I teach teachers. I assume that, like many teacher educators who are also parents, I look at my classes of undergraduate students and I see my child’s potential elementary school teacher. My two-year-old, the son of lesbian parents, still has a few years before entering kindergarten, but as I listen to the comments of my students, I know that there is much work to be done to ensure that he, and those from single-gender headed families like ours, as well as those who identify as gay or lesbian, will find themselves included in the curriculum. When I ask my students in a large southeastern United States university to read books like *Holly's Secret* (Garden, 2000), a story about a middle school girl trying to hide the relationship between her two moms from the other students at her new school, it is often the first time that they have read a text that portrays gay people in a positive light. Sometimes, it’s the first time they’ve seen a gay person in a book at all. The refrain that, “This isn’t an elementary school issue!” frustrates me. Where, when, and how will our new teachers learn that this is an issue in elementary school—immediately for the children living in homes headed by same-gender couples, but also for the students who will be harassed in middle and high school because of their perceived gay or lesbian identities. When will their peers learn that claiming a non-heterosexual identity has always and will continue to be a reality for many people? When will they learn to be proactive allies and friends rather than viewing one another’s taunts as normal or acceptable?

In this paper, I identify some of the resources I have used to help future teachers become fully inclusive teachers, particularly of early elementary students. Through sharing these resources—children’s literature, a children’s literature textbook, edited books for teacher educators and pre- and inservice teachers, and a video—I hope to engage with issues that face teacher educators who are interested in including the perspectives and concerns of gay and lesbian families and students in their literacy education classrooms. In relation to these resources, I ask the following questions: How can teacher educators better prepare their pre- and inservice teachers to address gay and lesbian issues in elementary school classrooms? What kinds of resistance should teacher educators be prepared for from their students? What types of literature and literacy strategies would support a goal of full inclusion?

**STUMBLING BLOCKS**

The most obvious entrée into discussions around gay and lesbian issues, in my opinion, is through literature. Unfortunately, books that address these issues are not readily available to elementary school students. In part, this is because so few exist, but it is also because few teachers know about the books that are available. Further, as preservice teachers’ resistance to conversations and texts regarding gay and lesbian issues are reinforced by the laws of the land that deny equal rights to members of the gay and lesbian community, it is easier to leave these few texts in the closet, even to the detriment of future elementary school students.

One of the major stumbling blocks to including literature that accurately and positively represents gay and lesbian perspectives is a pervasive climate of fear and harassment for students and teachers. Quite often, the experiences of teens set the stage for statistics about lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) youth experiences of exclusion. A 2005 National School Climate Survey reports that 33% of students surveyed responded that they have been harassed because of actual or perceived sexual orientation at school.
and nearly two thirds of surveyed students feel unsafe at school because of their sexual orientation (Kosciw & Diaz, 2006). Other students, like the children of gay, lesbian, or transgender parents who share their stories in Lambda’s 2000 children’s literature award winner Out of the Ordinary: Essays on Growing Up with Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Parents (Howey & Samuels, 2000), suffered a similar fear of their differences being discovered and targeted. Like the children in Lambda’s book, I well remember the sting of “lesbo” and “dyke” during elementary recesses in the 1980s. More recently, as an out lesbian educator in a 2001 graduate course on multicultural children’s literature, I heard a fellow teacher argue against including books with gay or lesbian characters in elementary school, saying “Well, if you put garbage in, you get garbage out.” I know that the structures that support and reify homophobia in education are still in place in elementary, secondary, and post-secondary settings. Whether deliberately or inadvertently, many people feel no hesitation in expressing their disdain for their gay peers or colleagues. Given this climate, pre- and inservice teachers are uncertain about their responsibilities or their capacity to be advocates for gay- and lesbian-headed families and their children.

