Transgender Representation: Common Themes Found in Ten Children's Books

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Abstract

With the increased publication of books featuring LGBTQ2S+ characters and issues, there is an opportunity for the reader to acquire a greater understanding of various LGBTQ2S+ experiences. This article focuses on ten books for children ages eight to twelve that include transgender characters. The books are as follows: Lily and Dunkin; The Boy in the Dress; Sapphire the Great and the Meaning of Life; George; Gracefully Grayson; Zenobia July; A Boy Named Queen; The Pants Project; The Other Boy; and My Life as a Diamond. This article offers a brief synopsis of the ten selected books and a discussion of how each book fits into transgender literature as a whole. A thematic analysis revealed six themes that occur in nearly all of the books studied: gender transition, the nuclear family, adult antagonists, bullies, resolutions, and racial diversity. This study will be useful to librarians and teachers wishing to increase their knowledge and awareness of LGBTQ2S+ literature and add to their LGBTQ2S+ collection.

Keywords: transgender; LGBTQ2S+; middle grade children; literature

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Introduction

LGBTQ2S+ characters are increasingly common in children's literature (Naidoo, 2012). With more books featuring LGBTQ2S+ characters and challenges, there is a greater opportunity for readers to learn about various LGBTQ2S+ experiences. However, this increase in the representation of LGBTQ2S+ characters within children's literature necessitates the further explanation of *how* LGBTQ2S+ characters are—or are not—portrayed. In looking at the themes and tropes present in this body of literature, we gain awareness of the progress that has occurred in publishing diverse LGBTQ2S+ perspectives and experiences, and the work that remains to be done.

The scope of the study includes ten books that include representations of transgender characters. The ten books included for this study are: *Lily and Dunkin* (Gephart, 2016), *The Boy in the Dress* (Walliams, 2008), *Sapphire the Great and the Meaning of Life* (Brenna, 2019), *George* (Gino, 2015), *Gracefully Grayson* (Polonsky, 2014), *Zenobia July* (Bunker, 2019), *A Boy Named Queen* (Cassidy, 2016), *The Pants Project* (Clarke, 2017), *The Other Boy* (Hennessey, 2016), and *My Life as a Diamond* (Manzer, 2018). Seven of the books feature a transgender protagonist, two books have a main character that explores the gender binary, and one portrays a transgender adult who is explored through a child's perspective. While all ten books are different in terms of characterisations of LGBTQ2S+ people and content, there are reoccurring themes and character attributes that are found in all ten books. Six themes can be identified within all ten books and will be examined in this paper. These themes include: gender transition, the nuclear family, adult antagonists, school bullies, resolutions, and racial diversity.

Literature Review

Transgender literature for older children is currently at the forefront of a discussion between librarians, teachers, and concerned parents (Yorio, 2019). While this topic is relatively new and is still contested, there is a small pool of academic literature written about transgender novels.

Overall, the literature presents a consensus that transgender literature for older children is growing, yet it is still very much lacking in comparison to other genres. Furthermore, not all librarians and educators are familiar with this genre and, in such cases, they may neglect transgender books in their collections (Williams & Deyoe, 2015). As transgender literature becomes more prominent and as librarians and educators add more of it to their collections, it is likely that there will be an even bigger and more diverse selection of it available in the future.

Finding academic literature about books targeted to children ages 8-12 is challenging as most LGBTQ2S+ books are picture books for young children or are classified as young adult literature (Dorr & Deskins, 2018). While my study focuses on readers aged 8-12, it is useful to look at analyses of LGBTQ2S+ literature for young children and young adults in order to help situate where literature for older children currently stands.

In *Representing the Rainbow in Young Adult Literature* Jenkins and Cart (2018) have outlined the progression of LGBTQ2S+ literature since the Stonewall riots of 1969. The authors have offered an analysis of books that have been added to the LGBTQ2S+ canon and have provided an annotated bibliography of recent LGBTQ2S+ materials that are largely targeted toward a young adult age group. As such, *Representing the*

Rainbow in Young Adult Literature is a helpful resource in populating libraries with a wide range of recent LGBTQ2S+ literature.

