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# Foundations for Promoting LGBT+ Social Justice through Early Childhood Teacher Education

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## Abstract

This chapter presents a framework for early childhood (EC) teacher education experiences that align with aims of LGBT+ (lesbian, gay, bi, trans, plus other identities) social justice. The chapter begins with an introduction to the populations addressed: children of LGBT-led families, trans people, children who represent gender diversity, and LGBT+ teachers. Ethical and teaching responsibilities of educators who serve children aged birth to five are shared, including the work of authors in the interrelated fields within EC education. Examples of supportive educator competencies are shared across three critical aims: including and supporting LGBT-led families, supporting children's explorations of gender (including combating gender bias), and supporting LGBT+ educators. Next, a model for authentic, field-based EC educator preparation is presented, including strategies for better linking preparation to practice. Finally, resources for EC educators and those who prepare them are provided. The overall goal of the chapter is to integrate topics, competencies, and issues typically treated separately into a more holistic view of the possibilities within EC teacher education to enhance the inclusivity of preparation programs, broaden the knowledge and skills of pre-service educators, and positively influence the lives of LGBT+ individuals.

**Keywords:** gay, lesbian, social justice, early childhood, teacher education

## 1. Introduction

Two decades into the 21st century, preservice educators struggle to openly discuss and integrate practices related to gender, social identities, LGBT-led families, and inclusive curriculum [1]. Teachers experience concern about or fear of what will happen to them if they include books in their classroom libraries that include same sex parents, even when children in those classrooms are members of LGBT-led families. In literature examining teacher perceptions, participants debate practices displaying the most basic level of representation or care. LGBT+ people still worry about the consequences of living authentically as they seek employment as educators, and as they work to secure education and care for their own young children [2]. These are among the challenges in contexts where injustice is the norm. The absence of community or support, inadequate preparation, limited awareness of

resources, and poor understanding of professional obligations and opportunities all work against teachers, children, and families even *without* the active suppression associated with homophobia and legally/religiously sanctioned discrimination.

Literature has emerged which provides some hope, as well as evidence of both the potential benefits of various supportive practices and the harm of failing to employ them in the field of EC education. Furthermore, literature on the devastating effects of isolation, oppression, harassment, and bullying of LGBT+ people is extensive. The purpose of this chapter is to identify dimensions of EC education with potential for direct, positive impact on the lives of LGBT+ people, and to consider what a comprehensive EC educator preparation framework that addresses them might look like. In other words: what areas and practices might the field of EC teacher education need to consider in order to build systemic change?

Social justice is defined within this chapter as equal educational rights and opportunities for LGBT+ people and the individual and systems-level changes required to ensure optimal supports and outcomes for educators, children, and families. Each section of this chapter focusing on promising practices begins with a list of group-specific rights and educator responsibilities that expand upon the definition above. That definition carries with it an acknowledgement of certain truths in the field of EC education and literature within it that addresses equity, diversity, and inclusion. For example, the ongoing suggestion (within EC literature and professional organizations) to implement or teach *welcoming*, *supportive*, and *inclusive* practices presumes the normalization of unwelcoming and exclusionary environments. Practices addressing the needs of “non-traditional” families essentially expose a history and understanding of “tradition” that by definition excludes LGBT-led families and LGBT+ educators. Finally, preparing future EC educators with competencies that will ideally benefit children with diverse potential gender identities or future orientation requires a recognition of the near-worldwide normalization of practices that cause harm to such children and continue to perpetuate conditions that threaten their development, health, and lives.

This chapter identifies, describes, and shares practical recommendations around three broad areas related to social justice for LGBT people that have implications for both the preparation and roles of early childhood educators. The sections to follow are designed to serve as a starting point for enhancing practices, raising visibility, mitigating ongoing harm, and identifying further needs both in teacher education and in the settings in which children and families are themselves served.

## **2. Complexities and contexts: who are these teachers, children, and families?**

Approximately 4.5% of adults in the United States (U.S.) identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer (LGBTQ), translating to a minimum of nearly 15 million people [3]. 1.4 million adults in the U.S. identify as transgender, with a slightly larger estimate of 1.5 million for the European Union (EU), including data from the United Kingdom (UK) [4]. LGBT rights are protected in both the U.S. and the E.U. This includes recognition of same-sex relationships and protections from employment discrimination; however, countries vary significantly on other rights and protections, many of which are under continuous threat. As a result, the experiences (including stressors, barriers, and the effects of discrimination) of LGBT+ people who decide to parent vary tremendously as well. The sections to follow present three groups about whom LGBT-inclusive literature/practices have most frequently been published: children in LGBT-led families, children who do not fit a strict gender binary (including trans children), and LGBT educators themselves.

## **2.1 Lesbian and gay-led families**

In the U.S. alone, millions of children in the U.S. are raised and cared for in families led by LGBT+ parents; these families include nearly half of lesbians and over 20% of gay men under the age of 50 [5]. Families with LGBT+ parents exist in every family configuration – married spouses, separated or divorced parents, blended families, families led by extended family members, and single parent families. LGBT+ parenting is achieved through adoption, surrogacy, alternative insemination, or other means. LGBT+ parents face scrutiny and opposition rooted in homophobia and discriminatory religious beliefs. Over one million LGBT+ people in the U.S. (where gay marriage is legal in all 50 states) are married to a same-sex spouse, with at least another 1.2 million in same-sex relationships [4]. In the EU, laws pertaining to gay marriage and family-building vary by country. As a result, family configurations differ as well. Many EU states offer full parental rights to lesbian and gay couples. Meanwhile, other countries (including many where gay marriage is still not legally recognized) have acted aggressively against the rights of LGBT+ couples; Hungary, for example, enacted a 2020 law forbidding them from adopting.