Institutional Constraints

In addition to the climate of sanctioned exclusion in schools, teacher educators also know that many state and city governmental entities, charged with upholding equity and justice, continue to support book censorship. Robinson (2005) reported, “Some Oklahoma House members are threatening to kill new funding for the Department of Libraries unless libraries across the state remove homosexual-themed books from children’s shelves.” In another report, “A citizens’ group has listed 119 books—most with gay content—it would like to see removed from their current locations in the Montgomery County Memorial Library System, Conroe, TX” (Oder, 2004, p. 20). And “In . . . Wilmington [NC] . . . a copy of King and King was taken home by a first-grader whose parents then challenged the book’s availability to children” (Holder, 2005).

These are just a few of the many instances where books with gay or lesbian characters have been deemed inappropriate for school-aged children. In addition, in states across the nation, gay and lesbian people’s lives are on the ballot (eleven states passed a ban on gay marriage in November of 2004). Such a climate translates quickly into strongly held beliefs about the rights of teachers to exclude or condemn the lives of their students and families who are gay or lesbian. After giving an invited talk about the importance of including gay and lesbian issues in the elementary classroom to an Elementary Language Arts Methods class, a student commented that if the President of the United States thinks gay and lesbian people shouldn’t be a part of the lives of children (as demonstrated through his rhetoric and his support for certain laws), then she shouldn’t make this issue a part of her classroom. Together, these institutional constraints don’t seem to create a climate ripe for publishing and reading texts with gay and lesbian characters. I argue, however, that these political stumbling blocks are not blockades. They can be overcome when teachers and teacher educators, librarians, and parents have access to quality literature with gay and lesbian characters, and when educators remember that public schools should include all students.

Discursive Constraints: Silences and Uncertainties

As I grapple with how to teach my students to use multicultural children’s literature and accept multiple ways of speaking, learning, and writing in my language arts methods classes, my own memories—images from gay-and lesbian-themed children’s literature, painful stories of sexual minority youth with whom I’ve worked, and statistics about the instances of violence toward and suicide rates of these youth—mingle in my head. We have so much to talk about. I want to offer answers to my students when they say they aren’t sure how to handle second graders telling each other that their actions are “so gay.”
have they learned that makes them hesitate to protect children from painful epithets and taunts?

When I was in college, Ellen DeGeneres came out on national television. My own students have had Will and Grace, Rosie O’Donnell, and other images of gays and lesbians as a part of the media fabric of their lives. The closet that kept many gay and lesbian people from openly living their identities functions differently now than it did in decades past. Hollywood as a learning site has had the power of money and visibility, but it has also helped to teach stereotypes. My own students (Hermann-Wilmarth, 2005) have made comments about gay people only living in big cities on the east or west coast of the United States (and, quite decidedly, not where they live). More recently, in discussions of gay and lesbian elementary school teachers, students have asked, “Isn’t it like ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’?” This question implies heterosexism—a feeling or belief that people who are non-heterosexual are (or should be) invisible and unimportant. Heterosexism, as institutionally pervasive as sexism and racism, underlies both the resistance and passivity of students around these issues.

Perhaps the current spate of laws that aim to discriminate against gay and lesbian people is a backlash to Hollywood’s opening of the closet door. For me, as an educator who believes in social justice and equality, living my lesbian identity in non-quiet ways is the only option. That option, however, comes at a cost. Evans (2002) describes the “emotional work” that comes with fully living one’s identity. This living, I believe, is a part of my responsibility to my own students, to their students, and ultimately to the gay and lesbian community. Those who choose not to fully live their gay or lesbian identities in the classroom and those who inadvertently fail to acknowledge the span of possible identities silence these issues.

I am frustrated that few university professors find time in their curriculum to integrate the topics of homophobia and heterosexism into their classroom discussions of other “isms,” like racism and sexism. I am frustrated that few university professors find time in their curriculum to integrate the topics of homophobia and heterosexism into their classroom discussions of other “isms,” like racism and sexism.

and perhaps others, are heterosexually privileged professors failing to address this issue?

