

### TRANSCRIPTION

**Center Announcer:** Welcome to the Midwest and Plains Equity Assistance Center Equity Spotlight Podcast Series. This podcast series will feature the Center’s Equity Fellows, national scholars from North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma, Minnesota, Iowa, Missouri, Wisconsin, Illinois, Michigan, Indiana, and Ohio who are working to advance equitable practices within school systems.

Each episode will focus on a topic relevant to ensuring equitable access and participation and quality education for historically marginalized students specifically in the areas of race, sex, national origin, and religion, and at the intersection of socioeconomic status.

**Mary Catherine Miller:** Welcome to today’s podcast, which pairs with the Equity by Design brief, “Teaching LGBTQ-Themed Literature in English Language Arts Classrooms.” The brief describes curriculum strategies for incorporating LGBTQ literature in Language Arts classrooms and for this podcast, we’ll be hearing from a few teachers who have used LGBTQ books with their students. Each contributor was asked to describe the way they use an LGBTQ-themed text in their classroom, with the purpose of providing concrete examples of both high quality LGBTQ texts and how they might be used in elementary and secondary Language Arts classrooms. Many of our contributors are university educators, teaching pre-service teachers, providing a unique viewpoint of both instructional methods and how teachers respond to LGBTQ-themed literature. All of the books featured in this podcast can be found in a supplemental text list included with this podcast.

We will first be hearing from Rob Bittner, who teaches the picture book *10,000 Dresses* by Marcus Ewert and illustrated by Rex Ryan. *10,000 Dresses* features a transgender girl named Bailey who tells her parents that she wants to wear dresses. Bailey’s parents react negatively to her request, so Bailey seeks out the help of a neighbor to design and create her dream dress.

**Rob Bittner:** Hello, my name is Rob Bittner. I’m an LGBTQ children’s and young adult literature specialist and I teach undergraduate courses in Gender and Sexuality Studies as well as Children’s Literature at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, BC. One of my favorite activities to do with undergraduate students, um, particularly those who are looking to be elementary school teachers, is a close reading of the picture book *10,000 Dresses* by Marcus Ewert and Rex Ray. Um, I begin the activity by showing the cover image of the book to the class and ask students to indicate what they think the book is about. More often than not, students make some mention of the child being a boy and likely being gay because of the short hair and the dress on the cover image. I then move on and read the first few pages of the book aloud, showing the accompanying images. A few pages in, Bailey, who self identifies as a girl, confronts her mother, asking if she can get a new dress. Bailey’s mother, though, states that Bailey was born a boy and boys

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don't wear dresses. At this point, I stop and ask students to consider how the gender pronouns used to describe Bailey complicate and inform their earlier assumptions of the main character, which they based solely on the cover image. Finally, I read the students the remainder of the text which explores acceptance from chosen family and friends versus the assumptions of biological family members who are unaccepting and intolerant. The exercise enables students to confront their own assumptions and to see how children aren't often afforded the space to explore their own identities, but are instead often told how to identify. I think this activity is important in helping undergraduate students confront their own biases and also see ways in which they can explore gender in their own classrooms and homes.

**Mary Catherine Miller:**

Next, Sara Austin discusses how she also uses *10,000 Dresses* alongside two other picture books in her university-level children's literature course. Sara discusses *Heather Has Two Mommies* by Leslea Newman and illustrated by Dana Kingsbury. The book, first published in 1989, is considered to be the first picture book depicting a child with lesbian parents. Sara Austin pairs *10,000 Dresses* and *Heather Has Two Mommies* with *And Tango Makes Three* a picture book by Peter Parnell and Justin Richardson, illustrated by Henry Cole. *And Tango Makes Three* tells the story of two male penguins who raise and hatch an egg in Central Park Zoo. The book won multiple awards but, like *10,000 Dresses* and *Heather Has Two Mommies*, has been the subject of numerous censorship debates and is one of the American Library Association's most frequently challenged books.

**Sara Austin:**

My name is Sara Austin and I taught survey children's literature for the University of Connecticut. In the section of the class on gender and sexuality, my students read three picture books: *10,000 Dresses*, *Heather Has Two Mommies*, and *And Tango Makes Three*. After discussing Kathryn Bond Stockton's [*The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century*] and Lee Edelman's [*No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*] as backgrounds in queer theory in children's literature, we used the three picture books to talk about how children's books represent the difference between sexuality and gender and how family diversity works as a stand-in for discussing the child as sexual subject. We specifically noted that none of these picture books deal with the possibility of queer children. In class, we also did some brief research on the controversy surrounding these picture books, looking at the ALA website and other online responses to them and then connected those responses, which were overall negative, to positive discussions of the books such as the Huffington Post article on queer children's books or the mommy blog "Raising my Rainbow." Students then were able to connect these books to books about heterosexual reproduction including *It's Not the Stork!* and young adult novels such as *The Giver* and *Zom-B*.

