A Queer Literacy Framework Promoting (A)Gender and (A)Sexuality Self-Determination and Justice

Historiography: Building the Queer Literacy Framework

Gender and sexuality norms, conscribed under heteropatriarchy—a history we never made—have colonized and established unstable social and educational climates for the millennial generation of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans*, intersex, gender/sexual, gender creative, and questioning youth (LGBT*IAGCQM)(Miller). While many studies by GLSEN and their allies show that LGBT*IAGCQM students feel safer overall in schools than their LGBT*IAGCQ predecessors, due to shifts in national and state policies and amendments advocating for LGBT rights, state anti-bullying laws, increased numbers of Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs), and a wider social acceptance of LGBT*IAGCQ people, schools still struggle to normalize the inclusion of a LGBT*IAGCQ-positive curricula (Kosciw et al.; GLSEN, “States,” “Teaching”). This work addresses, through a queer literacy framework (QLF), how teachers can support students to understand and read (a)gender and (a)sexuality through a queer lens; how to rework social and classroom norms where bodies with differential realities in classrooms are legitimated and made legible to self and other; how to shift classroom contexts for reading (a)gender and (a)sexuality; and how to support classroom students toward personal, educational, and social legitimacy through understanding the value of (a)gender and (a)sexuality self-determination and (a)gender and (a)sexuality justice.

Adolescent culture today teaches us that some youth eschew gender and sexual labels. Faced with these realities, teachers are challenged to mediate literacy learning that affirms these differential realities in their classrooms. That said, how can teachers move beyond discussions relegated to only gender and sexuality and toward an understanding of a continuum that also includes the (a)gendered and (a)sexuality complexities students embody? How can we undo restrictively normative conceptions of sexual and gendered life, unhinging one from the other, and treat them as separate and distinct categories? Even more critical, how can we support preservice and inservice literacy teachers to develop and embody the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to help all students learn (NCATE) while simultaneously supporting them to remain open to redefinition and renegotiation when they come up against social limits?

For students to be self-determined-autonomous beings, they must be afforded favorable opportunities or have opportunities “worth wanting” (Howe) from within favorable social contexts (Leonardi and Saenz 204). When we consider that gender and sexuality categories, which predate our existence, typically shape how we think inwardly about ourselves and others, classrooms that fail to affirm students’ (a)gender and (a)sexual diversity contribute to students not wanting to connect or participate in learning. However, when favorable social conditions are present, students can experience an internal safety that has limitless possibility for students to be “read” or “made” legible both to themselves and others. Applying a QLF across literacy-focused classrooms, these questions, concerns, and conditions suggest that a reading of adolescence/ts that encourages (a)gender and
(a)sexuality self-determination can pivot toward (a)gendered and (a)sexuality justice. As adolescents come to see their realities reflected, affirmed, and made legible both through literacy practices in the classroom and society writ large, self-determination and, hence, a queer autonomy can be realized.

Key Terms for the QLF

*Queer* refers to a suspension of rigid gendered and sexual orientation categories (Jagose) and is underscored by attempts to interrogate and interrupt heteronormativity, reinforced by acknowledging diverse people across gender, sex, and desires, as well as to foreground the sexual (Blackburn and Clark). It embraces the freedom to move beyond, between, or even away from, yet even to later return to, myriad identity categories (Britzman). Queer is not relegated to LGBT*IAGCQ people, but is inclusive of any variety of experience that transcends what has been socially and politically accepted as normative categories for gender and sexual orientation. The addition of the lower case (a) in front of both gender and sexuality demonstrates an expanding understanding that some people do not ascribe to social definitions for either. (A)gender references those who may eschew gender and its biological, historical, and even social definitions, and (a)sexuality refers to those who are not sexual or who do not identify with a sexual orientation. Queer is therefore a continuum for (a)gendered and (a)sexuality expressions, as well as a political consciousness that calls for any form of self-expression. Self-determination is the right to make choices to self-identify in a way that authenticates one’s self-expression, and which has potential for the embodiment of self-acceptance. It is also a type of self-granted or inherited permission that can help one refute or rise above social critique. It presumes choice and rejects an imposition to be externally controlled, defined, or regulated. It presumes that humans are entitled to unsettle knowledge, which can generate new possibilities of legibility. It means that any form of (a)gender or (a)sexuality deserves the same inalienable rights and should be afforded the same dignities and protections. Such de facto rights thus grant individuals ways of intervening in and disrupting social and political processes because one’s discourse and ways of being as self-determined demonstrate placement as a viable stakeholder in society, revealing that no one personhood is of any more or less value than any other.