Research on lesbian and gay-led families has shown similar parent/child relationship quality and developmental outcomes to that of non-LGBT-led families. Parents' orientation has also shown not to predict children's orientation, gender identity, or the likelihood of abuse or neglect. Such families demonstrate resilience and are strengthened by loving bonds; the only unique sources of stress they face tend to be discrimination, harassment, and bullying by non-LGBT individuals. In 2021, these issues continue to threaten the health and welfare of such families; in fact, hate crimes have recently risen in many countries. Because LGBT-led families regularly interact with EC educators and their children are counted among those receiving birth-three (B-3) and preschool education, it is imperative that EC educators to be prepared to understand and respond to their unique needs.

## **2.2 Trans and nonbinary individuals**

Approximately 1.5 million adults identify as trans in the U.S. [6]. Exact numbers in the EU are unknown and range from 30,000 to as many as 1.5 million. Public awareness and media attention regarding gender diversity has increased dramatically in recent years. In some ways, this visibility has worked to the benefit of trans and gender non-binary individuals through greater representation in media, a rise in prominent figures and role models, and an increase in visible support. The visibility of trans and gender diverse people has been met with a rise in discriminatory action and organized attempts to dehumanize them. The consequences for individuals who do not conform to narrow binary conceptions of gender are devastating. As one example, by adulthood the majority of trans people in the U.S. have lost a job due to discrimination.

Of course, all young children explore and learn about gender regardless of their genetic or physical characteristics. During early childhood, masculinity and femininity are portrayed for them in a variety of ways, and they learn what it means to identify as male or female through the available models, transmitted values, teaching, and through both encouragement and discouragement by adults and peers. The victimization of children whose play, dress, interaction style, or choice of play partners deviates from the expectations of this gender binary is already in full effect when children reach the age of 5–6, when research has identified that they have already experienced teasing, correction and redirection of their play choices, and other unsupportive behaviors that lead to shame, hiding of their emergent identity,



withdrawal, or even aggression. These children benefit from broader laws and local policies that respect their agency to define their gender and ensure that they are safe and protected in school. Children who do not fit the gender binary are vulnerable to verbal harassment and both physical and sexual assault [7]. They benefit from strong teacher-child relationships and supportive learning environments that encourage development of self-awareness, promote acceptance, and push back against developing biases and strict gender norms. Practices that accomplish these goals are not well understood and rarely used in early childhood education. A great need exists for practicing and preservice teachers to better understand and implement both supportive and preventative teaching strategies.

## **2.3 LGBT+ Educators**

It is estimated that somewhere around 2 million people (almost exclusively female) in the U.S., and 1.2 million in the EU work as early childhood educators, although these figures are underestimates given the diverse roles and titles educators carry within the complex and varied systems of education and care for children under the age of 5 [8]. The number of openly LGBT+ teachers is small in both the U.S. and the E.U. While the number of trans adults in the U.S. has been estimated to be approximately 0.6 percent (approximately 1.4 million people), there are no known statistics on the number of trans and gender-nonconforming people working in schools.

While overall conditions (including employment protections and public perception) have improved for LGBT+ educators, conditions are highly variable across states and the E.U. Misconceptions, isolation, and invisibility are still faced by the majority of LGBT+ educators. Even under the best of circumstances, parent or community opposition or even harassment remain legitimate concerns for educators. Preservice EC educators have also expressed concern about such issues as being accepted in their field experiences, witnessing or experiencing unchecked homophobia, misconceptions about men (particularly gay men) who enter the EC field, the challenges of intersectionality (such as experiences of dual discrimination for being both black and gay), and how/whether identity should come up as they approach graduation and enter the field [9]. For some LGBT+ educators, coming out is a privilege not afforded to them, and for others remaining invisible is not possible. Experiencing negative consequences for these forced decisions is unacceptable. Like most EC educators, LGBT+ EC educators seek human connection, opportunities to collaborate, and enter this field to make a positive impact in the lives of young children and their families. Most of them lack critical supports, preparation, or even an acknowledgement of their need for community, role models, and the freedom to exist authentically in their professional lives.

## **3. In what ways has the field of EC education responded to the need for LGBT+ social justice?**

Teacher education models and practices supporting the aims of LGBT+ social justice have not been comprehensively studied. Preservice teachers have minimal exposure to meaningful learning experiences that support their development of these skills or implementation of practices [10]. Still, policymakers and professional organizations in the fields related to EC education have responded to the needs outlined in the previous sections of this chapter. Policies regarding equity, nondiscrimination, and addressing the needs of diverse children and families are present in professional organizations, position statements, and teacher education

standards in the U.S. and E.U. Specifically, sexual orientation, gender, and family structure are repeatedly named as forms of diversity that must be addressed via an equity lens. EC education is cited across multiple professional fields as a critical professional context where the foundations and negative effects of racism, sexism, and homophobia are rooted, cementing a firm link between the role of EC educators and not only the rights of LGBT+ individuals, but their well-being, positive identities, and protection from harm. As an example, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) Code of Ethical Conduct [11] in the U.S. prioritizes, above all other concerns that practices that are “emotionally damaging...disrespectful, degrading...or intimidating to children” must not under any circumstances be employed in EC education [11]. In numerous position statements and professional articles published by NAEYC, authors have attempted to articulate and provide examples of practices to address gender identity inclusivity, and gender bias, as well as practices to support LGBTQIA staff. NAEYC and other organizations also acknowledge the need for recruitment of LGBT+ faculty in EC education and identify it as a priority for teacher education programs. Organizations such as the Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network in the U.S., ILGA-Europe, and other country-specific organizations have advocated for educators, collected and widely shared useful data, and pushed back against harmful policies. Professional development targeting anti-bias practices is increasingly available and desired by educators, particularly in the virtual environment, but more is needed. On the whole, most education advocacy organizations focus almost exclusively on children in elementary/primary school through adulthood.

