

The Power of Language and Its Integral Role in LGBTQ+ Inclusion in Education

by

Jay Carr

A capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Teaching.

Hamline University

Saint Paul, Minnesota

December 2021

Capstone Project Facilitator: Karen Moroz  
Content Expert: Kit Kogan

## **Project Summary**

As a person who has worked in education and identifies as queer, I have noticed that educators, the most eager LGBTQ+ allies included, are often unaware of the ways language is (or is not) used by the LGBTQ+ population. This noticing inspired me to create a resource which could help educators deepen their understanding of how to use affirming, inclusive language, and the importance of disrupting harmful language. The website Gay-OK.org is the end product stemming from the research question: *How does understanding language enable educators to move from being LGBTQ+ allies in intention to allies in action?* The purpose of the website is to present information and resources aimed at encouraging critical thinking surrounding language use, and to increase educators' awareness of dominant, heteronormative discourses which exclude the LGBTQ+ population as well as language that affirms and includes this population of learners.

A website was created as the final product because websites allow a wide audience to access the content from any location. The top priority for the website design is to ensure compliance with current Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) so that the material is accessible to people who use assistive technology to interpret or relay information. This consideration affected the Content Management System (CMS) that was chosen, and other decisions such as color contrast, and the primarily text-based format of the current iteration of Gay-OK.org. As my technological skills develop over time, visual components that are coded in accordance with WCAG will be implemented. The website's intended audience is educators based in the United States (including states with No Promo Homo policies in place), but as it is an open resource on the internet, it

could in theory be visited by anyone from anywhere. Much of the information shared on Gay-OK.org is relevant to LGBTQ+ inclusion in non-educational settings as well, and may be of interest to anyone seeking information on language as it relates to LGBTQ+ culture and identities.

### **Project Description**

The name ‘Gay-OK’ is a play on the phrase ‘A-OK’ which means ‘All OK’. This is the sentiment behind Gay-OK.org which supports everyone under the LGBTQ+ umbrella. The term ‘gay’ is often used as an intended insult, especially in school settings. Therefore, the name Gay-OK is also meant to counter that message with a positive association of the word. The logo was designed to be memorable, and because rainbows are an iconic image in the LGBTQ+ community, a rainbow is the main element. The pencil points on the ends are meant to represent education, and they are in the colors of the trans (short for transgender) flag, which is blue and pink. This is intended as a visual cue that Gay-OK is inclusive and supportive of trans identities.



## **Major Topics**

In order for educators to successfully show up as allies in action, it is crucial to understand the ways language is intertwined with inclusion. Language can create feelings of belonging and validation, and it can cause harm. Language is a tool used by those in power to dictate social do's and don'ts, and to define their views of what is 'normal' and 'natural'. It is through language that dominant discourses have been established surrounding gender and sexuality, and oftentimes those narratives are so harshly enforced that they become largely accepted as fundamental 'truths'. Educators who wish to be allies in action will need to use language that is affirming to the LGBTQ+ population, and be willing to disrupt harmful dialogues. This requires a familiarity with the nuances of language as it relates to non-conforming identities and experiences, and it also requires a critical lens through which to analyze *all language* for the ways it upholds heteronormativity and creates exclusive environments.

### ***LGBTQ+ Vocabulary***

One major focus of the website is to bring awareness to language as it relates to the LGBTQ+ community. I originally planned to create my own glossary of terms, however, there are already many valuable resources available from different organizations. Some of the most comprehensive glossaries I have discovered are linked in this section and offer educators an abundance of insight into LGBTQ+ - specific language (including language that is affirming and language that is offensive).

# LGBTQ+ Vocabulary Resources

Language that is specific to the LGBTQ+ community is a broad topic. People within the community might generally agree on the meaning of certain terms, however, language is a very personal thing, and as such it will hold different meanings and nuances to different people. Terms which originally carried negative connotations are sometimes reclaimed and used to self-identify. An example of a widely reclaimed word is *queer*, which is often used as an umbrella term to encompass many non-heterosexual identities.

While it is acceptable for people within the LGBTQ+ community to reclaim language when self-identifying, it is NOT appropriate for people outside of the community to assign those terms to others. It is always up to the individual to determine what language is appropriate for their

up to the individual to determine what language is appropriate for their own use. Want to learn more about LGBTQ+ specific language? The following links offer extensive glossaries of LGBTQ+ vocabulary terms.

