

2024

## Representation of LGBTQ+ Characters In the 2019 to 2022 Iowa Teen Award Books

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## **Representation of LGBTQ+ Characters In the 2019 to 2022 Iowa Teen Award Books**

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REPRESENTATION OF LGBTQ+ CHARACTERS IN THE 2019 TO 2022

IOWA TEEN AWARD BOOKS

A Graduate Research Paper  
Submitted to the  
Division of School Library Studies  
Department of Curriculum and Instruction  
In Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts  
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by  
Jamie Thompson  
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Titled: Representation of LGBTQ+ Characters in the 2019 to 2022 Iowa Teen Award

Books

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## ABSTRACT

This qualitative literary content analysis examines the representation of LGBTQ+ themes in the student-nominated Iowa Teen Award (ITA) books from the past three years to help librarians and classroom teachers build an inclusive library collection. The research question posed in this study is: In what ways are LGBTQ+ characters represented in the Iowa Teen Award books? The analysis of eight middle-grade books (Appendix A) using the book analysis tool (Appendix B) identified three themes: Transformation of Understanding, Hopefulness, and Richness of Plot. Results showed that while all the books had a complex storyline, only five of the books showed a shift in mindset of other characters towards the LGBTQ+ characters, and four of the eight books showed hopefulness, that wasn't already present, for the LGBTQ+ character.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### **Justification of Problem**

Adolescents struggle with acceptance, acceptance from friends, family, teachers, and society. As they grow and develop, they are trying to figure out who they are and may begin to question and explore their sexuality. The Williams Institute (2020) estimated about 9.5% of the youth population identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ+). Many LGBTQ+ adolescents perceive school as hostile. In the 2019 National School Climate Survey conducted by GLSEN, “59.1% of LGBTQ students felt unsafe at school because of their sexual orientation” (p. 16).

Further information showed that “many LGBTQ+ students in Iowa did not have access to important school resources, such as an LGBTQ+ -inclusive curriculum, and were not protected by supportive and inclusive school policies” (GLSEN, 2019, para. 1). Teacher librarians (TL) can provide a diverse and inclusive collection to make schools welcoming and safe. This collection can be a window into the LGBTQ+ community and mirrors for students who identify as LGBTQ+ and help advocate for these students when considering Bishop’s (1990) windows and mirrors theory.

#### **AASL Standards and the Importance of LGTBQ+ Representation**

Intellectual freedom “ensures free access to seek and receive information and expression of ideas from all points of view without restriction for every individual of any



age” (ALA, 2019, para. 1). To uphold intellectual freedom, the Shared Foundation II: *Include* instructs librarians to “establish and maintain a collection of reading and information materials in formats that support the diverse developmental, cultural, social and linguistics needs of the range of learners and their communities” (AASL, 2018, p. 77). In conjunction with the AASL standards, the Iowa School Library Standard LM6 (Iowa Department of Education, 2019) states, “the library provides experiences with and access to a current and diverse collection of resources, fiction and nonfiction, print and digital, to support student and curriculum needs” (p. 11). With guidance from these standards, TLs can become advocates for LGBTQ+ students by providing a diverse collection in the school library.

### **Furthering Past Research about the Representation of LGBTQ+ Characters**

A qualitative content analysis by Snyder (2020) found that while the representation of LGBTQ+ characters in young adult (YA) literature has come a long way, there is still work to be done. Snyder noted that “curating a more diverse collection can help reach more students and lessen the tragic statistics of self-harm and suicide as more individuals feel validated, recognized, and accepted” (p. 46). To reach all readers and help teacher-librarians make decisions, Snyder suggests further research on newer literature and focus on the genres represented in LGBTQ-themed YA literature. Based on Snyder’s findings, it seems clear that teacher librarians can help build awareness and acceptance by fulfilling their responsibility to develop a diverse collection.

### **Rationale of Leadership of LGBTQ+ Characters in YA Literature**

As young adult literature featuring LGBTQ+ characters becomes more prominent, the representation is still inadequate. Groups that will benefit from this study are librarians and other educators in Iowa who may need guidance when selecting books and have a limited budget, therefore prioritizing the purchase of the student-nominated Iowa Teen Award books. They will benefit from this analysis because it may help justify a request for a larger budget to purchase diverse literature, including books with LGBTQ+ themes, which will help meet the needs of students.

### **Summary of Problem Statement**

Young adult literature offers LGBTQ+ students opportunities for self-reflection and helps others foster empathy; educators need to identify literature that respectfully portrays LGBTQ+ characters.

### **Purpose**

This qualitative literary content analysis examines the representation of LGBTQ+ themes in the student-nominated Iowa Teen Award books from the past three years to help librarians and classroom teachers build an inclusive library collection.

### **Research Questions**

1. In what ways are LGBTQ+ characters represented in the Iowa Teen Award (ITA) books?

### **Assumptions**

This study assumes that librarians with limited budgets may only be able to purchase the ITA books as ways to participate in reading promotions; therefore, the library collection may lack representation of the LGBTQ+ community.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

By Jamie Thompson and Andrea Schoenbeck.

Note: Chapter 2 was written collaboratively as assigned in course SLS 6295.

This qualitative literary content analysis examines the representation of LGBTQ+ themes in the student-nominated Iowa Teen Award (ITA) books from the past three years to help librarians and classroom teachers build an inclusive library collection. The following studies focus on the following areas: collection analysis of library materials, teacher and library inclusion of LGBTQ-themed literature, and content analysis of LGBTQ-themed YA literature.

#### **Collection Analysis of Library Materials**

In their observational qualitative research, Hughes-Hassell, Overberg, and Harris (2013) analyzed the library collections of 125 high schools for the inclusion of LGBTQ-themed titles, including 21 recommended titles. The researchers wanted to know “how well are school libraries providing resources for LGBTQ teens, especially at this critical transitional time in their identity development” (p. 3) which they determined through an evaluation of the OPAC of the 125 high school libraries, finding that half the schools had fewer than 31 titles, only 22% had more than 50 titles, the average number of titles was 35.7. The average percent of LGBTQ titles in a library’s collection was only 0.4 percent of the total collection. Of the 21 recommended titles, more than 65% of the schools had less than five titles in their library collection. This “lack of LGBTQ-themed

literature in school libraries can send a message to LGBTQ teens that the school library is not the place for them, and that their lives and their concerns are not valued there” (p. 10). While this study took place only eight years ago, it is crucial to continue to evaluate the LGBTQ+ literature available in school libraries across the country so the students who identify with these characters feel accepted and welcome in their school community. The researchers concluded that this also allows for opportunities for other students to learn to be accepting of and celebrate the differences of their peers.

