

Youth disrupting traditional notions of gender identity and sexual orientation through writing

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Keywords: writing | gender | sexual orientation | secondary English

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**Youth Disrupting Traditional Notions of Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation through
Writing**

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Youth Disrupting Traditional Notions of Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation through Writing

During the summer of 2015, a group of young writers in grades 9-12 met for two weeks at a southeastern university for a young writers' camp. As part of a research study focused on teen writers, several campers engaged in interviews about their writing history and process. After being asked what she wrote about in camp, Haley, a tenth-grade camper, described her story (all participants' names are pseudonyms):

My story from camp last year was about two gay girls and how they had to deal with coming out to their parents about being gay. And that was really traumatic for one of the characters because her parents were not okay with it, and society was not okay with it.

In this quote, Haley described a story that dealt with issues of gender and sexual orientation from a teenager's point of view. Specifically, she described what it was like for one of her characters to be alienated from her family after "coming out." For Haley, writing stories about experiences that were typically silenced or ignored was one way for her to make changes in a world that maintained traditional notions of gender and sexual orientation (see Appendix A for definitions of key terms). Such traditional notions include viewing gender as a male/female binary and/or recognizing heterosexuality as the only socially acceptable sexual orientation (Halberstam, 2005; Wilchins, 2013). As English educators interested in learning how to address such issues in a literacy classroom, we engaged in this research project to learn more about how teens used writing to trouble gender and heteronormative stereotypes both in and out of school. With that information, we hope to offer concrete ideas for educators to open writing opportunities for students that help them make sense of themselves and the world around them, particularly in relation to gender and sexual orientation.

The need for research in this area is significant given the fact that 78% of transgender and gender fluid students were harassed in school in 2011 (Grant et al., 2011). Thirty-five percent were assaulted, 12% were sexually assaulted, and 6% were expelled from school. Not to mention, LGTBQ+ students typically experience high rates of truancy, suicide, substance abuse, dropout, and homelessness (Corliss et al., 2010; Irvine, 2010; Kosciw et al., 2014). To address these issues, educators can become more aware of myths vs. facts associated with the LGBTQ+ population, advocate for staff development related to LGBTQ+ issues, and be aware of how to stop harassment and bullying when it occurs in the school (Grant et al., 2011; Kosciw et al., 2013; Robinson & Espelage, 2012). With the 2015 Supreme Court ruling to legalize same-sex marriage (Supreme Court of the United States, 2015), media related to transgender issues (e.g., Caitlyn Jenner), and House Bill 2 (North Carolina General Assembly, 2016), LGBTQ+ issues are something that students are grappling with at a national level.

Within literacy education, more scholarship has been done to explore non-traditional views of gender and sexual orientation (Blackburn, Clark, & Nemeth, 2015; Ryan & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2013; Miller, 2015; Page, 2016; Schieble, 2012). For example, Schieble (2012) explored how students' desire to maintain a culture of safety around discussions of sexual orientation resulted in uncritical conversations that left normative constructions of sexuality unexamined. The study raised questions about how educators can create opportunities for students and teachers to critically explore such topics while maintaining a classroom community. In an attempt to offer solutions to such dilemmas, scholars like Miller (2015) discussed how to teach, affirm, and recognize transgender youth through the use of a Queer Literacy Framework (QLF) within English Language Arts classrooms. The National Conference for Teachers of

English (2012) also recently approved Standard VI in secondary English teacher preparation advocating for queer-inclusive curriculum, among other social justice issues.

Specifically, in regards to writing, scholars illustrated that youth compose in ways that help them make sense of issues related to gender and sexuality. For example, Blackburn (2002) found that one teen in an after-school program wrote performance poetry to position herself as powerful and beautiful within a space that situated her otherwise because of her sexuality. In other out-of-school spaces, Haddix and Sealey-Ruiz (2012) found that youth benefit from writing in ways that enable them to author their lives and speak out in ways that are typically oppressed in traditional spaces. In particular, both scholars argue that using digital literacies and popular culture to teach writing with black and Latino males who are underserved and marginalized can be a way to empower these young men to pursue their potential and redefine what masculinity means to them. In school, Guzzetti and Gamboa (2004) found that teen girls used zines as a way to explore sexuality in ways that disrupted gender stereotypes and advocated for justice-oriented issues. Students in a ninth-grade classroom focused on teaching social justice through writing benefitted from teachers who shared their experiences as writers and activists because they saw a model for using composition skills to promote change within families and communities (Chapman, Hobbel, & Alvarado, 2011).

With that said, we argue that educators would benefit from more research focused on how youth use writing, in particular, to explore a broad spectrum of gender identities and sexual orientations. Such opportunities could address gaps in school curriculum and research that tend to focus more on traditional notions of gender identity and sexual orientation (Blackburn et al., 2015), such as heterosexual identities. To offer more insight into this issue, we examined how three young writers used writing to disrupt stereotypical notions of gender identities and sexual

orientations. We use the term disrupt to mean moments when the three teens problematized common understandings related to gender and sexual orientation. Below, we discuss research related to such disruptions and discuss the need for more research in this area.

Literacy, Gender, and Sexual Orientation

From decades of research in the literacy field, we know that gender and sexual orientation shape how and why youth read and write (Vetter, 2010; Blackburn, 2002; Cherland, 1994; Finders, 1997; Ma'ayan, 2012; Page, 2016). For instance, a student may choose to disengage in reading a piece of literature in class because they view it as discriminatory (Vetter, 2010). At the same time, they might engage in writing in new ways after being given the opportunity to explore identities related to gender identity or sexual orientation (Vetter, 2010; Blackburn, 2002). Youth also engage in literacy practices to make changes in a world that does not respectfully represent their identities (Blackburn, 2002).

Related to gender identities, literacy scholars typically recognize power dynamics related to gender that privilege some (men) over others (women and feminine men) (Davies, 1989; Dutro, 2001). Many studies also recognize that gender is constructed and performed, thus arguing for broadened notions of femininity and masculinity (Dutro, 2001; Lewis, Enciso, & Moje, 2007; Ma'ayan, 2012; Morrison, 2010). Such research illustrates how youth both use reading and writing to appease and/or disrupt traditional notions of gender (Lewis et al., 2007; Ma'ayan, 2012; Mazzarella, 2010; Morrison, 2010; Orellana, 1995). For example, Finders (1997), engaged in an ethnographic study that highlighted the significant role that literacy played in girls' identities, friendships, families, and social networks. Her work is seminal because it questioned the "good girl" role so often assigned to and reinforced in female students. To update this work, Ma'ayan (2012) worked with a small group of middle school girls from various

backgrounds in an after-school literacy discussion club. She found that her students gained the most from classrooms that explored multiple literacies to examine and disrupt issues of power and performance in relation to the intersection of identities.

