

2020

## Representation of LGBTQ characters in 2019 young adult literature

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## Representation of LGBTQ characters in 2019 young adult literature

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### Abstract

This qualitative content analysis study examines the representation of LGBTQ characters in 10 young adult literature published in 2019 in light of rising numbers of self-harm and suicide among youth who identify as LGBTQ. Novels were identified using the WorldCat Online Database and the search delimiters of year of publication, LGBTQ, young adult, and fiction yielded 30 novels. Every third novel was randomly selected, narrowing the sample. Novels were read and analyzed using an initial coding list to consider the following factors: sexual identity, age, socioeconomic status, race or culture, major or minor character, sexual orientation, appearance, permanence of sexual orientation, and relationship status. Results showed that lesbians were well represented while gay and bisexual men, non-binary, and transgender characters were underrepresented. Results also revealed that female characters generally dealt with sexual identity and/or orientation and an additional conflict. Males, nonbinary, and transgender characters generally focused solely on sexual identity and/or orientation and were not occupied with another concern concurrently. This study shows that while LGBTQ YA literature has come a long way, there is much work to be done. Specifically, LGBTQ literature needs more works featuring characters who identify as nonbinary, transgender, males who identify as gay or bisexual as well as characters who are aromantic, asexual, gender fluid, or otherwise queer.

**REPRESENTATION OF LGBTQ CHARACTERS IN 2019 YOUNG ADULT  
LITERATURE**

A Graduate Research Paper  
Submitted to the  
Division of School Library Studies  
Department of Curriculum and Instruction  
In Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts  
UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

by  
Janelle M. Snyder  
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This Research Paper by: Janelle M. Snyder

Titled: Representation of LGBTQ Characters in 2019 Young Adult Literature

has been approved as meeting the research requirement for the

Degree of Master of Arts.

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## ABSTRACT

This qualitative content analysis study examines the representation of LGBTQ characters in 10 young adult literature published in 2019 in light of rising numbers of self-harm and suicide among youth who identify as LGBTQ. Novels were identified using the WorldCat Online Database and the search delimiters of year of publication, LGBTQ, young adult, and fiction yielded 30 novels. Every third novel was randomly selected, narrowing the sample. Novels were read and analyzed using an initial coding list to consider the following factors: sexual identity, age, socioeconomic status, race or culture, major or minor character, sexual orientation, appearance, permanence of sexual orientation, and relationship status. Results showed that lesbians were well represented while gay and bisexual men, non-binary, and transgender characters were underrepresented. Results also revealed that female characters generally dealt with sexual identity and/or orientation and an additional conflict. Males, nonbinary, and transgender characters generally focused solely on sexual identity and/or orientation and were not occupied with another concern concurrently. This study shows that while LGBTQ YA literature has come a long way, there is much work to be done. Specifically, LGBTQ literature needs more works featuring characters who identify as nonbinary, transgender, males who identify as gay or bisexual as well as characters who are aromantic, asexual, gender fluid, or otherwise queer.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION	1
Problem Statement	1
Rationale	4
Deficiencies	5
Summary of Problem Statement	5
Purpose Statement	6
Research Question	6
Limitations	6
CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW	7
Reflection and Portrayal of LGBTQ Youth in Existing Young Adult Literature	7
Portrayal of Other Youth in Young Adult Literature	10
Analysis of Young Adult Literature Depicting Youth Who Identify as LGBTQ	13
Summary	16
CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY	18
Research Design	18
Sample of Books	19
Procedures	19
Data Sources	19
Data Analysis	20
Limitations of Research	20

CHAPTER 4. FINDINGS	21
Representation of Female Characters	21
Representation of Male, Nonbinary, and Transgender Characters	24
Gay Characters	24
Bisexual Male Characters	26
Nonbinary Characters	28
Transgender Characters	29
Character Conflicts are Dependent upon Sexual Identity and Orientation	30
Female Characters Deal with Multiple Conflicts	31
Safety	31
Family	34
Peers	36
Male, Nonbinary, and Transgender Characters Deal with Fewer Conflicts	38
Sexual Identity and Acceptance	38
Traditional Teenage Conflicts	41
CHAPTER 5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS	43
Conclusions	44
Recommendations	45
REFERENCES	48
APPENDIX A: BOOK LIST	50
APPENDIX B: BOOK EVALUATION CHART CODING MANUAL	51
APPENDIX C: DEFINITIONS	53

## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

In a world where adolescents are constantly exposed to social media, gender norms, and idealistic lives, it is easy for them to feel lost and insecure. As children grow and develop into adolescence, they explore who they are as people, often including their sexual identity and orientation. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transexual, and queer or questioning (LGBTQ) adolescents, may feel especially isolated and unaccepted by their communities. This isolation is exacerbated by prevailing images in literature and other media. The Human Rights Campaign surveyed over 10,000 individuals aged 13 to 17 who identify as LGBTQ and found that four in 10 feel that their community is not accepting of them. Additionally, 90% of students surveyed hear negative messages about the LGBTQ community in school, on the internet, and through their peers (Human Rights Campaign, 2018, para. 5). Educators should be doing all they can to ensure that all students feel safe and included in school. One way to work towards this is to examine the literature written for young adults to uncover the messages they are receiving through reading.

#### **Problem Statement**

It is important for students to see themselves reflected respectfully and positively in the media and in the young adult (YA) literature that is accessible to them. As LGBTQ author and advocate David Levithan (2004) suggests in *Supporting Gay Teen Literature: an Advocate Speaks Out for Representation on Library Shelves*, it is a librarian's job to supply books to students in which they can find themselves and whatever they may be



going through. He goes on to suggest that it is not only a librarian's job, but a librarian's obligation (p. 44). This helps to articulate the importance of providing resources to reach all readers, including those who identify as LGBTQ and of varying races, sexual identity, sexual orientation, class, and more.

Literature offers students a mirror to see themselves reflected. While the number of works of YA literature featuring LGBTQ characters has increased through the years, it is lacking in a broad representation of races, sexual identities, and class, among other aspects (Jenkins, 1998, pp. 301-302). This may lead students to feel underrepresented and isolated. When students do not see themselves represented, they do not feel validated which may prove detrimental to their mental health. Adolescents who identify as LGBTQ are already at higher risk of self harm and suicide. In 2015, 40% of LGBTQ adolescents reported seriously considering suicide, 34.9% planned suicide, and 24.9% attempted suicide. In contrast, 14.8% of heterosexuals seriously considered suicide, 11.9% planned, and 6.3% attempted suicide (Caputi et al., 2017, pp. 2349-2351). This research also concludes that the risk is higher for adolescents than for older individuals, so it is of particular concern for secondary students. A possibly more tragic note is that death records do not typically record sexual preference and/or identity and therefore the actual rate of completed suicides of those who identify as LGBTQ is unknown (Haas et al., 2011, p. 15). Educators and librarians cannot stand for this trend to continue or worsen. It is an obligation to provide resources to students where they can see themselves reflected and validated in hopes of diminishing these tragic statistics. To ignore these statistics would be a failure to live up to professional ethics.

The need for librarians to heed this call is reinforced by the fact that students who identify as LGBTQ rarely see themselves reflected in literature within their school libraries' collections. Garry (2015) showed the importance of providing LGBTQ resources in libraries in order to meet the needs of all patrons. The study showed that nearly 70% of the libraries examined contained fewer than a quarter of titles on the list of books including LGBTQ characters used in the study (p. 74). Furthermore, the study does not address how those characters are represented, for example their sexual identity or orientation, race, class, age, or appearance.

The unfortunate truth is that school librarians are concerned with parent and administrative push back if they include literature containing LGBTQ content (Garry, 2015, p. 75). With this fear comes a lack of resources for students who, as a result, are unable to see themselves reflected in young adult literature. By providing more literature including characters of varying backgrounds who identify as LGBTQ, all students are exposed to a more inclusive and inviting environment where more students can feel validated, connected, and accepted.

Failing to include works that would serve to help provide a balanced collection out of fear of confrontation goes against the American Library Association's (ALA, 1996) *Bill of Rights* which states: "Libraries should provide materials and information presenting all points of view on current and historical issues. Materials should not be proscribed or removed because of partisan or doctrinal disapproval" (para. 3). Furthermore, the *Bill of Rights* confirms that resources should challenge censorship "in the fulfillment of their responsibility to provide information and enlightenment" (para. 4).

It is therefore the professional responsibility of educators to provide inclusive works where students see themselves reflected in the literature they read without living in fear of push back from community members and administration.

### **Rationale**

In order to work towards diminishing the aforementioned tragic suicide and self harm rates among LGBTQ adolescents, it is crucial that students feel safe and accepted in our schools and communities. The hope of the researcher is that findings demonstrate progress in YA literature featuring LGBTQ characters, that includes representation of varying backgrounds including, but not limited to race, age, sexual identity, sexual orientation, and class. This study aims to provide students, educators, and parents books through which LGBTQ students feel more accepted and comfortable in both their school and larger community.