For this work, (a)gender and (a)sexuality justice and *queer autonomy* are interchangeable terms because they each ideologically reflect an actualized freedom of humans to be self-expressive without redress of social, institutional, or political violence. Were (a)gender and (a)sexuality justice actualized, homophobia, transphobia, gendertyping, and, hence, compulsory gender and sexuality labeling would be deemed as systemic forms of violence, which would incur appropriate consequences. In sum, teachers who take up a QLF can be agents for social, political, and personal transformations.

Uneven Bodied Realities

We are dependent on norms and external forces for our social acceptance and worth. These norms, which are put on psyches from birth, maintain status quo beliefs and make identities legible and readable. One’s legibility is therefore socially mediated and constituted. One cannot exist without drawing on the sociality of norms that precede one’s existence, so from inception, personhood is constituted outside the self, leaving little space for organic experiences of internal safety. Norms, which construct ways to read and understand the other, create uneven social realities, and one’s sense of internal safety (Leonardi and Saenz), or the ability to be a self-determined autonomous agent who determines how to live one’s life, is often at odds with competing societal norms.

Paradoxically, our personhood depends on recognition, which is connected to social norms. Yet, some of these conditions make life Unlivable. Sown into the fabric of heteropatriarchy, gender and sexuality norms have been relegated and naturalized (Butler 43) by restrictive discourse in particular, under laws and social mores. Judith Butler contends that people are regulated by gender norms, which make them credible and legible to each other. As Michel Foucault reminds us, the self constitutes itself in discourse with the assistance of another’s presence and speech. The force of knowing the true self lies in the rhetorical quality of the master’s discourse (Butler 163).

When we are not accepted, bodies are open to violence. Violence is thereby a symptom of
anxiety for those threatened by their inadequacies of not reading others’. Gender and sexuality, therefore, operate as regulatory norms to remind us that under patriarchal domination, gender is a symbolic signifier of the power of the external over the limits to self-determination, and subsequent self-worth.

To the detriment of those who do not ascribe to gender and sexuality norms and cannot reap social and political benefits, the norm operates to keep people from gender and sexual self-determination. The norm polices and inhibits internal freedom. This is not to say that those who live outside the norm and have come to accept their lived realities suffer, but it does suggest that there are often psychic, emotional, political, economic, and sometimes physical consequences. These consequences suggest that human value is context based, that one’s happiness and success is dependent on social legibility (Butler 32), and only certain lives are worthy of protection. In other words, violence—broadly speaking—is permissible and human worth is protected selectively under law.

The classroom space holds contemporaneous plurality and teachers have great agentive possibility to rupture dangerous dichotomies and myths about gender and sexuality while educating adolescence/ts about how all students (and others) can be rendered legible. Bodies are not reducible to language alone because language continuously emerges from bodies as individuals come to know themselves. Bodies thereby generate and invent new knowledges: “The body gives rise to language and that language carries bodily aims, and performs bodily deeds that are not always understood by those who use language to accomplish certain conscious aims” (Butler 199). How can a QLF subvert the master’s discourse and shift norms to affirm differential bodied realities?