Other researchers, (Smith & Wilhelm, 2011; Rowsell & Kendrick, 2013), have explored notions of masculinity by discussing reasons why males rejected certain ways of being literate. Such research highlighted the importance of choice, meaningful social activity for shaping literate identities, and utilizing visual methodologies in the classroom. Other studies recognized the need for literacy classrooms to take a more direct approach by engaging in consistent critical conversations about masculinity and femininity through literature (Dutro, 2001; Godley, 2006; Guzzetti et al., 2013). Researchers highlight the importance of teachers modeling the disruption of male/female boundaries through texts (Davies, 1989; Wohlwend, 2012).

More recent scholarship in literacy education has explored how youth disrupt traditional notions of sexual orientation both in and outside of school (Blackburn, 2002; Dodge & Crutcher, 2015; Page, 2016). For example, Blackburn's (2002) study about a youth-run center for LGBTQ+ teens illustrated that a young woman's literacy performances and identity work were intertwined. Specifically, she wrote and performed poetry to engage in social change related to LGBTQ+ issues. Research also suggests that LGBTQ+ students can benefit from teachers using LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum in the classroom (Kosciw, 2014). Teachers, however, are not always certain how to utilize the growing number of LGBTQ+ literature and resources available (Kosciw, 2014). To address this issue, more studies are examining how teachers might advance LGBTQ+ curriculum in their classroom, including how teachers can integrate texts that address the experiences of LGBTQ+ students and meet Common Core State Standards (Dodge & Crutcher, 2015; Page, 2016). To help teachers foster rich discussions about such texts, a study

focused on an after-school book club group and analyzed discussions about books with LGBTQ+ characters and themes (Blackburn & Clark, 2011). Such analysis highlighted LGBTQ+-inclusive and queer discourses to understand potentially oppressive and liberatory dimensions of each (Blackburn & Clark, 2011). The above research informs teachers who are interested in fostering critical literacy conversations in their classrooms. For that to happen, classrooms need to be safe places to take risks, cause disruptions, and experience discomforts (Dutro, 2001).

To extend the scholarship previously discussed, this study examines how youth write in ways that disrupt traditional notions of gender and sexual orientation both in and out of school. Specifically, we focus on the voices and writing of youth to explore this topic. The intention of the research is to open opportunities for educators to imagine how they might foster writing in their classroom that support alternative ways of viewing gender and sexual orientation.

Theoretical Framework

We draw from gender and queer theory (Butler, 1990; Halberstam, 2005; Wilchins, 2013; 2014) to make sense of how the three campers used writing to disrupt gender and heteronormative stereotypes. Practically, both perspectives helped us become more educated about the everyday experiences of youth making sense of their gender identity and sexual orientation at this particular time and place. We draw from Ma'ayan's (2012) work who used both perspectives to help her make sense of her ethnographic study about how identity markers and multiple literacies shape the school experiences of adolescent girls. This combined framework helped her illustrate the lack of space for students to explore life topics such as sexual orientation or gender identity.

With this framework, we took on a perspective that viewed gender as performative, multiple, and fluid (Butler, 1990; Halberstam, 2005; Wilchins, 2013, 2014). In other words, we

recognize that individuals perform gendered identities that are not constrained to traditional dichotomous notions of male and female (Wilchins, 2013; 2014). Butler's (1990) notion of gender trouble highlights the possibility of doing gender differently while also acknowledging that gender is shaped by the social, cultural, and political context that surrounds individuals. Thus, femininity or masculinity is performed in multiple ways depending on the time, place, and individual giving the performance. Sometimes these performances align with stereotypical notions of femininity and masculinity, while other times such performances illustrate a wide range of what it means to be feminine and/or masculine (Halberstam, 2005).

Similarly, a queer theory approach recognizes a variety of genders and sexual orientations, "thereby challenging the notion of what counts as normal among them" (Blackburn et al., 2015, p. 2). A queer theory perspective, then, suspends specific classifications (Pinar, 2003), such as lesbian or gay, and recognizes sexual and gender identities as social, multiple, variable, shifting, and fluid. As Blackburn and Clark (2011) state, two key ideas are important to this theory: understanding sexual and gender identities in complicated ways and valuing disruptions of norms (i.e. socially acceptable behavior). Scholarship from queer theorists that examine the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ youth helped inform the study by highlighting what many LGBTQ+ teachers and students must confront on a daily basis and illustrates how gender identity and sexual orientation plays a part in teaching and learning (Horvitz, 2011; Greytak et al., 2010). In addition, this work draws on the analysis of feminist writers (e.g., Anzaldúa & Keating, 2002; Lorde, 1984; Rich, 1979) who contribute to the understanding that "adolescent female sexualities" are "complex, multifaceted, and significant identity markers in the lives of adolescent girls" (M'ayan, 2012, p. 27).

Methods

Methodological Framework

This study used case study methodologies (Merriam, 1998) to explore the following question: In what ways did three teen campers disrupt gender and heteronormative stereotypes through writing? Many case study scholars in education draw from a constructivist paradigm that claim truth is based on an individual's perspective and is socially constructed (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003). One goal of the approach is to foster a trustworthy relationship between the researcher and participant so that the participant is comfortable telling his/her story. Those stories, or descriptions of the participants' reality, enable the researcher to comprehend participants' actions and better understand a phenomenon within a context.

For the above reasons, we chose a case study approach for this study, in conjunction with a gender and queer theory framework, to gain a rich and complex understanding of the experiences of LGBTQ+ youth in a writing camp. In addition, this method allowed us to highlight the often silenced voices and written work of LGBTQ+ youth (Nash & Browne, 2012). Below, we describe the young writers' camp where we met our three participants. The camp is an important part of the study because it provides insight into how and what the campers composed over a two-week period of time. Our study, however, focused on gathering information through interviews about their writing practices both in and out of school.

The Camp

The Young Writers' Camp met from 9-12 every morning for two weeks in the School of Education at a southeastern university. Youth in grades 3-12 signed up for the camp. For this study, we focused on writers in grades 9-12. Every morning from 9-9:30, campers met in a large classroom and listened to a local author talk about the writing process, engaged in an interactive

writing activity, and asked questions. Authors included poets, fiction writers, animators, and journalists. After the author talks, campers went to assigned classrooms with an instructor who was a state certified teacher with a specialization in literacy. In addition, writing coaches worked with small groups of campers from 9:45-12:00. The coaches were graduate students attending a summer course focused on teaching writing. Working with the campers was part of their coursework. Instructors and coaches facilitated the goal of the camp—to create a published text. Campers could write in any genre and could choose the topic they wrote about. Many of the older campers brought in work they had been working on at home and/or came with an idea that they shared with coaches and instructors on the first day. The writers were expected to publish their work on the Young Writers' Camp website and read aloud a portion of their text on the final day of camp, either at the university or a local bookstore. Campers had access to laptops and/or computer labs, along with two technology instructors who coordinated aspects of digital and social media so that they were useful tools for the writing process.