Social justice issues not only affect EC education from its broader educational and societal contexts, but arise within schools and EC centers themselves when: a) neglect or erasure of, or discrimination against LGBT-led families with young children is evident and allowed; b) rigid gender norms are upheld in EC classrooms in opposition to the developmental needs of young children who do not present as stereotypically masculine or feminine; c) children’s identities are silenced, punished, or ignored; d) educators are subjected to negative judgment or discrimination due to their orientation or identity. In the section to follow, examples of these issues in action are explored in greater detail.

The existing problem of defaulting to heteronormative practices in EC is rooted both in assumptions of heterosexuality, pathologizing or erasing other groups, and in the mistreatment of those who are either not heterosexual, perceived as LGBT+, or whom heterosexuals fear will become LGBT+. Worsening this harm is the persistence on the part of heterosexuals to equate teachers addressing LGBT+ needs with introducing the topic of sexual activity to children. This misconception has fueled fear and resistance to supporting children and families, raised the anxiety and reinforced the isolation of LGBT+ educators, maintained confusion and hesitation regarding developmentally appropriate teaching practices, and inhibited the progress of this field. Unfortunately, research on perceptions of LGBT+ people (including educators) continues to reinforce or even legitimize this misconception. For example, surveys may ask respondents questions about their opinions regarding marriage, family, and children in LGBT+ families alongside questions about gay and lesbian sexual relations. This normalizes the idea that scrutinizing the sexual behavior of parents is both a right of educators and somehow relevant to respecting the rights of LGBT+-led families or meeting the needs of their children - a horrific notion unthinkable to heterosexual parents.

The disconnect between what is known about child development and the practice of educators is, of course, not unique to LGBT+ issues. Even in publications focused on racism, space is frequently provided to the concern that “sensitive” topics such as race are too complex or upsetting for young children to explicitly

learn about. There is little evidence to suggest that adults should worry about harm associated with introducing these topics too early; in fact, it is of greater concern when they are ignored. It is long overdue for EC educators to transcend older and more abstract notions of inclusivity and work toward reframing of EC education as an essential context for asset-based, LGBT+-supportive practices that enhance (rather than detract from) the lives of children, families, and educators.

#### **4. Relevant areas of practice in early childhood education**

The areas of practice most often discussed in literature related to LGBT+ social justice fall into three general categories: welcoming and including LGBT-led families; addressing gender bias and allowing for gender agency and creativity; and incorporating social justice into EC curriculum. In the sections to follow, examples of these areas of practice are shared with a goal of identifying some of the knowledge and skills EC teacher educators must consider in designing preparation experiences for future educators. These consist of practices which have been recommended and/or evaluated in EC education literature as well as in the policies and publications of organizations (such as NAEYC) focused on the education of young children. Each section begins with a set of principles related to LGBT+ social justice representing the beliefs of the author which underlie the presentation and critical analysis of practices that follows.

##### **4.1 Inclusive EC practices addressing LGBT-led families**

EC educators must:

- recognize the realities of LGBT-led families as critical issues of EC development rather than exclusively adult social issues
- understand and prevent negative consequences (for children and families) associated with erasure, silencing, shaming, and/or ostracizing
- recognize and value the importance of knowing, collaborating with, and supporting LGBT+-led families
- fully include LGBT+-led families in programs, classrooms, and curriculum
- teach with an asset-based lens on diverse family structures
- work within diverse family structures to identify developmentally appropriate materials, learning activities, and practices

Practices for responding to family diversity are the most prevalent in all literature pertaining to LGBT+ issues in EC education. A potential reason for this is the broad relevance of these practice across the developmental continuum from birth to age five and across roles, program models, and systems. Family-centered practices are integral to addressing the needs of LGBT+-led families because family engagement itself is integral to the success of collaborative education and intervention for young children. These practices are rooted in dual concerns: first, ensuring that LGBT+-led families feel that they are valued members of the community of their child's EC education program; and second, a desire for children in such families to begin their school experiences with a sense of family pride, as opposed to feeling

erased or silenced by messages of exclusion that are potentially damaging to their self-esteem [12]. As teacher educators consider how to best approach the teaching of these practices, a critical lens on such practices is necessary for bridging the gap between preparation to practice. Adaptations and responsiveness to individual settings and needs should be emphasized, as well as strategies to support children's emerging understandings as they begin to develop.

#### 4.1.1 Considerations of language

Across both published research and in the articles and policy statements of various professional organizations, practices directed toward LGBT+-led families are frequently framed as “welcoming” and “supportive.” Inclusive language serves as one example, particularly on forms and communication from the school. For example, forms that refer to or require the input of a “mother” and “father” could easily be changed to read: a) “parent 1 and 2” b) “parent/caregiver 1 and 2,” or 3) “caregiver” with options to indicate whether each adult is a mother, father, foster parent, extended family member, etc.

Another change in language involves reflecting on and updating language used to refer to various family structures. The terms *traditional* vs. *nontraditional* reflect a history of heteronormativity, as *traditional* often refers to nuclear families and carries with it an outdated assumption that such families are superior or prevalent. A useful question for educators to consider is whether grouping families into more general categories is necessitated by context, or whether the labels are associated with generalizations about family types reflect a deficit lens on families who are different from those in the experience of the educators themselves.

#### 4.1.2 Welcoming and inclusive policies

Families vary widely on what they view as welcoming and inclusive [12]. While a mere symbol (such as a rainbow flag) can be powerfully welcoming for some families, for many others inclusiveness is rooted in trust that must be earned. This can be a challenging idea for preservice teachers to grapple with as they enter preparation programs potentially holding assumptions that children and families will immediately respond positively to their good intentions. Family-centeredness requires educators to allow and encourage families themselves to decide whether they feel welcome or included, rather than assuming that a practice or policy itself is inherently welcoming or inclusive.

