexuality and Gender in Schools: Politics and Pedagogy**

Influenced by historical tensions concerning sexuality and gender, heteronormative perspectives remain embedded within the teacher recruitment process, curriculum, student conduct codes, approval of extra-curricular activities and after school programs (Clifford, 1989; Harbeck, 1997; Lugg, 2003). The degree to which heteronormativity permeates most schools is perhaps best illustrated within certain key historical moments. In the early 19th century, when sexologists classified two types of sexualities—heterosexuality and homosexuality—homosexuality by default became the socially deviant classification as it did not support procreation thus creating the homogenous heterosexual culture (Hocquenghem, 1978; Pinar, 1998). Classifying people according to their sexuality not only placed heterosexuals as the dominant group, but also facilitated in justifications for prosecuting and bullying homosexuals (Hocquenghem, 1978; Pinar, 1998). Gender expression played an important role in identifying a person as homosexual or heterosexual. Individuals who demonstrated heterosexual behavior received heterosexual recognition and those who did not were homosexuals (Clifford, 1989, Lugg, 2003). Following these classifications, sexologists later proclaimed that children’s sexual orientation are “at risk” causing schools to securitize for pernicious homosexuals. By the 1950s, the educational administration was male dominated and married; single women affected by gender expectations were ideologically compelled to marry, and students understood that heterosexuality was the only sexuality that did not carry stigmas or discrimination (Lugg, 2003). The sexual hysteria placed on teachers trickled down to students and to the curriculum. Sexual
education courses did not appear within the school system until the late eighties (Lugg, 2003), and in the case of Montgomery County of Maryland schools, it was required that health teachers suggested reparative therapy or sexually transmitted diseases within in the context of homosexuality (Vail, 2005).

In Queens, New York, during the 1990s, there was a recommendation for an elementary curriculum guide titled *Children of the Rainbow* that focused on tolerance towards different cultures, including LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer) people. Many parents and community members objected to the curriculum guide based on three pages which included representations of LGBTQ individuals along with three supplementary gay-friendly children’s books. As a result, one school district accounting for 2700 students rejected the curriculum guide, and four other districts omitted the sections pertaining exclusively to homosexuality (Besner & Spungin, 1995, Whitson, 1992).

Another factor to consider is the various interpretations of the first amendment and its role in censoring representations related to diverse sexuality and gender expression in schools (Whitson, 1992). For instance, in one court ruling (*Zyan v. Warsaw*, 1980), the court ruled in favor of granting the school board members the final word about which books supported their political, social, or moral viewpoints. Books not suited to their position were to be removed from classrooms or the library. In doing so, this case signified that school officials had almost unlimited authority to censor courses, materials, and the curriculum. More recently, some schools censor any type of instruction or activities portraying the LGBTQ lifestyle in a positive manner by enacting *No Promo Homo* policies (Hanlon, 2009) and approximately 39 states refused to enact laws which would protect LGBTQ students from harassment based on their sexual orientation (Calefati, 2008).
The historical efforts to guard schools and classrooms from any positive LGBTQ perspectives demonstrate poignantly the interlinking of pedagogy and politics and the struggle of whose viewpoints will ultimately prevail in the classroom. Blackburn (2012) asserts how negative schools are for LGBTQ students as well as those with LGBTQ family members. Consequently, there remains a significant degree of apprehension surrounding queer students or those raised by LGBTQ parents for many schools (Mayo, 2014). The discussion to integrate topics within the school context often elicits divisive and politically charged reactions, as evidenced by the recent June 2014 debate in Ohio that required Catholic school teachers to sign an anti-LGBTQ “morality cause” (Gettys, 2014) obliging teachers to not support LGBTQ individuals. Other states, such as Tennessee, have equally demonstrated their dislike of integrating LGBTQ topics into the school. For instance, public schools in Tennessee (Curve, 2009) blocked websites containing the keyword “LGBTQ”. In a 2013 survey conducted by the Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network (GLSEN) less than two students out of ten students reported that they were provided with positive representations about LGBTQ people in the classroom. In sum, students learn powerful lessons about sexuality and gender by the ways in which schools and teachers validate or silence LGBTQ individuals in the classroom (Blackburn, 2012; Blount, 2000; Birden, 2005).

**Statement of the Research Problem**

Children’s literature, a staple in early childhood classrooms, advances certain normative beliefs and offers a world view about how males and females should interact in the world and with each other (Crisp & Hiller, 2011). Most children’s literature, and in particular those texts that are used in the classroom, and during storytime, support a heteronormative perspective of society (Rowell, 2007). Offering only normative representations of sexuality and gender in the
classroom implicitly suggests that lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) people either do not exist or that they are not worth mentioning (Daniel, 2007; Janmohamed, 2010). Consequently, by offering mostly heteronormative perspectives, schools not only fail to take a proactive stance towards homophobia (Blackburn & Clark, 2011) but also support a type of hidden curriculum which denies positive representations about diverse sexuality and gender (Sears, 1991).

Some critical literacy scholars (Burns, 2009; Harste, 2000, Leland & al, 2005; Vasquez, 2010) assert the importance of reconceptualizing storytime, a staple in most elementary classrooms, to include a critical literacy approach. Adopting a critical literacy approach with a focus on sexuality and gender, for instance, would encourage readers to examine the text beyond the words and pictures of LGBTQ-themed and non-LGBTQ themed texts with the goal of interpreting the text in relation to the author’s purpose, message, and its overall place within society. Harste (2000) believes that engaging children in conversations which invite them to examine the effects of otherness encourages children to examine the world from a different perspective. Harste demonstrates how she utilized a critical literacy approach by reading books aloud versus enacting the conventional tenets of storytime which required children to decode the overall idea. Leland, Harste, and Huber (2005) further state that what is missing in most elementary classrooms is the involvement of young learners engaging in a deeper process which requires them to analyze and critique the messages around them. Children who experience and engage in a critical literacy approach not only learn how to read between the lines but also are able to produce alternative explanations for the author’s purpose (Leland et al., 2005).

Researchers, focused on sexuality and gender, have found that some adults believe that by discussing sexuality and gender with children it promotes the loss of childhood innocence
Yet sexuality and gender representations are readily available through media, family, and friends (Hanlon, 2009). Ryan, Patraw, and Bednar (2013) have argued that many educators do not feel comfortable addressing diverse gender notions. Curriculums which only offer heteronormative perspectives can deny children the chance to see family and friends who exhibit gender creativity, defy gender norms, or identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual in a positive manner. Since education can play an important role in either reproducing or challenging unequal structures of power in society, critical readings focused on gender and sexuality not only allow children to expand their viewpoints regarding men and women but also work to support equal representation and social justice perspectives towards individuals and their families.

Although some early childhood researchers and literacy scholars have recommended introducing topics of sexuality and gender in the primary grades (Blaise, 2009; Blackburn & Clark, 2011; Davies, 2003; DePalma & Atkinson, 2009; Hall, 2008; Hermann-Wilmarth, 2007, 2010; Janmohamed, 2010; Rice, 2002; Rowell, 2007, Letts & Sears, 1999, Schall & Kauffman, 2003), very few research studies have focused directly on critically reading LGBTQ-themed with elementary students or have offered a cross-case analysis of the participants responses to the topic of sexuality and gender (Hall, 2008; Hermann-Wilmarth, 2007, 2010; Souto-Manning & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2008).

**Purpose of the Study and Research Questions**

This study investigated young children’s responses to LGBTQ-themed children’s literature using a critical reading approach enacted by the researcher serving as the teacher. The term, *critical reading*, is defined for the purposes of this study as analyzing, discussing, and comparing the LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ representations presented in multiple texts, including
children’s literature and television shows (Comber, 2013, 2005, 2001; Janks, 1993, Vasquez, 2010). A critical reading approach thus views texts as neither neutral nor apolitical artifacts, but rather every text carries a message through its words or illustrations. For this reason, a critical literacy theoretical framework guided the study and was enacted through approaches similar to critical pedagogical practices (Comber, 2005; Hagood, 2002; Janks, 1993; Vasquez 2010).

The overall purpose of the study was to examine how young children respond, both verbally and nonverbally, to critical readings of LGBTQ-themed children’s literature as a way to explore their thinking about sexuality and gender and add to the limited body of scholarship that supports curriculum change directed toward integrating these topics at the elementary level. The study was guided by the following questions:

1. How do young children respond, verbally and non-verbally, to LGBTQ representations within children’s texts via a critical literacy approach?

2. How can critical literacy with a focus on sexuality and gender be enacted by the researcher assuming the role as teacher?

Positionality of Researcher

According to Maxwell (2013), a researcher must consider the role that her or his personal, practical, and intellectual objectives play in the study. For these reasons, I acknowledge that I am a lesbian mother of a young child committed to making schools and, specifically, elementary schools, a more inclusive place for LGBTQ students or those raised by LGBTQ parents. Given my position, my research goals continually work toward providing children with equal opportunities by ensuring access to resources that validate LGBTQ individuals, such as their family members or themselves, and engaging in positive conversations about LGBTQ individuals within the school context.
Additionally, I bring the insights gained from my pilot study, in which I examined a group of preschoolers participating in read alouds of LGBTQ-themed literature (Bridgman, 2012). At the onset of my pilot study, I entered the research site with the conviction that notions about diverse sexuality and gender could be constructed alongside heterosexual representations. I intended to represent LGBTQ people and their families “as is”—another element of society—meaning that I had planned not to highlight the nontraditional family structure. After a few observations, however, I recognized that young children already possessed a wealth of knowledge regarding gender and sexuality, specifically representations related to heterosexual families. This realization caused me to immediately realign myself with a critical perspective, which aims to challenge existing power structures and expand ideologies (Cushman, Kintgen, Kroll, & Rose, 2001; Freire, 1970/2000).

In doing so, I turned to the work of Vasquez (2004) who in her book, *Negotiating Critical Literacies with Young Children*, claimed that preschoolers are capable of successfully engaging in critical literacies by examining assumptions about society, as well as questioning their own perspectives about texts. Daniel and Auriac (2011), researchers of educational philosophy of children, argue that we are not inherently born as critical thinkers, critical thinking is a learned process. Second, as cited by Hagood (2002), since critical literacy is located between social theory and the sociology of reading, literacy equally becomes a political practice affected by social, cultural, and historical factors (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Street, 1995). By becoming critical thinkers, children are able to examine the interplay between society and literacy by understanding the influence on the construction of texts, textual meanings, and the formation of self, such as the heteronormative representations offered to children in most children’s literature. Critical thinking as a process requires repetition and skills on behalf of the teacher to guide
elementary students in their elaboration and analysis of a problem. The study, therefore, was guided by critical literacy theory as a means of implementing critical practices at the elementary level.

**Conceptual Framework: Critical Literacy and Queer Theory**

The study relied on two conceptual frameworks: critical literacy and queer theory. Both theories equally guided the data analysis and assisted in selecting data suited to answering the research questions. Each framework is discussed below in further detail outlining how each was used in collecting and interpreting the data.

**Critical Literacy**

Critical literacy served as one of the study’s theoretical framework. Critical literacy is consistent with Freire’s (1970/2000) notion of *libratory education* which encourages the student to make inquiries about all taken-for-granted values, ideas, norms, and so forth (Sargis, 2008). Likewise, critical literacy encourages the student to become aware of how the written language and supplied representations in the text promotes a particular ideology (Bloome & Talkwaker, 1997). In the case of elementary students, critical literacy allows young children to enjoy the text while evaluating the social construction of it, asking questions such as what representations are present and which are not (Harwood, 2008). Unlike the majority of scholars employing critical literacy, Vasquez (2004, 2007) primarily studies young children using critical literacy.

Informed by Comber (2005) and Vasquez (2010), this study used language and literacy as an approach to explore ideologies governing sexuality and gender in society through critical readings similar to storytime within a classroom. Freire (1970/2000) and hooks (1994) maintain that the dissemination of knowledge coincides with implementing certain ideologies and viewpoints. Reading heteronormative children’s literature thus coincides with implementing
certain ideologies governing sexuality and gender. Examining data through a critical literacy lens permitted me to adopt a contextualized viewpoint as well as to account for the explicit and implicit power dynamics within the classroom. A critical literacy lens thus facilitated a closer examination of the social valorization of heterosexuality over homosexuality within the school context (Birden, 2005; DePalma & Atkinson, 2009).

In this study, critical literacy involved examining society’s views regarding sexuality and gender to better understand the connection between language and power (Janks, 1993). Additionally, critical literacy was an approach used to demonstrate how language and literacy categorizes people as either aligning with the status quo (e.g., those most represented in texts) or positioned them as outcasts (e.g., minimal to no representations). Through evaluating the missing voices of texts readily available to young children, via children’s literature or pop culture (e.g., children’s television programs), critical literacy supports examining social issues such as race, class, sexuality and gender.

Exploring topics of sexuality and gender by means of examining LGBTQ-themed texts aligns with critical literacy in several ways. First, critical literacy validates young children as capable and willing to engage in social justice issues (Vasquez, 2004 2007). Second, critical literacy demonstrates how our understanding of the world is socially constructed and in turn can be lacking in multicultural and diverse representations (Vasquez, 2004; 2007). By applying critical literacy to the study, I was able to consider how students navigated their position in the classroom as well as situated themselves in relation to diverse representations in the texts (Larson & Marsch, 2005). Lastly, to explore ideologies governing sexuality and gender in society, I relied on language and literacy as a way to exercise power in the classroom by modeling how to examine readily available texts in schools (Comber, 2005). Using critical
literacy required exploring multiple texts and teaching participants that all texts portrayed a particular perspective about the world which might be similar to or different from personal viewpoints and experiences of their own.

In this study, the tenets of critical literacy refer to the overall philosophy and purpose of critical literacy and are defined as (a) focusing on power that encouraged reflection, transformation, or action (b) focusing on the issue and its complexity (c) using dynamic and adaptable pedagogical techniques according to the context and perspectives of students, and (d) examining multiple viewpoints of critical literacy, such as production of identity and construction of subjectivity (DeVoogd, 2004; Hagood, 2002; Quintero, 2009; Vasquez, 2010). In sum, a critical literacy approach refers to the action of the teacher or student implementing the tenets of critical literacy. This theory is further discussed in chapter two.

**Queer Theory**

The second theoretical framework supporting this study is queer theory. Queer theory promotes various perspectives on what normal means to various people (Britzman, 1995) and thus deconstructs rigid binaries to uncover the complexities connected to sexuality and gender (Oswald et al., 2005). Many books and, in particular, young children’s books depict females as nurturing feminine individuals, attentive to fashion and home, while males are portrayed as masculine, outspoken, and heroic (Martino & Mellor, 2000). These types of representations can limit children’s knowledge about how men and women act in society as well as uphold stereotypical beliefs.

Ryan and Hermann-Wilmarth (2013) reported on how queer theory had been used to examine multiple texts and thus is an equally appropriate theory for examining children’s literature. In line with critical literacy, queer theory recognizes that each book carries a message
imposed by the author or illustrator. Ryan and Hermann-Wilmarth acknowledged that the gender or sexuality of a text could not be altered, but rather examined for its complexity. In this study, queer theory was used to examine the fluidity of gender and sexuality while using a critical literacy approach to foster analytical discussions about the purpose and intent of the author. Additionally, queer theory was used to “queer” or alter perceptions related to gender and sexuality through talking about commonly-held binaries and promoting the importance of sexuality and gender diversity in children’s books.

These conceptual frameworks not only aligned with a critical literacy approach in examining the literature, but also supported my role as the researcher serving as the teacher. Used in tandem, critical literacy and queer theory permitted me to focus on disrupting the everyday heteronormative practices, by analyzing children’s literature, as a means to investigate the social and equity issues surrounding sexuality and gender in society (Comber, 2005). In sum, this study relied equally on critical literacy and queer theory to examine the responses of young children’s participation in a read loud of LGBTQ-themed texts.

Knowledge Gained from Pilot Study

The findings noted in the limited but similar research studies along with the results from my pilot study (Bridgman, 2012) shaped the analysis of the data for this study. In my pilot study, five preschoolers’ responses to LGBTQ-themed children’s literature were investigated to better understand how topics of sexuality and gender could be addressed in the classroom. Critical literacy theory and queer theory served as the theoretical frameworks. Two findings on how to address topics of sexuality and gender with young children were revealed in the pilot study. The first finding outlined that teachers should explicitly confront heteronormativity through various pedagogical practices: (1) questioning and responding to literature, (2) being empathetic; and (3)
modeling acceptance toward multiple views. The second finding demonstrated the various ways in which the preschoolers served as active agents reserving their viewpoints toward sexuality and gender by: (1) expressing their awareness and acceptance towards LGBTQ representations, (2) resisting or redirecting such representations, or (3) consenting with the perspective of another. Overall, the data suggested that learning about diverse sexual representations and gender occurred during those times in which, I, as the researcher-teacher, purposely included non-heteronormative topics in the classroom.

This current study is different from my pilot study in that my pilot study examined the participant responses as one group, whereas this current study included an in-depth analysis of the individual perspectives of three participants. This current study closely examined the responses of three participants by devoting individual case studies to each student participant as well as includes data about the role I assumed as both the researcher and teacher. Additionally, the participants in my pilot study demonstrated their perspectives to sexuality and gender in general. This current study provides an additional layer of examining student responses according to Hagood’s (2002) views of how critical literacy should encompass both production of identity and construction of subjectivity approaches. Lastly, this study presents information about the tensions, struggles, and uncomfortableness I encountered by critically reading and discussing sexuality and gender with the younger participants.

Analyzing how students older than preschool age responded to critical readings about sexuality and gender provided meaningful additional data about this topic. For instance, the children in this study were at least 5 years of age. The starting age range was selected for two reasons. First, this age range was not observed in my pilot study. Second, young elementary participants provided more in-depth responses as their language and vocabulary were stronger
than that of a preschool student. Leaper and Smith (2004), developmental psychology researchers, noted in their meta-analytic review of gender variations in children’s language use, that gender is a concrete aspect for young children versus older children. Children over the age of five are less rigid and consequently are more flexible in their attitudes about gender. In regards to language ability, older children demonstrate better language skills moving from one-word utterances to complex grammatical sentence (Brown, 1973).

**Definitions of Key Terms**

**Critical Literacy**

Critical literacy was used in this study as a way of framing the practice of critically reading a text. Vasquez (2010) argues that critical literacy should “look, feel, and sound different, and it should accomplish different sorts of life work depending on the context in which it is being used as a perspective for teaching and learning” (p. 2). Vasquez resists defining critical literacy, since it can vary according to the context and purpose of the readings. The premise of critical literacy includes teaching that texts are not neutral and that each text provides an ideological message about the world through its words and illustrations. Such text analysis includes examining the missing voices and the dynamics between language and power in relation to social issues, such as race, class, sexuality, and gender and one’s overall identity (Janks, 1993). This study equally supports the recommendation of Hagood (2002) to consider both perspectives of critical literacy: production of identity and the construction of subjectivity. Hagood notes that critical literacy rooted merely in identity or subjectivity could be problematic and therefore both production of identity and construction of subjectivity should occur. Critical literacy which focuses primarily on production of identity invites the reader to identity with the proposed identities in the book. The possible problem with this approach is that the reader views
these proposed identities as the only viable options in society. Often the representations in children’s books tend to be heteronormative as well as uphold stereotypical beliefs (Hagood, 2002; Oliver & Lalik, 2000; Young, 2000). Critical literacy which focuses primarily on construction of subjectivity assumes that the reader will struggle to accept or even resist representations offered texts as a way to construct their own identity. The possible problem with this approach is that the reader is already positioned in a place which assumes that he or she will resist the proposed representations (Hagood, 2002). Critical literacy should welcome both production of identity and construction of subjectivity reader responses as a way to empower the student to construct her or his individual identity. In short, applying the tenets of critical literacy in this study consisted of (a) focusing on power that encouraged reflection, transformation, or action (b) concentrating on the issue and its complexity (c) employing adaptable pedagogical techniques according to the context and perspectives of students, and (d) analyzing multiple viewpoints of critical literacy, such as production of identity and construction of subjectivity (Vasquez, 2010; Quintero, 2009; DeVoogd, 2004; Hagood, 2002).

**Construction of Subjectivity in relation to Critical Literacy**

The construction of subjectivity places the reader as the main subject who struggles to accept or may even resist representations offered in texts in an effort to construct their own identity (Hagood, 2002; Fuery, 1995). By pushing back from the offered representations the reader commences a process by which s/he constructs his or her subjectivity to be unlike the representations offered in the texts. The overall meaning of the text, in this sense, does not reside in the text but how the reader struggles with or rejects the proposed text.
Production of Identity in relation to Critical Literacy

The production of identity, in contrast to the construction of subjectivity, serves as a stable representation in that it relates to categorical understandings which are formed over time (Hagood, 2002). Examples of such categories are nationality, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, or any other identity-producing method used to organize people into groups. The overall purpose of the text, in this sense, is to recruit readers to align to the imposed categories (Hagood, 2002). The concern with this approach is that the proposed identities in most texts are normative, stereotypical, and serve to perpetuate the status quo by inviting the reader to identify, as in the case of this study, with heteronormative representations.

Critical Readings

Critical readings are defined as analyzing, discussing, and comparing the representations presented in children’s literature as well as in media, such as films or television series. Overall, a critical reading approach is guided by the premise that texts are neither neutral nor apolitical artifacts; rather every text promotes a message through its words and illustrations (Ryan & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2013). A critical literacy theoretical framework guided the study and was enacted through approaches similar to critical pedagogical practices, except that the focus of the study remained on children’s literature or media.

LGBTQ

LGBTQ is an acronym for people who identify as lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, transgender or queer. In this study queer is also a term which breaks the heteronormative assumptions of what is considered normal and expected; it also encompasses other alternative identities such as intersex or people questioning their sexuality or gender expression.
Heteronormativity

Heteronormativity is a concept that describes how social institutions and policies emphasize the notion that sexual relationships only exist between males and females and thus are the only viable option; this term refers to the interlocking system that includes both sexuality and gender (Ryan, 2010). In this study, heteronormativity refers to the assumptions and expectations that govern both sexuality and gender in society.

Heterosexism

Heterosexism is an ideology which asserts that heterosexuals have privileges based primarily on their sexuality. For example, heterosexual people do not face unfair employment discrimination based solely on their sexual orientation (Queen, Farrel, & Gupta, 2005). Recently Vocativ (2015) noted that homosexuals can still be fired in 32 states based solely on their sexual orientation. In this study, heterosexism includes the prejudice and discrimination that transgender, queer, or those who defy gender norms (e.g., a male wearing a dress) experience for not adhering to the traditional roles of heterosexuals.

Homophobia

In general, homophobia refers to the fear and hatred of homosexuals. Homophobia can equally include the discomfort and dislike that people have towards LGBTQ people and can lead to misunderstandings about LGBTQ people as well as affect discriminatory practices toward LGBTQ people (Fakhrid-Deen, 2010).

Queer

Queer has multiple meanings. In this study, queer refers to anyone who defies traditional sexual and gender norms (Queen, Farrel, & Gupta, 2005) as well as how a concept or object (i.e., children’s books) can be altered (e.g. “queered”) to be more inclusive of those who fall outside
of the heterosexual and gender norms (Ryan, Patraw & Bednar, 2013). For this reason, the
definition of queer supports the practice of reading LGBTQ-themed children’s books aloud and
of representing non-heterosexual practices in a quotidian manner as a way of deconstructing or
possibly rejecting the formation of binaries regarding sexuality and gender.

**Significance and Rationale for Study**

Most children’s literature used in classrooms support a heteronormative perspective of
society (Rowell, 2007). Offering such limited perspectives within the school context supports a
type of hidden curriculum reduces positive representations about diverse sexuality and gender
(Sears, 1991). Additionally, it ensures that schools remain complicit to discrimination by failing
to be proactive toward homophobia (Blackburn & Clark, 2011). Although some early childhood
researchers and literacy scholars support introducing topics of sexuality and gender at the
elementary level or younger (Blaise, 2009; Blackburn & Clark, 2011; Davies, 2003; DePalma &
Atkinson, 2009, Hall, 2008; Hermann-Wilmarth, 2007; Rice, 2002, Rowell, 2007; Letts & Sears,
1999, Schall & Kauffman, 2003), very few research studies focus directly on the use of LGBTQ-
themed children’s literature with K-4 students (Hall, 2008; Hermann-Wilmarth, 2007, 2010;
approach which involves the reader moving from reflection to action and is generally rooted in
social justice initiatives (Janks, 1993; Quintero, 2009). Inducing social action however requires
that first; society better understands the connection between language and power (Janks, 1993)
and second, accepts this new level of awareness by igniting a movement toward change. This
study was significant in that it invites educators to consider exploring subjectivity by questioning
the normative practice and ideologies portrayed in text through literacy conversations and thus
support equity and social justice with elementary students.
Documenting an examination of LGBTQ topics through critical literacy is pertinent for contributing to the fields of knowledge about young children’s understanding of sexuality and gender, children’s ability to critically examine texts, and the ways in which sexuality and gender diversity could be taught appropriately and effectively at the elementary level. Teachers and teacher educators should reflect on the significance of each component as well as consider how the components are interrelated. In other words, what are the best ways to interrogate critical literacy within the classroom as well as discuss the topic of sexuality and gender with young children? By examining these processes, we seek to better understand how the role of education can reproduce or challenge unequal power structures in society, as well as reflect on our part in the overall process.

**Rationale for Literacy Researchers and Teacher Educators**

Although studies exist that document students engaging with LGBTQ topics at the secondary level and higher (Blackburn & Clark, 2011; Clare & James, 2005; Macgillivray & Jennings, 2008;), few studies focus on elementary students expanding their knowledge of sexuality and gender through reading LGBTQ-themed children’s literature (Hall, 2008; Hermann-WilmARTH, 2007; 2010; Ryan, Patraw, & Bednar, 2013; Souto-Manning & Hermann-WilmARTH, 2008). Scholars have called for continued research to inform educators about the various ways children construct knowledge concerning sexuality and gender and how their knowledge may play in the classroom as well as be expanded through literacy (Crisp & Hiller, 2011; Davies, 2003; Hall, 2008; Hanlon, 2009; Hermann-WilmARTH, 2007; Rice, 2002, Schall & Kauffman, 2003). In order for teachers to consider embracing LGBTQ representations or including LGBTQ texts within the classroom and to feel successful in doing so, more scholarship
is needed which demonstrates real life experiences of what happens when a teacher and students discuss sexuality and gender.

Additionally, teachers would benefit from having more knowledge about LGBTQ-themed texts as well as a tool box of strategies for integrating these texts into the classroom. In an article about teaching gender diversity and transgender experiences at the elementary level, Ryan, Patraw and Bednar (2013) assert that remaining silent ultimately hurts children more. A lack of scholarship focused on exploring topics of sexuality and gender with elementary students, in addition to rendering gay and lesbian issues from teacher education programs invisible, leaves teachers ill-equipped to address the needs of students in their classroom (Souto-Manning & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2011). Teacher education programs concerned with social justice issues must aim to provide students with experiences and activities as a way to explore how we are all cultural beings. The present study addressed this call for research by documenting actual experiences of both the teacher and students using LGBTQ-texts within the context of a learning environment through critical readings.

**Rationale for Elementary Teachers**

A critical literacy application of reading LGBTQ-themed texts provides a means with which teachers might work more effectively to address the diversity of their classrooms. Examining LGBTQ-themed texts could be a valuable method for challenging children to analyze and empathize with those absent within the majority of children and classroom texts. By reading LGBTQ-themed books, the teacher demonstrates her or his willingness to discuss sexuality and gender through inviting perspectives and asking questions focused on such topics. Including LGBTQ-themed children’s books and providing a safe space for discussions to occur is pivotal
in the process of viewing the world critically and to learn about sexuality and gender in ways applicable to the everyday world.

This study inspires to provide teachers with a lens to analyze the implementation of critical literacy by means of reading the vignettes taken from transcripts during the actual readings. By doing so, teachers are able to better understand what critical literacy might look like in the classroom and more importantly how to use critical literacy to explore topics related to sexuality and gender. This study both encourages teachers to become familiar with children’s literature featuring characters and explains how to integrate these texts and topics in the classroom thus making the classroom more inclusive for LGBTQ individuals or children who have LGBTQ family members.

**Classroom Literacy Rationale: Social Justice Initiatives**

By examining topics related to sexuality and gender through the lenses of critical literacy and queer theory, this study demonstrates the ways in which schools can assist students in exploring subjectivity by questioning the normative practices and ideologies portrayed in texts which can create or maintain stereotypes (Hagood, 2002). Given the selective views of the world through classroom texts, critical literacy is a necessary aspect of literacy instruction to teach children how the texts to which they are exposed play into their understanding of themselves and their place in the world (Moje, Young, Readence & Moore, 2000). Critical literacy rooted in critical social theories focuses on effecting change as a way to create a more socially just and equitable society by understanding the power dynamics between language, literacy and personal meaning (Hagood, 2002; Lankshear & McLaren, 1993). Applying the tenets of critical literacy is paramount in creating literacy environments which render readers as active questioners who view “reading the word” and “reading the world” (Freire & Macedo,
1987). This study provides an occasion to consider how critical literacy learning not only focuses on students recognizing the tensions between the word and the world, but also empowers students to transform reality by envisioning their own renditions aligned to their beliefs and in their own words.

**Summary**

This dissertation presents collective case studies documenting the application of critical literacy intertwined with queer theory to demonstrate how the elementary curriculum might support sexuality and gender diversity in the classroom. Guided by the research questions, I focused on three students and my role as their teacher. I observed how the children responded to LGBTQ representations within children’s texts and to topics of sexuality and gender in general. I analyzed the children’s willingness and ability to apply critical literacy to texts inside and outside of the classroom.

Additionally, I examined my position and capacity to work with and on theory by queering the classroom environment, allowing sexuality and gender to remain fluid constructs, and disrupting the everyday heteronormative practices portrayed in texts and in the classroom.

Findings point to a number of considerations about both the student participants and my role as their teacher. These findings provide both teachers and teacher educators with asset-based ways of knowing and understanding how to render schools a more socially just place for all students, including those who know or identify as LGBTQ.

Overall, these findings challenge schools and teachers to reflect on how the dominant and deficit narratives of the classroom characterize LGBTQ individuals and their families as non-mainstream or render them invisible from society by and large.
Chapter 2

Relevant Literature and Conceptual Frameworks

This chapter provides an overview of the relevant literature concerning the topic of sexuality and gender with children as well as the lack of LGBTQ-themed literature in the classroom and overall. This chapter highlights the existing scholarship and examines how this study compares to and contrasts with emerging themes in similar studies. Two conceptual frameworks, critical literacy and queer theory, are also discussed in depth. An analysis of how critical literacy and queer theory might appear to be contradictory frameworks is addressed followed with a discussion on how such frameworks equally offer benefits in interpreting the data.

Relevant Literature

Discussing Sexuality and Gender with Children

The majority of elementary students has a basic understanding of sexuality and gender and is familiar with the words “gay” and “lesbian” (Soloman, 2004; Schall & Kauffmann, 2003). Children construct ideas about sexuality and gender, including myths and misconceptions, through media, friends, or family (Soloman, 2004). Elementary students express various perceptions about sexuality and gender. For instance, one first grader wrote: “I don’t think that stuff is for kids” (Soloman, 2004, p. 104), while another third grader shared, “my anty [sic] is a lesbin [sic]” (p.104). Not discussing topics related to sexuality and gender with children effectively puts them at greater risk for becoming bullies or being bullied themselves, as well as being unable to develop appropriate coping defenses when faced with opposing views (Sears, 2009). The notion that adults are “protecting” children through silence is more of a reflection of
the adults’ uneasiness around sexuality and gender than it is a concern for children’s inability to comprehend such topics (Sears, 2009).

Many teachers fail to see the connection between creating environments free from harassment, homophobia, and discrimination to the significance of discussing such topics with young children (Wolfe, 2006). Interrogating beliefs and attitudes is pertinent with young children as name-calling and ridicule often begins in elementary school (Swartz, 2003). Although teachers admit to controlling what is acceptable in terms of bullying and teasing, they have often not considered how their views of LGBTQ individuals can influence the safety of LGBTQ students or those raised by LGBTQ family members (Bower & Klecka, 2009). Bower and Klecka (2009) found that teachers neglected to identify how lessons targeting diversity and acceptance connected to the prevention of bullying and teasing.

The silence, fear, and taboo around LGBTQ representations can cause dangerous consequences for students as they advance into the higher grades (Burt et al., 2010). For instance, Kosciw and Diaz (2008) found that 42% of students reported being verbally harassed in school due to their parents’ sexual orientation, and over a third (37%) of students admitted to being verbally harassed due to their own or perceived sexual orientation. Children raised by LGBTQ families experienced higher levels of anguish at school, which was based not on the family difference, but rather the teacher’s assumption that every child had a mother and father (Kosciw & Diaz, 2008).

Additionally, over half of LGBTQ parents felt excluded from the school community by means of the school not including LGBTQ-themed books or not being permitted to participate in school activities or events (Kosciw & Diaz, 2008). Nearly half of the children raised in an LGBTQ household report being verbally abused by other classmates because of their parents’
sexual orientation. Discounting LGBTQ families in schools invalidates children in that it hinders the connection the child feels with the parent (Burt et al, 2010). Teachers might want to consider the student’s perspective when books, posters, music, and so forth used in the classroom are representative of a group to which he/she does not belong (Fox, 2007). Overall, integrating LGBTQ topics in the classroom is a matter of recognizing the different types of family relationships, love, and structures (Wolfe, 2006).

**LGBTQ-themed Literature in the Classroom**

Literacy may either deny or permit students to imagine, to describe, and to narrate themselves into existence (Banks, 2009), if used appropriately, critical literacy should offer an ideal image of the world and allow students to visualize their lives in relation to the literature by either connecting to the text or by critically examining the underrepresented (Vasquez 2004, Vicars, 2009). Requiring students to read texts which valorize one type of sexuality over others or assume the role of a heterosexual character unwittingly endorses an “unchangeable binary: You are either Romeo or Juliet, a boy attracted to a girl or a girl attracted to a boy” (Blackburn & Smith, 2010, p. 627). Conversely, as Whelan (2006) documents, one lesbian student read every LGBTQ-themed book in the school library in order to validate her existence through the literature. In this example, LGBTQ-themed books provided this student with a type of stability and assurance by connecting her life experiences to the stories of other LGBTQ individuals.

One primary purpose of classroom literature is to legitimize the lived experiences of students in the classroom (Crisp, 2009; Rowell, 2007; Smolkin & Young, 2011, Schneider, 2001). That said, children should also have access to books that reflect their lives outside of the classroom (Smolkin & Young, 2011). Diversity within the literature validates the lives of children reflected in the literature, while simultaneously exposing children to various
perspectives unlike their own. Few elementary classrooms, however, include LGBTQ representations (Smolkin & Young, 2011; Schneider, 2001). Including LGBTQ-themed materials can be instrumental in shaping the self-esteem of a child, particularly those who are queer or have LGBTQ family members (Burt et al., 2010). LGBTQ-themed books deserve equal recognition, particularly if schools incorporate books with people of color, people who have disabilities, and people who speak different languages (Fox, 2007). Schneider (2001) observed that while elementary teachers did not forbid students from writing about LGBT topics in the classroom, such student-produced work became censored by means of not allowing the student to share the work or forbidding the student to read it aloud in class. When the classroom literature environment does not authenticate the lives of students, students wrestle to answer questions such as: “Where do I belong?” and “How do I fit in?” (Vicars, 2009, p. 316).

In surveying high schools mostly in the Midwest, Blackburn and Buckley (2005) discovered that only 18 out of 212 schools (approximately 8.49%) incorporated LGBTQ representations in the English language arts curriculum. Similarly, Thein, Kavanagh, and Fink (2013) found that although K-12 language arts teachers expressed sympathy for LGBTQ concerns, the majority (76%) would not incorporate LGBTQ literature into the classroom. Teachers’ responses regarding their uneasiness to incorporate LGBTQ literature in the classroom varied from: “It’s not my job, others will protest, it will cause more harm than good, to, I don’t know how” (Thein et al., 2013).