The Researchers

Vetter directed the camp. She observed the high school campers for approximately 30 to 45 minutes each day. Langston-Demott, her research assistant, spent the entire two weeks with the high school group and collected all data. Both took a participant observer approach (Merriam, 1998), by helping campers with their writing, while also observing and interviewing.

Vetter is a former high school English teacher and a current English educator. Langston-Demott, a former elementary school teacher, is a doctoral student in teacher education with a focus on literacy. Both of us identify as White, female, and heterosexual. For this study, we were interested in the ways gender shaped writing practices, which is why we developed interview questions that focused on that topic (Appendix B). We recognize that we came to this study with

personal experiences related to being cisgender (Appendix A), heterosexual females that shaped our interpretations. That narrow lens became obvious after the first few days of interviews when participants identified as asexual, transgender, and gender fluid. At that point, we realized that we needed to broaden our perspective of gender and sexual orientation so that we could engage in thoughtful and caring conversations. For example, one of our participants directed us to the website *It's Pronounced Metrosexual* to help us learn more about LGBTQ+ vocabulary (Killermann, 2013), which we read and used to inform our discussions. Both of us were open to learning more about these broad notions of gender and sexual orientation and we were lucky to have participants willing to educate us. To broaden our analysis, we asked scholars who are experts in this line of work to read our article and give feedback. One person noted that we did not pay appropriate attention to Cara's preferred pronoun usage. As a result, we revised our original use of "she" to "he." We also included quotes from the three case studies to provide an opportunity for readers to hear participant voices, rather than merely our interpretations.

The Campers

Campers came from the surrounding area of the southeastern mid-sized city. All of them chose to sign up for the camp because of their interest in writing. Twenty-three of the 85 campers were in the high school classroom (grades 9-12). From those students, we chose three case studies to focus on for this study. All three identified as White. One received a needs-based scholarship for the camp. We chose these three campers because they used writing to disrupt gender and heteronormative stereotypes.

Harper. Harper is a White female who was going into eleventh-grade at the time of the study. She attended a competitive high school program that offered college credit. She wrote

historical fiction with strong, female characters. Harper identified as asexual, an identity that became an important aspect of her writing. She explained:

And I'm ace and we don't get very much, um, we don't get noticed very much and when we are noticed we're told 'oh, you haven't met the right person yet' or 'oh, you've just had bad sex' or 'oh, are you a virgin?'

Harper frequently wrote stories that included characters who identified as LGBTQ+. Her intention was to create rich characters whom others could identify with.

Cara. Cara is a White ninth-grader who attended a suburban public high school in the area. He used this camp to write about his experience as a female transitioning to a male. He said, "Well, I was born a girl, but like as I got older I realized I don't really feel like a girl. I would try to do like girly things but it just didn't feel right and so I was like I don't know what's wrong. So I looked it up one day and I was like, 'Oh, transgender, that's what that was.'" During camp, Cara wrote a fictional story about his experience and planned to read it aloud to his family in hopes of educating them about what it meant to be transgender. Like the character in his story, he preferred to be called "male pronouns" like "he" and "him." Although still going by his name, Cara admitted that he "hated it" because it "literally means princess. Ewwww.... ugh!" Cara wanted to change his name but he had not made a decision about a new name at this point.

Haley. Haley is a White female who attended a suburban public school in the area. She wrote poetry and short fiction. Her characters also included strong, female leaders and her writing oftentimes dealt with issues of sexual orientation. Haley's strong opinions about disrupting gender stereotypes stemmed from her family who led "nontraditional lifestyles." In an interview, Haley expressed her belief that gender and sex are different: "Gender, it's all up here [points her index finger to her temple]. Don't let anyone tell you anything different. Why do you

think there are transgender people or that there are people who aren't either gender or both genders? It's not your body parts. That is your sex." Haley did not identify as gay, but she said that she did "like some girls." Through poetry and fiction, Haley wanted to push the boundaries to better represent a broad spectrum of genders and sexual orientations.

Data Collection

For two weeks (total of 30 hours), Langston-Demott collected data in the form of video- and audio-recorded interactions (small and large group), interviews with campers, and artifacts (i.e., writing). Using thick description, Langston-Demott took notes of small and whole group interactions, including author talks, one-on-one conferences with writing coaches, and small group work between campers. Vetter then reviewed all recordings and added extended field notes to observations mentioned above.

After receiving assent from students (parents had already given permission at a parent orientation before camp started), Langston-Demott asked campers to do short interviews (audio recorded) with her that focused on questions about what it meant to be a writer, their writing process, and the ways in which gender shaped their writing experiences both in and out of school. For example, we asked questions, such as: In what ways has your gender shaped your writing? In what ways, if any, have your teachers addressed gender this year? These short conversational interviews with our participants occurred each day and included a range of questions, with Langston-Demott asking follow up questions when appropriate. Informal conversations (recorded in field notes) about writing and gender issues occurred, especially in relation to current events (e.g., Caitlyn Jenner), frequently throughout the camp. Approximately 3 to 6 months after camp ended, we engaged in follow-up interviews with participants. Both

Harper and Haley participated in those interviews. We were unable to reach Cara for a follow up interview.

Artifacts included campers' writing done in their notebooks and on social media sites that house various versions of their past and current writing. We used these data to help us better understand how they used writing to disrupt traditional notions of gender and sexual orientation.

Data Analysis

Case study data analysis (Merriam, 1998; Saldaña, 2015) began by reviewing all field notes and transcripts of recorded interactions that included talk about gender/sexual orientation and writing to better comprehend the experiences of the young writers. For example, when Harper said, "I tend to focus more on leading ladies, on ladies having all the power," we identified that interview statement as relating to gender and composition. Out of the 30 short interviews (approximately 5 to 10 minutes each), 26 included discussion about gender and sexual orientation (e.g., writing about being transgender). In addition, 9 artifacts (e.g., a piece of writing with a strong, female character), and 8 recorded field notes included something related to gender (e.g., informal conversations with the instructor about Caitlyn Jenner). After identifying data related to the research questions, Vetter wrote a descriptive summary of how each participant disrupted such stereotypes through writing.

While writing those descriptive summaries, Vetter produced common patterns and themes within each case study that helped us better understand how the young writers did or did not disrupt gender and stereotypes through writing. After writing all three summaries, Vetter engaged in a cross-case analysis that explored similarities and differences thematically. For example, after looking at all three cases, Vetter created five categories. Vetter then divided those categories into two overarching categories: out-of-school writing and in-school writing (Table 1).

With those themes in mind, we created five subcategories explained below. With our theoretical framework in mind, we made sure to highlight the voices and written work of participants rather than focus only on our interpretation of data. We also preserved the original spelling and punctuation in the participants quoted data.

