

Minnesota Preservice Teachers Perceptions of LGBT-themed Children's Literature

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Diversity is an important topic that preservice teachers need to explore a great deal before they launch their career. The state of Minnesota recognizes the importance of understanding diverse learners in education and lists it in standard 3 in Minnesota Standards of Effective Practice for Teachers¹. As expected teacher behaviors, the standard 3 states that, teachers need to “understand the contributions and lifestyles of the various racial, cultural, and economic groups in our society” and pay “attention to a student’s personal, family, and community experiences” (Minnesota Department of Education). My college, where I have taught a diversity class and children’s literature class, emphasizes recognizing and appreciating diversity in many forms. We also try to develop students’ awareness of diversity through classes in our teacher education program. Students also have other opportunities to be exposed to LGBT (Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) related issues through university-wide events, such as seeing LGBT-themed films, listening to a guest speaker, discussing LGBT issues, and participating a LGBT conference.

As a teacher educator, I wondered if university-wide and department-wide efforts on supporting LGBT people are reflected in Minnesota preservice teachers’ teaching positions. In other words, I wondered if Minnesota preservice teachers would become teachers who support LGBT students and families and make efforts

¹ MN Standard of Effective Practice for Teachers. Standard 3. diverse learners: A teacher must understand how students differ in their approaches to learning and create instructional opportunities that are adapted to students with diverse backgrounds and exceptionalities.

to defeat homophobia in schools. Specifically, as I believe that LGBT-themed literature can be one of effective ways to introduce LGBT people to K-12 students, I was curious about Minnesota preservice teachers' positions on bringing LGBT-themed literature to their classrooms. In this paper, I will share my findings on Minnesota preservice teachers' perceptions of LGBT-themed literature and discuss the results of the study. I hope that this study can provide teacher educators with a chance to look back at their own advocacy on supporting LGBT students and students from LGBT families. In this paper, I will call my undergraduate students who participated in this study as preservice teachers because they are expected to be teachers in the near future. Additionally, in my department, we express our expectations that they display professional-like dispositions, and behaviors by addressing them as preservice teachers or teacher candidates.

Unsafe School Environments for LGBT Students

Teachers and administrators should make safe and welcoming learning environments for LGBT students and students from LGBT families (Lamme and Lamme, 66). Without supportive school environments, LGBT students cannot be successful. In fact, LGBT students who experienced high levels of victimization or discrimination had lower GPA's than their peers (GLSEN, 47). Even though teachers and administrators can make a difference with LGBT student-supportive instructions and activities (Roeck, 56; Toomey et al, 2011), many LGBT students are suffered from unsafe school environments in the U.S. According to 2013 GLSEN's (Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network) survey results, the large numbers of

LGBT students experienced harassment in their schools. For example, GLSEN reported that 55.5% of LGBT students felt unsafe in their schools and 30.3% of LGBT students missed at least one day of school because of that reason. 74.1% of LGBT students were verbally harassed and 36.2% of LGBT students were physically assaulted because of their sexual orientation. When looking at 2013 GLSEN's survey results by state, Minnesota schools are not safe for LGBT students, either. In Minnesota, 72% and 28% of LGBT students experienced verbal and physical harassment respectively, but 52% of students have never reported it to school.

LGBT-themed Literature in School

Having a strong collection on LGBT-themed literature in a school media center can be one way to support LGBT students and students from LGBT families (Lamme and Lamme, 67). In a class level, reading and discussing LGBT-themed literature can be one of the strategies that helps to create a safe environment for LGBT students, and disturbs homophobia and heterosexism in schools (Clark and Blackburn 25; Dedeoglu, Ulusoy, and Lamme 262; Schall and Kauffmann 43). Even elementary students are capable of reading and discussing LGBT-themed literature. Schall and Kauffmann (42) found that even though elementary students were exposed to the misrepresentations of gay and lesbian through media, they excluded their bias, and tried to understand and accept information on homosexuality and viewed it not as wrong but as different during discussion. If children can break the stereotyped images of LGBT people and understand them through literature discussion, then, preservice teachers should be able to do so as well. In addition to

bringing LGBT-themed literature, teachers need to make efforts to defeat heteronormativity, which views homosexual orientation as abnormal, and discuss intersectionality that allows teachers not to simply categorize LGBT students as a gay group, but guides teachers to consider LGBT students' other identities such as race, class, gender etc as well to help them understand "the complexities" of the people's identities (Blackburn and Smith 632).