**Table 1** presents examples of supportive practices from EC literature. A pitfall in implementing such practices is a failure to root them in actual relationships. They also rest on a variety of assumptions, hypotheticals, and generalizations about LGBT+-led families that run the risk of simultaneously ignoring both the diversity of such families and their potential similarities, including with non-LGBT+-led ones. Instituting blanket policies can be necessary and useful; in itself, however, this does not necessarily meet the need for individualization that true inclusivity requires. In **Table 1** examples of policies are resituated within responsive, individualized, and potentially more inclusive frameworks on the right.

#### 4.1.3 Strategies to increase family representation in the classroom

EC educators can affirm children's family lives by creating a classroom environment that positively represents families' experiences and structures. NAEYC's Position Statement on Developmentally Appropriate Practices [13], which guides EC teaching/preparation in the U.S., includes among its standards for Creating a Caring, Equitable



Generalized Policies	Responsive Policies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• In dialog, refer to all <i>husbands and wives/moms and dads</i> as <i>partners</i></li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Learn how the members of each family refer to one another</li><li>• Demonstrate respect by consistently incorporating the terms used by each family</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Address communication to <i>families</i> rather than <i>parents</i> [10]</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Recognize LGBT+ parents <b>as</b> parents and ensuring they are included and referred to as such rather than diminishing them via dilution of language</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Abolish holidays such as Mother’s Day or Father’s Day (where these are celebrated)</li><li>• Replace gender specific holidays with others, such as Families’ Day [10]</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Consider the purpose/benefit of these holidays to children; ensure they are addressed in developmentally appropriate ways (as opposed to, for example, overusing adult-selected projects to send home)</li><li>• Recognize a variety of meanings of parenthood in diverse families</li><li>• Learn about whether/how same-sex couples have addressed the topic of the opposite gendered parent with their child</li><li>• Learn more about adoption types and acknowledge adoptive LGBT+ parents’ wishes regarding the inclusion of biological parents</li><li>• Encourage children with two mothers or fathers to celebrate and create for both parents</li><li>• Encourage children to include other close male and female family members (e.g., grandparents, aunts and uncles)</li><li>• Celebrate adoption in the curriculum and through literature</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Recognize Adoption Awareness Month (or other similar isolated celebratory events)</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Learn about the unique journeys to parenting and adoption experiences of LGBT+ people</li><li>• Authentically, meaningfully, and consistently celebrate and acknowledge adoption in curriculum and literature</li><li>• Include families in planning and decision-making for informational or celebratory events</li></ul>

**Table 1.**  
*Resituating broad policies pertaining to families into a responsive framework [1, 10, 12].*

Community of Learners the following: *Educators acknowledge and accept the family composition that each family defines*. Representation is rooted in this acknowledgment and takes many forms, including basic visual representation, wherein photos of children’s families are included in the EC classroom as a way to ease separation, provide a foundation for conversation, and to increase children’s awareness of the spectrum of human differences and relationships. As an alternative, classroom posters or other displays can also portray this diversity. Teachers can include families with slight changes in the wording of songs and fingerplays. Educators should be prepared to answer children’s questions about family structures, to model genuine curiosity and acceptance of differences, and present an inclusive definition of families and the various ways they are formed [10]. EC educators must also set expectations for what is acceptable and unacceptable treatment of children in LGBT+-led families by peers and other adults. Such competencies are critical to combating hesitancy stemming from ignorance and fear, and the resulting erasure of these families.

Literature serves as a powerful tool for increasing family representation in EC classrooms. It is crucial, however, that in preparing preservice teachers to select texts for their early childhood classrooms, teacher educators strive to address

representation not as a static goal but as a complex phenomenon. For example, Christiane Engel's *baby's first words/mis primeras palabras* is a beautifully illustrated book appropriate for B-3 including familiar words within a day in the life of a family with two fathers; the representation provides the context for the concepts and vocabulary in the book rather than their focus. In contrast, a book such as Michael Genhart's *Rainbow: A First Book of Pride* includes joyous vignettes focusing on the colors of the rainbow flag around more abstract concepts such as spirit, harmony, and healing, which has different implications for how and with whom the text might be shared. Additional dimensions of representation requiring consideration by EC educators include the extent to which a text presents families through an asset lens; the level of representation (i.e., including an LGBT+-led family vs. a story about that family); vocabulary and concepts requiring explanation or teaching; intersectionality and diversity within the category of LGBT+-led families, and; themes and messages within each text.

#### 4.1.4 Strategies to address family needs and provide support

While EC educators must maintain an asset lens when working with families, support for LGBT+-led families may also require an understanding of the ways in which discrimination, teasing, and bullying have affected them. Educators require targeted and intensive preparation in order to understand how to develop and act on a commitment to breaking these patterns. Roles for EC educators include supporting children who have been teased, creating a supportive classroom community, connecting LGBT+-led families with resources (or those who may provide them), and serving as a voice of change when it is needed in their programs/schools. EC teachers must also be prepared to create opportunities for open dialog with parents, including non-judgmental listening and problem-solving in instances where parents/caregivers may have felt excluded or misunderstood [10]. Such conversations require skilled dialog within which educators seek to understand and reflect (listen actively, probe further, value parent/caregiver views, commit to collaborative problem-solving). A reflective stance, willingness to reveal/reflect on/reduce bias, openness to feedback, and professional self-awareness are all required in order to develop skills which build and deepen relationships between educators and families.