Table 1

Categories for Disruption of Gender and Heteronormative Stereotypes

Category	Sub Category	Example Data
Out-of-school writing	Create characters that disrupt traditional gender and heteronormative stereotypes	I focus very strongly on female leads, and focus away from the more common romance novels that seem to be churned out monthly that are always aimed at females (Harper).
	Use wide range of resources to learn about gender and sexual orientation	...I started to buy more books by women that actually had female characters that weren't really love interests. Like they were love interests but that was more of a back burner idea. The goal in mind was mainly what they were doing (Harper).
	Realize complexities of change	And the thing is, I would love nothing more than to um, go into social justice, but I know my weaknesses. I'd eventually be bought.... (Harper).
In-school writing	Engage in critical conversations	Whenever like, usually it would happen around lunch or whatever when we are sitting at tables and someone would bring it up. And then there's like one side, they'd be like really opened minded and then the other would be really religious and really close-minded and be like "there's only two genders and you can't pick." So it's like really different for each of them (Cara).
	Negotiate unsafe spaces	Like a lot of people at my school they try to make rape jokes about women. And stuff like that... I'm like this is so not okay on so many levels. Like do you understand what this does to a woman? Like you're beyond stupid at this point (Haley).

Findings

Findings from the data illustrate that the three campers disrupted gender and heteronormative stereotypes through both in and out of school writing. Out of school, the

campers created characters that disrupted traditional gender and heteronormative stereotypes in stories, used a wide range of texts to learn and write about gender and sexual orientation, and articulated the complexities of writing for social change. In school, the campers engaged in critical conversations that shaped writing and negotiated unsafe spaces that impacted how and what they wrote. Findings are organized by the described themes.

Out of School Writing

The three campers discussed how they disrupted gender and heteronormative stereotypes through writing practices that they did outside of school. Many of those writing practices included writing on social media, like Tumblr. To discuss the themes described above, we examine the unique experiences of each case study.

Creating characters that disrupt traditional gender and heteronormative stereotypes. Each of the three campers created characters in their stories and poetry that disrupted traditional notions of gender and sexual orientation. Through these characters, the campers were able to tell typically silenced stories and reimagine a world in which multiple genders and sexual orientations are the norm.

Harper. In her fictional stories, Harper created leading characters who were strong and female. She described how she worked to make those leading ladies powerful, but “real”:

Um, I tend to focus more on leading ladies, on ladies having all the power. And I don’t just like make them completely just ba (badass). They can kick butt, but I also add weaknesses. Like they have fears that are crippling or there are people that they rely on as a crutch. I try to like portray them as being real (Interview).

Above, Harper described developing powerful female characters that “have fears.” For Harper, it was important to disrupt gender stereotypes by creating realistic, powerful female characters that

led the story. This was in contrast to typical female characters whom Harper viewed as either not having the lead or not being realistic with a spectrum of strengths and weaknesses.

We saw those characters developed in her story, *Family*, which took place in post-WWII England, and focused on the younger sister in a set of twins, both of whom were orphaned in the Blitzkrieg. The younger twin became attached to an older girl from Scotland whose parents had been in England when they died. In the following excerpt, she wrote about a young girl wearing pants in a time period when that was prohibited.

When she was fifteen, Emmy wore her first pair of breeches. Ladies weren't to wear them, of course, but Seraphina liked them, and wore them under her dress. And the girl knew the best ways to dress...They gave her a better freedom of movement. Whenever she had the chance to go into town, Emmy would strip out of her dress and into a loose man's shirt, tucking her hair up into a cap. No one noticed, no one knew.

Above, Harper created a character, Emmy, who not only disrupted the gender norms of her time period by wearing pants when ladies were not allowed to wear them, but also by dressing as a man so that no one knew she was a woman. Such actions raised questions for the reader about the benefits the character might experience by pretending to be a man during this time period.

Harper also disrupted gender and heteronormative stereotypes by creating strong characters that questioned traditional notions of romance. In an interview, she explained:

I focus away from the more common romance novels...that are always aimed at females...I end up, in my writings, writing a lot more of male/female friendships, where romance is, at most, a background relationship between minor characters. I write a lot of scenes where the interactions are normal, or lean towards tense scenes where characters are forced to bend and change and learn more about each other.

Rather than creating a typical love story between a man and woman, Harper preferred to write more about the complexities of relationships between people, particularly moments when characters must work to build friendships with one another. For her, this represented the reality, rather than myth and magic, of love between two people.

Harper also created characters of various genders and sexual orientations. She wrote stories about characters who are gender fluid and pansexual. Like her explanations about strong, female leading characters, she explained that these characters were complex with an expectation that readers will form a bond with them. She stated:

I try to portray worlds where the idea of men marrying men, women marrying women, and men marrying women, or even poly marriages is a widely accepted notion, or that someone could be born male or female but be mentally the opposite or neither...When I began my book series two years ago, long before I'd heard of Caitlyn Jenner...I'd had these ideas in mind because each had rich, heavily diverse cultures and couldn't have possibly not have these as common things.

For Harper, her book series opened up opportunities for her to create a world that disrupted gender and heteronormative stereotypes by modeling what it was like for those identities to be an accepted cultural norm. Despite pop culture's focus on such issues at the moment, Harper had a vision of her own that focused on creating holistic leading characters of various genders and sexual orientations that told complex stories.

Cara. Cara disrupted gender and heteronormative stereotypes by telling the story of a transgender character explaining his identity to his family. Published in Storybird, (an online visual storytelling community) he wrote the following description:

Gender does not equal biological sex and biological sex does not equal gender. Gender is more on how you see yourself and how you express yourself. Biological sex is just your body. If you are cisgender your body matches your mind and you never really experience gender dysphoria. When you're transgender gender dysphoria can bother you...

With this description, it appears that Cara's goal was to educate his audience about the differences between gender and biological sex. He used factual statements and specific terminology to lead into his story about what it meant to be transgender.

Although written as a fictional piece, the story was based on his own experiences. In an interview, he described what his story was about:

The character is kind of me, but it's different. Pretty much she goes through this thing where she's like I don't know what's wrong with me, maybe it's something else. Then she goes and she tells her parents and it gets really really bad. Then later on she finds out that she's transgender. Then...she comes out in a camp and they get really frustrated and it shows what it's like to not be accepted by your family when you're trans.

Through this piece, Cara told a typically silenced story. Specifically, the text wrestled with two issues that potentially helped others better understand a transgender experience. First, he discussed the semantics of names and pronouns. After being asked what the main character in his story would like to be called, he answered:

She's like female to male so she, when she was younger she got called "she" and "her" and things like that but when she comes out to her friends she's like "can you call me male pronouns?" "He" and "him" and things like that. Like, that was something that I had done. I came out to one of my friends and she was fine with it.

Here, Cara disrupted notions of what it means to be a girl or a boy, opening up the idea that gender can be multiple and fluid. By talking about switching pronouns, he highlighted the experiences that someone might encounter through daily conversations.