<https://thesafezoneproject.com/resources/vocabulary/>



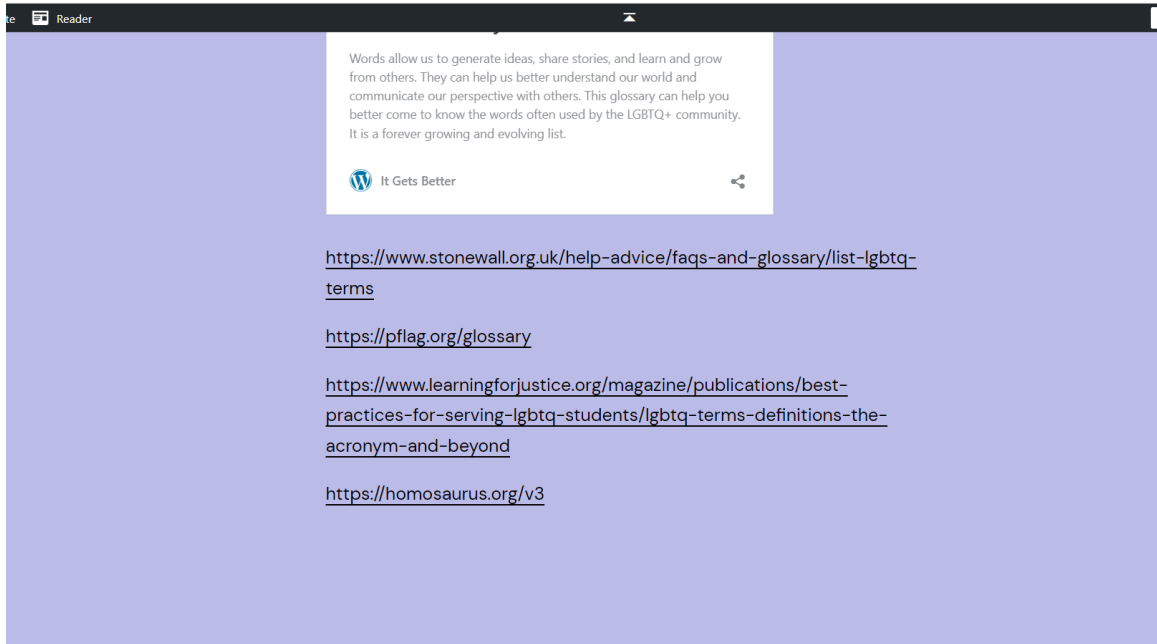
## LGBTQ+ Glossary

Words allow us to generate ideas, share stories, and learn and grow from others. They can help us better understand our world and communicate our perspective with others. This glossary can help you better come to know the words often used by the LGBTQ+ community. It is a forever growing and evolving list.

