

K–12 Methods: English Language Arts and Language Learning

This module focuses on content areas related to language arts courses and language use and mechanics. This content often appears in language arts or English classes, and while we focus primarily on English-language content here, these principles may be usefully adapted to other language courses. We focus on reading and writing practices, literacy, and some material on EAL content. (See also [Inclusive Education for Diversity, Anti-oppression, and Critical Pedagogy](#))

What does it mean to queer Language Arts, Literacy, and EAL courses?

- *Inclusion and critical reading.* It means including 2SLGBTQ+ content in Language Arts, Literacy, and EAL courses, and also teaching students to read texts critically through a 2SLGBTQ+ lens.
 - These practices may involve identifying and critiquing heterosexist and cisgenderist power structures embodied in texts. For example, asking questions that provoke thinking about how 2SLGBTQ+ characters are represented and how their stories are told can help to develop critical literacies: How are 2SLGBTQ+ people represented and what are the real-world impacts of those representations? What is treated as the root cause of 2SLGBTQ+ characters' troubles? Whose interests are served by the way stories are told? How could the story be told differently/anti-oppressively, to open up more space for 2SLGBTQ+ lives?
 - *Who gets represented?* Thinking about literature in terms of representation and the stereotypes and/or dramatic devices that are used to advance plots. For example, how often is a white boy the protagonist in young adult literature? How are 2SLGBTQ+ characters represented in stories? What might be the effects of representing them this way?
- Queering language arts subject matter means instilling in pre-service teachers that the books on their reading lists and in school libraries almost certainly exclude some people in the classroom and in the broader community. Challenge and develop more inclusive alternatives to the traditional cisgender, heterosexual, white male canon that has often been privileged when teaching literature. Pre-service teachers who are taught to develop a critical awareness of these shortcomings and a commitment to understanding and meeting the needs of every student will be better equipped to teach Language Arts, Literacy, and EAL.
- *How are stories told?* If there are 2SLGBTQ+ characters in a text, does the heterosexual, cisgender protagonist act as savior? Is the story about the protagonist learning to treat a 2SLGBTQ+ character with respect? Is the moral of the story that not all 2SLGBTQ+ people fit stereotypes? Is 2SLGBTQ+ identity addressed beyond naming it as a difference (reinforcing heterosexuality as the norm)? Are 2SLGBTQ+ characters one-dimensional and concerned only about their sexual orientation/gender and discrimination, or do they have the same depth as other characters?

- In the context of Language Arts, Literacy, and EAL, examples of an Indigiqueer approach would mean expanding curriculum to include Indigenous languages and storytelling approaches and expanding literacy beyond stories about white, heterosexual, cisgender characters to include stories by and about Two-spirit and Indigiqueer people. It also means identifying the colonial worldviews behind depictions of sex, gender, and sexuality in texts, and imagining how the story (characters, relationships) might be told differently and play out differently from Indigenous perspectives.

Why do we need to do this?

- Teaching 2SLGBTQ+ content can counter injustices experienced by students, disrupt homo/bi/transphobia, and help create safer, more equitable spaces. Language Arts, Literacy, and EAL classes offer a prime opportunity to reflect diverse experiences that already exist in the classroom, but are often silenced or erased. Teaching 2SLGBTQ+ narratives helps students to develop empathy and deeper understanding because they make the subject matter real (Dodge & Crutcher, 2015, p. 95). Students can imagine that not everyone is heterosexual and cisgender when they read 2SLGBTQ+ peoples' stories. Inclusive literature can be a lifeline for 2SLGBTQ+ children and youth.
- The common assumption that students are white, heterosexual, and cisgender, and that theirs are the only experiences that matter, is perpetuated by literature that is populated only by white, cisgender, and heterosexual characters. Representation matters—and exposure to 2SLGBTQ+ content can provide useful opportunities to talk about individual/lived experiences of 2SLGBTQ+ people. Such representation in children's texts is rare, but it exists.
- Both 2SLGBTQ+ and non-2SLGBTQ+ students need to see reflections of themselves and possibilities beyond their own experiences in literature in order to understand and accept themselves and each other. It has often been said that curriculum is a mirror and a window. A mirror in which students should be able to see themselves, their families, and communities reflected back to them, and a window which opens to the diversity of the world around them.
- While there is now some representation of racial and religious minorities in children's and YA literature, there is almost no representation of Two-Spirit people, so students identifying as Two-Spirit or Indigiqueer are unlikely to see themselves reflected in stories they read for school (Bittner, 2014, p. 14).
- Language structures reality, and exposure to 2SLGBTQ+ positive, non-heteronormative language helps us perceive the world in 2SLGBTQ+ positive, non-heteronormative ways, particularly thinking about Indigenous languages and English/French.
- Teachers may be reluctant to teach 2SLGBTQ+ themed books because they worry that questions about sexuality may arise, and that they will not know how to answer them. The challenge in B.Ed. classes is to have discussions that address these concerns and the unconscious biases about gender and sexual orientation that may inform them

