

## “Cause I'm a G”: Identity Work of a Lesbian Teen in Language Arts

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### **Abstract:**

Framed around the perspective that identities matter in relation to literacy learning, this case study examined the identity work of June (pseudonym), a lesbian youth in an 11th-grade high school language arts classroom. Informal interviews with June about her work on a multigenre research project in relation to LGBTQ issues were analyzed using the constant-comparative method and discourse analysis. Findings indicate that she positioned herself as a reader and writer in new ways because of an assignment that provided her the opportunity to explore her sexuality. I propose that teachers consider making youth's experiences, including LGBTQ experiences, the centerpiece of literacy instruction. More work, however, needs to be done to explore how educators can create curricula and school communities that recognize and celebrate sexual identities as a part of literacy learning.

**Keywords:** LGBTQ students | high school literacy | identity

### **Article:**

In the spring of their 11th-grade year, June and Shane (all names are pseudonyms) sat next to each other in Ms. Gina's English language arts classroom to work on an outline for an exam essay on *Fallen Angels* by Walter Dean Myers (1988). They were asked to write about how they might react in a war-related life or death situation and compare/contrast those reactions to those of one character from the book.

During this 20-minute writing time, June and Shane, both self-identified African American lesbian and gay youth, chatted about their weekend and ruff led through their backpacks; neither of them attempted to write the essay like the other students. I wondered why they were resisting an essay question that to me (i.e., a researcher and former high school English teacher) seemed broad enough for them to relate to their own lives and opinion, so I asked them what they were writing about.

June: Some Vietnam crap that I don't like.  
Shane: I don't know, because I don't want to go to no war.  
June: They ain't gonna draft you. You want to know why?  
Shane: 'Cause I'm a G.  
June: I will write it on the paper. [writes "G\*\*"].  
Shane: I'm a G. I already know I have two stars at the end.  
June: Exactly. [to Shane]  
Shane: I'm a G with two stars at the end.

After asking them to explain their disengagement, I learned that their resistance to this assignment was linked to their sexual identities. June commented to Shane that he would never be drafted, because he was a "G\*\*," or in other words, gay. This conversation implied that the essay question was not relevant to her or Shane's lives, because their sexual orientations excluded them both from being drafted in a war. For the teacher (Ms. Gina) and me, this excerpt reminded us about the alienation that LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer) youth often experience in schools, even in classrooms and assignments that intend to be inclusive of all students (Blackburn, 2006; Moje & MuQaribu, 2003). We realized that this essay question was a missed opportunity to engage these two students in identity work related to a piece of literature.

It was this episode and others like it that led me to learn more about the experiences of LGBTQ youth in school. Freire and Macedo (1987) argued that literacy instruction should be about "moments in which texts...[are] offered to us in our restless searching" (p. 33). Teachers should provide opportunities for students to read the word and the world and should use literacy from the students' "word universe" (p. 35) to express fears and anxieties through reading and writing. Providing opportunities for students to make sense of themselves and the world around them through reading and writing is an important part of literacy learning. Thus, educators cannot expect students to separate their identities from literacy practices. Audre Lorde, a self-identified black, lesbian mother, warrior, and poet, said it best when she stated, "My sexuality is part and parcel of who I am, and my poetry comes from the intersection of me and my worlds" (Rowell, 2000, p. 56). In school, however, students are often expected to distance their identities from reading and writing, especially when it comes to issues of sexuality.

This portrait of June provides a snapshot of how one school assignment, a multigenre research project, attempted to provide opportunities for her sexuality to openly be part and parcel of what she read and wrote in class. Multigenre research refers to a "nontraditional" research paper in which students research a topic in depth and report their findings in a "genre-blended" paper (Romano, 1995). To do this, students selected a research topic that interested them, studied it in detail for five days in the library, and wrote about it in various genres. June chose to research the history of LGBTQ issues. Through observations, I noticed that her identity as a lesbian was inextricably tied to her identity as a reader and writer. In other words, she resisted any assignment that she perceived to alienate her because of her sexuality. If an assignment provided her the space to explore her sexuality, then she extended it and used it to reflect about what it meant to be a lesbian in our society. Specifically, I examine how one such assignment simultaneously enabled her to explore her lesbian identity and position herself as a reader and writer in new ways.