By examining young adult literature featuring LGBTQ characters, this study explores the portrayal of LGBTQ characters and the representation of their backgrounds. The researcher hopes that educators will use this study's findings to seek out and include young adult literature that respectfully and accurately portrays characters who identify as LGBTQ. In so doing, these findings will benefit teacher librarians, classroom teachers, administrators, students, and parents.

### **Deficiencies**

Previous research studies examined the portrayal of characters who identify as LGBTQ. The study *From Queer to Gay and Back Again: Young Adult Novels with Gay/Lesbian/Queer Content, 1969-1997* (Jenkins, 1998) analyzed novels involving

homosexual content published between 1969 to 1997. The study analyzed the portrayal of LGBTQ characters in young adult literature from 1969 to 1997, however, the study did not report portrayals in novels written after 1997. The study focused on gay, lesbian, and queer characters but did not include characters who specifically identify as bisexual or transsexual. Wickens (2011) also analyzed young adult literature featuring LGBTQ content. The study *Codes, Silences, and Homophobia: Challenging Normative Assumptions About Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary LGBTQ Young Adult Literature* analyzed homophobia and its representation in young adult novels. The study's sample was limited to novels published between 1969 and 2004. The study found common threads among themes, language, and discourse but did not analyze the portrayal or backgrounds of characters. In *Examining Queer Elements and Ideologies in LGBT - Themed Literature: What Queer Literature Can Offer Young Adult Readers*, Blackburn (2015) analyzed texts to understand the beliefs and ideologies within heterosexism, misogyny, and homophobia. That study's analysis of novels ended with those published in 2008 and so the current research study will update its findings.

### **Summary of Problem Statement**

Students lack access to young adult (YA) literature that represents LGBTQ students from varying backgrounds of race, age, sexual identity, class, sexual orientation, appearance, relationship status, permanence of their sexual orientation, and variation as to whether the LGBTQ character is a major or minor character.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative content analysis is to analyze Young Adult literature for the portrayal of adolescents who identify as LGBTQ and to ascertain the messages that are being presented in YA LGBTQ literature.

### **Research Question**

What messages are presented through young adult literature featuring LGBTQ characters and content?

### **Limitations**

This study was limited to 10 YA fiction novels featuring LGBTQ characters published in 2019. It was also limited to novels identified for secondary students and that also included the tag “LGBT” within the WorldCat online database.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this qualitative content analysis study is to analyze the portrayal of LGBTQ adolescents within young adult literature. The hope is to support educators, family members, and peers of LGBTQ youth in their efforts toward inclusivity, especially given that self harm and suicide rates are higher among LGBTQ adolescents than their heterosexual peers. A review of literature aims to analyze how LGBTQ youth see themselves reflected and portrayed in existing young adult literature, how other youth of the same age see themselves portrayed in young adult literature, and an analysis of young adult literature depicting youth who identify as LGBTQ.

#### **Reflection and Portrayal of LGBTQ Youth in Existing Young Adult Literature**

It is important to consider how LGBTQ youth see themselves reflected and portrayed in existing young adult literature. According to Kosciw et al. (as cited in Antuna et al., 2018), LGBTQ youth are at risk of “significant prejudice and discrimination” (p. 25). In *The Stonewall Books: LGBTQ-Themed Young Adult Novels as Semiotic Beacons* researchers describe their investigations into “the perceptions of secondary school students and future high school teachers toward two Stonewall Award-winning novels” (p. 24). Their study sought to discover how participants perceived and related to LGBTQ characters and the relationships represented in two young adult Stonewall Book Award winning novels. Researchers conducted a qualitative study that examined participants’ responses to Benjamin Alire Saenz’s 2012 novel *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* and E.E. Charlton-Trujillo’s

2013 novel *Fat Angie*. Participants consisted of three groups with the following compositions: 1) ten undergraduate preservice teachers, 2) members between the ages of 12 and 18 from an LGBTQ youth group, and 3) a ninth grade English class. All participants completed an online questionnaire consisting of 11 questions which focused on various aspects of the novels, including initial impressions, relatability, and authenticity. Responses were analyzed in three phases where codes were created and emerging themes were examined (pp. 27-28). Results showed that all groups found the Saenz novel to be relatable in terms of events and characters as well as the importance of self-discovery (pp. 28-29). This “self-discovery” explained how groups saw themselves reflected in the literature, an important theme considered by the researchers. Overall, preservice teachers found the novels to be more realistic and authentic than the younger participants did (p. 30). Students who identify as LGBTQ found the novels to be realistic in terms of relationships. Surprisingly, all participants agreed that the Saenz novel should include a heterosexual relationship. This study is relevant in that it explains how students ages 12 to 18 perceive award winning LGBTQ young adult literature. However, due to its design as a qualitative and comparative study, it is limited to examination of only two novels.

Literature is often viewed as a mirror for readers to see themselves reflected. As explained in *Opening Doors: Teaching LGBTQ-themed Young Adult Literature for an Inclusive Curriculum*, LGBTQ YA literature is also used as a window and a path to forming one’s own identity (Batchelor et al., 2018, pp. 33-34). Given that LGBTQ youth are more likely to feel unsafe, researchers sought to explore how future teachers perceive

issues of controversy, sexuality, and non-dominant viewpoints in English classrooms (pp. 29-30). This study focused on a book club where preservice English Language Arts teachers selected YA LGBTQ novels. Participants voluntarily chose to engage in the book club in which sessions were audio recorded and analyzed as to the major themes that emerged. Results included that participants agreed that educators need to include LGBTQ characters and content in their curricula as well as discuss it in the classroom (p. 35). Furthermore, support from administrators is necessary to ensure that students feel safe to express how they feel within the school without fear of being ridiculed (p. 35). This study shows that these preservice educators recognized the importance of including LGBTQ literature in the classroom.

Additionally, the purpose of the study, *Scenes of Violence and Sex in Recent Award-Winning LGBT-themed Young Adult Novels and the Ideologies They Offer Their Readers* was to analyze five recent award winning LGBT-themed young adult novels with a focus on scenes including violence and sex and/or love. Novels were analyzed in hopes of better equipping schools with literature to counter heterosexism, misogyny, and homophobia and literature in which LGBTQ students can see themselves reflected (Clark & Blackburn, 2014, pp. 867-868). Researchers sought to find novels that would also be beneficial to educators. To collect and analyze their data, the researchers cited textual evidence in the form of direct quotations to analyze scenes of violence and sex and/or love in relation to homophobia (p. 871). Analysis of data showed that often people who identify as LGBTQ are victims of violence and that such is shown in the novels that young students are reading. Additionally, findings show that through the reading of



novels containing LGBTQ content in terms of sex and/or love, readers are exposed to more nuances of LGBTQ people (p. 883). These findings show the importance of exposing youth to LGBTQ literature, and also describe the frequency with which readers are exposed to negative portrayals of LGBTQ content. This study examined five novels published in or before 2013. The studies in this subtheme (Antuna et al., 2018; Batchelor et al., 2018; Clark & Blackburn, 2014) show the perception and reflection of LGBTQ literature among students aged 12 to 18 who identify as LGBTQ as well as the importance of exposing students to young adult literature with LGBT content.

### **Portrayal of Other Youth in Young Adult Literature**

Students often see themselves reflected in the literature they read. It is more common for students to engage in reading when they are invested in a work's characters and content. In the study, *Engagement With Young Adult Literature: Outcomes and Processes*, researchers investigated the perception of outcomes and processes when students engaged in self-selected and self-paced reading. Researchers investigated the development of identities, moral development, and personhood through self-awareness and self-respect (Ivey & Johnston, 2013, pp. 255-256). The researchers looked at what students perceived to be the outcomes when engaged with young adult literature and what processes led to this engagement. They conducted a qualitative study exploring processes and outcomes of engaged reading. To prepare for this, they obtained the cooperation of four eighth grade teachers who committed to engaged reading and allowed their students to self-select what they read rather than choosing a whole class text (p. 258). Seventy-one eighth graders participated in self-selection. Data collection included student interviews,

classroom observations, classroom conversations, and records of small group discussions (p. 259). Data were analyzed to find patterns and catalysts of engaged reading were identified. Findings showed that the opportunity to self select afforded students the possibility to shape their “individual and collective lives” as well as develop a “deep engagement with the characters” (p. 271). These findings show the importance of students making connections with characters in the literature they read as it shapes who they are.

