

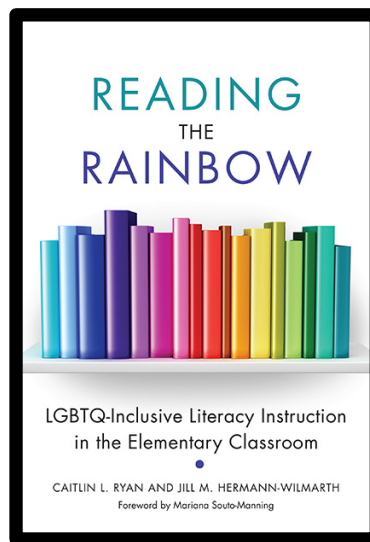
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Reading the Rainbow: LGBTQ-inclusive Literacy Instruction in the Elementary Classroom

By Caitlin L. Ryan and Jill M. Hermann-Wilmarth

Reviewer: Stephen Adam Crawley
Oklahoma State University
Stillwater, Oklahoma



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As stated in the “About the Authors” page near the end of the book, Caitlin L. Ryan and Jill M. Hermann-Wilmarth have been “researching, writing, and presenting together since 2007” (p. 139). It is with this decade-plus collaboration that they wrote *Reading the Rainbow: LGBTQ-Inclusive Literacy Instruction in the Elementary Classroom*. As a former elementary teacher and current teacher educator who identifies as a gay male and conducts research about LGBTQ-inclusive children’s literature and its use in elementary (grades K-5) contexts, my work has been largely informed by Ryan and Hermann-Wilmarth’s multiple contributions to the field over time. While reading *Reading the Rainbow*, I recognized how their past scholarship was integrated in and expanded upon in this book, both from empirical research with teachers and youth as well as their content analysis of children’s and young adult literature.

Reading the Rainbow is largely structured into sections based on a framework previously proposed by the authors where they suggest three ways educators might incorporate LGBTQ-inclusive practices, especially using children’s literature, in their classrooms: (1) including/contextualizing LGBTQ-inclusive texts, (2) reading “straight” books through a queer lens, and (3) queering LGBTQ-inclusive texts (Hermann-Wilmarth & Ryan, 2015). These three approaches become the foci of Parts I, II, and III respectively. Bookending these three core Parts are an introductory and concluding chapter, each of which provides valuable information to consider both for researchers and practitioners. Interwoven throughout this accessibly-written book are examples of how elementary classroom teachers teach inclusively, the children’s literature they use, the conversations with youth that ensue, and direct connections to how LGBTQ-inclusive reading and teaching address a wide variety of

English Language Arts (ELA) skills and standards. Ryan and Hermann-Wilmarth list a variety of ELA practices accomplished with such teaching including, but not limited to: responding to texts, learning multiple meanings of words, crafting arguments by building on the comments of others (p. 28); using critical thinking, providing evidence to support ideas, considering multiple perspectives, and noticing character traits as well as text-to-self and text-to-text connections (p. 69); and comparing characters from different texts, writing, and exploring multiple genres (p. 106). Not only are such ELA practices dispersed throughout the book in connection to the various classroom scenarios described, but also Parts I, II, and III each conclude with a section devoted to addressing this aspect central to expectations often imposed on teachers in the current educational climate. In other words, how does the content or activity address the curricular standards? As *Reading the Rainbow* frequently attests, LGBTQ-inclusive instruction achieves such goals!

Much like Ryan and Hermann-Wilmarth embed ELA connections throughout the book, they also provide gray call-out boxes (titled “Stop and Think”) across chapters, providing questions that encourage readers to consider their contexts and how they might use or build upon the classroom scenarios and suggestions the authors share. Ryan and Hermann-Wilmarth also urge teachers to consider the challenges potentially present in their contexts (such as parents and administrator levels of support as well as school, district, and state policies or laws) that bolster or inhibit LGBTQ-inclusive teaching. Most importantly, Ryan and Hermann-Wilmarth assert that LGBTQ-inclusive teaching in the elementary grades “isn’t about any kind of agenda other than safety, respect, and equitable student outcomes.

This is meaningful learning” (p. 113). In other words, such teaching is not about advancing a “gay agenda”, nor even an ELA curriculum-mandated agenda, but rather an agenda aimed at building community and equity reflective of and contributing to a pluralistic society.