#### 4.1.5 Community-building

Even when their children are enrolled in EC education programs, LGBT+-parents can still feel isolated, or perhaps struggle with whether/when to come out to teachers or other parents. Educators who want parents to feel welcomed may ask whether those parents would feel comfortable attending a planned family event, not realizing that this question contains an underlying message that the family should not be comfortable. Even when parents do feel welcomed and included, they may face challenges in relating to other parents. For example, a mother who has not experienced childbirth firsthand or a father who utilized surrogacy to become a parent each experienced journeys to parenthood that differed from each other's and those of, for example, mothers who themselves gave birth. In addition to demonstrating sensitivity and a commitment to representation, planning informal community-building activities and events can be helpful in helping parents get to know one another and share their journeys to parenting in a low-stakes environment before assumptions about their experiences take root. This can be helpful whether an LGBT+ parent is the only such parent/caregiver in a class or one of many. Over time, as educators develop relationships with additional families, they

may participate in informal support networks for parents who do not know others who have experienced similar journeys.

## 4.2 Incorporating social justice into EC curriculum

The most frequently cited resource on incorporating the aims of social justice in EC education programs is *Anti-Bias Education* [14]. A basic tenet of this approach is that bias is learned. From their earliest days of life, children receive messages about their own identity and the identities of others. These messages are often subtle and learned unconsciously—from family, friends, school and the media—but they can have a lasting impact on their self-image and worldview.

The *Anti-Bias Curriculum* is organized around a set of four core goals focusing on positive identities, human differences and connections, addressing unfairness, and action against discrimination. The four core goals are presented as child outcomes which begin with the phrase “*each child will...*” [14]. Below, those goals have been reorganized and reformatted as six questions that shift the focus from children to teachers, linking goals to teaching practices. These questions provide a starting point for teachers to investigate, reflect upon, and eventually identify/share specific practices aligned with LGBT+ social justice. Further, teacher educators are challenged to consider the specific practices their programs actually prepare preservice candidates to enact:

1. How do you ensure that children who will later identify as LGBT+ build self-awareness and confidence?
2. What practices do you utilize in order to ensure that children in LGBT-led families demonstrate family pride?
3. How do you help children to notice, discuss, and celebrate the similarities and differences among children and their families?
4. How do you support young boys and girls in learning how to demonstrate caring and to maintain caring relationships?
5. How do you support young children in understanding and describing unfairness and its consequences? How inclusive are these practices?
6. How do you empower children to act against prejudice toward or discrimination against others? What forms of discrimination do you actively combat?

One of the ways in which EC educators have sought to translate anti-bias principles into action in preschool is through the enhancement of curriculum to emphasize social justice [15]. Essentially, this involves using an anti-bias lens to evaluate and adapt existing practice to reflect a particular conceptualization of social justice. Social justice curriculum has largely been applied to preschool (rather than birth to three) settings, within which curriculum is reconceptualized to adopt an inclusive view of human diversity, address injustice or unfairness in the classroom through problem-solving approaches to conflict, introduce conversations about similarities/differences, exclusion, and support children in developing an understanding of empathy. These models address social responsibility, engagement with the surrounding community and problem-solving through integrated exploratory projects or units focusing on such topics as health issues or food scarcity [15]. They support the aim of inclusivity through incorporating inclusive language, open discussions

about topics such as gender identity, and the empowerment of LGBT+-led families through welcoming practices, parent/caregiver support, and affinity groups.

### 4.3 Supporting gender identity and development

With respect to gender diversity in early childhood, children have the right to:

- agency to declare their gender
- positive practices that support their emerging awareness of gender
- educational environments where it is safe to explore and talk about gender
- a variety of materials, activities, and supports for non-stereotypical play and learning
- protection from harm (e.g., shaming) for non-stereotypical behavior or choices
- inclusive language regarding gender identity

During infancy and toddlerhood, children already respond to cues and norms in their families and schools regarding gender and categorize people accordingly. Children often learn the gender roles of their caregiving context during these years; most of the time this consists of stereotypical roles for boys and girls in alignment with the societal patterns, cultural signals, and attitudes of others. By the time they reach kindergarten, these stereotypes are firmly entrenched and children begin to reject non-stereotypical play and materials, as well as those who choose to engage in them. Many children explore gender through their play and even take on opposite gender roles or personas, but do not grow up to identify as nonbinary or trans. For these children, the exploration has no effect on the constancy of the correlation between their assigned sex and their understanding of their own gender.

During preschool, children who identify as trans at some later point in life may display visible signs and choices that indicate their identification with a gender other than that presumed by adults. Research suggests that children who change their gender do so as a result of an awareness and understanding of their identity [16]. This contradicts the common misconception that children simply decide to change gender without fully understanding themselves, or have been influenced by others or the media. From preschool on, children who do not fit those stereotypes begin to pay a price for it – social, academic, and mental health issues that children later frequently experience are, for the most part, the result of their identity being suppressed or oppressed [7]. These children are largely ostracized, bullied, shamed, and the challenges to their mental health and safety worsen as they get older.

#### 4.3.1 Examples of supportive EC practices

In EC, when children are encouraged to explore a variety of toys and materials without constant gender signifiers, supported as they do so (rather than chastised by adults for not fitting cultural stereotypes), and allowed to engage with presumed opposite gendered peers, they tend to behave less in accordance with harmful stereotypes than children who are not, regardless of their later gender identity. Contextual factors in the classroom can provide natural opportunities for children to explore gender in their own way and on their own terms; some of the practices that support these opportunities are indicated in **Table 2** below [17–19].