My questions and experiences point to the responsibility that I feel lies first on the shoulders of schools of teacher education to expand the intersections of race, class, and gender to include sexual orientation. If preservice teachers have never had opportunities to explore their own homophobia, or the ways that homophobia affects students, the likelihood that they will successfully interrupt the ideological heterosexism of schools seems slim. If students are given the opportunity to state, “Well, I know someone who is gay,” or “I love the sinner, but not the sin,” as my students have (Hermann-Wilmarth, 2005), we have created a space to explore the meaning and ramifications of these statements and beliefs, and in the process, we have set the stage for change. As John Stewig (1994) argues when discussing self-censorship surrounding books with gay and lesbian characters, “Teachers and librarians . . . overlook another largely invisible minority. . . . At what cost to the child readers’ curiosity about the world do we make such [censorship] decisions?” (p. 184). Until there are more discussions with preservice teachers about how to include in our curricula the experiences of students who either live in households with same-gender parents or who are grappling with their own sexuality, teachers will continue to see these concerns as “sensitive issues” (as one of my students put it during class discussion) that have no place in the public school classroom. Instead of being silenced under such a label as “sensitive,” I agree with Hade’s (1997) assertion about the importance of looking through multiculturals lenses in classrooms: “Silence is the oxygen of racism and bigotry. Silence allows the dominant assumptions about the inferiority of the poor, women, and persons of color to remain unchallenged” (p. 237). I would add that silence about the treatment and lives of gay and lesbian members of society by teachers at all levels allows assumptions of that same dominant culture to continue.

Silence is as evident in professional publications as it is in school classrooms. Even with calls for inclusion of gay and lesbian issues in elementary schools and teacher education through children’s
literature (Marinoble, 1998; Miller, 1999; Stewig, 1994), there is a relative dearth of publications on using gay- and lesbian-themed books in either elementary school classrooms or with preservice elementary school teachers. Those articles that have been published reflect my own experience with students who strongly resist the idea of using these books with elementary school students. Two studies, however, shed light on effective ways of integrating gay- and lesbian-themed books into curricula.

Janine Schall describes her work as a graduate student teaching children’s literature courses. When she brought examples of children’s books with gay or lesbian characters to share with her preservice students, she found that many of her students . . .

*were willing to read the books, [but] some wouldn't even look at them. The majority of preservice teachers rejected the idea of children’s reading these books in the classroom, saying that books with gay and lesbian characters were inappropriate because the children couldn’t deal with books “like that.” (Schall and Kauffmann, 2003, p. 36)*

The desire to protect elementary students’ innocence was a theme that ran through her students’ discussions of prejudice, racism, and identity. There is no further exploration of how Schall approached the literature with her preservice students, but she decided to explore the students’ notions of children’s innocence. She joined a classroom teacher to see if, indeed, elementary students *could* “deal with books ‘like that.’” Schall and Kauffmann worked in Kauffman’s fourth/fifth-grade multiage class where Kauffmann tied the reading of picture books with gay and lesbian characters to the name calling on the playground. Students had a variety of responses to the books, and were given the option of not participating in the readings or discussions. All but five participated, and participants came to the conclusion that, as one of the books suggested, being gay was just another kind of love. Interestingly, the students wondered “why they weren’t told about the reality of gays and lesbians” (p. 41). In their discussions, the students taught the teacher/researchers not to approach these issues separately from other issues, but “emphasized that gay and lesbian issues would naturally integrate into themes of family, identity, stereotyping, survival, relationships, a sense of belonging, or discrimination” (p. 43).

Another professor of children’s literature, Patti Capel Swartz (2003), found “the children’s literature classroom to be a place where discussion of [gay and lesbian] issues can reach prospective elementary school teachers” (p. 52). She used both children’s literature and Deborah Chasnoff’s (1995) film *It’s Elementary: Talking about Gay Issues in Schools* as springboards for discussion of homophobia in schools, which “provide[d] methods of discussing homophobia, gender, and sexuality in elementary and middle-grade classrooms” (p. 52). She says that most students in elementary education programs care about the well being of all children, but have yet to think about the effects of homophobia on students who might later identify as gay or lesbian, or who have same-gender parents.