In *Rainbow Family Collections: Selecting and Using Children's Books with Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Content*, Naidoo (2012) has explored LGBTQ children's literature and found that there is a limited selection of children's books with LGBTQ characters (p. 36). Naidoo (2012) has included useful resources for parents, teachers, and librarians in this guide and has also recommended books for various age groups that deal with specific LGBTQ themes. Although a great deal of children's LGBTQ2S+ material has been published since this book came out including nine of the ten books featured in this study, Naidoo's (2012) findings are still applicable to the growing selection of LGBTQ2S+ books for children.

Crawley's (2017) literature review on transgender children's picture books examined "nine realistic (both realistic fiction and autobiography) picturebooks featuring children whose gender identities were different from the gender assigned at birth" (p. 29). Overall, Crawley (2017) has found a lack of racial and class diversity within this body of literature as most books in his selection depict white middle class characters and thereby exclude a number of intersections in transgender stories.

Cooperative Children's Book Centre (CCBC) librarian Madeline Tyner (2018) wrote an article regarding LGBTQ+ representation in children's books in 2017. Tyner (2018) found that of the 3,700 children's books collected that year, only 136 had LGBTQ+ content. Additionally, it was determined that 63 of the books had a LGBTQ+ identifying protagonist and of those 63 books, only four had transgender protagonists.

However, if transgender and non-binary identities were grouped together the total number would have reached 11.

In commenting on why middle grade children need LGBTQ+ books, McWilliams (2018), a Youth Services librarian at the Houston Public Library, has stated that “children need access to [LGBTQ+] middle grade books because they’re already experiencing these feelings or know someone who is [part of the LGBTQ+ community]” (para. 12). While McWilliams (2018) has not focused specifically on transgender literature, her arguments on why LGBTQ+ representation is paramount in the library setting are certainly applicable to this body of literature: “[w]e, as librarians, owe it to everyone, and especially to LGBTQ+ youth, who so desperately need support, to ensure this access” (para. 13).

Abate and Kidd (2011) have found LGBTQ2S+ themes to be more common in young adult (YA) novels than in children’s novels. The authors have suggested that the very structure of YA literature, which often relies on the coming-of-age plot, makes “for a fairly easy adaptation” when it comes to sexual identity (Abate & Kidd, 2011, p. 5). Furthermore, Abate and Kidd (2011) have pointed out that there is a “belief that sexuality, and especially homosexuality, threatens the essence of childhood” (p. 5). It is then no wonder that there are such controversies over LGBTQ2S+ books for children within the context of our culture’s imagined need to protect children from all that is different and to preserve childhood innocence. The controversy regarding LGBTQ2S+ children’s literature will be further examined below.

While not related directly to transgender literature, literature regarding gendered clothing is also relevant to this study as clothing is a common theme that appears in

nine of the ten books I examine. Buckley's (1996) essay examined the symbolic importance clothing has on one's identity, even if it is the parents choosing the clothing for their child. Although this essay is now over twenty years old, the content is still relevant and is demonstrative of our society's long-standing concern over gendered clothing.

Controversy

In order to understand the full scope of this study, it is important to consider the controversies regarding transgender literature. Censorship has always been a contentious issue in regards to LGBTQ2S+ books for children (Naidoo, 2012). An example of the controversy surrounding this can be seen in relation to the book *And Tango Makes Three* (Richardson & Parnell, 2005), "which depicts two gay penguins at the Central Park Zoo" (Naidoo, 2012, p. 53). While the picture book is based on a true story of two male penguins hatching an abandoned egg, the book was "the most-challenged book in 2006, 2007, 2008, and 2010" (Naidoo, 2012, p. 53). It has been accused of being "anti-family" and "unsuited for [the intended] age group," in addition to "[promoting] the homosexual agenda" (American Library Association, n.d, para. 8). Unfortunately, such controversy is common regarding LGBTQ2S+ themes in children's literature, and while *And Tango Makes Three* differs from the ten books in my study in that it is aimed at a younger audience and features gay characters rather than transgender characters, it is indicative of the level of censorship involved with children's literature.