Second, Cara discussed what it might be like for someone to tell their family that they are transgender. For Cara, he planned to read his piece to an audience, in particular, his parents who were not aware of his transgender identity. He described his hopes:

It's kind of like a thing, like if they catch on like "maybe [Cara's] trying to give us a hint that she might be transgender" then that'd be cool. If they don't really catch on and are like "what is this?" I'll just go from there.

In his story, he described a scene in which the parents did not react well. Cara was hopeful that his parents would be "cool" with it. In particular, he seemed to believe that with information and education, his parents would be more understanding.

I don't know, cause like when I was, maybe a year ago or like two I thought that I was gay so I told them and they reacted kind of bad. But now that my dad has my stepmom who is a lot more open-minded then they are, she might be able to explain it all better and so like it's not just something I'm making up, like it's a thing.

As he explained, he was hopeful that they would understand with the help of a more knowledgeable stepmom. Thus, Cara developed a strong leading character to disrupt gender norms in hopes of educating those around him about what it means to be transgender from his character's perspective.

Haley. Like Harper, Haley recognized that male characters were the norm, so she resolved to focus more on the stories of females with strong roles to disrupt gender stereotypes.

Generally speaking, I have more girls in my stories than guys. A lot of the stories that you read are overpowered by guys and that just really agitates me. So I [write] what I want other kids to read so that...they see women in strong roles.

Like Harper and Cara, Haley wrote to tell a traditionally ignored story. For her, that was the story of a strong female character. Already, she developed guidelines about what that story could not include. One of those was a love triangle. She believed that if a writer wrote about a love triangle the media forgot other elements of the story, like the strong, female lead.

Like Harper, she also believed it was important to write about realistic relationships. In an interview, she said that it is important to write about the “good points and bad points” of a love story. Later, she elaborated by saying she would not just write about how “this girl isn’t dependent on this guy, but also to just be like this is real life.” Thus, Haley disrupted traditional notions of romance, such as those written in fairy tales, with a more realistic description of the ups and downs of love and relationships.

To do this, Haley was inspired by family and her own experiences. She explained:

Like a lot of the women in my family suffer badly with depression and anxiety so I usually give one of my characters one of those that they have to work through so that way they’re still this strong independent person...For me growing up I didn’t have characters like that. So I was like there’s just something really wrong with me, what am I doing?

For Haley, a strong, female leading character was not only about portraying realistic romance, but also about illustrating the realities of mental illness. Here, Haley disrupted traditional notions of mental illness, particularly in relation to females, by portraying its strengths.

Haley also wrote about a diverse cast that included characters with diverse sexual orientations, including “people who don’t have a specific gender and people who are

transgender.” She believed this was important because she wanted “people to be represented and I feel like people are not.” In an interview after the camp ended, Haley said that she not only created a diverse cast in her writing, but her writing dealt with the everyday experiences of LGBTQ+ youth. She explained:

My story from camp last year was about two gay girls and how they had to deal with coming out to the girl’s parents about being gay. And that was really traumatic for that girl because her parents were not okay with it and society was not okay with it.

Like Cara, she wrote about what it was like to be alienated from family because of sexual orientation. Unlike Cara, though, Haley had very supportive parents and she could not imagine what it would be like to be cast out from her family.

We also saw a strong, female voice in her poetry that disrupted commonplace notions of gender and sexual orientation. For example, in the following poem, she pushed against the notion of females being sugar and spice and everything nice.

I’ve stopped being made of
sugar and spice and everything nice
I started slowly replacing this concoction of perfection with
one part suicidal, two parts depression and two parts bipolar
one part misplaced love, one part misguided trust
I became the epitome of disaster, flourishing in chaos
Beautifully destructive and artfully sorrowful.

Here, she disrupted the notion that a girl is sugar and spice and everything nice with the realities of mental illness, such as depression and bipolar disorder. Her poem, however, ends with the

juxtaposition of two phrases, “beautifully destructive and artfully sorrowful,” as a way of displacing the notion that mental illness is only negative.

Using a wide range of texts to learn about gender and sexual orientation. All three of the campers used a variety of texts, such as books and/or social media, to learn more about gender and sexual orientation as they explored these issues in their writing. Such texts were important resources for making sense of characters and experiences.

Harper. In interviews, Harper talked about reading and viewing various types of texts that shaped her perspectives about gender and sexual orientation. Specifically, she said that she followed “quite a few social justice blogs” and showed us her Tumblr page with her latest readings and writings. In addition, she discussed how the Netflix series *Sense8* (Wachowski, Wachowski, & Straczynski, 2015) currently interested her because of the diversity of characters. She explained that the show had “gay representation, lesbians, transfemale...And racial diversity, like nearly every character is from different places in the world.” Clearly, Harper was looking to these texts to see how they created characters that disrupted gender and heteronormative stereotypes.

She also used books as a resource to learn how to disrupt gender and heteronormative stereotypes through writing. In an interview, she explained how she searched and found books written by women with female characters whom she described as “healers and warriors.”

I started to buy more books by women that actually had female characters that weren't really love interests. Like they were love interests but that was more of a back burner idea. The goal in mind was mainly what they were doing.

Here, Harper described how books shaped her thinking about what it meant to read and write about female characters. Rather than being love interests, they were leading characters who

drove the story by “becoming what they want to be” rather than following the traditional narrative of falling in love with men and living happily ever after.

Cara. Cara also used online resources to help him with technical terms related to a transgender identity, such as transgenderlaw.org. In his journal, he wrote down FTM and MTF, which stands for Female to Male and Male to Female. He explained what this meant in his story about a female transitioning to a male identity. He also included statistics and information about housing for transgender people if they were no longer supported by their families. These online resources helped Cara not only identify as transgender, but it also helped him write a realistic fiction piece that disrupted gender and heteronormative stereotypes. As he stated, it was information on the Internet that helped him identify as transgender: “So I looked it up one day and I was like, ‘Oh, transgender, that’s what that was.’” While writing his piece, he returned to those resources to use specific terminology and facts for the purpose of educating his audience.

Haley. Haley also talked about the ways in which social media helped her to find information about gender and sexual orientation. For example, for a paper that she wrote in seventh grade on rape, she chose her topic based on something that came up on Tumblr that she viewed outside of school. She said, “I was on Tumblr one day and it just popped up and I was just like, ‘Dude, this is amazing!’” She explained that it was a quote from Project Unbreakable, a photography project that provides space for survivors of sexual assault, domestic violence, and child abuse to voice their experiences. She said, “Um, and I was just like blown away by just like all of these victims who had gone through all of this trauma and were still like ‘I’m strong and this is who I am and you’re not going to change that.’”

Similarly to Cara, Haley also used information from the Internet to help her understand broader notions of gender and sexual orientation that she later wrote about in her stories.