Furthermore, the purpose of the study, *Heightening Awareness About the Importance of Using Multicultural Literature* was to explore preservice teachers’ understanding of the use of multicultural literature as well as examine changes in beliefs regarding the importance of using such literature to enable students to see themselves reflected in what they read (Colby & Lyon, 2004). Researchers explored how preservice teachers currently view multicultural literature and how preservice teachers’ views change in regards to using multicultural literature after completing self reflection and response papers (p. 24). Participants included approximately 100 preservice teachers who completed student response surveys. Emerging themes were developed: 1) it opened my eyes (Euro-American white students realized for the first time the lack of African American literature which led to empathy and the importance of role models), 2) finding yourself (white students “grew up” with characters), 3) opening their minds, 4) not just African American, and 5) it’s my responsibility. This study shows how some students realized for the first time what their peers did not have growing up as well as how their minds were opened to the lives of minorities. Additionally, it explains the importance of students

seeing themselves reflected and “growing up” with characters; something that is lacking for LGBTQ youth.

Finally, in the study, *You Are What You Read: Young Adult Literacy and Identity in Rural America* (Moeller & Becnel, 2015) researchers sought to better understand the reading habits and preferences of teens and how they perceived their current and future lives compared to how lives are depicted in literature. This study focused on rural students in the United States with a goal of improving library collections, programs, and school services to best meet the needs of students. Researchers considered the reading habits of students and the issues teens read about and in what formats. Furthermore, they looked at whether or not teens consider themselves to be part of the culture that is reflected in literature and how it shapes their ideas for their future selves. This empirical study featured a 20 question survey including multiple choice and open ended questions. Tenth graders in four schools were surveyed, totalling 118 students. Questions centered on reading habits and interests as well as self-perception and future aspirations. Open ended questions were sorted and categorized based on their responses. Results showed that students preferred magazines, books, and online content and accessed most material from home with school libraries being a close second. The majority of students (58%) reported seeing people like themselves or people they know in the literature that they read. Researchers examined gender differences and females reported reading more and found more connections in literature than males. This is relevant to the current study in that most students see themselves reflected in literature, however, this study does not report race, sexual identity, or any other identifiers. These studies (Ivey & Johnston,

2013; Colby & Lyon, 2004; Moeller & Becnel, 2015) are relevant to the current study in that they demonstrate the importance of self-reflection for teens reading young adult literature.

### **Analysis of Young Adult Literature Depicting Youth Who Identify as LGBTQ**

Previous researchers analyzed young adult literature depicting characters who identify as LGBTQ and/or including LGBTQ content. Blackburn (2015) evaluated relationships among queer literature and its effects. The purpose of the study *Examining Queer Elements and Ideologies in LGBT - Themed Literature: What Queer Literature Can Offer Young Adult Readers* was to analyze and understand text features and their effects on educators in countering beliefs and ideologies within heterosexism, misogyny, and homophobia (p. 13). The researcher questioned what queer literature looks like and what resources queer books offer that differ from the broader category of literature. The study featured a reading group consisting of 32 participants, 22 youth and 10 adults. The group met 20 times over the course of three years. The study also analyzed 24 young adult texts featuring LGBT content in terms of queer theory, literary elements, and the portrayal of characters and their change over time. Findings included various conceptions of identities (*Developmental, Essential, and Poststructural*) and that the examined novels included disruptions of norms in terms of sexuality and gender. The analysis of the relationships portrayed proved that novels varied in terms of the portrayal of family and home life. While some portrayed traditional homes, others showed non-traditional homes. Novels also showed rejection, reconciliation, and acceptance of LGBT characters. This

work is relevant to this study in that it expresses various ways to analyze relationships in LGBTQ literature however, it lacks analysis of novels published after 2008.

In an additional study, researcher Wickens (2011) analyzed young adult literature featuring characters who identify as LGBTQ and/or LGBTQ content in her study, *Codes, Silences, and Homophobia: Challenging Normative Assumptions About Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary LGBTQ Young Adult Literature*. The purpose of this study was to analyze selected young adult novels that challenge homophobia but ultimately leave it untouched. Wickens additionally aimed to contrast these selected novels to David Levithan's 2003 novel, *Boy Meets Boy*, which does subvert heteronormative assumptions. Research questions investigated the major "social forces" at work in the novels and how characters respond to them. The researcher additionally questioned how the authors portray various characters and how those characterizations convey underlying messages and themes (p. 152). This study employed 17 young adult novels featuring LGBTQ characters and content published between 2000 and 2005. The researcher defined young adults as including adolescents aged 13 to 17. All novels received positive acclaim from *Horn Book*, *School Library Journal*, or *Booklist* and challenged homophobia but left it intact. Finally, the study contrasted these novels to *Boy Meets Boy*. Wickens looked at language, culture, and discourse and their effect on how gender is perceived. More specifically, analysis included examination of grammar and genre structure including character development, family relationships, and narrative conflict. Findings indicated that attitudes often stem from history carried out through the years. As a result, novels associated homosexuality with "ideas of perversion, deviance, and being anti-American"

(p. 155). Thus, findings showed that young adult novels featuring LGBTQ characters and/or content provided negative portrayals of characters and their lives. This study provides important analysis of homophobia and how the lives of LGBTQ youth were perceived in young adult novels, however the study lacks analysis of novels published after 2004. Additionally, the study analyzed relationships, but not the portrayal of specific characters in those novels.

Finally, in the study, *From Queer to Gay and Back Again: Young Adult Novels with Gay/Lesbian/Queer Content, 1969-1997*, Jenkins (1998) explored several young adult novels published between 1969 to 1997 portraying characters who identify as gay, lesbian, or queer and topics revolving around homosexual content. Jenkins questioned how the subgenre evolved over time and aimed to find patterns suggesting progress toward more realistic portrayal of the lives of gay, lesbian, and queer teens in young adult literature. In this article, Jenkins references previously examining 60 novels featuring gay, lesbian, or queer content from 1969 to 1992. These 60 novels were divided into two groups, those published from 1969 to 1984 (31 titles) and 29 titles published from 1984 to 1992. The groups were compared according to “how gay and lesbian characters were portrayed, gathering demographic data on each gay or lesbian character: age, sex, race, class, appearance, single/partnered status, occupation/interests, and the character's relation to the protagonist” (p. 300). Analysis proved that characters were highly likely to come across anti-gay hardships such as bullying and abuse. Jenkins expanded her previous study to analyze progress and looked at 38 titles from 1993 to 1997 as well as a “small but growing number” (p. 301) of short stories featuring the same content. Findings

displayed common threads throughout novels featuring LGBTQ content: the question of authenticity of characters who identify as homosexual, the representation of relationships between gay or lesbian characters and those who are part of traditional (in this case, heterosexual) families, and the difference, or lack of difference, in understandings of those who identify as gay, lesbian, and queer. While these findings are critical to the portrayal of LGBTQ characters in young adult literature, it does not report portrayals in novels written after 1997. These literary studies (Jenkins, 1998; Wickens, 2011; Blackburn, 2015) of young adult LGBTQ literature inform the current study through various analyses of character portrayal and peer and family relationships.

### **Summary**

The aforementioned studies demonstrate the importance of seeing oneself reflected in the literature one reads, opening minds to others' experiences, and understanding how LGBTQ content is portrayed in YA literature. The first three studies showed how readers connect to the characters they read and the importance of exposing students, regardless of sexuality, to LGBTQ literature (Antuna et al, 2018; Batchelor, Ramos, & Neiswander, 2018; Clark & Blackburn, 2014). Studies by Ivey and Johnston (2013), Colby and Lyon (2004), and Moeller and Becnel (2015), explain how students engage in reading when given choice in what is read and are able to choose literature that allows them to connect with characters. These studies also show how students' eyes can be opened to the experiences of their peers who may not find that same connection in literature. What's more, the final three studies demonstrate how YA literature across time has continued to portray heterosexism, homophobia, and misogyny (Blackburn, 2015;

Jenkins, 1998; Wickens, 2011). The current study reflected upon this research and evaluated the portrayal of adolescents who identify as LGBTQ as well as peer and family relationships within young adult literature in order to help support LGBTQ teens and their educators, family members, and peers.



## **CHAPTER 3**

### **METHODOLOGY**

Previous studies demonstrated a need for analyzing the portrayal of LGBTQ young adult literature. The purpose of this qualitative content analysis was to analyze Young Adult literature for the portrayal of adolescents who identify as LGBTQ and to ascertain the messages that are being presented in YA LGBTQ literature. This work aimed to support LGBTQ teens and also educators, family members, and peers of LGBTQ youth. It evaluated the messages presented when considering race or culture, socioeconomic status/class, sexual identity, sexual orientation, attractiveness, permanence of sexual orientation, and the relationship status of characters.

#### **Research Design**

This study used a qualitative content analysis approach in order to evaluate selected fiction novels featuring LGBTQ content published in 2019. Qualitative content analysis, as described by Zhang and Wildemuth (2017), "goes beyond merely counting words or extracting objective content from texts to examine meanings, themes, and patterns that may be manifest or latent in a particular text" (p. 318). In this study, I recorded data (see Appendix B) on a digital spreadsheet for examination using the qualitative content analysis approach. Such analysis of themes, patterns, and other observations revealed the messages present in the LGBTQ literature published for young adults in 2019.

