

Project Title: Implementing Socially Just Literacy Practices in Elementary Classrooms Using Multicultural Children's Literature

Project Purpose:

I have been awarded a Spring 2016 sabbatical leave in order to collaboratively complete research and write a book that makes accessible theories that explore and methods that integrate LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) topics in elementary literacy and language arts curriculum. This research is in collaboration with my colleague Dr. Caitlin L. Ryan of East Carolina University. The book will include both *portraits of practice*, focusing on 3 elementary school teachers, and *methods* that teachers can use with traditional language arts materials such as children's literature. Underlying all of this will be *theoretical explanations* that explain and justify the rationale for this kind of classroom work. The intended audience for this study is in-service elementary school teachers, elementary school teachers in training, and teacher educators who are interested in issues of justice around LGBT topics, but don't have the language to support why this is important, or don't know how to implement LGBT topics into well established or state required curriculum. This builds on the scholarship I have conducted both in single authored studies and in studies with Dr. Ryan over the past ten years on LGBT topics in elementary language arts education.

Background:

It is widely acknowledged that schools are sites of homophobia, heterosexism, and heteronormativity (Blaise, 2010; Kosciw, Diaz, & Greytak, 2008; Heffernan, 2010; Renold, 2005; Robinson, 2005; Ryan, 2010). Additional research, particularly work that takes place in schools and with practicing teachers, has the potential to shed light on the ways these forces work and on the kinds of curricula, pedagogies, and leadership that might make for more inclusive educational spaces. Furthermore, portraits of more inclusive practices, collected directly from classrooms and classroom teachers could serve as possibility models to help teachers, teacher educators, researchers, and administrators see how LGBT-inclusive teaching is possible and how it might look in a variety of different contexts.

Much of the research on LGBT topics, particularly at the elementary level, is not empirical or is not being done in schools. In a review of empirical research on gay and lesbian teachers, Duke (2007) found that while every article of the 22 he reviewed "described the pervasive homophobia that characterizes much of the political and social discourse in the United States... [and] every author acknowledged public schools as sites of institutional homophobia," only four of the articles (18%) were empirical studies that directly investigated this situation, (Duke, 2007, p. 25). In fact, the "scarcity of empirical studies in naturalistic settings" led Duke to conclude that "research about gay and lesbian people in public school settings is forbidden, discouraged, and taboo" (Duke, 2007, p. 27).

Often times literacy and elementary education professors do not always know or understand how to talk about LGBT topics with preservice teachers (Hermann-Wilmarth and Bills, 2010). Likewise, preservice teachers are entering schools where homophobia and heterosexism coexist with ever expanding notions of legalized family, thanks to marriage equality laws. As they begin their careers, preparation for how to include and talk about LGBT topics as they are aligned with curriculum, as well as how to counter negative messages about LGBT people when those messages come from parents (an oft cited fear of my own students) and students will help them to be more inclusive teachers. Likewise, inservice elementary and middle school teachers who want to include LGBT-inclusive topics and texts in their curriculum would find a helpful resource in this work. Additionally, there are currently no book length texts on the market that specifically address the integration of LGBT-inclusive texts or the teaching of LGBT topics at the elementary school level.

As teacher educators at large, regional universities with large teacher preparation programs, Dr. Ryan and I teach over 200 teachers a year in two different regions of the country. We regularly hear from a large portion of the pre and inservice teachers in our classes that, while they might think it is important to address LGBT topics and to bring LGBT-inclusive texts into their classrooms, they are nervous about, or aren't sure how to do this. When we present sessions at professional conferences (such as the National Council of Teachers of English) with titles like "LGBT 101 for Elementary and Middle School Teachers," not only are the rooms filled to capacity, but the attendees ask the same questions that our own students ask. Our experiences have indicated that A) teachers are seeking models of how to do this work but need additional ideas, guidance, and support, and B) there are audiences of pre- and in-service teachers who can't attend conferences to learn about these models or who don't attend universities with classes that offer this content. We want our book to reach them and support them as they work to make their classrooms safer, more inclusive, and more effective for all their students. We also want the book to reach teacher educators who might be in a position to address these topics with their students if they felt like they had materials to draw on. This book will add to my own single authored work (Hermann-Wilmarth, 2007; Hermann-Wilmarth, 2008; Hermann-Wilmarth; 2010), some co-authored work (Hermann-Wilmarth & Souto-Manning, 2007; Souto-Manning & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2008) extensive work with Dr. Ryan in this area (Ryan & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2013; Hermann-Wilmarth & Ryan, 2013, Hermann-Wilmarth & Ryan, 2014; Hermann-Wilmarth & Ryan, 2015; Hermann-Wilmarth & Ryan, in press).