## Literacy and Identity in Theory

Students' identities, including their past experiences, shape how they "interact, respond, and learn" in literacy classrooms (McCarthy & Moje, 2002, p. 229). To better understand how identity matters to literacy learning, I describe past and current research about the relationship between identity and literacy, as well as LGBTQ youth's literacy experiences and teachers' integration of LGBTQ curriculum into literacy classrooms (Blackburn, 2006; Finders, 1997).

### Literacy and Identity

It's like one country where we can get married, and it's way out there. But it shouldn't—we shouldn't have to go way out there to get married. It don't matter who gets married as long as we are happy. (June)

In this excerpt, June illustrated engagement in a multigenre research project about LGBTQ issues by expressing her personal connection and opinion about the topic. As opposed to the dialogue at the beginning of this article, in which she resisted writing because she did not identify with the topic (i.e., fighting in war), she was engaged in reading and writing about why lesbian and gay couples could not marry legally in the United States. For June, her participation in reading and writing was directly tied to her identity as a lesbian.

This is one example of how students' identities shape their literacy interactions in school. Much research has studied why and how identity matters in literacy classrooms. By *identity*, I mean "self-understandings," or the ways in which people "tell themselves and then try to act as though they are who they say they are" (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998, p. 3). Identities are fluid, based on practices and activities situated in social, cultural, and historical worlds, and recognize issues of power, status, and solidarity that are legitimized within particular contexts (Wenger, 1998).

Students' identities matter in literacy education, because they often shape how students engage in literacy practices (Rogers, 2000). For example, educators have reported that females mostly read novels and males tend to read newspapers and sports-related items (Finders, 1997). Identities also shape how students interpret various types of texts and interactions about texts. In particular, a student's sexuality might shape his or her interpretation of a story about heterosexual love and marriage, because he or she brings a different perspective to the interpretation. Although some research has shown the benefits of identity work in literacy classrooms (Alvermann, Moon, & Hagood, 1999), many educators argue that students are not given enough time in class to explore their identities through literacy discussions (Broughton & Fairbanks, 2003; Finders, 1997). Moje (2000) suggested that if more opportunities were available for students to do identity work in literacy classrooms, they might be more likely to become "actors in a story" rather than passive observers of "someone else's experience" (p. 680). Specifically, more research needs to be done that explores identities related to sexuality (Sieben & Wallowitz, 2009).

Identity work in school, however, is about more than just providing moments to explore identities. Youth navigate various positionings in school to benefit both socially and

academically (Solá & Bennett, 1991; Vetter, Fairbanks, & Ariail, in press). Students struggle to find a balance between their home and school identities (Solá & Bennett, 1991). Vetter and colleagues (in press) found that Jessica, a Latina youth, became increasingly proficient at negotiating “in-between” spaces for herself throughout her high school experiences as a means of both maintaining her status as a good student and a schooled identity consistent with her sense of herself. Although difficult, students can navigate identities to provide a space to situate themselves in ways that do not typically coexist within a school context. Educators need to not only provide assignments or events that encourage students to explore their identities but also push for spaces that provide opportunities for students to navigate marginalized identities in schools, especially those related to LGBTQ youth.

### Teaching LGBTQ Issues in High School English Classrooms

This is a story about a little boy falling in love with a fireman.... I guess he is trying to figure out if he is gay or something. [At the end,] he was glad that his family approved of him or something like that.... (June)

While doing research in the library for her multigenre research project, June came across a story about a youth struggling to come to terms with his sexuality. In our conversation about the story, she discussed LGBTQ issues related to family acceptance and approval. She was not always afforded the opportunity to read about such issues, but certainly took advantage of the opportunity when given the choice. From several observations, it was evident that she thrived on occasions in which she could read and learn more about LGBTQ issues, because it allowed her to make sense of herself and the world around her. Teachers are more likely to unpack issues related to gender, race, and class than they are issues of sexuality (Bettie, 2003; Broughton & Fairbanks, 2003). Recent research about sexuality has focused less on the school experiences of queer youth and more on how teachers integrated LGBTQ issues into language arts classrooms in order to teach students about tolerance (Sieben & Wallowitz, 2009).