Introductory Section

Following a Foreword by Marianna Souto-Manning whose former elementary classroom practices are later described in the book (Souto-Manning & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2008) and Acknowledgements section, Chapter One – “A Rationale for Teaching LGBTQ Topics in Elementary English Language Arts” – encourages readers to consider the various people who may comprise their classroom, school, or larger community: students with LGBTQ families, students who identify as LGBTQ, students who are harassed for being LGBTQ (whether they self-identify or are perceived by others as such), and “everyone else too” (p. 7). By describing these various groups, Ryan and Hermann-Wilmarth situate their rationale within Bishop’s (1990) concept of windows and mirrors in which readers should have access to and learn from texts that introduce other ways of being as well as texts that provide reflections of themselves and thus affirm their identities. Addressing potential questions about appropriateness, Ryan and Hermann-Wilmarth describe how gender and (hetero)sexuality are always already pervasive in schools. The authors provide examples that often occur in schools, including (but not limited to) when children are required to sit or line-up by gender; heterosexual relationships are depicted in the anecdotes and books shared with children; derogatory remarks are made by peers to their classmates who perform gender in non-stereotypical ways; and children discuss LGBTQ-related topics amongst themselves based on having LGBTQ family members or

friends and/or seeing LGBTQ identities and relationships in television, movies, or other forms of media. By highlighting these examples, the authors show how critiques of discussing sexuality and gender in elementary schools as inappropriate are unfounded because such topics already exist and sometimes reinforce certain ways of being at the exclusion of others.

In addition to providing a rationale for LGBTQ-inclusive teaching, Ryan and Hermann-Wilmarth introduce and describe to readers the three veteran, elementary teachers who are at the heart of the book: Maree Bednar, Rose Lannen, and Barbara O’Grady (pseudonym). Maree identifies as lesbian, and excerpts in the book come from her third through fifth grade classrooms across two schools. Rose identifies as straight, and excerpts in the book describe her combined fourth and fifth grade classroom. Barbara also identifies as straight, and scenarios shared come from her second grade classroom. All three of the teachers identify as White, cisgender, and teach at different schools in the midwestern U.S. Ryan and Hermann-Wilmarth describe their longstanding collaboration with each teacher, having spent time in their classrooms as a co-teacher as well as researching, presenting, and writing together in some instances (e.g., Hermann-Wilmarth, Lannen, & Ryan, 2017; Ryan, Patraw, Bednar, 2013). Scenarios from each teacher’s classroom are used as exemplars across Parts I, II, and III. Each part includes two chapters. The first chapter in each part provides theory, rationale, and examples from the focal teachers’ use of children’s literature or other media within typically single, momentary sessions while the second chapter in each part demonstrates the approach in a more prolonged class-unit, often in conjunction with a novel. Each part begins with a brief introduction to provide context for the two chapters therein.

Part I: Expanding Representations of LGBTQ People in Elementary ELA

Part I is dedicated to teaching practices that bring LGBTQ-inclusive texts into the classroom. As an elementary educator who yearned to be more inclusive in my own classroom, Chapter Two, “Introducing LGBTQ People Into Your Teaching”, particularly resonated with me because it shares three entry points for teachers: “(1) connecting to the diverse families in your classroom and school, (2) responding to instances of bullying around LGBTQ identities in your own school, and (3) discussing LGBTQ-related current events” (p. 23). The first two entry points are described using classroom vignettes from a first grade classroom (Souto-Manning & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2008) and combined fourth and fifth grade classroom (Schall & Kauffmann, 2003), thus acknowledging and sharing other scholars’ previous research as well as integrating the studies into Ryan and Hermann-Wilmarth’s newly introduced entry point framework. The third entry point is demonstrated via a vignette from Maree’s classroom, thus segueing to the focal teachers of the book. In this vignette, Maree discussed with students a recent event she heard about in the news in which a boy committed suicide because of peer-harassment due to how they perceived his gender performance and sexual orientation.

In Chapter Three, “Expanding LGBTQ Representations Through Novel Studies”, Ryan and Hermann-Wilmarth describe how Maree used *Totally Joe* (Howe, 2005) and Rose used *George* (Gino, 2015) to expand on classroom units in which their classes had already read and studied fairly widely, though not yet directly connected to LGBTQ topics. Of note is that although both veteran teachers had experience with LGBTQ-inclusive teaching in smaller ways, the scenarios described in Chapter

Three were the teachers’ “early attempts” (p. 39) at addressing gender and sexuality over longer periods of time. This disclaimer is important in that the exemplar teachers become increasingly relatable to readers who may also be novice to such instruction.