(Schieble, 2012, p. 14). This is also an opportunity to discuss school district policies for challenges to learning materials, and to examine the current provincial/territorial curriculum to examine how 2SLGBTQ+ identities are represented in learning resources and outcomes, if at all.

How do we do it?

- *Naming and accountability.* In a B.Ed. course teaching pre-service teachers how to teach Language and Literacy courses, having a unit about the power of language and representation. Words are not just words—they carry tremendous meaning and shape / reinforce students’ understanding.
- *Challenging resistance.* Teacher candidates may be reluctant to teach 2SLGBTQ+ content, and the B.Ed. classroom is a great place to work through their concerns (Thein, 2013, p. 177).
- *Inclusive language.* Use of *they* as a singular pronoun and as a gender-neutral pronoun, which is recommended by [APA](#) and is included in the [Oxford dictionary](#) (see also the [OED’s “A brief history of the singular ‘they’”](#)) and [Merriam-Webster dictionary](#) (see also [“A note on the nonbinary ‘they’”](#)).
- *Gender pronouns:* Introduce your own gender pronouns to students (e.g., “My name is Dr. Anna Cho and my pronouns are she/her”) to introduce the concept of pronoun diversity, but beware of putting students on the spot by requiring them to publicly share their pronouns. This can have the unintended consequence of forcing students to reveal information they are not prepared to share or, alternately, to hide who they are for fear of negative consequences. Teachers can make it clear to students that they want to use the students’ affirmed pronouns by explaining it at the beginning of the term as needed after that.
 - One way to learn students’ gender pronouns without putting them on the spot publicly is to distribute confidential questionnaires at the beginning of term asking if students use a pronoun or a name different from the one on the class list, and if it is ok for the teacher to use their pronoun/name in front of others. In the spirit of expansive education and accessibility, this is also a good opportunity to ask students if there is anything else they would like the teacher to know about them. Teachers can let students know that they are aware that a student’s name or pronoun may change over the course of the term, and that it is ok to discuss this with the teacher at any time.
- *Assignments.* Composition assignments can include content that addresses 2SLGBTQ+ topics. Often, however, we fall into the trap of creating apologist-style assignments that seek to put forward arguments about why being 2SLGBTQ+ is okay, which can reinforce the social narrative that it is not okay and that 2SLGBTQ+ identities are in need of defending. Rather, developing assignments that highlight the rich and diverse histories/contributions of 2SLGBTQ+ people can be very effective.