As multicultural literature has a window and mirror effect (Bishop), when preservice teachers read LGBT-themed literature, they have a chance to look at LGBT people's lives as non-LGBT people or see themselves in literature as LGBT people themselves (Clark and Blackburn 29). However, reading and discussing LGBT-themed literature may not be an easy task for preservice teachers. In Clark and Blackburn's study, they reported that some preservice teachers accepted the suggestion of using LGBT-themed literature, but some expressed their concerns of using this literature as they believe that a teacher should be "neutral and apolitical" (25). Preservice teachers may have more difficulty welcoming the idea of reading and discussing LGBT-themed literature if heterosexism is penetrated as a norm of the sexual orientation in the community.

In Turkey, Dedeoglu et al. surveyed preservice teachers' responses on two LGBT-themed picturebooks, *And Tango Makes Three* and *Molly's Family* and found that some preservice teachers showed negative responses on using LGBT-themed literature in their future classrooms. Their negative comments included that these books are not appropriate for Turkish culture and children's young ages (259). Dedeoglu et al. analyzed that the belief of Turkish society was reflected on students'

negative responses (262). They also inferred that preservice teachers' limited knowledge on LGBT people and the traditional cultural values of their home communities may have influenced their responses (262). In sum, preservice teachers' unwillingness of using LGBT-themed literature can be shaped by their personal belief and background knowledge, as well as the culture of the society.

Method

This study replicated Dedeoglu, Ulusoy, and Lamme's study on preservice teachers' perceptions of LGBT-themed picturebooks with Minnesota preservice teachers in the United States. Dedeoglu et al's (258) study was chosen to be replicated because their grounded theory and research questions were suitable to find out Minnesota preservice teachers' perceptions of LGBT-themed literature. In this study, the preservice teachers' responses were analyzed with Rosenblatt's (35) reader response theory and Vygotsky's (25, 86) sociocultural theory. Rosenblatt's reader response theory allows the researcher to view the preservice teachers as readers who actively respond to the text based on various factors including their personal experiences, social and historical backgrounds, relationships with the text, and the environments that they are in. Vygotsky's sociocultural view of learning supports the important role of speech and collaboration with others.

Even though this study replicated Dedeoglu et al's study, there are several differences between their study and this present study. Dedeoglu et al. (258) collected their data from twenty-nine Turkish preservice teachers, and this study collected data from seventy-eight Minnesota preservice teachers. In Dedeoglu et al.'s

(258) study, they read two LGBT-themed picturebooks, *And Tango Makes Three* (2005) and *Molly's Family* (2004) to the preservice teachers, but in this study, *Molly's Family* (2004) was not read to the preservice teachers because the book was not available at a school library at the time of the study. The research questions in Dedeoglu et al's study were adopted and in this study.

1. How do preservice teachers respond to *And Tango Makes Three*?
2. What do preservice teachers say about reading LGBT-themed literature in their future classroom?

Data Collection Procedure and Analysis

I collected data from preservice teachers in my three sections of children's literature classes. A total of seventy-eight preservice teachers participated in this study. When my students finish the education program at the university located in southeastern part of Minnesota, they will obtain their initial teaching license of the state of Minnesota. Even though the research participants of this study may have different opinions than other preservice teachers in different institutions in Minnesota; however, at least the data from this study can give a glimpse of what Minnesota preservice teachers think about LGBT-themed literature. To survey the preservice teachers' responses on LGBT-themed literature, I brought a picturebook, *And Tango Makes Three* in my children's literature classes. It is an award winning picture book that tells a story of a male penguin couple, who made their own family with a baby penguin Tango. This story is based on a true story that happened in Central Park Zoo in New York.