 It Gets Better

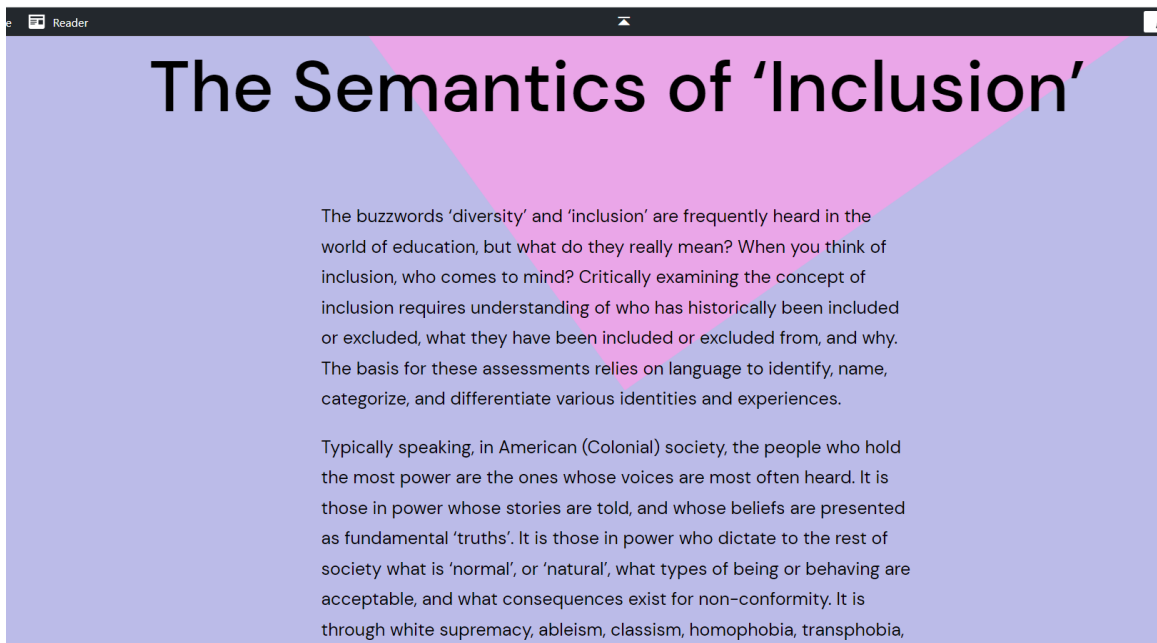


<https://www.stonewall.org.uk/help-advice/faqs-and-glossary/list-lgbtq->



### *The Semantics of 'Inclusion'*

'Diversity' and 'Inclusion' are common buzzwords in the world of education, but what do they really mean? This section encourages educators to take a critical look at the concept of inclusion and consider how it is possible to include 'others' into a heteronormative system that is designed to exclude them.



through white supremacy, ableism, classism, homophobia, transphobia, and other forms of bigotry that dominant narratives have been established surrounding gender and sexuality.

Language is a tool for expressing and enforcing dominant narratives, and it is also a tool for disrupting them.

When educators talk about 'inclusion', it is important to consider the integral role that language plays in the process, and assess the ways historical and current narratives continue to perpetuate social inequities for marginalized people. Language itself holds immense power. It is through language that people can feel included or excluded, affirmed or harmed, respected or rejected, and the list goes on and on.

It all begins with language.

Click [here](#) to learn more about heteronormativity and dominant narratives surrounding gender and sexuality.

### ***Let's Talk About Heteronormativity***

We live in a heteronormative society which positions certain identities as correct and 'others' as deviant and unnatural. Heteronormativity is deeply embedded into our social fabric, and dominant narratives surrounding gender and sexuality. Understanding how heteronormativity is upheld in schools each day, and being willing to disrupt heteronormative discourses are fundamental components of acting as an ally to the LGBTQ+ population and creating inclusive classrooms.

# Heteronormativity

Heteronormativity is the prevailing assumption or belief that heterosexuality is the only 'natural' and 'normal' form of sexuality. Heteronormativity relies on the concept of the 'gender binary' which consists of male and female, and assumes that one sex / gender will be attracted to the opposite sex / gender. In heteronormative societies, dominant discourses position those who are heterosexual and 'cisgender' (a person who identifies with the sex / gender assigned at birth) as normal, while positioning anyone who does not align with those identities as abnormal or 'othered' in some way.