Of the books included in my sample, *George* is the only one that has been addressed by scholarly literature thus far. Doyle (2018) has discussed the controversy

surrounding *George* in schools in Oregon. Since its publication 2015, *George* has gained both positive and negative attention in the media. Doyle (2018) has stated that *George* is “charming and well-reviewed” (para. 1), yet it was also the most contested book of 2018 (American Library Association, n.d.). *George* was challenged because “it was believed to encourage children to ... change their bodies using hormones” (American Library Association, n.d. para. 2), in spite of the fact that *George* does not use hormones, but rather considers using hormones in the future. Sadly, it is not surprising that *George* has been contested as “many challenged books deal with gender, sexuality, or diversity” (Doyle, 2018, para. 6). In fact, five other books on my list that deal with LGBTQ2S+ content have been contested (American Library Association, n.d.).

The American Library Association’s (ALA) Office for Intellectual Freedom (OIF) has reported a resistance to children’s books with LGBTQ2S+ content (Yorio, 2019, p. 10). According to Yorio (2019), “most challenges to library resources [...] focused on materials and programs addressing issues of concern to those in the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, and related communities” (p. 10). There are a number of posts regarding the censorship of books for children available on the ALA’s OIF blog.

For instance, Price (2019) wrote an OIF article about the introduction of more diverse books into the library collection in the Loudoun County Public Library system. While only 4% of the 3,400 books acquired by the school board had LGBTQ2S+ content, those books were the most contested (Price, 2019). Price (2019) has argued that the word *inappropriate*—commonly used by those who contest the inclusion of

diverse books in libraries—“is simply code for presenting queer people at all” (para. 5). Similarly, on the same topic of books being deemed *inappropriate*, author Kate Messner (2016) has argued “when we say, ‘This book is inappropriate,’ we’re telling those children, ‘Your situation...your family...your *life* is inappropriate.’ This is harmful. It directly hurts children” (para. 9).

What is most disheartening is that these negative biases are presenting themselves in the real world. Transgender people, including transgender youth, are being challenged in society at alarming rates: “89.5 percent of transgender students report feeling unsafe at school; and no wonder, for 55 percent of them say they’re being physically harassed because of their gender expression” (Jenkins & Cart, 2018, p. 161). In the American context, discriminatory legislation targets LGBTQ2S+ children and adults and challenges their right to existence, just as some people are challenging the existence of books involving transgender characters (Jenkins & Cart, 2018). There is a need for librarians and schools to include LGBTQ2S+ books for children of all ages in order for children to see diverse and dynamic lives and to understand and appreciate the struggles LGBTQ2S+ people face.

Methodology

I randomly selected the sample of books to analyse for this study, so as to approximate the selection of books that a patron, educator, or librarian might find in my area who was conducting a smaller search.

Nine of the books have been accessed through the London Public Library (LPL) where there are multiple copies of each book except *The Boy in the Dress* of which there is only one copy. *The Pants Project* was accessed through the Education Library

at Western University. This study was designed to draw on books available in the author's local (London, Ontario) library systems to obtain a clear picture of the locally available books featuring transgender characters that are accessible to older children. Collection management for LGBTQ2S+ books varies depending on librarians' level of experience with LGBTQ2S+ literature and their understanding of the appropriate books for different age groups (Williams & Deyoe, 2015). While there is unfortunately always the possibility that patrons and community members may contest titles that feature LGBTQ2S+ characters, it is the responsibility of librarians and educators to represent the diverse lives of their patrons and students. Giving young readers the opportunity to understand and explore different experiences allows them to develop a greater understanding of diverse issues (Dorr & Deskins, 2018).

To find a list of relevant books available locally, I conducted a Google search for transgender books for middle grade children. I located some of these titles in the LPL catalogue and used the authoritative subject heading "transgender people – juvenile fiction" to search for additional relevant material. However, it should be noted that the subject headings are not exhaustive, and not all books with the same content have the same subject headings, making the search difficult and at times inconsistent. Out of the nine books I found at LPL, only three of them were listed under that subject heading.

I chose to work with the first ten books that I found that were aimed at eight-to-twelve-year-olds, featured transgender characters, and were locally available. I had little to no information on the books when I selected them, and I had not read any of them before beginning this analysis.

The nine books that were available at LPL were all found in the children's section of the library. While the content in some of the books was somewhat heavier (e.g., *Lily and Dunkin*, *Gracefully Grayson*, and *The Other Boy*), I relied on the public library's classification system, which specified that all of the chosen materials are intended for children. While *The Pants Project* was found at an academic library, I chose to include it because the main character is in the middle school age group of eight to twelve years and the tone of that novel is similar to others I researched.