- Other simple ways to create inclusive assignments are to include 2SLGBTQ+ language on spelling tests and using readings that focus on 2SLGBTQ+ content in reading comprehension assignments. Writing assignments and examples can also use non-gendered names and gender-neutral pronouns, such as *they* and *them*, as inclusive models.
- *Representation.* Inclusion of stories/readings that feature 2SLGBTQ+ perspectives and are written by 2SLGBTQ+ authors. Providing an opportunity for students to read texts by 2SLGBTQ+ authors supports principles of inclusive education and teaching for social justice through representation (see reading list below for some specific titles). Beyond books, 2SLGBTQ+ content can include examples from popular culture, including television, film, theatre, online content, and spoken word poetry, that helps to provide accurate information and greater understandings of 2SLGBTQ+ people.
- *Critical reading practices.* Practice critical reading of texts, identifying and challenging the use of stereotypes and negative representations of 2SLGBTQ+ characters (if there are any). Consider what inclusive texts would look like at the junior (K–4), middle (gr. 5–8) and senior (gr. 9–12) levels (Hermann-Wilmarth & Ryan, 2015, p. 438). Discuss the concept of “age-appropriateness” and how this is often used as a tactic to exclude 2SLGBTQ+ content based on stereotypes, myths, and misinformation, such as the myth that exposure to queer content is exposure to sex, that students are too young, school is not an appropriate place for such discussions, etc.
- *Self-reflection.* Discuss ways that teachers can help students to imagine themselves reflected in narratives and classroom activities and conversations. For example, Sumara et al., 2006, discuss how readings of a young adult novel in a teacher education class prompted consciousness raising among preservice teachers and might be more expansively developed.
- *Practice activities.* Show examples of inclusive and non-inclusive texts and encourage students to critically analyze them; ask them to consider which ones they would teach and why. Ask how will they deal with student and/or parental resistance to 2SLGBTQ+ inclusion, and discuss strategies for doing so.

Teaching Activities

- Include 2SLGBTQ+ texts in courses for teacher candidates about Language Arts, Literacy, and EAL subject instruction:
 - Lead a discussion about 2SLGBTQ+ inclusion in classroom activities, using the example of 2SLGBTQ+ focused texts (books, poems, blogs) in a language-focused class.
 - In pairs or small groups, have students read books designed for children at various reading levels. For example, Gonzalez’s (2005) *Antonio’s Card*, which is about a child who makes a Mother’s Day card for his two mothers.

- Prompt them to consider how they would incorporate these books, consider what class discussions they could have about them, and anticipate responding to student questions.
- Have a larger group discussion about representation in the book, asking students to think about the 2SLGBTQ+ representation, whether it reinforces or challenges stereotypes, why it would be a good teaching tool, what it can offer classrooms that may not otherwise be included, etc.
- Ask students to develop a lesson plan for the book, considering how they would lead a class discussion and manage challenging questions or comments that may arise.

Note: For *Antonio's Card*, this would be a K–4 lesson plan. This exercise is adaptable for B.Ed. students who will work with Grades 5–8 and 9–12 students using different books and more advanced discussion schemes.

- *Have critical conversations with teacher candidates about including 2SLGBTQ+ for all age levels.* While there are many approaches to leading discussions with B.Ed. students about including 2SLGBTQ+ content in Language Arts, Literacy, and EAL classes, here are some suggestions to approach the topic:
 - When comparing stories for consideration for students in K–4, 5–8, and 9–12 classrooms, think about who is and isn't represented, and the message(s) behind the representation. Does the text challenge or reinforce stereotypes? Who benefits, and who is harmed, from the way the characters are represented?
 - Have students practice leading discussions about 2SLGBTQ+ focused texts, and to reflect on any discomfort they might experience.
 - Discuss possible objections by school and/or parents, guardians, or community members to including 2SLGBTQ+ texts and content, and strategize responses (e.g., 2SLGBTQ+ and questioning students are already in the classroom and deserve to have their experiences represented; increasing empathy and understanding may help reduce bullying).