I brought this book for a classroom activity when we discussed banned books and censorship issues. I thought that LGBT-themed literature should be discussed under these topics. As mentioned, as a teacher educator, I was curious about what the preservice teachers in my class thought about reading *And Tango Makes Three* in their future class. A few years ago, this book was banned in one elementary school, which is located about 50 miles away from my college. In that elementary school, *And Tango Makes Three* was removed from the school media center after the superintendent and two school board members reviewed it. However, the school board members did not follow the district policy correctly and made a decision on banning the book by them. The local TV station reported this happening and has posted the updated news since then. After making a buzz in a community, *And Tango Makes Three* has been back to the media center shelf in that local elementary school. This school district is to be inclusive buildings like the mayor of the city said (KTTC). If this school support all students including LGBT students then, the school media center should establish a strong collection of LGBT-themed literature (Lamme and Lamme, 67), but what the Rochester school did does not match what the inclusive building would look like.

In my children's literature classes, I asked one student to volunteer to read *And Tango Makes Three* aloud for the class. The volunteer used the document camera so that the entire class could easily look at the illustrations of the book. When the volunteer finished reading, I asked my students to type their answers on the response sheet I posted on the class homepage. On the response sheet, I asked four questions in relation to *And Tango Makes Three* and LGBT-themed literature.

The four questions were “How did you feel while listening to the story?” “Will you use this book in your future classroom? Why or why not?” “Will you use LGBT-themed literature in your future classroom? Why or why not?” and “Have you ever read LGBT-themed literature before? If you have, what did you read? If you haven’t, are you willing to read it?” I also asked the preservice teachers to read the newsletter articles on banning *And Tango Makes Three* in a local elementary school in Minnesota that I downloaded from the local news channel website, then, we discussed their responses including bringing *And Tango Makes Three* and other LGBT-themed literature in their future classrooms.

The collected responses were read and categorized into different categories including positive responses, negative responses, will use it in the future, and will not use in the future. The numbers of responses for each category were tallied. Once the responses were tallied, the percentage was calculated for each category. Then, the tables were created to display numbers and percentage of the preservice teachers’ responses. The results will be discussed with examples under two research questions in the following section.

Findings

Responses to And Tango Makes Three

The preservice teachers who participated in this study responded to *And Tango Makes Three* both as readers and as teachers. 75% of the preservice teachers responded to this book positively and less than 1% of them responded negatively. 15% of the responses included both positive and negative comments. In their

positive responses, the preservice teachers evaluated the story as cute and sweet and that it introduces a different type of family to children. The followings are the examples of positive responses.

I think it was really cute how they incorporated two fathers into a children's book without getting a huge point across.

I felt happy that the penguins were able to feel like they belong with all the other penguins and that they fit in with the other couples.

It shows them to be accepting of every kind of relationship that they will see in the world. It also makes kids who are a part of the LGBT community to feel proud of who they are and the choices of love that they are making.

The word, "uncomfortable" was commonly used in the preservice teachers' negative responses as shown in the following responses. The reasons for feeling uncomfortable included not familiar with the topic and inappropriateness for children's literature. Two respondents said that they felt slightly uncomfortable but did not write reasons for feeling uncomfortable.

I would feel a little uncomfortable reading it to younger students because they may not understand.

I felt uncomfortable while reading the story. I am not very familiar with these types of families.

I have to say I did feel a little uncomfortable.

15% of the responses were categorized as "Not sure/Both ." The word, "weird" was used quite often in this category. The preservice teachers said that they were not sure what to think about the book or they liked the book, but felt weird to have LGBT-themed in children's literature. Their responses showed that even though

they liked the book as readers they have concerns reading *And Tango Makes Three* to children as teachers and adults.