The ways in which the school literacy environment is constructed teaches students not only what counts as literacy and bolsters certain ideologies (Moita-Lopes, 2006), but also influences how a student positions himself or herself within the educational context (Gee, 2005). A student is likely to position herself or himself based on the school literacy environment. A
school literacy environment that offers only heteronormative representations positions all others as invisible from both the text and within the classroom. For example, Vetter (2010) studied a LGBTQ student who deemed her sexuality as an inappropriate topic in the classroom, a positionality that consequently caused her to censor words or expressions in support of diverse types of sexuality. Students become skilled in academically and socially navigating their position between the expectations of the class to their individual sense of sexuality and gender (Moita-Lopes, 2006). In this sense, the literacy environment in the classroom could potentially provide a place for students to align with or deviate from the discourses available in the literacy environment.

Recognizing the heteronormative representations commonly embedded in many children’s books highlights how the concepts of sexuality and gender are taught in schools (Davies, 2003). Heteronormativity, in this study, refers to the interlocking system between sexuality and gender which is socially constructed to emphasize that sexual relationships between males and females are the only viable and acceptable option (Davies, 2003; Jackson, 2006; Thorne and Luria, 1986). This interlocking system between sexuality and gender remains consequential, as there is no consensus on what either term means due to the various social dimensions in society (Jackson, 2006).

Thorne and Luria (1986) found that the arrangement of children according to their gender (i.e., boys lining up versus girls lining up) provides a foundation for how boys and girls interact with each other in the later years. Heterosexual teasing and rituals such as “chase and kiss” increase gender boundaries and promote heteronormativity (Thorne & Luria, 1986).

Offering multiple gender discourses of femininity and masculinity is essential to subverting and deconstructing the definitions of what it means to be a girl or a boy (Blaise,
Blaise (2009, 2010) found that young children are not only interested in exploring gender, but also hold certain viewpoints regarding sexuality. For instance, in observing typical early childhood activities (e.g., reading, drawing, talking), one child participant examining a picture of two kissing crocodiles stated, “they are being sexy,” prompting another child participant to assume that “one is a boy and one is a girl” (Blaise, 2010, p. 7) thus supporting the viewpoint that sexuality and gender are concepts which children learn about congruently.

Heteronormative gender representations in children’s books solidify children’s perceptions on how males and females should act (Crisp & Hiller, 2011; Korenhaus & Demarest, 1993). Equally, children exposed to nontraditional books with non-normative representations were likely to consider other depictions (e.g., two moms, a transgender sibling) as foreign, weird, or atypical. Expanding students’ views toward gender and sexuality requires more than simply having LGBTQ-themed books in the classroom. Davies (1989) and Rice (2002) demonstrated that offering nontraditional children’s books (e.g., books portraying diverse gender roles) was not sufficient for broadening students’ definitions of masculinity and femininity. To expand the children’s definitions of masculinity and femininity, Rice (2002) relied on transmediation, defined as examining the same topic across different mediums (e.g., reading, discussion, writing), while reading nontraditional children’s books to third graders. Similar to Blaise (2005), Rice found that the classroom discussions were pivotal for expanding students’ current gender understandings.

Like Rice (2002), Schall and Kauffmann (2003) also used LGBTQ-themed children’s books to approach the topics of gender and sexuality within a class of fourth and fifth graders. Schall and Kauffman found that most students did not view homosexuality as immoral, just different, and empathized with people who experienced prejudice and discrimination. One
participant, for instance, shared, “It’s kind of like the same thing as a girl and a boy liking each other but it’s boy and boy” (p. 40). Participants sought to better understand diverse relationships and questioned the lack of LGBTQ representations in classrooms.

Ryan, Patraw, and Bednar (2013) examined how an elementary teacher fostered literary discussions around transgender and gender non-conforming people (i.e., people who do not conform to the traditional gender roles) through reading children’s literature. Four instructional episodes consisting of “thematically connected lessons around a text or group of texts in which gender diversity was a central component” (Ryan, et al., 2013, p. 90) were conducted to illustrate how these topics could be integrated into an elementary classroom. One episode, “Beginning Discussions of Unwritten Gender Rules,” encouraged third-graders to examine gender expectations in society. Lessons focused on bullying, examining a gay character in literature, to discussing the complexities of gender expression and transgender people/experiences. One essential finding documented by Ryan et al. (2013) included the participants’ willingness to discuss these topics and seek out additional knowledge about diverse gender identities and expressions.

The relevant scholarship discussed above highlights three important areas. First, including non-traditional children’s books is not sufficient in expanding children’s views about sexuality or gender. Second, classroom conversations are essential for discussing the prolific heteronormative representations of sexuality and gender offered in most books. Third, gender and sexuality are interrelated concepts that children construct congruently; therefore, asking children to examine what it means to be a boy or girl and how such representations are depicted in books could likely broaden their perceptions about both sexuality and gender. For instance, inviting students to examine both the gender and sexuality expectations of a princess allows
students to first examine how society expects a princess to dress and second, how society expects her to marry a prince.

This Study in Relation to Findings in the Relevant Literature

Taking into account the relevant scholarship as well as the findings from my pilot study (Bridgman, 2012), this study examined students’ responses as a way to imagine what a curriculum might look like when it includes critical readings of LGBTQ-themed children’s books with elementary students. In contrast to previous research, this study used both critical literacy and queer theory to analyze the data and provide rich descriptions of multiple students and the researcher taking on the role of teacher to examine the dynamics of classroom conversations when diverse sexuality and gender topics occur. This study documented in-depth responses of three focal participants as well as data from the researcher acting as teacher through a collective case study analysis (Barone, 2011). In light of the current scholarship, the next section compares and contrasts the focus of my study with the emerging themes found in similar studies (Ryan et al., 2013; Vasquez, 2004; Davies, 2003; Schall & Kauffmann 2003; Dutro 2001).

First, Schall and Kauffmann (2003) documented that most children questioned why topics of sexuality and gender were not part of the classroom curriculum after openly discussing these topics. They noted that children expressed interest and sought additional knowledge about sexuality and gender particularly when linked to understanding their own existence and those around them. Second, Davies (2003) found that children as young as four and five struggled to make sense of gender. Davies’ finding not only supports the need to invite children to converse in such topics to lessen their struggle, but also supports Schall and Kauffmann’s finding in that students will have to struggle independently in order to make sense of these eliminated topics in
the classroom. Dutro (2001) witnessed this similar struggle in a study in which she observed how young children selected books to read based on gender. For instance, girls and boys made generalizations about what the other should read by stating: “girls like…” or “boys won’t read…” (Dutro, 2001, 383). Dutro demonstrated how young children not only work to understand what being a boy or girl entails in their own world, but also how this knowledge applies to their identity as readers. These findings spotlight children exploring how gender and sexuality fit into their lived experiences both as students in the classroom as well as independent readers.

In order to evaluate similarities and differences across the scholarship, my study focused on young participants discussing topics related to sexuality and gender. First, like Schall and Kauffman (2003), I examined whether young children posed similar inquiries about the absence of sexuality and gender topics in the classroom. Second, like Davies (2003) and Dutro (2001), I considered whether participants demonstrated similar struggles by asking questions or appearing confused about gender and sexuality and how, if any, such topics influenced their identity as readers. Thirdly, and similar to Ryan et al. (2013), this study used a critical lens to demonstrate injustices towards diverse forms of sexuality and gender.

In contrast to the studies above, and to Ryan et al. (2013), my study conducted critical readings of LGBTQ-themed books as a way of not only analyzing the purpose or message of the author, but also to compare and contrast the readings to non-LGBTQ-themed books. Lastly, through the implementation of critical literacy, which also differs from the studies above, I analyzed data for in-depth descriptions in order to provide each participant’s responses about sexuality and gender. Additionally, this study includes examples of critical literacy in action for each participant. Overall, my study builds on previous research and goes beyond it to add to the
scholarship in the field by offering a unique perspective about both the importance of implementing LGBTQ-literature as well as the importance of using critical literacy in the pursuit of inciting social justice in the classroom.

**Conceptual Frameworks**

This section provides a discussion regarding the conceptual frameworks used in this study: Critical Literacy and Queer Theory. Both are discussed in-depth relative to their appropriateness for analyzing the data and thus for answering the research questions:

1. How do young children respond to LGBTQ representations within children’s texts and to the topic of sexuality and gender in general via critical literacy?
2. How is critical literacy with a focus on sexuality and gender enacted by the researcher assuming the role as teacher?

**Critical Literacy**

**Critical Literacy: Overview**

In this study, I used critical literacy as a way to frame the practice of critically reading a text. Critical literacy involved looking at and comparing texts in order to pinpoint the expectations in society surrounding sexuality and gender. Such analysis provided the students a way to better understand the connection between language and power by understanding the dominant discourses present in texts (Janks, 1993). Through investigating the missing voices of texts, critical literacy supported examining social issues such as race, class, sexuality and gender (Comber, 2013, 2001).

In order to construct a space for critical literacy to occur with children, I relied on the work of Vasquez (2010). Vasquez’s work is aligned to this study in that it demonstrates how to use critical literacy to connect what happens in and out of the classroom with young children.
Vasquez’s book *Getting beyond “I like the book”: Creating space for critical literary in K-6 classrooms* (2010) permitted me to examine how other elementary teachers applied the theory of critical literacy to children’s books. For instance, Vasquez provided several vignettes of elementary teachers enacting the theory of critical literacy with children’s literature as a way to discuss social issues. In one vignette with kindergartners, Vasquez shared how young children discovered the discrepancies between portraying men and women equally while analyzing a poster and a book about Canadian Police Officers. One student stated: “There’s no girls. There’s not girls in it” (24). By applying the theory of critical literacy to this type of text, the students reflected on how both females and males were socially-constructed and how males were viewed in a position of power. Children continued to discuss how these representations were inaccurate. One girl problematized the absence of females by stating that since girls ride horses, the portrayal is not accurate without the representation of females.

Additionally, the teacher’s role was paramount in providing children with the necessary language to analytically discuss complex issues by modeling it. In general, Vasquez concluded that the result of enacting the theory of critical literacy should involve the teacher and students collectively working to expand their knowledge around social and equity issues by means of examining the representations in texts alongside those represented in the day-to-day world.

Critical literacy is an important aspect of literacy instruction which teaches students the importance of interrogating texts as a means to construct their understandings in relation to themselves and to the world (Moje, Young, Readance & Moore, 2000). Given that the works of social theorists such as Freire (1970/2000) and Althusser (2001) have influenced educators’ understanding of critical literacy, the application of critical literacy can differ depending on how teachers define the role of critical literacy. Critical literacy enables educators an “opportunity to
use language in powerful ways to get things done in the world” (Comber, 2001, p.1), such as expanding children’s views about gender and sexuality.

In this study, critical literacy remains grounded in Freire’s (1970/2000) concept of *liberatory education* in that Freire views liberation as a praxis which involves reflection followed by action about society in order to transform it. Educators “truly committed to liberation must reject the banking concept…and replace it with the posing of the problems of men [sic] in their relations with the world” (Freire, 1970/2000, p. 63). Freire considered any situation in which students did not participate in the inquiry process as an act of violence and domination. This notion of liberatory education, inviting students to participate in the inquiry process, allowed me to analyze how the participants responded to LGBTQ-themed texts through critical literacy.

Stitzlein (2007) has demonstrated why gender and sexuality are best suited for exploring under a critical lens, particularly in the elementary classroom. According to Stitzlein, children who appear to traverse societal gender expectations with such ease that they blur the distinctions of what it means to be a boy or a girl are *gender crossers*. For example, Stitzlein remarked how a four-year-old boy assumed the role of “mother” during playtime to such a degree that the child’s gender unmistakably personified a female. Like other scholars, Stitzlein highlighted how gender and sexuality are connected constructs and that by crossing the gender construct, a person may inadvertently involve crossing the sexuality construct or vice versa. In other words, classifying an individual based solely on their attire and demeanor leads to defining what type of attraction the person may eventually have toward others. For this reason, critical literacy with a focus on gender and sexuality can allow all children, including gender crossers, to examine how gender and in turn sexuality are socially constructed as well as explore how to problematize these classifications.
Quintero (2009) argued that by enacting critical literacy in the classroom, students are exposed to powerful lessons through examining their lived experiences in conjunction with the new information. Critical literacy thus fosters a natural development from reflection to action. In this way, this type of movement from reflection to action resembles Freire’s (1970/2000) notion of liberatory education. Quintero (2009) breaks down the critical method by viewing it as a problem-posing approach in that critical literacy encourages students to experience and make conscious the transformation that occurs from reading and reflecting about the literature. For instance, while reading a children’s book about Native Americans, a group of students discovered that the illustrations of the Native American characters in the book were not accurate. As a result, children discussed the importance of becoming critical readers in order to locate the correct information about Native Americans.

In sum, the tenets of critical literacy theory applicable to this study included: (a) focusing on power that encouraged reflection, transformation, or action; (b) focusing on the problems and its complexities; (c) using dynamic and adaptable techniques according to the context and the perspectives of the students; and (d) examining multiple perspectives both in relation to critical literacy, such as production of identity and construction of subjectivity (Vasquez, 2010; Quintero, 2009; McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004; Ha good 2002). Becoming a critically literate reader requires participants to problematize issues dealing with power and equality as well as examining the silencing and nonexistence of voices represented in texts. Critical literacy, in this study, mirrored the notion of liberatory education by means of implementing a literacy practice. Doing so involved inviting participants to examine the dominant discourses by reflecting about the use and regulation of language in conventional ways in children’s books, television
programs, and other media, and within social institutions, as well as to consider the ways language works to define a particular culture (Janks, 2010).

**Critical Literacy: Production of Identity and Construction of Subjectivity**

Hagood (2002) recognizes the challenges teachers may face when using critical literacy. Some teachers may consider critical literacy better suited for focusing on identity issues if they feel that the reader seeks reflection in the literature, while other teachers may view critical literacy as a means for the reader to examine more deeply the construction of her or his subjectivity in relation to the text. In other words, some teachers may invite students to read about a heroic individual who overcame several life obstacles as a means to invite other students in the class to replicate this proposed representation. The problem with focusing merely on production of identity is that it assumes that the reader will identify with the proposed representation.

Conversely, teachers who prefer to use critical literacy with a focus on construction of subjectivity may invite students to read about a complex individual who commits several wrongdoings as a means to invite students to push back or not align to the proposed identity and thus create their own identity in opposition. The problem with focusing merely on construction of subjectivity is that it equally assumes that the reader will resist or not align to the proposed representation.

For that reason, Hagood, asserts that both approaches should be equally supported in the classroom: when critical literacy “looks at either identity production destined only for reader consumption or… [the] active subject construction….each [is] an important aspect… [but] alone seems inadequate and problematic…” (Hagood, 2002, p. 259). Hagood thus calls our attention to the insufficiency of framing critical literacy either solely as the study of identity or, contrastively,
as merely subjectivity. These stances are problematic in that they deny readers the opportunity to analyze literature from both perspectives. Critical literacy grounded in both the production of identity as well as the construction of subjectivity offers readers the opportunity to pinpoint the complexities and symbolism based on the construction of identities in texts. In other words, critical literacy allows readers to discover new textual representations in which they may recreate or replicate similar identities, while simultaneously encouraging them to reject such textual representations in order to construct identities suited to their own identity production. For this reason, this study considered both aspects of critical literacy by examining how the participants used the texts as a way to align with the proposed identities as well as how they construct subjectivity by pushing against the categorical identities represented in the texts.

**Identity Production.** Identity, when viewed as a stable and fixed categorical marker, serves to classify people according to the definitions constructed by social institutions (Althusser, 2001; Troyna & Vincent, 1995). For instance, categories such as nationality, gender, race, ethnicity, and sexuality not only arrange people according to certain categories, but also offer ways for all individuals to cognitively organize other people according to these categories. In turn, this type of classification works to stabilize notions about identity (Hagood, 2002).

In applying categorical markers to the participants in my study, the participants assumed the identity of elementary student as well as the identity of young child. Considering these particular identity markers was essential in that both placed the participants in an inferior place relative to: student and child. Additionally, according to this dynamic, the teacher and adult would necessarily possess more knowledge.

Some researchers, however, consider the notion of identity to be much more fluid and changeable according to the context (Gee, 2000). While certain identities may be viewed as fixed
and socially defined, such as nationality, race, and sexuality, the degree to which they influence our lived experiences in the world varies according to the context. For instance an African-American student attending a diverse school may feel differently about her ethnicity than an African-American student who attends a predominately white school.

Critical literacy, with a focus on identity, concentrates on the message of the text and the reader who reads the text as means of understanding that the representations, or in a sense proposed identities in the text, are viable options in society (Hagood, 2002). The central critical concern in applying this type of critical literacy is that many representations in texts are normative, stable, or otherwise stereotypical, thus exposing students to dominant identities that perpetuate hegemonic beliefs and uphold the status quo (Oliver & Lalik, 2000; Young, 2000). Considering that diverse sexuality and gender representations are absent from many elementary classrooms, children raised by LGBTQ parents or those who identify as queer struggle to position themselves in relation to the mother and father images depicted in the classroom literature (Gilmore & Bell, 2006). With that in mind, critical literacy with a focus on identity should not only present multiple realities of the world and thus multiple identities, but also encourage students to consider their identity in relation to the representations given in the text.

In attending to the production of identity, critical literacy works to invite students to understand the spoken and taken-for-granted identities, such as the dominant heteronormative perspectives found in most children’s literature and television. It is equally essential that the teacher support both types of critical literacy responses toward all types of texts including LGBTQ-themed texts—production of identity and construction of subjectivity—which encourages text inquiries as a way to possibly transform identity as well as effect social change (Hagood, 2002).
**Construction of Subjectivity.** In contrast to identity production within critical literacy, Hagood (2002) highlights how some theorists have shifted away from the institutional practice that endorses producing multiple identities reflective of the dominant culture and instead chosen to focus on the construction of subjectivity. Given that subjectivity, as a philosophical concept, is situated within poststructuralism, and calls into question the notion fixed identities and binary relationships such as the relationship between heterosexual and homosexual (Foucault, 1982). A focus on subjectivity thus considers the reader as shifting, never fully aligning with one particular identity. The difference in focusing on identity versus subjectivity depends on the emphasis of the text (Hagood, 2002). Instead of relying on the text to produce multiple identities, the reader as subject, speaks himself or herself into existence by viewing the text as merely a platform for thought, with no definite or concrete meaning about the self (Hagood, 2002; Fuery, 1995). In contrast to the production of identity, construction of subjectivity is an exploration which invites readers to play with texts as way to disrupt and displace localized meanings. In this sense, readers are encouraged to construct and navigate through subjective perspectives based on their individual beliefs and desires about the world. The reader, as subject, exercises power and agency by directing his or her position in relation to the text. This type of critical literacy approach views the readers as subjects able to push against structured identities presented in texts. Critical literacy with a focus on subjectivity places the reader in an active position (Alvermann & Hagood, 2000). Subjectivity thus encourages active engagement of the reader to establish oneself by pushing away from staid representations that work to stabilize and situate the reader within a singular identity (Hagood, 2002).

Resistance on the part of the reader accords with Freire’s (1970/2000) and Quintero’s (2009) problem-posing application of critical literacy in that critical literacy invites the reader to
adopt an inquiry position or problem-posing stance about the text. Consequently, the meaning of the text does not reside within the text itself, as the individual reader renders the meaning fluid by constructing his or her interpretation in relation to himself or herself. Subjectivity disrupts the need to categorize oneself within a particular identity or within multiple identities; instead, it places the reader continually in a state of transformation. In this way, critical literacy, with a focus on subjectivity, supports not only the examination of conflicting discourses and practices, but also explores how various cultural, social, and historical factors shape our everyday discourses in general (Hagood, 2002).

By focusing on the construction of subjectivity, students are invited to transform themselves by going beyond the socially and institutionalized identity markers. Students should be encouraged to resist and push back from identity markers including those related to all types of gender expression and sexuality. Focusing on subjectivity allows students to direct their attention toward the socialized and institutionalized practices upheld in society surrounding sexuality and gender. Examining these practices should involve an analysis and ongoing discussion about the dominant and missing voices of children’s literature as well as the importance of constructing oneself among the varying and often conflicting representations available in society.

**Queer Theory**

**Queer Theory: Overview**

In that my study focuses on diverse forms of sexuality and gender expression, queer theory served as the second theoretical framework. This study required a theory which addressed particular lived experiences of queer individuals. The primary purpose of queer theory is to denaturalize stable categories related to the construction of sexuality and gender by examining the production and effects of such classifications (Jagose, 1996). Queer theory calls into question...
all binaries related to gender and sexuality. Wilchins (2004) notes that binaries, in particular with sexuality and gender, are systemic in that they work to define one position as good and the other as bad, causing binaries to be political and to assert unwarranted power. Queer theory prompts an examination of the multiple understandings surrounding what it means to be a male or a female, to be heterosexual or homosexual, or to be nurtured by same-sex parents or by a mother and father (Oswald, Blume & Marks, 2005). Additionally, queer theory rejects the notion of what “normal” is and means (Britzman, 1995) and in effect works to unsettle rigid constructions connected to family, sexuality, and gender (Oswald et al., 2005).

Blackburn and Buckley (2005) assert that queer theory “is not the lumping together of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender, [but is instead]…the suspension of these classifications” (p. 202). Blackburn and Buckley utilized queer theory as way to promote a queer-inclusive literacy environment. Students examined the interconnectedness among sexuality, identity, and literature by applying a queer lens in order to consider how LGBTQ students, as readers of heterosexist texts, may find themselves as outsiders, not only within the classroom, but also in relation to the assigned or available text. Bower and Klecka (2009), two other scholars who studied teacher’s beliefs about LGBTQ parents, used a queer perspective as a way to question the notion of normalcy regarding children with same-sex parents. Queer theory, according to Bower and Klecka, allowed for an investigation into the dominant social norms by exploring hegemonic constructions of acceptability, normalcy, and identity. In addition, queer theory works to destabilize and trouble binary placements of normal and deviant.

In keeping with children’s literature and the study’s objective to invite participants to examine representations about sexuality and gender in various texts, it is important to consider how many children’s books depict females as nurturing feminine individuals, attentive to dress
and home, while males are portrayed as masculine, outspoken, and heroic (Martino & Mellor, 2002). These types of representations limit children’s knowledge about how men and women act in society, in particular, and about gender performance, more generally. In order to problematize such normative depictions, Ryan and Hermann-Wilmarth (2013) explored what it means to apply queer theory to children’s literature. Ryan and Hermann-Wilmarth utilized queer theory as way to not only deconstruct texts, but also disrupt interdependent categories such as sexuality and gender. Ryan and Hermann-Wilmarth pointed out that since queer theory has been used to analyze multiple texts, from historical records to pop culture, it is an appropriate theory for deconstructing children’s literature. Furthermore, they argued that queer theory cannot impose a type of sexuality onto any book since the book has already been sexed via the author and the illustrator or both (Huskey, 2002) but it can encourage the identification of taken-for-granted categories of identity around gender and sexuality that too often go unnoticed and undiscussed. Queering familiar children’s literature also encourages extended conversations and textual comparisons about sexuality and gender. Ryan and Hermann-Wilmarth asserted that educators can apply queer theory to children’s books as a way to complicate the traditional homogenous, heteronormative binaries of normal and perverse and make elementary language art curricula more inclusive.

Although queer theory draws our attention to the privileging of heterosexuality within our society, and in turn the valorization of heteronormativity, heterosexual practices become problematic when presented as the only viable option (Blaise, 2010). Heterosexual practices are embedded in what Butler (1999) refers to as the “heterosexual matrix” (p. 6), a means of revealing how patterns and the discourse of heterosexuality are engrained in our everyday thoughts and actions. For instance, assuming that every child has a mother and father in her or
his life, and thereby requiring that students create a mother’s day or father’s day card or display conventional family photos within the classroom, silences or oppresses any other viable option through mere lack of representation (Bower & Klecka, 2009; Janmohamed, 2010; Kosciw & Diaz, 2008).

Additionally, queer theory investigates how heterosexual discourses influence the social construction of gender (Warner, 1993). Children as young as two or three years of age may exhibit gender variances, while children as young as three or four have displayed that their gender identity is not aligned with the one assigned at birth (Boenke, 1999). Many studies observe how young children during the preschool years begin to construct and seek knowledge regarding gender (Freeman, 2007; Dykstra, 2005; Pollen, 2011; Trepanier-Street & Romatowski, 1999). With that in mind, Pollen (2011) argues that the tensions between the child’s right to explore the world on the one hand and the overabundant and compulsive pressures of normative gender roles suggested to children are exceedingly unbalanced.

In applying a queer perspective to their work, some scholars (Blaise, 2005; 2010; Skattebol, 2006; DePalma & Atkinson, 2009) have used queer theory to illustrate how young children produced and regulated gender within the early years. Tsao (2008) and Trepanier-Street and Romatowski, (1999) studied the effects of using picturebooks with non-conforming gender roles with younger children (55 months to preschool), and found that children’s attitudes towards gender expression expanded. Gender is an essential dimension through which children make sense of the social world and their place in it (Tsao, 2008; Taylor, 2003). Young children who must create their own theories about both gender and sexuality, as Blaise (2010) urges, and by default only receive normative understandings, must navigate the pressures of heteronormativity in an unaccompanied and unequipped manner.
In that queer theory works to deconstruct rigid binaries and uncover the complexities connected to sexuality and gender (Oswald et al, 2005), I used queer theory to actively deconstruct the notion of binaries in general and to dismantle the position of homosexuality versus heterosexuality as well as any and all gender constraints placed on individuals. In doing so, I read LGBTQ-themed books aloud and called the participants’ attention to the diverse sexual and gender representations by posing questions, breaking the silence, and deconstructing the taboos associated with such representations in the classroom and within most children books.

Additionally, queer theory led me to recognize the participants’ responses that questioned the formation of binaries as well as to analyze their consciousness efforts to discuss alternative sexualities and gender roles in a quotidian manner; and as a result destabilize heteronormativity in the classroom. In this manner, queer theory allowed me to complicate the conventional heteronormative binaries which related to both gender and sexuality.

**Contradictions: Queer Theory & Critical Literacy**

Queer theory remains a contentious and contested field in that scholars’ attempts to define queer theory have only revealed the vexed task of settling upon a static and mutually agreed-upon meaning. The resistance and inability to stabilize queer theory into a clear-cut meaning is in part what makes it an appealing and potential theory (Mallan, 2011). Because the aims of queer theory and critical literacy may seem in contradiction, I am mindful of the possible critiques that may occur in situating my study within these two frames.

First, I acknowledge that queer theory works to destabilize the notion of identity. Butler (1999) not only considers the notion of identity to be a trap but also rejects the formation of binaries. The central premise of queer theory is to include all images which “trouble” or mix notions of male/female or homosexual/heterosexual. In keeping with queer theory which
questions the formation of identity and binaries, critical literacy was used in this study to encourage participants to contemplate the overall existence of binaries related to sexuality and gender. Moreover, queer theory was used in this study to examine the function and positionality of binaries, such as superior vs. inferior or natural vs. deviant and in turn to consider the positionality of all individuals within such binaries. Critical literacy facilitates a process of deconstruction in that to understand “the manifold relationship of force that take shape and come into play in the machinery of production” (Foucault, 1978, p.94), one must first deconstruct in order to reconstruct. Critical literacy also facilitates a process of deconstruction in that the reader, as subject, constructs his or her own identity in ways fitting to oneself. Harstock (1990) cautions us against rejecting identity or categorical markers entirely, and Blackburn (2012) asserts that “oppressed people need to be able to name power dynamics in order to work against them” (p. 19). Following this line of thought, critical literacy paved the way for the participants to acknowledge the power dynamics related to diverse sexuality and gender identities and in turn use queer theory to reflect about the confinement of identity markers and binaries in society.

Second, while critical literacy is an important element of literacy instruction which supports students interrogating texts to construct an understanding about themselves and the world (Moje, Young, Readence, & Moore, 2000), queer theory encouraged particular attention to the ways in which our bodies, as texts, are constructed both socially and linguistically. In this study, considering the body as text was also in keeping with the aims of queer theory. Butler (1990) reminds us how our bodies obtain meanings and transmit messages through the types of activities we perform. These meanings are inscribed and interpreted according to our surroundings. In expanding upon Butler’s (1999) view, Stitzlein (2008) highlights how bodies are not only socially constructed, but also linguistically formed. Speech and bodily performance
thus are interrelated to the social norms which govern gender and sexuality and thus, “bodies and performativity have meaning as signs and signification that allow them to be culturally recognized” (Stitzlein, 2008, p. 57). In the case of my pilot study (Bridgman, 2012), for example, David, a preschooler, often defied the traditional roles of a boy by wearing princess dresses, earrings, and assuming the role of Cinderella in search of a prince. As a subject (a human) and text negotiating a place between the cultural expectations of how a boy should act and dress, David often defended his preferences to classmates who would question his choices. Ultimately, David was wedged in a power struggle relative to the social norms of sexuality and gender, and more specifically in relation to how a young boy should dress and communicate. These meanings are inscribed and interpreted according to our surroundings. With that in mind, examination of the participants in this study included their responses in relation to how they communicated both through performance and language within the classroom, but also how the participants made sense of gender and sexuality by taking into account the author’s or illustrator’s decision to depict characters in relation to their bodily movement or gestures in particular ways.

The final possible contradiction of this study was apparent in the researcher’s assumptions that binaries related to gender or sexuality may have already formed in the participants’ minds and that, by working to challenge the formation of binaries, the study might stabilize these structures even more. Certain scholars (Blaise, 2010; Crisp & Hiller, 2011; Davies, 2003; Hall, 2008; Hermann-Wilmarth, 2010) have argued that such rigid binaries exist due to the multiple heteronormative perspectives available to children. Mindful that queer theory attempts to discard accepted identities and binaries in general, I relied on critical literacy and queer theory equally to support an equalitarian and fluidity perspective about all types of sexuality and gender expression.
Benefits of Merging and Applying Critical Literacy and Queer Theory

Given that the study used critical literacy to focus on identity and subjectivity in relation to the individual and in turn society, participants benefited from the application of queer theory by keeping them engaged in the process of decentering oneself. Subjectivity calls upon the individual to decenter oneself which differs from connecting to multiple identities (Hagood, 2002). Decentering entails resisting the urge to concede to multiple identities in an attempt to remain fluid by never fully locating oneself to one particular identity. Decentering through focusing on subjectivity, after reflecting on the multitude of socially-constructed identities, allowed the participants, as readers, to speak themselves and construct themselves into existence by using the texts to identify, reflect, and push back on the various sexual and gender types representations available (Hagood, 2002; Oswald et al., 2005).

Next, subject formation, in accordance with critical literacy and queer theory, entailed recognizing how the dominant culture not only works to mold individuals to follow their line of thinking, but also ensures preservation of its own culture (Delpit, 2006; Darder, 1991). The participants benefited from an examination of the culture of power (Delpit, 2006) which involves recognizing how the dominant culture subjects other cultures to their ideological beliefs by means of copious representations (Darder, 1991). Delpit (2006) posits the culture of power as a reflection of those who have the most power in society. Understanding the culture of power required that the participants analyze the process of identity. The dominant culture in this case, the heterosexual individual, still holds the most power in society. Social power involves not only the denial of certain rights to individual or adoption laws, but also the minimal representations available that include same-sex parents or gender non-conforming characters. Survival and success of the culture of power thus depends upon the acceptance and reproduction of the
culture. Such factors are at work in the classroom when primarily representations of the
dominant power are available (Delpit, 2006). Participants identified Delpit’s notion of the culture
of power by examining the diverse sexual and gender representations accessible in their
classroom, the library, and at home.

Finally, by examining the power of the dominant culture and the process of subjectivity
formation, the participants benefited from reflecting on questions which examined how normalcy
and abnormality become assigned subject positions (Luhmann, 1998). In doing so, participants
were invited to shift from thinking that “queerness is not a natural state of being” but instead
“queerness is produced as a contrast, as that against which normalcy is established” (Kumashiro,
2004, p.46). By challenging participants to reflect on the complexities related to identity,
subjectivity, and decentering, thus remaining rooted both in critical literacy and queer theory,
students became aware of how diverse sexual and gender expressions, in general, are a part of
human history. The participants reflected on the classification of sexuality and gender labels as
well as how these classifications influenced our current understandings (Lipkin, 2002). Overall,
the participants benefited from considering how their understanding of the world in relation to
sexuality and gender expression impacted the ways in which they connected to the text causing
them to replicate, reject, or recreate the representations within the book.

In sum, this chapter not only provided an overview of the existing scholarship in relation
to discussing sexuality and gender with young children but also compares the extant literature to
the study at hand. Next, the researcher’s reasons and reflections regarding the conceptual
frameworks demonstrate why critical literacy and queer theory were the best fit to analyze the
data.
The next chapter, methodology, consists of the research questions and overall design. Also included in the chapter are descriptions of the collective case studies as well as the researcher’s ethical considerations. Finally, the chapter concludes with information pertaining to the research site, the participants, the various data sources, and how the data were analyzed.
Chapter 3

Method

To understand the complex thoughts of young children about sexuality and gender and to provide explicit explanations about their understandings which are relevant and useful, this project used a case study approach to answer the question of how children respond in particular ways to these specific topics (Barone, 2011). The methodology for this study involved a qualitative case study (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006) and more specifically a collective case study design (Barone, 2011). A qualitative case study seeks to identify themes or categories of behavior and includes an in-depth analysis of individual participants in a natural context (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006). Deeper analysis includes examining the individual participants’ collectivity for similarities or differences across identified themes or categories (Barone, 2011). For these reasons, a qualitative approach was best suited for this type of analysis in that the study required an examination of the experiences of young children positioned as independent students within a classroom, as peers alongside classmates, as well as children in an educational context with an adult serving as a teacher.

Validity and Trustworthiness

Two specific threats to validity are researcher bias and reactivity. Each of these threats, as preferred by Maxwell (2013), should be discussed independently from the methods section. First, it is impossible to eliminate my positionality as a lesbian mother. I acknowledge this bias by discussing my position throughout the study. Second, I discuss my role as researcher as well as the ethical considerations taken in the methods section. Emerging themes of the study are supported by concrete data in the individual case studies as well as in the overall findings. Additionally, ensuring validity and trustworthiness on the part of the researcher includes
examining various criteria, such as, first, *democratic validity* and second, *process validity* (Anderson, Herr, & Nihlen, 1994; Newton & Burgess, 2008). *Democratic validity* (Anderson, Herr, & Nihlen, 1994; Newton & Burgess, 2008) involves researcher acknowledgment of her or his points of view, as well as documenting such accounts. For this reason, I maintained a researcher reflective journal in which I grappled with what the data suggested versus what I, as the researcher, might be interpreting in light of my positionality. *Process validity* (Anderson, Herr, and Nihlen, 1994, Newton & Burgess, 2008) requires that the researcher provide descriptive explanations regarding the data collection and analysis processes. Validity, in this sense, was met by providing a level of transparency to the processes which not only ensured replication of the analysis but also demonstrated plausibility of the methods used in analyzing multiple data sources. Plausibility of the methods included providing explicit descriptions of the analysis process for each participant.

Precautions were put in place to ensure validity and trustworthiness which included analyzing the various data sources as a way to uphold the multiplicity and fluidness of the participants’ perspectives toward sexuality and gender (Ryan, 2010; Talburt, 2004). In doing so, I collected data across multiple means. Next, I recorded data across multiple sites. Data was primarily collected in a classroom at a daycare facility during an afterschool program in which the critical readings of LGBTQ-themed books took place. Also, data collection consisted of participants producing photographs of texts outside of the classroom. Finally, since the entire study encouraged multiplicity through the multiple contexts and multiple data sources as well as supported openness and fluidity of the participants’ views toward sexuality and gender, it seems fitting that the study be contextualized in theoretical frames—critical literacy and queer theory—which equally encourage multiplicity and fluidity.
Overview of Research Questions and Design of the Study

This study sought to examine how children respond to critical readings of LGBTQ-themed children’s books as a way to explore their ways of thinking about sexuality and gender, as well as to add to the extant body of research that supports curriculum change directed toward incorporating these topics at the elementary level. The following questions guided this study:

1. How do young children respond (verbal and non-verbal) to LGBTQ representations within children’s texts and to the topic of sexuality and gender in general via critical literacy?