For example, Blazar (2009) used *Angels in America*, an epic play about the AIDS epidemic and its impact on the gay community in the 1980s, to build a thematic unit around issues of sexuality and gender. He found that students engaged in open dialogue about gayness; however, students' homophobic beliefs were not completely transformed. Other teachers have focused on work in after-school programs. For example, Blackburn (2002) worked with one student who engaged in identity work in an after-school literacy performance program. She found that the literacy performances of Justine, a self-identified lesbian, in an after-school group broke down walls between her and classmates by using poetry to make space for a less-sanctioned lesbian identity at school.

Despite this work, LGBTQ issues continue to be ignored or prohibited in schools, and there is not much support for teachers who advocate for such curricula (Curwood, Schliesman, & Horning, 2009). Advocates who integrate LGBTQ issues into their curricula must be careful that heterosexist and homophobic perspectives do not drive the learning, because it leaves LGBTQ youth feeling even more alienated (Clark & Blackburn, 2009). Providing spaces for students to write about issues of sexuality might seem like a good place to start, but it is difficult for LGBTQ youth to write about such personal issues in classrooms in which their sexuality is not

accepted (Ressler & Chase, 2009). More research about the school experiences of LGBTQ youth needs to be done to improve their academic learning.

### **Identity and Literacy in Practice**

Because people use language to “enact, perform, and recognize different socially situated identities” (Gee, 2005, p. 147), I used discourse analysis of June’s informal conversations to better understand the relationship between her lesbian identity and her literacy identities. In particular, I highlighted the social languages, situated meanings, and Discourse models of three videotaped informal conversations during a six-week multigenre research project in which she explored her identity as a lesbian. Within this analysis, I determined how she situated herself as a reader, writer, and lesbian, and how she negotiated those identities within a school context. Before detailing the analysis, I describe the school, teacher, and June to provide context to the data.

#### **School**

Ms. Gina teaches at Rushmore High School, which is centrally located in a southwestern U.S. city. At the time of the study, the school’s population was 68% Latino, 30% African American, 2% white, and 1% Asian and Native American. Of the student population, 81% were labeled economically disadvantaged, and 31% entered school speaking English as a second language. The school was rated academically unacceptable based on test scores and completion rates since 2005.

Issues of race and segregation seemed to be at the forefront of staff’s and faculty’s vision for teaching students in the English department. Populated with recent graduates from the local university, teachers formed book clubs, writing projects, and teacher research groups to explore aspects of culturally relevant pedagogy (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Although issues of race were commonly explored, issues of sexuality were not as widely discussed. Students, however, formed the Gay/Straight Alliance at Rushmore, an organization that worked to educate the school community about issues of gender and sexuality, form safe spaces for students, and fight discrimination (GSA Network, 2009). Ms. Gina’s classroom was often a meeting space for this group.

After speaking with a colleague of Ms. Gina about the climate of the school in regard to issues of sexuality, she stated, “there were two openly gay boys on the dance team, and they performed at all of the football games. There were a lot of ‘out’ couples... and many of them indicated to me that they felt comfortable on campus and weren’t harassed or bullied.” Despite this perspective, heterosexuality remained the accepted norm that inevitably resulted in silenced experiences and voices from a marginalized population.