Practice	How this might look
Demonstrate respect	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Accepting children’s interests, choices, self-descriptions</li><li>• Refraining from characterizing children’s friendships as romantic (“is she your girlfriend/boyfriend?”) when children of presumed opposite genders play together)</li></ul>
Using inclusive language	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Addressing children in gender inclusive ways (e.g., <i>learners, investigators, readers, artists, thinkers</i>, or simply <i>children</i>)</li><li>• Avoiding assumptions of gender in play, literature, and learning activities within and outside of the classroom</li></ul>
Expanding practices beyond the gender binary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Teaching that identity has many components, and the ways people are both individuals and members of various groups</li><li>• Avoiding the introduction of gender stereotypes or gendered expectations (e.g., use groupings other than boy and girl)</li><li>• Minimizing separations between “boys” and “girls” toys, materials, cubbies, etc.</li><li>• Expanding pretend play clothing and materials to enable a variety of forms of play and exploration</li><li>• Building on children’s understanding of gender and categories through conversation</li></ul>
Disrupting segregation or mistreatment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Teaching children to share and resolve problems</li><li>• Intervening when misgendering or stereotyped roles/exclusion are used</li><li>• Interrupting children’s suppression of one another’s play and expressive choices</li></ul>
Attunement and responsiveness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Allowing and answering children’s questions about gender and gender roles</li><li>• Supporting and joining children as they explore non-stereotypical toys, clothing, and play</li></ul>

**Table 2.**  
*Practices that support gender diversity in EC.*

Many of these practices are complex, challenging to enact, and likely to be met with questions or resistance by those to whom they are unfamiliar or even threatening. For preservice EC educators to learn and implement these practices successfully, they must do so with the support of teacher education faculty in field settings where collaborative groundwork has been laid to support them.

5. Identifying and addressing the needs of LGBT+ EC educators

LGBT+ EC educators have the right to:

- safety, and safe spaces within the workplace
- protection from harm aimed at their identities
- support in addressing LGBT+ issues and supporting families
- decision-making regarding coming out at work, free from the threat of negative repercussions (including job loss)
- administrative support in individually and collectively addressing social justice issues
- systems that support the professional development of non-LGBT+ colleagues in understanding and enacting practices that address equity

- colleagues who understand and respect their identities

Many LGBT+ educators now live and work in settings where their identities are celebrated. Even within more accepting and protective political systems, however, LGBT+ educators still face complex and varied local policies and beliefs which may regulate their practice, threaten their sense of safety, and/or reinforce the silence within which oppression thrives. Contexts where teaching about LGBT+ issues is forbidden are associated with higher rates of bullying and homophobic comments, lower rates of acceptance for LGBT+ people, and poorer outcomes for children who identify as LGBT+ [20]. Teachers in these contexts have access to fewer resources and are less likely to support LGBT+ students.

The particular experiences of EC educators have not been extensively researched. Too many educators still face tremendous (and under-researched) stress in what King [21] accurately referred to as a “very bad bargain” – in which LGBT+ teachers have agreed (implicitly or explicitly) to remain in the closet, hiding identities from children and creating an inauthentic professional persona only to then live with the cost of teaching in a state of hypervigilance, self-monitoring, and fear of judgment or even losing their jobs within systems that erase them. They also are faced with teaching within systems where students who share their identities are neglected or harmed.

Discrimination against LGBT+ EC educators (and staff) is common [2]. Some evidence to suggest that the younger the children served, the more concerned teachers are about being “out” [20]. Stereotypes about LGBT+ EC educators (particularly men), as well as long-standing misconceptions about recruitment, childhood sexuality, and potential harm to children persist despite decades of evidence invalidating them. Such misconceptions fuel prejudice and underlie the attitude of caution adopted in literature outlining superficially welcoming or inclusive practices. In other words, these resources state or imply that LGBT+ EC educators must demonstrate respect and a posture of deference toward individuals who offer them neither.

In terms of teacher education, examples of the needs of LGBT+ preservice EC educators include:

- safe spaces in teacher education programs and on campus where preservice teachers can form social and practice-based communities,
- networking opportunities with LGBT+ EC teachers and administrators as well as those who teach and lead in systems where teachers feel safer and supported
- advice and support on coming out during field experiences/internship
- strategies for identifying supportive workplaces
- opportunities to engage in action to for broader legislative and educational systems change
- support in dealing with resistance, especially homophobia/transphobia
- mentorship from LGBT+ EC faculty and practicing EC teachers
- opportunities to explore, learn about, use, reflect on, and share teaching resources specific to EC

Even if such needs are met, improving the working conditions and supporting the practice of LGBT+ educators requires change in the preparation and support of *all* preservice teachers. This may involve educating them on LGBT+ issues while dispelling misconceptions that inflame their biases. In a broad sense, this preparation could be integrated into efforts to awaken or support their interest in teaching for equity; however, simply sharing practices and resources in the university context is not enough, as those same misconceptions, biases, and fears are likely to prevent teachers from applying what they have learned about. Perhaps nothing reinforces this point more strongly than research on the reluctance of non-LGBT+ educators who are fearful about showing support to colleagues out of a fear that others will think they are LGBT+ as well [2]. (i.e., “I can’t do more to support you, because someone might think I am like you”). This destructive pattern slows progress for all LGBT+ people and continues to inflict harm on educators.

## **6. How are these competencies and skills best developed?**

The assumption that non-LGBT+ teachers will reflect on and change their practices rests on their willingness, experience, support, and sense of community. Evidence has repeatedly identified teachers’ fear and discomfort in addressing LGBT+ issues [22]. Teachers are unlikely to develop an awareness of their biases and transform into advocates for social justice unless they have been specifically prepared to find, build, and contribute to systems that challenge heteronormative, exclusionary, and biased practice. Educator preparation must build these skills and provide opportunities to apply and reflect upon them, as well as creating both safe spaces and communities of support.

Some teacher education programs have incorporated supportive practices such as addressing negative attitudes and stigma, providing diversity training, and including advocacy practices for LGBT+ students and families. However, EC teacher education is characterized by a lack of comprehensive and cohesive preparation in these areas of practice. In the U.S. in particular, traditional models of EC teacher education are largely seen as ineffective and inequitable. They have done little to address high teacher turnover rates associated with complex systemic issues, and indicators of quality in teaching are minimal and fail to capture skills relevant to addressing equity. Teachers report that they lack the knowledge and skill in addressing issues affecting the LGBT+ community, and that they fear the repercussions of becoming advocates. In addition, they cite their own biases and prejudiced beliefs as a justification for allowing inequity and harm to occur.