2. How is critical literacy with a focus on sexuality and gender enacted by the researcher assuming the role as teacher?

Research Design

A case study design was an appropriate method for examining individual readers’ responses to children’s literature to elicit data (Cunningham & Fitzgerald, 1996). A practical goal as well as personal goal for this study was to call attention to the need to make the curriculum more inclusive of LGBTQ individuals and their families at the elementary level. This study, aligned with critical literacy and queer theory, required analysis of the people involved in the teaching and learning transaction, and included both students and researcher serving as teacher.

A collective case study (Barone, 2011; Hancock & Algozzine, 2006; Hatch, 2002) allowed me to analyze each participant including myself as both researcher and teacher, in-depth as a way to record statements and describe (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006) how critical readings about sexuality and gender might occur in the elementary classroom. The case study was bounded to each individual participant, including the three young participants and to the
researcher who assumed the role as teacher. Analysis of each participant included examining individual verbal and non-verbal responses expressed through bodily physical movements and facial expressions, such as remaining silent, looking downward, or refusing to comment.

In recruiting the participants, a purposeful criterion-based process (Patton, 2002) was used to select students from diverse family structures (e.g., mother and father, same-sex, single-parent, divorced parent, etc.) as well as different ethnicities in order to increase the likelihood of obtaining various responses. Additionally, analysis included examining the types of knowledge and various sources (film, TV, family and friends) that each participant brought to the study regarding sexuality and gender. The significance of this type of diversity provided me with participants who may define sexuality and gender differently due to their family or ethnic dynamic. Such elements were important to consider, as first, texts can serve as a stimuli for activating prior experiences (Cochran-Smith, 1984) and, second, one out of ten children makes a personal connection to texts based on their background or experiences (Sipe, 2008). The recruitment process is discussed in more detail later in this chapter (see Participants).

**Research Site and Context**

This study was conducted in a preschool/daycare which also serves as an afterschool facility located in a large city in a Midwestern state, Ohio. The site was selected because of its reputation for valuing diversity, a reputation that is validated by the multiple children with same-sex headed families who chose to enroll their children at this facility. The facility’s strong reputation in the community for diversity was essential in that it ensured that the participants might be either raised within a same-sex household or at least be aware of other children who were. The study duration was 15 consecutive weeks. The period for the study was based on wanting to work with and analyze the participants according to a typical semester, since an entire
school year of data collection was not possible. The objective was to investigate a site in which a diverse group of young children and their families attend.

The first two weeks consisted of building a rapport with the participants and collecting the pre-assessment drawing. The next twelve weeks consisted of reading LGBTQ-themed books. Data was captured once a week for about an hour to an hour and a half. Before reading each book, the weekly sessions included reviewing the author’s purpose from last week’s book as well as making a prediction about the current week’s book. Critical sessions would include directing the participants’ attention toward the diverse representations and answering any questions that participants posed during the readings. At the conclusion of the book, participants were asked to share why thought the author wrote the book. Additionally, participants were asked to respond to one critical literacy question borrowed from Vasquez’s (2010) work with young children and critical literacy. For a list of questions, see section Critical Literacy later in the chapter. All responses were welcomed and none of the responses were labeled as incorrect. If participants struggled to identify the author’s purpose, particularly at the beginning of the critical reading sessions, the teacher provided scaffolding by offering an additional response to the author’s purpose. Following the critical reading sessions, participants completed weekly critical literacy drawings at a table located in the same room as the reading sessions. Participants were given the prompt to draw what thought the author would want them to remember the most about the book. Once participants had completed their drawings, the researcher asked each participant to describe their drawing. Student responses were captured on the back of each drawing. Each week provided a consistent routine for the participants which simplified the data collection process by primarily focusing on conducting critical reading of LGBTQ-themed books.
Historical and Political Context within Ohio. The Midwest setting for this study represents a unique contribution given that the particular state, Ohio, at the onset of the study was still upholding a legislative ban on gay marriage. Multiple lawsuits concerning the rights of LGBTQ people took place in Ohio from 2013 to 2014. Lawsuits ranged from gay couples having access to the Affordable Care Act, to having gay couples recognized on death certificates, to fighting the marriage ban (http://huffingtonpost.com/tag/ohio-gay). In the past three years, various articles ranging from educational journals to magazine and newspaper pieces have surfaced demonstrating the anti-gay climate in Ohio schools. Smith Amos (2011) claims that the bullying statistics are higher in Ohio schools than what most schools report to state and federal agencies. For instance, 70% of students stated that they were sexually harassed, 61% were cyber-bullied and 57% had items damaged or stolen all in due part to their sexual or gender orientation (Smith Amos, 2011). In another incident, when a flyer was posted in an Ohio high school in support of forming a Gay-Straight Alliance club, which welcomes all sexual and gender diversity to join a support group, an adversary parent contacted a news station with concerns (Reid, 2014). Such historical and political contexts are important to consider as students and families described in this study reside within a state which continues to struggle with the topic of diverse sexuality and gender expression.

Participants

Gaining Access to Student Participants. In order to maximize the opportunity to recruit participants, the study took place after the beginning of the school year and before spring break commenced. A purposeful criterion-based sampling (Patton, 2002) was used in selecting the participants who would participate in critical readings of LGBTQ-themed books. The criteria for the case study entailed that the student participants be between the ages of 4-years-old to 7 years-
old and be able to verbally express themselves independently. Participants who spoke with ease in the presence of others and freely shared opinions were kept in the selection process. This type of participant sampling allowed me to construct a small group of students with information-rich cases. The young student participants represented: awareness and presence of same-sex parents, single or divorced parents, mother and father households, as well as various ethnicities. Information-rich participants (Patton, 2002) were selected according to the age criteria between 4 to 7, their family structure, and their willingness to actively participate in the critical reading sessions. Three student participants, out of a total of 5, along with myself as the teacher participant, were chosen to observe in-depth.

The initial recruitment information was gathered in various ways. First, the researcher asked the director to select participants according the age criteria and to the willingness of the parents to allow their child to participate in the study. After consent forms were returned, the researcher relied on the director’s personal experience and judgment about each child to determine those students best suited for the study. For instance, students with a history of disruptive behavior or who were reserved in nature were removed from the list of potential participants. Five participants initially met the criteria, but two were eliminated due to their lack of desire to actively participate in the critical reading sessions. The final three participants studied in-depth met the criteria of having a unique family structure or difference in the sense that each of their families were unlike the other participants. The final three participants had solid verbal skills and continually demonstrated a desire to participate. Upon obtaining parent consent, the researcher explained the study in simplified terms by describing that the study would include reading books and asking questions and that each session would be videotaped.
Table 3.1 provides a brief overview of the general characteristics of the student participants; each student is discussed in further detail below.

Table 3.1

*Characteristics of Student Population*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Family Uniqueness</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hank</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Kindergarten</td>
<td>Mother and Father, identical twin, White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jerry</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>First Grade</td>
<td>Mother and Father, middle child, White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Page</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Kindergarten</td>
<td>Divorced Mother and Father, African-American</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Family Uniqueness refers to how the participant’s families were different according to the other participants.

**Student 1.** Hank, White, was in Kindergarten and was seven years. He and his brother had a birthday after the first week into the study. Hank lives with his mother and father and identical twin. Hank’s brother also took part in the study, but Hank was selected to examine more in-depth as he often generated creative comments and drew fantastical images. His interpretations and contributions to the study were purposeful in that Hank represents the autonomous and individualistic students who are representative in most classrooms. Hank interpreted the world in unique ways and was not easily persuaded by others’ opinions or thoughts. For instance, after reading a book in which a liberal princess demands her suitors to slay animals and perform dangerous feats, Hank’s response to the critical question about what surprised you the most about the book, consisted of: “I like the ending of the book cause her [the princess] is holding up her drink.” Others participants remarked on the princess not wanting to marry or the suitors fighting in hazardous conditions to win the princess. Hank instead focused on the picture at the end of the book which depicted the princess celebrating her unwed days by
drinking a commemorative beverage and raising it in air. It is uncertain as to whether Hank was
drawn to the picture because the princess was elated to have maintained her single status or
because he enjoyed viewing the princess raise her glass and simply having fun. Regardless, the
positive and celebratory outcome for the princess caught Hank’s attention in such a way that he
viewed it as the most surprising element of the book.

Student 2. Jerry, White, was in first grade raised by his mother and father in the same
household and was a middle child. He had two other brothers. Jerry readily supplied responses
and shared his thoughts or concerns with ease. He was the most demonstrative boy in the group.
Jerry often challenged, inquired, or supplied additional information about the books throughout
the critical reading sessions. For instance, while reading The Family Book (Parr, 2010) which
depicts various family structures, Jerry adds, “Some people have three,” after hearing the section
of the book: Some families have one parent instead of two (Parr, 2010, 16). Jerry’s response not
only demonstrates awareness about different family sizes but also demonstrates how at ease he
felt in the classroom to offer unsolicited and dissimilar information from the read aloud page.
Jerry also felt comfortable in sharing predictions and would voluntarily acknowledge when his or
his classmates’ predictions differed from the books. For instance, Jerry would often state, “we
were wrong” as soon as he realized that his or his classmates predictions differed.

Student 3. Page, the final student participant, was in kindergarten and was being raised
by her divorced mother and father. Page is African-American. Unlike the other participants, Page
did not have any siblings, yet she talked often about her cousins and other extended family
members. Although Page was the only girl in the study, she positioned herself as an equal by
participating as much as, if not more than the boys participated. Page often asserted herself,
would correct the others if they mispronounced a word, or did not follow my directions for the
drawing assignment. She posed several questions and was equally eager to answer all of mine. Over the course of the readings, Page often asserted her ethnic difference by including African-American characteristics in the drawings as well as made comments referring to her ethnic heritage. For instance, after reading the *The Family Book* (Parr, 2010) about various families, Page shared, “My family is all the same color, but some of my cousins are darker.” In two of her illustrations, Page depicted characters with which she calls “afros” even though the original characters did not have any of these features.

**Researcher and Teacher.** As a researcher advocating for curriculum change to include critical literacy discussions surrounding sexuality and gender topics in the classroom, I felt it essential to include my voice in the process as the researcher assuming the role of teacher. By assuming the roles of both teacher and researcher, I gained knowledge and skill in research methods and became aware of the options and possibilities for pedagogical change (Johnson, 1993). Teachers participating in such roles become more critical and reflective about their practice, and about the whole approach of teaching in general (Street, 1985). Teacher research in part forces re-evaluation of current theories and can greatly influence what is understood about what takes place in the classroom (Johnson, 1993). Wolfe (2006) believes that teachers often leave their mark, in terms of influencing their students in the classroom, but seldom mark their profession, meaning that teachers should equally mark and influence pedagogical changes in the classroom. With that in mind, I included myself as a participant in hopes marking the profession by recognizing the importance and necessity of incorporating such topics at the elementary level.

This mark would entail providing experiences and perspectives as the teacher outlining my successes and challenges faced when applying critical literacy to LGBTQ-themed literature, so that fellow teachers and researchers might envision not only student responses but also the
teacher’s. Following an analysis of a teacher research report, I considered the steps taken by teacher researchers in the field (Hoffman, Afflerbach, Duffy-Hester, McCarthey & Baumann, 2014). In doing so, I examined questions around student inquiries concerning sexuality and gender as well as the application of critical literacy with elementary students. Second, while assuming the role as teacher, I worked to position myself equally alongside the participants learning and engaging in the critical discussions by allowing for responses unrelated to sexuality and gender to occur. Thirdly, I accepted that, as researcher and teacher, I would struggle with the dual roles and expected to feel uneasy at times. In order to capture and add authenticity to the overall study, I became an equal participant in the study and adopted a narrative style to reflect on both as a researcher and as a teacher while writing in the researcher’s journal. At the end of each data collection, I reflected by capturing the details of the day as well as my thoughts about the readings and students. Such data serves as one of the collective case studies in the overall study.

**Book Selection**

The purpose of reading LGBTQ-themed children’s books was not only to provide students with diverse representations of sexuality and gender, but more importantly to conduct critical readings of these texts. Out of the twelve books (see Table 3.2) used in this study, seven were used in my pilot study (Bridgman, 2012) with a group of preschoolers ranging in ages from 4 to 5. The decision to incorporate the same LGBTQ-themed books was based on reasons of researcher familiarity, LGBTQ popularity, and accessibility. A book was determined to be LGBTQ-themed if the text offered diverse and positive representations outside of the conventional sexuality and gender norms. LGBTQ-themed books were also selected according to articles referencing LGBTQ-themed books (Fox, 2007; Hermann-Wilmarth, 2007; Rowell, 2007)
or studies that had used such books with students (Rice, 2002; Sapp, 2010; Schall & Kauffman, 2003). One book was read each week, starting with the third week and lasting to the fourteenth week (Table 3.2). Starting with the third week, and thereafter all odd data collection weeks, the book included a same-sex parent representation. On the even data collection weeks, starting with the fourth week, the book included a text portraying a character who defied or challenged conventional gender roles. Critically reading LGBTQ-books allowed participants to reflect why the author or illustrator opted to include such representations as well as consider how these representations compared and contrasted to those in other children’s literature. Although some of the storylines represented in LGBTQ-themed books may uphold heterosexual or gender conventions, such as marriage or wanting to be a princess, these conventions intentionally were chosen as a way to equally include LGBTQ individuals in commonplace storylines and in turn interrupt heteronormativity.

Additionally, the reading level for each book was taken into consideration. Reading levels were obtained using Accelerated Reader, Lexile, or suggested age range from various websites. The lowest reading level book was suggested for readers three years of age with the highest reading level suggested for readers nine years of age.

Overall, the majority of the books were suggested for students in the second grade or below. This range of reading level aligns with the participant selection process in that the criterion is that the children will be between the ages of four to seven. To compensate for the varied reading levels, the teacher researcher read the books aloud and posed questions throughout the readings to ensure that participants understood the purpose of the diverse representations.
Table 3.2

*LGBTQ*-themed Books

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Weeks</th>
<th>LGBTQ-Themed Books</th>
<th>Sexuality or Gender Representation</th>
<th>Suggested Age Range</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>The Family Book (Parr, 2010)</td>
<td>Same-Sex Parent</td>
<td>3-5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4th</td>
<td>Olivia and the Fairy Princesses (Falconer, 2012)</td>
<td>Gender Role</td>
<td>3-8 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5th</td>
<td>Emma and Meesha My Boy: A Two Mom Story (Considine, 2005)</td>
<td>Same-Sex Parent</td>
<td>3-7 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6th</td>
<td>Princess Smartypants (Cole, 1986)</td>
<td>Gender Role</td>
<td>4-8 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7th</td>
<td>King &amp; King &amp; Family (de Haan &amp; Nijland, 2004)</td>
<td>Same-Sex Parent</td>
<td>5-8 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8th</td>
<td>The Paper Bag Princess (Munsch, 1995)</td>
<td>Gender Role</td>
<td>4-7 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9th</td>
<td>Donovan’s Big Day (Newman, 2011)</td>
<td>Same-Sex Parent</td>
<td>3-7 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10th</td>
<td>My Princess Boy (Kilodavis, 2010)</td>
<td>Gender Role</td>
<td>4-8 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11th</td>
<td>A Tale of Two Daddies (Oelschlager, 2010)</td>
<td>Same-Sex Parent</td>
<td>4-7 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12th</td>
<td>The Boy with Pink Hair (Hilton, 2011)</td>
<td>Gender Role</td>
<td>3-5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13th</td>
<td>The White Swan Express: A Story about Adoption (Okimoto &amp; Aoki, 2002)</td>
<td>Same-Sex Parent</td>
<td>4-7 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14th</td>
<td>10,000 Dresses (Ewert, 2008)</td>
<td>Gender Role</td>
<td>5-9 years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Data Collection and Sources

Data collection occurred throughout a fifteen week period in which I spent approximately an hour with the participants, once a week. Data collection consisted of pre- and post-assessments, fourteen transcribed video recordings of critical readings, participant and field observations, an artifact collection of tangible drawings, as well as the researcher’s journal. The hour of observation each collection day included critically reading a book, focused on sexuality or gender, followed by a critical discussion, as well as examining the participants in the classroom alongside their classmates.

Analyzing multiple forms of data helps to strengthen the approaches of each method while minimizing the limitations of any one (Patton, 2002). The first week consisted of primarily observations which consisted of watching the participants interact with each other as well as communicating with them one-on-one. The first week allowed the participants to become acquainted with my presence in the classroom as well as to build a rapport with the core participants. The second week consisted of observing and learning more about the participants as well as collecting the pre-assessment data. By the third week, the participants were video recorded during the critical readings and discussions. Observations included all aspects of the teaching and learning transaction, from behaviors and actions to words and activities. Participants were asked to make predictions about the context of the book by examining the cover and illustrations. Multiple questions were posed during each reading to ensure that participants were engaged and to document their reactions to the book. In general, each critical reading session included making predictions about the book, making intertextual connections to other texts inside and outside of the site, as well as posing a targeted critical question.
**Pre- and Post-Assessments**

Pre- and post-assessments occurred during the second and last week of the study. The pre and post-assessments involved drawing a self-made character that each participant would like to read about in a book. This self-made character could be one in which they created by combining multiple attributes of other characters, a character which is unique and never been represented in a book, or finally an already represented character in which they would like to see and read more about in other books. The purpose of the pre-assessment was to evaluate which representations, by means of literature previously read or observed, resonated the most with the participants. For instance, participants who depicted a heterosexual family, a conventional war hero, or a princess, granted me access to knowing that these types of representations were either most accessible or most preferable. Having this type of information allowed me to further explore and better understand why each participant drew or wrote about his or her character. The purpose of the post-assessment was two-fold. First, I evaluated the post-assessments to determine if LGBTQ characters or non-traditional gender representations appeared in the post drawing after critically reading LGBTQ-themed books with such characters. Second, participants who included LGBTQ characters or non-traditional gender representations in the post assessment, but not in the pre-assessment, were examined further as means to decipher what changes occurred from the pre and post assessments. For instance, did the drawing reflect more of gender or sexuality focus and how did the post-assessment drawing compare to the data represented across the other data sources for the participant.

**Video Recordings of Critical Readings**

Video recordings of critical readings occurred once a week for approximately an hour of each data collection day. Critical readings included reading one LGBTQ-themed book during
each session. Books alternated between focusing on sexuality by including diverse sexual representations or gender by offering non-conforming gender roles. At the conclusion of each book, students completed a reflective drawing about what they thought the author or illustrator thought was the most important element of the story. Following a discussion about each of the reflective drawings, participants engaged in a critical discussion aimed at answering the weekly critical question adapted from Vasquez’s (2010) critical literacy work with young children. Video and audio recordings were viewed and transcribed within 48 hours of the original recording. Non-verbal communication and body language, such as avoiding eye contact or frequently changing body positions, were examined which added to capturing richer descriptions of participants (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). During the readings and discussions based on the LGBTQ-themed texts, I analyzed not only how participants interacted with the texts, but also if and how they made sense of the power issues during the critical discussions. For instance, I observed whether participants agreed with or refuted the perspectives of others about the author’s or illustrators overall purpose of the book. Additionally, I examined whether the participants displayed empathetic, distrustful or indifferent reactions through words or gestures, as well as whether they chose to represent the missing voices by making their classroom more inclusive of diverse sexuality and gender.

Participant and Field Observations

Observations occurred during and after the critical readings, first in the classroom, and second with an analysis of the video recordings of the critical readings. Both types of data presented several advantages to the study. Direct observations are crucial in examining interactions and behaviors within a particular context (Patton, 2002; Yin 2003). In observing the interactions between the researcher and the students, analysis of the data included not only how
the students responded to critical literacy but also the willingness with which students explored topics related to sexuality and gender. The objective of the field observations was to examine whether children act, talk, or play in ways that illustrate positive, negative, or indifferent views toward diverse sexuality and gender. Positive responses included participants actively engaging in storytime and connecting elements of their lives to the book and thus being open to the diverse themes of sexuality and gender. These responses were coded Student Replicates. Negative responses included participants actively refusing to make any connections to the book and thus actively refusing the theme of the diverse books. These responses were coded Student Rejects. Indifferent responses, which were coded as such, included participants who did not participate in the sessions by means of continually remaining quiet, looking in different directions, not answering the questions posed, and playing with other toys in the room instead of participating in the critical reading sessions. Each week, participants’ responses were transcribed and analyzed. Responses from two participants were continually recorded as indifferent. These participants were eventually eliminated from the study due to their unwillingness to remain engaged during the critical readings. Finally, participants were equally observed as unique individuals as well as students situated within a classroom and surrounded by peers and teachers. For instance, I paid attention to how they positioned themselves alone as opposed to in a group, and how they expressed themselves orally and through bodily gestures.

Critical readings, which consisted of analyzing, discussing and comparing the representations in children’s texts based on the premise that texts are neither neutral or nor apolitical artifacts (Ryan & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2013), occurred in a small side room sectioned away from other participants not participating in the study. Participants were informed that the study consisted of reading books for the purpose of analyzing the author’s purpose. Consent
forms informed parents that books would include diverse representations of sexuality and gender. The video camera was situated across from all the participants to capture each participant engaging in the critical literacy sessions. The data collected from the video recordings served as a means to conduct field observations both of me, the researcher taking on the role as teacher, as well as the participants. Additional direct observations took place after the critical readings which involved observing the participants in the classroom while completing the critical literacy drawings.

**Artifact Collection**

Student artifacts, such as drawings and photographs, either produced or brought in by the participants to the research site supplemented the other data sources. Student artifacts are considered appropriate data sources which provide an additional lens to study the central research question (Patton, 2002; Yin, 2003). The two main artifacts of the study included weekly critical drawings and photographs. After each reading, participants drew a picture about what they thought the author or illustrator wanted the reader to remember the most about the book. For each drawing, the researcher then wrote a brief description stated by the student. Additionally, participants provided photographs taken from portable cameras during three different intervals of the study. Each participant received a camera during the second week of the study and kept the camera until all photographs were taken. The photographs allowed the participants to convey their personal interests by taking pictures based on three different themes as well as allowed the researcher to examine the representations which capture the participants’ attention outside of the critical reading sessions. For each theme, participants were asked to take eight pictures. The three themes served as the photography assignment:

- Week 2: Take 8 pictures of favorite books in your classroom, your house, or local library
• Week 4: Take 8 pictures of your favorite characters in books
• Week 6: Take 8 pictures of your favorite movie or TV show characters.

At the conclusion of the study, photographs were processed at a local drugstore and examined collectively from each participant’s view. The photographs allowed me to examine which representations resonated with each participant and to observe any similarities or differences across the group. Participants were asked to take pictures as a way to bridge the literacy between various contexts, and to connect the critical readings focused on the topic of sexuality and gender to other texts outside of the critical reading sessions. This type of artifact collection provided an additional lens to examine the participants’ understanding about sexuality and gender before, during, and after the critical readings.

**Researcher Reflective Journal**

Functioning as the researcher, teacher, and participant required me to take copious notes about assuming these multiple roles. Doing so required that I reflected about these positions at the conclusion of each data collection day. Keeping a researcher reflective journal is an essential and interpretive tool (Slotnick & Janesick, 2011). Slotnick and Janesick (2011) argue that a researcher reflective journal is a valid data source in that the journal allows the researcher to refine oneself as the research instrument throughout the study. Furthermore, Slotnick and Janesick assert that reflective journaling aids the researcher in several ways (a) by allowing the researcher to refine the meaning and interpretation of his or her role within the study, (b) to better understand the participants’ responses, (c) to practice journal writing as a way to become connoisseurs of one’s own thinking patterns and in turn research instrument, and (d) to create a cohesive and deeply textured analysis of the study. With these points in mind, I also incorporated the researcher reflective journal as a way to take copious notes on the subject of critical literacy.
and queer theory, as well as LGBTQ topics in general that were applicable to the participants. Next, I dialogued with myself and posed questions about the study. For instance, I noted whether participants seemed engaged and motivated to participate in particular sessions and worked to evaluate and compare those responses to days when participants appeared nonresponsive to the readings.

Overall the researcher’s reflective notes allowed me to capture rich perspectives (Seidman, 2006) ranging from discussing sexuality and gender with the participants to implementing a critical literacy approach in the classroom. The journal was organized according to my position as teacher and as researcher; reflections about both were taken during each journaling process. As a research tool and additional source of data, the journal became a “connective tissue” fusing the multiple data sources (Progroff, 1992, p. 14).

**Situating the Collective Case Study within the Conceptual Frameworks**

The case study methodology was situated at the intersection of critical literacy and queer theory. Qualitative methods such as observations, collecting participant produced artifacts, and keeping a researcher journal encouraged understanding participants within their natural setting (Hatch, 2002). Understanding the participants meant examining them as group members and as individuals working to make sense of their experiences and everyday situations and in particular their conceptualizations of sexuality and gender. The methods used in the study support the gathering of rich descriptions about how students might respond to critical readings of LGBTQ-themed children’s literature focused on sexuality and gender and how such readings might occur in the elementary classroom. Data was referenced according to the research questions. Data analysis proceeded from a critical literacy and queer theory framework. Data which did not respond to the research questions or coincide with the theoretical approaches was not analyzed.
For instance, data which was not representative of the ways in which the participants responded to readings of LGBTQ-themed texts via critical literacy or demonstrated the multiplicity and complexity of production of identity, construction of subjectivity, and queer theory were not included. Excluded data examples include participants speaking about what they ate for lunch or discussing their math homework assignment.

In short, qualitative methods more generally, and a collective case study approach more specifically, allowed me to gather data which valued the context, the group, and the individual with respect to the various ways the participants made meaning surrounding the topic of sexuality and gender.

Critical Literacy

The methodology intersects with critical literacy in various ways. First, the study sought to note the participants’ reactions to critical readings. Second, the participants took part in weekly critical conversations by responding to a set of critical literacy questions formulated by Vasquez (2010) in her critical literacy work with children. Finally, as a researcher and mother, I worked to spotlight the ways in which classrooms could enact change particularly through student empowerment and knowledge.

Collecting and analyzing data in line with critical literacy involved two essential components. First, the following critical literacy discussion prompts (Vasquez, 2010) served as a classroom framework for reading and discussing LGBTQ-themed books.

1. Why do you think people should or should not read these books?
2. What surprised you about these books?
3. What questions do you have about the stories? What questions would you ask the author or illustrator?
4. What are one or two things from your own life that connect to these stories?

5. Write one or two statements about people who may be like the characters in these stories. Discuss how you think they may feel when they read these books.

6. Write one or two things about people who are not represented in these books. Why do you think the author wrote a story about different families or about a boy who dreams about dresses?

Additionally, at the conclusion of each book, each participant drew a reflective picture and described what he or she thought the author or illustrator wanted the reader to remember the most about the book. Such an approach positioned the readers as researchers of language and text by examining the implied message of the text (Vasquez, 2010, 2005). In conjunction, with weekly discussion prompts and reflective drawings, participants took three sets of photographs, each consisting of at least eight pictures focused on a particular theme. Themes were selected as a way for participants to compare and contrast the LGBTQ representations offered in our critical reading sessions to those representations outside of the research site.

- Take eight pictures of favorite books in your classroom, your house, or local library
- Take eight pictures of your favorite characters in books
- Take eight pictures of your favorite movie or TV show characters on screen or on a DVD cover

Collecting and analyzing data in alignment with a critical literacy approach consisted of documenting each participant’s responses in a critical literacy chart. Documentation included examining the ways each participant responded to all readings which could range from actively sharing individual viewpoints and observing others before responding to not participating in the discussion overall. Based on analyzing young children while reading LGBTQ-books in my pilot
study (Bridgman, 2012), I assessed whether each participant actively, moderately, or minimally participated in the critical readings. Notes about participants who responded similarly to each discussion or books that yielded favorable or unfavorable reactions from participants were added to the chart in order to locate or identify particular themes.

Applying critical literacy with a focus on a particular topic may in some instances silence other social issues that students might raise independently. For that reason, and following the advice of Vasquez (2010), I sought to generally construct a flexible space that attended to viewpoints outside of sexuality and gender. For instance, participants who supplied additional social justice perspectives, such as the dominant presence of mostly Caucasians portrayed in LGBTQ-themed books, were welcomed and discussed. Doing so allowed me to understand the perplexing components of the world through my participants’ eyes while reading LGBTQ-themed books together.

In this way, critical literacy not only remained in line with Freire and other critical pedagogies (Edelsky, 1991; Freire, 1970/2000) but also allowed me to recognize the various interpretations of my participants as well as support the notion of “reading the world” (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 29) versus just reading the “word.” In sum, critical literacy aligned to my methodology by framing the discussions, documenting the multifaceted experiences of my participants, validating the participants’ meanings about texts, and most importantly inviting the participants to problematize texts by addressing the issue of dominance and marginalization in society.

**Queer Theory**

The methodology used in this study equally intersects with queer theory in several ways. First, the study sought to document participants’ responses to LGBTQ-themed children’s books.
Second, the participants engaged in conversations about diverse sexualities and genders. Thirdly, as a queer researcher, I felt comfortable to queer parts of the classroom and the curriculum to encompass all sexualities and gender expression.

Collecting and analyzing data through a queer lens consisted of maintaining individual participants’ charts documenting their viewpoints about sexuality and gender. In creating the charts, I struggled with how I would consider each participant as unique with a set of individual characteristics. I pondered how I would identify and describe each participant, and more importantly, the ways in which each one would express himself or herself. What was the best way to account for the diversity and differences among each of the participants’ families? What words and descriptions would best reflect my participants’ individual understandings revolving sexuality and gender? To what degree would my homosexual understandings influence the ways I described and defined non-gender conforming responses or alternative sexualities in the chart?

To deal with these questions, I reflected on the overall premise of queer theory which resists being defined for reasons of protecting sexual and gender fluidity (Pinar, 1998). In looking at similar literacy and queer theory research with students, Ryan (2010) asserts that, “a focus on the myth of normalcy writ large implicates not just those who identify as LGBTQ, but people of all sexualities, including the children…” (p.66). It is imperative thus to consider how people of all experiences and preferences are positioned in society (Ryan, 2010) simply through the notion of compulsory heterosexuality (Rich, 1980) which demonstrates how heterosexuality is imposed and reinforced by social constraints (i.e., heterosexual images of couples in wedding or valentine photos, heterosexual representations of families during holidays, and so forth).

In this way queer theory allowed me to document various interpretations of sexuality and gender in ways that reflected my participants, but also resisted the imposed conditions of
heterosexuality and in turn heteronormativity by validating multiple understandings in the classroom. In sum, queer theory aligned to my methodology by spotlighting the lived experiences of my participants and encouraging flexible representations which honored multiple voices and meanings of the participants surrounding sexuality and gender.

Collectively critical literacy and queer theory highlighted the fluid and dynamic ways in which sexuality and gender could be addressed in the classroom. Together critical literacy and queer theory support a comprehensive and diverse route for thinking about the social and queer lives of people in society and their families in a respectful and fitting way for young students.

Role of Researcher: Ethical Considerations

Certain ethical considerations were attended to during the data collection and analysis process. For instance, I contemplated how my presence as a teacher and researcher, as well as my queer values, might shape not only the classroom observations but also my interpretations of the data (Maxwell, 2013). These issues were included in the researcher’s journal. Journal entries were completed on each data collection day. Journal entries included what it meant to be LGBTQ identified and a same-sex parent conducting a study aimed at increasing LGBTQ equity in schools. Journal entries also included thoughts about applying critical literacy as a way to discuss sexuality and gender with children. Such reflections forced me to remain cognizant of my positionality toward the research. To ensure as much of an unbiased position as possible, I examined various data sources for consistent themes, explored contradictions and unexpected findings, and followed up on themes within the data by analyzing the stronger prevalence of some themes over others (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Doing so provided an extra level of credibility to the study by ensuring that the participants’ responses were interpreted authentically.
Brydon-Miller (2012) suggests that researchers must also recognize the power dynamics that exist within a community of participants. For instance, I thought about the power dynamics I brought to the site, both as the researcher and as an acting teacher who assumed an active role in the study by conducting the critical readings. To distribute the power among the participants, I constructed an open environment by welcoming participants’ comments, both on-topic as well as off-topic participant responses were validated. Angrosino and Mays De Perez (2003) assert, however, that identities as either the researcher or teacher should remain in flux through ongoing interaction with participants. Constructing a solid and trustworthy rapport with the participants began with sharing my multiple identities: a researcher, a member of the classroom, a teacher, a parent, and a LGBTQ member. Doing so created a space for participants to position me in various identities while also opening the conversation for them to share their various positions.

With that in mind, ethical considerations were taken into account surrounding the identities of the young participants. Participants had pseudonyms to protect their identity and although participants’ caregivers gave consent, children were also given the option to refuse participation in the study on any given data collection day. Finally, when working with young children, Cohen (1971) cautions researchers to grasp how our personal associations shape our interpretations. For instance, adjectives in general, such as “sensitive,” “sloppy,” “tomboyish,” and “helpless,” could vary according to the observer. For that reason, interpretations regarding the participants included thick and rich descriptions which conveyed children’s specific actions and were void of ambiguous descriptions.

**Data Analysis**

Analyzing the data across multiple sources provided me with an expansive view of the data and allowed me to identify reoccurring codes and themes. Data analysis occurred at the initial
stages of the collection process; I analyzed and coded all data sources including pre- and post-assessments, video recordings of critical readings, student artifacts, and the researcher reflective journal. All data was coded using qualitative open coding procedures (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) as a means to identify themes in relation to the research questions. For example, a chart was made for each student participant to document the participant’s responses to the critical readings with a focus on sexuality and gender. Since sexuality and gender are mostly interrelated constructs, some participant responses were coded as both sexuality and gender. Analysis of each data set occurred and was charted individually to establish themes across the various data sources. By analyzing various data sources related to the research questions, I was able to highlight data that specifically attended to the research questions and in turn identify themes. Figure 3.1 demonstrates the data analysis process of this study.

**Figure 3.1 Data Analysis Process**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Develop general idea of data</th>
<th>Identify frames (opening coding)</th>
<th>Establish domains (focused coding)</th>
<th>Search for themes (categorizing)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**Pre- and post-assessments**

Pre- and post-assessments required students to draw a character they would like to see in a book. Participants could either create a character using their imagination or represent a character already presented in another text. Pre-assessments and post-assessments were analyzed to whether the participant included or did not include representations related to conventional norms regarding sexuality and gender. For instance, one participant drew a mother, father, and little girl which was coded as a sexuality representation since the family represented a
heterosexual family structure. Additionally, post-assessments were analyzed according to whether the participant began to consider other characters outside the conventional norms in regards to sexuality and gender and consequently included unconventional norms in their post assessments.

**Video recordings of Critical Readings**

Erickson (1982) recommends a four stage process to analyzing audiovisual data. Heeding this advice, I analyzed each video first as a whole event to then increasingly smaller components. This process consisted of (a) reviewing the whole event (b) identifying the major constituent segments of the event and, (c) identifying the aspects within a particular main segment and the actions of the individuals. Once a week, audiovisuals were analyzed under a critical literacy and queer theory lens. In applying Erickson’s four-step process, I was able to identify emerging themes as well as conduct a closer examination for sub-codes. Sub-codes were identified after examining the actions of the participants in relation to a larger theme.

Transcriptions occurred with 48 hours of the original recording followed by an analysis which included first reading the data to develop a general idea. Continual non-verbal communication or unwillingness to participate (e.g., participants playing with other toys in the room, not responding to questions) resulted in recognizing two participants who were not responsive to critical readings focused on sexuality and gender as well as recognizing three participants who remained engaged in the process.

Next, data analysis included coding the data according to whether the student responses spoke to directly a gender or sexuality representation or both. For instance, one of the participants stated that “there were no girl colors or boy colors”, this statement was coded as “gender representation”. If student responses offered connections to sexuality as well as gender,
responses were coded as both. Deeper analysis occurred until categories within the data were established which resulted in identifying three types of students’ responses.

Video recordings were equally analyzed in order to examine how the researcher could enact literacy with a focus on sexuality and gender. Transcripts of the researcher assuming the role as teacher were analyzed for ways in which the teacher garnished the attention of the participants and used critical literacy to keep the participants engaged and focused on sexuality and gender. Four codes were identified which resulted in establishing two overall categories in order to answer how a teacher could enact critical literacy with a focus on sexuality and gender.

**Participant and Field Observations**

As with the video recordings and the other data sources, data was first coded according to whether the participant produced a response more aligned to sexuality or gender or both. Next, a deeper analysis of the data occurred in order to establish categories. Observations included the first two weeks of the study as well as an analysis of the video recordings of the critical readings which recorded participant events before, during, and after the readings.