Not totally sure what I think about it.

I don't think it would be a good book for children. I thought the story was interesting and it was told in a good way though.

It was weird to me because I have never seen a picturebook like this for LGBT but I enjoyed it because they did a good job illustrating and making this topic lighter.

Response	N	%
Positive	59	75.6
Negative	7	0.08
Not sure/Both	12	15.3

Table 1. Responses to *And Tango Makes Three* (N=78)

Reading to And Tango Makes Three and LGBT-themed Literature in Future Classrooms

As Table 2 and Table 3 display, it was noticed that preservice teachers who agreed to read *And Tango Makes Three* also agreed on reading LGBT-themed literature in their future classrooms. Close to 80% of the preservice teachers responded positively both on reading *And Tango Makes Three* and LGBT-themed literature. A couple of preservice teachers' responses below were categorized as "maybe" because they expressed that depending on where they teach, they would decide whether to read *And Tango Makes Three* and LGBT-themed literature in their classrooms.

It depends on the view that the school and the parents of the children in my classroom possess.

I am torn on whether I would use this in my classroom.

Some of the positive responses are related to promoting diversity and supporting LGBT students and students from LGBT families. The preservice teachers also mentioned that children need to learn about LGBT people, because the society already accepted the LGBT community. The next responses show the positive responses.

I don't see the issue of using the literature in a classroom because it should be a thing that society accepts not debates. Society has already made changes to accepting the LGBT community and this is a step that needs to be taken so we can keep making moves to the future and keep getting us closer to the peaceful society that we can be.

I think I will use this type of literature in my future classroom, because it is a part of life. Children need to know about this type of families, and it is a common issue today.

I really did enjoy this book *Tango Makes Three*, and would definitely use it in my classroom. I would love to allow my students the opportunity to learn and grow by understanding the viewpoints of others in terms that they can understand and relate to.

Response	N	%
Yes	61	78.2
No	15	19.2
Maybe	2	0.02

Table 2. Future Use of *And Tango Makes Three* in Class (N=78)

Response	N	%
Yes	62	79.4
No	15	19.2
Maybe	1	0.01

Table 3. Future Use of LGBT-themed Literature in Class (N=78)

While the majority of the preservice teachers agreed on reading *And Tango Makes Three* and LGBT-themed literature about 20% of the preservice teachers responded negatively both on reading *And Tango Makes Three* and LGBT-themed literature. Some of their negative responses were as follows.

No, I would not at all. I feel uncomfortable with it. I just wouldn't read it at all.

No, I do not feel this book is appropriate to use in a classroom setting because of the LGBT. I will not encourage that because I am not a supporter of that.

No I will not use LGBT-themed literature in my future classroom. I am hoping to teach kindergarten and I don't think this is an appropriate age to be teaching them about. I feel like it's not my job to inform them of LGBT and it's the parents job to do that Yes, I think kids should be exposed but I will not have this as a theme for my classroom.

The preservice teachers' major concerns on reading LGBT-themed literature were related to upsetting parents, and age appropriateness of the topic. The following responses show some of the preservice teachers' disagreement on reading LGBT-themed literature in school. In fact, these concerns were found in positive responses as well. Most respondents mentioned about getting parental permissions before reading LGBT-themed literature. When preservice teachers were asked to if

they have read LGBT- themed literature before 82% of them said that they have not read LGBT- themed literature before *And Tango Makes Three* that was introduced in class.