Resources

The Midwest and Plains Equity Assistance Center has a helpful teaching guide: *Equity by Design: Teaching LGBTQ-Themed Literature in English Language Arts Classrooms* by Mollie Blackburn and Mary Catherine Miller (2017):

<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED580428.pdf>

PRISM Toolkit for Safe and Caring Discussions About Sexual and Gender Minorities For Elementary Schools (Alberta Teachers' Association, 2016, p. 54–58)

Exploring Gender Stereotypes – Grade 4–6

https://www.teachers.ab.ca/SiteCollectionDocuments/ATA/For%20Members/ProfessionalDevelopment/Diversity-Equity-and-Human-Rights/PD-80-15cPrismToolkitBooklet_Web.pdf

PRISM Toolkit for Safe and Caring Discussions About Sexual and Gender Minorities For Secondary Schools (Alberta Teachers' Association, 2017, p. 115)

Activity: *Brokeback Mountain* film/story analysis (Author: Annie Proulx) Subject tie-in: 10–12 Social Studies, 10–12 ELA, Pop Culture, Media Studies

<https://www.teachers.ab.ca/SiteCollectionDocuments/ATA/Publications/Research/PD-80-15e%20PRISM.pdf>

SOGI 123 – ELA Lesson plans by grade level

- Elementary: <https://bc.sogieducation.org/sogi3>
- Secondary: <https://bc.sogieducation.org/sogi3#secondary-lesson-plans>

Articles on “they” as a singular pronoun

APA Style - Welcome, Singular “They” (+ bias free language resources on APA site)
<https://apastyle.apa.org/blog/singular-they>

The “No Big Deal” Campaign
<https://www.nbdcampaign.ca/>

Oxford English Dictionary - A brief history of singular ‘they’
<https://public.oed.com/blog/a-brief-history-of-singular-they/>

Merriam-Webster Dictionary - A Note on the Nonbinary ‘They:’ It’s now in the dictionary.
<https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/nonbinary-they-is-in-the-dictionary>

Selected 2SLGBTQ+ themed books

The list of titles we include here have been chosen because they do not follow tropes that are often seen in 2SLGBTQ+ themed children’s and young adult literature. Two examples of these tropes are (1) the white/heterosexual/cisgender saviour, who becomes the hero of the story when they save the 2SLGBTQ+ character from a threat; and (2) the 2SLGBTQ+ character who is considered acceptable only when they are found by white/heterosexual/cisgender characters to be exceptional in some way (e.g., their ability to climb trees, solve mysteries, or do magic). Another common trope is when 2SLGBTQ+ characters are found to be acceptable when white/heterosexual/cisgender characters determine that they are “not that different from us.”

We have highlighted some titles that make an effort to avoid these tropes. We have also included links to 2SLGBTQ+ reading lists that may feature some books that follow these tropes. Think critically about the titles you choose to teach and talk about representation with

B.Ed. students. It is important to consider that sometimes 2SLGBTQ+ representation can actually perpetuate normative stereotypes about gender, sexuality, race, class, and ability. Not all 2SLGBTQ+ representation is necessarily helpful representation, and part of the work of teaching 2SLGBTQ+ content and working with B.Ed. students is to learn how to tell the difference.

Selected 2SLGBTQ+ themed children's books

Anderson, A. (2018). *Neither*. New York: Little, Brown Books for Young Readers.

Ewert, M. (2008). *10,000 dresses*. Portland, OR: Triangle Square.

Godon, I. (2004). *Hello, sailor*. London, UK: Macmillan.

Gonzalez, R. (2005). *Antonio's card*. San Francisco: Children's Book Press.

Hernandez, C. (2019). *I Promise*. Vancouver: Arsenal.

Krakov, K. (2001). *The Harvey Milk story*. Ridley Park, PA: Two Lives.

Love, J. (2018). *Julián Is a Mermaid*. Somerville, MA: Candlewick.

Namir, H. (2020). *The Name I Call Myself*. Vancouver: Arsenal.

Newman, L. (2011). *Donovan's Big Day*. Berkeley: Tricycle Press.

Newman, L. (2004). *A fire engine for Ruthie*. New York: Clarion Books.

Parr, T. (2009). *It's okay to be different*. Boston: Little, Brown Books for Young Readers.

Polacco, P. (2009). *In our mothers' house*. New York: Philomel Books.

Richardson, J. & Parnell, P. (2005). *And Tango Makes Three*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Shraya, V. (2016). *The Boy & the Bindi*. Vancouver: Arsenal.