**Artifact Collection**

Student produced artifacts included weekly critical literacy drawings as well as photographs captured outside the research site. After each reading, participants drew a picture about what they thought the author or illustrator wanted the reader to remember the most about the book. Each participant described the drawing to the researcher which was recorded on the back of each drawing. Critical literacy drawings were analyzed according to whether the participant depicted the theme of book (i.e., relating to gender or sexuality or both) in the drawing or not. Weekly charts were made which charted the drawings of each participant. Charting the drawings according to the book allowed me analyze whether a particular book
evoked an overall positive or negative response toward critical readings of sexuality and gender in the participants. Additionally, charting each drawing allowed me to analyze the participants’ responses according to the weekly theme of gender or sexuality. For instance, I was able to analyze if participants resisted one representation over another, such as resisting diverse gender representations more than alternative sexual representations.

**Researcher Reflective Journal**

Data pertaining to the researcher as teacher was analyzed independently to describe the possible implementation of critical literacy and the ways in which a teacher might face uncomfortable situations, such as challenging questions or comments from the young participants. All data collected in the research journal was compared to the teacher-researcher data transcribed and charted from the video recordings. I analyzed and compared my teaching practices implemented in the classroom and captured on video recording to my reflections in the research journal. Reflections of the researcher assuming the role as teacher were analyzed for comments which referenced the ways I obtained the participants’ attention and used critical literacy to keep participants engaged and focused on sexuality and gender.

**Data Analysis Summary and Charts**

In analyzing the data for codes and categories to emerge in relation to sexuality and gender within the context of critical readings, the process was divided into three stages. These stages occurred simultaneously for both the teacher and the student participants. In the first stage, I relied on a qualitative approach by inductively analyzing both the student and teacher data (Bodgan & Biklen, 2007). Data was analyzed for comments that reflected not only critical literacy and queer theory in action but also how the children and teacher responded to the diverse representations of sexuality and gender in the selected literature. For instance, comments about
sexuality (e.g., same-sex relationships) or gender (e.g., unconventional gender expressions) were noted in the individual charts across each observation. Charting the data served two purposes. First, charting provided a comprehensive snapshot of each participant in relation to sexuality and gender as well as to the application of critical literacy. Second, individually charting the participants’ responses aided in the process of collectively comparing or contrasting the participants’ data. Figure 3.2 provides a visual of student data was charted in the first stage of the process.

**Figure 3.2 Sexuality and Gender Chart**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Sexuality | “A Tale of Two Dads, it’s about dads like X and X” – *Tale of Two Dads*  
“the kings got married” - *King & King & Family*  
“Every King gets married” - *King & King & Family*  
“the princess boy and the boy love each other” - *Princess Boy*  
Mother, Father, and little girl - *Pre-assessment Drawing* |
| Gender | “it’s a girl story and I don’t like it” – *Olivia and The Fairy Princess*  
“there are no girl colors or boy colors” – *The Princess Boy*  
“I’m going to draw them all grown and they are boys” – *The White Swan Express*  
Changes sex of girl character to boy - Critical Drawing - *Tale of Two Daddies*  
Alters sex of girl characters to boys - Critical Drawing - *The White Swan Express* |

In the second stage and guided by the research questions, I utilized qualitative open coding procedures (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) to establish categories. Data which supported these categories included when participants aligned to the story during storytime and made personal connections to the topic. Another example included when participants recreated or remade certain aspects about the book, by altering a character or changing the storyline to their liking. Finally, the third example occurred when participants rejected the stories by not making any connection to the book by drawing or responding off topic to the critical literacy prompts.
Charts were used to code the students’ responses, meaning was provided for each response to indicate why the response was coded in that particular category. Figure 3.3 includes a visual to illustrate how this process took place.

**Figure 3.3 Student Response Chart**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
<th>Data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student Rejects</td>
<td><em>Princess Smartypants</em> - Page rejects the idea that Princess might not want to marry and views the refusal as offensive. This perspective demonstrates that Page upholds the societal view that a princess should marry a prince.</td>
<td>Teacher: Does she want to marry a prince or not marry a prince? Page: Not marry one Teacher: What do you think about that? Page: Rude</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Replicates</td>
<td><em>My Princess Boy</em> - Page is replicating the main character by putting herself in a similar position as the Princess boy and acknowledging the feeling of being ridiculed for defying the conventional norms.</td>
<td>Page: Sometimes I dress up like a boy and people laugh at me and my clothes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Recreates</td>
<td><em>The Boy with Pink Hair</em> - After reading a book about a boy with pink hair, Page comments about her families’ hair and its uniqueness.</td>
<td>Page: “My grandpa, his hair is dyed brown and my grandmother’s hair is afro.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the third stage, I analyzed the data according to the categories in order to identity themes (Richards & Morse, 2007). Data was coded according to participant responses thereby producing the theme: Critical Literacy in Action toward Sexuality and Gender Produces 3 Student Responses. Data focused on the researcher serving as teacher produced two categories thereby producing the theme: Two ways to Enact Critical Literacy with Young Children using LGBTQ-themed literature. Figure 3.4 provides a snapshot of how the data was processed in the third stage in order to identify themes using the categories generated in the data.
### Figure 3.4 Identify Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
<th>Data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Critical Literacy in Action:       | Through discussion and classroom acknowledgement that some people may prefer to remain single. After providing Page with a representation in which a Princess finds more happiness being single, Page verbalizes that not all princesses should feel compelled to marry a prince. | Initial: *Princess Smarty Pants*  
Page: Not marry one  
Teacher: What do you think about that?  
Page: Rude  
Transformative: *The Paper Bag Princess*  
Page: She was alone; some people don’t want to marry. |
| Sexuality                          |                                                                                                                                                                                                          |                                                                                                                                          |
| Critical Literacy in Action:       | Through discussion and classroom acknowledgement that some people connect to another gender choice, Jerry illustrates transformative thinking. This transformation is supported by his first drawing in which he draws a princess boy slashed to his final drawing of depicting an effeminate boy in the final story of *10,000 Dresses* as is. | Initial: *My Princess Boy*  
Jerry’s Critical Drawing: The Princess Boy with lacerations wounds from other people  
Transformative Thinking: *10,000 Dresses*  
Depicting the main character, Bailey, as is in the book, wearing a crystal dress. |
| Gender                             |                                                                                                                                                                                                          |                                                                                                                                          |

In sum, after coding the data into sexuality or gender, three categories emerged producing two overall themes which spoke to the research question of how students respond to LGBTQ-themed books using critical literacy with a focus on sexuality and gender. In the next chapter, I discuss these three categories in detail and present the findings of the overall study as well as highlight the findings of the individual case studies.
Chapter 4

Case Study Findings

This chapter includes the four individual case studies in relation to the research question: *How do young children respond to critical readings of LGBTQ-themed children’s literature and in turn to the topic of sexuality and gender?* To answer this question, three focal participants out of five were selected for in-depth discussion. The three participants studied met the criteria of having a unique family structure, had solid verbal skills, and demonstrated a desire to participate on data collection days. Reports on the individual participants are organized according to (a) the data source and (b) the pattern of responses that emerged from each participant. Overall, the three major types of responses generated by the focal participants across the various data sources and discussed are: (1) *Student Rejects*, which included when a participant refused to make any connections to the main character or the author’s purpose of the book, (2) *Student Replicates*, which occurred when the participant replicated the main character or the author’s purpose of the book, or (3) *Student Recreates*, which involved when the participant altered the main character or author’s purpose of the book to his or her liking. The labeling of these responses—Student Rejects, Student Replicates, or Student Recreates—are unique to this study in that they were created by the researcher and not inspired from any previous study.

Responses were examined regarding how the participants’ comments aligned to critical literacy, sexuality and gender, or both. To fully examine the complexity of my first research question, it was imperative to recognize elements in the data which addressed critical literacy and sexuality or gender as well as to spotlight critical literacy in action toward sexuality and gender. In some instances, responses aligned to both critical literacy and sexuality and gender, and thus were examined as such. In general, responses were examined in their totality, meaning
unsolicited responses were coded with the same importance as solicited responses. Solicited responses included implementing Vasquez’s (2004, 2010) critical questions while unsolicited responses were those in which the participants voluntarily shared their thoughts throughout the reading or during our critical discussions which occurred at the conclusion of each book.

The final case study in this chapter reports on the researcher serving as the teacher. This case study examines the data in relation to the second research question: How is critical literacy with a focus on sexuality and gender enacted by the researcher assuming the role as teacher? This last case study is organized according to the data sources as well as to my dual position as a teacher and a researcher. In order to examine the complexity of the second question, it was equally imperative to recognize elements of the data that addressed my dual position in relation to both implementing critical literacy and to the integration over the topic of sexuality and gender.

**Case 1: Page**

**Background**

Page is an African-American girl in kindergarten being raised by her divorced mother and father who live in separate households. Page does not have any siblings, but shared many stories about her extended family members. She was the only girl in the study, but positioned herself as an equal by participating as much as, if not more than, the boys. She was very observant and would often vocalize how the boy participants would agree with her viewpoints. Page tended to answer my questions first while offering very detailed responses. For instance, when asking Page to make a prediction about the book, *Princess Smartypants* (Cole, 1986) which portrays a princess and a dragon riding a motorcycle on the cover, Page stated: “It’s about a little princess with a dragon and she was being a smartypants cause she thought she knew how
to ride a motorcycle but she didn’t.” Due to Page’s eloquent responses, on occasion, the boys would respond, “I agree with Page,” prompting her to evaluate the situation and proclaim: “Everyone agrees with me?” Over the course of the study, Page posed several questions and was equally eager to answer all of mine. Near the conclusion of the study, Page began to assert her ethnic difference by including African-American characteristics in the drawings as well as make comments referring to her cultural heritage. Table 4.1 below provides an overview of Page’s responses across the data sources which are discussed below.

Table 4.1

*Data Collection for Page*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Rejects</th>
<th>Replicates</th>
<th>Recreates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Transcripts</td>
<td>6 (LGBTQ)</td>
<td>14 (LGBTQ)</td>
<td>17 (LGBTQ)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical Literacy Drawings</td>
<td>2 (LGBTQ)</td>
<td>6 (LGBTQ)</td>
<td>3 (LGBTQ)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Photographs</td>
<td>6 (Traditional)</td>
<td>8 (Traditional)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre- &amp; Post Assessment</td>
<td>Pre (Traditional)</td>
<td>Post (Traditional)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Transcripts and Critical Literacy Drawings were analyzed as to whether Page rejected, replicated, or recreated LGBTQ-themed representations. In contrast, the photographs as well as the pre- and post-assessment drawings were analyzed as to whether Page rejected, replicated or recreated traditional sexuality and gender representations.

**Transcripts**

Coding the transcripts included examining both Page’s solicited and unsolicited responses to the critical reading sessions. Both responses were equally important to examine as they expressed Page’s perspective about sexuality and gender. Additionally, by asking critical questions about each book, the teacher and the participants constructed an environment in which all critical inquiries were welcomed and often occurred spontaneously. The following sections are divided according to the three types of responses: student rejects, student replicates, and
Student recreates. The final section spotlights critical literacy in action in which Page’s initial verbal responses shifted from one reading to another and, as a result, transformative thinking took place.

**Student Rejects.** Page was a very demonstrative student who asked several questions and sought to answer those posed by the teacher. In some cases, if Page’s perspective of the world did not align to the book, she willingly shared her viewpoint. For instance, when reading *The Family Book* (Parr, 2010), a book about different families which states, “all families like to hug.” Page quickly interjected, “some families don’t.” In this sense, Page used the critical readings to voice her opposition to the book’s view about hugs. Since participants were frequently asked to share their predictions and thoughts about why the author would write the book, Page felt comfortable in equally sharing her contradictory views about not all families liking to hug and, more importantly, that not all families participate in the same activities.

The participants would at times offer perspectives that would communicate their ideas or beliefs about sexuality and gender as well. Such insights allowed the teacher to consider these perspectives when reading the LGBTQ-themed books. For instance, when reading a story about a princess who diverts male suitors from marrying her, the following exchange occurred between the teacher and Page.

Teacher: Does she want to marry a prince or not marry a prince?

Page: Not marry one

Teacher: What do you think about that?

Page: Rude

In this scenario, Page rejects the notion that the Princess might not want to marry and instead views the Princess’s refusal as offensive. Page did not consider how it might be “rude” to force a
Princess into marrying who wishes to remain single. This perspective demonstrates that Page was upholding the societal pressure of a Princess needing to marry a Prince in a superior position versus considering the Princess’s viewpoint. When the Princess refuses to conform to the stereotypical imagine, Page considered the Princess ill-mannered.

**Student Replicates.** In relation to sexuality and gender, Page tended to replicate the main character or the author’s purpose. For instance, after reading *My Princess Boy* (Kilodavis, 2010) which portrays a boy who enjoys dressing up like a princess, Page stated, “Sometimes I dress up like a boy and people laugh at me and my clothes”. In this sense, Page replicated the main character by putting herself in a similar position as the Princess boy, and acknowledged the feeling of being ridiculed when one wears clothes outside of the conventional norms. Another example of Page replicating the main character in this same book occurred when Page answers the critical question: What are 1 or 2 things from your own life that connect to these stories? Page made a direct connection to the main character in the book by stating, “Me and that boy both like to twirl and wear girly things.” Page focused on the shared actions that both she and the Princess Boy enjoy and was not swayed by the fact that she was born as a girl and the Princess Boy was not.

Page replicates a similar response in reading *Donovan’s Big Day* (Newman, 2011). This story is about a boy who is excited to be the ring bearer for his two moms who are getting married. During the story, the following exchange occurred.

Teacher: He has two moms.

Page: I have one mom.

Another participant: I have one mom, too.

Page: I might have another mom in China, but I don’t know.
Page is demonstrating her acceptance over the possibility of having two moms by placing herself in that position. Although Page is being raised by a mother and a father, Page replicates the main character’s position by suggesting that she might have a second mother as well.

Lastly, after reading a book about two married kings who wish to have a child, Page uses critical literacy to state that the author might have written the book to illustrate how the two kings are proud of their family: “I think he [the author] wrote it because he [the author] is a king and he likes his family.” Page replicates the author’s purpose of the story and uses critical literacy to pinpoint the purpose of acceptance toward alternative families.

**Student Recreates.** In comparison to Page rejecting or replicating the author’s viewpoints of the books, Page often recreated elements of the book’s critical message or character in order to interject her ways of viewing the world. For instance, after reading a book which portrays a two mom family with a little girl named Emma who plays with a cat in unconventional ways, Page stated her belief that the author’s purpose for this book was not to represent a family with two moms, but instead to demonstrate how to treat pets properly. Page responds that “some people have pets and should know how to treat them”. In asking Page what surprised her about the book, she responds, “The thing that surprised me is when Emma painted the cat brown.” Page uses critical literacy to spotlight animal rights. In this sense, Page has recreated the critical lesson of the book by placing a higher importance on animal rights than a family with two moms.

Unlike the other participants, Page was the only African-American girl in the study and often used critical literacy to recreate the purpose or main character to align with her own cultural background. This type of response became more apparent in the critical drawings but a few instances occurred throughout our discussions. For instance, after reading, *The Boy with*
*Pink Hair* (Hilton, 2011) which portrays a boy born with pink hair, Page’s states: “My grandpa, his hair is dyed brown, and my grandmother’s hair is afro.” Discussing the unusual circumstance of having pink hair and reading a book that celebrated this difference caused Page to comment about her families’ hair and its uniqueness. Another example of Page using critical literacy to recreate the message of a book occurred after reading a story in which two moms get married. The purpose of the book, *Donovan’s Big Day* (Newman, 2011), was to demonstrate the different types of families. At the conclusion of the book, Page comments how the two moms are marrying, but that her mother and father are not. Since Page comes from a divorced family, she used critical literacy in this case to redirect the attention off the marriage of the two women and place it on the separation of her parents. Although critical literacy allowed Page to visualize the marriage of two women and to discuss it in the classroom, she recreated the theme to align it to her own family and thus possibly heteronormativity.

**Critical Literacy toward Sexuality and Gender in Action.** Given that the study’s focus was to use the tenets of critical literacy which requires action or transformative thinking to occur in relation to sexuality and gender, this section serves as a model to demonstrate how a student who is comparable to Page might similarly respond. In comparison to the above sections, Page either replicated or recreated the author’s purpose or main character of the book. There were certain incidents in which participants would shift from one response to another and in this sense transformative thinking occurred. One example of Page recreating the author’s purpose or the main character took place when reading *Princess Smartypants* (Cole, 1986). In this book, a princess who does not want to marry a prince requires her suitors to perform treacherous and impossible tasks in which they inevitably fail. After asking Page why she thought the author wrote the book, Page responds, “So we can know how mean it is to test people, so you won’t get
married.” Page focuses more on the challenges that the suitors were forced to face rather than on the princess who was resisting the societal pressure placed on her to marry a prince. Through discussion and classroom acknowledgement that some people may prefer being single, Page, in a later session, replicates the author’s purpose of the book when asked: “Remember Princess Smartypants? Why do you think the author wrote this book?” Page fervently responds, “because some people don’t want to get married.” In this sense, critical discussions allowed Page to first acknowledge what she believed the author’s focal point of the first book was, which dealt with being rude and testing people, but then, and more importantly, to expand her views and to consider that not everyone wishes to be married. As a result, Page replicates this expanded viewpoint after reading a similar second book, The Paper Bag Princess (Munsch, 1995), in which a Princess at the end of the story decides not to marry the Prince.


Page: She was alone, some people don’t want to marry.

After offering Page a representation in which a Princess finds more happiness in being single, through reading Princess Smartypants (Cole, 1986), Page replicates this theme and does not push back when a similar theme is proposed in the second book: The Paper Bag Princess (Munsch, 1995). Critical literacy with a focus on sexuality and gender not only offered Page alternate representations regarding diverse gender roles, but also transformed Page’s way of thinking by realizing that not every Princess seeks a Prince.

Another example of critical literacy in action occurred when reading A Tale of Two Daddies (Oelschalger, 2010) in which two daddies demonstrate the ways in which they take care of their young daughter. During the reading, the focus is placed on the daughter having two fathers to such a degree that the daughter in the story is not given a name. At one point, Page
stands up demanding the name of the girl by hastily stating: “What is the girl’s name?” The teacher explains that we do not know the name of the girl because the focus of the book is placed on the girl having two fathers, unlike most books that portray a mother and a father. Page accepts the response and the story is concluded. The following week during a review of previous books read, the teacher asks: “Who did we read about last week?” Page quickly responds “the daddies”. This response demonstrates that Page had shifted her focus of the little girl to the understanding the role that the fathers played in the story.

**Critical Literacy Drawings**

The instructions involved with the critical literacy drawings consisted of asking participants to draw what they thought the author or illustrator wanted them to remember the most about the book. Since the critical drawings occurred after the critical discussions took place and involved discussing various interpretations about the overall purpose of the book, critical drawings were evaluated based on whether the weekly drawing related to the general theme of the book or about the main character. The following parameters were set in order to ensure consistence in coding all drawings across participants. A picture was labeled as *Student Rejects*, if a participant drew a picture unrelated to the theme of the book, and thus the author’s purpose or to the main character. If the student recreated certain elements of the book by changing the author’s purpose or the main character, the drawing was labeled as *Student Recreates*. A picture was classified as *Student Replicates*, if the student depicted the author’s purpose or replicated the character according to the author’s creation. Similar to the transcripts, Page demonstrated all three responses in her drawings.

**Student Rejects.** Out of the eleven drawing assignments, two drawings were coded into this category. The fifth book read during the study, *King & King & Family* (de Haan and Nijland,
2004), portrayed two kings traveling on their honeymoon who returned home to discover their soon-to-be adopted daughter in their suitcase. This was the first book in the study which portrayed two fathers and a child as a family. In her critical literacy drawing, Page redirects attention off the two Kings and in its place depicts only one King who is disturbed by an annoying mosquito. Instead of focusing on the main theme, which was an alternative family, or depicting both Kings with the child, Page affirms her views of the story by representing another element in the story. Page’s drawing was influenced by a part in the story in which one of the Kings is stung by a mosquito. When asked to draw what she thought the author or illustrated wanted her to remember the most about the book, Page omits the alternative family representation as well as the same-sex relationship by not depicting the two men in unison in her picture.

Page exhibits this same response in another critical literacy drawing when reading a second book about two fathers. The book, *A Tale of Two Daddies* (Oelschlager, 2010), portrays two white fathers taking care of their young white daughter. The ethnicity of these representations is provided in order to compare and contrast Page’s response to the first book in the series with two fathers, *King & King & Family* (de Haan & Nijland, 2004) which also offers portrayals of two white fathers adopting a daughter who could be viewed as Latina, African-American, Indian or a child with olive skin. As in the first book, Page rejected both fathers’ roles as well as the daughter’s in the second book by drawing a picture of a boy who stumbles and bruises his knee (see appendix A). Her drawing is in reference to an illustration in the book, *A Tale of Two Daddies*, which shows a friend of the girl’s, a young boy, falling and getting hurt. In the illustration, the boy asks the girl which father takes care of her when she injures herself. Page’s critical drawing does not include any of the main characters nor does it reflect the
author’s purpose which is about alternative families. Page’s decision to not depict the fathers occurred after having an explicit conversation about how the author of this book, *A Tale of Two Daddies*, similar to the book, *King & King & Family* (de Haan & Nijland, 2004) also does not provide a name for all of the characters, since the primary focus is on having two fathers. Her choice to concentrate on another element of the book in her drawing allowed Page to assert herself and her choice to reject the critical reading about alternative families and in particular two fathers. This data also demonstrates that Page tended to reject texts which did provide names for its characters as was the case for both these books.

**Student Replicates.** Out of the eleven critical drawings, Page produced six that were coded into this category. Overall, Page replicated the author’s purpose about alternative families as well as books about gender differences. After reading a book about alternative families in which Page rejected some of the author’s view, she replicates a similar illustration in the book by connecting it to her family. For instance, while reading *The Family Book* (Parr, 2010) Page overtly contrasts the author’s views that all families like to hug by stating that her family does not. Page felt that the most important element of the book was that not all families live in the same house. Since the book focuses on how families are different, it is not surprising that Page chose to replicate this illustration for critical literacy picture given that she lives in two separate houses (see Appendix B). Although this depiction does not include a same-sex parent representation, it does consist of elements that were central to the book’s purpose in that it demonstrates the different family structures. The second drawing is for the book, *The White Swan Express: A Story about Adoption* (Okimoto & Aoki, 2002) which also includes alternative family representations. The book is about different families who travel to China to adopt infant girls. For this picture, Page draws an infant yelling out to her mother. Page’s drawing
demonstrates how she viewed the infant finding her new mother as a central theme versus the various families represented. Alternatively, her drawing also suggests that the child is the essential character and not the sexuality of those who love him or her. Her drawing is most likely influenced by a comparable imagine in the book which depicts several families sitting in a room waiting to be placed with newly adopted daughter.

The last four drawings incorporate themes related to gender expression. Three books depict young boys who do not subscribe to the typical conventional roles. In comparison to The Family Book (Parr, 2010), Page draws a picture that is similar to an illustration in My Princess Boy (Kilodavis, 2010). Page draws the Princess Boy, the main character, twirling and happy because no one is laughing at him (see Appendix C). Her critical drawing aligns to the weekly critical question in which she responded, “Me and the boy [Princess Boy] both like to twirl and wear girly thing.” This representation was likewise repeated in her drawing for 10,000 Dresses (Ewert, 2008) in which the main character, Bailey, born as a boy, but identities as a girl, is drawn wearing a crystal dress and happily dancing in a dress (see Appendix D). The theme of boys being mocked for expressing themselves differently appeared to resonate with Page, as it reappeared after reading The Boy with Pink Hair (Hilton, 2011). For this critical literacy drawing, Page portrayed the main character, the boy with pink hair, being ridiculed by another boy in the story (see Appendix E). Page tended to empathize with boys who embraced bodily performances and garments generally associated with young girls.

On the flip side, Page initially resisted portrayals of females who did not conform to stereotypical representations. For instance, during the reading of Princess Smartypants (Cole, 1986) Page recreates the theme by placing the focus on the prince versus the Princess. She views the Prince as being rude and fails to recognize the choice of the Princess who seeks her freedom
from the constraints of matrimony. Her critical literacy drawing depicts a similar illustration in the book in which one suitor seeking the Princess is transformed into a toad. There are two possible interpretations for Page’s drawing. First, the princess is performing an impolite action by altering the Prince into a frog; or second, the princess has acquired her independence by transforming the only viable Prince into a toad. Since Page’s drawing includes the main character performing an act which grants her autonomy, this drawing was labeled as: Student Replicates. Page’s resistance toward females who refuse to embrace conventional roles decreased over the course of the study.

**Student Recreates.** Under this category, Page produced three drawings. The drawings displayed the quality of recreation in that her drawings presented a change either in the theme of the book as well as an alteration of the main character. Overall, Page altered the characteristics of the main characters in all of her drawings as well as changed the author’s purpose in one. For instance, after reading *Emma and Meesha My Boy: A Two Mom Story* (Considine, 2005), a book about two moms and a daughter named Emma who plays with her cat, Meesha, in unusual ways, Page places greater concentration on the cat’s family versus the two mothers or their daughter. Her critical literacy drawing depicts a cat with two brown painted spots (see Appendix F). This drawing was most likely influenced by an illustration in the book in which Emma paints the cat. Page portrayed the cat to be black although it was gray in the story. Page not only altered the characteristics of the cat, but also only drew the cat. Her decision to depict simply the cat supports her viewpoint about the main theme of the book. In her verbal response to why the author wrote this book, Page highlighted the treatment of animals rather than the alternative family of two mothers. In sum, she recreated the author’s purpose as well as changed a characteristic of the cat in the book in her critical literacy drawing.
Altering some aspect of the main character occurred frequently in Page’s drawings. After reading *The Paper Bag Princess* (Munsch, 1995) and *Donovan’s Big Day* (Newman, 2011), Page transformed the characters by recreating them with African-American traits. Conversely, Page did not recreate, but in fact replicated the African-American characters proposed in the LGBTQ-themed books. In looking at how Page transformed the characters, Page not only altered the light skin princess in the book, *The Paper Bag Princess*, by adding African-American hair, but also provided this same transformation to the dragon by outlining the dragon’s scales in brown (see Appendix G). Page described this picture as “the Princess with afro and dragon puffed out hair.” In *Donovan’s Big Day*, a story about a white boy, Page recreates the main character, the boy, by making his hands and feet brown in the story (see Appendix H). It is unclear as to why only his hands and feet are brown; however, this is the second instance in which Page interjects the color brown onto a character. The first occasion occurred in *Emma and Meesha My Boy* (Considine, 2005) in which the color of the cat changed to brown. Considering the various modifications ranging from inserting African-American hair traits to inserting the color brown onto the various light on the absence of many African-American families in children’s literature.

**Critical Literacy toward Sexuality and Gender in Action.** Critical literacy occurred in various ways with this type of data source. Unlike the transcript data about families with two fathers or a family with two mothers, Page asserted her views about families with two fathers by not only failing to represent these roles in her critical literacy drawing, but also to ignoring the author’s purpose of the book by drawing a King getting bitten by a mosquito. Second, although Page initially resisted the idea of a Princess being single in the transcript data, she does in fact replicate the main theme of the book, *Princess Smartypants* (Cole, 1986), in her drawing. This
drawing indicates a movement from initially understanding that some women do not seek to marry a prince.

Another way in which Page demonstrated critical literacy through her drawings was to insert her own cultural heritage into three of the pictures. Although this insertion is not in line with sexuality and gender, it does suggest that Page felt comfortable in critically examining books and in turn used this knowledge to include elements which were important to her. Discussions involving which representations were present and why allowed Page to evaluate books in relation to what she would like to see represented. Page’s critical literacy drawings began to contain African-American elements around the eighth week and beyond.

**Photographs and Pre- and Post-Assessment**

In analyzing the photographs, only two categories applied, *Student Reject* or *Student Replicates*, as participants were not able to recreate or alter photographs. Participant photographs that rejected traditional roles in relation to sexuality or gender were labeled as: *Student Rejects*. For instance, photographs of books, movies, or characters that defied nontraditional gender and sexuality roles were coded into this category. In contrast, photographs that portrayed conventional roles in keeping with sexuality or gender were coded as: *Student Replicates*. The third category, *Student Recreates*, was not utilized given that no initial data source was used in order to suggest that the student “recreated” a particular product or character. Out of the twenty-four photographs that Page captured, eight were coded as *Student Replicates*. Six photographs were coded as *Student Rejects* and ten photographs were not included due to blurriness of pictures or redundancy of the same book or character.

Unlike the participant photographs, the pre- and post-assessment pieces were analyzed according to all three categories: *Student Rejects, Student Replicates*, and *Student Recreates*. The
assessment pieces were evaluated on whether there was change from the first drawing to the second. By analyzing the photographs and the pre- and post-assessment pieces as a comprehensive data set, Page produced responses in each category.

Student Rejects. Page captured six pictures of books, DVDs, or characters which did not portray stereotypical roles of men and women in relation to gender and sexuality. For example, photographs which did not capture a heterosexual family structure or have a boy or girl conveying to traditional gender roles were coded as student rejects. The next section discusses the pictures in which Page took.

Two pictures portrayed books about boys who are very clever about getting what they desire. For instance, one book, *What! Cried Granny: An Almost Bedtime Story* (Lum, 2002), is about a boy who circumvents his grandmother by giving her multiple tasks in order to avoid sleeping. The second book, *David Gets in Trouble* (Shannon, 2002), is about a boy who refuses to take the blame for his actions and conveniently places the guilt onto others. One book portrays a friendly witch who is saved by her animal friends when taken by a hungry dragon. This book, *Room on the Broom*, (Donaldson, 2003) offers another perspective of a woman in that the main character is not juxtaposed against a heroic male figure nor is she adorned in typical female garb. One of the books was an expository text about the rain forest and one was a Dr. Seuss book, *Happy Birthday to You!* (Dr. Seuss, 2003) about celebrating a birthday. The final book, *Fun to Learn: Opposites* (Filipek, 2006) portrayed an African-American girl and a White boy along with other opposites. This book was an educational text concerned with demonstrating opposites and did not supply a story or representations related to sexuality and gender.

Student Replicates. Page took eight photographs that replicated the traditional roles of men and women in relation to sexuality and gender. In each of these pictures, Page captured
either a picture of a young girl or a Princess. Three of the pictures include a young girl under the age of ten as the main character. One book, *Fancy Nancy and the Posh Puppy* (O’Conner, 2013), is about a girl who wants a dog. Although Nancy has a very robust vocabulary and is intelligent, she also often wears tutus and tiara. The next books, *I Love to Sing* (Matheson, 2014) and *I’m a Pretty Little Black Girl* (Bynum & Parod, 2013) equally portray girls dressing and performing activities associated with girls. For instance, the main characters like to sing, to dance, and to twirl and primarily wear pink garments throughout the books.

The remaining five texts portray older females seeking or being courted into male companionship. Four of the females in the texts are princesses: *Barbie Fairytopia: Mermaidia* (2012), *The Frog Prince* (2009), *Frozen* (2013) and *The Princess and the Frog* (2009). Each of these texts contains a princess who adorns herself in ways typical of a princess and who desires to fall in love with a prince. Although some of the texts, such as *Frozen*, portray a Queen who does not seek to be married, the Queen is described as one who possess uncontrollable special powers and ultimately secludes herself into a self-imposed isolation, while her sister, the delightful princess, rescues her with the assistance of male companion.

The final photograph in this category is of the text *Cloudy with a chance of Meatballs* (2009) which contains a nerdy male and geeky female who begin to care for each other while saving the world against a cloudburst of provisions.

**Student Recreates.** The pre- and post-assessment asked students to draw a character they would like to see in a book. For the pre-assessment, Page drew a picture of Snow White which suggested that Page had been conditioned by societal representations to produce a White character attracted to a heterosexual counterpart. Given that the prompt was to draw a self-made character, Page’s drawing equally suggests that she had most likely been exposed to White
characters as she was unable to produce other nonconventional characters. Over the course of the study, participants were challenged to consider why the author would create alternative representations and to reflect on whose voices were omitted from texts in general. For the post-assessment, Page drew a picture of a brown potato head with African-American hair to which she called “afro puff.” Her post-assessment drawing not only suggests that Page began to consider other characters outside of the conventional norms, but also felt comfortable in the critical literacy environment to construct an alternative character that resonated with her experiences.

**Critical literacy toward Sexuality or Gender in Action.** The best example of critical literacy in action toward sexuality and gender according to this data set is the change from the pre- and post-assessment. Page’s pre-assessment picture indicates that she was unable to conjure up different images of characters than those primarily found in children’s textbooks: White females adorned in stereotypical garb and attracted to the opposite sex. Page’s post-assessment drawing offers a different perspective in that she drew Ms. Potato head with African-American hair. Page’s post-assessment drawing suggests a movement of power on her behalf by illustrating a character with similar skin color and hair. It is impossible to determine with accuracy whether the exposure of various alternative representations prompted Page to depict a non-stereotypical character in the post-assessment, but such a change suggests that it was likely.

**Summary**

The findings regarding Page’s responses across the data sources indicate that critical literacy in action took place and, as a result, transformative thinking occurred in the areas of both sexuality and gender. Data highlighted how Page initially resisted the concept of females, and in particular Princesses, choosing to be single, but altered her thinking by acknowledging that not
everyone seeks companionship of the opposite sex. Another way in which critical literacy took place was by Page becoming aware that not all females depicted in texts must act and dress in conventional ways. For instance, Page’s post assessment drawing of Ms. Potato head rejects the traditional representation of females commonly depicted in books and is significantly different than her pre-assessment illustration of Snow White. The final way in which critical literacy occurred was Page’s insertion of her own cultural heritage by transforming the characters to have African-American hair or brown skin color. Page’s tendency to insert her cultural heritage increased over the course of the study and became more apparent near the end.

Overall, Page’s case study demonstrates how implementing critical literacy by reading alternative books over the course of fifteen weeks caused Page to reflect in various ways. Page reflected about the overabundant representations readily available, particularly in terms of marriage, the ways in which both boys and girls are depicted in books, as well as the need to see her own cultural heritage embodied in children’s books.

**Case 2: Jerry**

**Background**

Jerry, a middle child, raised in a heterosexual home environment and in first grade, easily shared his thoughts throughout the course of the study. Starting with the first day of the study, while reading *The Family Book* (Parr, 2010), Jerry interjected his opinion by stating, “My favorite word is other and I love pets.” Since this book focuses on various family structures and uses animal characters to portray various family structures, it appears that the reading of this book influenced Jerry’s comment. He was the most demonstrative boy including the boy participants eliminated from the study. His demonstrative personality may stem from being raised in household with two other brothers. Although Jerry expressed his thoughts and concerns
with ease, he also searched for teacher approval and responded well to structure. For instance, prior to reading each book, the teacher asked the participants to make a prediction based on the cover of the book. Before reading *My Princess Boy* (Kilodavis, 2010), Jerry believed that we had missed a step and hastily stood up proclaiming, “We have to guess what it will be about.” Jerry’s desire to obtain the correct answer consumed his mind during the readings by evaluating the predictions made to the actual events of the story. Predictions that did not coincide with the participants’ responses often led Jerry to acknowledge the error; for example, Jerry would state, “we were wrong” or “I was wrong.” Table 4.2 provides an overview of Jerry’s responses across the data sources which are further discussed below.

Table 4.2

*Data Collection for Jerry*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data Source</th>
<th>Rejects</th>
<th>Replicates</th>
<th>Recreates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Transcripts</td>
<td>8 (LGBTQ)</td>
<td>9 (LGBTQ)</td>
<td>12 (LGBTQ)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical Literacy Drawings</td>
<td>3 (LGBTQ)</td>
<td>6 (LGBTQ)</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Pre- &amp; Post Assessment</td>
<td>Pre (Traditional)</td>
<td>Post (Traditional)</td>
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</tr>
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*Note.* Transcripts and Critical Literacy Drawings were analyzed as to whether Jerry rejected, replicated, or recreated LGBTQ-themed representations. In contrast, the photographs as well as the pre- and post-assessment drawings were analyzed as to whether Jerry rejected, replicated or recreated traditional sexuality and gender representations.