Part II: Questioning Categories by Reading Straight Books Through a Queer Lens

Part II introduces readers to the concept of reading queerly, specifically regarding texts that may be assumed to have characters and themes that are “straight” because LGBTQ-identities and topics are not directly stated. Similar to Part I, entry points are shared to help readers determine possible ways to initiate such reading and conversations with their students. Various entry points are the focus of Chapter Four – “Discussing Queer Moments in Straight Books” – and include acknowledging how pronouns reveal and reinforce gender categories, contemplating how gender is expressed through people’s clothing and interests, considering how gender expectations have changed across time, and questioning how gender sometimes works to control access to places and opportunities. As examples of such entry points and teaching, Ryan and Hermann-Wilmarth describe teacher-initiated conversations in Rose’s classroom, discussing *Because of Winn Dixie* (DiCamillo, 2009) in Barbara’s classroom, and reading *Crooked River* (Pearsall, 2005) in Maree’s classroom. Ryan and Hermann-Wilmarth remind readers to attend to “queer moments” (p. 70) and opportunities for teaching that exist within a book’s plot, setting, and characters.

While Chapter Four discussed single queer teaching moments within larger novel studies, Chapter Five – “Building Students’ Queer Lenses Through Anchor Lessons” – demonstrates the use of a picturebook for queered explorations that became lessons on which the class

remembered and built as their time together progressed. Ryan and Hermann-Wilmarth describe how *The Other Side* (Woodson, 2001) was used in both Maree and Rose's separate classrooms to facilitate conversations about gender and its associated, assumed "rules" (p. 79). The authors conclude the chapter by connecting the queering seemingly-straight texts approach to other specific picturebooks and chapter books they had described elsewhere (e.g., Hermann-Wilmarth & Ryan, 2015; Ryan & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2013).

Part III: Questioning Silences in Expanded Representations

With two approaches to LGBTQ-inclusive practices using children's literature now described, Part III combines the two approaches – an approach important for all teachers to consider and a logical progression for those teachers who already feel adept at the strategies described in Parts I and II. In this section, Ryan and Hermann-Wilmarth address expanding and queering LGBTQ depictions, especially to combat "single story" (Adichie, 2009) representations and attend to experiences impacted by intersectional identities (Crenshaw, 1991) such as race, dis/ability, and social class among other ways of being. To address both single stories and intersectionality, Ryan and Hermann-Wilmarth suggest (1) developing text sets to show and compare various LGBTQ characters and their experiences and (2) aiming to find and include depictions other than White, middle-class characters that are currently predominant in LGBTQ-inclusive children's literature. Ryan and Hermann-Wilmarth assert that multiple representations are important so that children do not develop partial, incomplete understandings of LGBTQ people based on limited information.

To show texts and such teaching in action, Chapter Six – "Acknowledging Silences in LGBTQ Inclusion" – depicts Maree's use of the novel *Totally Joe* (Howe, 2005); picturebooks *My Princess Boy* (Kilodavis, 2009), *10,000 Dresses* (Ewert, 2008), and *Be Who You Are* (Carr, 2010); and supplemental videos to engage students in conversations and writing to deepen and expand understandings about LGBTQ people. In Chapter Seven – "Connecting LGBTQ Characters and the Larger World" – readers are invited to observe Rose and Hermann-Wilmarth's co-teaching with the novel *After Tupac and D Foster* (Woodson, 2008) in which a secondary character, Tash, is Black, gay, gender creative, and incarcerated. A character with these identities and experiences added to the predominantly White, middle-class, and largely privileged depictions the class had previously read in other LGBTQ-inclusive novels. Chapter Seven concludes with descriptions of activities teachers could readily take into their classrooms to provide students choice while also supporting their consideration of multiple perspectives.

Conclusion Section

While the preceding chapters provide a wealth of rationales, connections to theory, book suggestions, and teaching practices, the concluding chapter – "Mapping Out Your Journey – Making a Plan and Finding Your Resources" – is equally imperative. As the chapter title suggests, Ryan and Hermann-Wilmarth now place onus on readers to consider *their own* rationales for LGBTQ-inclusive teaching, arguing that being prepared to articulate this will be helpful if questioned by parents or administrators. Also shared in the chapter are resources created by other organizations (e.g., GLSEN, Human Rights Campaign) teachers may find helpful, a discussion about context-specific policies and

laws, and suggestions for communicating with and responding to administrators and parents. As an assistant professor in literacy education who recently moved to Oklahoma, I particularly appreciated Ryan and Hermann-Wilmarth's elaboration on "No Promo Homo" laws, legislation existing in seven states forbidding positive or inclusive discussion of LGBTQ people or topics in K-12 schools. Echoing GLSEN, Ryan and Hermann-Wilmarth emphasize such laws primarily were written in reference to sexual health education. Therefore, the "sometimes vague" laws are often "misapplied" and "ELA teaching might have more leeway" (p. 109). This consideration further strengthens my optimism about the potential for and actualization of LGBTQ-inclusive teaching practices in my state, the other states in which such laws exist, and beyond.