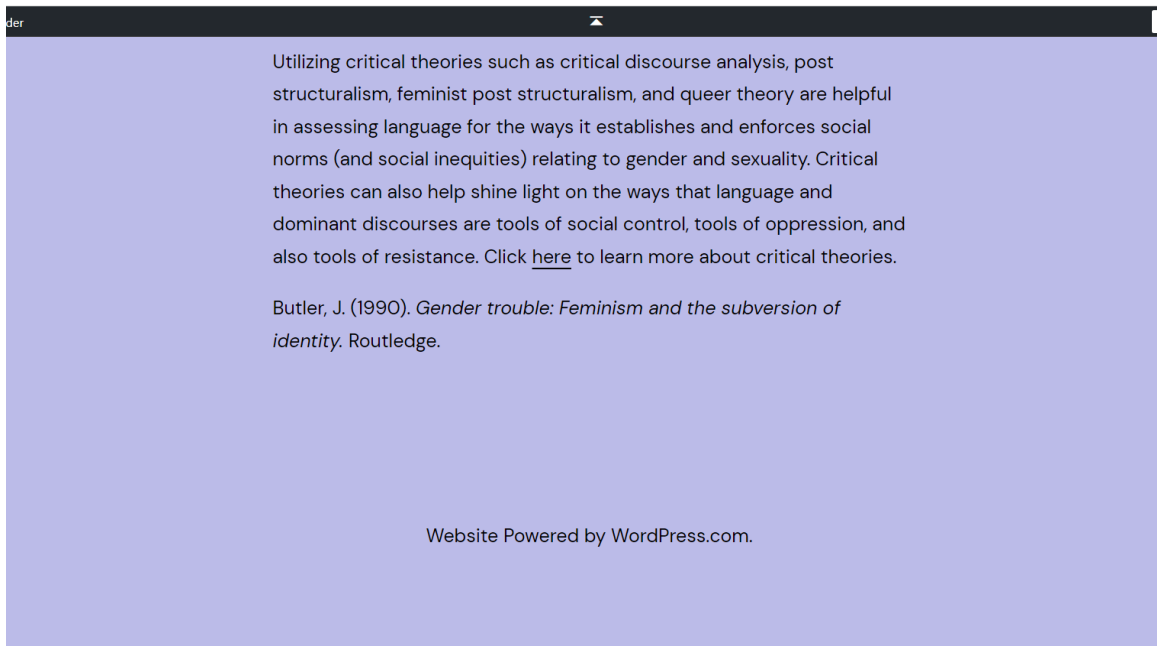
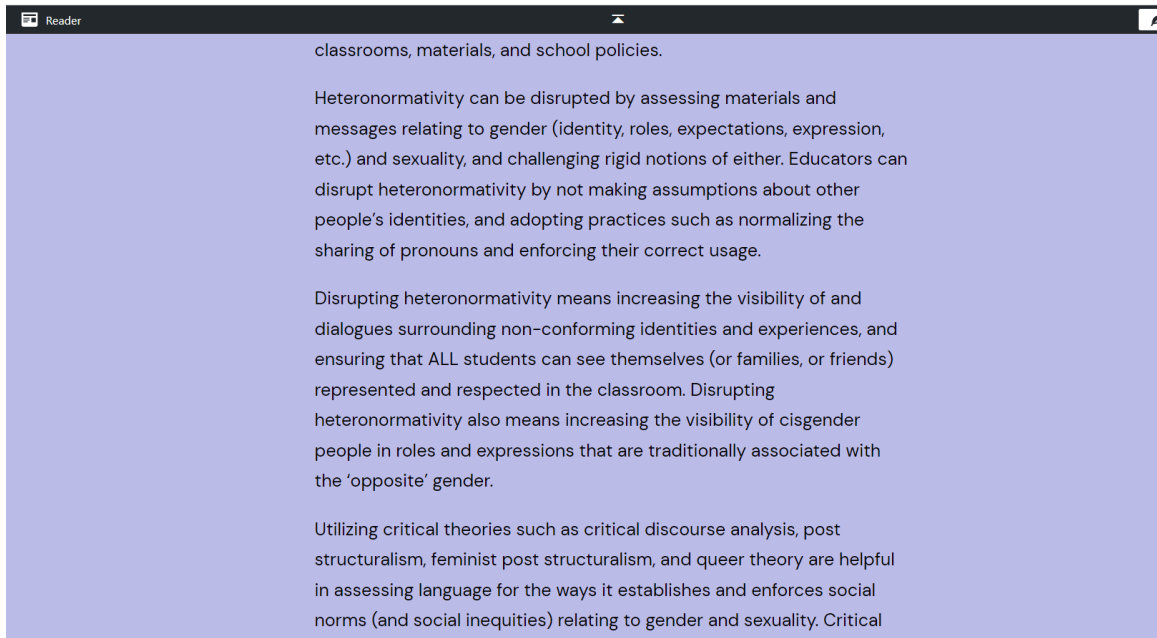
Heteronormativity is upheld in schools and classrooms every day. Think of young children in Kindergarten 'playing' by mimicking gender roles and common stereotypes surrounding gender expression. This is rarely, if ever, considered inappropriate or unnatural – as long as the behaviors and expressions (clothing, mannerisms, emotions, etc.) are in alignment

and expressions (clothing, mannerisms, emotions, etc.) are in alignment with their assigned sex / gender. However, students who do not conform to rigid structures of gender performativity (Butler, 1990) may experience negative reactions from peers, staff, and caregivers.