Content Analysis

The six themes I identified are: gender transition, the nuclear family, adult antagonists, school bullies, resolutions, and racial diversity. When reading the books chosen for the content analysis, I kept a spreadsheet and identified all aspects of being transgender that were in the books, and I also tallied how many times each theme appeared in each book. There were originally 35 themes identified in total, but these 35 themes did not appear in all of the ten books. The six themes that remained reoccurred in most or, in some cases, all of the books in the study. Additional original themes included puberty (which was sorted into the gender transition theme) and general antagonists (which was either sorted into the adult antagonists or school bullies category).

Overview of Books

To provide some context for readers who are not familiar with this material, this section includes a brief summary of how the transgender or non-binary characters from each book identify. In *Lily and Dunkin*, Lily was born male but identifies as a girl, and her father does not approve of her wearing dresses in public. Shane, the main character of *The Other Boy*, deals with familial difficulties due to being transgender. For example, his

father is hesitant to allow Shane to take hormone blockers and is presented as the main antagonist.

Dennis in *The Boy in the Dress* does not necessarily identify as transgender, but he does enjoy wearing dresses. His gender identity is never fully disclosed, but the book's message is that people should be allowed to dress the way they like (in solidarity with Dennis, the entire boys' football team wear dresses). Similarly, Queen, the title character in *A Boy Named Queen*, is not explicitly described as transgender, but he dresses how he likes without regard for the gender labels that traditionally have been assigned to different types of clothing. As with *The Boy in the Dress*, the moral of the story is that people should be allowed to dress as they choose without being judged for choices that diverge from traditional gender norms.

The transgender character in *Sapphire the Great and the Meaning of Life* is Anna Konda, a woman who befriends Jeannie (the story's narrator) and her mother. Through the first-person narration, the reader sees that Jeannie does not necessarily understand that Anna is transgender but still accepts her as a person independent of her gender identity. In *Zenobia July*, Zenobia passes as female and is assumed to be a girl at her new school. While the plot of *Zenobia July* revolves around gender identity and bullying, Zenobia and her friend also fight cybercrime and solve the mystery of who is hacking their school's website. The protagonist of *The Pants Project* is Liv, who is attending a new school that enforces a strict uniform policy. Although Liv identifies as a boy, he is forced to wear a skirt as he was assigned female at birth. *My Life as a Diamond* also involves a transgender student starting at a new school. Caz identifies as a boy and

plays for the new baseball team. Issues arise when it becomes known that Caz used to be called Cassie.

George and *Gracefully Grayson* both follow similar plots in which the transgender protagonists, George and Grayson, respectively, wish to perform the female lead in their school plays and challenge gender roles through theatre. The primary difference between the two books is tone: *George* is more lighthearted, while *Gracefully Grayson* has a less resolved ending.

Themes

Gender Transition

It is relatively common to see male-to-female (MTF) representation in media. A likely reason for this is the societal concern about MTF transitions as it is seen as socially unacceptable for a male to wear traditionally female clothes (Buckley, 1996). Some of the books in my study address the societal concern around boys assuming stereotypically feminine roles and how such concern often manifests as insults. For example, in *My Life as a Diamond*, Caz questions why a boy being seen as feminine is insulting: “For some boys, calling someone a girl is the worst thing they can come up with. Don’t guys have a mom? I had nothing against girls. I just knew I wasn’t one” (Manzer, 2018, p. 44). Indeed, “the idea of cross-dressing males is ... not agreeable to numerous parents and educators” to the point that “the notion that a boy would voluntarily dress as a woman and suppress his masculinity is beyond the realm of acceptable subjects in books for young children” (Naidoo, 2012, p. 38).

While gender is an important issue in all ten books, gender identity has reoccurring and differing themes throughout the books. Half of the books, including *Lily*

and *Dunkin*, *Sapphire the Great and the Meaning of Life*, *George*, *Gracefully Grayson*, and *Zenobia July*, feature MTF transitions, making this identity the most common among the ten books. Three of the ten books have a character transitioning from female-to-male (FTM): *The Pants Project*, *The Other Boy*, and *My Life as a Diamond*. The remaining two books, *The Boy in the Dress* and *A Boy Named Queen*, have protagonists that challenge or question the gender binary but never state that they want to transition.