**Theoretical Framework**

While nearly 30 years of research about the criticality for bridging LGBTQ issues (Quinn and Meiners) to school curriculum has been well documented, education remains without a large-scale study of how Schools of Education are preparing preservice teachers to address and incorporate LGBT*IAGCQ into PreK–12 classroom education. There is, however, a growing body of PreK–16 LGBT*IAGC research across various geographical contexts of pre-service teacher preparedness. These subfields include beliefs about LGBT*IAGCQ issues, teaching and queering disciplinary literacy, challenges to gender norms, preparing teachers to teach queer youth of color, and program effectiveness on preparing teachers to teach LGBT*IAGCQ issues. Yet, there is an egregious gap in the field about preservice teachers’ feelings of fitness/preparedness to teach and include LGBT*IAGCQ issues in their classrooms (Jennings; Quinn and Meiners). Therese Quinn and Erica Meiners found that 57 percent of preservice teachers needed more training to work effectively with LGBT*IAGCQ youth and 65 percent indicated they needed more specific education to address homosexuality. Similarly, James Thomas Sears found that prospective teachers were reticent about including LGB issues in the curriculum, with only 29 percent expressing that they would include issues related to homosexuality. These realities are resultant of the legacy of heteropatriarchy and its colonizing impact on social and educational policies and what Todd Jennings found—that by end of preservice coursework and as students enter into student teaching, LGBTQGV issues were nearly extant in coursework and discussions.

We do know that students’ identities are affected by teachers’ beliefs and perceptions of adolescence/ts (Hagood; Lesko; Mahiri; Miller, “[Dis] Embedding Gender”; Miller, Burns, and Johnson; Miller and Norris; Moje and Helden; Petrone and Lewis) and that LGBT*IAGCQ students carry vulnerabilities that make them susceptible to suicidal ideation, lowered GPA, bullying and harassment, lowered self-esteem, higher truancy and drop-out rates, and cognitive overloads (Kosciw et al.). Unfortunately, and more often than not, the classroom and its prevailing social environment, through lack of democratically favorable contexts of choice and adequate options (Moses), reinscribe heteronormative and gendertypical realities. For students who are LGBT*IAGCQ and have differential bodied realities, schools are not just unsafe, they are restrictive, constrictive, and reinforcers of multiple forms of systemic oppression.

For students, then, who are LGBT*IAGCQ or have differential bodied realities, they are highly attuned to prevailing gender and sexual norms and typically feel unsafe from the moment they cross
Onto school property. Gaps in codes of conduct, posters that do not reflect their realities, gendered and heteronormative school events, locker rooms, gendered bathrooms, notes home that reinforce heteronormative or gender norms, and a hetero, gender-normative, and undemocratic classroom curriculum all ignore their truths, deligitimize their lived realities, and absent a sense of communal belonging. Such macro-aggressions, day after day, and year after year, scream to students they don’t matter, and systemically destabilize their abilities to ever feel or experience safety at school, and even in their lives, writ large. These contextual realities, however, can be shifted by a deeper and more informed understanding of how heteronormativity and gender-normativity vulnerabilize students in our schools, which can lead toward contexts shifting.

Michele S. Moses draws from Will Kymlicka and Joseph Raz’s work in particular ways—integrating their ideas to support a conceptualization of personal autonomy and self-determination. Moses’s concept of “autonomy as self-determination” provides a framework to analyze race-conscious education policies that mitigate the racism and oppression often experienced by students of color in US educational institutions.1 Moses then conceptualizes the ideal or possible realization of self-determination through two specific conditions: favorable social contexts of choice and authenticity. Bethy Leonardi and Lauren Saenz2 take up these concepts and apply them to how queer youth who, as they experience internal safety, can become self-determined. Building from Moses, they proffer that internal safety requires “both autonomy and self-determination and that these components are contingent upon favorable social contexts of choice” (207). Drawing from the combined works of Moses and Leonardi and Saenz, I extend these concepts to queering literacy instruction.

For students to experience (a)gender and (a)sexuality self-determination, two conditions must be present: they must be afforded favorable social contexts and have authentic identity-affirming choices. In the classroom, optimal conditions that make self-determination possible include activities that foster independence, agency, integrity, an adequate range of options, and that authenticate cultural identity (Moses). When such conditions are normalized, students can develop internal safety. Internal safety galvanizes individuals to take risks and to be their authentic selves.