Similarly, Jorgenson and Burress (2020) conducted a qualitative analysis of the top 100 checked out titles at a high school library in the Midwest. The researchers wanted to compare the diversity of the library’s top titles to the racial, gender, cultural, ability, and sexual preference diversity of the student body. Within their analysis, the researchers compared the diversity of the student body to the diversity of main characters and authors of the titles by pulling a report of the titles from the library management system, analyzing the information through this same system, reading reviews from Goodreads, *Kirkus Reviews*, *School Library Journal*, and other internet sites, and a survey of the student body. They determined that 66 books had male main characters, 57 had female main characters, 42% were Black or African-American, Asian, Latinx, multirace, Korean, and Middle Eastern. Strikingly, “when analyzing sexual preference of main characters, 90% of the characters were straight, and 10% were identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or queer” (p. 51). The researchers’ analysis found that 22% of the student body identified as lesbian, bisexual, gay, or queer, showing a disparity in the representation of these students in their library (p. 51). “Diverse texts allow students to see themselves in mirror books

with characters who look and act like them; they also enable students to look through windows to gain a better understanding of others' lives by reading about characters from different backgrounds" (p. 50). The researchers concluded that when these disparities exist, students lack the opportunity to learn about themselves and those around them.

### **Teacher and Librarian Inclusion of LGTBQ-Themed Literature**

In Garry's (2015) mixed-method research, quantitative and qualitative data were collected from 120 Ohio public high schools, and 12 school librarians were interviewed. The researcher wanted to know, "what is the evidence that suggests school librarians may be practicing self-censorship when it comes to materials with gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender content; what is the evidence that suggests certain attributes of the librarian, school, or community may correlate with higher or lower instances of self-censorship" (p. 2). The researcher surveyed TLs and analyzed catalogs through the Online Public Access Catalog (OPAC) and compared LGBTQ titles in a pre-chosen list of LGBTQ titles to a control list of books containing controversial content that did not include LGBTQ issues. The researcher found that librarians who had more administrative and community support were more likely to purchase controversial materials for their collections, but that it was more likely that the controversial materials did not contain LGBTQ content. "Almost 70% of the libraries held less than a quarter of the titles on the LGBTQ list...conversely, 80% of school libraries owned more than half of the control list titles" (p. 8). Whether the reason was self-censorship, community or administrative influence, or personal bias, the research shows that there is a lack of LGBTQ titles available, preventing access of materials to students.

During this qualitative study, Batchelor (2018) held two book club meetings where seven volunteer English/Language Arts preservice teachers (PSTs) self-selected young adult books with a character who identified on the LGBTQ spectrum and discussed the importance of having an inclusive curriculum with a representation of LGBTQ literature. The study sought to answer “how future teachers might address issues of controversy, sexuality, and non-dominate viewpoints in the English classroom in order to identify strengths and areas for growth in education with all practicing teachers” (p. 30). Through the audio recording transcripts, three themes became evident; literature can be used as a mirror, a window, or a path for self-discovery. Findings showed that the PSTs recognized the impact literature can have on students when they see themselves in characters, some stating fellow high school classmates may have had a safer experience in high school if they had literature that reflected their lifestyle. Furthermore, the PSTs felt that literature can foster discussion and create a deeper understanding of diverse viewpoints while helping students form their own identities. Despite these beliefs, the PSTs had potential fears of job security and parental pushback but felt with support from the administration, they could become an advocate for equality.

### **Content Analysis of LGBTQ-Themed YA Literature**

In this qualitative analysis, Logan et al. (2014) examined 25 young adult (YA) queer-themed books (5 lesbian, 7 gay, 4 bisexual, 4 transgender, and 5 questioning/queer). The researchers sought to find “tools or a set of criteria that can help guide educators through the processes of selecting the best of the YA queer literature for use in their schools” (p. 31). The researchers formulated their criteria by exploring queer

literature and reviewing other checklists and came up with nine categories: curriculum relevance, literary merit, windows and mirror, social justice and equity, stereotypes, pride, resilience and self-actualization, sexual expressiveness, and offsetting heterosexism and homophobia/challenging heteronormativity. Using this checklist, researchers found 16 out of the 25 books met seven to nine of the listed criteria, and nine books met four to six of them. Through discussion, the researchers further examined the value of the books, focusing mainly on curriculum relevance and literary merit. *Asking the passengers* by A. S. King, *Absolute Brightness* by James Lecesne, *Boyfriends with Girlfriends* by Alex Sanchez, *I am J* by Cris Beam, and *The House you Pass on the Way* by Jacqueline Woodson were five books that the researchers felt met curriculum requirements and literary merit. Researchers noted that while YA queer literature in the classroom will be controversial, this set of criteria will help educators provide a rationale and support for queer literature integration.

Through textual content analysis, Blackburn et al. (2015) examined five queer-themed books that were a subset of 24 lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans\* (LGBT) texts read during a three-year, out-of-school reading group. Researchers sought to answer “what does queer literature look like and what qualities do queer books share” along with “what particular resources do queer books offer that are distinct from the broader category of literature with LGBT themes” (p. 12). In their findings, researchers found there were two categories: (1) conceptions of identity and (2) disruptions of norms that made queer books distinct from those with broader LGBTQ themes. The conceptions of identity category included three criteria: essential, developmental, and poststructural.

The second category, disruptions of norms, included sexuality and gender, families and homes, and time passage. The disruption of sexuality and gender norms and family and home norms are discussed in more detail. The researchers found evidence of sexuality and gender disrupted norms in all five books by characters acting upon desires towards others of the same sex, characters rejecting their assigned gender at birth, and questioning their attraction to different types of characters. The norm for family and home is seen as a father and mother with their biological children living under the same roof but these 5 books disrupt that norm by characters having affairs, living with family members other than their biological parents, and having a desire for a different family. With the help of this analysis, educators can implement queer literature and provide students with experiences that “counter or critique pervasive, normative ideologies” (p. 43).

Lewis (2015) conducted a qualitative analysis of three LGBTQ-themed novels published in three different decades to examine the representation of LGBTQ characters in YA literature. The researcher sought to find “where the genre began and where it can still go” (p. 53). *Annie on My Mind*, by Nancy Garden, was published in 1982 at a time when people feared homosexuality. This fear presented itself towards two lesbian teen girls from almost all supporting characters but despite objections, there was a happy ending. In contrast to *Annie on My Mind*, in *Boy Meets Boy*, by David Levithan, published in 2003, queerness is celebrated and has many diverse characters, including a transgender cheerleader and a gay high school student. The last novel Lewis examines is *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*, published in 2012. Unlike the previous two novels, this novel dives into “discovering one’s identity as a whole” (p. 54,)



not just discovering their sexuality. After examining these three novels, Lewis came up with a list of criteria to help teachers evaluate other LGBTQ YA literature:

- it should not relate being gay or coming out as a traumatic experience.
- it should focus on the formation of one's whole identity or portray a character who is secure in his or her identity as a member of the LGBTQ community.
- it should provide LGBTQ characters with a supportive community
- it should provide a cathartic reading experience for teens who are struggling with or are just beginning to grasp their sexualities. (p. 57)

*Annie on My Mind* paved the way for other LGBTQ-themed novels, and Lewis found that, over the decades, books are becoming more inclusive and moving towards positive representation.