**Transcripts**

Similar to Page, Jerry’s solicited and unsolicited responses were coded during the critical reading sessions. Jerry offered multiple perspectives through voluntarily sharing his concerns as well as when prompted to reflect on a particular question. By asking critical literacy questions during each reading, the teacher and the participants constructed a welcoming environment in
which various inquiries occurred spontaneously. Sections are divided according to the three types of responses: student rejects, student replicates, and student recreates. The final section discusses critical literacy in action which examines how verbal responses shifted from one reading to another suggesting that transformative thinking had occurred.

**Student Rejects.** Jerry expressed the most opposition in relation to gender and, more specifically, concerning girls, their clothing, or behavior (e.g., dresses or twirling). After reading *Olivia and the Fairy Princess* (Falconer, 2012), the teacher asked whether we should or should not read this book. Jerry responded, “Should not because, she is a girl and I don’t like girls.” The teacher then followed this line of thinking with, “Do you think this book is just for girls?” to which Jerry confirmed, “yes.” Jerry’s resistance to widen his views about gender, surfaced once more when reading *My Princess Boy* (Kilodavis, 2010) however in this case, Jerry shared why people generally mock boys like the main character, the Princess Boy, in this book.

Page: But how come they laugh at him?

Jerry: Can I tell her?

Teacher: What do you think the reason is?

Jerry: They will laugh at him because when they see boys with girl’s stuff, they think the boy wants to wear it.

Jerry, at the age of six, has realized that boys are expected to conform to particular roles by acting and performing in certain ways. This conversation equally revealed that Page was not only unaware of these expectations, but also surprised by the actions of others related to the boy’s desire to wear dresses. At the conclusion of the book, the weekly critical question asked the students to state what they have in common with the Princess Boy, a question to which Jerry quickly responded, “nothing.” The teacher then directed the participants’ attention toward
focusing on the feelings of the Princess Boy and how it feels to be treated unkindly. When other books are read with similar themes, Jerry does not resist the nonconventional gender role of boys represented in the same manner.

Another instance in which Jerry rejected the author’s purpose and the characters of the story occurred while reading *The White Swan Express: A Story about Adoption* (Okimoto & Aoki, 2002). This story was about different families traveling to China to adopt infant girls. The book portrayed several different types of families. Jerry directed the attention from the families and the adoption process by asking multiple questions related to China: “Is China sometimes sunny?”, “Are bicycles real there?” to “I thought those were Chinese words?” Jerry’s fascination about China prevented him from making comments related to the author’s purpose of the book, which was about different families and adoption.

**Student Replicates.** Jerry’s responses were higher in this category than in *Student Rejects* and tended to replicate thoughts related to the main character or to the theme of the books which represented various families. For instance, while reading the last page of *The Family Book* (Parr, 2010): “Your family is special no matter what kind it is” (p. 29), which caused Jerry to shout, “That’s just what I was going to say. I want a copy.” Jerry’s comments illustrate that his viewpoints were similar to those of this book. Another instance, in which Jerry supports alternative family roles, was when the class read *Emma and Meesha My Boy: A Two Mom Story* (Considine, 2005). When asking the participants why the author might have written this book, Jerry responded, “two moms” and then voluntarily states, “people should read it” which indicates that Jerry is assuming that this week’s critical literacy question is the same by offering an answer in advance. The following week prior to reading a new book related to gender, the teacher completes a mini-review of *Emma and Meesha My Boy* by asking the
participants why they think the author wrote this book. Jerry takes action by stating, “it has two mommies.”

Although Jerry showed the most opposition toward male figures depicted in clothes socially acceptable for girls, he did not demonstrate any verbal resistance toward two males forming a family unit. For instance, the book *King & King & Family* (de Haan & Nijland, 2004), portrays two Kings vacationing on their honeymoon. The book introduces the Kings as just getting married which causes the following conversation to occur between Page, Jerry, and the teacher.

Page: The Kings got married?
Teacher: Yes
Jerry: Every King gets married

Jerry’s comment not only implies that he does not have any reservations about the two men together, but also that he believes that every man should have a companion. This is an insightful remark given that we discussed the week prior that not every Princess, and in turn everyone, desires to be married. Before reading *A Tale of Two Daddies* (Oelschlager, 2010), Jerry makes a prediction about the book by looking at the cover and states, “I think the two dads like the sister, I mean the kid, and likes the two dads.” Jerry’s comment shows that before reading the story he can envision this family structure and does not demonstrate any resistance to its type. The final example of Jerry embracing alternative families is when he makes a direct connection to a family with two dads and the following conversation occurs.

Teacher reads: *Which one [dad] makes your birthday cake? Who is the one who stays up late?* Yes, stays up late and tells stories

Jerry: My dad stays up late, he doesn’t tell me stories, but he just watches TV.
In this exchange, Jerry is comparing the dads and their actions to his father’s. At the conclusion of the story, Jerry supports the answer of another participant when asked: Can you tell me one or two people like the people in the story? One participant calls out: “Jenny and Cindy” who are twin girls at the daycare center raised by two fathers; this response causes Jerry to become frustrated and state, “He took my answer.” Overall, Jerry’s responses suggest that books with two fathers resonated more with him than books with two mothers. This conclusion is made in light of how Jerry voluntarily made personal connections to these books and willingly shared his thoughts with stories which portrayed two fathers versus two mothers. In general, Jerry was more receptive to the concept of alternative families than to the notion that boys could express themselves in nontraditional ways, except in the realm of two men marrying.

**Student Recreates.** In comparison to the other two categories, Jerry produced the highest amount of responses in this category. Jerry altered themes or main characters of books, both of which pertained to sexuality and gender, by changing sentences read in books or the appearance of certain characters. Regarding sexuality in terms of family structure, the following conversation occurred.

**Teacher reads:** Some families have two moms or two dads. Some families have one parent instead of two.

**Jerry:** Some people have three or more

This comment is worth noting in that Jerry does not resist the suggestion that some families have two moms or two dads, but instead proposes that some families have three or more parents. Given that Jerry is raised by a mother and a father who still live together, his comment implies that he is familiar with various family structures and thought it significant to share his view about how some are different.
Another situation in which Jerry recreated an element of a book occurred when reading *My Princess Boy* (Kilodavis, 2010). Before reading, Jerry assumes that this book will be like *King & King & Family* (de Haan & Nijland, 2004) in which two kings get married and find a daughter on their honeymoon. When asked what he thinks the story might be about, Jerry responds, “The princess boy and the boy love each other.” Jerry recreates the story by assuming that the premise is a love story between the two boys. Jerry’s response may indicate a text-to-text connection (Cochran-Smith, 1988) but it also demonstrates that Jerry made a connection to the representation of two male characters in unison in that Jerry suggested this type of relationship will take place in the book: *My Princess Boy*.

Although Jerry produced the greatest opposition to male figures adorned in stereotypical garments, particularly when reading *My Princess Boy* (Kilodavis, 2010), his perspective toward similar books begins to shift by recreating certain elements of the book that make more sense to him. For instance, before reading *The Boy with Pink Hair* (Hilton, 2011), Jerry examines the front cover of the book which portrays the boy with pink hair and shares: “I think the boy likes having pink hair and he might have painted it, and he painted it to look like a girl.” Jerry has not only taken the main character and created a reason as to why the boy has pink hair, but also attached the reason to the boy seeking to be like the opposite sex. This comment demonstrates growth in Jerry realizing that some boys may relate more with items typically associated with girls. Another moment in which Jerry reveals that he is considering how people are categorized and mocked by their gender occurs when he approaches the book, *The Boy with Pink Hair*, points at the illustration of a girl with pink hair, and poses the following question.

Jerry: Why aren’t people laughing at her?

Teacher: That’s a good question. Why do you think that is?
Jerry: Because they laugh at boys with pink hair and not girls, because they think it’s a girl color and think not all colors are boy colors.

Teacher: Do you think that is nice?

Jerry shakes his head to confirm that it is not a kind response.

Jerry redirects the attention away from the boy with pink hair, the main character, by inquiring about a secondary character, a girl in the story with pink hair. In doing so, Jerry contemplates the unfairness society places on boy and girls regarding color choices.

One book in particular, *Princess Smartypants* (Cole, 1986), caused Jerry to produce several comments in which he recreated the main character or theme in order to make sense of the actual story being told. The book portrays a Princess who expresses to her mother at the beginning of the book that she does not wish to marry a Prince. The mother refuses to take note of the Princess’s request and sends several suitors to her. The Princess feeling powerless concurs with the mother but demands that the chosen suitor must be able to demonstrate his loyalty and love by completing several challenging tasks. The wise Princess requires the suitors to perform impossible tasks. All the men except one fall short in succeeding the Princesses’ tasks, the one suitor that does succeed is transformed into a toad and hops away. At the end of the book, a discussion occurs in which the teacher shares with the participants that not every Princess seeks a Prince. In asking Jerry the critical literacy question for that week about what surprised him, instead of noting that the Princess wished to be single; Jerry places the focus on prince by stating: “When the prince did everything that Princess Smartypants told him to do.” This comment shows that Jerry could not understand why the final suitor opted to take on the additional obstacles posed by the Princess. In doing so, he recreates the main theme by redirecting the main focus on the Prince versus the Princess.
Jerry’s struggle continues with the conclusion of this book and thus the Princess’ desire to remain single which is expressed when he states: “I think Princess Smartypants wants not to marry a prince because if she marries the prince then the magic spell, the kiss, will turn him into a frog. Actually, maybe Princess Smartypants only likes pets.” Jerry’s first assessment about the Princess’s decision to remain single is based on the premise that the Princess’s actions are acts of kindness; and that she rejected the suitors because they would transform into toads once kissed. Jerry’s final comment demonstrates that he is doubting his first line of reasoning and believes that the Princess is happier in the company of animals. Jerry makes this conclusion in that the Princess is portrayed at the end of the book with her dragon and other animals lying down next to her.

Jerry’s confusion about why a Princess might not want to marry a Prince reappears when reading *The Paper Bag Princess* (Munsch, 1995). The story is about a young princess who wishes to marry Prince Ronald, but changes her mind at the end of the story once she realizes that Prince Ronald is not a grateful person. In the story, Prince Ronald is taken by a dragon and is rescued by the Princess. When rescued, however, the only comment that the Prince makes to the Princess is how dirty she is. The Princess decides that the Prince is unappreciative and leaves happily by herself walking away in the sunset. This illustration prompts Jerry into sharing: “Maybe the guy [Prince Ronald] doesn’t want to marry her”. Instead of recognizing that the aim of the book is about how the Princess decides that it is better to be alone than married to the wrong person, Jerry redirects the attention onto the male character by seeking to find a reason for his actions. Jerry’s comment not only recreated the purpose of this ending, but also demonstrated a level of critical thinking in that it is possible to assume that perhaps the Prince acted unkindly in a response to liberate himself from the duties of marrying the Princess. Whether Jerry’s
perspective about the conclusion had been fully developed in his mind, and was most likely in contradiction to the author’s purpose, Jerry did offer an alternative reason for the Prince’s reactions as well as demonstrate his understanding and assumptions about gender norms.

**Critical Literacy toward Sexuality or Gender in Action.** In analyzing the transcripts for shifts in which Jerry appeared to alter his responses, critical literacy occurred in two significant ways according to this data source. First, Jerry’s initial response to books which portrayed activities commonly related to girls caused Jerry to react in negative ways. When reading *Olivia and the Fairy Princess* (Falconer, 2012), Jerry made reference that the book was only for girls as it talked about princesses. His perception, however, about princesses only pertaining to girls was called into question when we read *My Princess Boy* (Kilodavis, 2010). In this book, the main character, a boy, dreams of being a princess and mainly wears dresses and tiaras. Jerry continues to resist this representation and offers explanations as to why other children are laughing at the Princess Boy. After reading the book, the participants and teacher discussed how mocking the Princess Boy was an unkind gesture that did not demonstrate support and understanding of being different. As a result, when *The Boy with Pink Hair* (Hilton, 2011) and *10,000 Dresses* (Ewert, 2008) was read with similar themes, Jerry’s resistance lessened. In fact, while reading a book about a boy born with pink hair, Jerry inquires as to why some people are mocking the boy, but not the girl who also has pink hair. This inquiry illustrates that Jerry is recognizing that having pink hair is different and that laughing at only the boy and not the girl is an unjust response. During the reading of *10,000 Dresses* (Ewert, 2008), which portrays a character who identifies as a girl, but born as a boy, Bailey, dreaming of wearing dresses, Jerry does not interject any negative comments. Jerry, according to this data source, demonstrated a greater degree of awareness about children who may defy conventional gender expression.
Another instance of critical literacy in action occurred around the concept of marriage. Jerry is first introduced to the concept that not all people wish to marry while reading *Princess Smartypants* (Cole, 1986). This book portrays a princess who outsmarts all her suitors in the pursuit of remaining single. Jerry’s initial reactions are toward the suitor who finally performs all the dangerous feats for the princesses’ hand. Jerry is confused as to why the suitor accepts the multiple challenges. An interesting twist occurs however when reading *The Paper Bag Princess* (Munsch, 1995) which is about a princess who saves her prince-to-be. Once the prince is rescued, he insults the princess on the basis of her dirty garments which causes the princess to change her mind and leave without him.

The purpose of both books is to demonstrate that not every princess needs a prince and thus people, and women, in particular, can be happy being alone. Instead of recognizing the rudeness of the prince and how the princess realizes that she would be better alone, Jerry views the rudeness of the prince as a means to purge his marriage to the princess. Although this perspective is very unlikely on the part of the authors, Jerry’s viewpoint could also be accurate in that it might be the prince seeking liberation in a similar fashion as in princess did so in the book, *Princess Smartypants*. In sum, Jerry’s thinking about marriage, which generally links characters to the opposite sex in most children books, and about various gender expressions shifted during this process.

**Critical Literacy Drawings**

To analyze the critical literacy drawings with consistency across this particular data set and across the participants, parameters were set: participants were asked to draw what they thought the author or illustrator wanted them to remember the most about the book. Participants drew their critical literacy drawings following the critical readings sessions which involved
discussing the author’s purpose of the book. The critical drawings were evaluated as to whether the weekly drawing related to the author’s purpose or main character. A drawing was coded as Student Rejects, if a participant drew a picture unrelated to the author’s purpose or main character. If certain elements related to the author’s purpose or to the main characters were changed, the drawing was coded as Student Recreates. Finally, if the participant drew about the author’s purpose or replicated the character after the author’s creation, the picture was coded as Student Replicates. Jerry produced eleven critical drawings, as he was absent one day during the study.

**Student Rejects.** Out of the possible eleven drawings, Jerry produced three drawings coded into this category. After reading *King & King & Family* (de Haan & Nijland, 2004), in which two kings travel on their honeymoon and return home to find their soon to be daughter in their suitcase, Jerry draws a picture of one of the kings who has a red face due to a mosquito bite (see Appendix I). This was the first book in the study in which two men discuss their desire to have a child together and adopt the young girl they discover in their suitcase on their arrival home. Jerry, like Page, drew a picture of only one of the men. Jerry was sitting close to Page, who drew a comparable picture, it is very likely that Jerry followed Page’s direction and produced a similar drawing. By not focusing on the main theme, which was an alternative family, or depicting the young girl, Jerry ignores the author’s purpose by only drawing the King’s red face. The annoying mosquito is unrelated to the Kings’ love together, their desire to have a child, or their decision to adopt the girl at the end of the story. Jerry has opted to omit alternative family representations or same-sex representations in his picture. In comparison to the transcripts in which Jerry tends to support the union of the two kings in the book, this data set offers a different perspective. It is hard to distinguish why Jerry verbally supported this book, but
rejected it in the drawing, but it very likely that Page’s drawing played an important role in helping Jerry decide what to draw.

Jerry produces another picture coded in this category which is also very similar to one of Pages’. After reading *A Tale of Two Daddies* (Oelschlager, 2010), a book with two dads and a daughter, Jerry draws a picture of a secondary character, a boy who falls down and hurts his knee. This picture is either influenced by Page’s, who draws an identical picture, or after the illustration in the book in which a friend of the daughter’s, a young boy, stumbles and hurts his knee. The boy then inquires as to which father takes care of the girl when she injures herself. Jerry rejects this story, within this data set, in that he chose not to draw elements related to the main theme, which was about alternative families, as well as any of the main characters in the story. Jerry’s critical literacy picture deeply contrasts with the transcripts, in that in the transcripts, Jerry clearly acknowledges the family structure, a girl and two dads, before reading the book. Jerry similarly makes verbal connections by comparing his father to the two fathers in the story. It is unclear as to why Jerry rejected the characters and the main theme in his drawing, yet it is possible that Page’s picture influenced Jerry more.

The third and final picture that Jerry produced in this category pertained to *My Princess Boy* (Kilodavis, 2010). In this book, a young boy prefers to wear tiaras and dresses and is often mocked by others due to his difference. Jerry drew a picture of a Princess Boy with bloody lacerations, and explains the picture: People are cutting the Princess Boy (see Appendix J). Jerry likely rejected the representation of the Princess Boy as it did not coincide with other princess representations he had been offered in other books outside of the research site. The Princess Boy was also the first representation in the study which depicted a boy seeking to be a princess. Given that the story discussed how the Princess Boy faced ridicule from people outside
of his family, some may consider Jerry’s critical literacy drawing to be depicting the Princess Boy as emotionally wounded. Jerry’s verbal responses toward this book in the transcripts do not support this claim. What does support this claim is how Jerry offered a different response to a similar book. In 10,000 Dresses (Ewert, 2008) the main character, Bailey, born as a boy, but identifies as a girl, dreams of wearing different types of dresses. Bailey, like the Princess Boy is also ridiculed in the story, but unlike the Princess Boy, Bailey receives ridicule from family members. Both books, My Princess Boy (Kilodavis, 2010) and 10,000 Dresses (Ewert, 2008) portray the main character, the Princess Boy and Bailey, as happy individuals at the conclusion of the book. Yet, Jerry’s portrayals of these characters in his critical literacy drawings differ greatly. The Princess Boy is depicted with laceration wounds while Bailey is depicted in a crystal dress.

Similar to his verbal responses toward this book, My Princess Boy (Kilodavis, 2010), Jerry’s critical literacy drawing shows that he continued to struggle with the notion that some people, born as boys, prefer to express themselves in unconventional ways. This notion tended to conflict with other representations to which Jerry had been offered about boys and caused him to react in oppositional ways. It is unclear as to why Jerry decided to depict an aggressive scene; perhaps in doing so, Jerry was asserting his belief about how boys should act according to society. This resistance decreases as the study continues.

**Student Replicates.** Out of the eleven drawings, Jerry produced six pictures coded into this category. In general, Jerry replicated the author’s purpose in the majority of his critical literacy drawings. Jerry replicated three drawings which were related to sexuality in that the books portrayed same-sex families and three drawings were related to gender topics. In looking at the books which included various family structures, Jerry replicated the first book, The Family
Book (Parr, 2010), by drawing a picture of a single mother kissing her son goodnight (see Appendix K). Jerry first discussed about drawing a picture with both of his parents, but modified his plan by only drawing a female character. The second critical literacy picture about families which Jerry drew was in relation to Emma and Meesha My Boy: A Two Mom Story (Considine, 2005). Instead of drawing the two mothers depicted in the book, Jerry draws a picture of their daughter, Emma. In order to assure accuracy, this picture was coded under this category as Jerry did draw one of the main characters in the book, unlike some of his other drawings, which were coded differently. The final critical literacy picture in this category about families was The White Swan Express: A Story about Adoption (Okimoto & Aoki, 2002) which reveals several different family types adopting baby girls in China. For this book, Jerry drew a picture of a baby swaddled in a red blanket (see Appendix L). Since many of the illustrations use the color red which is also closely associated to many Chinese items, it is assumed that is the reason why Jerry picked this color for the baby. Instead of focusing the various family units seeking to adopt a child, one of which was a single mother, and other two women, Jerry chooses to draw only the child. One interpretation of this picture could be that Jerry is placing more attention on the child having her or his needs met by qualifying adults versus the structure of the family, and thus becomes a secondary concern for Jerry, and one that is not worthy of illustrating in the picture.

The final three pictures related to gender expression. After reading Olivia and the Fairy Princess (Falconer, 2012) in which Olivia questions her parents as to why everyone wants to be a pink princess instead of desiring to be an Indian Princess or African Princess, Olivia ultimately decides to be a Queen at the end. For this book, Jerry draws a picture of Olivia who is wearing pink and is crying. This picture not only replicates the main character but also the theme in that Olivia fought the notion that girls should merely wear pink. The second picture in which Jerry
replicated the book or main character was in regards to *Princess Smartypants* (Cole, 1986). In this picture, Jerry depicts one of the final scenes in the book in which the princess kisses the final standing suitor who turns into a toad, her attempt to remain single. Although Jerry struggled with why this suitor would agree to perform multiple dangerous feats for the Princess’s hand in marriage, and in turn places the attention on the suitor rather than the Princess, the main character of the book, Jerry’s critical literacy picture reveals equal importance on both characters by depicting them in the picture. The final picture in which Jerry replicates in relation to gender is *10,000 Dresses* (Ewert, 2008). This book, similar to *My Princess Boy* (Kilodavis, 2010), focuses on a child born as a boy, but identities as a girl, Bailey, who dreams of wearing eclectic dresses. No one, including Bailey’s family, understands this desire, except a girl in the neighborhood, who loves to sew and eventually aids Bailey with constructing the dresses. For this critical literacy drawing, Jerry drew Bailey wearing a crystal dress (see Appendix M). This picture is inspired after one of the illustrations in the book in which Bailey dreams about a crystal dress. This critical literacy drawing, which was the final drawing in the study, shows much more transformation and less resistance on the part of Jerry about boys expressing themselves in nontraditional ways. Jerry not only depicted the main character, but he also replicated the author’s purpose which was about the character’s desire to wear very ornate dresses.

**Student Recreates.** In this category, Jerry produced two drawings. These drawings displayed the quality of recreating in that he altered the form of the main character in some degree. For instance, when asked to draw his critical literacy picture regarding the book, *The Paper Bag Princess* (Munsch, 1995), which portrays a princess saving the prince from a wild dragon. Jerry recreated the dragon by transforming him into an enormous caterpillar that is
sleeping after the Princess has strategically exhausted him, so that she may enter the castle unharmed to get the prince (see Appendix N). Although Jerry does replicate the Princess outsmarting the dragon by causing him to fall into a deep slumber; the reason as to why Jerry decided to draw a caterpillar is unclear.

The second book in which Jerry recreates the main character occurs after reading *The Boy with Pink Hair* (Hilton, 2011). In this story, the main character, a boy, is born with pink hair. For this drawing, Jerry recreates the character by not only making his hair pink, but also his legs, his shirt, and even his eyes and mouth (see Appendix O). In addition, Jerry depicts him as eating a pink ice cream cone. Given that the boy with pink hair liked to cook and prepare food in the story, it is not surprising that Jerry depicted him as eating. In contrast to the book, however, the main character, the boy, is illustrated as only having pink hair, his remaining features are typical: blue eyes, green shirt, and blue jeans. The fact that Jerry embraced the color pink in his drawing by incorporating it to the fullest, demonstrates a greater awareness on the part of Jerry about not classifying colors according to one’s gender.

**Critical Literacy toward Sexuality and Gender in Action.** One of the most significant ways that critical literacy toward sexuality and gender occurred in this data set was with the transition between the pictures dealing with gender issues over the course of the study. In the eighth week, Jerry produced a critical literacy picture of a Princess Boy who received lacerations from other people. Jerry rejected this book, *My Princess Boy* (Kilodavisk, 2010), by illustrating the main character as physically wounded for his desire to express himself in another way. Critical discussions based on various gender expressions occurred which took the focus off children expressing themselves differently to being compassionate and understanding everyone’s right to be unique. These conversations juxtaposed with Jerry’s right to articulate his
contradictory views allowed him to shift toward being more receptive about others’ differences. For instance, Jerry’s critical literacy drawing for *The Boy with Pink Hair* (Hilton, 2011) exhibited an enormous amount of pink. Jerry not only drew the boy with pink hair, but every feature, including clothes and facial elements, were also pink. This drawing illustrates Jerry’s acceptance over the notion that boys could be associated with the color pink, given that everything in the picture, except for the outline of the boy’s face, is pink which is unlike the book. The final critical literacy in action occurs after reading the last book, in which Jerry demonstrates a level of normalcy toward alternative gender expression after reading *10,000 Dresses* (Ewert, 2008). Jerry does not resist or embellish the main character, Bailey, who dreams of wearing dresses. In fact, Jerry depicts Bailey in his critical literacy drawing as portrayed in the book in reference to both appearance and action. Through exposure to LGBTQ-books, critical literacy practices, and critical literacy drawings, Jerry’s actions transformed over the course of the study concerning gender.

**Photographs and Pre- and Post-Assessment**

In order to provide consistency across the study, the only two categories which applied to the photographs were: *Student Rejects* or *Student Replicates*. Photographs captured by the participants were coded as *Student Rejects* if the picture rejected traditional roles in relation to sexuality or gender. For instance, photographs of any type of text, both movies and books, which defied nontraditional gender and sexuality roles were coded into this category. Photographs portraying conventional roles pertaining to sexuality or gender were labeled as: *Student Replicates*. The final category, *Student Recreates*, was not utilized in that no initial data source was used in order to suggest that the student “recreated” a specific product or character. Out of
the 24 pictures, eight were coded as Student Replicates, eight were coded as Student Rejects and eight were not included due to blurriness, redundancy, or not related to project.

Contrary to the photographs, the pre- and post-assessment pieces were analyzed according to all three categories: Student Rejects, Student Replicates, and Student Recreates. The assessment pieces were evaluated on whether there was change from the first drawing to the second. Analyzing the photographs and the pre- and post-assessment pieces in unison provided an inclusive data set, which offered responses in each area.

**Student Rejects.** Jerry captured eight photographs of books, DVDs, or characters which did not portray stereotypical roles of men and women in relation to gender or sexuality. Seven of the pictures included characters which were nonhuman, but personification occurred in all but one. One text, *Tales of the Cryptids* (Halls & Spears, 2006), was an expository text about legendary creatures known to exist. Three of the texts utilized animals as the main characters who dealt with various problems. For instance, one book, a Dr. Seuss text, *Put Me In the Zoo* (Lopshire, 1960), described a polka dotted animal who craved to live at the zoo. Another book, *I Got Two Dogs* (Lithgow & Neubecker, 2008) portrays two clumsy and raucous dogs who are silly but well-loved the neighbors. The third text in this category, *Never Take a Shark to the Dentist* (Barrett & Nickle, 2008), includes various animals such as giraffes, goats, and pigs taking on human tasks and failing miserably. The remaining four texts consist of a diverse assortment. For instance, one photo is of Darth Vader, a character from *Star Wars* (1977), while another includes the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (2015), a series on Nickelodeon. Both of these pictures include characters resembling male epic figures which could be interpreted as conveying to stereotypical gender norms; however, their sexuality and gender overall remain mute. Another book which includes personification is *Planes, Fire & Rescue* (Gannaway &
Hernandez, 2014) the main character Dusty Crop-hopper dreams of soaring alongside his high-flying friends in a race. The final book and the only one with a human, *The Class Pet from the Black Lagoon* (Thaler & Lee, 2008), portrays a young boy whose imagination runs wild when the teacher tells the class that they will be getting a pet. Collectively these pictures portray Jerry as someone interested in fantasy and adventurous characters that provide both drama and comedy to the story.

**Student Replicates.** Jerry took eight pictures that replicated the traditional roles of men and women in relation to gender and sexuality. All of the books contained a main character raised in a traditional heterosexual family structure; only one book replicated the stereotypical gender roles of girls. Six of the books included animals as main characters, while two of the books had humans as the main character. For instance, *Halloween Howl* (Herman, 2004) and *Clifford’s Family* (Bridwell, 2010), the main character, Clifford, is a red dog who lives with Emily Elizabeth and her mother and father. Other books included, *Berenstain Bears’: Bedtime Battle* (Berenstain, 2008), *The World of Arthur and Friends* (Brown, 2004), *Hurry Up! Franklin* (Bourgeois, 2012) and *Splat the Cat: The Rain is a Pain* (Scotton, 2012), of which include bears, turtles, and cats as the main characters, but are depicted alongside their mother and father. The final texts with humans are *Sloppy Joe* (Keane & Brunkus, 2009) and *Sophia the First: Once Upon a Princess* (Disney, 2013). *Sloppy Joe* is about a young boy who struggles to be neat, until his family—mother, father, grandmother and grandfather encourage him to embrace his uniqueness. While this story focuses on being proud of one’s uniqueness, the uniqueness only pertains to being orderly and neat, which is arguably not a biological uniqueness. The last text, a DVD, is about a newly found princess, Sophie, who struggles to fit in with her new family who include a mother, father, sister and brother. Sophie and her family comply with both gender and
sexuality traditional roles in the film. One final and significant element to note is that this picture demonstrates that Jerry’s resistance toward items typically pertaining to girls decreased over the course of the study in that initially Jerry would have avoided stories with a princess, as equally supported in other parts of the data.

**Student Recreates.** Jerry’s pre- and post-assessment drawings were coded into this category since his post-assessment drawing offered qualities of being recreated when analyzed next to his pre-assessment drawing. Jerry’s pre-assessment drawing incorporated conventional family roles while his post-assessment drawing did not. For instance, his pre-assessment included a family with a mother, father, and small child, a girl, while his post-assessment drawing consisted of a smiling monster with three bloody scratches. Jerry, like the other participants, was instructed to draw a character that he would like to see in a book for both drawings. Jerry’s pre-assessment drawing suggests that he had been mostly exposed to books with heterosexual family structures since this is the representation he opted to depict. His post-assessment drawing could imply that after reading LGBTQ-books, some of which included dragons and imaginary creatures, Jerry began to consider other options for primary characters in books. Although his post-assessment drawing does not portray a same-sex family or an individual who defies the gender norms, it does in effect evade such classifications all together by constructing a creature in which sexuality and gender categorizing are absent. For this reason, his post-assessment picture could be perceived as **Student Rejects.** Yet, given that Jerry significantly altered his pre- and post-assessment drawing, this data set offers a better description and a more plausible quality of recreating characters, which is why his post-assessment was coded as **Student Recreates** and not **Student Rejects.**
Critical Literacy toward Sexuality or Gender in Action. There are two examples of critical literacy toward sexuality and gender in action in this data set. First, Jerry generally provided an equal amount of photographs which both portrayed conventional roles to those that did not. Additionally, Jerry included a picture of a princess despite previously asserting during the first week that princesses were only for girls. Second, after given the prompt to draw characters that he would like to see in books for his pre-assessment drawing, Jerry’s picture included a mother, a father, and a little girl. Since this was the first drawing produced in the study, it suggests that Jerry had mostly been exposed to heterosexual family characters in texts. His post-assessment drawing however portrays a smiling monster bleeding. Jerry’s post-assessment picture avoids any categorical markers in that gender and sexuality become unclear. Whether reading books which portrayed alternative families and characters which defied traditional gender roles affected Jerry’s post-assessment picture is difficult to establish, but given the significant variation between the pre- and post-assessment drawings, it is likely that the readings were impactful to some degree.

Summary

The findings regarding Jerry’s responses across the data sources reveal that critical literacy in action took place and consequently transformative thinking occurred in the areas of both sexuality and gender. Data highlighted how Jerry initially resisted the concept of princesses as he believed it only pertained to girls. Over the course of the study, data showed how Jerry’s resistance decreased as result of critically reading texts which defied traditional gender roles for both girls and boys. The most poignant example was the transformation that occurred between the critical literacy drawings from *My Princess Boy* (Kilodavis, 2010) to *10,000 Dresses* (Ewert, 2008), in which Jerry draws the princess boy slashed to depicting Bailey, born as a boy, but
identifies as a girl, in the final story as is represented by the author and illustrator. Another way in which critical literacy took place was by Jerry recognizing that not everyone seeks to be married. After reading *Princess Smartypants* (Cole, 1986) in which a Princess dodges getting married by tricking her suitors, Jerry believes that a Prince, in another story, seeks to do the same by being rude to a Princess in the book titled: *The Paper Bag Princess* (Munsch, 1995). The final way in which critical literacy took place was through Jerry becoming aware that not all families consist of a mother and a father. Jerry’s post-assessment drawing, his photographs, and his tendency to verbally support families with two fathers demonstrate that Jerry began to consider other nontraditional representations. In sum, Jerry’s case study suggests how critical literacy caused Jerry to reflect and transform his thinking in regards to gender expectations, marriage, and family structures in general.

**Case 3: Hank**

**Background**

At the time of this study, Hank was a seven year old kindergartner, being raised by a mother and a father. He has an identical twin brother who was also initially in the study. Hank was selected to participate as opposed to his brother who was eliminated because Hank generated imaginative comments and drew unique images unlike the other participants. Hank viewed the world in a way that made sense to him and he did appear to be influenced by the demonstrative personalities of others in the group. For instance, after reading a book in which Olivia, a pig, examines why everyone wants to be a princess, Jerry claims that the book is only for girls. The teacher then asked all the participants if they agree with Jerry. Hank asserted his viewpoint which was contradictory to Jerry’s by stating “no”. Jerry reacted by stating the word “yes” twice and then takes a winning stance claiming that there are a higher number of negative responses.
Hank grasps Jerry’s strategy and responds by offering two affirmative responses which ends the match between the two boys. This duo demonstrates that Hank is able to assert himself and support his views when they differ from another’s. Hank offered a bit of candidness to the study in that when asked to make predictions about the books we would read, he would simply say “I have no idea, I have never seen that book.”

Although Hank supplied the fewest responses in comparison to Page and Jerry, his responses were distinctive and reflected yet another perspective that children may have. Table 4.3 provides an overview of Hank’s responses which were analyzed in the study and are discussed in detail below.

Table 4.3

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data Collection for Hank</th>
<th>Rejects</th>
<th>Replicates</th>
<th>Recreates</th>
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<td>Transcripts</td>
<td>3 (LGBTQ)</td>
<td>11 (LGBTQ)</td>
<td>11 (LGBTQ)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Critical Literacy Drawings</td>
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<td>5 (LGBTQ)</td>
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<td>Pre- &amp; Post Assessment</td>
<td>Pre/ Post (Traditional)</td>
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*Note.* Transcripts and Critical Literacy Drawings were analyzed as to whether Hank rejected, replicated, or recreated LGBTQ-themed representations. In contrast, the photographs as well as the pre- and post-assessment drawings were analyzed as to whether Hank rejected, replicated or recreated traditional sexuality and gender representations.

**Transcripts**

Analyzing the transcripts included examining both solicited and unsolicited responses to the critical reading sessions. Hank produced a greater amount of unsolicited responses and did not consistently provide a response to each of the solicited questions. Both responses were equally important to examine as they provided an overall perspective of how Hank viewed
sexuality and gender topics in relation to the texts and to the world. The following sections are divided according to the three responses: Student Rejects, Student Replicates, and Student Recreates. The final section discusses critical literacy in action pertaining to this particular data set and whether such occurred for Hank. Overall, Hank’s responses were coded as Student Replicates or Student Recreates with the least being coded as Student Rejects.

**Student Rejects.** Hank often articulated wavering viewpoints. For instance, during the reading of *Olivia and the Fairy Princess* (Falconer, 2012) Hank stated that the book could be for both boys and girls. Also, Hank was the first to claim that “there are no girl colors or boy colors” when issues related to gender differences would surface. Hank expressed support of genderless items during certain sessions, while contradicting himself in other sessions. For instance, in contrast to the reading of *Olivia and the Fairy Princess*, Hank resisted the book *My Princess Boy* (Kilodavis, 2010). In asking him what was one thing he had in common with the Princess Boy, Hank dodged the question by stating: “I will draw him without the princess things.” Although Hank initially resisted categorical markers for both boys and girls in relation to gender, his response to *My Princess Boy* suggests another perspective. Perhaps diverse gender representation were too extreme for Hank, as it was most likely the first time he had been exposed to such a representation.

Another time in which Hank appeared to reject the story was in reading *The White Swan Express: A Story about Adoption* (Okimoto & Aoki, 2002). The book represents various families, all with different structures, traveling to China to adopt an infant girl. Instead of focusing on the mixtures of families represented or about the adoption process, Hank makes a few off topic comments. For instance, he shares, “there are lots of things to do on a plane.” Hank remains focused on the secondary elements of the story versus replicating or recreating the main
characters or discussing the author’s purpose of the book. Near the end of the story, Hank’s responses alter a bit, as he works to recreate certain elements of the book.