Swartz’s (2003) students were mostly white and Appalachian from rural and often socioeconomically depressed towns with deeply held religious beliefs. These students were hesitant to integrate literature that discusses gay and lesbian characters into their curricula and doubted that elementary school students are even aware of gender and sexuality differences. Chasnoff’s (1995) video helped them to see both how this integration could help them achieve their goal of “being there” for all of their students and that their students may, because of media and other cultural influences, be fully aware of how GLBT people are seen as different. Swartz facilitates discussions in which her students use the film and children’s literature to “[explore] the diversity of family structures” (p. 59). Students wrote about their internalized homophobia, and Swartz described one student who recognized that, in order to “reach all children, her religious beliefs or personal prejudices must be set aside” (p. 59).

Swartz provides examples of the picture-books she used, and reviews extensively Chasnoff’s film, but never delves into *how* her initially homophobic students will simply set aside their religious beliefs. The model that she provides for other teacher educators of integrating film, children’s literature, and other texts in which elementary teachers describe how they address gay and lesbian issues with elementary students is incredi-
ibly valuable, but it still falls short of addressing how to work within the strong religious bias that she attributes to her students.

While these studies point to a resistance from preservice elementary teachers to using gay or lesbian literature in the classroom, they also point to important ways of thinking about that literature. Schall and Kauffmann’s (2003) study is important for teacher educators who meet resistance to the discussion of gay and lesbian issues from their students. Showing pre- and inservice teachers how elementary students respond to texts with gay or lesbian characters can not only counter the idea that books “like that” are too mature for children, but serve as a model for the teacher education students’ own readings of these books. While Swartz (2003) seems to have a somewhat positive response, there is a decided lack of discussion about how teacher educators respond to the homophobia of some of their students.

In my own work (Hermann-Wilmarth, 2005), I have explored ways to engage in dialogue about gay and lesbian issues with self-identified Conservative Christians. This kind of dialogue takes time and willingness on the part of both teacher educator and preservice teacher. The methods used, particularly Swartz’s (2003) students’ discussions of family variance, are strong examples that could be even more effective with deliberate and respectful dialogue about what causes student resistance and how that resistance can translate into damaging classroom practice for students touched by this issue. When teacher educators provide forums for these kinds of conversations in our classrooms, we provide the opportunity for pre- and inservice teachers to imagine themselves integrating gay and lesbian issues into their own classrooms. We provide possibility.

RESOURCES

For teacher educators who are interested in addressing gay and lesbian issues with their students, the available resources provide a powerful backdrop for discussion. Here I will discuss resources that I’ve found helpful as I encounter student resistance to gay and lesbian issues in elementary education and try to engage in constructive dialogue.

When teacher educators provide forums for these kinds of conversations in our classrooms, we provide the opportunity for pre- and inservice teachers to imagine themselves integrating gay and lesbian issues into their own classrooms.

In Getting Ready for Benjamin: Preparing Teachers for Sexual Diversity in the Classroom (Kissen, 2002), authors explore myriad approaches to bringing these issues to K–12 teacher education students in a variety of content areas. They offer language about gay and lesbian issues that help teacher educators move their students beyond multiculturalism and into a critique of structures that allow heterosexism to operate inside classrooms and schools. In the first section of the book, “Surveying the Landscape,” authors discuss the ways that teacher educators and their students have thought about gay and lesbian issues. They address head-on some of the reasons or excuses for resistance encountered by many teacher educators, such as, “But no one in the class is gay” (Straut & Sapon-Shevin, 2002). In the second section, authors examine ways that lesbian and gay issues fit into the larger study of multicultural education. Looking at different methods and theoretical groundings—special education (Kluth & Colleary, 2002) and queer multiculturalism (Letts, 2002), for example—teacher educators are introduced to different approaches to the inclusion of and dialogue about gay and lesbian issues in teacher education classrooms. In the final section, voices that are often silenced—LGBT teachers, teacher educators, and a school administrator—give readers a glimpse of the impact that the integration of gay and lesbian issues into a teacher education program can have.