While gender identity and gender dysphoria can be difficult to explain, the texts use basic emotions such as sadness and feeling excluded to express what it feels like to be transgender in today's society. In *My Life as a Diamond*, Caz feels excluded from his baseball team after cutting his long braid, a signifier that he did not identify as a girl: "Was it wrong to cut my hair and ask to be called Caz? I was so tired of feeling like nothing about me felt right – my hair, my name, my clothes. I had thought my team would understand" (Manzer, 2018, p. 67).

What differs between these transgender characters is how far along they are in their respective transitions. Lily (*Lily and Dunkin*) has decided on her name and wears dresses outside much to her father's disapproval, while the adult character Anna in *Sapphire the Great and the Meaning of Life* has already transitioned. Zenobia (*Zenobia July*) wears dresses and has long hair, but in the mirror "she never knew what she was going to see" (Bunker, 2019, p. 24) and struggles with her body image. Caz (*My Life as a Diamond*) has cut his hair short and presents himself as a boy, while Shane (*The Other Boy*) has decided he wants to go on hormone blockers. Liv (*The Pants Project*) is still seen as female by his school, and the strict dress code requires him to wear a skirt.

In contrast, Queen (*A Boy Named Queen*) and Dennis (*The Boy in the Dress*) have no intent to transition; rather, they simply enjoy wearing dresses and skirts. George (*George*) and Grayson (*Gracefully Grayson*) know they are girls but struggle to tell their loved ones for fear of being rejected. Indeed, the concept of acceptance in the family is an important theme in all ten books and will be discussed further below.

The Nuclear Family

An interesting and unexpected theme that appeared in all ten of the books was the concept of the nuclear family or rather the lack thereof in most cases. Within the ten books analysed, only three main characters have a traditional nuclear family: Queen (*A Boy Named Queen*), Lily (*Lily and Dunkin*), and Caz (*My life as a Diamond*). Zenobia (*Zenobia July*) and Grayson (*Gracefully Grayson*) live with relatives, and Liv (*The Pants Project*) is being raised by her mothers. The most common family dynamic involved divorced parents, with Jeanie (*Sapphire the Great and the Meaning of Life*), Dennis (*The Boy in the Dress*), George (*George*), and Shane (*The Other Boy*) raised by single divorced parents.

Despite the differences in the family dynamics, Lily, Queen, and Caz face the very same problems as Dennis, Jeannie, George, Grayson, Shane, Zenobia, and Liv. In this regard, the type of family the child lives with does not alter the difficulties they face in the context of their respective stories. Each child faces a disapproving adult in a position of authority, most often and most notably a parent or guardian. The family dynamic then has no impact on transgender issues, allowing readers to realise that whatever the living situations of the characters, they can still face disapproving adults.

Adult Antagonists

The majority of the selected books feature a parent or guardian figure that is resistant to or disapproving of the child transitioning. It is interesting to note that these adult antagonists are often men in positions of power. For Lily, it is her father who disapproves of her wearing dresses. Likewise, Liv's headmaster will not change the school dress code, and Shane's father is outwardly uncomfortable with his son's transition. Jeannie's father is concerned about his daughter spending time with a transgender woman, and Dennis' father forbids his son from reading fashion magazines. In contrast, four books have a female adult antagonist: George's mother is concerned about her child's transition; Grayson's aunt (and guardian) shows disdain for her transition, or desire to transition; a friend's parent who believes there is something inherently wrong with transgender individuals acts as Zenobia's adult antagonist; and, Caz's mother is hesitant to accept her son's gender transition.

In *The Other Boy*, Shane's tumultuous relationship with his antagonistic father is the main conflict in the novel. Shane's father neglects to tell his fiancée that Shane identifies as a boy. When the fiancée misgenders him, Shane feels betrayed: "It felt like I'd been punched in the stomach; suddenly it was hard to breathe. I stared at Dad, who was swallowing hard like something was caught in his throat" (Hennessey, 2016, p. 28). As the novel continues, Shane's father begins to unintentionally alienate himself from his son, making Shane resent him: "I punched the pillow hard. If he didn't want a son, fine. Turned out I didn't really want a dad anymore, either" (Hennessey, 2016, p. 53).

