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## Celebrating the work of pre-service teachers

Keyan Robertson  
Edith Cowan University, [keyanr@our.ecu.edu.au](mailto:keyanr@our.ecu.edu.au)

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“Books can be both mirrors and windows”, by investigating this statement, we acknowledge the vital importance of engaging students in a diverse range of children’s literature. This can develop children into accepting, empathetic, compassionate and prosocial members of the community, who strive to achieve self-actualisation (Maslow, 1943; McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Literature is constructed on foundations of historical, social and cultural contexts, traditionally influenced by the political and social views of its time (McDonald, 2018). Therefore, modern literature, exploring differing perspectives on inclusivity, gender, sexuality and identity, provides a window to educate and enlighten some readers and a mirror to empower and inspire others (Flores, 2016; Smolkin & Young, 2011). The right to access literature, reflective of oneself, and a lens into the lives of others different from ourself, is a liberty all children deserve (Smolkin & Young, 2011).

The invigorating sense of connection a student can gain from reading literature, reflecting who they are as a human being, is a sensation that should never be denied within a primary education setting. This natural right should be honoured regardless of one’s culture, gender or sexuality (Smolkin & Young, 2011). Saxby (1997), issued an incredibly powerful insight into the abilities of literature, allowing for “the re-creation of thoughts, sensations, dreams, feelings, fears, aspirations. It causes awe and wonder. It can bring joy... It can propel the reader into a more secure future as self-awareness and understanding is nourished and grows” (Saxby, 1997). Literature is a vessel leading children on a journey to self-discovery, an awakening within one’s self, gently reminding readers they are not alone (Saxby, 1997). It can support children in forging bridges, crossing boundaries and defying stereotypical traditions within society, as they advance on this journey to achieving self-actualisation (Maslow, 1943). Saxby (1997), went even further to declare “Literature is life, illuminated and sweetened by the artist”, a clear endorsement of how literature, in every sense of the word, is life.

Literature has the capacity to educate and deepen children’s’ understandings of gender, sexuality and identity in relation to themselves through the exploration of differing social

perspectives within the classroom (McDonald, 2018). Literature has the ability to challenge society's traditional ideology of 'normal' and truly debate what it is, what it is not, and who decides what is different (Beveridge, 2006). Society's perspective of 'normal', is immensely scrutinising and forbidding, not only limiting our uniqueness as individuals but we as collectives too.

The construct of 'family' has traditionally been forced into conformity, an eternal restriction to heterosexuality, constrained by historical, cultural and social beliefs (Flores, 2016). This intolerable construct of 'family', and its obtuse affiliation with heterosexuality as the dominant and only acceptable version of normality, has been engrained in society's beliefs for millennia, a term known as 'heteronormativity' (Beveridge, 2006; Flores, 2016). Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner (1998), elaborated on society's traditional affiliation with heterosexuality due to it being "produced in almost every aspect of the forms and arrangements of social life: nationality, the state, and the law; commerce; medicine; and education; as well as in the conventions and effects of narrativity, romance, and other protected spaces of culture".

This starkly labels any alternative sexuality as wrong and un-natural, not to be accepted within society, as it will "indoctrinate our kids with the lie that homosexuality is normal" (Barrett, 2006). Therefore, to avoid 'indoctrinating' children to differing perspectives of sexuality, the range of children's literature that has been available in the past has been restricted to heterosexuality (Beveridge, 2006). For readers, who are were not aligned to heterosexuality, this would have had a detrimental impact on their learning, inhibiting their capacity to ascertain deeper understandings of themselves and others (McDonald, 2018). To only provide children with censored literature is to affirm society's outdated, cyclical, traditional views and prevent children from exploring their true identity.

The children's picture book, "Jenny lives with Eric and Martin" by Susanne Bosche, was originally written in 1981. A text, at the time, that challenged heteronormativity and societies parochial concept of a 'normal family' (Beveridge, 2006). The text explores, with beautiful, raw photography, the life of a six-year-old girl, Jenny. Jenny lives with her father and step-father, and maintains regular contact and a healthy relationship with her mother.

Bosche (1987), skilfully highlighted not all children are members of a heteronormative 'family' construct. Offering readers an opportunity to emotionally bond to her text and grasp a deeper understanding of their own personal context by discussing families that identify with same-sex parents. It conveyed to readers that there is no definitive 'normal', it is a construct to support traditional beliefs of those who have failed to accept societies progression in its current social and cultural contexts (Beveridge, 2006; Flores, 2016).

Bosche's book attracted public criticism, and was labelled by Kenneth Baker, the then education secretary to Margaret Thatcher, as "blatant homosexual propaganda" (Beveridge, 2006). The picture book was vilified, utilised as a political tool to introduce a piece of legislation, known as 'Section 28', prohibiting the use of published material discussing any sexuality other than heterosexuality in education. Such material was deemed a promotion of homosexuality, rejected as a family relationship (Local Government Act 1988). Beveridge (2006), elaborated on the traditional beliefs at the time, "children are figured as utterly impressionable, and homosexuality as a sort of contagion: a crime against innocence" (p.152). Section 28's intended purpose, was to protect children from this 'crime against innocence', however, it itself became the crime against the innocent. Depriving children the ability to see themselves represented in literature is the true crime, only furthering isolation and alienation of children, however, now these innocents were criminalised in the eyes of the law. Bosche's (1987) "Jenny lives with Eric and Martin" was written with the purpose to improve inclusion and acceptance, and to nourish young, curious minds. It is beyond disheartening to discover it was utilised as a political tool to devise further segregation within society.