In this qualitative analysis, Betts-Green and Latham (2017) examined 31 graphic novels, published between 2006 and 2016, which received the Stonewall Book Awards and Honor Books and appeared on the Rainbow List, to determine the realistic portrayal of LGBTQ characters. The researchers sought to answer the following questions:

- what are the bibliographic characteristics of these books,
- what are the demographic characteristics of the characters/people in these books
- what does the application of Jenkin's four frameworks reveal about the contents of these books what are the outcomes of the LGBTQ characters in these books (p. 3)

After examining these books, the researchers found various genres (fiction, manga, memoir, superhero, anthology, and biography) and artistic styles represented. When it

comes to character demographics, the researchers thought there was progress to be made. Researchers noted there was a representation of different genders and sexuality, most main characters identified as female (two-thirds of the books) and lesbian (nine books). Researchers also found that even though different racial and ethnic groups (African Americans/Black, Asian/Asian Americans, Hispanic/Latino/Latina, Multiple, White, Other) were present, most of the main characters were white (15 books). Using Jenkins (1998) adapted framework, the researchers found positive and authentic portrayals of LGBTQ characters (almost half of the books), a culturally sensitive depiction of LGBTQ characters and experiences (25 books), and few books that dealt with isolations, invisibility, and internalization (9 books). When the researchers examined the outcomes of the LGBTQ characters, they found that the majority of the books had positive or mixed outcomes (28 books) instead of ending in loss, death, or breakups, similar to what Jenkins has noted in her study. Researchers concluded that despite positive portrayals of LGBTQ characters, “there needs to be diversity among the LGBTQ characters and representations across race, gender identity, sexuality, ability and ethnicity” (p. 17).

### **Summary**

Two studies above looked at the library collections and the inclusiveness of LGBTQ-themed materials. The two studies found a lack of diversity, and more LGBTQ-themed books were needed to show students that the library is a safe space and a place to learn about others (Jorgenson & Burres, 2020; Hughes et al., 2013). Two additional studies examined how teachers and librarians play a role in including LGBTQ themes in their collections. One study showed that with administrative and community

support, librarians would be more likely to add books with controversial material but not necessarily LGBTQ+-themed books (Garry, 2015). Whether it was due to self-censorship, personal bias, or administrative influence, there was a lack of LGBTQ+-themed books when looking at some library collections. Whereas, in the other study, the preservice teachers saw the importance of having LGBTQ+-themed literature in their classrooms and could accomplish inclusion with administrative support but feared parental pushback and job security (Batchelor, 2018). The final four studies analyzed the LGBTQ+ characters and events in YA literature (Betts-Green & Latham, 2017; Lewis, 2015; Blackburn, 2015; Logan et al., 2014). Specifically, Betts-Green et al. and Lewis found similar themes that have been adapted into the following list of criteria for initial coding of YA books in the current study: (1) genre, (2) character gender, sexuality, race, and ethnicity, (3) major or minor character, (4) community and family support, (5) positive outcomes, and (6) positive portrayals of LGBTQ+ characters. All four studies determined there needs to be a broader range of content within the LGBTQ+ literature available to young adult readers, including inclusiveness and positive representation of LGBTQ+ characters.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### **Research Design**

This study used a qualitative content analysis approach that Wildemuth (2017) says “allows researchers to understand social reality in a subjective but scientific manner” (p. 318). Specifically, this is a *summative* analysis of the content that Wildemuth states “starts with counting words or manifest content, then extends the analysis to include latent meanings and themes” (p. 320). This research design approach is appropriate for this study because it looked at the number of books with LGBTQ+ themes and analyzed the representation of LGBTQ+ characters in those books. The books were purposely chosen to address the research questions. This study relies on past research discussed in Chapter 2.

#### **Sample of Books**

The sample of books in this study were nominees on the Iowa Teen Award (ITA) book lists from the past three years, 2019 to 2022. The ITA books are nominated by Iowa teens and narrowed to 15 books each year by the ITA committee and volunteers; they must have a positive review from a major library reviewing periodicals. After using the websites Follett Titlewave and Goodreads to identify which of the 45 ITA books have LGBTQ+ themes (see Appendix A), the list was narrowed down to eight. The focus on ITA books is significant because librarians often purchase them to participate in reading promotions and could be the only purchase if on a limited budget resulting in a lack of inclusion and diversity and not meeting the needs of all patrons.

## **Procedures**

### **Data Collection**

Wildemuth (2017) states that a qualitative analysis examines “topics and themes as well as the inferences drawn from them” (p. 319). To evaluate the books in Appendix A, I created a list of criteria adapted from Betts-Green et al. (2017) and Lewis (2015), which are referenced in Chapter 2. While reading, I took notes and provided textual evidence about themes, patterns, and topics utilizing the form in Appendix B.

### **Data Analysis**

The qualitative analysis of this study is described by Wildemuth (2017) in eight steps. The first step, preparing data, involved collecting and organizing titles of books from the awards lists of the last three years, which resulted in eight titles. Step two identifies what will be analyzed. This study analyzed the (1) genre, (2) character gender, sexuality, race, and ethnicity, (3) major or minor character, (4) community and family support, (5) positive outcomes, and (6) positive portrayals of LGBTQ+ characters. The third step involved developing a way to code the material, including the previously stated six areas. Step four required a coding sample of the data to determine the efficacy of the coding of the material. Once the coding sample proved effective, step five required the entire set of texts to be coded in the same manner. Step six indicated that the consistency of the coding be rechecked throughout to ensure reliable coding throughout the study. The seventh step directed that inferences be made from the coded data to “make sense of themes or categories identified” (p. 322) in the results. The eighth and final step was the reporting of the findings in Chapter Four.

### **Limitations**

This study is limited to eight books nominated by teens and reviewed by the ITA committee for the Iowa Teen Awards (ITA) from 2019-2022. These eight books are intended for students/readers in grades 6-9 and contain LGBTQ+ characters. While there are numerous other YA books with LGBTQ+ themes, the scope of this study was limited to the ITA to raise awareness of the potential lack of diversity in these awards, which could affect the diversity of a school library collection. There was only one researcher who read books and coded them.

## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS

The purpose of this qualitative literary content analysis is to examine the representation of LGBTQ+ themes in the student-nominated ITA books from the past three years to help librarians and classroom teachers build an inclusive library collection. I read the eight books (including one graphic novel) listed in Appendix A and completed the Evaluation Tool included in Appendix B for each book. I analyzed the text and images in the graphic novel to see how LGBTQ+ characters were represented.