Only one book did not have an adult antagonist: *A Boy Named Queen*. Out of the ten books, this one was the shortest and the most lighthearted. The plot is simple

and the moral is to not judge others based on how they dress or act. Evelyn learns that Queen may not always behave like other boys, but he is still a valuable friend.

Most of the adult antagonists are resistant or alienating not out of malice, but out of concern for the main character. For example, George's mother reprimands George for keeping teen girl magazines and states: "George, I don't want to find you wearing my clothes. Or my shoes. That kind of thing was cute when you were three. You're not three anymore" (Gino, 2015, p. 94). George's mother is not a cruel character and loves George very much; it is clear she is worried about George being bullied in school. The other books are similar in this regard. Lily's father is afraid she will be bullied in school and wants her to dress like a boy in public. Grayson's aunt alerts the school's social worker that the humanities teacher is allowing Grayson to play the lead female role, resulting in the teacher's termination. Although these adult characters are motivated by love and wanting to protect the children, in these cases the adult is ultimately the one harming the child.

The resolution in the books is very similar in that the adult antagonists shift their beliefs to varying degrees of acceptance. Dennis' father learns he was wrong, George's mother accepts her child as a daughter, and Grayson's aunt tries to understand her niece's position. Liv's principal changes the dress code policy, and Shane's father actively tries to be more accepting of his son.

However, in *Lily and Dunkin*, the adult antagonist is jolted into an acceptance of his daughter. More than the other books assessed, the book deals with mature themes such as mental health and suicide. Lily's father's change comes from hearing the dire suicide statistics for transgender children: "[The therapist] showed me a statistic. Forty-

three percent of transgender kids try to kill themselves.’ Dad sniffs again, hard. ‘Then [the therapist] said ‘Would you rather have a dead son or a live daughter’” (Gephart, 2016, p. 324). A study from 2018 by the American Academy of Pediatrics found 50.8% of FTM youth and 41.8% of MTF youth admitted to attempting suicide (Toomey et al., 2018). Lily’s situation reflects the real-life issues and hardships some transgender youth face, which in turn helps to educate the reader about a difficult subject in a safe and controlled way.

A possible issue with frequently representing family members as antagonistic adults is the message it presents to its young readers: that family will always challenge their child’s transition. While there is no doubt that many transgender children face resistance from family members over their gender identity, in some cases family members are completely accepting from the start. Additionally, it is worth considering whether the over-representation of unaccepting family members can be disheartening to transgender readers. Because the transgender experience is so vast, it is impossible to represent all experiences in a single book; however, when readers encounter numerous books that follow the same narrative, there is a danger that it may give them a one-dimensional view of transgender reality.

School Bullies

While adults certainly play an antagonistic role in most of the books, there are also school bullies present in this sample of titles. The severity of the bullying varies across the sample of titles: some transgender characters are verbally teased, while others are physically assaulted. In some cases, the bullying is not specifically targeted towards children. For instance, Anna Konda, an adult transgender character, is uncomfortable

going into the school to fetch Jeannie's lost hamster because she worries the children will be cruel. Similarly, in *A Boy Named Queen*, Queen explains to Evelyn what he does when people are mean to him: "I put up a force field. All around me. The dumb things they say—even the dumb things they *think*—bounce off it [...] Just make one. Imagine it. See it. Mine is turquoise" (Cassidy, 2016, p. 52). While there are no instances in the book where Queen is bullied, he still refers to unpleasant encounters with others. Out of all the books in the study, *A Boy Named Queen* is one of the most lighthearted books and possibly the easiest one to read. Queen prepares readers for the potential of bullying but never goes into full detail, which could potentially upset any young readers.

Although the severity of bullying ranges in each book, many of the main characters in these books (Lily, George, Grayson, and Shane) are called "freaks" by the bullies they encounter. The amount of homophobic comments made by the bullies is also interesting to note. In *Gracefully Grayson*, Grayson's cousin Jack constantly equates Grayson's gender identity with being gay, and his comments about being gay are always derogatory. When Grayson tells her family that she wants to play Persephone in the school play, Jack replies, "But what am I supposed to tell all my friends when they ask me why my cousin is totally gay" (Polonsky, 2014, p. 121). Despite being reprimanded by his family for saying these things, Jack continues to make homophobic comments towards his cousin. Similarly, one of the bullies in *The Other Boy* refers to Shane as a "lesbo" upon realising he is transgender (Hennessey, 2016, p. 140).