There are solutions to legitimating the realities of LGBT*IAGCQM students and students with differential bodied realities. Fostering conditions that can lead to internal safety, schools must strive to rid the environment of “unsafety” (e.g., all forms of bullying; see Miller, Burns, and Johnson) by eliminating all enactments of domination and oppression (Young) from the micro to the macro level across practices and policies. Schools predicated on democratic values that inspire independence, integrity, and an adequate range of options can ostensibly shift the prevailing schooling environment. The QLF was developed as a tool for that very purpose.

The QLF asserts that students must be allowed to self-identify however they choose and to be provided opportunities to see themselves reflected back in a positive manner. Such legitimacy can foster a student’s ability to experience internal safety. With these goals in mind, teachers must first help to unpack complexities of the language and the commitments in the QLF and build a continuum of understanding with their students about (a)gender and (a)sexuality and its intersectionalities. The QLF, therefore, introduced in the English language arts classroom (or any literacy classroom), attempts to disrupt, interrupt, and provide a potential intervention/prevention that can normalize and stabilize LGBT*IAGCQM students across PreK–12 school contexts.

By teaching students about how bodies are vulnerable to reinforcing hidden ideologies, LGBT*IAGCQ-inclusive curriculum can cut across literacy work and rupture oppressive narratives that can be recast into school and across community spaces. In so doing, adolescents and how we understand adolescence (adolescent/ce) has great potential to steward in a queer autonomy as people move across their lived experiences—which can promote social acceptance of (a)gendered and (a)sexuality justice.

Why a QLF Matters

The QLF is a critical interventionist and political strategy to challenge the taken-for-granted value of hegemonic demarcations of gender and sexuality assumed under patriarchy and hidden within and by curriculum. It is a strategy for literacy teachers
to reinscribe, instate, and affirm differential bodied realities and give voice to those who experience illegibility and delegitimazation. Because social norms have great structural power in shaping the lived realities of people and humans come to identify with a set of social conventions from birth (Miller, “Mythology of the Norm”), when gender and sexuality norms are fixed and rigid, people are made vulnerable to internalized and external oppressions. Wherefore social norms most often reinforce self-acceptance and can take a toll on one’s psyche by destroying self-love, acceptance, and internal safety, when one does not ascribe to binary gender or sexual orientation categories, the QLF as tool for legitimazation affirms all forms of (a)gender and (a)sexuality expression. A QLF matters because it positions teachers as agentive who, through their teaching, can affect and influence adolescence/ts to not only expand social norms but also to influence policy en route.

**Why Not Using a QLF Matters**

To not challenge current understandings of gender and sexuality norms, we are left with a myopic and vulnerabilized understanding of the evolving lived realities of people. If we ascribe to a recurrence of sameness, it creates a flattening and unidimensional perspective of gender and sexuality, while it continues to delegitimize those who do not ascribe to gender and sexuality norms by relegating them to ongoing inferior status. In the literacy classroom (and eventually for schools writ large), the absence of a QLF reinscribes gender and sexuality norms in schooling practices. It also enhances policies of exclusion for it obscures voices from rising and having power to change and shift social spaces. Most critically, its absence condones an anxiety that emerges from the unknown and that can produce and reproduce systemic forms of violence. Teachers who do not employ a QLF become co-conspirators in not only reproducing current understandings of gender and sexuality but also in reproducing rationales that can lead to gendered and sexual violence.

**The QLF**

The QLF is comprised of ten principles with ten subsequent commitments for educators who queer literacy practices. The framework is underscored by the notion that our lives have been structured through an inheritance of a political, gendered, economic, social, religious, linguistic system we never made and with indissoluble ties to heteropatriarchy. This is not to suggest that we should do away with (a)gender and (a)sexuality categories altogether, but that we pivot into a paradigm that refuses to close itself or be narrowly defined, and which strives to shift and expand norms that account for (a)gender and (a)sexuality complexities and differential bodied realities. In this space, and the yet to be defined, a QLF can shift norms that operationalize our lives.