Consider how 'normal' it is to read a book in any grade which features cisgender characters or heterosexual parental structures. However, reading a book that features a gender nonconforming character, or allows a 'non-traditional' family configuration to become visible – much less celebrated – is entering into a 'dangerous' zone that is likely to involve criticism or pushback. Similarly, educators who are 'straight' can freely discuss their significant others without fear of being criticized or punished. It is considered 'normal' and 'natural' to be straight, and therefore, no disclosure of that identity is necessary. It is assumed, expected, and accepted by broader society.

Heteronormative discourses and their accompanying social do's and don'ts create a hostile world for anyone who is 'othered' by their gender identity or sexuality. In order to create safe space for ALL students, attention should be given to heteronormative discourses that appear in classrooms, materials, and school policies.





## ***Dominant Narratives Surrounding Gender***

This portion of the website focuses on biological essentialism and its roots in the corrupt 'science' of Eugenics. Concepts surrounding biology have been used to historically - and currently - oppress non-conforming individuals and negate their validity and / or existence. Educators who wish to be inclusive of the LGBTQ+ population must

recognize the harmfulness of these dialogues and be willing to challenge rigid notions of gender (identity, expression, roles, stereotypes, etc.), and refrain from making assumptions about other people's identities.

Reader

# Dominant Narratives Surrounding Gender

Trigger Warning: The following text mentions biological essentialism and Eugenics – both of which are sensitive topics to many people. These topics are being examined here due to their impacts on social norms and dominant narratives surrounding gender and heteronormativity.

People are assigned a sex at birth based on a medical professional's inspection of their anatomy, and along with a designation of 'biological' sex comes socially constructed and assigned notions of gender.

Dominant narratives surrounding gender are based on a rigid binary system of male vs. female and many people hold the notion that this is a fundamental, immutable, 'biological' truth. However, this version of 'science' and biological essentialism stems from the corrupt 'science' of Eugenics (Fausto-Sterling, 2020; Ordover, 2003; Stern, 2015).

Reader

'science' and biological essentialism stems from the corrupt 'science' of Eugenics (Fausto-Sterling, 2020; Ordover, 2003; Stern, 2015). Eugenacists have used the concept of biology to justify racist, sexist, ableist, homophobic, transphobic, etc. beliefs which uphold white supremacy and establish white, able-bodied, cisgender, heterosexual men as the biological ideal while actively oppressing any 'others' that threatened this social superiority (Fausto-Sterling, 1992, 2020).

Dominant narratives claiming biology as the ultimate determiner of a person's sex / gender are rooted in Eugenics and exclude the wealth of scientific knowledge that exists surrounding the fluidity of sex and sexuality in the natural world. Nature is queer, and humans are part of that! Unfortunately, there are many people, educators included, who use the concept of biology to negate the existence and validity of non-conforming identities.

Educators wanting to be allies in action must listen for harmful rhetoric surrounding gender / sex / sexuality / biological essentialism (etc.) and interrupt it immediately. We live in a diverse world and that diversity is present in every school population. Educators who are dedicated to being culturally responsive and LGBTQ+ inclusive will need to disrupt

being culturally responsive and LGBTQ+ inclusive will need to disrupt not only harmful language, but also heteronormative discourses that further marginalize the LGBTQ+ community.

Disrupting heteronormativity and creating inclusive spaces for LGBTQ+ students and staff includes not assuming people's identities. Offering ways for people to share their names and pronouns upon meeting, and adhering to the requested names and pronouns is an important practice in inclusive environments. Pronouns like ze / hir / she / they / he / theirs / hers / his – and any other pronouns – or none – are all valid! If a student doesn't share a pronoun, then use the student's name instead. And yes, literacy enthusiasts, *they / them* can be correctly used to refer to a singular person! This is not a new phenomenon in the English language! An example: Someone left their umbrella; I wonder if they will come back to get it?

Another inclusive practice is using gender neutral language. For example, instead of saying 'boys and girls', or 'ladies and gentlemen', try 'folks, everyone, y'all, people', etc. Want to learn more about gender neutral language and talking to your class about pronouns? Check out these helpful resources from [GLSEN](#) (Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education

these helpful resources from [GLSEN](#) (Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network) and the [University of Arizona](#).