Final Thoughts

Research documenting actual enactments of LGBTQ-inclusive teaching practices in elementary classrooms is still relatively new and limited (e.g., Cullen & Sandy, 2009; Frantz Bentley & Souto-Manning, 2016; Ryan, Patraw, & Bednar, 2013; Schall & Kauffmann, 2003; Souto-Manning & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2008). *Reading the Rainbow: LGBTQ-Inclusive Literacy Instruction in the Elementary Classroom* is a significant contribution to the growing body of research, especially in that it provides numerous scenarios from multiple teachers, grade levels, and schools along with frameworks for why and how to be increasingly LGBTQ-inclusive. That said, a few aspects of the book warrant critique.

One aspect concerning to me is the subjectivity of occasional terms used to describe particular books, such as "developmentally appropriate" (p. 33) and "high quality" (p. 39). The authors define neither of these terms, and the concept of developmental appropriateness

relative to LGBTQ-inclusive children's literature is particularly problematic. It is well documented in research that pre/in-service teachers hesitate about LGBTQ-inclusive teaching because of concerns about appropriateness, including after they have read and discussed representative children's literature. For some stakeholders, any emphasis on gender or sexual orientation – especially relative to LGBTQ topics – is considered inappropriate. Therefore, what Ryan and Hermann-Wilmarth deem developmentally appropriate may be easily struck down as inappropriate by those who oppose LGBTQ-inclusivity. Further, concepts of appropriateness are antithetical to queer theory, the theoretical framework from which the authors appear to largely operate.

Another personal source of concern are the contexts in which the majority of the scenarios take place. Maree and Rose, whose classroom vignettes comprise the bulk of the book, both teach in settings dissimilar from the majority of U.S. teachers (i.e., public school employees). Rose teaches in a private school, and the majority of Maree's excerpts depicted her time in a school with an "informal education philosophy" (p. 14) and lottery-based student selection process. Only Barbara teaches in a traditional public school, and scenes from her classroom are only depicted in one introductory section and subsequent chapter (Chapter Four). Further, she is the only one of the three teachers who is referred to by a pseudonym, perhaps indicating her precarity with LGBTQ-inclusive teaching. It is important to note that the other two studies showcased as exemplars – Schall and Kauffmann (2003) and Souto-Manning and Hermann-Wilmarth (2008) – both occurred in public schools. However, these classrooms, along with Barbara's current and Maree's former schools, all serve marginalized populations. The public school contexts are

described as mobile, English emergent (Schall & Kauffmann, 2003), urban Title I (Souto-Manning & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2008), underresourced and low income (Maree), and socioeconomically disadvantaged in which the majority of students are African-American or LatinX (Barbara). Though these settings mirror the environments of many U.S. schools, they are also problematic because they propagate the use of marginalized populations for research (Glesne, 2011). In addition, concerns by family members or other stakeholders connected to such classroom communities may be less likely to occur due to language barriers, extensive or irregular work schedules, or other obstacles hindering communication and accessibility to their children's schools. This is a marked difference compared to the contexts in which some, if not many, readers may teach and be concerned about increasingly inclusive-teaching. In short, readers are provided exemplars from primarily two specific contexts: (1) public schools serving marginalized populations and (2) private or informal settings. In nearly all instances, teaching occurred with

researchers serving as co-teachers.

One final critique is the LGBTQ-inclusive children's literature and resources the authors provided in the Appendix. Though I understand publishers may impose length requirements, I would have liked to see a more extensive list of both picturebooks and chapter books, as they certainly exist. Related, readers would benefit from the authors sharing other places to access endorsed LGBTQ-inclusive children's literature such as Naidoo's (2012) annotated bibliography and resources provided by the American Library Association including the Rainbow Book List and children's and young adult literature category of the Stonewall Book Awards.

Despite these critiques, I believe *Reading the Rainbow: LGBTQ-Inclusive Literacy Instruction in the Elementary Classroom* accomplishes what the authors hoped: to foster "ELA teaching that is meaningful and sustainable" (p. 115). It is a book of great import to *all* teachers and researchers regardless of their grade level, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, or specific contexts.

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