[I learned about these issues] from the Internet. I mean, I kind of knew these things existed, but I think that I learned that this exists and I wanted to learn more about it so I did research and read more about it.

For Haley, she was able to find the information that she needed to write in educated ways about these issues. For her, being informed was important because she did not want to misrepresent anyone. She said, that she wanted to understand what she was writing about before she wrote about it and she used trusted information online to help her reach that goal.

Articulating the complexities of social change. All three campers explained that writing for social change afforded them the opportunity to tell stories not normally told, but it also had its challenges. They articulated those challenges during their interviews.

Harper. Harper often called herself a “social justice girl,” but she struggled to figure out how to enact that identity. Specifically, she realized that making policy changes took integrity that she was not sure that she had.

And the thing is, I would love nothing more than to um, go into social justice, but I know my weaknesses. I’d eventually be bought...So I can’t. But I can blog about it and I can talk about it and hopefully get somebody who will make a difference.

For us, Harper’s assumption that she would not be successful as a social justice advocate in the political world represented her belief that such work is difficult. Despite her fear of “being bought,” Harper stated that she would continue to blog about issues of social justice in hopes of influencing others. Thus, rather than being a politician or lobbyist, she chose to enact a social justice identity through writing that she could create and publish on her own. Overall, Harper viewed creative writing as a way for her to make social change.

Cara. For Cara, social change was related to his audience. Reading aloud his piece to a group of people, including his family, was a way for him to educate others about gender and sexual orientation and possibly change perspectives so that he was accepted. As mentioned earlier, Cara did not start out writing his story as a fictional piece. At first, he began with a personal essay—telling his own story. As he started to think of reading it aloud, he became afraid of how his family would react:

I was kind of, like with the thing I was writing before that was more like straight forward. I got really scared for them to read it. Like it wasn't like a good kind of scared. It was like "I don't want them to read it now." But with this it's like I don't care if they read it. It's a little bit better. I'm not as scared. It's still kind of, I'm nervous, but that's it.

For Cara, then, his courage to share his story and push for social change shifted as his opportunity to read aloud approached. To deal with his fear about his family's reaction, he rewrote his piece so that it became a piece of fiction. When the day approached, however, Cara did not come to the open reading and he removed his story from Storybird. Cara's experience, then, highlights how difficult it can be to share traditionally silenced stories, especially when they have personal consequences.

Haley. Like Cara, writing to change the way society thinks about LGBTQ+ issues was personal and emotional. Although supported by her family, Haley recognized that her peers treated her differently because she openly wrote about these issues. Specifically, she said, "I get outcast a lot from a lot of different things." Thus, Haley often felt alienated by others because she tended to write in ways that promoted social change for LGBTQ+ individuals.

In addition, Haley described the writing of her stories and poetry as an emotional experience. In the follow up interview, she said that she was not able to finish her story about a

female character coming out to her family, because it was “too emotional” for her to finish. She elaborated, “I didn’t end up finishing it. It made me too sad, honestly, because my parents wouldn’t do that. I don’t know any parents who would...I can’t imagine being in that situation, so I had to stop.” For Haley, writing about these issues was emotional, and that stress sometimes caused her to stop writing. Haley’s experience highlights the emotional exhaustion that writers might feel as they attempt to tell stories that are not always accepted by society.

In-School Literacy Practices

During interviews and informal conversations, all three young writers discussed how they disrupted gender and heteronormative stereotypes in school. Although not all were direct examples of writing, these experiences inevitably shaped how and what they wrote in the future. We realize that these claims are solely based on campers’ self-reports, but we believe that their commentary offers insight into how they did and did not use writing to disrupt gender and heteronormative stereotypes in school. To begin, we discuss how each case study engaged in critical conversations about issues of gender and sexual orientation.

Engaging in critical conversations. Both Harper and Haley reported engaging in critical conversations with classmates and teachers in school that opened opportunities for them to disrupt gender and heteronormative stereotypes. By critical conversations, we mean conversations in which they had the opportunity to disrupt commonplace notions about gender and sexual orientation and discuss multiple perspectives (Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002). Many of these conversations shaped how and what they wrote. Cara, however, stated that she did not engage in any critical conversations, which is why she is not represented in this section.

Harper. In school, Harper engaged in critical conversations with friends and classmates. During these hallway conversations, Harper disrupted traditional notions of gender and sexual

orientation. She said that she talks “about gender inequality quite a bit, because I have a problem with it. My friend Cassidy sympathizes with me on everything. We’re little social justice girls.” Harper talked with friends who also shared her investment in issues of access and equity. Her phrase “social justice girls” is important because it illustrates her knowledge about a concept that is founded on troubling societal norms.

Harper also engaged in critical conversations in the classroom. For her, this happened most often in her English classroom, which she described below.

We’ll talk about social injustice and inequality and um like things that happened in other countries. We talk about things that have to do with like women’s roles in history. We can’t dress how we want to and a lot of dress codes are about making *women* cover up... Here, Harper had the opportunity to engage in critical conversations that disrupted gender norms by discussing the school dress code, a relatable issue (e.g., story about breeches).

She also engaged in critical conversations prompted by research at school. Harper described a presentation that focused on something that she wanted to change in society.

Mine was on sexual inequality. I ended up focusing on asexuality and how it wasn’t noticed and... we’re shoved into the back corner. The “A” in LGBTQA is seen as “allies” instead of “asexuality.” And how a lot of times we are actually in the highest number of being sexually assaulted or forced into corrective rape. People try to rape us and fix us. For Harper, this opportunity to research a topic related to social injustice allowed her to learn more about asexuality, an identity she claimed. With that knowledge, she was better able to disrupt heteronormative stereotypes in her project, which made a difference to her classmates.

A lot of people were surprised to hear about it. My friend helped me on the project and she was just like so excited to see me doing the presentation and people were really

interested in learning about it and to find out about this new sexuality that nobody had heard of before. And it felt really good to be noticed. And I finally recently came out to my aunt and uncle about that. After doing all this research for several weeks I realized that yeah, that is what I am. Every single thing that an ace identifies as is what I am.

For Harper, the opportunity to disrupt heteronormative stereotypes helped her learn more about asexuality. With the support of her classmates, she not only educated others about asexuality, but she also realized that she herself was asexual. This helped her better understand herself at the time and it helped her talk to her family about her experiences.

These critical conversations also occurred in discussions about literature. In an interview after camp, Harper discussed how she engaged in dialogue that disrupted gender stereotypes through two pieces of literature, *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *The Crucible*. She explained:

In both, the leads are equally ostracized for being female and using it to their advantage in different ways, one to forget her pain and guilt while the other uses it to condemn others...I've loved every minute of the discussion of gender in class. It's refreshing to have it looked at from the view of a man and of woman.