Likewise, in Queering Elementary Education: Advancing the Dialogue about Sexualities and Schooling (Letts & Sears, 1999), authors explore foundational issues, children’s sexual and social development, curriculum, families, and issues facing educators and their allies. Highlighting theories about children’s development (Bickmore, 1999), the history of early childhood education (Weems, 1999), as well as pedagogical issues (Cahill & Theilheimer, 1999), authors bring to the foreground the mantra of loving all children and ask early childhood teachers to imagine that love as inclusive of gay and lesbian issues. With suggestions that apply to all content area classes, King and Schneider (1999) specifically address how to locate gay and lesbian themes in the reading, writing, and talk of elementary school students and suggest ways to analyze that language.
The final section of the book provides stories and insights into families headed by same-gender parents. These stories go hand-in-hand with the picturebooks that I will discuss later. The theories and examples offered in this book provide a jumping-off point for teacher educators and their students to discuss how and why they can integrate gay and lesbian issues into their classrooms.

The film It's Elementary: Talking about Gay Issues in Schools (Chasnoff, 1995; used by Swartz (2003) in the previously discussed study) provides a way for preservice teachers to observe teachers of early elementary through middle school students engaging in dialogue and activities centered on gay and lesbian issues. By showing how teachers and schools grapple with gay and lesbian inclusion in diverse—racially, geographically, chronologically—classrooms, this film invites viewers to imagine how they would integrate these issues into their own classrooms. These teachers employ many techniques (including the reading of children's literature, guest speakers, and open discussion) to help students explore their own thinking and stances about gay and lesbian people. A powerful aspect of this film is seeing how these kinds of conversations aren't always easy. Teachers and students come from different ideological positions, and viewers listen to people talk not about sex or politics, but about how to respect people.

More Traditional Resources

As I learned from an offhanded inquiry to my students about the frequency of discussions on sexual orientation in their other teacher education classrooms, there are few opportunities for preservice teachers to learn about resources, appropriate responses, and responsible teaching around gay and lesbian issues. I began to wonder if my own desire to talk about these issues stemmed only from the fact that I, as a lesbian, wished that my own teachers had offered more than a heteronormative way of knowing, or if there was a larger issue.

I looked first at the textbooks that recommend literature for inclusion in elementary and middle-grade classrooms. In literacy teacher education classrooms, particularly in children's literature classes, the traditional readings, novels, picturebooks, and literary selections are from children’s literature textbooks and from a variety of children's literature. Educators who seek to initiate discussions about gay and lesbian issues in young peoples’ lives can refer to these texts for recommendations about books that feature characters who are gay and lesbian or who are advocates (adult or child) supporting an inclusive view of family, school, and community life.

Children’s Literature Textbooks

As I examined academic books and articles about multicultural literature, I became aware of a decided silence around sexual orientation, even from those who assert the importance of multiple and diverse voices and representations. Taxel (1981), Sarland (1996), Cai (1997), and Hade (1997) all implore educators to include books with a diversity of racial perspectives, of ways of expressing gender, and of class. There is no mention, however, of sexual orientation. Likewise, in Norton's (2000) Multicultural Children’s Literature: Through the Eyes of Many Children, there is no mention of books that look through the eyes of children in the gay and lesbian community.

