When children find books that are meaningful to them, they read. Put the right books in the hands of the right children at the right time and magic happens: they find the information they need, they realize that others understand and possibly share their situation, they learn powerful life lessons and how to cope with difficult situations, and they discover that they are readers—that reading is valuable.

And yet, in too many instances and in spite of previously positive experiences with books, when students reach middle school, their reading atrophies (NEA, 2007; VanSlyke-Briggs, 2011). They look back fondly on the stories they enjoyed in elementary school, but this nostalgia doesn’t necessarily propel them toward the nearest library to find their next meaningful read. During their middle school years as they begin to transition from childhood to more adolescent and adult sensibilities, many students need books more than ever to help them navigate the social, emotional, and intellectual concerns of their particular age. They continue to require high-interest, engaging stories that motivate them to maintain the intense relationship they forged with books in elementary school. These stories can and should include LGBTQ characters and themes.

In their 2009 article in *English Journal*, Jen Curwood and Megan Schliesman (along with co-author Kathleen Horning) challenged English teachers to include LGBTQ texts in their instruction. Books with LGBTQ characters, argued Schliesman “aren’t about the other, they’re about us—all of us. They’re about teens walking down the hallway of every high school, and about people walking down the streets of every community” (p. 39). Curwood, Schliesman, and Horning aren’t alone in their appeal. Over the past ten years, there has been growing advocacy for greater visibility of LGBTQ-themed literature in secondary schools (Blackburn & Buckley, 2005; Daniel, 2007; Meixner, 2009; Ressler & Chase, 2009). The developing body of scholarship on this topic has provided numerous reasons for increased access to LGBTQ-themed literature, including school safety, curricular expansion, empathy and tolerance building, information availability, and literary merit. However, most of the research and, as a result, the recommendations have focused on high school contexts and texts/titles most appropriate for high school readers. Less discussion has zoomed in on the expanding availability of middle level LGBTQ-themed books, the specific needs of middle level students, and how making LGBTQ-themed middle level texts available to all students can continue to engage and motivate middle level readers. While Schliesman is right, books with LGBTQ characters are about teens, they are also more and more regularly books about preteens written especially for students of that age.

For teachers and students unfamiliar with this literature, there are many wonderful, age-appropriate LGBTQ-themed texts available to middle level readers, texts with engaging, complex tween and early teen protagonists who live with their diverse families in diverse communities, and who confront the concerns of adolescence with cour-
age, humor, and astonishing empathy. For middle level readers looking for just the right story, LGBTQ-themed texts might fill that need and motivate them to keep on reading. Here are just a few recommendations:

Life isn’t easy for eighth grader Nate Foster. Small for his age with a flair for the dramatic, Nate feels trapped in his small Pennsylvania home town. When his best friend Libby learns about auditions in New York City for a new musical, Nate decides to try out and secretly sets off on the adventure of a lifetime. As Nate learns to navigate a new city, he also encounters several important adults who help him think through questions he has about himself, his family, and his future. Nate isn’t perfect, but he is brave and vulnerable—a character equal parts humor and pathos.

It’s the summer between sixth and seventh grade, and June Farrell only wants one thing: to bake the best pie in the Champlain County Fair. What she doesn’t want is to deal with her mom’s fiancée, Eva, who’s just moved in, and the way her mom and Eva’s upcoming marriage is negatively affecting her life. She’s losing friends, her mom is losing customers, and Eva’s always there making things worse. As the tension escalates in town and at home, June has to decide what is right for her. Will she enter the pie contest? Can she accept Eva? To do both, June must overcome others’ prejudices as well as her own.

Families are complicated, especially when you live with three other adopted brothers. As twelve-year-old Sam debates whether or not it’s cool to play soccer and try out for his school’s production of *Annie*, his brothers Jax (age 10) and Eli (also age 10) struggle with their own school-related dilemmas. Frog (age 6) just wants to enjoy kindergarten. At mealtime and during back-to-school nights, family trips, holiday parties, and many soccer practices, Papa and Dad do their best to hold everything (and everyone) together. Each boy’s story is affecting as are their unique perspectives.

When seventh grader Lizzy McMann’s father announces he wants a divorce, leaving her and her mother both homeless and penniless, they are forced to move from Phoenix to upstate New York where they are taken in by Lizzy’s maternal grandparents. Once there, Lizzy befriends and develops feelings for her eighth-grade neighbor, the beautiful and dramatic Eva Singer. A rich, layered story about growing up that depicts relationships, friendships, and developing self-knowledge in complex, hopeful terms.

**Drama** by Raina Telgemeier (2012). New York: GRAPHIX (Scholastic).
Between her classes, her crushes, and designing a set for the upcoming school musical (including a cannon that may or may not fire), Callie has plenty to keep her occupied. Seventh grade is turning out to be busier, more fun, and definitely more complicated than she anticipated. A warm-hearted, beautifully drawn and colored graphic novel about finding your passion and following your heart.

Twelve-year-old Dennis loves soccer and fashion. When he’s presented with an opportunity to try on several of a friend’s dresses, he nervously does so and discovers he enjoys wearing them and can pass as a girl. Emboldened by this knowledge, he agrees to attend school disguised as a French foreign exchange student—which works,
until it doesn’t, and Dennis is expelled from the school and the soccer team. Fast-paced and often funny, Dennis’s dilemmas raise interesting, age-appropriate questions about masculinity, gender, and gender performance.

The House You Pass on the Way by Jacqueline Woodson (1997). New York: Puffin. Staggerlee is searching to understand why she often feels alone and, well, different. She knows her family is unusual and that her quiet, thoughtful reserve often sets her apart from her classmates. But lately, now that she’s fourteen, Staggerlee has been thinking about her feelings and a kiss she shared with her friend Hazel in sixth grade. When her cousin Tyler (Trout) comes for a summer visit, Staggerlee finally has someone to help her puzzle through her confusion. A tender, contemplative narrative.

References

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