### **Sample of Books**

The sample of books (see Appendix A) for this study included 10 Young Adult fiction novels published in 2019 featuring characters who identify as LGBTQ. The sample utilized purposeful selection to include LGBTQ content and/or characters included in works published in 2019. I used the WorldCat.org online database to create the sample of novels that met the criteria of being written for a young adult audience, being tagged within the system as containing LGBTQ content, and having a publication year of 2019. The parameters utilized to generate a list of novels are as follows:

Advanced Search > Keyword: LGBT > Format: Book > Language: English > Audience: Juvenile > Year: 2019 > Content: Fiction. The search yielded 48 results. However, I eliminated novels classified for primary school from the sample as they were not consistent with the criterion that works be written for a young adult audience. This narrowed the results to a sample including 30 novels. I then alphabetized the novels by title and every third title was selected to yield a randomized sample of 10 novels.

### **Procedures**

#### **Data Sources**

I read the selected novels and documented the data in the Book Evaluation Chart (see Appendix B) for each novel. I entered textual evidence as well as quotations in the evidence column of the Book Evaluation Chart to provide raw data which I analyzed and condensed into themes as described by Zhang and Wildemuth (2017, p. 319). I created a coding manual for evaluation and determined significant variables. I found it significant to track and analyze major and minor characters as the age, social class, race or culture,

appearance, permanence of sexual orientation, and relationship status, though appearance proved to be insignificant. I based such variables on the work of researcher Jenkins (1998) in that Jenkins also tracked this information. I then used the eight steps suggested by Zhang and Wildemuth to prepare the data by transforming it into written form as well as defining units and a coding scheme to analyze the data (p. 320-321).

### **Data Analysis**

In this qualitative content analysis study, I utilized the aspects listed in Appendix B to determine who is represented and underrepresented in Young Adult fiction novels featuring LGBTQ characters. The Book Evaluation Chart provided data which I then analyzed by making inferences, drawing conclusions, and making meaning from the data as explained by Zhang and Wildemuth (p. 322). Through this closing read and analysis of coded data, I was thus able to determine emerging patterns and themes as described in Chapter 4: Findings.

### **Limitations of Research**

This study was limited to 10 Young Adult novels featuring LGBTQ characters published in 2019. Selected texts appeared when searching the WorldCat Database. This could be limiting as it may not include all novels published in this timeframe. The study only analyzed the data represented in Appendix B. Additionally, the study utilized one researcher who read the novels and coded the data. Subjectivity and the use of just one researcher allowed for error and bias as well as a lack of opportunity to check for consistency.

## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS

Ten Young Adult novels (see Appendix A) featuring LGBTQ characters were analyzed for the portrayal of adolescents who identify as LGBTQ and to ascertain the messages that are being presented in YA LGBTQ literature. Messages were recorded in the Book Evaluation Chart to help identify emerging themes.

Female characters identifying as LGBTQ were well represented throughout the 10 novels analyzed while males, non-binary and transexual, or any other sexual identities were underrepresented or nonexistent. Throughout these novels, there were 26 characters identifying as LGBTQ and of those 16 were female, seven male, two non-binary, and one transgender. Female characters were well represented but with less diversity in terms of socioeconomic status, race or culture, age, and sexual orientation. Though less diverse, these characters dealt with multiple conflicts in the storylines such as sexual identity and an additional conflict specific to that novel. Conversely, there were fewer males, nonbinary, transgender, or otherwise queer characters represented throughout these novels, but there was more diversity among those seven characters. The conflicts faced by these characters, unlike those faced by the female characters, focused solely on their sexual identity.

#### **Representation of Female Characters**

Females identifying as LGBTQ were well represented throughout the 10 novels, even in those featuring males or non-binary individuals as main characters. As previously mentioned, out of all 26 characters who identify as LGBTQ, 16 of those characters were

female, appearing in eight of the 10 novels. When analyzed more closely, these characters had more in common than their sexual identity, yielding little diversity among the group.

Seven of the 16 female characters shared several characteristics. These characters, featured throughout five of the 10 novels all identifying as female, middle class, and lesbian which made for a well represented group: Deen and Cale in Fowley-Doyle's *All the Bad Apples*, Eleanor in Herman's *Everything Grows: A Novel*, Amanda in Crenshaw's *Kiss Number 8*, Jojo in Howard's *Social Intercourse*, and Hannah and Veronica in Sterling's *These Witches Don't Burn*. All of these characters, aside from Jojo, are between the ages of 15 and 17. Jojo and Tracee, lesbian mothers of main character, Jaxson, are described as white, middle class, female-identifying lesbians but as mothers of an 18 year old son, I assumed them to be older than the 15 to 17 year olds featured in the other books. Rey, a lesbian in Villasante's *The Grief Keeper*, also falls into this category save that she is upper class, rather than middle class.

After examining these initial characters, it was clear that female adolescents identifying as lesbian have multiple opportunities to connect with relevant characters given the representation present in half of the novels analyzed. Eight additional female characters share many aspects, increasing the chances for a white, middle class, cis-female, lesbian reader to find connection with one or more of the characters. A minor character, 16 years-old T'Nea, in *Everything Grows: A Novel*, for example, is a middle class, female character identifying as LGBTQ. Written as the main character's love interest, T'Nea is described as having a darker complexion, yet also identifies as lesbian.

While she fits within the identification of middle class female characters, T'Nea expands the possibilities to reach various readers through her existence as a woman of color. The inclusion of female characters of color further broadened the opportunities for queer adolescents to see themselves reflected in young adult literature.

Seventeen year-olds, Marisol in *The Grief Keeper* and Dani and Carmen in *We Set the Dark on Fire*, are all Latinx characters who come from lower class families. While Marisol and Dani identify as lesbian, Carmen, a character who is surprised by her own attraction to another female, identifies as bisexual or questioning. Flor, a fourth, female Latinx character featured in *Everything Grows: A Novel*, is another addition to the group of middle class lesbians represented in the literature. However, Flor is distinct in that she is Latinx, not white, and described as being nearly 50 years old. She therefore did not fall into the larger group of 15-17 year olds. Flor provides a strong, positive, and independent role model for readers looking towards their future as LGBTQ individuals.

In a similar way, female characters Haruko and Saki in Kamatani's *Our Dreams at Dusk* are in a committed lesbian relationship, providing a glimpse of what LGBTQ youth may look forward to in the future. They live together in a comfortable middle class home and demonstrate a healthy relationship between two Japanese women. As a couple living on their own, I assumed that they are older than teenagers, but their exact ages are not given in the book.

While the female characters depicted in the analyzed novels are diverse in a variety of ways, the majority of them identify as lesbians between the ages of 15 and 17. Within that group, readers of varying race, culture and class may find connections and

see themselves reflected in those characters. However, representation of females who identify as bisexual, asexual, questioning, or any number of other identities along the spectrum of LGBTQ was missing from these works. As an author cannot predict who a reader might connect with, an increase in characters identifying as bisexual, asexual, questioning, etc. would also increase opportunities for connections and further expose readers to a wider variety of identities.

### **Representation of Male, Nonbinary, and Transgender Characters**

Characters identifying as male, nonbinary, or transgender proved to be underrepresented throughout the 10 novels analyzed. Out of the 26 characters who identify as LGBTQ, only seven are male, two are nonbinary, and one is transgender. These characters, both major and minor, appear in six of the ten novels: *All the Bad Apples*, *Everything Grows: A Novel*, Deaver's *I Wish You All the Best*, *Our Dreams at Dusk*, *Social Intercourse*, and Silverman's *You Asked for Perfect*. This group, while smaller than the number of female characters featured in the analyzed works, show more diversity of demographics, sexual orientation and comfort with their sexual identity.

#### *Gay Characters*

Seven of the 26 characters identify as male and four of those seven identify as gay and all around the same age. Beyond gender, age, and sexual orientation, these four characters share little in common. Amir, a minor character in *You Asked for Perfect*, is the 17 year-old love interest of the main character, a bisexual male named Ariel. Amir is a gay, Muslim senior who is very comfortable in his sexuality. Raised in a middle class home, his parents are comfortable with their son's sexuality and even root for the two

young men to get together, indicating they are supportive of who he is in terms of his sexual identity. As Amir is a minor character, I did not learn much more about him beyond his orientation which is an interesting note regarding the theme of underrepresentation of male gay characters.

*Our Dreams at Dusk*, a graphic novel, offers another male gay high school student, Tasukun. The main character of the story, a Japanese middle class student, Tasukun comes off as very timid and does not want the focus to be on him. As his peers bully him, he hopes for nothing more than everything to go back to how it used to be, that is, before his peers singled him out for being gay. Tasukun's age is unspecified but it is clear to the reader that he is a high school student given it was his classmates who ridiculed him for being gay. Unlike Amir, Tasukun is not comfortable in his sexuality and denies it when his classmates question him, even resorting to attempting suicide due to his treatment. While the reader is not privy to his homelife or relationships with his family, the absence of his family suggest that they are either unaware of his homosexuality or unsupportive. Unfortunately, Tasukun's behavior matches the tragic statistics that show that LGBTQ teens are more prone than their straight peers to suicidal tendencies.