For preservice and practicing EC educators who are interested and committed to action, limited professional development is available. Other than where EC programs provide opportunities for collaboration around social justice issues (such as affinity groups devoted to LGBT+ equity) it is up to individual teachers to figure out for themselves how to proceed. Integrating new knowledge and practices requires that teachers collaborate to plan, learn from, and reflect on their work on their journey to developing expertise [23–25].

### **6.1 Collaborative, field-based teacher education as a context for effective and authentic preparation**

In order to consider how to most appropriately and effectively address areas such as those represented in this chapter, the limitations of traditional models (emphasizing university-based coursework and clinical hours followed by internships) must be acknowledged. Teaching expertise is most effectively built through

authentic experiences and interactions. Building intensified, purposeful field-based learning experiences has been repeatedly identified as a key strategy for preparing preservice educators to enter the field with the necessary resilience, knowledge, and skills to serve diverse children, families, and communities [23, 26]. Models which emphasize these experiences are viewed as both authentic and of greater value by educator-partners. Teacher education has, for years, been shifting in focus from university-based preparation of individual teachers with a goal of placement and retention in schools [23] to authentic preparation of engaged teachers with broad-ened impact on children, families, and communities [25].

Field-based teacher education programs transcend the notion of merely adding hours in the field through outcomes-based learning opportunities designed and sequenced so that students work alongside practicing teachers and teacher education faculty throughout their preparation, with opportunities to build teaching skills under their collaborative supervision [24]. These models are grounded in mutually beneficial partnerships between community organizations, schools, and teacher education programs. With opportunities for growth through authentic experiences and continual feedback and reflection, these models are much more likely to provide the types of field experiences required to support complex and challenging practices. Findings have demonstrated the initial effectiveness of field-based models in meeting the needs of students and community partners.

**Table 3** presents some of the key differences and challenges associated with models emphasizing traditional preparation and those embedded in fieldwork [25]:

Aspect of preparation	Challenge to transcend from traditional approaches	Solutions within field-based models
Purpose	Bridging university- based and inauthentic online learning and with work in availability-based clinical site placements	Integrate the content knowledge and practices associated with effective teaching and social justice in the field
Format	Foundational/methods courses and clinical experiences may be planned and delivered by different faculty or departments, leading to misalignment and discontinuity	Knowledge and skills organized developmentally; students move purposefully toward competency; preparation proceeds through sites chronologically along the developmental continuum of EC
Knowledge and skills	Meaningful yet manageable individual courses require isolation of various competencies	Preparation activities/ assignments respond to the complex and integrated needs of children and families in diverse community contexts
Faculty supervision	Isolated silos where university-based preparation and supervision of practice do not always reinforce one another	Faculty teach through direct and consistent involvement in EC programs; university-based work exists to serve field-based learning
Role of early childhood teachers	Practicing teachers have little voice in the design of teacher preparation programming and limited communication with university faculty	Teachers meet with faculty before, during, and after field-based learning, as well as modeling, supporting students, and providing regular feedback
Role of school-based administrators	School and center administrators have little to no contact with individual faculty members outside of approving candidate placements	Administrators identify opportunities for mutual benefit, support teachers and engage with students.

**Table 3.**  
*Challenges within traditional preparation models and potential field-based solutions.*



In field-based EC teacher education, pre-service teachers and EC faculty work together within the shared spaces of EC programs, emphasizing direct experiences over coursework and thus creating and requiring new roles for practicing teachers in collaborating with faculty and apprentice students [25]. Coursework is designed to support these experiences rather than the reverse, and course schedules are designed around the schedules and learning activities of partner schools. In addition, administrators who have traditionally been viewed as gatekeepers for students collaborate with faculty to open conversations about shared aims relative to equity.

Area	Strategies
Building community and relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Provide safe spaces and community-building events for LGBT+ students and faculty</li><li>• Form mentoring relationships and professional networking opportunities between students and practicing LGBT teachers/faculty</li><li>• Build community partnerships within which discussion about social justice issues can be normalized</li></ul>
Developing a social justice orientation to LGBT issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Meaningfully incorporate LGBT history and current local/national/global issues</li><li>• Utilize professional resources on equity and supporting LGBT families and teachers in EC</li><li>• Assist students in understanding the limitations and potential harm of a strict gender binary</li><li>• Host and provide professional development events inclusive of all students</li><li>• Support students' efforts at teaching social justice concepts and acting to produce change</li><li>• Engage in collaborative action research to address social justice issues affecting preservice teachers, families, and children</li></ul>
Setting up meaningful interaction with LGBT families	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Share research on family experiences with early childhood professionals</li><li>• Host panel discussions and other events during which students can meet LGBT parents/caregivers and learn about their journeys to parenting and experiences</li><li>• Action research in field sites designed to identify and address biased or exclusionary practices</li><li>• Collaborate with sites to plan events</li></ul>
Instilling the dispositions of reflection and continual growth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Empower teacher candidates to explain practices using evidence</li><li>• Utilize continual supervision, progress monitoring, peer and partner feedback to expand equitable and supportive practices and challenge bias</li></ul>
Learning and application of inclusive teaching practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Ensure that students understand both the advantages and the limitations of welcoming practices</li><li>• Support candidates in assessing and enhancing inclusiveness of classroom materials, displays, literature, and activities</li><li>• Teach and support competencies that build social competence, self-determination, and community</li><li>• Demonstrate and support the implementation of social justice foundations/curricula</li><li>• Ensure that activity/lesson planning tools and curricula</li><li>• Support the application of inclusive practices across the continuum of preparation</li></ul>

**Table 4.**  
*Practices supporting LGBT+ social justice within field-based teacher education models.*

## 6.2 LGBT-affirming practices within authentic models

Within field-based teacher education models practices for supporting LGBT+-led families, young children, and EC educators themselves may be organized around five priority areas. These are presented and described in **Table 4** above.