The framework is intended to be an autonomous, ongoing, non-hierarchical tool within a teaching repertoire; it is not something someone does once and moves away from. Rather, the principles and commitments should work alongside other tools and perspectives within a teacher’s disposition. An intention of the framework is that it can be applied and taken up across multiple genres and disciplines within literacy acquisition, as it was not intended for any sole literacy purpose.

**Applications across the QLF**

When working across the framework, there are several nonnegotiables that must be presupposed and applied to each principle:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 1. Nonnegotiables</th>
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<tr>
<td>• We live in a time we never made, gender and sexuality norms predate our existence;</td>
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<td>• Non-gender and sexual “differences” have been around forever but norms operate to pathologize and delegitimize them;</td>
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<td>• Children’s self-determination is taken away early when gender and sexuality are inscribed onto them. Their bodies/minds become unknowing participants in a roulette of gender and sexuality norms;</td>
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<td>• Children have rights to their own (a)gender and (a)sexuality legibility;</td>
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<td>• Binary views on gender and sexuality are potentially damaging;</td>
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<td>• Gender must be dislodged/unhinged from sexuality;</td>
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<td>• Humans have agency;</td>
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<td>• We must move away from pathologizing beliefs that police humanity;</td>
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<tr>
<td>• We are all entitled to the same basic human rights; and</td>
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<td>• Life should be livable for all.</td>
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Concluding Comments for the Efficacy of the QLF

Teacher education and professional development for teachers that support (a)gender and (a)sexuality self-determination, and that remain open to evolving understandings of (a)gender and (a)sexuality, can generate a stabilized futurity for (a)gender and (a)sexuality justice; as individuals leave schools, they can remain autonomous and embodied by an internalized safety as they navigate their life experiences.

FIGURE 1. A Queer Literacy Framework Promoting (A)Gender and (A)Sexuality Self-Determination and Justice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principles</th>
<th>Commitments of Educators Who Queer Literacy</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Refrains from possible presumptions that students are heterosexual or ascribe to a gender</td>
<td>Educators who use queer literacy never presume that students are a particular sexual orientation or a gender.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Understands gender as a construct that has and continues to be affected by intersecting factors (e.g., social, historical, material, cultural, economic, religious)</td>
<td>Educators who employ queer literacy are committed to classroom activities that actively push back against gender constructs and provide opportunities to explore, engage, and understand how gender is constructed.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Recognizes that masculinity and femininity constructs are assigned to gender norms and are situationally performed</td>
<td>Educators who engage with queer literacy challenge gender norms and gender stereotypes and actively support students' various and multiple performances of gender.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Understands gender and sexuality as flexible</td>
<td>Educators who engage with queer literacy are mindful about how specific discourse(s) can reinforce gender and sexuality norms, and they purposefully demonstrate how gender and sexuality are fluid, or exist on a continuum, shifting over time and in different contexts.</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Opens up spaces for students to self-define with chosen (a)genders, (a)sexuality, (a)pronouns, or names</td>
<td>Educators who engage with queer literacy invite students to self-define and/or reject a chosen or preferred gender, sexual orientation, name, and/or pronoun.</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Engages in ongoing critique of how gender norms are reinforced in literature, media, technology, art, history, science, math, etc.</td>
<td>Educators who use queer literacy provide ongoing and deep discussions about how society is gendered and primarily heterosexual, and thus invite students to actively engage in analysis of cultural texts and disciplinary discourses.</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. Understands how Neoliberal principles reinforce and sustain compulsory heterosexism, which secures homophobia; how gendering secures bullying and transphobia; and how homonormativity placates a heterosexual political economy</td>
<td>Educators who employ queer literacy understand and investigate structural oppression and how heterosexism sustains (a)gendered violence, and generate meaningful opportunities for students to become embodied change agents and to be proactive against, or to not engage in, bullying behavior.</td>
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<td>8. Understands that (a)gender and (a)sexuality intersect with other identities (e.g., culture, language, age, religion, social class, body type, accent, height, ability, disability, national origin) that inform students' beliefs and, thereby, actions</td>
<td>Educators who engage with queer literacy do not essentialize students' identities, but recognize how intersections of culture, language, age, religion, social class, body type, accent, height, ability, disability, and national origin inform students' beliefs and, thereby, actions.</td>
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<tr>
<td>9. Advocates for equity across all categories of (a)gender and (a)sexuality orientations</td>
<td>Educators who employ queer literacy do not privilege one belief or stance, but advocate for equity across all categories of (a)gender and (a)sexuality orientations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Believes that students who identify on a continuum of gender and sexual minorities (GSM) deserve to learn in environments free of bullying and harassment</td>
<td>Educators who use queer literacy make their positions known, when first hired, to students, teachers, administrators, and school personnel and take a stance when any student is bullied or marginalized, whether explicitly or implicitly, for (a)gender or (a)sexuality orientation.</td>
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A hope for the QLF is for teacher education programs to take up this work and modify it to their social, racial, linguistic, and geographic contexts. As preservice teachers study, unpack, and practice the QLF, they will develop a repertoire of texts. As preservice teachers study, unpack, and practice the QLF across different disciplines, its effect can have real-time generative consequences for students, who, as stewards with expanding mindsets, can truly begin to create even more equitable and accepting spaces. As teachers’ (and others’) dispositions expand to support the well-being of students’ personal and social legiti-
macies through understanding their own and the value of others’ (a)gender and (a)sexuality rights to self-determination, (a)gender and (a)sexuality justice is not just possible, it can be realized.