**Student Replicates.** Hank offered a fair amount of responses under this category by replicating thoughts related to the main characters or the author’s purpose. Hank preferred to demonstrate his knowledge of the selected book by interrupting the read aloud sessions during storytime. For instance, while reading *Princess Smartypants* (Cole, 1986), in which a princess seeks her autonomy, Hank interrupts to predict the final sentence in the book.

Teacher: *When the other princes heard what had happened to Prince Swashbuckle, none of them wanted to marry Princess Smartypants so she…*

Hank: lives ever after.

Hank’s predication is accurate which reveals that Hank understood that the main character, Princess Smartypants, constructed numerous barriers in an attempt to avoid marriage. Another time in which Hank produces an accurate prediction and interjects his comments took place when reading *Donovan’s Big Day* (Newman, 2011), a book about two mothers seeking matrimony. The marriage between the two mothers is concealed to the reader until the conclusion of the story. Hank surmises that a marriage is about to occur and expresses his knowledge in the below event.

Teacher: What do you think is inside the white satin box?

Hank stands up and makes the gesture of opening the white box on one knee.

The reader is only aware of a special event taking place; the fact that it is a marriage between two women is not divulged until the last two pages. Hank’s ability to mimic the gesture of asking someone’s hand in matrimony demonstrates that he has comprehended that the event is a wedding. Once Hank realizes that the marriage involves the two mothers of the young boy,
Donovan, Hank does not resist the representation by offering any negative comments or disapproving body gestures. The final example of Hank interjecting himself into the conversation by interrupting the teacher happened when discussing the book, *A Tale of Two Daddies* (Oelschlager, 2010).

Teacher: because Jerry was not here last week, who can tell him what we read? The title of the book was A Tale…

Hank: A Tale of Two Dads, it’s about dads, like X and X.

In this example, Hank demonstrates that he not only remembered the title of the book but more importantly that the author’s purpose was about the family having two fathers. Hank then makes a deeper connection to the book by connecting it to twin girls in the school who have two fathers.

Overall, Hank remained focused during most of the readings and enjoyed figuring out clues within the stories. As we read, *King & King & Family* (de Haan & Nijanld, 2004), a book about two kings honeymooning in a jungle who find a young girl in their suitcase when they return home, Hank replicates one of the events in the story. For instance, one part of the story shows the two kings canoeing along a river and discussing how they feel someone is following them. In the accompanying illustration, a small tube is peeping out of the water which leads the reader to believe that someone is breathing underwater. As the story concludes and the young girl pops out of the suitcase, Hank raises his hand to shout out, “the pipe was the girl, the girl is the pipe”. Hank is not certain how to correctly articulate that the person following the Kings underwater was the girl, but it is evident that he understood the story and replicated a section of the story.

Other instances of Hank replicating the main character or themes took place during the reading of *The Boy with Pink Hair* (Hilton, 2011). In discussing why the main character has pink
hair, Hank shares: “because he likes pink hair and there is no boy colors or girl colors”. This perspective portrays Hank has having a nontraditional viewpoint about gender and feeling comfortable to replicate the main theme of the book which is to celebrate everyone’s uniqueness. A final example of Hank replicating the author’s purpose of the story occurred when reading 10,000 Dresses (Ewert, 2008) in which Hank remains quiet for most of the story. When asked whether he thought there were other persons like Bailey, the main character, born as a boy, but identities as a girl and enjoys wearing dresses. Hank responds, “Yes, like in the other book.” This comment demonstrates that Hank has not only understood the theme of 10,000 Dresses by not rejecting or recreating the main character or author’s purpose, but in fact makes a distinct connection to a comparable book, My Princess Boy (Kilodavis, 2010) which we read previously. Hanks’ comment also suggests growth given that Hank initially rejected the book, My Princess Boy, by not wanting to depict the Princess Boy in feminine attire.

**Student Recreates.** Given that Hank often provided a unique perspective, he equally offered responses which were coded as Student Recreates. Hank tended to recreate elements of the story by altering the main character or the author’s purpose to represent versions more to his liking. For instance, after reading Princess Smartypants (Cole, 1986), and in response to a critical literacy question of what surprised him the most in the book, Hank responded: “I like the ending of the book cause her holding up the drink”. Instead of focusing on the fact that the princess had evaded the obligation of getting married, Hank recreated the final scene by focusing on the princess raising her arm to make a celebratory gesture. Hank does not verbally clarify that the princess is elated due to her unwed status but does acknowledge that the princess appears happy. Whether this scene surprised him because the princess is finally single is unclear, except that the teacher’s question caused him to make some sort of connection to it.
Although Hank offered many responses which replicated the main character or the author’s purpose, at times he would also interject comments demonstrating how he would recreate the same book. For instance, while reading, *King & King & Family* (de Haan & Nijland, 2004) in which Hank supplied many comments which replicated the events of the story, Hank decides to recreate the final story at the end. When asked why he thought the author wrote the book, Hank declares: “I think people like different pets.” Hank’s comment is mostly likely influenced by the various animals represented in the book as the two Kings honeymoon in a jungle. This comment demonstrates that while Hank was able to replicate many parts of the story, he also felt that the animals played an equally important role in the story.

Another way in which Hank would recreate the main characters was by changing their gender. For instance, after reading *A Tale of Two Daddies* (Oelschalger, 2010) which portrays two fathers and their daughter, Hank claims that he wants to draw the little girl as a boy. This type of occurrence appeared once more after reading *The White Swan Express: A Story About Adoption* (Okimoto & Aoki, 2002) when Hank declares that he plans to draw the infant girls in the story as boys. Hank does not provide details as to why he prefers to depict boys instead of girls when discussing family representations. Perhaps Hank prefers to imagine families similar to his own which consist of boys as the children.

**Critical Literacy toward Sexuality and Gender in Action.** The most significant way in which critical literacy toward sexuality or gender in action took place within this data set occurred from across the readings of *My Princess Boy* (Kilodavis, 2010), *The Boy with Pink Hair* (Hilton, 2011) and *10,000 Dresses* (Ewert, 2008). Hank initially rejected the author’s purpose and main character of the book, *My Princess Boy*, by stating that he would draw the boy without the princess attire. Although Hank accepted that the main character was born as a boy, he did not
associate the boy with wanting to wear dresses and tiaras and thus refused to merge these representations as one. As we read *The Boy with Pink Hair*, Hank exclaimed that the main character had pink hair because he liked it, and followed this comment with the declaration that there are no boy or girl colors. In this incident, Hank duplicates the comment he made while reading *Olivia and The Fairy Princesses* (Falconer, 2012) about genderless color choices. It is unclear as to why Hank did not interject this comment while reading *My Princess Boy*. During the last reading, *10,000 Dresses*, which portrays a child born as boy, but identifies as a girl, dreaming of dresses, Hank offers little responses, except when asked if he could recall other people like the main character. Hank not only offers an affirmative response, but also connects it to the book *My Princess Boy*. This connection demonstrates that Hank understood the similarities between the main characters in these two books and, unlike the reading of the Princess Boy, he did not reject this final main character, Bailey, in *10,000 Dresses*.

**Critical Literacy Drawings**

The same parameters used with Page and Jerry were applied to Hank’s critical literacy drawings in order to provide consistency across this data set: participants were asked to draw what they thought the author or illustrator wanted them to remember the most about the book. The critical literacy drawings occurred following the critical reading discussions which included talking about the author’s purpose of the book. Analysis of the critical drawings consisted of whether the weekly drawings related to the author’s purpose or to the main character. A drawing was coded as *Student Rejects*, if a participant drew a picture unrelated to the author’s purpose or to the main character. If modifications to the author’s purpose or to the main character were made the drawing was coded as *Student Recreates*. Drawings which replicated the author’s
purpose or the main character were labeled as *Student Replicates*. Hank produced a picture for each book thereby allowing an analysis of twelve drawings.

**Student Rejects.** Out of the twelve drawings, Hank produced two pictures coded into this category. Hank opted to depict animals instead of refer to the central theme for each of these books. For instance, for *The Family Book* (Parr, 2010), Hank’s drawing included a monkey hanging in a tree and an alligator lying in a hammock (see Appendix P). Hank is rejecting the multiple ways in which different variations of families occurred in the book. His picture is unique and thus does not resemble any of the book’s illustration. Additionally, Hank only conjures up the statement that the two animals are playing hide-n-seek. Although the book does include colorful illustrations of some animals, there is a family theme represented in the pictures, unlike in Hank’s drawing or comment about his critical literacy drawing.

Hank produced another picture coded in this category after reading the book *Princess Smartypants* (Cole, 1986). Instead of depicting the princess or the multiple suitors, the main characters of the story, Hank draws a picture of unrecognizable creatures eating alongside an enormous alligator wearing shoes (see Appendix Q). Hank’s picture demonstrates that he did not deeply connect to any of the characters in the book or ponder about the princess seeking to remain single as none of these representations appeared in his drawing. Oddly, Hank does note the princess in the data transcripts, particularly at the end of the story, but does not create her or the suitor in his drawing. In sum, Hank rejected one book which portrayed various family configurations, such as same-sex families, and another book in relation to diverse gender expression.

**Student Replicates.** Out of the twelve drawings, Hank produced five pictures in this category. Overall, Hank produced an equal amount of drawings in this category as well as in
Student Recreates. This finding is comparable to the transcript findings. Hank constructed three drawings in relation to books about gender expression and two drawings in relation to books portraying a same-sex family. Hank replicated two same-sex families which appeared in two different books. For instance, after reading the King & King & Family (de Haan & Nijland, 2004), a book in which two kings go to the jungle for their honeymoon, Hank draws a picture of both of the kings standing on a bridge in the jungle next to an ape (see Appendix R). The second critical literacy drawing about families produced by Hank occurred after reading Donovan’s Big Day (Newman, 2011) in which two mothers wed and their son is the ring bearer. In this picture, Hank draws the son, Donovan, standing between the two mothers and who is receiving a kiss on his cheek from one of his mothers (see Appendix S). These pictures suggest that Hank felt comfortable about same-sex family representations in that he reproduced a family as well as a couple with two men and two women. Although Hank did reject a book, The Family Book (Parr, 2010) which included same-sex representations, it might be possible that Hank needed explicit representations in order for those representations to make sense. For example, the two books in this category only focused on one same-sex family or couple, while The Family Book portrayed a wide arrangement of families.

The final three pictures related to gender expression. After reading Olivia and the Fairy Princesses (Falconer, 2012), a book in which Olivia resists being an American Princess by pretending to be other role models, Hank draws Olivia wearing a warthog costume. Hank’s drawing is influenced by an illustration in which Olivia wears such a costume for Halloween. This picture not only replicates the main character but also the theme in that Olivia took pleasure in trying on nontraditional representations. The second picture in which Hank replicated the book or main character occurred after reading The Paper Bag Princess (Munsch, 1995). In this critical
literacy drawing, Hank depicted the dragon that Princess Elizabeth outsmarted in order to save Prince Ronald. The author’s purpose of the book was to spotlight that not every princess should marry a prince. Hank describes his picture as the dragon engulfing the princess’s clothes with fire (see Appendix T). Hank’s picture is depicting an actual event in the story which causes Princess Elizabeth to wear a paper bag the rest of the story. The final picture in which Hank replicates the author’s purpose and the main character occurs with 10,000 Dresses (Ewert, 2008).

Hank draws Bailey, the main character, born as a boy, but identifies as a girl, in a crystal dress (see Appendix U). This picture is taken from one of the illustrations in the book in which Bailey dreams about wearing a crystal dress. Hank’s final critical literacy drawing demonstrates much transformation and less resistance on the part of Hank toward representations of diverse gender expression.

**Student Recreates.** In this category, Hank recreated five out of the twelve critical literacy pictures by altering the form of a main character in the book by some degree. For instance, after reading Emma and Meesha My Boy: A Two Mom Story (Considine, 2005), a book with two mothers, a daughter, and a cat, Hank draws a picture of an angry cat. Although there is a cat in the story in which Emma plays with in unusual ways, the cat does not repeal or act unkindly toward Emma. Hank has decided to recreate the cat as being upset. The second critical literacy drawing in which Hank changes the main character occurs with The Boy with Pink Hair (Hilton, 2011). Instead of drawing the main character with pink hair, Hank depicts the main character with purple hair (see Appendix V). It is unclear as to why Hank opted for purple instead of pink, yet Hank still selected a color which is mostly associated with girls than boys. The final picture in which Hank recreated the main character took place after reading My Princess Boy (Kilodavis, 2010). Before drawing his picture, Hank commented that he would
draw the main character without the princess items. Hank draws the Princess Boy on both sides of the paper and describes that the Princess Boy as wearing several different Halloween costumes: Easter bunny, spider, ant, butterfly and an insect (see Appendices W and X). This picture might also be classified as Student Rejects, as Hank consciously rejected the dresses and tiaras worn by the main character as well as possibly viewed the princess attire as a costume and not acceptable nor quotidian attire for the Princess Boy. This category however appeared to be the best choice in that Hank did not depict the Princess Boy in typical boy attire but instead viewed him in several genderless animal creations and recreated the Princess Boy in ways that were important for Hank by inserting animal representations.

Another way in which Hank tended to recreate the main character was through changing the sex. For instance, after reading Tale of Two Daddies (Oelschalger, 2010), a story about two fathers and their daughter, Hank recreates the family with two fathers and their son (see Appendix Y). Hank repeats this pattern when reading The White Swan Express: A Story about Adoption (Okimoto & Aoki, 2002) in which the story portrays several different families traveling to China to adopt an infant girl. For this critical literacy drawing, Hank draws only the children but as boys and older (see Appendix Z). Hank describes this picture as the boys playing in water while the parents are waiting to adopt them. The fact that Hank transforms the sex from girls to boys in these drawings might suggest that such a representation makes the most sense to him given that it resembles his family as well as provides him with additional male role models.

**Critical Literacy toward Sexuality and Gender in Action.** The most notable way in which critical literacy toward sexuality and gender in action occurred in this data set was with the variation in drawings dealing with gender expression. After reading My Princess Boy (Kilodavis, 2010), Hank recreated the Princess Boy in his drawing by placing him in multiple
Halloween animal costumes. Before drawing the picture, Hank commented that he would draw the Princess Boy but without the princess attire. The next book dealing with gender expression, *The Boy with Pink Hair* (Hilton, 2011) focused on a young boy with pink hair who was ridiculed for his difference at school. Like the drawing above, Hank recreated the main character by changing a particular element; in this case it was the boy’s hair color. Instead of pink, Hank drew the character with purple hair, a color often associated with girls. It is unclear as to why Hank opted for purple versus pink, but it appears that a conscious decision was made since he did not select a nontraditional girl color such as blue or brown. When the final gender expression book was read which focused on a character, born as a boy, but identifies as a girl, Bailey, who dreams about dresses in *10,000 Dresses* (Ewert, 2008), Hank did not change any elements of the story. In fact, Hank depicted an illustration in the story in which Bailey is wearing a crystal dress. By applying critical literacy to LGBTQ-themed books, Hank’s actions toward nonconforming gender expression transformed over the course of the study.

**Photographs and Pre- and Post-Assessment**

Hank’s camera produced a blank role; consequently, his pictures were not processed and this data set will only include the pre- and post-assessment drawings. The pre and post-assessment drawings which Hank produced were coded into one of these categories: *Student Rejects, Student Replicates,* and *Student Recreates.* Evaluation included whether a change occurred from the first drawing to the second drawing and whether traditional roles in relation to gender and sexuality were rejected, replicated, or recreated from the pre-assessment to the post-assessment.

**Student Rejects.** Hank’s pre- and post-assessment pictures were coded into this category in that he rejected sexuality and gender in both pictures. Like the other participants, Hank was
instructed to draw a character that he would like to see in a book. In both drawings, Hank did not depict any characters which could be classified as homosexual or heterosexual nor did he portray the characters as acting or asserting themselves to one particular gender. For instance, Hank’s pre-assessment picture consisted of two unrecognizable characters. The first character was tall with three legs, a round belly, three arms and red spiky hair. The second character was short, yellow, with long arms, and red spiky hair. Hank’s post assessment drawing included several spiders, a stick figure with pizza hands, and a short yellow body with round eyes. Hank draws similar representations in both of his drawings, representations of which are void of any human categorical markers. Although it is impossible to know for certain, perhaps Hank is suggesting that he would prefer to read books with characters that evade all classifications concerning sexuality and gender given that he drew a similar picture for both assessments.

Critical Literacy toward Sexuality and Gender in Action. Since the photographs were not part of the data set, the only useable data source was the pre- and post-assessment drawings. It is challenging to speculate what is the best example of literacy in action toward sexuality and gender given the limited data. Second, Hank did not demonstrate any significant transformations from his pre- to post-assessment drawings. It can be noted however that after reading several LGBTQ-themed books, Hank did not resist such portrayals by including traditional representations in his post assessment drawing.

Summary

The findings regarding Hank’s responses across the data sources suggest that critical literacy in action took place by means of transformative thinking around different forms of gender expression. Data demonstrated how initially Hank verbally rejected or recreated representations of young boys in dresses or tiaras. Through readings, discussions, and exposure
to gender variances, Hank’s initial responses transformed over the study. When the second book was read, which portrayed a young boy with pink hair, Hank did not interject any negative comments and only altered the boy’s hair color from pink to purple in his drawing. The final story in the study included a similar representation as the one Hank initially rejected. During this final reading, Hank not only connected it to the first reading, he also replicated an exact illustration in the book for his critical literacy drawing. Critical literacy with a focus on sexuality and gender encouraged Hank to become aware of various ways in which children may choose to express their gender without judgment or shame by the final week.

**Case 4: Teacher and Researcher**

**Background**

As a researcher and a teacher, I assumed two roles throughout the course of the study. In taking on these two roles, I gained the knowledge and skills needed to implement critical literacy regarding sexuality and gender. I set an expectation of providing experiences and perspectives from a teacher’s viewpoint, positioned myself as an equal among the young participants, and embraced the necessary struggles of taking on a dual role. In addition to my role as researcher and teacher in the study, I was equally a full-time teacher, graduate student, and same-sex parent to a young child. I remained cognizant of my personal biases of being a same-sex parent and challenged myself to support all viewpoints even those which may not align to my own. As a full-time teacher, I reflected on the field of teaching and how critical literacy would work in the classroom. In an attempt to offer evidence-based practices and perceptions to teachers and researchers about what critical literacy focused on sexuality and gender might look like in the classroom from my dual perspective, analysis included closely examining the transcripts and the researcher journal.
Overall, two findings were noted on the part of the researcher assuming the role as teacher. The first finding, *Focusing on Power*, involved incorporating diverse representations and calling the participants’ attention to such diverse representations. The second finding, *Teaching Critical Language*, included modeling critical language by means of posing questions as well as encouraging participants to make a personal connection to the story.

**Focusing on Power: Incorporate Diverse Texts and Call Attention to Diverse Representations**

The first finding, focusing on power, emerged when examining the data for the ways in which critical literacy was implemented by the researcher assuming the role as teacher. Through investigating the missing voices of texts, critical literacy supports examining social issues in society as well as provides students a better way to understand the connection between language and power (Comber, 2013; Janks, 1993). Following Comber and Janks’ perspectives, focusing on power in this study meant to call the participants’ attention toward the diverse representations in each of the books. Using LGBTQ-themed books allowed the students to observe and read about different family structures as well as various gender expressions. Six books with at least one same-sex family representation and six books with characters defying the typical gender expression were read with the intent of drawing the students’ awareness to these underrepresented portrayals in society. Incorporating diverse books related to the power issue on hand, which in this study was sexuality and gender, allowed participants to visualize these underrepresented characters more concretely and to reflect on how these characters often are absent in other settings or media: books in the classroom, in the library, on their favorite television shows, and so forth.
Transcripts. In order to raise the participants’ awareness about diverse sexuality and gender expression by means of critical literacy, it was imperative to incorporate LGBTQ-themed books into the curriculum. By focusing on the text and examining the message of the author regarding sexuality and gender, students felt at ease to discuss their thoughts and pose questions about these topics. In this sense the LGBTQ-themed books functioned as a springboard which allowed participants to ask questions such as why the author did or did not include certain representations. Focusing on the author’s purpose removed the pressure of requiring participants to continually tap into their lived or non-lived experiences in order to discuss sexuality and gender. Since the LGBTQ representations were essential to identifying the author’s purpose, I prompted the participants to examine these representations closer to ensure that they did not overlook these representations or misinterpret the relationship between characters. For instance, while reading Donovan’s Big Day (Newman, 2011), a story about two mothers who marry each other, which is concealed until the very end, I directed the participants back to the relationship between the two women by asking: “So, who are these two people?” In reading books with multiple family structures, I pointed out the various configurations using explicit descriptions. For instance, while reading The White Swan Express: A Story about Adoption (Okimoto & Aoki, 2002), I prompted students to examine the different families by stating: “There are different families in the story: we have a man and a woman, we have two women, and we have a single woman”. Additionally, I called participants’ attention toward concepts that I thought might be confusing by soliciting information. For example, with the book, The White Swan Express: A Story about Adoption, I paused and asked the students to reflect about the meaning of: “you will meet your new family (20)”. By doing so, I ensured that the participants understood the concept of adoption and how various families could be formed. Finally by exposing students to diverse
books in which we examined topics related to sexuality and gender, students were able to make connections to other books in the study. Case in point included our last reading of the book, *10,000 Dresses* (Ewert, 2008), in which one of the participants examined the cover and commented on its similarity with *My Princess Boy* (Kilodavis, 2010), another book in which the main character prefers to express oneself in effeminate ways.

Another way in which I called the participants’ attention toward the diversity in these books was by raising prediction questions to the students prior to reading each of the books. For example, before reading *The Princess Boy* (Kilodavis, 2010), I asked the students to examine the cover and share their prediction about the story. By doing so, the participants were able to compare and contrast the actual events of the story to those they predicted. In general, making predictions with LGBTQ-themed books equally allowed participants to examine and for us to discuss stereotypical beliefs against the nontraditional views presented in the LGBTQ-themed books. For instance, certain books, such as *The Paper Bag Princess* (Munsch, 1995) and *Princess Smartypants* (Cole, 1986), challenged students to consider how every princess might not wish to be married. Overall, this data source revealed that focusing on power was best completed by incorporating and reading aloud diverse texts accompanied with posing questions which guaranteed that participants were able to observe various unconventional characters.

**Journal.** Beginning with the onset of my study, I remained mindful of how Vasquez (2010) envisions critical literacy by recognizing the power dynamics in books. I wrote notes to remind myself how Janks (2010) underlines the importance of examining the dominant and minority voices of texts. After reading the first LGBTQ-theme book to the participants, I struggled with multiple questions and wrote in my journal:
I wish I had seen some examples of how to best enact critical literacy? At what point are you challenging students’ perspectives to such a degree that they bend? Transformative thinking is the ultimate goal, but not at the expense of being dogmatic. As a teacher, I should focus on how changes occur toward the diverse texts and work to raise equity in the classroom. Critical literacy needs to be about equity on the whole and not enable the teacher’s view (Journal 11/25/2014).

This passage represents how I felt in regards to initially spotlighting the diverse representations. I contemplated over what point I should remove the spotlight as well as how long and how strong should I continue to call the participants’ attention to such diverse representations. I remained cognizant of my personal biases while still recognizing my role as their teacher working to construct a critical literacy classroom. Determined to remain focused on the minority voices of the texts in comparison to the prolific voices represented in society, some of my journal entries caused me to return to the scholarship in search of how to best enact critical literacy with my participants. In doing so, I pondered about what types of conversations I should initiate when critically viewing literacy. After the fourth and fifth week, I struggled a bit with the duality of my role as a researcher and as a teacher in regards to focusing on power.

I find myself at a crossroad as I want to expand and challenge their views as a researcher, while still respecting their beliefs about the world. As a teacher, I want them to learn how to read critically, but not to such a degree that I rob them from the experience of simply reading a book for pure enjoyment. What does it truly mean to assume the role of a critical literacy teacher? What does that exactly mean in realms of teaching, educating, and opening our students’ minds and according to whose views: theirs or mine? (Journal 12/9/2014).
I wrestled as the researcher, yearning for students to view the world as an LGBTQ person and promote equity, while also acknowledging my role as their teacher, and more importantly what that role would be like for an actual classroom teacher. Overtime, the struggle between the researcher and the teacher lessened as I fell more into the role as teacher and then equal participant as a contributor to the critical literacy sessions. The challenge of implementing critical literacy and my initial concerns of best practices decreased as we continued to read more LGBTQ-themed books. Directing the participants’ focus toward the diverse representations set a certain expectation for the readings and allowed the participants and myself to be at ease each week. By the twelfth week, I noted in my journal how most of the participants were able to critically analyze texts and naturally sought to understand the relationship between the characters. Through explicitly reading LGBTQ-themed texts which involved drawing attention to the diverse representations in the book, I was able to spotlight the characters’ uniqueness by examining the dominant and minority voices of texts in general with the participants.

In this study, focusing on power meant that students were encouraged to reflect on the presence and absence of LGBTQ representations across multiple texts. Focusing on power, in this study, equally paved the way for participants to start considering how superior and inferior structures of the world are implied in the books we read, and to consider how society should work to change such dominant representations in order to make texts more inclusive of all individuals, and not just those regarding diverse sexuality and gender.

**Teaching Critical Language: Modeling and Asking Questions**

The second finding, teaching critical language, emerged when analyzing the data for how I enacted critical literacy while assuming the role as teacher. In order for students to be able to pose and respond to critical questions, Vasquez (2010) highlights that students must first be
taught such skills. One of the most effective ways to teach students is through modeling. For this reason, I modeled how to use critical language by posing critical literacy questions about the books and then supplied possible responses. Participants learned not only the technique for critically analyzing books, but also acquired complex language skills focused on examining power issues.

Transcript. In order to help students develop critical literacy skills, Vasquez (2010) underscores the importance of empowering students with the language skills necessary to examine literacy. Doing so meant that I needed to model what critical literacy looked like in action, which occurred more frequently at the onset of the study. After the first reading, I began to ask critical literacy questions centered on the author’s purpose for writing the book. I would commonly ask: “What do you think was the author’s purpose for writing this book?” At the beginning or when students struggled to find the overall purpose, I would provide scaffolding. For instance after reading *Princess Smartypants* (Cole, 1986), the following exchange occurred between myself and another non-selected participant within the classroom setting.

Teacher: What do you think was the author’s idea for writing this book?

Participant: Maybe, Miss Smartypants only likes pets.

Teacher: Maybe she does, but I think that the author, the person who wrote the book, did it because they wanted to say that some people do not want to get married. Just as there are different families, people can live differently too.

This exchange not only allowed the student asking the question to ponder on how to examine books differently, but also served as a modeling example for all students. This type of questioning took place throughout the study and participants were encouraged to critically examine the books. Posing questions focused on critically examining literacy provided a model
for students to not only consider critical elements when reading texts, such as examining the author’s purpose as well as analyzing the types of proposed representations, but modeling equally exhibited the language skills necessary to analytically discuss and ask questions regarding sexuality and gender.

Critical literacy not only focuses on examining the author’s purpose but also how it fits in relation to society by noticing the missing voices of most texts. Since I purposely selected alternative texts as a means to spotlight these underrepresented voices, it was imperative that the participants compared and contrasted the LGBTQ-themed books to other books outside the research site. Equally, I incorporated a review session which allowed the participants to reexamine the books in regards to the author’s purpose thereby providing them with multiple opportunities to study and employ their flourishing critical language skills. I prompted participants to reflect on how many books portrayed their family and to consider how it might feel to read books in which you are not present in the story. For instance, after reading two books, Donovan’s Big Day (Newman, 2011) and Emma and Meesha My Boy: A Two Mom Story (Considine, 2005) which portray a family structure with two mothers, I pose the following question.

Teacher: Both Donovan and Emma have two mothers. How do you think Donovan and Emma feel when they read books which do not include their family?

Participant: Sad

By asking these questions in relation to LGBTQ-themed books, participants were encouraged to reflect about the often invisible voices of same-sex families and children who defy traditional gender roles.
Journal. Starting my journal entries in the footsteps of Vasquez (2010) and Janks (2010) allowed me to remain focused on the significance of teaching the participants how to use critical language in order to analyze the power dynamics in texts. During the first part of the study, I kept writing down Vasquez’s belief about how a teacher’s role is paramount in providing the necessary language to children in order to discuss complex issues through modeling it. On three separate occasions, I noted in my journal: “Am I doing this?” I struggled with finding the balance of how I envisioned the critical literacy sessions with my participants against what they were capable of delivering. Although Vasquez (2010) asserts that young children are capable of applying the tenets of critical literacy to texts, my expectations were taunted by having taught middle school which differed greatly than working with Kindergartners. I contemplated the importance of explicitly focusing on the power with such a young group, as well as the importance of explicitly asking and using critical questions to ensure that the participants learned how to employ critical language skills. I continued to jot down questions about the different ways I could get students to better understand critical language: Who is the text written for? Who benefits from the message of this text? What would this story look like from another perspective, from your perspective? (Journal 12/2/2015).

After the fourth reading, I went back to the literature in search of trying to increase student engagement in the modeling and questioning process. In doing so, I found a quote from Wood (2005): “By using critical literacy as a frame….the students viewed literacy connected to their lived experiences and as a tool which could be used effectively to explore and effect change in their lives” (p. 11). This quote highlighted the importance of inviting students to make personal connections while still critically examining books. Since one of the tenets of critical literacy is transformative thinking, I realized that in order for my students to want to make a
change they must first understand the context of the book in relation to their lives, or as Wood describes “lived experiences” and then in relation to others in order to foster change. Teaching and using critical language became less problematic over the course of the study; I began to note that critical questions which focused on both the book and called upon the participant to make a connection worked best. For instance: Why did the author write this book and what is one or two things you have in common with the character? (Journal 1/13/2015). Some participants who wrestled to understand the significance of books were able to connect to the character which in turn allowed further scaffolding to occur regarding the overall purpose or message of the author. When making connections appeared challenging for some of my participants, I modeled how all humans can connect to another by being empathetic. For instance, after reading My Princess Boy (Kilodavis, 2010), some of the boy participants expressed frustration or resistance in making a connection to the main character. To model how such a connection could be made despite the dissimilarities between the readers and the main character, I relied upon human emotion and discussed how hurtful it was to be ridiculed and to feel alone at school. Modeling empathy permitted the participants to understand how multiple connections could be made to characters unlike themselves. As a teacher, I reflected on how critical literacy could be further enhanced with young children by incorporating the important aspect of human emotion particularly when reading nontraditional books and equally shared the feeling of what it was like to feel like an outsider among other individuals. Modeling and posing questions taught participants how to critically examine books as well as employ complex language skills to discuss issues related to power.
Summary

I worked to position myself first as their teacher, and then an equal participant by learning and engaging in critical discussions. I embraced the struggles that occurred due to my dual role and welcomed additional learning opportunities by returning to the scholarship. In assuming the role as teacher and researcher, I gained knowledge and skill in how to best enact critical literacy within the classroom with young children. Dedicated to the tenets of how Vasquez (2010) and Janks (2010) envisioned critical literacy, I remained committed to focusing on the power dynamics of the dominant versus minority voices in texts. By doing so, data revealed that focusing on the power meant incorporating diverse literature and calling the participants’ attention toward the various nontraditional representations in the book. Second, to engage in critical discussions, it was imperative that participants be exposed and study critical language. Serving as both teacher and researcher, analysis of the data revealed that teaching critical language involved modeling and questioning critical language skills as well as encouraging participants to make personal or empathic connections to the book characters. The participants demonstrated that critical conversations were not hard to maintain particularly when given the language skills and opportunity to engage in such conversations. In short, I believe that critical literacy is a perspective about curriculum and literacies which should encourage students to connect to their lived experience in order to seek ways to promote acts of social justice, starting within their own classroom. Page serves as an excellent example of a student promoting social justice in the classroom by purposely including more representations which reflected her and her family.
Chapter 5

Discussion and Cross-Case Analysis

The first purpose of this study was to focus on how young children respond to LGBTQ representations within children’s texts and to the topic of sexuality and gender via critical literacy. In applying a critical literacy approach, three responses observed from the participants toward LGBT representations were coded as: student rejects, student replicates, or student recreates. The second purpose of this study, expressed in research question two, was to examine how the researcher assuming the role as teacher could enact critical literacy with a focus on sexuality and gender. Two findings were noted in the data. The first finding, focusing on power, included incorporating diverse texts and calling the participants’ attention to such alternative representations. The second finding, teaching critical language, entailed modeling critical language through posing questions and encouraging participants to make personal connections. In this chapter, the findings are discussed in relation to the two conceptual frameworks —critical literacy and queer theory— as these pertain to each participant. In addition, this chapter also includes a discussion related to critical literacy and pedagogy and the researcher taking on the role of teacher. The chapter ends with a cross-case analysis focused on the three young participants.

Analysis through a Critical Literacy and Queer Theory Lens

Critical literacy supports studying social issues such as sexuality and gender by investigating the missing voices of texts (Comber, 2013, 2001). Critical literacy, in this study, meant observing texts to pinpoint society’s expectations concerning sexuality and gender by comparing the available dominant discourses in most children’s texts to the alternative texts read
aloud in our sessions. In making such comparisons, participants reflected on the connection between language and power within children’s texts.

Implementing critical literacy required relying on the work of Vasquez’s (2010) critical literacy work with young children. Application of critical literacy, however, can differ depending on how teachers define the role of critical literacy. Some teachers may view critical literacy better suited for focusing on the production of identity as a means for readers to seek and observe various representations in the literature. Other teachers may regard critical literacy as a means for readers to examine the construction of subjectivity and to reject the representations offered in the text. Critical literacy framed solely as the study of identity formation or merely the construction of subjectivity is problematic (Hagood, 2002). In focusing solely on identity formation, teachers expose students to various identities and representations as means of understanding that the produced identities in the text are viable options (Hagood, 2002). This approach may be problematic in that students learn about categorical markers set by society which may, in turn, reinforce stereotypical viewpoints. In this study, utilizing children’s books with LGBTQ representations decreased the likelihood of upholding heteronormative viewpoints. Conversely, concentrating solely on subjectivity may be equally problematic in that readers are encouraged to reject meanings of texts in an attempt to define themselves, which occurred more frequently in this study with diverse gender representations and ethnic differences.

To account for these potential problems, I considered both production of identity and construction of subjectivity by examining how each participant used the texts as a way to align with the proposed identities or used subjectivity as a way to push back against the representations in the texts. In the following pages, examples are provided that demonstrate how each participant, alternately offered responses which spoke to the production of identity, the
construction of subjectivity or demonstrated fluidity and thus offered responses in keeping with queer theory. Production of identity aligned mostly with the participant responses of Student Replicates. Participants who replicated the given representations tended to support the identities supplied in the text and constructed by the author. Construction of subjectivity aligned mostly with participant responses of Student Recreates and Student Rejects. Participants who rejected or pushed back from the representations supplied in the text tended to exercise power and negotiate their understanding of the representations in ways that supported their individual pursuit and construction and, in certain cases, allowed also transformational thinking to occur.

Finally, given that the study encouraged critical literacy as a means to focus on identity and subjectivity through the readings of LGBTQ-themed books, participant data was equally analyzed using the principles of queer theory. I used queer theory to actively deconstruct the notion of binaries and to put pressure on the conventional norms placed on males and females. Queer theory supports the process of decentering which entails that one remains fluid by never fully locating oneself with any single identity. In analyzing the data sources separately, participants at times offered varying responses to the same text. Such varying responses fall in line with queer theory in that participants remained fluid and resisted fully locating themselves with one particular identity regarding sexuality and gender. Examples of participants supplying varying responses to the same text in relation to sexuality or gender and across various data sources demonstrate how participants used the decentering process of queer theory.

Page

Production of Identity. Focusing on the production of identity and the formation of identities in general, Page tended to reproduce certain identities by replicating the main character or main purpose of the book. Page inclined to mostly resonate with texts which portrayed
effeminate boys. Page not only related but also empathized with boys who embraced bodily performances and garments generally associated with young girls. In reading *My Princess Boy* (Kilodavis, 2010) which depicts a boy who enjoys dressing like a princess, Page placed herself in a similar position by suggesting that people laugh at her when she dresses like a boy. She is identifying with the main character by putting herself in a likewise situation and acknowledging the feelings of being ridiculed when one steps outside of the conventional norms.