#### **Teacher**

Ms. Gina, a third-year teacher, began the school year with a focus on empowerment. For example, she headed Rushmore’s literary anthology, developed an action research project with her students, and conducted a teacher research study in conjunction with the National Writing

Project. After a colleague introduced me to Ms. Gina during a National Writing Project meeting, I observed a few of her classes and chose to attend her seventh-period on-level class for five months, because she used strategies, created curricula, and negotiated assignments that provided opportunities for students to make sense out of themselves and the world around them. Her seventh-period class was especially open to the research project and welcomed my laptop, my video and audio recorders, and me. Even though issues of sexuality were not at the forefront of Ms. Gina's curriculum, students sometimes chose to write about and share personal, reflective essays about their experiences as LGBTQ youth. When read aloud, observations indicated that students in her classroom were accepting of such readings about LGBTQ issues, because no one made homophobic remarks during classroom conversations.

“You Can Do It! You Can Do It! Let's Go!”: June

June, a self-identified African American high school junior, joined Ms. Gina's classroom during the middle of the fall semester. In this section, I provide a detailed description of June as a literacy student in Ms. Gina's classroom to illustrate the kind of student that June was at this time. Although this article focuses on how she explored her lesbian identity in relation to one multigenre research project, several other identities shaped her experiences as well, especially her identity as a struggling reader and writer and as an African American student who had recently transferred to Rushmore.

June entered the class with an individualized education program that addressed issues related to her reading and writing skills. Her participation in class was inconsistent. Frequently, she put her head down when she entered class and minimally participated in assignments and discussions. Ms. Gina commented in a formal interview that June's participation was “random,” and she thought that it might stem from past experiences with teachers who told her that she was not a capable student. When June did participate in assignments, she often grew frustrated and left them incomplete.

Ms. Gina attributed June's frustrations to moving “around from three or four different schools in a year” and not being familiar with the classroom norms. When June gave up, Ms. Gina usually worked with her individually to mediate her frustrations by saying things like, “You can do it! You can do it! Let's go!” Overall, Ms. Gina and June had a positive, trusting relationship. June said that she liked the class, because it kept her awake, and she liked the freedom to write about how she felt. She thought that Ms. Gina was “fun to talk to” and was open with her about her sexuality.

Analyzing Talk to Uncover Situated Identities

Although interviews and artifacts were collected over the entire semester, I focused on three of the eight informal interviews during the third and fourth months of the study to examine a time when June was engaged in identity work within a classroom-based assignment. Because language is used to fashion identities, discourse analysis was especially helpful in identifying how June constructed socially situated identities related to reading, writing, and her sexuality during our interviews. Specifically, I drew from Van Sluys, Lewison, and Flint's (2006) use of

Gee’s (2005) techniques (i.e., situated meaning, social languages, and Discourse models) and asked the questions presented in Table 1 to analyze June’s talk about her assignment.

**Table 1.** Questions for Discourse Analysis of Lesbian Youth Identity Work

<b>Inquiry tool</b>	<b>What are the keywords or phrases in the text?</b>
Situated meaning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What do particular words mean in this context?</li> <li>• What do these words mean in this time and place?</li> </ul>
Social languages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is the grammar and function of the language?</li> <li>• What type of person speaks like this?</li> <li>• Is the grammar appropriate for the setting?</li> </ul>
Discourse models	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are the speaker’s underlying assumptions and beliefs?</li> <li>• What are the simplified story lines that one must assume for this to make sense?</li> <li>• What Discourse models does the speaker believe in?</li> </ul>
Situated identities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Who is the speaker trying to be, and what is she or he trying to do?</li> <li>• What Discourses are being produced here?</li> </ul>

*Note.* Adapted from *An Introduction to Discourse Analysis: Theory and Method* (2nd ed.), by J.P. Gee, 2005, New York: Routledge; and “Researching Critical Literacy: A Critical Study of Analysis of Classroom Discourse,” by K. Van Sluys, M. Lewison, and A.S. Flint, 2006, *Journal of Literacy Research*, 38(2), 197–233.

Through the examination of situated meanings, social languages, and Discourse models of these informal interviews, I highlighted June’s situated identities that were in play. Thus, I used discourse analysis to better understand how her literacy identities were shaped and reshaped by her lesbian identity. Gee (2005) stated that situated meanings are the understanding that words take on different meanings in different contexts of use. For example, after asking June about the specifics of her research question, she said she wanted to know more about “why we—why they can’t get married.” In this context, I know that both “we” and “they” refer to same-sex couples. Because she switched back and forth between the two pronouns, I understood that she is hesitant about situating herself as LGBTQ within this context or situation.