Response	N	%
Yes	14	17.9
No	64	82.0

Table 4. Have Read LGBT-themed Literature Before (N=78)

Discussion

Almost 80% of the preservice teachers who participated in this study responded positively on reading *And Tango Makes Three* and LGBT-themed literature. Considering only 20% of the participants have read LGBT-literature before, it shows how willing and open Minnesota preservice teachers are regarding bringing LGBT-themed literature into their classrooms. A couple of reasons can be discussed on the positive responses from Minnesota preservice teachers on reading LGBT-themed literature. First, if the culture of the community shapes the preservice teachers' responses (Dedeoglu et al. 262) I assumed that my students are in such a good place to be advocates for LGBT students. They are in an inclusive college community where LGBT students and faculty are supported. Moreover, same-sex marriage is legal in the state of Minnesota since 2013 (Minnesota Legislative Reference Library). This inclusive culture needs to be continued for the preservice teachers to become advocates for LGBT students when they become inservice

teachers. Some preservice teachers expressed their concerns about not getting support from parents, or school administrators, they need support in a school/district level for them to act for LGBT students.

Second, I expected my students to be advocates for LGBT students and students from LGBT families. My own subjectivity, a LGBT ally who wants to disturb existing heterosexism and homophobia, may have influenced the preservice teachers' responses on LGBT-themed literature. It is possible that some of them responded the way I wanted them to respond to please me. It is also possible that since the preservice teachers have been recently educated on reading multicultural literature in my children's literature class before this survey, they may be more open to an idea of bringing LGBT-themed literature.

Even though the majority of preservice teachers said that they would read LGBT-themed literature, like the preservice teachers in Clark and Blackburn's and Dedeoglu et al.'s studies, Minnesota preservice teachers also showed their concerns on reading to their classrooms in the future. Since the audiences of *And Tango Makes Three* would be young children, uncomfortable feelings to talk about homosexuality with children seemed to be an issue. *And Tango Makes Three* can be read as a story about two penguins who make a beautiful family. Certainly, this book can generate conversations about LGBT families and different types of families. It can also be read for the enjoyment of literature. LGBT-themed literature should be also enjoyable for students (Clark and Blackburn 30). However, based on their responses, some preservice teachers did not enjoy *And Tango Makes Three* because LGBT-themed literature does not reflect their personal belief, and they were also worried about

unsupportive parents and schools when they thought about reading this book to their students.

Implications

The data of this study were limited to seventy-eight preservice teachers in one university located in Southwest Minnesota, but this study leaves implications for both school administrators and teacher educators. First, it implies that the district and school administrators need to support teachers on bringing LGBT-themed literature into their classrooms. Even though the state of Minnesota allows same sex marriage by law, it is possible that not all school districts will welcome LGBT-themed literature in each teacher's classroom. Inferring from the preservice teachers' responses in this study, it can be anticipated that a large numbers of teachers would not bring LGBT-themed literature to their classrooms if they do not feel support from their school. If the school district's motto is welcoming all students, then their administration also needs to be in line with what they say they do.

Second, the result of the study implies that teacher educators cannot assume that preservice teachers would be LGBT's allies automatically even though they have studied diversity and have been exposed to a LGBT friendly environment in their college. If teacher educators agree that preservice teachers need to be ready and willing to teach all students no matter what their personal backgrounds are, including their sexual orientation, then they need to keep supporting preservice teachers to become advocates for LGBT students. Teacher educators can create

supportive environments for LGBT students through promoting diversity in the teacher education program and through various events and campaign in a department and a university level. In a teacher education class, small group literature discussions on LGBT-themed literature along with the classroom usage of that literature can be a practical exercise for preservice teachers to do. Teacher educators can introduce several LGBT-themed literature to preservice teachers and let them select a book to read. Making literature circles with different titles may be helpful because a literature circle provides a small group discussion setting where some preservice teachers may feel more comfortable to speak than in a whole group setting. Preservice teachers can read LGBT-themed literature from a child (or a teen) protagonist's perspective, and discuss the story as readers. Then, they can shift the discussion to think about supporting LGBT students in schools. Even a simple class activity like literature circles may plant a seed for preservice teachers to disturb homophobia in schools and create an inclusive community for all students in the near future. Together, teachers, teacher educators, and school administrators need to work on making Minnesota schools safe and welcoming for all students including LGBT students.

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