The name-calling in *Lily and Dunkin* is particularly harsh, perhaps because the novel deals with junior high school children (thirteen-year-olds as they enter grade

eight) and therefore would have older and more mature readers. Vasquez, the main bully in the group Lily has named the Neanderthals, repeatedly calls Lily a “fag.” While Jack uses the term “freaks” in *Gracefully Grayson* to reflect homophobic stigmas, Vasquez’s word choice holds a deeper meaning in LGBTQ2s+ history. Today, calling someone “gay” as an insult is inappropriate, but the term “fag” carries additional homophobic weight.

All of these words have homophobic connotations, but in the case of the selected books, these terms are used to describe transgender characters, not gay characters. Indeed, gender identity and sexuality are two separate identities, and being transgender does not inherently mean an individual is also gay. It may seem that the bullies are mistaken in their terminology, perhaps as a means of showing their lack of knowledge of the differences between being gay and transgender. However, a 2006 study has shown that the terms “gay” and “fag” are no longer meant exclusively as homophobic terms in the school setting, but are terms that are used to mean an individual is not being masculine enough (Pascoe, 2006). In this case, Lily (*Lily and Dunkin*), George (*George*), Dennis (*The Boy in the Dress*), and Grayson (*Gracefully Grayson*) do not present themselves in a traditional masculine way, which makes them targets for bullies.

While most of the bullies call the protagonists homophobic slurs, Liv is the target of homophobia in a different way. Liv is being raised by her lesbian mothers, Mamma and Mom. When talking about his family to the class, Liv reveals he has two mothers and the class bully, Jade, targets Liv: “That’s when it happened. That’s when I realized I’d made a terrible mistake. A voice piped up—a mean, spiteful voice. ‘You have *two*

moms? Ewww” (Clarke, 2017, p. 61). While Liv spends the novel challenging the school dress code, the school bully is more fixated on his two mothers than on his gender identity. Jade constantly offers snide comments such as, “What would *she* know about dads? She doesn’t even have one” (Clarke, 2017, p. 76), and while Jade sometimes targets Liv’s gender identity, the root of the bullying is directed at Liv’s mothers.

Resolutions

All ten books deal with difficult topics such as bullying and family members who are not supportive of their child. Some raise more difficult topics than others such as suicide (*Lily and Dunkin*), brief thoughts of self-harm (*The Other Boy*), or a family member never coming to terms with the transgender protagonist’s identity (*Gracefully Grayson*). Still, there are relatively happy or positive endings in all of the selected books: Lily’s father accepts his daughter, Dennis’ father and the boys at school realise boys too can wear dresses, Jeannie becomes friends with Anna Konda, George’s best friend allows her to try on girls’ clothing, Grayson’s aunt tries to understand her niece, the school dress code is changed for Liv, Shane’s best friend accepts that he is trans, Zenobia solves a cybercrime, Evelyn realises that Queen is a true friend, and Caz’s baseball team accepts him the way he is. Liv puts it best with the concluding narration: “But how about this instead? ‘And they all lived mostly happily ever after...and managed to ignore the occasional idiot saying something stupid’” (Clarke, 2017, p. 262). The endings are not always perfect for the ten characters and there are hints to future issues, but for the most part, the books end on a hopeful note.

As stated above, *Lily and Dunkin* and *Gracefully Grayson* deal with the most difficult and mature subject matter. Dunkin comes to terms with his father’s suicide and

realises “that I’m going to be okay. Maybe not right now. But someday soon” (Gephart, 2016, p. 311). This resolution creates a feeling of hope, that despite all the difficulties both Lily and Dunkin went through, things will be alright. By contrast, *Gracefully Grayson*’s ending challenges readers more directly, as Grayson’s aunt still finds it difficult to accept her. There is a feeling of unresolved tension, which the narration acknowledges through the weather: “the air feels heavy. The world outside is green-grey. It’s about to pour” (Polonsky, 2014, p. 240). Like many YA novels, *Gracefully Grayson* has an ambiguous ending with Grayson changing into a pink shirt during a bathroom break and entering back into class. The students’ reactions to Grayson dressing like a girl and revealing her gender is never stated. The novel ends with the following, unresolved narration: “I look down at the doorknob. I’m scared, but I do it anyway—I open the door and walk inside” (Polonsky, 2014, p. 243). The reaction of the students, teacher, Grayson’s aunt, and family are all left to the reader’s imagination, giving this book the most uncertain ending.