Fausto-Sterling, A. (1992). Building Two-Way Streets: The Case of Feminism and Science. *NWSA Journal*, 4(3), 336–349.  
<https://doi.org/https://www.jstor.org/stable/4316219>

Fausto-Sterling, Anne. (2020) "[Science Won't Settle Trans Rights.](#)" *Opinion*. Boston Review. 12 Feb. 2020.

Ordovery, N. (2003). *American eugenics: Race, queer anatomy, and the science of nationalism*. University of Minnesota Press.

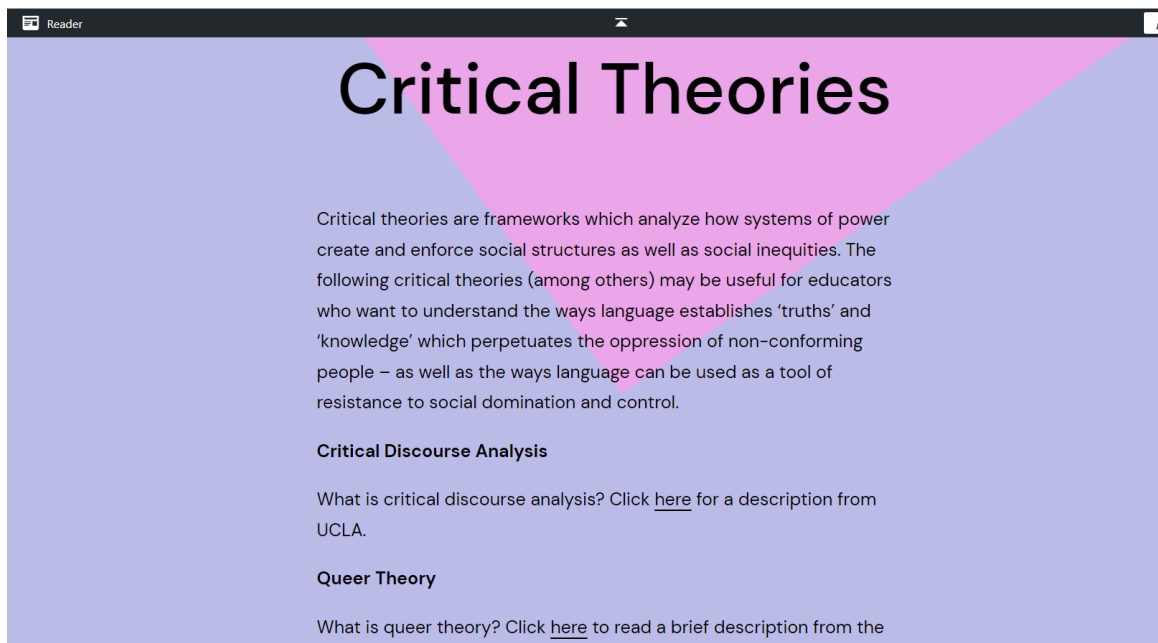
Stern, A. (2015). *Eugenic nation: Faults and frontiers of better breeding in modern America*. University of California Press.

Website Powered by [WordPress.com](#).

## ***Critical Theories***

Some of the most influential research I conducted during the literature review revolves around the use of critical theories (such as critical discourse analysis, post structuralism, feminist post structuralism, and queer theory) in analyzing language for the ways it upholds systems of power and establishes social domination and control. Through

studying the works of critical theorists such as Judith Butler, Paulo Friere, and Michel Foucault (just to name a few), I learned that efforts towards LGBTQ+ inclusion will never be successful without recognizing, challenging, and dismantling the systems and dialogues that have created exclusion. I believe that using critical theories when assessing language use (personal, school policies, etc.) is a potential key to helping educators move from being allies in intention to allies in action.



Reader

# Critical Theories

Critical theories are frameworks which analyze how systems of power create and enforce social structures as well as social inequities. The following critical theories (among others) may be useful for educators who want to understand the ways language establishes 'truths' and 'knowledge' which perpetuates the oppression of non-conforming people – as well as the ways language can be used as a tool of resistance to social domination and control.

**Critical Discourse Analysis**

What is critical discourse analysis? Click [here](#) for a description from UCLA.