The investigation of social languages provided insight into those situated meanings by asking what types of language June used in particular situations to situate herself as a reader, writer, or lesbian. A social language is a particular style or variety of language used for a particular purpose (Gee, 2005). By examining the same sentence, I inferred that June was hesitant about situating herself as lesbian within this context because of her switch between personal (“we”) and impersonal language (“they”).

To better understand the reasons behind June’s reluctance to situate herself as a lesbian, I examined Discourse models in conversations. Discourse models are a theory, story line, or “generalizations from past experience that people make” and are “representations of self at a particular time that people try to reassert” (Holland et al., 1998, p. 55). Gee (2005) used the example of a popular Discourse model: “Anyone can make it in America if they work hard enough” (p. 61). For him, Discourse represents specific socially and culturally distinctive identities that people take on in society, such as middle class parent.

By examining Discourse models, I was able to better understand the assumptions that June made about socially accepted identities within this context. From the same utterance (“Why we—why they can’t get married”), she appeared to take on or test out a Discourse model that assumed it

was not appropriate to talk about one's sexuality in an academic context. This belief portrayed issues of power and status related to LGBTQ issues and the institution of school. It caused me to wonder if she asked herself, is it okay to be a lesbian in school? To better understand how her lesbian identity related to her literacy identities within the same informal conversation, I engaged in a similar discourse analysis, but instead asked myself, how does she situate herself as a reader and writer?

I came to this analysis from a white, female, and heterosexual perspective. Although June's voice is represented in informal interviews to show rather than tell her experience throughout the article, my interpretation is still a partial view of one lesbian youth's literacy experience (Haraway, 1988). This view is supported by a variety of methods (i.e., field notes, interviews, artifacts, informal conversations) and sources (i.e., June, Ms. Gina, classmates). I also consulted with experts on issues of sexuality and identity in schools and spoke with June about my interpretations of our informal conversations to gain insight into her perspective.

### **June's Identity Work**

If identities are part and parcel of how and what students read and write, then it is important that educators investigate more about what happens when students engage in identity work within the context of a school assignment, specifically as it relates to the understudied issue of sexuality. In June's informal interviews about her multigenre research paper, I found that she positioned herself as a reader and writer in new ways (e.g., invested, critical, and oppositional reader) because of an assignment that provided her the opportunity to explore her sexuality. Analysis focused only on the informal conversations during this event, because they portrayed how June situated herself as a reader, writer, and lesbian, which captured the process in ways that her final product did not.

#### **Navigating the Situated Identities of a Lesbian Invested Reader**

From the first day in the library, I found that June was engaged in reading and writing in ways that were not typical of her past performances as a resistant literacy student. In the library, she sat at a table with Shane, away from other students whom she typically interacted with, illustrating a need for community and support. In informal interviews with her, I asked questions about her research to better understand how it related to her identity as a lesbian and as a literacy student. In one of our first conversations, she stated, "I wanted to know more about homosexuals, since I am kind of that way or whatever...and I just wanted to know...why we—why they can't get married." Rather than resisting an assignment because she felt it excluded her (e.g., the *Fallen Angels* essay), she enacted a reading identity that was invested in the opportunity to explore issues related to her sexuality.

June's repetitive use of "I wanted to know" illustrated how she situated herself as an invested reader, because she genuinely wanted to know more about a subject that related to herself as a lesbian (e.g., "kind of that way," "why we," "why they"). Her use of personal language (e.g., "I just wanted to know") portrayed a sincere curiosity about marriage laws related to lesbian/gay couples that she intended to fulfill by reading articles on the topic. Rather than "sanitize" her research topic, as students have been found to do when it comes to sexuality, June took



advantage of this opportunity to begin a research project about LGBTQ issues and took on the situated identity of an invested reader who wanted to learn more about herself and the world around her through a school assignment (Moje & MuQaribu, 2003). This choice can be viewed as a first step in her identity work, which she continued to explore throughout the project. Although she appeared to take on a story line that school and/or Ms. Gina's classroom is an appropriate place to examine issues of sexuality, she did not illustrate her belief that those issues could be made personal, as observed in her hesitancy to identify herself as a lesbian.