Silverberg, C. (2015). *Sex is a Funny Word: A Book about Bodies, Feelings, and YOU*. Portland, OR: Triangle Square.

Silverberg, C. (2013). *What Makes a Baby*. Portland, OR: Triangle Square.

Thom, K. C. (2017). *From the Stars in the Sky to the Fish in the Sea*. Vancouver: Arsenal.

Tott, P. (2019). *Dress Like a Girl*. New York: HarperCollins.

Valentine, J. (2004). *One dad, two dads, brown dad, blue dad*. New York: Alyson.

Selected 2SLGBTQ+ themed YA books

Amberstone, Celu. (2012). *The Dreamer's Legacy*. Neyaashiinigmiing Reserve No. 27, ON: Kegedonce.

Colbert, Brandy. (2018). *Little & Lion*. Boston: Little, Brown Books for Young Readers.

Danforth, Emily M. (2012). *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*. New York: HarperCollins.

Deaver, Mason. (2020). *I Wish You All the Best*. New York: Push.

Garvin, Jeff. (2017). *Symptoms of Being Human*. New York: Balzer + Bray.

Gregorio, I. W. (2015). *None of the Above*. New York: Balzer + Bray.

Johnson, Leah. (2020). *You Should See Me in a Crown*. New York: Scholastic.

Jones, Adam Garnet. (2018). *Fire Song*. Toronto: Annick Press.

Kulkin, Susan. (2014). *Beyond Magenta: Transgender Teens Speak Out*. Sommerville, MA: Candlewick.

Lauren, Christina. (2018). *Autoboyography*. New York, Simon & Schuster.

Levithan, David. (2012). *Every Day*. New York: Knopf.

Ryan, Tom. (2020). *Keep This to Yourself*. Park Ridge, IL: Albert Whitman Teen.

Shraya, Vivek. (2020). *God Loves Hair*. Vancouver: Arsenal.

Slater, Dashka. (2017). *The 57 Bus: A True Story of Two Teenagers and the Crime That Changed Their Lives*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Ukazu, Ngozi. (2018). *Check, Please!* New York: First Second.

2SLGBTQ+ Reading Lists

Edmonton Public Library:

https://www2.epl.ca/public-files/booklets/epsb-recommended-resources-sexual-orientation_2014.pdf

SOGI 123 Book List:

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5a581110b1ffb6a179642671/t/62f1676a7f28cd1849180351/1659987819074/K-12+SOGI+Books+List.pdf>

Harper Collins: Pride on Every Page book lists

<https://www.harpercollins.com/pages/childrens-pride-on-every-page>

Harper Stacks: Pride on Every Page: Librarian Guest Post by Rob Bittner

<https://harperstacks.harpercollins.com/blog/pride-on-every-page-librarian-guest-post-by-rob-bittner-phd/>

Scholastic Books:

<https://www.scholastic.com/parents/books-and-reading/raise-a-reader-blog/lgbtq-books.html>

References

- Alberta Teachers' Association. (2016). *PRISM Toolkit for Safe and Caring Discussions About Sexual and Gender Minorities For Elementary Schools*. Alberta Teachers' Association. https://www.teachers.ab.ca/SiteCollectionDocuments/ATA/For%20Members/ProfessionalDevelopment/Diversity-Equity-and-Human-Rights/PD-80-15cPrismToolkitBooklet_Web.pdf
- Alberta Teachers' Association. (2017). *PRISM Toolkit for Safe and Caring Discussions About Sexual and Gender Minorities For Secondary Schools*. Alberta Teachers' Association. <https://www.teachers.ab.ca/SiteCollectionDocuments/ATA/Publications/Research/PD-80-15e%20PRISM.pdf>
- Bittner, R. (2014). Hey, I still can't see myself!: The difficult positioning of Two-Spirit identities in YA literature. *Bookbird: A Journal of International Children's Literature*, 52(1), 11–22.
- Blackburn, M., & Miller, M. C. (2017). *Equity by design: Teaching LGBTQ-themed literature in English language arts classrooms*. Midwest and Plains Equity Assistance Center. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED580428.pdf>
- Dodge, A. M., & Crutcher, P. A. (2015). Inclusive classrooms for LGBTQ students: Using linked text sets to challenge the hegemonic “single story.” *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 59(1), 95–105.