Although Harper was not composing at this point, these discussions provided examples for how authors created characters within specific time periods that disrupted traditional notions of gender. Since Harper tended to write historical fiction, these kinds of conversations helped her to think about creating characters and settings in a specific time period that disrupted gender and heteronormative stereotypes.

Haley. Haley also engaged in some critical conversations in school. In particular, she remembered a paper that she wrote for her ELA class in 7th grade.

It was more focused on the aspect of the social norms of victim blaming, especially geared toward women, and where that came from and why that's so prevalent in society today...One of my boyfriend's friends had decided to make a bunch of rape jokes about me and threatened to rape me...I was like traumatized.

The paper was well received by her teacher and peers. Through comments on a Google Drive document, peers wrote that it was well written and deep. At the same time, Haley felt that more conversation could have occurred. Although no one wrote anything negative, she felt like their comments were saying that "this is just too much information for me to handle, like why are you writing about this, it's so deep." Rather than opening a conversation about it, her teacher focused only on the writing and research aspect. For Haley, that was a missed opportunity. She had the space to explore these issues, but she hoped for more opportunities to engage in critical conversations about the writing with her classmates.

Negotiating Unsafe Spaces. Although Harper and Haley engaged in critical conversations in their classrooms, all three campers stated that school spaces often missed opportunities to critically examine stereotypes associated with gender and sexual orientation. In fact, discussion, reading, or writing about gender and sexual orientation rarely occurred and if they did, they were ignored or tended to reify stereotypes. Thus, the three campers described their classrooms as being unsafe spaces some of the time.

Harper. Although Harper experienced opportunities to disrupt such norms in school, she also experienced barriers. Specifically, she stated that some of her classrooms were not open spaces for critical conversations. For example, she said that in her civics and economics class they did not talk about historical issues because they did not pertain to the subject.

In school, Harper also tended to create more neutral characters in her stories. She explained:

So it's easier for people to understand...Recently I tried to write a character who is a-gender, meaning they are non-binary, neither male nor female. A lot of my friends, when they tried reading it, they didn't really receive it well. They ended up putting me down and I haven't finished the work and I just feel like really upset about that because I find that very important -that everyone gets noticed.

Despite the support that she discussed earlier, she also censored how and when she disrupted gender and heteronormative stereotypes depending on how others receive it. Thus, opportunities for her to disrupt such stereotypes were closed when a space was not safe enough.

Cara. Unlike Harper, Cara did not experience opportunities in school to disrupt such stereotypes. He explained what happened when the topic of transgender came up:

Any time that we've ever talked about it in school, it was like really transphobic. Like they would say, "if you have this you're a girl, if you have this you're a guy and that's just how it is." They only believe in two genders and that's it. And that like being transgender is a mental illness and it's really unsafe. Really the only time it ever came up was in gym...She um, it was a gym teacher talking about like if you don't know if you're a girl or a guy come up here and I'll tell you.

Specifically, he stated that he would rather not talk to teachers about this topic because "they are very hard headed and I am too so I know that I can't make them change their mind in like 5 minutes so I just let them be." He also stated that he does not write about gender in school. He said, "I kind of try to keep away from it just so that they don't ask about it and I don't have to talk about it and they don't start getting religious again. It's really frustrating, I think." For Cara,

engaging in critical conversations in school was mostly out of the question because it was not a safe space to talk about those issues. Both students and teachers tended to reify stereotypes, so instead he stays quiet so he doesn't "have to talk about it."

Haley. Haley negotiated the unsafe spaces of school by questioning peers' comments that they made in school. Specifically, she said that most of the time, issues of gender and sexual orientation are not discussed. If they are, then most comments are derogatory toward women, which irritated her. She gave an example:

Like a lot of people at my school they try to make rape jokes about women. And stuff like that...I'm like this is so not okay on so many levels. Like do you understand what this does to a woman? Like you're beyond stupid at this point.

In response to comments like these, Haley engaged in debate in order to negotiate spaces that she deemed unsafe. For example, she explained:

And there are a lot of boys at my school who are homophobic and against gays and they will try to use the bible to justify that. If I hear someone being derogatory, then I will say something. That is just not okay. And I will say something and if it does turn into a debate, then so be it. If you are using religion as an excuse then I probably know more than you because I've actually done some research on it.

For Haley, debating in informative ways about these issues was one way for her to disrupt stereotypes during conversations with peers at school. By doing that, she was able to negotiate a space that fostered multiple perspectives when talking about gender and sexual orientation.

Haley also stated that teachers were not knowledgeable about how to talk to transgender youth. She explained:

There is one teacher in my life skills class. And we have a transgender student in that class. And he purposefully misgenders her all of the time and it makes me so mad. And I keep correcting him and he says, oh, you know what I meant. Say it the right way, please!

Thus, Haley recognized that teachers who were not informed about various genders and sexual orientation often alienated students from the classroom community, creating an unsafe space. To push back against that alienation, Haley corrected the teacher, hoping that he would understand.

Discussion and Implications

We know that “A gender-diverse child’s best predictor of success is whether that child receives support at home and from teachers” (Kilman, 2013, p. 1). Findings from this study contribute to that argument by illustrating how writing was a space for teens to disrupt traditional notions of gender and heteronormative stereotypes. Specifically, the three campers created characters that problematized traditional gender and heteronormative stereotypes, using resources to find information, writing research papers/presentations in school, and engaging in critical conversations. Much of their writing was used to change the world around them by composing stories that are typically silenced. Below, we highlight how our three writers disrupted such stereotypes in and out of school and what that might mean for educators.

Out of school, the campers had more opportunities to critically examine issues of gender and sexual orientation through writing. During the composition process, they explored books and online resources to help make sense of their own gender and sexuality (e.g., Cara’s discovery about being transgender) and disrupt traditional notions of gender and sexual orientation. All three used that information to write stories about the experiences of youth that were typically silenced (e.g., Cara’s story about telling a family about being transgender).

Campers described three specific challenges to writing about issues of gender and sexual orientation. Those challenges included the appropriate use of pronouns, developing complex and holistic characters whose stories were about more than gender and sexual orientation, and rewriting romance. All three wrote about these issues at the young writers' camp and two out of three read them aloud to an audience.

With that information, it is clear that the campers used writing as a way to both shape personal understandings of gender and sexual orientation and as a way to shape the world around them by telling typically silenced stories (Blackburn, 2002; Dutro, 2001). These findings, however, extend such research by illustrating how campers used writing to explore broad notions of gender and sexual orientation. Such an opportunity aligns with Miller's (2015) Queer Literacy Framework that argues for educators to invite students to self-define gender identities and sexual orientations, and support students as they investigate structural oppression. The biggest barrier to publishing and sharing these stories, however, were the social consequences. How would readers perceive it? These are dilemmas that all authors face. This study raises questions, however, about how educators might support students who plan to publish and share stories that might receive negative social consequences from family and friends.