When asked to identify a way of how she connects to the story of *My Princess Boy* (Kilodavis, 2010) Page eagerly responds, “Me and that boy both like to twirl and wear girly things.” Page replicates this production of identity by understanding societal norms of how boys and girls are expected to act and dress. Similarly, Page conveys her understanding of what it feels like to be an outcast by wearing clothes outside of the gender norms as well as associates herself to the main character through sharing similar performance activities related to girls. While Page relates to the production of identity placed on girls, she likewise relies on this same production of identity in order to connect to the diverse representations of effeminate boys to understand their position and their desire to wear clothing and act similarly to girls.

Page demonstrated similar responses to the three books that portrayed boys defying conventional roles. First, in her critical literacy drawing for the book *10,000 Dresses* (Ewert, 2008), Page illustrated the main character wearing a crystal dress and joyful. Second, she reflected on how children born as boys, but exhibited gender creativity, might feel by depicting images of these children being ridiculed in some of her critical literacy drawings. For instance, after reading *The Boy with Pink Hair* (Hilton, 2011), Page drew the main character with pink hair being mocked by another boy in the story. The identities produced in these texts were not normative; however, and due to the stereotypical views of how girls should act within society,
Page was able to apply this understanding as means to connect to the main characters in these stories and to identify with their desires to wear dresses and act in ways mostly associated to girls. Page not only empathized with the effeminate characters or characters identifying with the opposite sex in the texts, but also placed herself in a similar position as means of identifying with being teased when not conforming to the gender societal norms.

Similarly, Page’s identification with princesses and the traditional expectation that princesses should get married appeared in her pre-assessment picture and in her photographs. For instance, Page took eight photographs of texts that replicated traditional roles of men and women. In each of the photographs, Page captured a stereotypical image of a young girl or an older Princess. For instance, *Fancy Nancy and the Posh Puppy* (O’Conner, 2013) portrays a young girl who often wears tutus and tiaras while two other books, *I Love to Sing* (Matheson, 2014) and *I’m a Pretty Little Black Girl!* (Bynum & Parod, 2013) includes images of young girls who like to sing, to dance, and to twirl and who primarily wear pink garments throughout the books. The above books demonstrate an intersection of race and gender in that Page demonstrates both her identity as a girl as well as an African-American. The remaining five photographs captured texts portraying older females seeking or being courted into male companionship. Each of these photos included texts containing a princess adorned in typical princess attire wishing to fall in love with a prince. Page’s pre-assessment drawing also contained a similar representation in that she drew a picture of Snow White wearing a long yellow dress that ultimately wakes up from a kiss delivered from her prince charming. In examining these various data points, Page appeared to identify deeply with the societal norms of what it means be a princess, both in regards to attire and to seeking companionship. In contrast to the societal norm which offers greater representations of girl princesses versus boy princesses,
Page demonstrated that the identity production of princesses is not limited by gender by depicting representations of both girl and boy princesses in study. Similarly to the societal norm, Page reproduced the identity and expectations involving gender performance, particular with females, and matrimony by initially resisting diverse representations.

Another way in which critical literacy focusing on the production of identity and identities, in general, occurred with Page was when focusing on the identity of families. When reading Donovan’s Big Day (Newman, 2011) a story about a boy who is excited to participate in the wedding of his two moms, Page suggested that she too might have another mom in China. Although Page’s family consists of a separated mother and father, Page identifies with the main character’s position by pretending to have a second mother. Page does not reject the idea of having two mothers. Page’s viewpoint about alternative families remains consistent when reading King & King & Family (de Haan &Nijland, 2004) in that she states that the author wrote the book because he is a king and likes his family; yet, Page did not portray families with two fathers in her critical literacy drawings. Page’s understanding about family differences resurfaces in her critical literacy drawing of The Family Book (Parr, 2010) in which she replicated an illustration from book of a family living in two separate households. According to Page, the identity production of families is not heterosexually limiting or limited to one particular household.

**Construction of Subjectivity.** Critical literacy also focuses on the construction of subjectivity, which enables readers to construct themselves into existence by pushing back on certain representations found in texts (Hagood, 2002; Alvermann & Hagood, 2000; Fuery, 1995). Page negotiated herself into being by rejecting or recreating the main character or main purpose of the books in various ways. The best example of Page constructing herself into being occurred
when reading *Princess Smartypants* (Cole, 1986). In this book, the main character, a princess, does not wish to be married despite the numerous suitors who perform treacherous tasks in order to gain her love. Instead of acknowledging the princess’s desire to remain unwed, Page felt that the author wrote the book to demonstrate how ill-mannered the princess was by requiring her suitors to complete impossible tasks. In this sense, Page rejects the author’s purpose which illustrates that some princesses prefer to remain single. Page directs her attention on the challenges placed on the suitors versus on the princess resisting the societal urge to marry a prince. Through critical discussions and reading other similar books, Page begins to reflect on how some people prefer not to get married. As a result, when reviewing *Princess Smartypants* for a second time to reflect on why the author wrote the book, Page declared “because some people don’t want to get married.” Critical discussions and exposure to a princess seeking autonomy allowed Page to expand her viewpoint from believing that the author’s purpose was based on being impolite and testing people to acknowledging that not everyone seeks to be married. Page replicated this expanded viewpoint after reading a likeminded book, *The Paper Bag Princess* (Munsch, 1995) in which a princess at the end of the story decides not to marry the prince. Page examined the construction of princesses in these books seeking autonomy and initially rejected this viewpoint. In this sense, Page exercised power and agency as subject by navigating and constructing her positionality regarding the expectations of princesses. Although Page ultimately considers this alternative viewpoint about princesses, initially it is met with rejection until she is able to construct this knowledge in a way that makes sense to her and who she imagines herself to be.

Another way in which the construction of subjectivity occurred was through the wavering recognition of families with two fathers. Though Page offered verbal support, her critical literacy
drawings portrayed another perspective of families with two fathers. For instance, after reading the book *King & King & Family* (de Haan & Nijland, 2004) Page illustrates one of the kings getting bitten by a mosquito. In reading the third and final book, *A Tale of Two Daddies* (Oelschalger, 2010) which portrays two fathers and their daughter, Page’s critical literacy drawing excludes both fathers. During the reading of this book, Page demanded the name of the little girl which is not offered until the end of the book. An explanation was given describing that, as readers, we do not know the name of the girl since the focus of the book is placed on the girl having two fathers, unlike most other books which portray a mother and a father. On this note, others readers might view the fact that the girl does not have a name as a major flaw in the text. Other readers might also debate the ethnicity of the child in the book as it is not entirely evident. The representation of the girl could equally speak to African-Americans, Latinos and Latinas, or a child with olive skin tone. Some readers might consider that perhaps the authors did not initially attach a name to the girl character in order to speak to and represent a larger readership. Both reader interpretations hold value and the girl character is given a name at the end of the book as Princess Daisy. What is highly debatable is the notion that the authors, de Haan and Nijland, consciously defaced the girl character, as these authors have written other LGBTQ-themed books as a way to bring greater visibility to LGBTQ individuals and families. For this reason, when Page asked about the girl’s name, her focus was redirected toward the diverse family structure. During a review, later in the week, participants were asked to state the characters we read about the previous week, a question to which Page quickly responds, “the daddies.” Such a response demonstrated how Page initially pushed back from the representations of two fathers but was able to shift her focus on understanding the significant role that the fathers played in the story.
Similar to Page’s viewpoint about princesses seeking autonomy, Page tended to reject the representation of two fathers until she was able to construct this knowledge in terms suitable to her and in turn vocalize that the fathers were the main focus of the story in later sessions.

The final example of Page exercising power and agency as a subject in order to construct herself within the context of a text involved inserting her cultural heritage into three of her critical literacy drawings and in the post-assessment drawing. This insertion is not in line with sexuality or gender, but it does suggest that Page understood the aspects of applying the tenets of critical literacy by being able to in turn use this knowledge to include elements which were important to her. Page tended to insert elements of her heritage by drawing the story characters with brown skin or depicting them with African-American hair.

**Queer Theory.** Page benefited from the principles of queer theory by being able to decenter her viewpoints in an attempt to remain fluid. The best example of Page demonstrating her ability to use texts to identify, reflect on, or push back on the various sexual and gender representations occurred while reading the *King & King & Family* (de Haan and Nijland, 2004). In reading this text, Page applies her understanding of critical literacy to state that the author might have written the book to illustrate how the two kings are proud of their family. In this sense, Page not only replicates the author’s purpose of the story, but also uses critical literacy to pinpoint that the purpose of the book is about alternative families. Page’s critical literacy drawing of this book portrays another perspective in that she only illustrates one king who is annoyed by a mosquito. By doing so, Page redirects her focus away from the author’s purpose, which was an alternative family or depicting both kings with the child, and places it instead on a secondary element in the story. In reading this book, Page demonstrates two varying responses in the transcripts and in the critical literacy drawing. By not aligning to one particular side of the
binary, heterosexual families versus homosexual families, Page’s viewpoint regarding families with two fathers could be viewed as fluid and thus makes it less likely to situate herself on either side of the binary.

Jerry

**Production of Identity.** Focusing on the production of identity and the formation of identities in general, Jerry tended to replicate certain identities by duplicating the main character or main purpose of specific books. Jerry mostly aligned with texts about families, particularly books which included fathers. Jerry offered several verbal responses acknowledging his positive viewpoint about all types of family structures. For instance, while reading the last page of *The Family Book* (Parr, 2010): “Your family is special no matter what kind it is (p.29), Jerry shouts out, “that’s just what I was going to say. I want a copy.” This type of response exhibits that Jerry had few reservations about the various families represented in the book, including families with two mothers and two fathers. Jerry’s critical literacy drawing for this book also included a diverse family representation in that he depicted a single mother kissing her son goodnight. Jerry continued to show his acceptance toward diverse family structures in which Jerry supported alternative family roles after reading *Emma and Meesha My Boy: A Two Mom Story* (Considine, 2005). When asked why the author might have written the book, Jerry spotlighted the two moms and declared that everyone should read it. Jerry’s reactions did not waver when asked in a later time about *Emma and Meesha My Boy: A Two Mom Story* and he delivered the exact same response.

Jerry’s acceptance of all types of families was equally visible in his collection of photographs. Jerry took an equal amount of photographs challenging as well as supporting traditional roles in relation to sexuality and gender. For instance, Jerry took eight photos which
replicated the traditional role of men and women in relation to both sexuality and gender. All of the books in this set contained a main character raised in a heterosexual family. In contrast, Jerry also captured eight pictures of books, DVDs, or characters that did not portray stereotypical roles of men and women in relation to gender or sexuality.

Finally, Jerry’s pre- and post-assessment drawings reflect a change from first representing a heterosexual family of a mother, a father, and a girl, to drawing a smiling monster with three bloody scratches. Although his post-assessment drawing does not portray an alternative family, it does evade all classifications by constructing a creature in which sexuality and gender categorizing are absent.

Although Jerry tended to show little opposition toward representations of all types of families, he mostly gravitated toward representations with two fathers. While reading the King & King & Family (de Haan & Nijland, 2004), Jerry made a comment about how all kings should get married. Jerry displayed no resistance toward either the two men marrying one another or the concept of the two men adopting a little girl. During the reading of A Tale of Two Daddies (Oelschlager, 2010), another book about two fathers and their daughter, Jerry identifies the characters on the cover and labels them as two dads and a kid. This comment shows that before reading the story, Jerry easily envisions this type of family structure. Jerry continues to embrace this family of two fathers by making a personal connection to it. Jerry compares the actions of his father and to those in the book and shares, “My dad stays up late, he doesn’t tell me stories, but he just watches TV.”

In light of how Jerry voluntarily made personal connections to these books and willingly shared his thoughts with stories portraying two fathers versus two mothers, Jerry’s responses suggest that books with two fathers resonated more with him than books with two mothers.
Jerry was more receptive to the concept of alternative families and relationships versus the notion that males could express themselves in nontraditional ways through attire or performance. This type of data further demonstrates how diverse gender expression is a harder construct for children to accept versus diverse sexuality. Likewise, the data underscores how gender is a construct that children struggle to comprehend but seek understanding around what it means to be a man and woman, not only in society but in also how gender applies to their own being.

According to Jerry, the identity production of families was not limited by heterosexually or homosexuality, but having at least one father or two appeared to be the most appealing family representation.

Initially, Jerry linked the concept of being a princess to only girls. This linkage is not unexpected given the many representations of girls dressed as princesses and adorned in the color pink. Uniquely enough, Jerry’s resistance to princesses and to the color pink allowed Jerry to connect to the character in a story we read. In the book, *Olivia and the Fairy Princess* (Falconer, 2012), Olivia questions her parents as to why everyone wants to be a pink princess instead of desiring to be other things, such as an African princess or a warthog. Jerry’s critical literacy drawing of this book included Olivia wearing the color pink and crying. This picture not only replicates the main character, but also the theme of the book in that Olivia fought the notion that girls should only wear pink. The production and identity of a girl rejecting the representation of a pink princess is abnormal, yet this resistance allowed Jerry to relate to the character, Olivia, by equally resisting such representations. The societal production of princesses and of girls wearing mostly pink aided Jerry in realizing how some girls may equally experience a similar sentiment as he does as well as to connect with others who hold likeminded viewpoints across all genders.
Construction of Subjectivity. Jerry navigated himself into existence in relation to critical literacy and the construction of subjectivity by pushing back on and questioning the representations in texts through rejecting or by recreating the main character or main purpose of book in various ways. The best example of Jerry negotiating himself and his viewpoint occurred through pushing back on representations of princesses or items typically related to girls. Jerry’s first rejection to a book occurred with Olivia and the Fairy Princess (Falconer, 2012). Before reading this book, Jerry assumed that the book must be for girls since it focused on princesses. His assessment about princesses being relevant to only girls was challenged when we read My Princess Boy (Kilodavis, 2010), a book in which the main character, the Princess Boy, wears dresses and tiaras. Jerry resisted this representation and offered an explanation to other participants as to why other children were laughing at the Princess Boy, suggesting that people, in general, laugh at boys who have an affinity for playing with objects stereotypically associated with girls. Jerry continued to resist this representation of the Princess Boy when he portrayed the Princess Boy in his critical literacy drawing with laceration wounds.

Critical discussions and exposure to other gender diverse representations of princesses allowed Jerry to expand his viewpoint and to consider how mocking someone for their gender difference was an unkind gesture. As a result, when reading The Boy with Pink Hair (Hilton, 2011), and 10,000 Dresses (Ewert, 2008), Jerry’s resistance decreased. Critical discussions revolving around color associations for boys and girls as well as understanding various ways people express or identify with the different gender caused Jerry to inquire why some characters in the book, The Boy with Pink Hair, were mocking the boy, but not the girl who also had pink hair. This inquiry illustrates that Jerry acknowledged that having pink hair is different and that laughing at only the boy and not the girl was a biased response. Jerry’s critical drawings also
demonstrated how he negotiated toward his understanding that some boys prefer to wear pink as well as feminine clothing. Unlike his drawing of the Princess Boy with lacerations, Jerry depicted the boy entirely in pink including clothes, hair, and facial features. Additionally, he portrayed the main character in *10,000 Dresses*, Bailey, as a child born as a boy, but identifies as a girl, by wearing a crystal dress. Jerry examined the construction of what it meant to be a boy in these books who defied the traditional roles and initially rejected this construction. Jerry exercised power and agency by navigating and constructing his positionality with regard to the expectations society holds for boys. Ultimately, Jerry was able to construct knowledge which included both boys and girls wearing pink and dressing in unconventional ways, and more importantly, considered mocking others as an unjust response.

Another way in which Jerry navigated his subjectivity through the texts by pushing back on and questioning certain heteronormative representations occurred in relation to the topic of marriage. Jerry was introduced to the notion that not all people wish to marry while reading *Princess Smartypants* (Cole, 1986), a book that portrays a princess who wishes to remain single and consequently outsmarts all of her suitors. During the reading, Jerry questions why the suitors agree to perform such dangerous feats to win the princess’s hand. Jerry thus neglects to realize the princess’s plan to claim her independence by outsmarting the suitors and instead focuses on the suitors’ heroic tactics. Critical discussions based on getting married or remaining single, Jerry draws the final scene in the book which consists of the princess kissing the suitor who then transforms into a toad. Although Jerry struggles with why the suitors would agree to perform multiple dangerous feats rather than considering the princess’s objective, his critical literacy picture places equal importance on both characters by drawing the princess kissing the toad.
An interesting twist occurred when reading *The Paper Bag Princess* (Munsch, 1995) in which another princess decides not to marry a prince and happily departs unwed at the end of the story. In this book, the princess saves her soon to wed prince who is captured by a dragon at the beginning of the book. Once the prince is rescued, he insults the princess based on her dirty garments causing the princess to reflect on his ungratefulness and leave him. As a result, the princess departs in the sunset alone and happy. The purpose of both books is to demonstrate that people can be content being alone, and that not every princess needs a prince or vice versa. Instead of acknowledging the rudeness of the prince and how the princess realizes she would be happier without him, Jerry considers the impolite actions of the prince as a means to nullify his marriage to the princess. This interpretation is unlikely on the part of the author; however, Jerry’s perspective also could be accurate in that it might be the prince seeking liberation in a similar fashion as the princess in *Princess Smartypants* (Cole, 1986). To illustrate what Jerry felt was the most important concept of the book, he drew an enormous caterpillar that is sleeping after the princess has strategically exhausted him in an attempt to enter the castle unharmed and rescue the prince.

Although Jerry does replicate the princess outsmarting the dragon, it is unclear as to why he recreates the dragon into a caterpillar. Jerry tended to reject representations which expressed women seeking to live autonomously. Over the course of study he resisted these representations less, thereby allowing him to process and to construct this knowledge in ways that permitted him to consider how both men and women might prefer to live solitary lives and thus examine the construction of marriage in ways that made sense to him.

**Queer Theory.** The benefits of queer theory, which encourages individuals to decenter and deconstruct their viewpoints in order to remain fluid and resist binary thinking, occurred
with Jerry. An example of Jerry employing his ability to utilize texts to identify or push back on the various sexual and gender representations took place when the class read *Olivia and the Fairy Princess* (Falconer, 2012). In first reading this text, Jerry demonstrates resistance to the text as he viewed the book portraying activities commonly related to girls, the representations of princesses exist throughout the book. The main purpose of the book is to question why both boys and girls gravitate toward the representation of a pink princess versus taking on other representations such as African queens or Indian princesses. In this sense, Jerry rejects the notion of the book on the premise of the title and the illustrations included, and before fully understanding the message of the book. Jerry’s critical literacy drawing of this book portrays another perspective in that he illustrates Olivia, the main character, wearing pink and crying. Jerry not only replicated the author’s purpose of the story in his drawing, but also uses critical literacy to understand that some girls might not identify with the color pink or have the desire to be a princess. By reading this book, Jerry exhibits two varying responses in the transcripts and in the critical literacy drawing. In doing so, Jerry resists aligning to a particular binary by first associating girls to the color pink and the desire to be a princess in the transcripts to depicting Olivia wearing pink and crying. Jerry’s contrasting viewpoint about associating all girls with the color pink and the desire to be a princess remains fluid and makes it impossible to situate him on either side of the binary.

**Hank**

**Production of Identity.** Critical literacy with the focus on the production of identity while reading LGBTQ-themed books occurred in relation to both gender and sexuality. Hank replicated the identities supplied to him in the texts by reproducing the author’s purpose or main character of the books. Hank tended to align with books which spotlighted a same-sex family. In
reading *Donovan’s Big Day* (Newman, 2011), a book about two mothers seeking matrimony with their son as the ring bearer, the marriage between the two mothers is concealed to the reader until the final two pages of the story. Hank surmises that a marriage is about to take place and mimics the gesture of opening a white box on one knee and does not resist the representation of the two women by offering any negative comments or disapproving body gestures. Hank does not offer any opposition to this family structure which is supported by his critical literacy drawing of the boy, Donovan, standing between his two mothers on their wedding day.

Hank shows further acceptance of diverse family structures after reading *A Tale of Two Daddies* (Oelschlager, 2010). When asked if one of the participants could recall last week’s book, Hank states the title of this book and makes a text-to-life connection by linking it to twin girls in the school who have two fathers. The final example of Hank not resisting such representations occurred when reading *King & King & Family* (de Haan & Nijland, 2004), a story about two kings honeymooning in a jungle who return to find a young girl in their suitcase whom they later adopt. While reading the story, Hank discovers that the young girl is hiding and following the kings throughout their journey. His critical literacy drawing includes both the kings standing on a bridge in the jungle. This drawing suggests that Hank felt comfortable about same-sex family representations and the identities produced in these texts by replicating these representations through his words and in drawings. Although Hank did reject a book, *The Family Book* (Parr, 2010), about diverse families which included same-sex representations in his critical drawing, it might be possible that Hank needed explicit representations instead of being exposed to a variety of family structures. According to Hank, overall the identity production of families is not heterosexually limiting and can equally consist of two moms or two dads.
Similarly, Hank tended to align with books which portrayed princesses seeking their autonomy and fighting the societal pressure to marry a prince. While reading *Princess Smartypants* (Cole, 1986), Hank interrupts the reading to predict the final sentence in the book. By doing so, Hank predicts that the princess will live ever after without the companionship of a prince. Hank offers the same response when reading *The Paper Bag Princess* (Munsch, 1995) which portrays a princess who chooses autonomy over marrying the prince in the story. His critical literacy drawing also aligns to the theme in that Hank depicted the dragon that the princess outsmarted in order to save the prince. Hank describes his pictures as the dragon engulfing the princesses’ clothes. Hank’s picture represents an actual event in the story which causes the princess to wear a paper bag in the rest of the story after the dragon has synched her clothes. This data shows that, according to Hank, the identity production of princesses does not entail marrying a prince and in fact some princesses may achieve greater happiness by remaining unwed.

Hank equally replicated representations of both boys and girls wearing multiple colors across the gender spectrum and thus did not seem to subscribe to the ideology that certain colors are for girls and other colors are for boys. While reading *The Boy with Pink Hair* (Hilton, 2011) which represents the main character, a boy, with pink hair, Hank declares that the boy has pink hair because he likes the color and because there are no gender specific colors. This comment demonstrates that Hank has a nontraditional viewpoint regarding colors and feels comfortable in replicating the main theme of the book which is to celebrate everyone’s uniqueness. Hank’s critical literacy drawing for this book includes the main character with purple hair versus pink. It is unclear as to why Hank opted for the color purple, yet it is interesting that Hank selected a color which is typically associated with mostly girls. Although, as noted in the transcripts, Hank
claims not to subscribe to any gender specific colors, he appears to demonstrate his understanding of societal preferences by selecting another color associated with girls to depict the boy’s hair. Hank’s receptiveness toward receiving these diverse representations and thus identities toward girls and boys wearing multiple colors resurfaced when reading *Olivia and the Fairy Princesses* (Falconer, 2012). In this book, Olivia, a pig, questions why both girls and boys desire to be pink princesses. Olivia feels that children should choose other representations to emulate. Hank connects to this story and replicates the story’s theme in his critical literacy drawing. Similar to an illustration in the book, Hank draws Olivia wearing a warthog costume to a Halloween party. This picture not only replicates the main character but also the main theme in that Olivia took pleasure in trying on nontraditional representations. In this sense, the identity production of boys and girls and their color preferences are not limited by gender and thus all colors are genderless according to Hank.

Hank’s photographs could not be included since the roll of film produced blank pictures. Hank’s pre- and post-assessment pictures do not depict any characters that could be classified as homosexual or heterosexual nor did he portray the characters as acting or asserting themselves to one particular gender. Hank evades all classifications by constructing characters in which sexuality and gender are absent.

**Construction of Subjectivity.** Construction of subjectivity, which involves readers working to construct themselves into existence by pushing back on certain representations, occurred in various ways for Hank. First, although Hank claimed that colors were genderless, he tended to resist representations of boy princesses. In asking Hank to share one thing he had in common with the Princess Boy, he avoided the question and stated, “I will draw him without the princess things.” Initially, Hank resisted categorical markers which pertained to gender for both
boys and girls, but when exposed to a boy desiring to be a princess, Hank rejects such a representation. His critical literacy drawing for this book consists of the Princess Boy in several different Halloween costumes: Easter bunny, spider, ant, and butterfly. Hank consciously rejected the dresses and tiaras worn by the main character, but he also did not portray the Princess Boy in typical boy attire. By doing so, Hank recreates the Princess Boy wearing several genderless animal creations. During the last reading, *10,000 Dresses* (Ewert, 2008) which portrays a character born as a boy, but identifies as a girl, dreaming about dresses, Hank supplies little responses, except when asked if he can recall other people like this main character. Hank not only offers an affirmative response, but also connects it to the book *My Princess Boy* (Kilodavis, 2010). This connection demonstrates that Hank understood the similarities between the main characters in these two books and, unlike the reading of *My Princess Boy*, he did not reject this final main character. In this example, Hank exercised power and agency as subject by navigating and constructing his final position about diverse gender expression.

Another way in which Hank pushed back on certain representations and constructed characters to his own liking occurred through changing the sex of the character. For instance, after reading *A Tale of Two Daddies* (Oelschalger, 2010), a story about two fathers and their daughter, Hank recreates the family with two fathers and their son in his critical literacy drawing. Hank repeats this pattern when reading *The White Swan Express: A Story about Adoption* (Okimoto & Aoki, 2002) in which the story includes several different families traveling to China to adopt infant girls. For this critical literacy drawing, Hank draws only the children, but as boys and older. This type of transformation of the sex from girls to boys could suggest that such a representation makes the most sense to Hank given that he has a twin brother and no other siblings.
The final example of Hank constructing the characters or themes to his own liking involved inserting animal associations into his comments or drawings. While reading King & King & Family (de Haan & Nijland, 2004) Hank responds that the author wrote the book because people like pets. Hank’s comment is most likely influenced by the various animals represented in this book as the two kings honeymoon in a jungle. This comment suggests that although Hank replicated many parts of the story which demonstrated support for same-sex families, he equally felt that the animals played an important role in the story. Animal representations reappear in two of his critical literacy drawings. After reading The Family Book (Parr, 2010), which portrays various family structures, Hank’s drawing included a monkey hanging in a tree and an alligator lying in a hammock. Hank describes the two animals as playing hide-n-seek and does not make any association to families. Another example occurs after reading Princess Smartypants (Cole, 1986). Instead of depicting the princess or the multiple suitors fighting for the princess’s hand, Hank draws a picture of unrecognizable creatures eating alongside an enormous alligator wearing shoes. This representation is in contrast to other data sources about this book which suggested that Hank understood the importance of the princess seeking autonomy. Similarly this book also included several pictures of animals. The final example pertaining to Hank’s tendency to focus on animals involves the book Emma and Meesha My Boy: A Two Mom Story (Considine, 2005), a book about a young girl, Emma, who plays with her cat while her two moms teach her how to be respectful of the animal’s needs. Hank’s critical literacy drawing includes a picture of an angry cat, although the cat does not rebel or act unkindly to Emma. While these animal insertions are not in line with sexuality or gender, it does suggest that Hank comprehended and felt comfortable to apply the tenets of critical literacy in order to include elements that were significant to him.
**Queer Theory.** Queer theory calls upon individuals to decenter themselves by means of deconstructing their viewpoints about particular concepts in order to remain fluid and open to all possibilities. An example of Hank demonstrating his ability to identify or push back on the various sexual and gender representations occurred when reading *Princess Smartypants* (Cole, 1986). For instance, while reading this text, Hank interrupts to predict the final sentence in the book which declares that the princess will live ever after in peace and in autonomy from other suitors. Hank’s prediction is not only correct, but also signifies that he understood the desires of the main character. In answering the critical literacy question of what surprised him the most about this book, Hank’s comment refers to the final illustration in the book which shows the princess holding up a celebratory drink. Instead of stating that the princess has evaded the obligation of marriage, Hank recreates the final scene by discussing the pose of the princess. Although Hank does not verbally acknowledge why the princess is elated, he does remark on her final sentiment. Lastly, Hank’s critical literacy drawing of this book paints another perspective as he illustrates bizarre creatures eating next to a huge alligator wearing shoes. In reading this book, Hank demonstrated a range of responses in the transcripts to the critical literacy drawings regarding the significance of marriage. Hank’s varying viewpoints about the theme or main character may have made it difficult to fully situate himself in relation to this book.

**Teacher and Researcher**

**Production of Identity.** Since critical literacy requires an equal examination of the production of identity, I examined the ways in which I reproduced certain identities within the classroom. Examination included focusing on instruction which allowed participants to understand how identities are produced in texts and made available to them. One of the most significant ways in which participants were able to examine the production of identities was
though reading LGBTQ-themed books. Using children’s books with alternative representations allowed the students to analyze and read about various family structures, including same-sex families, and a range of gender expression. Six books included at least one same-sex family and six books portrayed characters defying typical gender expectations. While incorporating and exposing participants to diverse representations was necessary, it was equally imperative that critical discussions take place in order to allow participants to construct meaning about the diverse representations outside of the societal norm. To make certain that participants did not overlook these representations or misconstrue the relationships between characters, I directed the participants to examine the representations closer. While reading Donovan’s Big Day (Newman, 2011), a story about two mothers marrying each other, I brought the participants’ attention back to the relationship of the two mothers and asked, “So who are these two people?” I highlighted the various configurations using explicit descriptions while reading books with multiple family structures.

The participants’ attention was directed toward the diversity in these books by raising prediction questions prior to reading. For instance, before reading The Princess Boy (Kilodavis, 2010), I asked the students to observe and share their prediction about the story. The participants were able to compare and contrast the actual events in the story to their predictions. Making predictions with LGBTQ-themed books allowed participants to consider their viewpoints against the nontraditional views presented in the LGBTQ-themed books. For instance, certain books, such as The Paper Bag Princess (Munsch, 1995) and Princess Smartypants (Cole, 1986), caused students to consider how every princess might not want to marry.

Second, empowering students with the proper language skills to examine LGBTQ representations spotlighted the production of identities. In order for students to learn this
approach, it was necessary that I model what critical literacy looked like in action. Commencing with the first reading, I integrated critical literacy questions into the discussion by focusing on the author’s purpose for writing the book. Commonly, I asked, “What do you think was the author’s purpose for writing this book?” When students struggled to identify the overall purpose, I provided scaffolding. This type of scaffolding demonstrated to students how to examine books differently. Posing questions focused on critically examining literacy provided a model for students to not only consider critical elements while reading, but also exhibited the necessary language skills to analytically discuss topics from various perspectives. I selected alternative texts as a means to highlight these underrepresented voices which equally required that participants compare and contrast these books to those outside the research site. Weekly review sessions allowed participants to reexamine the books in regards to the author’s purpose which provided them with several occasions to examine and utilize their blooming critical language skills.

**Construction of Subjectivity.** The construction of subjectivity requires readers to reexamine themselves in relation to the representations in texts by pushing back and constructing themselves into being. As their teacher, I allowed students to reconstruct themselves by focusing on power and through teaching critical language skills. Through focusing on the power by means of incorporating diverse texts and calling the participants’ attention toward LGBTQ representations, I remained cognizant of my personal biases while recognizing my role as a critical literacy teacher who actively seeks to bring equality to the LGBTQ community. I struggled with the duality of my role as a researcher and teacher focusing on power. I posed questions such as: What does it mean to assume the role of a critical literacy teacher in relation to teaching, educating, and expanding students’ minds and according to whose views: theirs or
mine? These challenges decreased as I continued to read Janks (2010, 1993) who underlines the importance of examining the dominant and minority voices of texts. Focusing on power, in relation to construction of subjectivity, meant that students were encouraged to consider the issue of access as a means to comprehend how unequal power structures and societal expectations are implied in the books we read, and to consider how society should work to change such dominant representations to make texts more inclusive of all individuals.

In teaching critical language skills, I made multiple inquiries about how to best teach critical language skills to young participants while still allowing them to construct themselves into existence in relation to the texts. To remain focused on the task, I wrote about how Vasquez’s (2010) perspective on the teacher’s role to model as paramount in providing children the necessary language skills in discussing complex issues successfully. I wrestled with how I had envisioned the critical literacy sessions against what they were capable of delivering. I reflected on the importance of explicitly focusing on the power with such a young group, as well as importance of explicitly asking and using critical questions to guarantee that the participants understood how to best use critical language skills. In doing so, I took notes about questions I could ask participants in simple and understandable ways: Who is this text written for, and what would this story look like from another perspective, from your perspective?

Another way in which participants were encouraged to construct their identities as independent subjects and readers of alternative texts was through allowing participants to make personal connections to the texts. Wood (2005) notes that students should view literacy as connected to their lived experiences and as a tool, which could be used effectively to foster change in their lives. When making connections appeared challenging for some participants, I modeled how, as readers, we could connect to characters through empathy. For instance, after
reading, *My Princess Boy* (Kilodavis, 2010), some of the boy participants grappled with making a connection to the main character. I modeled how a connection could be made despite the dissimilarities between the reader and the main character, by relying on human emotion and discussing how it feels to be bullied or ridiculed by others. Modeling empathy permitted participants to understand how connections are possible with characters unlike ourselves. Through relying on shared emotions or making personal connections participants were able to construct themselves in relation to the texts in ways that were applicable to their lives.

In sum, the construction of identity and the production of identity on the part of the teacher involved remaining focused on the power, both in relation to the teacher’s beliefs and to those of the students. Second, it equally involved teaching critical language skills through means of modeling and asking questions which supported the tenets of critical literacy as well as allowing participants to make connections to the texts in ways that encouraged them to exercise and power and assert agency as readers.

**Cross-Case Analysis**

The purpose of conducting a cross-case analysis in most studies is to enhance generalizability through deeper analysis and explanation (Miles & Huberman, 1994), since this study consisted of a small group of participants, claiming generalizability is not possible. The greater purpose of conducting a cross-case analysis of this study was to provide teachers and researchers with additional information regarding the types of themes which may surface when addressing topics of sexuality and gender via critical literacy with young children. Before collectively analyzing the cases, Miles and Huberman (1994) assert that it is imperative to first understand the dynamics of each particular case prior to delineating cross-case explanations. The findings focused exclusively on each participant and each participant’s responses were
additionally analyzed through a theoretical lens in relation to critical literacy and queer theory. By doing so, rich and descriptive data produced patterns of similarities and differences yielding to a deeper understanding across the cases.

Included in this section are similarities and differences across the cases. Four similarities as well as two differences were noted among the participants in the data. Similarities among the participants included: (1) family is not heterosexually or homosexually limiting, (2) questioning the concept of not wanting to marry, (3) resisting representations of princesses, particularly boy princesses and (4) using critical literacy to insert individual and meaningful topics into one’s work. The two overarching differences among the participants were: (1) the individual and unique views about family structures and (2) the participants’ views according to color preferences and gender. Discussed in more detail are the findings noted in Tables 5.1 and 5.2 in relation to the participants’ similarities and differences.

Table 5.1

*Cross-Case Analysis*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Similarities</th>
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<tr>
<td>Participants: Page, Jerry, and Hank</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Family is not heterosexually or homosexually limiting</td>
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<tr>
<td>Participants: Jerry and Page</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Questioned concept of not wanting to marry</td>
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<tr>
<td>Participants: Jerry and Hank</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Resist representations of princesses, particularly boy princesses</td>
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<tr>
<td>Participants: Page and Hank</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Using Critical Literacy to insert individual and meaningful topics into their work</td>
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<tr>
<td>o Page- African-American traits in Critical Literacy Drawings</td>
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<tr>
<td>o Hank- Altering girls into boys and inserting animals in Critical Literacy Drawings</td>
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Table 5.2

Cross-Case Analysis

<table>
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<th>Participant Differences</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Participants: Page, Jerry, and Hank</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>- Page - less receptive to families with two dads</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Jerry - preference to families with two dads</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Hank - depicted families with sons versus daughters</td>
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| **Participants: Jerry and Hank** |
| - Jerry - specific colors for certain genders |
| - Hank - colors are genderless |

**Similarities**

The first similarity observed among all the participants was the notion that family is not heterosexually or homosexually limiting. Some ways in which Page shows support of alternative families appears after reading *King & King & Family* (de Haan & Nijland), a story of two kings honeymooning who return home and adopt a girl hiding in their suitcase, by stating that the author wrote the book because he is a king and likes his family. Another example, occurs after reading *Donovan’s Big Day* (Newman, 2011), a book about a marriage between two moms and their son, the ring bearer, when Page suggests that she might have a second mother in China. Page does not elaborate on the active role that the second mother would take in her life considering that the other mother lives in China, but Pages does demonstrate that she is receptive to queering the idea of family and that multiple mothers are possible. Like Page, Jerry does not demonstrate any resistance toward same-sex families. Some ways in which Jerry illustrates support of diverse families occurs while reading *The Family Book* (Parr, 2010), which spotlights various family structures including two moms and two dads; after reading “Your family is
special no matter what kind it is (29), Jerry shouts out “that’s just what I was going to say. I want a copy."