#### Research Question

The research questions asked, In what ways are LGBTQ+ characters represented in the Iowa Teen Award (ITA) books? While reading the books and after the initial coding, three themes emerged: Transformation of Understanding, Hopefulness, and Richness of Plot.

**Table 1**

*Themes Present in the Iowa Teen Award Books*

Book Titles in order by author	Theme 1 Transformation of Understanding	Theme 2 Hopefulness	Theme 3 Richness of Plot Beyond LGBTQ+ Issues
The Thing About Jellyfish	N/A	N/A	Divorced parents, autism spectrum, death of friend
Pet	Society changes its view after monsters are gone	N/A	Dystopian World, family structure, social justice
The Remarkable Journey of Coyote Sunrise	Parents change	N/A	Family death, automotive travel, family struggles,

			single parent, father/daughter relationship
Lily and Dunkin	Father changes, accepts his daughter	Dunkin accepts Lily as his friend and dad uses different pronouns and name	Understanding true friendship, bipolar disorders, family issues, suicide
One of Us is Lying	Father and society change views	Friend group is accepting and supportive, colleges offer scholarships, dad starts talking to him	Murder, teen relationships, family issues, drug and alcohol use, school troubles
Dear Sweet Pea	Friend changes and accept their friend	Family support, co-parenting, getting along, and friends start talking.	Divorced parents, friendship struggles.
The 57 Bus	N/A	The petition is getting more signatures and parents are supportive and trying harder	True Crime, Asperger's Syndrom, teen incarceration
Lumberjanes (Graphic Novel)	N/A	N/A	Monsters, mystery, summer camp adventures.

### **Theme 1: Transformation of Understanding**

After initially coding the books and analyzing the texts and images, the researcher noted how a shift in mindset presented itself in five of the eight books. This transformation typically happens with someone close to the character who identified as LGBTQ+.



*Lily and Duncan* (2018) is the story of Lily Jo, born Timothe McGrother. Lily believes she is a girl, but those feelings are hard for her father to accept. Wanting to protect his son, Lily's father refuses to accept this, doesn't allow Lily to wear dresses outside the home, and won't discuss hormone blockers. His view changes as time passes and after a discussion with Lily's psychologist, Dr. Klemme.

The book opens with Lily introducing herself while searching through her mom's closet for a dress; she wants to practice for the first day of eighth grade. While in the closet, her father gets home from getting groceries, and Lily decides to test the dress and go out to help her dad carry in groceries. The instant her father sees her, he yells, calling her by her birth name and telling her that she can only wear dresses inside (p. 5).

Lily's mother convinces her father to allow Lily to see a psychologist and discuss hormone blockers (p. 160). During the meeting, her psychologist asks to speak to Lily's father alone. After that meeting, he begins to change his mind about the hormone blockers, and he starts to be more accepting of things, starts calling her Lily and showing up to the school dance with a shirt that says, 'I love my DAUGHTER' (p. 324). Lily wonders what happened in that meeting but is excited her father starts to come around. It isn't until the end of the book that readers learn what impacts her father's change. Lily's psychologist shows him the statistics of transgender suicides and says, "Would you rather have a dead son or an alive daughter?" (p. 324). He realizes the love and support from home could impact the life decisions of family members, and he doesn't want to lose his child.

In *Dear Sweet Pea* (Murphy, 2019), Sweet Pea's father faces challenges with his choice to come out as gay. He is no longer with his wife, and his friends now view him differently. While he has support from his ex-wife and Sweet Pea, we infer that he is no longer welcome on the bowling team as he doesn't attend the weekly bowling league anymore "Mr. Bryant didn't take it too well when Dad explained to his bowling team why he and mom were getting a divorce" (p. 85). But hopefulness arises when his best friend, Mr. Bryant, who has cut off all communication with him, "apologized in his own way" (p. 253), and Dad is going to start going back to bowling league.

In *One of Us is Lying* (McManus, 2017), five teens go into detention, but only four come out alive; now the four that remain, Bronwyn, Cooper, Addy, and Nate, are being framed, and it's up to them, the Murder Club, to solve the mystery while keeping their secrets they don't want to be leaked. One of the most shocking secrets that become known is that Cooper, the popular all-star athlete, is gay. This shocks everyone except his grandmother, who seems has known for a while and supports him regardless of his choices. During a conversation about his current relationship, she tells him, "Keely is not who you love, she's just not. And that's fine" (p. 143).

After Cooper is involuntarily outed by the police, the kids in the school start bullying him, protesters show up at his games, and his father stops talking to him; things are hard for Cooper. One day, Bronwyn asks how he's doing and replies, "My father won't talk to me, I'm getting torn apart online, and none of the teams that were scouting me will return Coach Ruffalo's calls" (p. 265). Things begin to shift in support of Cooper when local TV host Mikhail Powers, who is also gay, advocates for Cooper. Mikhail was

in a similar position as Cooper when he was involuntarily outed at school. Since the police reveal Cooper's secret, Mikhail is on a mission to show the injustice that the police have shown Cooper. There are still protesters at games, and his dad is still giving him the cold shoulder, but college scouts begin to look at him again.

As the story continues, Cooper slowly becomes comfortable with himself and dating Kris, the guy he was trying to keep secret, although he is still unsure of how to act around him. The support from Cooper's new-found friends helps him through this struggle, and he even starts bringing Kris to their murder club meetings. Things take a triumphant turn at this meeting, all because of the idea Kris offers.

In the end, with help from Kris' perspective and Cooper's bravery, the mystery of who killed Simon is solved, and people are brought to justice. Cooper is now seen as a hero and is astounded by his new accidental fame, "First people supported me even though I'd been accused of cheating and murder. Then, they hated me because of who I turned out to be. Now they love me again because I was in the right place at the right time" (p. 336). While this shift happens because of Cooper's heroic actions and not purely for who he is, people begin supporting him. Lucas, Cooper's brother, reports that "Your Facebook fan page has a hundred thousand likes now" (p. 336). His dad begins to open up and talk with Cooper, but Cooper knows it will take time. Colleges recognize his abilities and make him scholarship offers.

*Coyote Sunrise* (Gemeinhart, 2019) follows Coyote and her father, Rodeo, on their travels in their converted bus. Coyote and Rodeo (she doesn't call him Dad) have been living on the road for five years and haven't returned home after the tragic accident

that killed her mother and two sisters. When Coyote hears that a park where her mother and sister buried a memory box will be torn down, she has to trick her father into going home. Along the way, Coyote meets some travelers and talks her father into giving them a ride. One of the passengers Coyote meets is Val.