Beckett, one of the main characters in *Social Intercourse*, is also a male, 17 year-old, gay student. Beckett identifies as a white, middle class male who is very comfortable in his sexuality. He even mentions that he was probably born "wearing a tiara, swaddled in a rainbow flag, and belting out 'It's Raining Men' at the top of my gay baby lungs," (Howard, 2019, p. 4). Even though Beckett's mom is missing from his life



throughout the beginning of the novel, both parents are very comfortable having a gay son and it is not a point of contention. While lucky enough to experience a positive relationship, readers are not spared the unfortunate abuse that Beckett endured as a middle school student. The narrator explains how, in his past, Beckett was called derogatory names and suffered physical abuse, something all too commonly seen in novels and real life experiences.

### *Bisexual Male Characters*

Out of the 26 LGBTQ characters, only three male characters identify as bisexual; two major characters and one minor character. One of the major characters, Ariel, identifies as a Jewish, middle class, 17 year-old student. Comfortable in his bisexual identity, Ariel is close to his family and is a hard working, high achieving student eager to head off to an ivy league college. While his family's Jewish culture is obvious and present, his race is not. Ariel's family participates in several family dinners where they share favorite Jewish dishes, such as matzo ball soup, and where they talk about their days, implying a strong family bond. This is also apparent, as previously mentioned, as Ariel's parents and Amir's parents are excited when the two boys enter into a relationship. This is another example of a positive family relationship and approving parents.

The characters in *Social Intercourse* are also fortunate enough to experience positive, supportive parents. Jaxon is also 17 years old, white, and male. While this alone does not make Jaxon unique among characters, he does prove to be unique in other ways. Jaxon is one of the very few characters depicted in the sample who is questioning his

identity, making him a great connection for adolescents who are not completely certain of their sexuality. Jaxon is also unique in that he is a typical jock, a popular, top-of-the-totem-pole kind of character surrounded by fellow jocks and cheerleaders.

While it was refreshing to see a character as such, it came with the expected homophobia.

Howard (2019) showed Jaxon's pain:

“Beck I never called you a name, and I certainly never laid a hand on you. I would never do that.” “No. But you were there, and you did nothing.” The words hang in the air between us like three bullets traveling in slow motion. Aimed at me. You did nothing. “Actually, you did do something,” he says with a crack in his voice that resonates in my chest. “You laughed. When they called me names like ‘skinny little faggot,’ you laughed. When they pushed me around, you did something too. You walked away. You were the rising star of the JV team and becoming one of the most popular kids in school. All those guys looked up to you. Hell, I looked up to you. And you have two moms. Of all people, I thought you would stand up for me. But you never did.” (pp. 153-154)

This makes for an interesting internal struggle for Jaxon as he, the son of LGBTQ mothers, is proud of them and is their ally, yet is confused by his feelings and resistant to share that fact with others who may not approve. Jaxon's situation highlighted how many adolescents may feel in a similar position as Jaxon: conflicted, yet not wanting to stand out apart from his teammates and allowing those fears to win over being an ally and being his true self.

Like Ariel, Jaxon is part of a very supportive family. His moms joke about his sexuality showing that they are comfortable with him being straight, gay, bisexual, or any other sexual identity. Another bisexual male, Finn of *All the Bad Apples*, proves also to be supported in a family where he has strong, solid relationships with his parents. Finn, a minor character, is confident in his sexuality and who he is. While readers do not get to

know Finn as well as a main character, he is described as 17 years old, middle class, black, Irish, and bisexual. There are only three male bisexual characters throughout the 26 LGBTQ characters in the 10 novels examined, yet Finn, Jaxon, and Ariel do provide diversity. The three male characters are all 17 years old and in high school, but these three are of different races, cultures, and levels of comfort with their LGTQ identity.

### *Nonbinary Characters*

Nonbinary characters, an underrepresented group, accounted for only two characters out of 26. Ben and Mariam, both in Deaver's *I Wish You All the Best* are friends who met online through a website for nonbinary individuals. Ben, 18, and Mariam, a college graduate, share little in common save the fact that they both identify as nonbinary.

Ben, the main character, is a white, middle class individual who comes out to their parents as nonbinary and is kicked out for it. Unfortunately, the rejection does not come as a surprise as homophobia is overtly exhibited by Ben's parents. Ben, who indicates a preference for they/them pronouns, finds a safe haven in the home of their estranged sister and brother-in-law. It is a relief that Ben finds safety, when so many rejected teens turn to self-harm out of depression and feelings of rejection. Nonbinary teens may find a connection with Ben and identify with their uncertainty regarding their feelings.

Though unsure of what they want, Ben is certain in their attraction to Nathan, a minor character in the story. The relationship is organic and a beautiful way to show that Ben is attracted to Nathan, but as a binary individual, is not exclusively attracted to

males. This is an important existence for nonbinary teens to see as they may be experiencing similar feelings.

Mariam, a nonbinary character attracted to men, lives far from Ben and their interactions are mostly online through text or video calls. Miriam is of Persian descent and wears a hijab, adding another dimension of diversity to the range of LGBTQ characters present in YA novels and increasing the possibility for connection that readers may find. As a young adult, Mariam is quite comfortable in their identity which made for a strong ally and role model for Ben who is beginning their journey of coming out.

The character of Mariam also plays an important role in sharing additional sexual identity terms, exposing the reader to new terminology. Mariam is a constant source of encouragement for Ben and therefore is comfortable joining a group where they meet Ava, a pan and gender-fluid individual and Blair, an aromantic transgender girl. While not developed characters in the novel, they are simply mentioned, it was refreshing to broaden the view of what LGBTQ can look like.

#### *Transgender Characters*

The final underrepresented group yet still present in the literature examined was transgender individuals. Out of 26 LGBTQ characters only one, Reigh in Herman's (2019) *Everything Grows* identifies as transgender and she is a minor character at that. There are hints of Eleanor, another character in the same novel, feeling that she may identify as transgender, but it is not confirmed. Eleanor finds comfort as Reigh answers questions about her own transition and reassures her with empowering words, "Eler, you

can call yourself anything you want. Hell, you can make up a word. This is your existence. Your words are free; you get to use whichever ones you want” (p. 165).

Unfortunately, little is revealed of Reigh making it tough for readers to connect with her. What is demonstrated is that Reigh is a confident, kind hearted transgender, or transexual to use the author’s term, person. Reigh’s character seems to serve more as a mentor and confidant to Eleanor than as a strong representation of transgender individuals for the reader. As an employee at a restaurant, I assumed Reigh to be an adult living on her own, though her exact age is not revealed. She is described as being beautiful with blonde hair, but her race or culture, socioeconomic status, and sexual orientation are unknown. Nevertheless, she provides an image of a successful, confident woman for Eleanor who is questioning her own identity. This novel was rich in LGBTQ characters and while I did not learn as much about Reigh as hoped, Reigh is an important role model for the main character and to adolescents who can relate to her.

### **Character Conflicts Are Dependent upon Sexual Identity and Orientation**

When I analyzed all characters identifying as LGBTQ, it was apparent that while females were more widely represented, they also carried more weight on their shoulders in terms of what they dealt with in their lives. That is to say, the conflicts among these characters focused less on the character’s sexual identity alone and varied greatly from relationships, to immigrant status, safety, family and peer conflicts, among other matters. Male, nonbinary, and transgender characters, on the other hand, focused mostly on their sexual identity. Of course there were distinct storylines, however there were similar points of concern among these characters. Overall, most of these characters were

preoccupied primarily with coming to terms with their sexuality and the effect on their lives.

### *Female Characters Deal with Multiple Conflicts*

While lesbians make up a large, unified group, their personal stories and conflicts within plotlines vary greatly. This provides possible connections for many female readers who identify as lesbian. Their conflicts vary from physical safety, family concerns, to conflicts with peers all while still dealing with their sexual identity and the lack of acceptance accompanying it. What is noteworthy here is that the female characters' main concerns are generally not their sexuality, but rather that is just one layer of their many conflicts.

### **Safety**

Safety and the future are main concerns for two of the female characters. These identify as female, low-income, lesbian or questioning, and Latinx. Interestingly, only four out of the 26 LGBTQ characters are Latinx and the two who are main characters, Marisol in *The Grief Keeper* and Dani in *We Set the Dark on Fire*, are of low-income status and concerned about their safety and their future. Whether a simple coincidence or a reflection on today's society, this provides additional opportunities for LGBTQ Latinas to connect with these characters. In these cases, the characters' sexuality plays a part in the plotlines, but is secondary to their need to feel safe, secure, and respected.