Such a realization is happening in education at the policy level. The newly vetted Standard VI in secondary English teacher preparation, a standard for social justice, advocates for LGBT*1AGCQ topics, among other topics related to traditionally undervalued identities in the classroom (for specific lessons and assessments see Alsop and Miller; Miller, “Hungry Like the Wolf,” “Moving an Anti-bullying Stance,” “Text Complexity”; NCTE). This new anchor for social justice and subsequent studies can support teacher education programs to reflect on ways to integrate topics of (a)gender and (a)sexuality across all of teacher preparation. Over time, and as other disciplines work to develop academic standards along with queer-inclusive curriculum, and that affirm students’ differential bodied realities, and hence, self-determination, a queer autonomy has real time possibility for becoming a normalized and integrated curricular piece—and that would be the ultimate justice.

Acknowledgment
I want to thank Michele Moses for her thoughtful feedback and for deepening the QLF’s theoretical framework.

Notes
1. See Moses for a robust discussion of autonomy as self-determination, which is characterized by Raz’s concepts of integrity, independence, and adequate range of options, etc. Herein, these terms are thoroughly defined.
2. For an extended discussion on “internal safety,” see Leonardi and Saenz’s conceptualization.

Works Cited
Leonardi, Bethy, and Lauren Saenz. “Conceptualizing Safety from the Inside Out: Heteronormative Spaces and Their Effects on Students’ Sense of Self.” Gender and
A Queer Literacy Framework Promoting (A)Gender and (A)Sexuality Self-Determination and Justice


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READWRTETHINK CONNECTION

Teen sexuality may be a taboo subject, but teens want and need books that talk to them in clear and respectful language about sex. Tune in to this ReadWriteThink.org podcast episode to hear about an array of nonfiction books on teen sexuality—some about the mechanics of sex, some about the media and body image, some written by teens themselves. You’ll hear about books for older as well as younger readers, boys as well as girls, gay teens as well as those who are straight or questioning. Through them, teens and adults will find a place to get their questions answered, along with the opportunity to talk and think about sex in healthy and personally empowering ways. http://bit.ly/YxOOi0