When Coyote and the crew stop at a gas station, she hears Val crying alongside the store. Coyote strikes up a conversation and asks her if she is running away. Val replies, “Not exactly. More like kicked out” (p. 182), and that her parents didn’t “approve of who I am. Of *what* I am, I guess” (p. 182). Val hesitantly reveals that she is gay; Coyote doesn’t see that as a reason to kick anyone out and offers Val a ride on the bus, which Val gladly accepts. Rodeo, of course, checked Val’s age; when she says she is nineteen, he doesn’t object and welcomes her on the bus.

Toward the end of the story, we discover the truth about Val when the cops pull over the bus looking for Valerie Beckett, a seventeen-year-old high school junior. Val’s parents haven’t kicked her but told her “basically that she could either be who she wanted to be, or she could live under their roof. Not both” (p. 278). When she doesn’t return that night, they assume she has been kidnapped instead of running away and call the police. After Val calls her parents and tells them Rodeo hasn’t kidnapped her, Rodeo is released from jail. Coyote genuinely worries for Val, but Rodeo reassures her that “it sounds like her folks might be looking at things a little different now” (p. 331).

*Pet* (Emezi, 2019) occurs in a dystopian world, in the town of Lucille, where all the monsters are gone, or so they believe. These monsters killed others, owned people, hurt children, and were crooked lawmakers that the angels fought to eliminate. When the

angels had eliminated all the monsters, there was a significant shift in society and mindsets. This shift lets Jam, a transgender girl, be who she believes she is because “it wasn’t like how it used to be, back when the world was different for girls like her. She didn’t have to wait to be considered an adult for her wants around her body to be acted on” (p. 17).

## **Theme 2: Hopefulness**

After initially coding the books and analyzing the texts and images, the researcher noted hopefulness in four of the eight books. While all the books had signs of hope, the researcher focused on LGBTQ+ characters who faced struggles because of their gender and sexual choices, but there was a resolution in the end.

In *The 57 Bus* (Slater, 2017), Sasha, a teen who identifies as agender, has their skirt lit on fire by another teen named Richard while on a bus headed home from school. Sasha isn’t the typical child; they were diagnosed with Asperger’s at a young age, making them socially awkward and very passionate about things (p. 31), one of which is buses. Sasha takes the hour-long bus route home from school, where they sit in the back, minding their own business. During this bus ride, the tragic incident happens, changing both of their lives.

The incident goes national and draws much attention. Although not everyone’s perspectives change, many people do. Before the incident, Sasha starts a petition on the We The People website asking the government to acknowledge the existence of nonbinary gender. This petition got 27,000 signatures, and although this is a great start, it isn’t enough to grab the government's attention (p. 63). A year after Sasha’s petition,

another petition is posted with wording identical to Sasha's (p. 241). This petition goes viral and receives 103,202 signatures. More signatures on the petition mean that more people are aware of issues and that more people support change.

When Sasha first tells her mother and father, they are supportive, although they have to get used to this new normal. While a news station reports that a man in a kilt was attacked, that statement felt wrong to Sasha's mother. They were wearing a skirt. During an interview, Sasha's mom uses the pronouns he and him to inform them that they were wearing a skirt and that her son identifies as agender. Later, she realizes she has used the wrong pronouns (p.159). While Sasah's mother's use of the correct pronouns only affected Sasha, there was hope that other people could change and be considerate of other people's pronouns.

Karl, Sasha's father and a kindergarten teacher, shows growth throughout the book. While always accepting of Sasha and their decisions, aspects could still change. Sasha helps him pack up his classroom at the end of the year and notices that their father has girls lining up on one side and boys lining up on the other; he says it is easier that way. Sasha commented, "what about the kids who aren't either? Which clipboard do they go on" (p. 65)? At the start of the next school year, Karl remembers Sash's comment and changes the lines to last names to make it more inclusive. Three years later, some kindergarteners don't fit the gender norms. As a kindergarten teacher, Sasha's father offers hope to future students that educators can offer a safe and welcoming space for all students.

*Lily and Duncan* (Gephart, 2018) is a story about a transgender girl named Lily, her birth name Tim, and a bipolar boy named Duncan. Hopefulness presents itself when Lily's dad, who is totally against Lily's decision earlier, comes around at the end of the story. Throughout the story, Lily's father calls her by her birth name, he will only allow dresses in the house and refuses to sign a consent for hormone blockers. With the help of Lily's psychologist, he realizes that he would rather have a living and happy daughter than a dead son. Her father says that "kids who get a lot of love and support have a much lower suicide risk" (p. 324). Seeing her father at the dance with an 'I love my DAUGHTER' t-shirt and hearing him call her Lily for the first time shows her that their relationship is changing and the future will be full of support from all her family members.

Lily also questions if she should tell Dunkin that she is transgender. Throughout the story, Dunkin only sees Lily as Lily once and knows her as Tim, and they hang out outside of school. Dunkin seems to be a good person, but Lily worries that he may change because of the group of friends he has chosen in school, the kids who bully Lily. It isn't until they spend a night in a tree that Lily is trying to save that they realize they are each other's true friends. Lily decides to share her secret with Dunkin, and he accepts her for who she is. She is relieved and knows that she made the right choice. At the dance, when Dunkin sees Lily in a dress and makeup, he is impressed, saying, "Wow. You're...you're...you" (p. 320). Dunkin asks Lily to dance, and they are both happy with how things have turned out.

*Dear Sweet Pea* (Murphy, 2019) introduces us to Sweet Pea's father, Andre, who has come out as gay. Despite losing some friends initially, her father has support from Sweet Pea and his former wife, Liz. Even though his marriage hasn't been successful, they are still working together to raise Sweet Pea, and Liz supports Andre's decisions. In the beginning, Andre's friends don't approve of his choices and talk behind his back, but those friends come around. Mr. Bryant, whom Andre had called a homophobe (p. 109), apologizes, and Andre is invited back to the bowling league. Although this may take time, he hopes things will return to how they were with his friends before he came out as gay.

In *One of Us Is Lying* (2017), four teens, Nate, Cooper, Bronwyn, and Addy, are trying to figure out who murdered Simon while keeping secrets, ones Simon figured out, hidden. Cooper's secret, revealed during police questions to his father and the community, is that he is gay. Cooper is a popular jock who has many scouts looking at him. When it comes out that he is gay, the student body starts picking on him, his father gives him the silent treatment, and scouts quit contacting him. Things begin to look up when the three other teens defend Cooper in the lunch room (p. 259), and he realizes he can trust this new group of friends.

Things also change when Cooper becomes the hero and helps bring the right person to justice. His Facebook page, which his brother had started to help support Cooper, is growing in popularity. College scouts have start to contact him again, and his father finally looks at him, maybe speaking a few words. While Cooper knows there will



always be people who disagree with his lifestyle, these turnarounds give Cooper hope that things will work out.