- Flores, G. (2016). Best not forget lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender themed children's literature: A teacher's reflections of a more inclusive multicultural education and literature program. *American Journal of Sexuality Education*, 11(1), 1–17.
- Govender, N. N. (2019). Critical literacy and critically reflective writing: Navigating gender and sexual diversity. *English Teaching: Practice & Critique*, 18(3), 351–364.
<https://doi.org/10.1108/ETPC-09-2018-0082>
- Hermann-Wilmarth, J. M., & Ryan, C. L. (2015). Doing what you can: Considering ways to address LGBT topics in language arts curricula. *Language Arts*, 92(6), 436–443.
- Schieble, M. (2012). A critical discourse analysis of teachers' views on LGBT literature. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 33(2), 207–222.
- Sumara, D., Davis, B., & Iftody, T. (2006). Normalizing literary responses in the teacher education classroom. *Changing English*, 13(1), 55–67.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13586840500523497>
- Thein, A. H. (2013). Language arts teachers' resistance to teaching LGBT literature and issues. *Language Arts*, 90(3), 169–180.

Other articles to assign to B.Ed. students about queering Language Arts, Literacy, and EAL

- Bittner, R., Ingrey, J., & Stamper, C. (2016). Queer and trans-themed books for young readers: a critical review. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 37(6), 948–964.
- Chung, S. K. (2007). Media literacy art education: Deconstructing lesbian and gay stereotypes in the media. *International journal of art & design education*, 26(1), 98–107.
- Goldstein, T. (2004). Performed ethnography for anti-homophobia teacher education: Linking research to teaching. *The Canadian On-Line Journal of Queer Studies in Education*, 1(1), n.pag.
- Goldstein, T. (2013). *Zero tolerance and other plays: Disrupting xenophobia, racism and homophobia in school*. Brill Sense.
- Hartman, P. (2019). Using literacy to explore heteronormativity with second-graders. In A. D. Martin & K. J. Strom (Eds.), *Exploring gender and LGBTQ issues in K–12 and teacher education: A rainbow assemblage* (pp. 73–94).

- Hickman, H. (2012). Handling heteronormativity in high school literature texts. In H. Hickman & B. J. Porfilio (Eds.), *The new politics of the textbook: Problematizing the portrayal of marginalized groups in textbooks* (pp. 71–85). Sense.
- Kedley, K. E. (2015). Queering the teacher as a text in the English Language Arts classroom: Beyond books, identity work and teacher preparation. *Sex Education, 15*(4), 364–377.
- Malo-Juvera, V. (2016). The effect of an LGBTQ themed literary instructional unit on adolescents' homophobia. *Study and Scrutiny: Research on Young Adult Literature, 2*(1), 1–34.
- Page, M. L. (2017). From awareness to action: Teacher attitude and implementation of LGBT-inclusive curriculum in the English language arts classroom. *SAGE Open, 7*(4), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244017739949>
- Parsons, L. T. (2016). Learning from preservice teachers' responses to trans-themed young adult literature: Improving personal practice in teacher education. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education, 37*(6), 933–947.
- Ryan, C. L., & Hermann-Wilmarth, J. M. (2013). Already on the shelf: Queer readings of award-winning children's literature. *Journal of Literacy Research, 45*(2), 142–172.
- Sieben, N., & Wallowitz, L. (2009). "Watch what you teach": A first-year teacher refuses to play it safe. *English Journal, 98*(4), 44–49. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40503260>
- Venzo, P. (2016). Reading them in: Using LGBT child and young adult literature in preservice teacher education. In E. A. Mikulec & P. C. Miller (Eds.), *Queering classrooms: Personal narratives and educational practices to support LGBTQ youth in schools* (pp. 111–126). Information Age Publishing.