In Villasante's *The Grief Keeper*, seventeen year-old Marisol's main concern is to travel from El Salvador with her younger sister, Gabi, arrive safely, and make a home in the United States. Fleeing from gang violence and threats after their brother was

murdered; she and her sister fend for themselves as they hope to make a home where they can send for their mother and bring her to safety as well. Marisol even accepts a deal offering to bring them to safety in exchange for participating in an experimental medical procedure which redirects grief experienced by individuals with PTSD. As Marisol puts it, “What is a little grief in exchange for safety?” (p. 74). Marisol understands that this experiment is dangerous and has its risks, yet she is willing to overlook all of that for the sake of the safety of her family and herself.

Amongst her worries about finding safety from gangs, Marisol struggles, hoping to fit in as an American, uncertain of her sexuality, and dealing with past abuse and homophobia. Nevertheless, she continues to put others before herself. While it was certainly a factor in her fleeing El Salvador, Marisol’s identity comes second to the safety of her family, partly because she fears that her attraction to women is the reason her family is going through this turmoil. Whether or not correct, this is a lot to put on the shoulders of a 17 year-old girl. Marisol consistently demonstrates that it is her responsibility to provide for and to protect her sister. “That’s my job, I think. I’m supposed to protect Gabi,” (Villasante, 2019, p. 234). Her need to survive and protect comes first before she can think about feeling comfortable and accepted for her sexuality. All in all, the topic of her sexuality was undeniably present but as a secondary aspect of the novel.

The love story aspect of *The Grief Keeper* was an unexpected occurrence, but the focus remained on safety and the future. Villasante (2019) expressed Marisol's doubt and uncertainty as she and Rey reach for each other's hands under the covers:

“This isn't bulls' shit. Right? You and me?” I have to ask, even though I'm inviting disaster by putting it into words. She could drop my hand and turn away. She could tell me we're just good friends. Rey shakes her head gravely. “No bullshit,” she replies (p. 249).

The girls found each other, grief stricken and bonding after the loss of their brothers. This display of a LGBTQ relationship was not a typical teen love story, but one full of doubt reflecting the uncertainty in other aspects of their lives. Similarly, Dani and Carmen in *We Set the Dark on Fire* juggled substantial matters simultaneously.

Dani and Carmen live in a world where men are thought to be deserving of two wives. *Primera*, the Spanish word for *first* represents the logical, intellectual equal of a man and *Segunda*, the Spanish word for *second*, represents the passionate and sexual counterpart to a man. At 17 years old, both Dani and Carmen are training to be wives to the same man. Dani, a lesbian, is training to be the *Primera* while Carmen, a questioning LGBTQ individual, is training to be the *Segunda*. In the midst of this training, Dani is asked to spy for a group fighting against this inequality and she risks her well-being for the chance at a life that a man is given without question. For example, when Dani is being convinced to spy on a friend for the sake of the resistance organization, *La Voz*, and refuses she is met with a reminder of how poorly she was treated. Her response was surprising, “‘It doesn't *matter!*’ Dani says, finally breaking, just a hairline crack. ‘It doesn't matter if I like them or I don't. If I want this life or I don't. This is what I have.



This is how I survive” (Mejia, 2019, p. 99). How Dani feels about her priorities and her life is clear; Dani does not have the luxury of making friends or feeling that she is treated well, her goal is to survive and that takes precedence over anything else.

While not the focus, Dani’s sexuality plays a role in the plotline as well. Just like Marisol and Rey’s relationship, Dani and Carmen’s is unexpected. It is of note that as many novels focus on the main character’s sexual identity and coming out story, this relationship happens organically. Dani is not looking for love or a relationship, but finds it in her counterpart, Carmen. The relationship seems almost accidental and incidental, an occurrence that happens by chance while something more important and pressing is happening. Even when the two women are in the middle of a conversation about their future together, Dani is distracted as she looks out for a fellow classmate, Jasmin. “‘I have to go,’ she says, more to herself than Carmen. ‘I have to make sure she’s safe’” (Mejia, 2019, p. 354). Throughout the novels, Dani’s top priority proved to be survival.

### **Family**

A common storyline across the books examined and source of concern for characters was the relationship between female characters and their family members. Main characters in *All the Bad Apples*, *Everything Grows: A Novel*, and *Kiss Number 8* demonstrate this. While the sexuality of the characters is a focus explored, their priority is maintaining their familial connections. The subject of sexual identity is certainly present, but again, it is secondary to the concerns related to preserving family ties.

Deena, 17 year-old lesbian in *All the Bad Apples*, is distressed by her sexuality and her family’s acceptance of her, but it is not her main focus. Her fear of being outed

ignites the story, but it is her sister, Mandy, and her disappearance that troubles Deena the most. Believing that Mandy is alive while others presume her dead, Deena sets out to find her and learns of her family's history and curse in the process. It is on this mission that she meets and, similarly to Marisol and Rey and also Dani and Carmen, happens to find a love interest along the way. Fowley-Doyle (2019) explained how Deena feels:

My face lit up like a beacon at how much I wanted to connect with this strange, pretty girl who seemed to live her life with an authenticity I could only dream of. Instead, I let Ida lead the conversation to talk of childhood and grandparents, music and TV, as it to keep us all from memories of the laundry, of Mandy's letters, of old ghosts. (p. 220)

Deena clearly expresses her interest in this stranger, Cale, yet does not allow herself to linger on it, instead pushing it aside to focus on her sister and her family. Even Deena and Cale's passionate kiss, a moment for which readers waited hundreds of pages, is cut short by Deena's friends who want to discuss Mandy's whereabouts and the next steps of finding her. Within a page the kiss was forgotten.

The focus remains on the main character's feelings: "I missed Mandy like a thirst, something so vital I couldn't not think of it" (Fowley-Doyle, 2019, p. 153). Expressing her feelings for her missing sister as a "thirst" indicated that it was a need, a major point of worry and anxiety, not a trivial desire. The fact that Deena believes her sister to be alive when everyone else assumes her to be dead shows her connection to her sister, and lack of willingness to accept that she is gone. Thus, readers are led to believe that the relationship between Deena and Mandy is incredibly important, even more so than Deena's grappling with her sexuality or coming out to others.

The theme of family concern was obvious in Eleanor of *Everything Grows: A Novel*. Eleanor experiences life after her mother's attempted suicide and is understandably concerned for her wellbeing moving forward. Herman (2019) expressed how Eleanor struggles to find the words as she asked,

“How are... are you... have you had any...” Oh gosh, I guess it isn't so easy to ask your mom if she's thought of killing herself recently. Shirley just looked at me blankly. “Are you gonna try to kill yourself again?” (p. 96)

Highlighted by the author through the use of ellipses, Eleanor shows her fear, and hesitation as she asks that difficult question. While admittedly, *Everything Grows* focuses on the main character's sexual identity more so than other novels, Eleanor still has an incredible, constant worry regarding her mother's mental health. Throughout the novel, she attends a suicide survival support group, suggesting that it is a big part of her life. Eleanor was yet another example of a main character struggling to understand her own sexual identity while also bearing the weight of another problem.

### **Peers**

Characters Hannah and Veronica in Sterling's *These Witches Don't Burn* experienced typical teenage issues as well as some very unique ones as they are practicing witches. These characters, both white, middle class, lesbian witches are concerned with dating and social gatherings as well as working on their witchcraft. Noteworthy of the characters' conflicts is their normalized peer interactions despite their identity as LGBTQ characters. Early on in the novel, a male classmate asks Hannah out on a date and her confident, casual response is that she is, in her words “a huge lesbian” (Sterling, 2019, p. 12) and the two move on with only slight embarrassment. It was

previously known and accepted by classmates and parents that Hannah identifies as a lesbian and therefore is not the focus on the storyline.

In this novel featuring magic realism, Hannah and Veronica concern themselves with their safety relating to dangerous witchcraft, yet issues with peers take precedence. As ex-girlfriends, Veronica and Hannah still feel residual feelings the same as heterosexual teen couples. Hannah deals with her breakup from Veronica and meets a new love interest, Morgan, while dealing with jealousy as Veronica finds a new girlfriend of her own. Hannah receives support from her parents without question. Hannah's sexuality is not a factor in her parents' love for her as evidenced by her mom's reaction when Hannah tells her that she learned Veronica was intimate with a new girlfriend.

Sterling (2019) explained:

Mom rubs little circles on my back, the way she used to when I wasn't feeling well as a kid. She waits patiently, letting me cry snotty tears into her shoulder... "I'm so sorry, baby. It's hard when the people we loved move on without us." (p. 209)

Hannah's mom comforted her with the love of a mother and it was clear that her daughter's sexuality had no impact on her degree of love for her.