### **Theme 3: Richness of Plot**

After initially coding the books and analyzing the texts and images, the researcher noted a richness of plot in all eight books. The novels also featured other events and situations the characters faced besides LGBTQ+-related matters and provided readers with various genres.

*Lily and Duncan* (Gephart, 2018) is a realistic fiction book that has many other elements happening in the story besides Lily's struggles in her transition to a girl. One of the main events in the book is saving a tree. Lily and her grandfather spent much time under the tree. She feels a deep connection with this tree, even naming the tree Bob after her grandfather. After writing letters to the city and protesting by camping in the tree, it is ultimately cut down. Duncan joins her in her protest, where she shares her secret with Dunkin while they spend the night in the tree for the last time.

Lily also struggles with new and old friendships. Dare has been Lily's friend for a long time and knows Lily's secret. Dare has started to bring another girl, Amy, into their friend circle, and Lily is starting to feel left out. She struggles with sharing her feelings with Dare. It isn't until the dance that Lily realizes that Dare is hiding that she and Amy are in a relationship. It isn't that Dare has found a new best friend; she has found a love interest. This makes Lily feel better about Dare and her friendship.

While Lily questions her and Dare's friendship, she also questions her new friendship with Dunkin. Dunkin knows Lily as Tim and a boy. Even though Dunkin

talks and hangs out with Lily outside of school, he also hangs out with Lily's bullies. Lily isn't sure if she can trust Dunkin because of his friend's choices. It isn't until Dunkin spends the night in the tree that Lily learns she can trust Dunkin, and Dunkin realizes that Lily is a true friend.

Dunkin has struggles of his own. Dunkin has bipolar disorder, moves to a new school, lives with his mom and grandma, and is trying to cope with his father's suicide. Dunkin wants to impress his new friend group and tries out for the basketball team. He realizes he performs better when he skips his medicine, so he stops taking his medicine in hopes his new friend group will accept him. This becomes a problem when he has an episode on the basketball court and has to be taken away by the police and placed in a mental facility. This is where he recalls the horrific event he has blocked out (p. 309). His father has died by suicide, which is why he and his mother moved to live with his grandma. He returns to reality and knows he is in this mental institution to get the help he needs.

*Dear Sweet Pea* (Murphy, 2019) is another realistic fiction novel where readers are introduced to Sweet Pea and her challenges as she navigates her new life. She is dealing with her parent's divorce, learning that her father is gay, and changing friendships. When her father came out as gay, Sweet Pea knows that "there was nothing wrong with being gay" (p. 141) but struggles with the fact that her family is now falling apart. Although her parents try to keep things as normal as possible, it is still hard for Sweet Pea to come to terms with her family not being the same. Her father buys a house

two houses down that is almost identical to her mother's house. They try to keep everything the same, but it still feels so different to Sweet Pea.

While navigating this new lifestyle, Sweet Pea has trouble with a friend. In fourth grade, Kiera and she had started to drift apart when Kiera started hanging out with the popular girls. Now, her ex-best friend, Kiera, was sitting right in front of her at school, and things were awkward. Sweet Pea feels Kiera judges her (p. 22) whenever she speaks. It is until Sweet Pea, while taking care of her neighbor's house, that she learns of Kiera's struggle at home with her parents fighting and that it might be up to Sweet Pea to help her out.

Suzy Swanson is the protagonist of the realistic fiction novel *The Thing About Jellyfish* (Benjamin, 2017). She shows characteristics of being on the autism spectrum, her parents are divorced, her only brother has gone to coach a college soccer team and is living with his boyfriend, and her ex-best friend, Franny, just died. When Suzy's mother tells her that Franny has drowned, she is in disbelief that such a good swimmer would have drowned. After coming across a jellyfish exhibit on their seventh-grade field trip, Suzy is sure she was stung by a jellyfish. Since things between Suzy and Franny hadn't ended well, Suzy feels the need to prove her cause of death and becomes obsessed with researching jellyfish.

After extensive research, Suzy is determined to seek advice from an Australian biology professor named Dr. Jamie Seymour. She plans a trip to Australia without telling her family, who has supported her through this tough time. She steals money from her mother and brother and makes her way to the airport but cannot get a ticket because she

doesn't have the correct documents to travel. Her mother, brother, and brother's boyfriend show up to take her home, and they all, plus her father, continue to give her the support she needs.

*Lumbersjanes* (Stevenson, 2015) is a graphic novel about a group of girls who attend Miss Qiunzella Thiskwin Penniquiquil Thistle Crumpet's Camp for hard-core lady types (p. 16). One night, when three-eyed wolves attack the five girls, a message is written in the sky "Beware the kitten holy" (p. 13), and they know this isn't their typical summer camp. The girls put up with an overprotective counselor as they work together to unravel the camp's mystery. They face monsters (p. 39), dark caves (p. 52), crushing on each other (p. 50), and a suspicious boys camp (p. 84).

*One of Us is Lying* (McManus, 2017) is a realistic fiction mystery crime novel written from 4 teenagers' points of view. The readers are introduced to Bronwyn, the brains, Cooper, the jock, Addy, the princess, Nate, the criminal, and Simon, the gossip. When the four are accused of murdering Simon during their detention, secrets about their lives are revealed, one by one, through Simon's gossip app, About That. They must find out who is releasing these secrets before their lives are ruined.

Bronwyn is a straight-A student on the road to Yale. Her squeaky-clean reputation becomes tarnished when a post on About That reveals she has cheated her way through Chemistry. Bronwyn is only trying to live up to the pressure her parents put on her, so when she struggles with chemistry, stealing test answers is the only way to succeed. As she and the other 3 work hard to solve the Simon murder case, she grows close with Nate.

Nate is known as a criminal and womanizer and constantly skips school. He is on probation for selling marijuana, and the About That app reveals he hasn't learned from his past mistakes. Nate dabbles in drug dealing for survival; his mother has abandoned him, and his father is an alcoholic. Because of his reputation, he is the top suspect in Simon's murder, but Bronwyn feels otherwise. Nate and Bronwyn were close in their younger years but grew apart when his mother left. She knows that Nate is a good person, and as they become closer during the investigation, she brings out the best in Nate.

Addy and Cooper run in the same circle. Addy is the popular princess who dates Cooper's best friend, Jake, and Cooper is the popular baseball star that all the girls find attractive, but Keely takes him. Addy and Jake are perfect for each other, so everyone is shocked when the About That post comes out that she has cheated on him with TJ over the summer. Her social life begins to fall, and she is miserable, but she soon realizes she was set free. Their relationship started to become abusive. Jake controls her every move, what she wears, where she goes, and who her friends are, but now she is in control. She begins to help the others in the investigation and becomes friends with better people.