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**Mary Catherine Miller:** Moving towards middle grade novels, Melissa Smith next describes how she teaches *Totally Joe* by James Howe. The novel is formatted as an “alphabiography” in which Joe describes his life from A to Z. Throughout the entries, Joe describes his friends and life in 7<sup>th</sup> grade, exploring gender roles and expectations, family relationships, and bullying at Joe’s school. Joe identifies as gay and comes out to his family and friends.

**Melissa Smith:** My name is Melissa Smith and I’m an assistant professor of children’s literature at Ferris State University in Big Rapids, Michigan. One of the texts that I enjoy using in my children’s literature course is *Totally Joe* by James Howe, and there’s two really interesting reasons why: the first is that Joe is a[n] endearing character that realizes over the course of the novel that he is gay and he comes out to his family. Um, unlike many novels, his family is incredibly supportive. His aunt, his grandparents, his mom and dad, they stick up for him, they believe in him, and they value his choices. Um, I do sometimes have students who think that the reaction is unrealistic but I do think it’s important for students and children and our college students to see a supportive family. The second reason I really enjoy this text is that although Joe is, um, gay and although he does have a crush on a boy over the course of the text, he does not choose to engage in any sexual activities. Um, in fact, he realizes that he’s too young to kiss anyone. And I think that often times our students assume that for an individual to be gay, they have to engage in some sort of intimate act. This book really counters that, sexuality for Joe is an identity, it’s a preference, but it’s not an action. Thanks.

**Mary Catherine Miller:** Next, high school English teacher Cary Snider discusses teaching *Am I Blue?: Coming Out from the Silence*, a collection of stories edited by Marion Dane Bauer. Snider particularly focuses his discussion on Bruce Coville’s short story from the collection, titled “Am I Blue?”, in which the protagonist Vincent experiences bullying and questions his own sexuality. When Vincent’s fairy godfather visits him, Vincent wishes for every gay person to appear as blue for one day.

**Cary Snider:** My name is Cary Snider and I teach high school English. I teach multiple stories from Bauer’s *Am I Blue?* My approach is to teach each story in conjunction with one or two relevant LGBTQ concepts. The title story, Coville’s “Am I Blue?” is excellent and follows the protagonist Vincent, a young teen who is bullied because he, to himself, is questioning his sexuality. I want to tell you how I teach microaggressions in conjunction with this story. First, I give my students the definition of microaggressions, a term coined by Pierce as “everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional which communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership.” After a detailed discussion of the meaning of this definition, and discussing various examples, I have students write a reflective journal entry responding to the

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prompt “Have you experienced microaggressions? How does it feel?” This assignment was designed in consideration of a prominent goal of queer-inclusive curriculum, which is to provide students with literature that serves as “windows and mirrors,” a term coined by Emily Style. The goal of this assignment was for my students to see themselves, or close friends and family, as victims of microaggressions. When students see themselves in this way, they have a clearer path to relate to and make meaning out of Vincent’s experience, who, as a questioning adolescent, is often the victim of homophobic microaggressions. My students’ journal entries either directly mirror Vincent’s experience with a homophobic microaggression, which is incredibly affirming, or parallel it with a microaggression that targets a different marginalized group, providing those students with a window, a path toward empathy.

**Mary Catherine  
Miller:**

The intentional incorporations of high-quality LGBTQ-themed literature, such as texts like *Am I Blue?*, *Totally Joe*, and *10,000 Dresses*, has been shown to provide readers with reflections of themselves and foster empathy in classrooms. The texts in this podcast center LGBTQ identities in the Language Arts classroom and this podcast showcases educators using intentional pedagogical activism that actively work to combat heteronormativity and homophobia. These educators report practices that invite their students to challenge stereotypes, confront their own initial assumptions and misconceptions about LGBTQ identities, and see themselves in the role of LGBTQ protagonists. As we describe in the associated Equity by Design briefing, LGBTQ-themed literature addresses issues of identity relatable to all students, and conversations on social justice and activism are transferable to other conversations on civil rights and social justice, which we can see occurring in Cary Snider’s discussion of microaggressions with his students, in which students find ways to relate to a protagonist experiencing bullying as he questions his sexuality. LGBTQ-themed literature also invites students to challenge their own stereotypes, as Rob Bittner asks his students to predict what will happen in an LGBTQ-themed text, and then discuss their assumptions. LGBTQ-themed literature, when paired with intentional pedagogical practices, allows us to disrupt heteronormative assumptions and practice empathy in the classroom, creating a more equitable space that improves the experiences of all of our students.

For a list of the novels and supplemental references mentioned in this podcast, please see the podcast transcript, available at the Great Lakes Equity center website.

**Center Announcer:** This podcast was brought to you by the Midwest and Plains Equity Assistance Center. To find out about other Midwest and Plains Equity Assistance Center podcasts and other resources, visit our website at [www.greatlakesequity.org](http://www.greatlakesequity.org). To subscribe to a podcast, click on the podcast link located on the Midwest and Plains Equity Assistance Center Website.



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