**Queer Theory**

What is queer theory? Click [here](#) to read a brief description from the



***Visit Gay-OK.org***

Click the following link to visit the website: <https://gay-ok.org>

## Resources Linked on Gay-OK.org

<https://thesafezoneproject.com/resources/vocabulary/>

<https://itgetsbetter.org/blog/lesson/glossary/>

<https://www.stonewall.org.uk/help-advice/faqs-and-glossary/list-lgbtq-terms>

<https://pflag.org/glossary>

<https://www.learningforjustice.org/magazine/publications/best-practices-for-serving-lgbtq-students-lgbtq-terms-definitions-the-acronym-and-beyond>

<https://homosaurus.org/v3>

<https://pages.gseis.ucla.edu/faculty/kellner/ed270/Luke/SAHA6.html>

<https://guides.library.illinois.edu/queertheory/background>

<https://www.brown.edu/campus-life/support/lgbtq/graduate-student-resources/queer-theory-reading-list>

<https://www.e-ir.info/2018/02/13/introducing-poststructuralism-in-international-relations-theory/>

<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/9781118611463.wbielsi020>

<https://www.glsen.org/activity/pronouns-guide-glsen>

[https://www.glsen.org/sites/default/files/2021-04/NSCS19-FullReport-032421-Web\\_0.pdf](https://www.glsen.org/sites/default/files/2021-04/NSCS19-FullReport-032421-Web_0.pdf)

f

<https://www.glsen.org/>

<https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/reports/leveraging-open-educational-resources-queer-students/>

<https://openlab.citytech.cuny.edu/oerresources/2021/06/14/lgbtq-open-resources/>

<https://www.thetrevorproject.org/>

<https://www.hrc.org/resources>

[https://www.learningforjustice.org/magazine/publications/best-practices-for-serving-lgbtq-students?gclid=Cj0KCCQiA-qGNBhD3ARIsAO\\_o7ymCQg3Mm9mJSJdNPDib-qGSnZWYga1nN8n21f7K-rRj0fMyxP4NrSIaAg4AEALw\\_wcB](https://www.learningforjustice.org/magazine/publications/best-practices-for-serving-lgbtq-students?gclid=Cj0KCCQiA-qGNBhD3ARIsAO_o7ymCQg3Mm9mJSJdNPDib-qGSnZWYga1nN8n21f7K-rRj0fMyxP4NrSIaAg4AEALw_wcB)

<https://knowlesteachers.org/kaleidoscope/difficult-conversations-in-support-of-lgbtq-students>

<https://www.ypapride.org/>

<https://www.nea.org/resource-library/nea-lgbtq-resources>

## References

- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. Routledge.
- Fausto-Sterling, A. (1992). Building Two-Way Streets: The Case of Feminism and Science. *NWSA Journal*, 4(3), 336–349.  
<https://doi.org/https://www.jstor.org/stable/4316219>
- Fausto-Sterling, Anne. (2020) “Science Won’t Settle Trans Rights.” *Opinion*. Boston Review. 12 Feb. 2020.
- GLSEN. (2021). *Homepage*. GLSEN. <https://www.glsen.org/>.
- Human Rights Campaign. (2020). *2020 state equality index*. HRC Digital Reports.  
[https://reports.hrc.org/2020-state-equality-index?\\_ga=2.250670724.328757996.1628441848-837868236.1628441848&\\_gac=1.121367930.1628441848.CjwKCAjwgb6IBhAREiwAgMYKRjx7hpu2RGWaH5SMT-8JkwBkoRZeGIWv291a6k\\_Kjm1ks0Pn64evVRoCyYIQAvD\\_BwE](https://reports.hrc.org/2020-state-equality-index?_ga=2.250670724.328757996.1628441848-837868236.1628441848&_gac=1.121367930.1628441848.CjwKCAjwgb6IBhAREiwAgMYKRjx7hpu2RGWaH5SMT-8JkwBkoRZeGIWv291a6k_Kjm1ks0Pn64evVRoCyYIQAvD_BwE).
- Ordoover, N. (2003). *American eugenics: Race, queer anatomy, and the science of nationalism*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Prescott, S. (2019, October 18). *Supporting LGBTQ-inclusive teaching*. New America.  
<https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/reports/supporting-lgbtq-inclusive-teaching/>.
- Stern, A. (2015). *Eugenic nation: Faults and frontiers of better breeding in modern America*. University of California Press.