Another way Jerry showed support of same-sex families occurred before and during the reading of *A Tale of Two Daddies* (Oelschlager, 2010). Jerry not only made a personal connection to the book by comparing his father to those in the book, he also identified the characters on the cover as a family consisting of two dads and a kid before our read aloud session. Hank, also demonstrated that family is not heterosexually or homosexually limiting. Ways in which Hank exhibited support of alterative families during the reading of *Donovan’s Big Day* included mimicking the gesture of opening the wedding ring box, not offering any negative comments, and drawing Donovan with his two mothers in his critical literacy drawing. Another way Hank showed support of diverse families was by making a text-to life-connection to *A Tale of Two Daddies* (Oelschalger, 2010) as well as by linking it to twin girls in the school who have two fathers. Overall, each participant exhibited an understanding and acceptance of all types of families regardless of sexuality.

The second similarity observed included Page’s and Jerry’s initial notions of remaining unwed and living single. Page and Jerry both pondered as to why people would choose not to marry. After reading, *Princess Smartypants* (Cole, 1986), in which the princess diverts all possible suitors in an attempt to remain single, Page believes that the author’s purpose was to demonstrate how ill-mannered the princess was and by consequence must live a solitary life. Though critical discussions and reading other similar books, Page began to reflect on how some people prefer not to marry.

Like Page, Jerry initially wrestled with this notion, during the reading of *King & King & Family* (de Haan & Nijland, 2004), Jerry claims that all kings should marry. This perspective
reappears while reading *Princess Smartypants* (Cole, 1986) in that Jerry overlooks the primary motivation of Princess Smartypants to remain unwed and instead places his focus toward the heroic tasks made by the suitors. Critical discussions based on the desire to remain single allowed Jerry to recreate another possible outcome when a similar book is read, *The Paper Bag Princess* (Munsch, 1995). In this book, the princess decides not to marry the prince due to his ungratefulness and rude demeanor which causes Jerry to consider that perhaps the Prince is being strategic in an endeavor to remain single as well. Originally, both Page and Jerry resisted the notion that some people would prefer to remain single; however, critical discussions that accompanied readings of diverse texts permitted both participants to consider other options.

The third similarity documented included Jerry’s and Hank’s initial resistance toward representations of princesses, particularly boy princesses or boys dressed in feminine clothing. Jerry’s first rejection to such a representation occurred when reading *Olivia and the Fairy Princess* (Falconer, 2012). Jerry examined the cover which included Olivia in princess attire and rejected the book verbally before realizing that Olivia equally rejects such representations. Jerry continued to resist this representation when reading *My Princess Boy* (Kilodavis, 2010) which was most notable with his critical literacy drawing of the Princess Boy with laceration wounds. Critical discussions took place with similar representations presented which over time produced less resistance on the part of Jerry.

By the end of the study and after reading *10,000 Dresses* (Ewert, 2008), Jerry illustrated the main character, Bailey, who identifies as a girl but born as a boy, in a crystal dress for his critical literacy drawing. Hank, like Jerry, pushed back on representations of princesses, in particular of boy princesses. After reading *My Princess Boy*, Hank comments how he will draw the Princess Boy without the princess belongings, and instead draws the Princess Boy wearing
several different Halloween costumes: Easter bunny, spider, ant, and butterfly. By doing so, Hank recreates the Princess Boy wearing genderless animal creations, which could also be considered as Hank viewing the princess attire as a costume and not the Princess Boy’s every day clothes. Yet, Hank tended to identify more with animals representations and it is likely that Hank sought to portray the Princess Boy in ways similar to Hank’s identity. Through critical discussions and continued exposure to diverse representations, Hank connects the final book, *10,000 Dresses*, which portrays another effeminate boy as the main character, to the book, *My Princess Boy*. Similar to Jerry, Hank does not reject the main character in the final book by illustrating the main character of *10,000 Dresses* wearing a crystal dress, as depicted in the actual text. Although both boys resisted representations of princesses and, in particular, boys as princesses, critical discussions along with readings of other books portraying effeminate boys allowed Jerry and Hank to consider various viewpoints and transform their initial responses.

The fourth similarity observed included Page and Hank using critical literacy as a means of exercising power and agency to interject individual topics which were meaningful to their identities. For instance, Page inserted her racial heritage into three of her critical literacy drawings as well as her post-assessment drawing. Page modified skin color and inserted African-American hair traits into her produced pieces. Hank constructed characters into his own liking by altering the sex of girl characters into boys. Hank made such adjustments twice in the study when the main character was a girl and when no animal characters were equally present. Page and Hank thus used critical literacy in this study as a means to speak back to the erasures and silences apparent in the LGBTQ-themed books we read. More importantly, Page and Hank used critical literacy to insert their own voice and construct their identity in ways that were significant for them.
Another way in which Hank constructed the character or themes was by incorporating animal associations into his drawings or comments. Hank inserts animal representations into three of his critical literacy drawings thereby placing the focus on the animals presented in the story as secondary characters versus the main characters as well as the main theme of the book. Although these insertions are not in line with sexuality or gender, this type of action illustrates that both Page and Hank understood the aspects of applying the tenets of critical literacy by being able to examine the representations and recreate them in ways to include personal and significant elements to each of them.

**Significance of Similarities.** The similarities documented in the cross-case analysis are significant for several reasons. First, none of the participants resisted the representations of a homosexual family structure. This finding leads us to pose other questions. For instance, if young children do not exhibit any type of resistance toward various family structures, why are schools so resistant to integrate these representations? More importantly, by not doing so, are schools subconsciously promoting discrimination by denying representations to all students? Studies have shown that LGBTQ topics are harder to discuss as children mature due to the overexposure of misinformed stereotypes surrounding sexuality and gender. This finding, similar to the finding of Souto-Manning and Hermann-Wilmarth (2008), underlines how schools can be complicit in the discrimination acts toward LGBTQ individuals and their families by denying equal representation.

Second, two of the participants supported the societal view that all individuals should marry. This finding is significant in that it demonstrates that children in the classroom raised by single parents or divorced parents are also being denied representation. If children believe that all adults should marry, what does this mean for the child raised by an autonomous and happy single
parent? Likewise, what does this mean for the child raised by a single parent who once viewed the parent as complete before entering school, but now views the parent as needing a mate? Third, both of the boy participants initially resisted the representation of children, born as males, but identify as girls or prefer to express themselves in unconventional ways. What does this mean for the child in the classroom who exhibits diverse gender expression and who is equally denied representation? Collectively these three findings documented in the cross-case analysis are significant because they reveal that schools may not be doing enough to validate the existence of all its students. Case in point, in a 2013 survey conducted by GLSEN, less than two out of ten students reported being provided with positive representations about LGBTQ people in the classroom. Unfortunately, this study brings to light that little advancement has been made despite the GLSEN findings.

The last finding in the cross-case analysis is essential in that it supports other critical literacy scholars (Comber, 2005; Hagood, 2002; Janks, 1993; Vasquez, 2010) who believe that the ultimate goal of critical literacy is to promote transformation. Although all of the participants demonstrated critical literacy in action toward sexuality and gender, two of the participants interjected additional missing voices outside of the realm of sexuality and gender. Page inserted her ethnic heritage onto the representations provided so that her identity would be represented in the class. Hank inserted animal creatures as mean to insert voices which he viewed as invisible but important to his perspective of the world. The highest goal of critical literacy is to prompt students to examine texts for missing voices and in turn observe how students give light to these missing representations by incorporating them into the classroom. This finding supports that young children, as early as Kindergarten and first grade, are capable of enacting critical literacy to the fullest.
Differences

The first notable difference occurred in relation to the notion of family. Although each participant viewed family as neither heterosexually nor homosexually limiting, each participant did demonstrate particularities about their family preferences. For instance, Page appeared to be less receptive to families with two fathers. Page offered verbal support in the data, but her critical literacy drawings portrayed another perspective. After reading King & King & Family (de Haan & Nijland, 2004) as well as A Tale of Two Daddies (Oelschalger, 2010), Page’s critical literacy drawings did not include the main characters or were not aligned to the main theme of the book. Similarly Page suggests that she might have a second mother in China when reading Donovan’s Big Day (Newman, 2011) a book with two mothers, but does not offer this type of suggestion when reading books with two fathers. This type of response when considering gender roles is typical in that a family with two mothers would continue to provide Page with examples of not only what it means to be a parent, and a mother, but also what it means to be a female according in society.

Like Page, Jerry also supported books with two fathers in the data, but failed to depict them in his critical literacy drawings. Unlike Page, however, data taken from the transcripts illustrate Jerry making personal connections to the books with two fathers and not to the books with two mothers. When reading A Tale of Two Daddies, Jerry compares the actions of the two fathers in the story to those of his dad. Lastly, Hank tended to prefer families with boys as children than girls. For instance, after reading A Tale of Two Daddies, Hank recreates the family in this critical literacy drawing by illustrating the two fathers and replaces their daughter with a son. Hank repeats this pattern with the book The White Swan Express: A Story about Adoption (Okimoto & Aoki, 2002) by substituting the newly adopted girls in the story to older boys in this
critical literacy drawing. Each participant was receptive to diverse family structures, but each displayed their personal preferences in relation to their ideal family. Similar to Page’s response, it is not surprising that both Jerry and Hank prefer male representations, either in the form of a father or a brother, as these representations not only align to how Jerry and Hank view their own identifies but also offer examples of what it means to be a male in society.

The second difference included Hank’s and Jerry’s perspective about gender specific colors. Hank appeared to support multiple representations of both boys and girls wearing numerous colors across the gender spectrum. For instance, while reading *The Boy with Pink Hair* (Hilton, 2011) which represents the main character, a boy, with pink hair, Hank declared that the boy has pink hair because he likes the color and because there are no gender specific colors. Hank proclaimed several times throughout the study: “There are no boy colors or color girls.”

Throughout the study, Jerry not only resisted the representations of princesses but also the color pink. Jerry later explained his stance while reading *My Princess Boy* (Kilodavis, 2010) by stating that people will ridicule boys who associate with objects mostly liked by girls. Jerry continues to guard his mindset for his critical literacy drawing of this book by omitting the color pink and drawing the Princess Boy with laceration wounds. Through critical discussions and additional books related to the topic of colors and gender, Jerry’s viewpoint widens as he illustrates the main character, a boy, in all pink in his critical literacy drawing after reading *The Boy with Pink Hair*.

**Significance of Differences.** The differences documented in the cross-case analysis are significant for several reasons. First, the differences provide teachers with information about the various areas on which students may not agree when enacting critical literacy with a focus on sexuality and gender. Participants in this study, exhibited openness toward alternative families,
but tended to identify with family structures which offered a role model with the same gender as their own. With that mind, it is not surprising that Page would prefer to have a family with two mothers versus two fathers. A family with two fathers would deny Page from having a feminine role model as well as efface her own gender from the parental role relationship. Like Page, Jerry and Hank prefer families which offer gender role models. For Hank, the masculine role model is desired in the form of a brother, while Jerry prefers the masculine role to be offered in the form of two fathers. While Jerry and Hank manifested different masculine role models, both, like Page, did not want their own gender effaced within the family structure. Teachers should pay particular attention to gender preferences as means to recognize them and invite students to explore their gender preferences further.

The second difference which occurred among the participants was the diverse degrees of acceptance toward genderless colors, particularly among the boys. This finding reveals another variation of responses in which teachers can expect to see across their students. As noted previously, (Blaise, 2009) gender continues to be a harder construct for young children to view as fluid versus sexuality. The notion that colors could be genderless according to Jerry, for example, demonstrates his inability to view gender in a fluid manner.

In sum, the differences noted in the cross-case analysis not only provide a glimpse of what teachers might face when enacting critical literacy in the classroom with a focus on sexuality and gender, but also provide teachers with insights for additional lessons. Teachers should begin to explore these differences by encouraging students to discuss these perspectives and to examine the multiplicity of views. Finally, student differences rooted in sexuality and gender should lead to other critical lessons which challenge students to analyze the root of subject formation as well as examine how all minority groups are textually portrayed overall.
Summary

This chapter presented and discussed findings by examining the young participants’ responses according to Hagood’s (2002) perspective of how to best apply critical literacy in the classroom. Following Hagood’s (2002) advice both identity formation and subjectivity were analyzed on whether the participant tended to focus on the production of identity by aligning to the characters presented in the chosen text, or tended to examine the construction of subjectivity and act through resistance. Critical literacy enacted with a focus solely on identity formation or construction of subjectivity can be problematic (Hagood, 2002). In the case of Page, a production of identity response would have only suggested that Page tended to reproduce and empathize with effeminate boys as well as the representation of princesses when reading LGBTQ-themed books. Allowing an examination of construction of subjectivity to occur, however, demonstrated that Page equally asserted subjectivity by pushing back from the notion of remaining single as well as, and most importantly, inserting a representation in keeping with her ethnicity by altering the skin color or hair texture of several characters in the books we read. By following Hagood’s advice, critical literacy allowed Page to enjoy the LGBTQ-themed texts while evaluating the social construction of them as well as question which representations were present and which ones were not.

Additional analysis occurred through conducting a cross-case analysis. Such analysis found that participants produced four similar responses and two different responses when collectively examining the cases. The similarities among some of the participants included the following topics: (1) family is not heterosexually or homosexually limiting, (2) questioning the concept of not wanting to marry, (3) resisting representations of princesses, particularly boy princesses and (4) using critical literacy to insert individual and meaningful topics. The
differences among some of the participants were: (1) the individual and unique views about family structures and (2) the participants’ views according to color preferences and gender. Collective responses across the participants help to provide classroom teachers and researchers with more detailed descriptions about which topics may surface in the classroom when critically reading texts which focus on sexuality and gender. When all children are encouraged to evaluate texts for the representations present along with those that are missing, only then can children begin to reflect on the connection between language and power (Janks, 2010, 1993). Critical literacy, with a focus on production of identity and construction of subjectivity, plays an important role in either reproducing or challenging the unequal structures of power in society, and in particular, supports equity and social justice practices at the elementary level.

The following chapter offers a summative discussion of the findings, addresses implications of the findings for the field of LGBTQ scholarship and in the classroom, notes the limitations of the study, and makes recommendations for further research.
Chapter 6

Conclusion

Despite the fact that we continue to live in a society which recognizes that discrimination in general is wrong, we continue to silence LGBTQ members and their families by not recognizing their existence in schools (Mayo, 2006). One of the most troubling perspectives about silencing the members of the LGBTQ community and those who love them is the continued inattention to the safety and well-being of these individuals and their families. Such is apparent when examining the statistical findings by GLSEN (Gay, Lesbian, Straight, Education Network), as noted below of the schools in Ohio. In fact, Mayo (2006) underscores Sedgwick’s (1990) perspective that “no other minority is so faced with medical and educational institutions intent on their eradication prior to their adulthood” (p. 473). The silencing or “eradication”, as Mayo asserts, persists in schools today through examining the GLSEN 2013 National School Climate Survey. These statistics pertain exclusively to schools in Ohio.

- Only 4% of LGBTQ members attended a school with a comprehensive anti-bullying harassment policy that included specific protections based on sexual orientation and gender expression.
- More than 9 in 10 students heard “gay” used in a negative way and nearly 9 in 10 heard other homophobic remarks at school regularly.
- Less than 2 in 10 students were taught positive representations of LGBTQ people, history and events.
- Only 13% of students reported having had any type of access to LGBTQ-related resources and supports in Ohio Schools.
Students learn powerful lessons about sexuality and gender by the ways in which schools and teachers validate or silence LGBTQ individuals (Blackburn, 2012; Blount, 2000; Birden, 2005). As a parent, teacher, and LGBTQ member in Ohio, I believe that schools can play an instrumental role in every child’s life. Schools can either interrupt heteronormativity by encouraging students to use critical literacy to explore the status quos of the world or schools can choose to remain silent and thus be equal participants in the discriminating process against LGBTQ members and their families.

One of the most poignant cases within the last 25 years included the banning of three pages which contained LGBTQ representations in the Children of the Rainbow curriculum guide (Lipkin, 1993). In comparison, to the 2013 survey conducted by GLSEN which reported that less than two students out of ten were provided with positive representations about LGBTQ people in the classroom or that 13% of students reported having access to LGBTQ resources, schools continue to fall short of validating LGBTQ people and their families. Curricula which only offer heteronormative perspectives can deny children the chance to see family and friends who exhibit gender creativity, defy gender norms, or identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual in a positive manner.

In view of the fact that my daughter at the age of two, along with her classmates, began to question the social expectations regarding sexuality and gender and, more importantly, are expected to participate in a compulsory school system, this study was inspired by her and others like her. For reasons both political and personal, this study sought to examine how young children respond, verbally and non-verbally, to critical readings of LGBTQ-themed children’s literature. Such an examination could provide snapshots of how young children react and explore their ways of thinking about sexuality and gender when exposed to LGBTQ-themed literature.
The findings provided a glimpse of how such conversations might appear in other classrooms, both in terms of pedagogical and personal reflections, by including the perspectives of the teacher and the young students and by providing actual conversations in the data set. Additionally, the cross-analysis illustrated what themes may arise in the classroom particularly when more than one participant demonstrated a similar or different response. Globally, this study aims to encourage curriculum change that supports equity and social practices regarding the LGBTQ community and their families at the elementary level. Teachers interested in promoting equity around this topic should reconceptualize storytime to include a critical literacy approach. Critical literacy needs to validate and welcome both production of identity and construction of subjectivity responses so that participants, as readers and more importantly, as individuals, feel at ease to construct their own self in accordance, in contrast, or differently to the presented representations in the classroom books. LGBTQ-themed books serve as an excellent medium to ensure that students with LGBTQ family members or LGBTQ individuals in the classroom feel validated as well as allow other students to consider and reflect upon diverse sexual and gender expression.

In order to guide such conversations, critical literacy was used to analyze how students responded to diverse texts with LGBTQ representations. Bringing insights from my previous study of examining preschoolers reading LGBTQ-themed literature (Bridgman 2012), I acknowledged the significance of using a critical perspective which challenges existing power structures and works to expand ideologies when working with young children (Cushman, Kintgen, Kroll & Rose, 2001). That said, I embraced this study with a critical perspective yearning to understand how critical literacy can work best in the classroom with young children and when reading LGBTQ-themed children literature.
In order to do so, I turned to the work of Vasquez (2004) who in her book, *Negotiating Critical Literacies with Young Children*, asserts that young children are capable of using critical literacy to examine the assumptions about society as well as question their own perspectives about the text. Since critical literacy requires that the teacher guide students in their analysis of texts, and in this study, LGBTQ-themed texts, the study was equally grounded in critical literacy and queer theory.

Consistent with Freire’s (1970/2000) notion of *liberatory education*, critical literacy encourages students to make inquiries about society’s taken-for-granted values, ideals, norms, and so forth (Sargis, 2008). A critical literacy lens thus facilitated a closer examination of the social valorization of heterosexuality over homosexuality within the school context (Birden, 2005; DePalma & Atkinson, 2009). Equally applying the tenets of critical literacy renders the reader as an active questioner who seeks to understand the connection between “reading the word” and “reading the world” (Freire & Macedo, 1987). This study provided an occasion to consider how critical literacy learning not only focuses on students recognizing the tensions between the word and the world, but also empowers students to transform reality by envisioning their own renditions aligned to their beliefs and in their own words.

Likewise, a queer theory lens was used to alter perceptions related to gender and sexuality through talking about commonly-held binaries and promoting the importance of commenting on representations of sexuality and gender in children’s books. These theories intertwined permitted me to focus on disrupting the everyday heteronormative practices, by analyzing the literature, as means to investigate the social and equity issues surrounding sexuality and gender (Comber, 2005).
This study was significant not only in that it contributes to the scholarship focused on examining topics related to sexuality and gender in schools, but also adds to the body of literature emphasizing critical literacy and equity issues. Similarly, for teachers to consider including LGBTQ representations in the curriculum or the use of LGBTQ texts with elementary children—and to feel successful doing so—more scholarship is needed to capture real life experiences of what happens when a teacher and students discuss sexuality and gender. Additionally, teachers will benefit from having more knowledge about LGBTQ texts as well as tool box of strategies for integrating these texts into the classroom. By examining these processes, I sought to better understand how the role of education can reproduce or challenge unequal power structures in society, as well as to reflect on the overall process as a parent, teacher, and LGBTQ member.

Findings pointed to a number of considerations about both the student participants and my role as a teacher. With these findings, I hope to provide both teachers and teacher educators with evidence-based ways of knowing and understanding how to render schools a more socially just place for all students, including those who know or identify as LGBTQ. This final chapter summarizes the findings, outlines implications of the study, addresses the study’s limitations, and makes recommendations for future research.

Summary of the Findings

This collective case study examined two research questions pertaining to the implementation of critical literacy with a focus on sexuality and gender using LGBTQ-themed children’s books with young children. The first research question focused on analyzing how young children responded to LGBTQ representations within children’s texts and to the topic of sexuality and gender in general via critical literacy. Analysis of individual data sources included
examining transcripts, critical literacy drawings, photographs and pre- and post-assessment pictures. Findings revealed that participants produced three general responses to the representations and to the topic of sexuality and gender while reading LGBTQ-themed children’s books. The first response, *student rejects*, happened when a participant refused to make any connections to the main character or author’s purpose to the book. Since the overarching goal of critical literacy includes action or transformative thinking on the part of the reader, examination of *student recreates* or *student rejects* responses were further evaluated to determine if participant responses changed over the course of the study, and in particular to the topic of sexuality or gender. The second response, *student replicates*, occurred when the participant duplicated the main character or the author’s purpose of the book. The third response, *student recreates*, took place when the participant altered the main character or the author’s purpose of the book.

Critical literacy in action occurred for each participant. For instance, Jerry and Page initially questioned why some individuals would choose to be single while Jerry and Hank originally resisted representations of princesses, particularly boys wearing dresses or tiaras. All participants’ resistance in these areas decreased through continued exposure to LGBTQ-themed books and critical literacy discussions.

After identifying the three types of possible student responses, this study also included a robust discussion about analyzing these findings through a critical literacy and queer theory lens (see Chapter 5). By doing so, consideration of whether these young readers produced critical literacy responses in keeping with production of identity or construction of subjectivity took place. Production of identity responses appeared to align mostly with participant responses of *Student Replicates*. Participants who replicated the given representations tended to support the
identities supplied in the text and constructed by the author. Construction of subjectivity appeared to align mostly with participant responses of *Student Recreates* and *Student Rejects*. Participants who rejected or recreated the supplied representations in the text exercised power and negotiated their understanding in ways that supported their construction of being and in certain cases led to transformative thinking. An example of how participants equally benefited from the principles of queer theory was also included in the discussion. Participant responses that demonstrated varying perspectives to the same text revealed fluidity. By doing so, the participant resisted being located to a particular side of the binary in relation to sexuality or gender: homosexuality versus heterosexuality; boys’ colors versus girls’ colors and so forth.

The second research question examined how the researcher assuming the role as teacher enacted critical literacy with a focus on sexuality and gender. The first finding, *focusing on power*, revealed that the teacher incorporated diverse representations and called the participants attention to such diverse representations. The second finding, *teaching critical language*, demonstrated that the teacher modeled critical language through posing questions and encouraging participants to make personal connections.

Findings from the cross-case analysis (see chapter 5) demonstrated that the participants produced four similar responses and two different responses. Similarities ranged from (1) participants not viewing families as heterosexually or homosexuality limiting, (2) questioning the desire to remain unmarried, (3) resisting representations of boys wearing dresses or tiaras and (4) using critical literacy to insert individual topics that were meaningful to their identity. The two differences included how participants (1) responded differently to the various family structures and (2) to the notion of genderless colors. The cross-case analysis findings cause us to consider why the curriculum does not include LGBTQ representations in the classroom given that
students who identify with diverse expressions of sexuality and gender are being denied representation, and more significantly, how students, as demonstrated in this study, produced a greater sense of awareness and understanding toward LGBTQ individuals by replicating or recreating such representations. Through analyzing various LGBTQ representations and critically discussing the expectations governing sexuality and gender, students, similar to those in this study, illustrated that exposure to LGBTQ topics does not promote a loss of childhood innocence, but in fact allows students to construct the world in ways that make sense to them. Curriculum that excludes these types of representations silence the LGBTQ students in the classroom as well as the student raised by an LGBTQ parent or has a LGBTQ sibling or identifies with diverse forms of gender expression.

All children should be taught how to analyze texts for the representations present as well as those that are missing only then can children begin to reflect on the connection between language and power (Janks, 1993). An objective of this study was to provide snapshot of how schools, including teachers and students, can assist each other in exploring subjectivity by questioning the normative practices and ideologies portrayed in texts through literacy conversations. Globally, this study aims to encourage a curriculum change that supports equity and social justice practices regarding the LGBTQ community and their families at the elementary levels. The next section provides possible implications for the classroom as well as future research.

**Implications**

Several potential implications are possible for both classroom practice and for future research. In order to understand how critical literacy with a focus on sexuality and gender using LGBTQ-themed books could be specifically approached in the classroom, this study analyzed
the responses of three elementary students and one teacher. Data identified three possible student responses. This study also demonstrated how a critical literacy approach could be used in ways that position the teacher as a social agent inviting students to examine the heteronormative practices through literacy instruction. The findings provide various implications both pedagogically and to field of research.

**Pedagogical**

One of the most important implications of this study is the argument that heteronormative narratives could be counterbalanced with diverse representations of gender and sexuality by inviting such topics into the classroom and fostering multiple views by means of critical literacy. Exposing participants to diverse representations, as well inviting them to consider the underlying messages of the dominant and prolific representations found in the majority of children’s books, was essential to expanding their knowledge of sexuality and gender in general. Reading LGBTQ-themed children’s literature served as an excellent medium for inviting participants to analyze the various representations included in texts to those which are mainly absent.

Similarly, this study revealed how participants used critical literacy to investigate social and equity issues in the classroom that were not only outside the realm of sexuality and gender, but were also specific and important to their individual identity. This kind of critical literacy took place when Hank and Page inserted certain characteristics into their critical literacy drawings which were meaningful to them. For instance, although many of the LGBTQ-themed books offered limited African-American representations, Page used the tenets of critical literacy in order to display her ethnic heritage in her drawings or offered comments about African-American traits. By constructing a space and modeling critical literacy in the classroom, participants, such as Page, became skilled in contrasting herself into being.
Additionally, this study provided purposeful and practical ways for teachers to frame and model the topic of sexuality and gender via critical literacy with young children. Two key findings concerning the teacher’s role entailed (1) the need to incorporate LGBTQ-themed books in positive ways and (2) to model the ways to use critical language in the classroom. By inviting students to examine and engage in conversations about diverse representations provide students with the foundation to use critical literacy for topics which were individually meaningful for them. This study not only provides teachers with pedagogical suggestions outlined in the two findings above but also offers additional insights based on the teacher’s journal. Elementary educators interested in using critical literacy with young children might find this study valuable in that it offers both pedagogical and personal viewpoints as a teacher. For instance, pedagogically this study illustrates that in order to successfully enact critical literacy in the classroom teachers must recognize both production of identity and construction of subjectivity responses. By doing so, students will feel at ease to construct their own identity within the classroom. Teachers should also look for ways in which their students recreate representations in order to bring voice to identities which matter to the students and which may not be present in the classroom literature. Teachers should also expect to face challenges at the onset of teaching students to enact the tenets of critical literacy. Asking students to analyze the author’s purpose of a text is quite different from expecting students to share their personal viewpoints about the book or expecting them to identify the cause and effect. For this reason, teachers should expect students to struggle with this new literacy approach, which equally highlights the importance of teachers modeling critical literacy language more at the beginning of the critical reading sessions. With time, as demonstrated in this study, students will employ critical language skills
and begin to analyze the text by looking for the author’s purpose without any additional scaffolding.

Another significant implication of this study was its ability to encourage teachers to reconceptualize storytime by expanding the parameters of such a staple classroom activity to include a critical literacy approach. This study demonstrated that adopting a critical literacy approach was not only possible with elementary students, but also that it entailed reading beyond the word and pictures of all texts and to read with the intention of interpreting the text in relation to the text’s purpose, message, and place within society. Critical literacy invited readers to examine issues regarding power, especially in relation to silencing or limiting voices and particularly within the realm of sexuality and gender. Finally, this study showed the importance of reflecting how the production of identity and the construction of subjectivity are essential when using critical literacy in the classroom and that readers should be able to react to texts and construct themselves in ways that are fitting to them.

Research

This section discusses the implications regarding research; suggestions for future research are made in the recommendations section. The most significant implication of this study is its addition to the limited body of research examining LGBTQ topics. Although current researchers assert the importance of integrating LGBTQ topics into the classroom, few studies have documented a systematic research process that is supported by an explicit research question or methodology (Ryan et al., 2013; Vasquez, 2004; Davies, 2003; Schall & Kauffmann, 2003; Dutro 2001). With such limited scholarship, resources are scarce for educators and fellow researchers particularly interested in integrating LGBTQ topics at the elementary level. In the documentary, It’s Elementary, Chasnoff and Cohen (1996) illustrate that elementary students
possess a sense of fairness and kind of institutional philosophy about all sexualities (Hulsebosch et al., 1999). Data generated in this study also suggested that elementary students are capable of critically examining LGBTQ-themed children’s literature. Findings from this study help to validate Vasquez’s (2010) work of using critical literacy with young children as well as support LGBTQ scholars’ claims that sexuality and gender topics should be part of the elementary curriculum (Chasnoff and Cohen, 1996).

In comparison to other LGBTQ studies, one methodical difference of this study was to provide a dual glimpse of both the young participants and the researcher serving as a teacher reading the LGBTQ-themed books aloud. The limited research in the field offers a perspective of either the student(s) or the teacher, but not both (Bower and Klecka, 2009; Vicars, 2009; Whelan, 2006; Schneider, 2001). Next, this study examined each data source accordingly and then offered a cross-case analysis on the young participants as a way to enhance the credibility of the study. This study provides researchers with various perspectives based on the different data sources—transcripts, critical literacy drawings, photographs and pre- and post-assessments—as well as how each data point supported the three identified student responses. It also provides critical literacy researchers with a perspective on the importance of inviting both construction of subjectivity and production of identity responses in the classroom.

Studies of this sort are not only important to add to the limited research in the field and to inform the elementary educators, but also are timely given the increasing attention about sexual and gender equality nationwide. From the debate over the Supreme Court’s decision to legalize gay marriage to the latest report from GLSEN: Bias, Bullying, and Homophobia in Grades K-6 (2012), it is clear that the nation needs to recognize and challenge the inequalities faced by LGBTQ individuals and their families. By welcoming LGBTQ topics in the early grades,
educational researchers and literacy experts assert that schools use a more proactive stance against homophobia by portraying accurate and positive representations of society that include LGBTQ individual and their families (Blaise, 2009; Chasnoff & Cohen, 1996; DePalma & Atkinson, 2009; Hermann-Wilmarth, 2010, 2007).

In sum, this study includes several lessons for both the teacher as well as the researcher. First, in accordance with other research, this study has taught us that critical literacy is possible with young children. Second, this study has taught us that critical literacy topics can include even complex topics such as sexuality and gender. Third, this study has taught us that when enacting critical literacy with young children, it is imperative that both production of identity and construction of subjectivity perspectives be included in the process. Fourth, this study has taught us that critical literacy can produce equity in the classroom by validating both production of identity and construction of subjectivity student responses, by doing so, students learn to critically analyze texts for representations which speak to their identity, and when such representations are not present, students, as demonstrated in this study with Page and Hank, will begin to incorporate these representations in the space.

**Limitations**

There are a few limitations to consider which could have improved the study in the following areas. First, the study only analyzed three participants in depth; a larger participant pool would have provided a broader and realistic snapshot of a classroom setting. Second, the study was conducted in a non-profit daycare facility which offers after-school programs to a small number of students which may limit applicability elsewhere, such as to a large public school district. Third, student absences and the photo developing interfered with collecting data on particular days. Additional time in the field and other data sources were used to counteract
such offsets in the data collection process. Fourth, other minimal challenges included the participants’ inabilities to fully articulate their thoughts or interject unrelated comments into the discussion. To overcome these challenges, I redirected the attention of the participant(s) or sought clarification from the participant directly. Finally, another limitation of the conducting a qualitative case study was that each participant was bounded to a particular classroom setting which lessens the likelihood of being able to make claims that may apply to a larger or different educational setting.

A final limitation worth noting is the potential for researcher bias, as a member of the LGBTQ community whose research interests’ stems from personal struggles encountered in my educational and heteronormative experiences raised in the south. Next, as a same-sex parent and teacher in a public school system, I have faced many heteronormative situations and assumptions made in schools. For this reason, I elected to complete the readings LGBTQ-themed children’s books during this study. Overall, I recognize the initial biases that I brought to this study and for this reason kept a journal as a way to remain cognizant of addressing the diverse realms of sexuality and gender by not highlighting one lifestyle over another.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

The following recommendations are made in light of future research and in consideration of the limitations of this study. First, future studies might explore a larger number of students using critical literacy within a school classroom versus observing a handful of students in an after school program. In doing so, data would allow for greater impact across various different educational settings. Second, future studies which observe elementary students beyond the second grade would increase participants’ abilities to fully articulate thoughts and thus increasing the likelihood to capture data with additional levels of complexity. Participants’ penmanship
both in regards to writing down personal thoughts as well as drawing would be more pronounced beyond the first grade. Older participants might also produce a greater level of sophisticated responses due to obtaining a higher level of background knowledge and personal experiences both in and outside of the classroom.

Future studies could also include examining an actual teacher who conducts critical literacy reading with students thereby eliminating the dual role—researcher and teacher—taken on in this study. Other studies may decide to analyze various teachers conducting critical literacy readings across one grade level in order to compare and contrast the perspectives of multiple teachers. Studies of this kind might increase the likelihood of elementary educators implementing critical literacy using LGBTQ-themed books after reading how other educators did so in their classrooms.

In closing, these types of studies are needed in order to provide a deeper understanding of how to best use literacy in the classroom to improve the students’ educational experience overall by focusing on social and equity issues in society. Such inquiries could offer additional rationales as to why the topic of sexuality and gender should be included at the elementary level. Also, additional research would expand the existing scholarship and possibly provide ways of combating the heteronormative practices at the elementary level. Research of this kind would not only accommodate a diverse population of learners, but also validate the lives of LGBTQ students and children, such as my own, from LGBTQ households. This type of research raises other important questions such as whether the need to explore LGBTQ issues in education at the secondary level would be as critical if more focused was placed on the primary or elementary levels. Finally, by addressing LGBTQ issues in the younger grades, other questions emerge on a larger scale, such as: Could we eliminate or lessen the pressures and threat of suicide related to
the coming-out process mostly associated with the upper grades as well as galvanize a greater body of LGBTQ-themed children’s literature geared for younger children and their families?

In sum, this chapter offered concluding comments about the investigation of three young participants and the researcher serving as teacher regarding the implementation of critical literacy into the classroom with a focus on sexuality and gender using LGBTQ-themed children’s books. A summary of the findings in relation to the research questions was included along with how the data was viewed from a theoretical perspective. Implications to both the field and to the classroom were discussed to address the contributions of this study overall, and limitations were noted as a means and hope to generate suggestions for future research which may shed light and give credence to the LGBTQ individuals of society as well as to the children raised or living with other LGBTQ family members.

One final and most important implication of this study is a personal hope that not only my daughter, but also others like her, will have the reassurance and the right to complete their academic years in a school which textually and positively represents all families including individuals of the LGBTQ society.
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Young Readers.


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