The three campers had fewer occasions to disrupt gender and heteronormative stereotypes in school. All three stated that they rarely talked about such issues in class and critical conversations with peers in the hallway were unpredictable (e.g., Haley's debates). With that said, Haley and Harper both described a time when they engaged in a classroom assignment that helped them make sense of issues related to gender and sexual orientation (e.g., Haley's project on rape and Harper's project on asexuality). Such a finding contributes to research that argues for educators to engage in more critical conversations about gender and sexual orientation

with students (Godley, 2006; Ma'ayan, 2012; Schieble, 2012). Both shared these projects with classmates and had mixed results. Although both were praised, one fostered conversation about asexuality and the other silenced dialogue by focusing only on the writing aspect, rather than the content. The barriers to writing about these issues in school included the belief that school was an unsafe space with both students and teachers who were uncomfortable talking about gender and sexual orientation. This work, then, has implications for what educators mean about problematizing traditional norms of gender and sexual orientation. Is it enough to open opportunities for students to disrupt stereotypes through individual writing? We discuss ways that educators and researchers might answer that question below.

Implications for Practice

What can educators do? This research points to the importance of out-of-school spaces for students in which they can be surrounded by other youth and adults who support their need to disrupt gender and heteronormative stereotypes through writing. Such spaces can open dialogue and creativity in a way that provides opportunities for students to write in ways that help them make sense of the self and world. In order for students to feel safe enough to write about such topics, instructors must be educated about supporting a gender-inclusive classroom. All educators can do this by reflecting on their own stories related to gender and sexual orientation and by being aware of how one might communicate non-binary understandings of gender and sexual orientation. To do that, educators can use Miller's (2015) *A Queer Literacy Framework* as a guide. The framework includes specific principles and commitments that help educators better understand how to expand such social norms in the classroom.

In school, teachers can also open writing opportunities for students to disrupt such stereotypes. The teachers who opened those opportunities for Harper and Haley did so in two

ways. First, one teacher fostered ongoing critical conversations with students that challenged them to think and talk about issues of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation. Second, both teachers facilitated research projects in which students could research a topic that was relevant to them, write about it, and share it with the class. From the study, the three writers mentioned issues associated with choosing appropriate pronouns, troubling romance, and creating holistic characters. Such helpful details about developing characters and creating storylines could be integrated into lessons related to literary analysis and writing process.

Finally, for us, educating ourselves about broadened notions of gender and sexual orientation helped us to use appropriate vocabulary and/or ask appropriate questions that helped us better understand the writing experiences of these campers. In the classroom, educators can be aware of creating curriculum that is inclusive of LGBTQ+ youth, supporting the Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA), and understanding the school's policy regarding bullying. For example, teachers could collect LGBTQ+ books for a classroom library and create curriculum aligned with standards (Dodge & Crutcher, 2015) that draws on those texts connected to a theme, such as teen love or genre studies (Page, 2016). Such moves can create an inclusive community that opens opportunities for students to write in ways that disrupt traditional notions of gender and sexual orientation.

Implications for Research

To provide support to educators who want to know more about how to do this in their classroom, more research about how teachers open such opportunities would be valuable. How are teachers engaging students in compositional practices that help them disrupt traditional notions of gender and sexuality? How do students take up such curriculum? Specifically, studies

that explore how teachers develop and enact curriculum focused on disrupting such stereotypes through writing would be helpful for those interested in doing so in their high school classrooms.

Finally, educators would benefit from knowing more about how to move students from dialogue about these issues into action. The camp provided the young writers with a project-based goal of writing, publishing, and sharing a text. Here, the campers illustrated the power of telling stories about experiences that are normally silenced or dismissed. Writing, then, can become a way for students to advocate for social justice issues, specifically those that educate readers about broad notions of gender and sexual orientation. What might that look like in the context of a classroom? Studies focused on both the benefits and challenges of such work would help educators who are interested in teaching students how to use language to advocate for justice within their communities.

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Appendix A

Glossary of Key Terms

Asexual: A person who experiences little or no sexual attraction to others and/or a lack of interest in sexual relationships/behavior.

Cisgender: A person whose gender identity and biological sex assigned at birth align (e.g., woman and assigned female at birth).

Gender fluid: A person who does not identify with a single fixed gender; of or relating to a person having or expressing a fluid or unfixed gender identity.

Gender identity: One's innermost concept of self as male, female, a blend of both or neither – how individuals perceive themselves and what they call themselves. One's gender identity can be the same or different from their sex assigned at birth.

Heteronormativity: The assumption, in individuals or in institutions, that everyone is heterosexual (e.g. asking a woman if she has a boyfriend) and that heterosexuality is superior to all other sexualities.

LGBTQ+: An acronym for “lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer.” Adding a +, includes other gender identities and sexual orientations, not already included in the acronym.

Pansexual: A person who experiences sexual, romantic, physical, and/or spiritual attraction for members of all gender identities/expressions.

Sexual orientation: An inherent or immutable enduring emotional, romantic or sexual attraction to other people.

Transgender: An umbrella term for people whose gender identity and/or expression is different from cultural expectations based on the sex they were assigned at birth. Being transgender does

not imply any specific sexual orientation. Therefore, transgender people may identify as straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual, etc.

NOTE: These definitions are from the following two sources:

Killermann, S. (2013). Comprehensive List of LGBTQ+ Term Definitions. *It's*

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<http://itspronouncedmetrosexual.com/2013/01/a-comprehensive-list-of-lgbtq-term-definitions/#sthash.IwzJAqRC.dpbs>¹⁶

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Appendix B

Interview Questions

Day One and Two

1. What made you want to come to the writers' camp?
2. What kinds of things have you written in the past? Who has influenced you as a writer?
3. How is your writing influenced by your gender? For example, do you think your gender influences what you have written about? The kinds of characters you write?
4. How have you used digital media (e.g., computers, websites, etc.) to write? Do you use it to plan your writing? To read other work? To collaborate with other writers?

Day Three and Four

5. What are you thinking about writing for the camp? Why that choice?
6. How would you describe your writing process? How will you use digital media in the writing process?
7. So far, how has your gender influenced your writing? (See above for examples if needed).

Day Five and Six

8. Show them Coverflip and ask them what they think about the covers (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/05/07/coverflip-maureen-johnson_n_3231935.html¹⁸).
9. If you were going to create a cover for your published piece, what would it look like? How does gender influence that visual and your readers?

Day Seven and Eight

10. How will you publish your piece?
11. How does your gender influence the format in which you publish (e.g., website, blog, etc.).

12. Where will you do your read aloud? What are your thoughts on sharing your writing with others?

Day Nine and Ten

13. How would you describe a writer? How do you recognize a writer? Do you consider yourself to be a writer? Why or why not?

14. Do you hope to make a living by being a writer? Why or why not? If you do, how will you do it?

15. In what ways might your gender influence that career?

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