The tone of the ending or level of resolution is often the difference between older children’s literature and YA. Children’s literature often has a happy ending with all elements resolved and loose ends tied, whereas YA fiction tends to have a more ambiguous ending that forces the reader to decide if the ending is happy or not. In YA literature, morality and the difference between right and wrong become more complicated.

Diversity

Books with transgender protagonists diversify the pool of children’s literature by offering alternative perspectives from the heteronormative cisgender ones that are most

commonly presented. The books included in this study present transgender identity or explore the gender binary through ten different perspectives, and while these books share similarities, they each centre around a unique story. However, only *The Boy in the Dress* and *Zenobia July* present racially diverse characters.

The Boy in the Dress features two minor characters that are racially diverse: Raj, a variety store owner, and Darvesh, Dennis' best friend. More specifically, Darvesh is Sikh and wears "a *patka*, a bobble-hat-type thing that [keeps] his hair out of his face" (Walliams, 2008, p. 63).

Zenobia July tackles difficult issues such as racism and Islamophobia. The school's website is hacked by "a perpetrator" and posts "images disrespectful to people of the Muslim faith" (Bunker, 2019, p. 79). Zenobia's new friend Dyna is Muslim and is therefore very affected by the hateful comments posted on the school website. Dyna's "parents took her out of school" because of the attack on the website (Bunker, 2019, p. 88). The plot of *Zenobia July* revolves around this hack, and Zenobia uses her computer skills to track down the hacker. Later in the novel, the school website is hacked again, but with transphobic comments instead. The plot unravels a mystery of who is hacking the school's website and is solved by tracking down the hacker's IP address and finding out who posted the hateful comments.

Overall, the books included in this study overwhelmingly represent white transgender perspectives and do not address race or racial inequities. The illustrations in the books and front cover art confirm that all ten books have white main characters. Furthermore, apart from *Zenobia July*, race is not ever an issue explicitly discussed or experienced in any of the other novels. The books' lack of racial diversity and

representation of the intersectionality of being a member of a racial minority with a transgender identity is never addressed. Racialised children who also identify as transgender are not represented in any of the ten stories, which reveals that while there have been strides in representation, there is still work to be done.

Crawley (2017) similarly found that there is a need for “increasingly diverse stories” to be published in order to “disrupt and complicate the essentialist gendered representations and racially homogenized narratives currently available” (p. 38). Representation of racial minorities adds important perspectives, and this representation of diversity is important “so children can see myriad possible reflections of themselves and learn about others” (Crawley, 2017, p. 38).

Conclusion

In reality, transgender experiences are diverse. While the ten novels examined in this study portrays different perspectives, the experiences themselves are quite similar. In order to more fully represent the transgender community and a broader range of experiences, more novels must be added to this pool of literature.

Fortunately, more novels for older children regarding transgender characters and issues are being published: between 2010 and 2016, 592 LGBTQ2S+ books were published for the YA audience (Jenkins & Cart, 2018, p. 125). While this statistic refers to a population outside the age range for my study, it still shows an encouraging trend for LGBTQ2S+ literature as a whole.

In 2017, the Cooperative Children’s Books Center published an article regarding LGBTQ+ characters in books for children and teens and found that of the 3,700 books

collected in 2017, 136 had LGBTQ+ content (Tyner, 2018). The article concluded that there has been an increase in LGBTQ+ books for children and teenagers “that better represent the vast diversity of identities and experiences within the LGBTQ+ community” (Tyner, 2016, para. 8).

Overall, there are hopeful signs that libraries will continue to integrate LGBTQ2S+ literature into their children’s literature collections. For example, the London Public Library recently acquired five copies of the middle grade novel *The Deep and Dark Blue* by Niki Smith, which explores gender identity. As more librarians and teachers understand the importance of LGBTQ2S+ literature being available to children and young adults, collections will grow and will ultimately begin to better represent a very underrepresented population.

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