Although Cooper and Jake are best friends, they are complete opposites. Cooper is kind and warm-hearted and treats his girlfriend with respect. Cooper can't stand the thought of his secret getting out when the other secrets are posted. It would ruin everything: his sports career, relationship with his father, and social life. Eventually, his secret of being gay is revealed but not because of the About That app. The About That post for Cooper is false; the post accuses him of taking steroids, and he can't understand

why his secret isn't exposed when everyone else's was. It isn't long before the police find an encrypted post telling the truth about Cooper, eventually outing it to everyone. At first, this news damages everything, but in the end, he is determined to be truthful to himself, and things start looking up.

*The Remarkable Journey of Coyote Sunrise* (Gemeinhart, 2019) is a realistic fiction novel following Coyote, 12 years old, and her father, Rodeo, as they travel across the United States in a converted bus they call Yager. Their journey begins when Coyote's mother and two sisters are killed in an accident, and her father can't handle staying in the home where they live as a family. While on a weekly phone call with her grandmother, Coyote learns that the park is being bulldozed. This park is where she, her sisters, and her mother buried a memory box, and she is determined to return to her hometown in Washington State before the box is lost forever (p. 56). Since Rodeo refuses to return to their hometown, Coyote must trick him into returning. How was she going to do it? She tells her father she had a D.E.A.D Dream, a drop everything and drive dream, for the best pork sandwich in Butte, Montana. Rodeo falls for it, and they are off to Montana.

While on this fake journey to get a pork sandwich, they pick up some "wayward souls" (p. 74) that Coyote uses to help with her master plan. Coyote meets Lester in a diner. He is trying to get to his girlfriend in Idaho but doesn't have enough money for a bus ticket. After overhearing this conversation, Coyote decides she is going to offer Lester a ride, but not just because Coyote is a caring, helpful person; Coyote needs someone else, besides Rodeo, who can drive the bus if they are going to make it back to Washington before the park is demolished, and Lester is the guy. As they continue on

their way, Coyote learns that Lester is a musician and Tammy, his girlfriend, “wasn’t super interested in in the broke-as-a-joke-musician-living-his-dream-and-trying-to -make-it-work scene” (p. 81) and takes off to Boise, so Lester is on his way to win her back; Lester learns of Coyote's mission and is willing to help her get there.

While stopped at a gas station, Rodeo and Lester argue about whether a map or the GPS on the phone is better and don’t see Coyote head into the store. After they finish getting gas, they hop back on the bus and head out, assuming Coyote is in her room. This is where Coyote meets Salvador and his mother. Coyote, left alone at the gas station, is clearly distressed, and a woman who pulls up can see that. Coyote knows her type, the “oh-my-god-is-that-girl-okay-honey-we-should-call-the-police type” (p.92). Coyote doesn’t want the police involved because they always make assumptions about their lifestyle; Coyote knows she has to shake this lady, so she goes to the bathroom. Soon, a knock comes, followed by an “I can help you escape” (p. 96).

Salvador helps Coyote escape, and they meet up with Rodeo and Lesters. Coyote, wanting to help them, offers them a ride to St. Louis on Yager, and they join the crew on their journey. Coyote shares her past and tells Salvador about her mom and sisters. Salvador told Coyote that his mom had lost her job and his aunt had found her a job in St. Louis but is hesitant to give too much information away. On a pit stop near a creek, Coyote and Salvador head off to swim. Feeling bad about being a jerk during their earlier conversation, Salvador reveals that they were leaving because his father is abusive. As he is telling his story, he sees the look on Coyote's face and doesn’t want her sympathy or people feeling sorry for him. Neither of the two wants people to feel sorry

for them, and they make a pack never to feel sorry for one another. Their bond strengthens throughout the journey as Salvador is determined to get his new friend back home.

The next passenger to join the crew is a girl named Val. Val, who told Coyote she is nineteen, has been kicked out of her home for being gay. She isn't sure where she is going but tells Coyote she has a cousin in Seattle and says she thought about going there. Val, Salvador, and Coyote instantly become friends. Val is witty and a listener. She enjoys games and makes everyone feel comfortable. Salvador and Coyote each share their stories, while Val shares things about herself (p. 188). Coyote and Val grow close, and Coyote feels she is like the big sister she never got to have.

In the novel *Pet* (Emezi, 2019), Jam is a curious 15-year-old trans girl, supported by her family and friends, who wants to know all about the angels and monsters of the past. In Jam's utopian town, Lucilla, there are no more monsters, or so she thinks. Jam releases a creature named Pet from her mom's painting and learns that a monster exists in their community. Her best friend Redemption and her go on the hunt with Pet, but Jam learns that the monster is in Redemption's house. She struggles with whether or not to tell Redemption but also wants to keep his family safe.

*Pet* addresses internal challenges throughout the book. Jam is struggling to keep a secret from her best friend and parents. She and Redemption have been friends for a long time and share everything. For her to keep a secret from him is a struggle; even though it will protect his family, she knows it will also hurt him (p. 77). Jam also lies to her



mother and father about PET and the mission of finding a monster who is abusing a child (p. 75). It's a constant battle within to tell Redemption and get help from her parents.

The book also addresses social issues and shows a shift in societal beliefs, angels have come to destroy monsters who do wrong. They have taken down statues of those who enslave others and punish those who have murdered others for not looking like them. This book challenges people of power, including police, politicians, family members, etc. Angels and revolutionary leaders making social change take down these monsters (pp. 1-3). Jam and Pet are hunting for a monster, one abusing a child in her best friend's home.

*Pet* shows a different family structure. Along with LGBTQIA+ people being accepted, Redemption's family looks a little different. Redemption has three parents and society views this poly relationship as normal (p. 82). He also lives with extended family, aunts and uncles.

*The 57 Bus* follows the journey of two teens and their paths after their tragic event on a city bus. Sasha, an agender teen, has their skirt lit on fire by Richard, a black teen from a troubled childhood. Both board the bus that day, not knowing the events that will change their lives. Even though being agender is the reason for the hateful crime, many other issues and topics are discussed in the book.

The reader gets a glimpse into the life of a person diagnosed with Asperger's. Sasha was diagnosed with Asperger's when they were younger (p. 35). They have to navigate school and other social settings that are challenging. Readers see how Sasha becomes obsessed with certain things, such as language, communism, and buses (pp. 27-

31), which makes relationships awkward. Sasah is also a bright student, has a social network, and is determined to bring awareness to the LGBTQIA+ agenda.

Sasha is very close with both of her parents. They feel they can talk to their parents about anything and often go to them for guidance (p. 45). They are very supportive of Sasha when she comes to them about being genderqueer, but it is hard for them to understand and navigate this new world. Debbie, Sasha's mother, sometimes feels "the whole nonbinary thing was a pain in the ass" and wishes Sasha would be a little more relaxed with correcting relatives or refusing to use gender-specific bathrooms. At the same time, her father, Karl, feels "there was something admirable about it" when standing up for themselves (pp. 54-55). Even though her parents feel differently, they are supportive but scared of how society would treat Sasha and help them in any way possible.