June's reading also shaped how she situated herself as a lesbian. After asking her about the specifics of her research question, she said she wanted to know more about the marriage laws of "homosexuals," because she is "kind of that way." Her use of "kind of" and her switch between personal language ("we") and impersonal language ("they") represented her hesitancy to situate herself definitively. To better understand that reluctance, she appeared to take on a Discourse model that assumed it was not appropriate to discuss her identity as a lesbian within this academic context. Her hesitation to claim solidarity to the LGBTQ population could be representative of broader societal issues related to power and status within U.S. institutions, such as the acceptance of LGBTQ youth and issues in schools. By hedging and being concerned with aligning herself in the "right" group, she could be seen as someone who is keenly aware of how positioning oneself in a particular way can potentially alienate one from a context. Her hedging illustrated how she situated herself as both a lesbian and an invested reader simultaneously in this interview, two identities that she had difficulty merging in other assignments (e.g., her *Fallen Angels* essay).

### Navigating the Situated Identities of a Lesbian Critical Reader

A few days after June began her research, she described a variety of articles that dealt with broad LGBTQ issues. As our conversations progressed, she became more confident in critically examining texts, unlike other assignments for which she turned in incomplete work. I informally asked her what she had been reading. She stated that she was reading an article titled "Are People Born Gay?" that examined the brains of lesbian and gay people. She explained,

I don't see no point of opening a dead person's brain to figure out if they was gay... I don't think—you can't tell if somebody is born gay. It's just, I think how the world—how the world is, they just become.... I think 'cause like some girls...they was raised around boys, and they end up coming out like that.... They can't stand boys, because they were around them all the time.

June's repetitive use of phrases (e.g., "I think," "I don't see no point") illustrates how she critically examined her opinion of how people become gay. Her use of personal language (e.g., "I think") in connection with what she was reading illustrated how she made sense of a personal issue through research. She appeared to take on a situated identity of a critical reader who questioned the text and considered personal experience when forming an opinion (e.g., "I think," "not from what I read"). She appeared to follow a story line that assumed students talked back to the text and formed opinions based on various sources.

June also situated herself as a lesbian within this context. At the end of our discussion, she switched from “most” to “some” when talking about her belief. This switch illustrated her uncertainty about the debate and portrayed her belief that sexuality might be linked to genetics. At this time, however, she was not convinced. Her ambiguity toward the end of the conversation portrayed how this text may have opened her eyes to other perspectives about how one becomes a lesbian. Thus, this text played a part in the Discourse models and situated identities that she chose to take on at this moment (i.e., that some, not most, people become lesbian/gay because of environmental influences).

June did not completely reject her beliefs, but she critically pondered other possibilities to make sense of herself and the world around her. Many of her questions revealed inquiry and puzzlement over how society explained homosexuality. Still hesitant, however, about identifying herself as a lesbian (e.g., use of “they” instead of “we”) within this context, she appeared to take on a Discourse model that assumed a lesbian identity was not acceptable. Regardless, she capitalized on both her identity as a lesbian and as a critical reader by exploring issues of sexuality within this project, keeping her lesbian identity at a distance, related to an impersonal, broad context.

#### Navigating the Situated Identities of a Lesbian Oppositional Reader

During the last day of research in the library, June situated herself as an oppositional reader (i.e., a reader who passionately disagreed with the text) while simultaneously claiming her identity as a lesbian. She responded through anger toward a statement in an encyclopedia about homosexuals being blamed for the spread of AIDS:

They make me mad.... It said that heterosexual females and males—many people blame homosexuals for AIDS. See, it ain't *our* fault that people have sex with people and then bring it home to wives or girlfriends or whatever.