Pre-service and in-service teachers who feel a commitment to inclusion and social justice education across identity categories have access to powerful theoretical and methodological texts that include strong portraits of practice and inform teaching through a multicultural lens (for example, Mariana Souto-Manning's *Multicultural Teaching in the Early Childhood Classroom* and Mary Cowhey's *Black Ants and Buddhists*), but no book that is singularly focused on approaches to including LGBT topics and issues in elementary classrooms has been published since *Queering Elementary Education* (Letts and Sears, 1999) came out 15 years ago. Our focus on addressing LGBT topics through literacy and language arts curricula, will be of particular interest to teachers who are

unsure of how to use books with LGBT characters or themes in their own classrooms. Likewise, teachers interested in interrupting homophobic or heterosexist notions of gender and sexuality will find language and examples of how to do this. And, finally, we will provide methods to incorporate approaches to LGBT topics that fit within the boundaries of well-established curricula. Teachers will find both rationale and examples that are significant to their practice and can support both their initial and their ongoing efforts.

Methods and Plan of Work

Because this research project is focused on understanding the practices of teachers in classrooms, it is qualitative. I, along with Dr. Ryan, will examine the teaching methods of elementary school teachers. Specifically, the project uses an instrumental case study method (Stake, 2008) that balances the particular features of a given case with attention to the topical concern of the research questions. This approach will help us grasp and document the practices of particular elementary school teachers who are teaching in ways that are inclusive of non-normative experiences of gender and sexuality while also highlighting what can be learned from a given case that may be applicable to other practitioners (Stake, 2008). Because most elementary school teachers are not addressing these issues in their classrooms, the study has required purposeful sampling procedures to find participants whose teaching will provide appropriate data to answer the research questions. Specifically, I will have identified participants via a theoretically-based sampling procedure (Patton, 1990) in order to investigate manifestations of the theoretical construct of interest (i.e., teaching inclusively about gender and sexuality). Initial participants will be drawn from the population of teachers who have expressed interests in inclusive teaching.

The second approach to data collection will include interviews of teachers who are doing this work, mostly in Atlanta, GA and Greenville, NC. I have already identified teachers through sampling, and qualitative interviews (Kvale, 1996) will be conducted in the Spring of 2016 while I am on sabbatical. Because I hope to better understand the contexts in which they are teaching, I would like to travel to their schools and interview them face-to-face. These interviews will occur in January (Atlanta), February (Greenville), April (Greenville), and May (Atlanta). These interviews will help me better identify methods, challenges, needs, and experiences of teachers who approach the English language arts in LGBT-inclusive ways. They will help to create a more robust picture of what this work looks like.

Because we have already collected data in two teachers' classrooms, and I am completing data collection in a third teacher's classroom this fall and in the spring, the interviews are the final step of data collection for our proposed book. Once the data are collected, Dr. Ryan and I will do a final analysis of the data and write up the research. We plan to do this work while I am in the south, in the days immediately following the interviews.

Data analysis will be based on a grounded approach (Erickson, 1986), investigating the data on a regular and ongoing basis using topical or thematic analysis to determine trends

and patterns. Particular attention will be given to the ways that teachers structure their teaching over time. Analytic memos in the forms of brief narratives, charts, and other visual representations will be used to triangulate the analysis. Transcribed data, coded data, initial findings, and manuscript drafts be shared with the teachers, when possible, the students involved to ensure validity and ethical representations.

Schedule:

9/2015: Obtained HSIRB approval for research

9/2015-6/2016: Collect classroom data

11/2015: Book proposal submitted to TCCPress

1/2016: Interviews in Atlanta/Data analysis

2/2016: Interviews in Greenville/Data analysis

4/2016: Interviews in Greenville/Data analysis

5/2016: Interviews in Atlanta/Data analysis

8/2016: Submit book manuscript to TCCPress

9/2016: Submit proposal for edited book to Peter Lang Publishing

Budget and Justification

(omitted)

Anticipated Outcomes

The anticipated outcomes from this work are two fold. First, and most central, the completion of a book for Teachers College Press that includes theory, method, and portraits of practice to be used by elementary school teachers, teacher educators, and curriculum developers in order to learn how to create more inclusive classrooms. The second outcome is the possibility of a second, edited book, with chapters by the teachers and literacy educators interviewed for this project. This proposal is less developed, but the connections that I make with teachers who have longer stories to tell, and more research to write about than there will be room for in our book, will hopefully be the creation of a community of teachers who teach LGBT topics in inclusive ways. This anthology could be a valuable addition to the literature.

Plans for continuing research/creative activity

I plan to continue looking at how teachers implement LGBT topics into their English language arts curriculum, particularly in the changing cultural landscape. Likewise, I plan

to create curriculum based on what we learn in this research so that I can, in turn, write curriculum that adheres to the standards used in public schools, and then conduct classroom research to determine the effectiveness of this curriculum.

In order to continue my research in the area of LGBT topics, literacy, and elementary education, I plan to submit proposals for external funding from two organizations. The International Literacy Association's Elva Knight Research Grant to support work in reading and literacy, and the Spencer Foundation's Small Research Grant.

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