Modern children's literature is an essential tool that challenges traditional beliefs and supports children's knowledge acquisition and reflection of current social values, beliefs and attitudes (McDonald, 2018). Informed and knowledgeable authors utilise their skills, carefully crafting literature readers resonate with, that also develops emotive responses such as empathy, interest and sadness, motivating children to examine from broader perspectives (McDonald, 2018). Literature, in contemporary society, has the ability to develop students' understandings and knowledge of oppressed minority

groups. In the past, historical, social and cultural contexts developed, what modern society perceives as degrading and bigoted beliefs towards the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex and Asexual community (LGBTQIA+) (Flores, 2016). Through planned investigation of modern literature, that incorporates, inclusivity, self-expression and acceptance, prosocial beliefs can develop, that reflect all members of our current context (McDonald, 2018).

Present society, whilst still flawed, has progressed in our understandings, awareness and acceptance of the LGBTQIA+ community. This is reflected in the children's literary piece by Scott Stuart, "My Shadow is Pink". The text provokes development in students' understanding and awareness of the LGBTQIA+ community. The text follows a young male denying to accept his true-self, fearing rejection from his father and school peers. The father demonstrates heart-warming wisdom, empathy, and unconditional positive regard, encouraging his son to persevere and accept his true identity (Rogers, 1959). The text challenges numerous gender stereotypes, both male and female, such as colour association with gender, occupations, social interests and physical characteristics.

Scott (2020), incorporates multiple historical beliefs of gender identity, such as "My shadow loves ponies and books and pink toys, princesses, fairies and things not for boys'... 'It will turn blue one of these days... it is just a phase". These references benefit readers, providing an opportunity to acknowledge and challenge traditional beliefs as they are contrasted against progressive comments from the main character's father, "Your shadow is pink, I see now it is true. It is not just a shadow, it is your inner most you" (Scott, 2020). This literary text, offers readers, a "mirror" to develop students' understandings of one's self, as well as a "window" encouraging students to observe society from a different perspective (Flores, 2016; Smolkin & Young, 2011). All text elements are meticulously constructed to present the reader with multiple opportunities to develop prosocial and inclusive responses towards the character, as well as develop their socio-cultural understandings of current society.

During early years in education, educators focus on developing confident and creative students who are successful learners (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs Melbourne, 2008). Educators support students in developing their identity, sense of self, self-esteem, resilience and other areas of their socio-emotional domain, through the employment of literature (O'Donnell et al., 2019). An educator's main objective is to guide students on their journey to achieve self-actualisation, and in order to achieve this they must be presented with literary texts that reflect who they are as an individual as well as others who differ to them (Maslow, 1943). As previously mentioned, "Literature is life" (Saxby, 1997), children's literature is as a metaphorical gateway, enriching students' understandings, acceptance of themselves and others, and ultimately, their lives (Maslow, 1943; McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Saxby, 1997).

Authors are in a position to encourage readers on their journey to understanding themselves. Modern literature plays a pivotal role in exploring realities that challenge stereotypical ideologies within contemporary society. In 2015, Jo Hirst published her first children's picture book, "The Gender Fairy", with the purpose to educate and normalise gender identity in children, as she herself is a mother of a young transgender child (Hirst, 2015). The text follows two characters, a boy and a girl, frustrated as "no one can really see who they are inside". Hirst, addresses the characters with pronouns opposing their physical characteristics in the illustrations, creating some confusion initially as names are not associated with either character. However, this proves to be a powerful and insightful strategy. The characters do not identify with either a name nor their physical appearance, therefore only allowing the reader to emotionally connect with how the character feels "on the inside", a fundamental message to the reader, one that will assist them to gain further understandings of themselves, and others, as the story progresses. (Hirst, 2015). The characters eventually meet "The Gender Fairy", who addresses many questions, "Does this mean there is something wrong with me?... 'Am I the only one this has happened to?... 'Can I choose my own name?" (Hirst, 2015). The tact, placing these questions in the text, has provided many readers with healthy, positive answers to questions. Hirst (2015) challenged society's traditional concept of 'normal', whilst promoting inclusivity, stating "It is very normal. Some children feel no one can see who they

really are' ... 'there are lots of others". The story is astutely concluded when the children ask the Fairy, "Are you a boy or a girl?', 'Does it matter?' the Gender Fairy asked with a smile" (Hirst, 2015). This presents the reader with a touching resolution, dissolving traditional society's forceful position on gender identity conformity. The text represents the current socio-cultural contexts of contemporary society (McDonald, 2018). It offers another example of how imperative exposure to gender, sexuality and identity in literature is, and how it has immense value, to enrich children's experiences and lives (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2014).

One cannot deny the impact literature has in the development of children. Literature provokes thoughts, emotional responses, and encourages deeper, higher order thinking within readers (McDonald, 2018). Quality literature presents readers with mirrors, gifting them a deeper insight into their own personal context as well as a window to grasp new insights into the lives of others who have differing perspectives to our own (Beveridge, 2006; Smolkin & Young, 2011). To better our children into members of the community that are resilient, empathetic and self-actualising, the quality texts we choose must expose them to differing perspectives of sexuality, gender and identity and promote inclusivity and compassion to all individuals within society (Beveridge, 2006; Maslow, 1943; McDonald, 2018 & McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

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