June's use of “mad” illustrated her oppositional response to the text, to which she fervently disagreed with its claim about the relationship between the LGBTQ population and the spread of AIDS. Again, she used personal language (e.g., “they make me mad,” “our fault”) to situate herself as a reader who took up a contrasting opinion to a text. Similar to her passionate response to the *Fallen Angels* essay, she appeared to take on a Discourse model that assumed it was acceptable to express her opinion about an LGBTQ issue, except this time she capitalized on it rather than resisted it.

June also made sense of her identity as a lesbian by taking on an oppositional view. In this exchange, she clearly identified herself as a lesbian when she said, “it ain't *our* fault.” The use of “our,” an example of personal language and a message of solidarity, indicated that she became more comfortable situating herself as a lesbian in this public space. Her oppositional response also indicated a Discourse model that questioned society's assumption that AIDS is the fault of the LGBTQ population and ultimately privileges heterosexuality, even when it comes to issues of health. She continued to navigate her socially situated identities as lesbian and reader, but she did so with power and status through her emotional, oppositional response that refused to take on biased perspectives.

## Discussion

This close analysis of June's conversational talk within these three informal interviews provided insight into how she navigated her lesbian and reading identities in ways that benefited herself both academically and personally. She took on Discourses of sexuality that questioned how society treated and explained LGBTQ issues. She extended conversations specifically related to genetics, marriage laws, and health concerns of the LGBTQ population. She touched on issues of heterosexism and homophobia in our society. Her hesitation to claim an identity as lesbian until the final conversation highlighted how power, solidarity, and status shaped how she situated herself as a lesbian within this context. Thus, June was able to explore and acknowledge how her sexuality was part and parcel of her literacy practices. With the help of Lorde's words about education, sexuality, and the power of words, I illustrate what this study contributes to educational theory and practice in relation identity and literacy in the following discussion.

“If I didn't define myself for myself, I would be crunched into other people's fantasies for me and eaten alive” (Lorde, 1984, p. 137). Lorde implied that if she did not shape her own identities, then the world would shape them for her. Similarly, youth must find ways to construct multiple identities within an institution that sometimes works against those constructions. In other words, youth in school often find themselves navigating between identities that they hope will benefit them both academically and socially. Unfortunately, these negotiations are difficult, and youth are often alienated, because they must choose between identities (e.g., popular vs. smart) within particular contexts (Solá & Bennett, 1991; Vetter, Fairbanks, & Ariail, in press).

June's case study contributes to work about those negotiations by illustrating how in one assignment, she situated herself as both a lesbian and a critical, invested, oppositional reader—identities that she typically had a hard time negotiating in other assignments. Her experience illustrates that LGBTQ youth need more opportunities for such negotiations. Educators would benefit from longitudinal research that examined the identity work of LGBTQ youth from their perspectives to provide more insight into those negotiations.

June's story provides a glimpse into her experiences as a student, but her case poses several questions in relation to practical application: How can teachers open opportunities for identity exploration while also fulfilling curriculum mandates? How much class time should be dedicated to these opportunities? This case study suggests that K–12 classroom teachers can integrate opportunities for students to explore and negotiate identities throughout the year without transforming their entire language arts curriculum or assessments. For example, open-ended research assignments, sustained silent reading, student-led discussions, and reflective writing open spaces for students to examine themselves and the world around them.

Educators can also add young adult literature that addresses LGBTQ issues to their classroom bookshelves and facilitate discussions that foster multiple perspectives around literature, a goal related to the second International Reading Association and National Council of Teachers of English (1996) standard for language arts about reading a wide variety of literature about the many dimensions of human experience. There is not a magic number for the amount of opportunities that students should have to explore their identities through literacy. However,

from June we learn that the more occasions available, the more likely students will engage, participate, and identify themselves as readers and writers. Teachers can weave in these occasions daily by developing essential questions, reflective questions, or brief open-ended discussions that speak to students' identities and worlds.