Likewise, in Venable's graphic novel, *Kiss Number 8*, Amanda's life and conflicts mostly revolve around her peers. Amanda experiences typical teenage matters such as fights with her best friends, Cat and Laura, as well as excessive partying and being grounded by her parents. In addition to these matters, she struggles to figure out where a mysterious letter and check addressed to her came from, but much of the graphic novel focuses on Amanda's relationships with her peers. Even after learning that her

grandmother was transgender and her father was upset about it, the issue turns into a fight with her peers as her best friend tells others about it chalking it up to a funny story. This provides a conflict between friends, but also sends the message that while funny to some, being transgender or having a family member who identifies as such is not a joke.

It is an event with a peer, Laura, when the source of the book's title *Kiss Number 8* becomes apparent and where Amanda's sexuality comes into play. It is Amanda's eighth kiss, her first with a female, where Amanda faces rejection from friends and her own father and, surprisingly, acceptance from her otherwise distant mother. Interestingly, Amanda's focus is on relationships with her friends and losing them after coming to terms with her sexual identity.

*Male, Nonbinary, and Transgender Characters Deal With Fewer Conflicts*

Out of the 10 characters present in the novels examined who identify as male, nonbinary, or transgender, only five of these are major characters in their respective stories. This being the case, it came as no surprise that there were fewer themes present among those five characters. The majority of these major characters focused primarily on their sexual identity. Unlike the emerging themes from female main characters, those of the male, nonbinary, and transgender characters were less varied, traditional, and expected by the reader. In particular, I, as a reader, expected a theme revolving around sexual identity. While the importance was not to be minimized, this repeated theme is worthy of note. Themes relating to male, nonbinary, and transgender characters rarely ventured outside of uncovering who they are in terms of sexual identity.

## Sexual Identity and Acceptance

Main characters Jaxon in Howard's *Social Intercourse*, Ben in Deaver's *I Wish You All the Best*, and Tasukun in Katatani's *Our Dreams at Dusk* focused predominantly on their sexual identities and plotlines revolving around that subject. For example, Jaxon, a typical jock, discovers his bisexuality as he is confused by his feelings for his openly gay classmate, Beckett, while still enjoying the life and relationship he has with his girlfriend. This was an important depiction of a male experiencing confused thoughts and learning about himself. Jaxon expresses his hesitation to come out as he is aware of the homophobia of his football teammates. The more he hears, the more hesitant he is to accept himself and to come out to his peers and family. For instance, when the football team is training in the gym and Jaxon hears a teammate use the term "fag", Jaxon asks him not to use the word. Howard (2019) told how Jaxon's teammate responds:

"Okay then, gay," Billy says with air quotes and an eye roll. "Gay, queer, fag, lesbian - six of one, half dozen of the other," Bobby says. "Pastor Doug says they're all going to the same hell." Something deep inside me snaps. (p. 103)

It was clear to me that Jaxon does not approve of this sentiment of damnation as something "snapped" inside of him at its mention and yet ultimately Jaxon does nothing to stop it. He is dealing with an intense internal struggle that is shared by other questioning youth: How can he be true to himself while retaining the respect and acceptance of his teammates?

Jaxon's other main focus is on his parents: his lesbian mothers who adopted and raised him in a house full of love and support. He is shocked to find out that his parents separated and his mother, Tracee, recently entered into a heterosexual relationship. Jaxon

adds this to his concerns, but coming to terms with his sexuality and coming out remains the number one focus of the novel. Luckily for Jaxon, his LGBTQ mothers are supportive and encouraging of him and, unlike others, he does not need to worry about coming out to his parents, but can focus on coming to terms with it himself.

Much like Jaxon, nonbinary main character Ben experiences a coming out story of their own which provides the main focus of the novel. In contrast to Jaxon's treatment by his parents, Ben comes out to their parents and is immediately kicked out. Without explanation, Ben's father tells them to get out and Ben's reaction is clearly shared with the reader: "I didn't even know it was possible for Dad to look at me the way he had, it was... Terrifying" (Deaver, 2019, p. 10). Their mother's response is no more supportive: "God doesn't want this for you, Ben" (p. 11). As a result, they are forced to deal with enrolling in a new school as a senior in high school, catching up on the curriculum, struggling to meet new friends, and dealing with anxiety. While there were several small concerns for them to consider, they were propelled by Ben's coming out and their continued uncertainty about doing so.

Yet another example of dealing with sexual identity and acceptance as the main focus of a storyline was Tasukun in *Our Dreams at Dusk*. Tasukun is outed by his classmates and as he tries to deny it, his feelings lead him to attempt suicide. After witnessing a woman leap out of a window, Tasukun searches for her to help, but instead he finds what is known as "the drop-in center" which is full of individuals who are looking for safety and acceptance. The owner is the mysterious woman who continually leaps from a window, yet remains unharmed, sending the message that this space is

unique, magical, and unreal. The message sent was that while these LGBTQ identifying characters exist, perhaps a safe place for them does not.

Through this space, Tasukun meets Haruko and Saki who provide positive relationships, yet more examples of lack of support. The couple, adults living together, have yet to tell their parents about their committed same-sex relationship. This accompanied by the fact that Tasukun had to find a safe space to be himself, sent the message that his home life is not accepting or supportive of him. In such a brief graphic novel, the storyline did not have room to stray from the topic of Tasukun's sexual identity and left the reader wondering and wanting more.

### **Traditional Teenage Conflicts**

Two characters, Beckett in *Social Intercourse* and Ariel in *You Asked For Perfect*, were rare and unique among the novels examined in that the storylines did not solely revolve around their sexual identity. Both characters are confident in their sexuality and are accepted and supported by their parents. Beckett's father shows his approval as he lightheartedly jokes about all the boys Beckett has to fend off and by joining the PFLAG group, Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, demonstrated that his son's gayness does not bother him or negatively impact his love for him. As a high school senior, Beckett's initial concern is losing his virginity, which he attempts through use of a phone app to find other single gay men looking to "hook up" without entering into a relationship. Beckett further concerns himself with his father's relationship with one of Jaxon's mothers as well as dealing with the strained relationship with his own mother. He confronts this all while experiencing a crush on his classmate, Jaxon. Clearly, Beckett is



dealing with multiple problems, but unlike Tasukun, Jaxon, and Ben, accepting his sexuality is not one of them.

In *You Asked For Perfect*, Ariel's parents are also quite supportive of him and his relationship with his boyfriend, Amir. His mother told him: "Mrs. Naeem and I always said you two would be cute together. Now when did this start? I noticed you talking at Rachel's game. You know we support that you're gay, right?" When Ariel corrects her with "bisexual," she shows her support once again: "Yes, right! I'm sorry. That's what I meant - I don't care that you're bisexual. I mean, I do care. In a good way" (Silverman, 2019, p. 160). The reader was fortunate enough to experience positive, supportive allies in Ariel's parents and this was a factor in allowing the novel to focus on other concerns than the main character's sexuality. In a way, this helped to normalize identifying as LGBTQ. Ariel is a person struggling with the stress and anxiety of his senior year and he happens to be bisexual. His main problems throughout the novel are keeping his grades up as he is in the running for valedictorian, holding his first chair placement in orchestra, preparing for his Harvard interview, and being a good friend all in an attempt to be perfect, as the title *You Asked For Perfect* suggests.

I found Beckett and Ariel to be unique characters in that they are confident in who they are and live with supportive family members. This allowed the storylines to focus on other issues, the same ones that one might find in a novel featuring heterosexual characters. It is noteworthy that so few male characters focused on issues other than coming out or coming to terms with their sexual identity. Storylines revolving around sexual identity as well as the various themes in the female characters' conflicts certainly

have their place in literature. Exposure to readers of novels consisting of varied characters dealing with numerous themes increases the opportunities for them to connect and see themselves reflected and validated.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

This qualitative content analysis study examines the representation of LGBTQ characters in 10 young adult literature published in 2019 in light of rising numbers of self-harm and suicide among youth who identify as LGBTQ. Novels were identified using the WorldCat Online Database and the search delimiters of year of publication, LGBTQ, young adult, and fiction yielded 30 novels. Every third novel was randomly selected, narrowing the sample. Novels were read and analyzed using an initial coding list to consider the following factors: sexual identity, age, socioeconomic status, race or culture, major or minor character, sexual orientation, appearance, permanence of sexual orientation, and relationship status.

Results showed that lesbians were well represented while gay and bisexual men, non-binary, and transgender characters were underrepresented. Results also revealed that female characters generally dealt with sexual identity and/or orientation and an additional conflict. Males, nonbinary, and transgender characters generally focused solely on sexual identity and/or orientation and were not occupied with another concern concurrently. This study shows that while LGBTQ YA literature has come a long way, there is much work to be done. Specifically, LGBTQ literature needs more works featuring characters who

identify as nonbinary, transgender, males who identify as gay or bisexual as well as characters who are aromantic, asexual, gender fluid, or otherwise queer.