Of eight children’s literature survey text books (Hancock, 2000; Stoodt-Hill & Amspaugh-Corson, 2001; Russell, 2001; Anderson, 2002; Galda & Cullinan, 2002; Darigan, Tunnell, & Jacobs, 2002; Temple, Martinez, Yokota, & Naylor, 2002; Tomlinson & Lynch-Brown, 2002)—chosen because they were sent to me as review copies or because they had been used by other children’s literature instructors in my department), only four mention gay and lesbian identities (Russell, 2001; Galda & Cullinan, 2002; Temple et al., 2002; Tomlinson & Lynch-Brown, 2002), sometimes in less than one complete sentence. Unfortunately, by mentioning literature with gay and lesbian themes, some authors do not cast a positive light on this inclusion. Galda and Cullinan (2002), for example, discuss this literature under the subtile, “Sensitivity to Community Standards” (p. 185) and group Holly's Secret (Garden, 2000), a book about a heterosexual middle school girl with lesbian moms, with Dare, Truth, or Promise (Boock, 1999), a book about the lesbian relationship of two high school-aged girls, calling these and other books with gay and lesbian themes, “all for advanced readers” (Galda & Cullinan, p. 185).
There is no encouragement—in fact, there is discouragement—from these two authors to address a way of being other than heterosexual. Temple, Martínez, Yokota, and Naylor (2002) devote a paragraph of their approximately 600-page text to “homosexuality and alternative family structures” (p. 112), naming one picturebook and one chapter book that address gay and lesbian characters’ experiences and perspectives. The most positive endorsement of books with gay and lesbian themes that I found was in Literature for Children: A Short Introduction (Russell, 2001). Not only are several books named, but Russell describes these books in a way that acknowledges their place and importance in the classroom, saying, “The ultimate theme of all these works is that of understanding and acceptance of an individual’s sexual orientation. This is just one more hurdle of bigotry and prejudice that we must help our children overcome” (p. 46). Russell not only names discrimination against gay and lesbian people as bigotry, but he associates this bigotry with other, more traditionally discussed marginalized groups.

I frequently tell my students that the content-area textbooks—basal readers, social studies and science texts—provided by school districts do not provide the full possibilities for examining a topic; they will have to supplement with myriad texts from children’s literature to newspapers and magazines to the Internet and beyond. As teacher educators, we should model this by supplementing the children’s literature textbooks that we require our students to read. From my own small sampling, it is clear that these children’s literature textbooks aren’t enough to encourage dialogue about gay and lesbian issues or books.

**Picturebooks with Gay and Lesbian Characters**

Recent publications, such as Francis Day’s (2000) annotated bibliography of gay and lesbian literature for children and young adults, are excellent resources for titles published before 2000, and Cart & Jenkins’s (2006) analysis of themes in young adult novels with gay and lesbian characters from 1969–2004 suggests that, despite an adverse political climate, gay- and lesbian-themed books are not only being written, but read. These collections and critiques are useful, but I find the need to translate these larger texts into genres such as Alphabet and Counting Books, Realistic Fiction, Fairy Tales, and Nonfiction. I want to help my students see beyond the boundaries of selecting only one book that represents gay and lesbian characters—that texts that address these issues can be a part of multiple genre studies.

Fortunately, there are books for younger children that address gay and lesbian issues that have moved beyond the first groundbreaking but awkward texts like Newman’s (1989) Heather Has Two Mommys. Newman’s (2002) newest book, Felicia’s Favorite Story, tells the story of young Felicia’s adoption from Guatemala by her two mothers. Like two other books for very young readers, the beautifully illustrated 1 2 3: A Family Counting Book (Combs, 2000a) and A B C: A Family Alphabet Book (Combs, 2000b), Newman’s book does not address any challenges faced by children with same-gender parents, but provides a picture of a loving and healthy family. The alphabet and counting books are different from others in their genre only in that they portray families with two moms or two dads on the pages. Todd Parr (2003), who has published a large number of picture books, contributes The Family Book. This book, like the counting and alphabet books, does not address issues in the lives of gay and lesbian people, but includes families with two mommies or two daddies alongside families who adopt children, live in apartments, and have different kinds of diets.

Nancy Garden’s (2004) Molly’s Family extends the counting and alphabet books through a realistic fiction picturebook genre. In Garden’s story, a kindergarten class is getting ready for Open School Night. As the children draw pictures of their families, Tommy tells Molly her picture of herself with her two moms isn’t a family, and goes on to say that a person can’t have two mommies. As students describe their own pictures, readers see a variety of familial constructions, including a student with only a dad and another...
without a dad. The teacher provides a great model for the future teachers in our teacher preparation programs by responding to Tommy’s comment with an invitation to Molly to tell about her picture. After Molly explains that each mama is her mother (and not an aunt or a visitor), the teacher concludes, “It looks to me as if you can have a mommy and a mama” (Garden, unpaginated). When Molly talks to her parents that evening about the day’s events, she is upset by her classmates’ words. Her mothers talk about how they became a family, and about other kinds of families that are represented at Molly’s school. When they all venture to Open School Night, Molly sees multiple kinds of families, and the evening is a success.