“The learning process is something you can incite, literally incite, like a riot” (as cited in Hall, 2004, p. 61). In Lorde’s statement, she implied that learning occurs when teachers and students stir up feelings or provoke action about an issue. June teaches educators that when given the opportunity to examine a relevant issue, students may take on new ways of being readers, writers, and participants in the classroom and tackle learning in new ways. Although I would not describe June’s learning process to be incited “like a riot,” I would argue that a spark to learn was ignited from this opportunity to explore her LGBTQ identity. I propose, like other contemporary educators, that teachers consider making youth’s experiences, including LGBTQ experiences, the centerpiece of literacy instruction (Elbow, 1973; Giroux & McLaren, 1994; Moje & MuQaribu, 2003). Teachers can do so by developing curricula that critically investigate gender and sexuality issues. Specifically, literacy educators can examine LGBTQ literature with their students (see Table 2). Around this literature, teachers could create thematic units that investigate issues of oppression in the United States.

**Table 2.** Suggested LGBTQ Young Adult Literature

<b>Text</b>	<b>Summary</b>	<b>Appropriate grade levels</b>
Howe, J. (2005). <i>Totally Joe</i> . New York: Atheneum Books for Young Readers.	A novel about a boy in middle school who comes to grips with his sexuality as he realizes he is gay	6–9
Levithan, D. (2003). <i>Boy meets boy</i> . New York: Alfred A. Knopf.	A novel about an idealized high school where kids accept differences and same-sex preference is not a problem	6–9
Williams, B. (1998). <i>Girl walking backwards</i> . New York: St. Martin’s.	A novel about a 16-year-old lesbian who lives in Santa Barbara, California	7–10
Eugenides, J. (2002). <i>Middlesex</i> . New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.	A novel about a 41-year-old hermaphrodite who balances the personas of Cal (male) and Callie (female) convincingly to narrate a story that spans 80 years of a Greek American family from the early days of Ford Motors to modern-day Berlin	9–12
Fierstein, H. (1979). <i>Torch song trilogy</i> . New York: Villard.	Three plays about a torch song–singing Jewish drag queen living in New York City from the late 1970s through the 1980s that focus on different parts of his life, from settling down with his bisexual partner to raising a gay son	9–12
Peters, J.A. (2004). <i>Luna</i> . New York: Little, Brown.	A novel about two siblings—Regan and Liam, a transgendered boy who is the perfect son by day and a young woman named Luna by night—that focuses on Liam’s deliberations over a permanent change and Regan’s attempts to come to terms with the consequences for the family	9–12
Ryan, S. (2001). <i>Empress of the world</i> . New York: Viking.	A novel about a teenage girl who enters summer school thinking that she is straight but falls in love with a beautiful girl	9–12

Providing opportunities to explore LGBTQ issues in a literacy classroom can also pose problems when attempted in unsafe environments. In this case, Ms. Gina did not teach a unit on gender and sexuality like many of the teachers cited earlier in the article (Sieben & Wallowitz, 2009). She approached these issues through the written work of her students. Although a legitimate space to do this work, this kind does not always open up the conversation to students who are resistant to such topics. In classrooms, literacy teachers can deal with this resistance by introducing students to “other possible positionings” by examining LGBTQ literature throughout the year (Clark & Blackburn, 2009, p. 30). Ms. Gina was able to talk about these issues with her students, because they were open to approaching the subject in personal writing and class discussions.

For other teachers, classroom talk about sexuality is difficult, because it stretches the local normative structures of the community. In addition, some teachers are explicitly or normatively forbidden from having such discussions in their classrooms. Rather than avoiding LGBTQ issues altogether, however, I suggest that educators must first come to terms with their beliefs about LGBTQ issues in literacy classrooms. To do this, educators can attend professional development workshops, read literature, and talk with colleagues about LGBTQ issues in schools to challenge and recognize prejudices and sustain spaces that are inclusive of LGBTQ youth. This professional development can be the first step in attempting to introduce LGBTQ issues within a resistant context. Overall, much work needs to be done to examine how educators can create school spaces that recognize and celebrate sexual identities as part and parcel of literacy learning.

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