### **Conclusions**

After reading and analyzing the representation of LGBTQ characters found in 10 YA fiction novels published in 2019, it was evident that YA literature has come a long way, yet it is not where it needs to be in order to reach LGBTQ youth at risk. Previous research showed that youth found that LGBTQ literature focused a great deal on individuals who identify as gay, lesbian, and queer (Jenkins, 1998). When compared to Jenkin's work, this current research study shows that literature has indeed progressed greatly over these 22 years as main characters analyzed in this reseatch study identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual males and females, nonbinary, and transgender.

Lesbians were well represented in the LGBT literature, particularly white, middle class lesbians between the ages 15 and 17. The majority of the lesbian characters dealt with their sexual identity while also carrying the weight of another conflict. Females of color or varying culture, those younger than 15 years old, and storylines focusing on the process of self discovery and sexual identity were underrepresented. Middle class characters were overrepresented displaying less diversity of economic status. Furthermore, males who are gay or bisexual, nonbinary individuals, and transgender individuals were present, but underrepresented. Most of these characters were middle class, 17 year-old students dealing primarily with their sexual identities. Though races

and cultures were represented, there is room for expansion as the represented characters did not represent the full range of readers who might seek to engage with them.

Literature featuring LGBTQ characters has come a long way, as evidenced by one novel going so far as to mention aromantic and pansexual individuals. However, characters who identify as such were non-existent in the sample of books used for this research. While readers identifying as aromantic, pansexual, asexual, or a number of other identities on the LGBTQ spectrum may make connections to the characters analyzed in these novels, the probability of a connection can only be increased as more identities are represented in young adult literature. The majority of characters also proved to remain constant and did not show a change in their sexual identities throughout the novels despite that gender, sexual orientation, and identity are fluid. This inadvertently sends the message that these characteristics are fixed. An increase in literature featuring LGBTQ content combined with the expansion of gender fluidity, additional sexual orientation and identities would allow more adolescents at risk to be reached.

A further indication of progress toward inclusion is the sheer number of novels featuring LGBTQ characters. The original sample of 30 novels published in 2019 meeting the criteria was simply too large to be feasibly analyzed for in this master's research paper and needed to be reduced. This was a good indicator that books featuring LGBTQ characters exist and can be added to school library collections. Nevertheless, work still needs to be done to increase the variety of characters included.

### **Recommendations**

Teacher Librarians must consider their students walking through the library amongst shelves and vibrant new book displays and keep in mind the need and means to serve them all. These 10 novels are helpful in providing this service and should be considered introducing into a school's collection. All readers are unique and do not fit into predetermined categories no matter how hard anyone may try. Their needs and interests are unique. Just as Teacher Librarians aim to fill collections with works to meet the needs of all fantasy readers, science fiction readers, mystery readers, etc., they must likewise include literature for all LGBTQ readers. It is not enough to simply include novels featuring gay and lesbian characters when that only skims the surface of what it can mean to identify as LGBTQ. Of course these should be included, but it is a Teacher Librarian's duty to continue to educate themselves and to seek out more diverse, current, LGBTQ literature so that they may reach all readers and their needs.

A diverse collection is not only beneficial for LGBTQ youth, but for all readers. Literature is often referred to as a mirror where readers might see themselves reflected, however literature is also an important window (Batchelor et al., 2018, pp. 33-34). It is a means to learn, grow, and gain exposure to new views. Just as novels featuring African American characters benefit readers of all cultures and races as they learn and build empathy, novels featuring LGBTQ characters allow for readers to grow in compassion, leading to what is hopefully a more accepting society full of grace and understanding.

As Teacher Librarians look to build their collections, they should imagine the student who might approach them asking for a book with a pansexual main character, a book about a transgender character having a hard time with their family, or a book about

a lesbian character who feels lost and alone. Moreover, they need to consider those who desire a book with such content, yet are too timid to ask. Adolescence is a time of self-discovery, and while students may be in the midst of their own journey or may not share their discoveries, educators have the power to make the literature available to them rich in characters with whom they might connect.

Literature is powerful. In a society where too many students are feeling overlooked and undervalued (Human Rights Campaign, 2018), curating more diverse collections can help to reach more students and lessen the tragic statistics of self-harm and suicide as more individuals feel validated, recognized, and accepted. Teacher Librarians have the opportunity to reach these students and there is no excuse for not striving to do so (Levithan, 2004). Further studies should be conducted as new novels featuring LGBTQ youth are released in the coming years with perhaps a look at the genres represented. This effort would further support readers of varying interests. It is a professional and ethical obligation of Teacher Librarians to do all they can to serve and support readers of all types and interests. This study has provided guidance for Teacher Librarians in this effort.

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## APPENDIX A

## BOOK LIST

Deaver, M. (2019). *I wish you all the best*. Push.

Fowley-Doyle, M. (2019). *All the bad apples*. Penguin Random House.

Herman, A. (2019). *Everything grows: A novel*. Three Rooms Press.

Howard, G. (2019). *Social intercourse*. Simon and Schuster Books for Young Readers.

Kamantani, Y. (2019). *Our dreams at dusk* (Allen, J. Trans.). Seven Seas.

Mejia, T. K. (2019). *We set the dark on fire*. Katherine Tegen Books.

Silverman, L. (2019). *You asked for perfect*. Sourcebooks Fire.

Sterling, I. (2019). *These witches don't burn*. Razorbill.

Venable, C. F. & Crenshaw, E. T. (2019). *Kiss number 8*. First Second Books.

Villasante, A. (2019). *The grief keeper*. G. P. Putnam's Sons Books for Young Readers.

APPENDIX B  
BOOK EVALUATION CHART CODING MANUAL

Sex	<p>Accepted as indicated or assumptions are as follows:</p> <p>Male = Use of he/him pronouns</p> <p>Female = Use of she/her pronouns</p> <p>Non-binanry = Use of they/them pronouns (used for a single individual)</p>
Age	<p>Accepted as stated or assumptions are as follows:</p> <p>Freshman in high school = 14</p> <p>Sophomore in high school = 15</p> <p>Junior in high school = 16</p> <p>Senior in high school = 17</p>
Class	<p>Accepted as stated or assumptions are as follows:</p> <p>Low-income = indications of financial struggle to meet basic necessary needs included but not limited to housing, transportation, food, etc.</p> <p>Middle = no mention of aspects from upper or low-income</p> <p>Upper = indications of being financially well off including but not limited to fine furnishing, traditionally wealthy home and transportation items, etc.</p>
Race or Culture	Accepted as stated; no assumptions are made
Sexual Orientation	<p>Accepted as stated or assumptions are as follows:</p> <p>Males in a relationship or indicating attraction to same sex = gay</p> <p>Females in a relationship or indicating attraction to same sex = lesbian</p> <p>Individuals in a relationship or indicating attraction to both sexes = bisexual</p> <p>Individuals in a relationship or indicating attraction to opposite sex = heterosexual</p>

Major/Minor Character	<p>Major Character refers to an individual who is predominantly present throughout the novel; i.e. they are present in most or all chapters and the plotline revolves around the character</p> <p>Minor Character refers to an individual who is throughout some of the novel, but the plot does not revolve around said character</p>
Appearance	<p>Accepted as stated or assumptions are as follows:</p> <p>Attractive = requires positive commentary on a character's physical attributes</p> <p>Neutral = no description or a matter of fact description</p> <p>Unattractive = requires negative commentary on a character's physical attributes</p>
Permanence of Sexual Orientation	<p>Remain = indicates that a character's sexual orientation does not change throughout the novel</p> <p>Change = indicates that a character's sexual orientation changes from one sexual orientation to another throughout the novel</p>
Relationship Status	<p>Accepted as stated or assumptions are as follows:</p> <p>Single = not in a romantic or sexual relationship</p> <p>Partnered = in a romantic or sexual relationship</p> <p>Looking = character indicates that they want to be in a romantic or sexual relationship, but they are not</p>

## APPENDIX C

## DEFINITIONS

*This study used Merriam-Webster's definitions.*

- **Aromantic** = having little or no romantic feeling toward others : experiencing little or no romantic desire or attraction
- **Bisexual** = of, relating to, or characterized by sexual or romantic attraction to members of both sexes
- **Gay** = of, relating to, or characterized by a tendency to direct sexual desire toward another of the same sex
- **Lesbian** = of or relating to homosexuality between females
- **Nonbinary** = relating to or being a person who identifies with or expresses a gender identity that is neither entirely male nor entirely female
- **Pansexual** = of, relating to, or characterized by sexual or romantic attraction that is not limited to people of a particular gender identity or sexual orientation
- **Transgender** = of, relating to, or being a person whose gender identity differs from the sex the person had or was identified as having at birth
- **Transexual** = of, relating to, or being a person whose gender identity is opposite the sex the person had or was identified as having at birth
- **Queer** = sexually attracted to members of the same sex
  - In this study the term “Queer” may also refer to questioning individual who does not identify with any of the above terms.