Richard has a different upbringing than Sasha. Richard, a black male, comes from a troubled past, a poverty-stricken neighborhood, and is surrounded by violence, with close friends and relatives murdered (p. 109). As a freshman, he is placed in a juvenile home called Redding for fighting, and a close friend has been murdered; he has poor grades and skips school, but he wants to better himself.

At 16, returning from Redding, he asks to join Kaprice's, the truancy coordinator, program at the school to help him (p. 81). He wants to do better and begins coming to school, focusing on his school work, and signing up for job training (p. 110), but it is hard to escape his past. A few short months into the school year, Richard is robbed and has guns pointed at his head. He doesn't return to school for a few days, but when he does,

he tells Kaprice that he “stayed calm. Observing. Trying to figure out how not to have the situation escalate. How not to die” (p.115). Even though Richard faces many challenges, he wants to do better for himself and works hard to make it happen.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

This qualitative literary content analysis examines the representation of LGBTQ+ themes in the student-nominated Iowa Teen Award (ITA) books from the past three years to help librarians and classroom teachers build an inclusive library collection. The research question posed in this study is: In what ways are LGBTQ+ characters represented in the Iowa Teen Award books? The analysis of eight middle-grade books (Appendix A) using the book analysis tool (Appendix B) identified three themes: Transformation of Understanding, Hopefulness, and Richness of Plot. Results showed that while all the books had a complex storyline, only five of the books showed a shift in mindset of other characters towards the LGBTQ+ characters, and four of the eight books showed hopefulness, that wasn't already present, for the LGBTQ+ character.

#### **Conclusion**

Theme one examined the shift in mindset towards the LGBTQ+ characters in five of the eight novels. These shifts happened in different types of relationships with the LGBTQ+ characters. Some relationships were close, between parents and child, while others were distant, being between society and the characters. In closer relationships, the parents didn't want to lose a child. They realized having that child in their lives was more important than not. There was also a shift when it came to friends. In one novel, the character loses friends, but in the end, they start to accept them, while in another novel, the friends are always there to support the character. The shift within society

happened after tragic events, but it was a shift for the better. This made the characters feel like they were accepted, had support, and could be who they wanted.

Theme two examined the hopefulness of the characters in four of the eight novels. These characters had hardships associated with being LGBTQ+. They may have lost friends, had little support, or been looked down upon by society, but in the end, things looked up for these characters. In three of the eight novels, some family members had difficulty dealing with their relative's new lifestyle but realized they'd rather have the person in their lives than not. It was hard for the characters when friends and the community turned their backs. They wanted to feel accepted. It took time, but soon friends returned, and the community supported them.

Theme three examined the richness of the plot. All of the novels' plots incorporated many other issues besides LGBTQ+ topics. Secrets were being kept, mythical creatures to battle, abusive relationships, deaths, friendship struggles, neurodivergent characters, and expectations to be met, all while facing the challenges of being LGBTQ+.

Literature is the imaginative shaping of experience and thought into the forms and structures of language. Children read literature to experience life, and their experiences inside the world of a story challenge them to think in new ways about their lives and world. (Short et al., 2018, p. 4)

There was something for everyone to relate to or something new to experience in all of these novels.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

This research study indicated a positive portrayal of LGBTQ+ characters in the Iowa Teen Award Books; however, future studies should be conducted on a wider range of books in the school library collection. It is proposed that similar analyses be conducted for the remaining categories of Iowa award books, namely the Iowa High School Award Books (for grades 9-12), the Iowa Children's Choice Award Books (for grades 3-6), and the Goldfinch Award Books (for grades K-3). Examining whether LGBTQ+ characters are present in lower-level award books would be in our best interest. Additionally, there is a need for research to determine the representation of genders and sexualities in LGBTQ+ literature, identifying prevalent identities as well as those that are underrepresented. Another valuable area of inquiry would involve analyzing the genres within which LGBTQ+ characters are portrayed. Lastly, repeating this study every few years is recommended, given the continuous addition of new books into these awards annually.

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## APPENDIX A

## LIST OF IOWA TEEN AWARD BOOKS FOR ANALYSIS

Title	Year Nominated
Benjamin. A. (2017). <i>The thing about jellyfish</i> . Little, Brown and Company.	19-20x
Gephart, D. (2018) <i>Lily and Dunkin</i> . Yearling.	19-20x
McManus, K.M. (2017). <i>One of us is lying</i> . Thorndike Press	19-20 (winner)x
Stevenson, N. (2015). <i>Lumberjanes</i> . BOOM! Box	19-20
Gemeinhart, D. (2019). <i>The Remarkable Journey of Coyote Sunrise</i> . Henry Holt & Company	20-21x
Slater, D. (2017). <i>The 57 Bus</i> . Farrar, Straus and Giroux	20-21
Emezi, A. (2019). <i>Pet</i> . United States: Random House Children's Books.	21-22x
Murphy, J. (2019). <i>Dear Sweet Pea</i> . United States: Balzer + Bray.	21-22x

**APPENDIX B**  
**BOOK EVALUATION TOOL**

Criteria		Notes/Text Evidence
Genre	Accepted as indicated using Marc Records or other professional reviews.	
Gender	<p>Accepted as indicated or assumed as follows</p> <p>Male: uses pronouns he/his</p> <p>Female: uses pronouns she/her</p> <p>Transgender: identify as gender other than assigned at birth</p> <p>Agender: does not identify as any gender</p> <p>Non-Binary: uses pronouns them/they to refer to an individual, does not identify as male or female</p> <p>Bigender-sometimes identifies as male and sometimes as female</p>	
Sexuality	<p>Accepted as indicated or assumed as followed</p> <p>Gay: Male or male-identified person in a relationship or showing attraction to same-sex</p> <p>Lesbian: Female or female-identified person in a relationship or showing attraction to same-sex</p> <p>Bisexual: Individual in a relationship or showing attraction to more than one gender</p> <p>Straight: Individual in a relationship or showing attraction to the opposite sex (cisgender/transgender can be straight)</p>	
Race/Ethnicity	Accepted as indicated, nothing is assumed	
Major or Minor Character	<p>Major Character refers to an individual who is central to the main plot and predominantly present throughout the novel.</p> <p>Minor Character refers to individuals who support the main character and the plot does not revolve</p>	

	around the character.	
Community/Family Support	Accepted as indicated or assumed as follows: Individuals are accepted, loved, and encouraged by the community and/or family.	
Positive Outcomes	Accepted as indicated or assumed as follows: An individual's story doesn't end in loss, death and/or breakups.	
Positive Portrayals	Accepted as indicated or assumed as follows: Individuals are described respectfully and unbiasedly despite their gender and sexuality.	