The fairytale genre is playfully developed in de Haan and Nijland’s (2002) King and King. In this brightly illustrated modern day fairy tale, the queen is tired of her son’s lack of a spouse. She brings princesses from all over to the palace in order to find a suitable match. Finally, a princess is presented with her brother, Prince Lee. Our hero falls in love, surprisingly, with the prince, and after the wedding—cake, heart-covered kiss, and all—the two are pronounced King and King. The story has been frequently challenged by those wishing to keep it out of the hands of children. Interestingly, an 8th-grade student in Chasnoff’s (1995) film suggests that, if young children are going to be exposed to heterosexuality through traditional fairy tales like “Cinderella,” then they should be exposed to stories where a princess falls in love with a princess. This book seems to be an answer to this young adult’s challenge to the heterosexual norm assumed for young children through the literature most often read to them. While King and King certainly does not provide a balance to the many books with princes coming in to save the princess, it does provide one alternative.

The final book, And Tango Makes Three, is a realistic fiction picturebook by Richardson and Parnell (2005). It is the true story of two male penguins who have been partnered for years, and who watch the heterosexually partnered penguins wistfully as they raise their babies in the Central Park Zoo. When their keeper, Mr. Gramzay, finds an orphaned egg, he gives it to Roy and Silo to care for. When the egg hatches, the two daddy penguins care for Tango by providing food, warmth, and nurturing, “because it takes two to make a Tango” (unpaginated). The final illustration is of the family of three, snuggled on a rock.

These books all provide ways to talk about different families, familial issues (like single-parenthood, adoption, same-gender parents) in ways that are based in a presumption of love and security, regardless of who makes up the family.

CONCLUSIONS

Broadly defined, texts have power in classrooms. Documentaries, conversations about how other teachers have successfully integrated gay and lesbian issues into curriculum, positive words of experts in the field of children’s literature, and children’s literature itself all provide a rich context for helping teacher education students think in new ways about why they might make gay and lesbian characters and their representation an issue for critique and analysis in their teaching.

As Perry Nodelman (1996) explains, literary texts are “expressions of a culture and a significant way of embedding readers in those values and assumptions” (p. 69). Present in every text is the ideology of the author, whose “perspectives [are] shaped and conditioned by their times” (Cai, 1997, p. 204). Ideology is defined by Nodelman (1996) as “the body of ideas that controls how we view the world and understand our place within it” (p. 65). Further, as Taxel (1981) has argued, “Even though there is considerable disagreement among . . . theorists about the precise social and ideological function of the schools, most of them agree that educational institutions are active agents of cultural and economic reproduction” (p. 207). The literature that teachers bring into their classrooms usually reflects the values held by the teacher, and typically held by the larger culture.

In the 21st century, heterosexism still influences the laws and privileges that govern our lives, both inside
and outside of school. Providing pre- and inservice teachers with literature that challenges dominant ideologies about gay and lesbian people is one step towards changing those ideologies and towards making classrooms more inclusive.

Films like It’s Elementary: Talking about Gay Issues in School (Chasnoff, 1995) show future teachers that, unlike many adults, children are able and willing to talk about gay and lesbian issues in meaningful ways. The publication of books like Queering Elementary Education: Advancing the Dialogue about Sexualities and Schooling (Lotts & Sears, 1999) and Getting Ready for Benjamin: Preparing Teachers for Sexual Diversity in the Classroom (Kissen, 2002) help teacher educators and preservice teachers explore their questions and rationales as they also confront the importance of integrating gay and lesbian issues into K–12 classrooms. It is my belief that as more and more teacher educators find ways to integrate gay and lesbian issues into their classrooms—using children’s literature, films, and discussions—more and more elementary school teachers will find ways to integrate those same issues into their classrooms, which will, in turn, become more inclusive spaces.

Children’s Books Cited

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