Within each of these types of experiences, EC teacher educators should aim to accomplish four interrelated goals: 1) challenge preconceptions, biases, complacency, and the myth of “neutrality” in teaching; 2) build knowledge; 3) deepen empathy and a commitment to change, and 4) practice applying emerging skills in settings where children and families are served. Teacher education faculty can also revisit the six questions regarding anti-bias practices within each area and at critical points across the preparation continuum.

## 7. Conclusions

Supporting families and family-centered programming/intervention are central to the professional identity of EC educators. As a field, however, EC education (including teacher education) has failed to thoroughly acknowledge, identify, or address the needs of LGBT+ families and gender-diverse children. The field continues to hold a position of implied acceptance toward bias and prejudice while simultaneously acknowledging that these cause harm. Injustice also continues toward LGBT+ educators, who have not been sufficiently supported or protected from ongoing discrimination and the persistence of misconceptions about their identities. Every EC educator carries the professional responsibility to advance equity and a unique opportunity to do so. A need exists for a vision of full LGBT+ social justice in EC teacher education. The dimensions of practice and resources shared here reflect attempts by educators around the world to increase inclusivity, improve knowledge and skills, reduce hesitancy or fear, and build community and support. These themes are critical to addressing serious gaps in educator preparation that undermine social justice for LGBT+ people. Comprehensive examination and redesign of EC teacher education activities is a critical step toward maximize opportunity and mitigating harm to LGBT+ teachers, gender diverse children and LGBT-led families so that equity is both envisioned and achieved in the remaining decades of this century.

## 8. Positionality and bias

While the content of this chapter was designed to further discussion about how EC education and the rights of LGBT+ people might be jointly addressed via teacher education, it is inevitable that the assumptions of the author and the limitations of the literature on these topics leave certain individuals and groups behind. This chapter's author is a white, cisgender gay male living in the United States where same-sex marriage is currently legal, residing in a state with progressive educational policies regarding the teaching of LGBT+ content, history, and issues. This scholarly work has been developed at a university with an inclusive nondiscrimination policy and explicit social justice mission. The information in this chapter inevitably reflects these contextual and cultural dimensions, and privileges and biases associated with them. The work here stems from a desire to understand and identify opportunities in early childhood education and teacher education; as a result, the ideas therein reflect and mirror the structures of these professions when those structures should indeed be further interrogated and challenged.

Nomenclature

LGBT+ is employed in this document to refer to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender populations as well as other identities. LGBT is admittedly an oversimplification; however, most closely represents the ways in which individuals were described in cited literature. Other more specific terms are used in the cases of studies focusing on narrower populations. The + was added to recognize that the content of this chapter may have utility or at least warrant discussion around other identity groups even though they are not represented in EC education literature.

Appendix: sample readings and resources for teacher educators

Supporting Lesbian and Gay-Led Families	U.S. Dept of Health and Human Services. <i>Partnering with Parents Who Identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and/or Transgender</i> . <a href="https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/publication/partnering-parents-who-identify-lesbian-gay-bisexual-andor-transgender">https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/publication/partnering-parents-who-identify-lesbian-gay-bisexual-andor-transgender</a> COLAGE: An organization supporting individuals with LGBT parents <a href="http://www.colage.org">www.colage.org</a>
Supporting Classroom Practices	<i>Children’s literature with diverse gender representation:</i> <i>Julian is a Mermaid by Jessica Love</i> <i>When Aidan Became a Brother by Kyle Lukoff</i> <i>Call Me Max by Kyle Lukoff</i> <i>Children’s literature with diverse family representation:</i> Additional texts representing diverse family structures and backgrounds are included in this resource from the U.S. Dept of Health and Human Services: <a href="https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/publication/childrens-books-include-diverse-family-structures">https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/publication/childrens-books-include-diverse-family-structures</a> <i>Children’s literature that serves to define LGBT concepts:</i> <i>Intersection Allies</i> by Chelsea Johnson, LaToya Council, and Carolyn Choi <i>Rainbow: A First Book of Pride</i> by Michael Genhart <i>Pride Colors</i> by Robin Stevenson <i>I Am Jazz</i> by Jessica Herthel & Jazz Jennings <i>Children’s literature that may inspire action and change</i> <i>Say Something</i> by Peter H Reynolds <i>Speak Up</i> by Miranda Paul
Resources for Supporting Broader Efforts	Teaching for Change: supporting social justice teaching <a href="https://www.teachingforchange.org/anti-bias-education">https://www.teachingforchange.org/anti-bias-education</a> Responding To Children’s Questions on LGBTQ Topics <a href="https://www.welcomingschools.org/resources/challenging-questions/">https://www.welcomingschools.org/resources/challenging-questions/</a> Sample Guidelines for Inclusive Professional Development: <a href="https://www.thehrcfoundation.org/professional-resources/all-children-all-families-lgbtq-inclusive-parent-preparation-training">https://www.thehrcfoundation.org/professional-resources/all-children-all-families-lgbtq-inclusive-parent-preparation-training</a> GLSEN (Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network) <a href="http://www.glsen.org">www.glsen.org</a> Equity resources from the National Association for the Education of Young Children <a href="https://www.naeyc.org/our-work/initiatives/equity">https://www.naeyc.org/our-work/initiatives/equity</a> AMAZE: provides resources and curriculum inclusive of EC <a href="http://www.amazeworks.org">www.amazeworks.org</a>

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