First Comes Love, Then Comes Marriage (Equality): Welcoming Diverse Families in the Elementary Classroom

Selena E. Van Horn and Andrea M. Hawkman

The use of trade books to foster discussion of historical events and major Supreme Court decisions in the elementary classroom can serve as a powerful method through which elementary students can begin to see themselves as active contributors to the communities and worlds in which they live.1 When students learn how Supreme Court decisions affect their communities and lives, they become informed, agentic members of society. In this article and the accompanying lesson plan, we share ways to teach about Supreme Court decisions, specifically the decisions that have affected marriage equality, with the C3 Framework.2 Following the Inquiry Arc, we identify the steps to understanding and evaluating sources about marriage equality and the Supreme Court decisions that have affected it, support students in communicating their conclusions to their emerging questions, and describe ways to encourage and support students in social action.

Discussing Marriage Equality in the Elementary Classroom

While the term marriage equality is sometimes used interchangeably with same-sex marriage, we define marriage equality as providing equal rights to all married couples including same-sex, different-sex (heterosexual), and interracial couples (both same-sex and different-sex). When referring specifically to same-sex marriage, we will use the term same-sex. When referring to both same-sex and interracial couples, and their equal rights, we will use the term marriage equality. Defining these terms for students will be helpful when engaging in the lesson discussions of Supreme Court decisions.

Obergefell v. Hodges is a case about marriage equality. In June 2015, the Supreme Court delivered a 5-4 decision determining that the Fourteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution requires states to issue marriage licenses to same-sex couples and recognize lawfully conducted marriages between same-sex couples performed in other states. The Obergefell v. Hodges case is the most recent, but not the only Supreme Court decision that attends to marriage equality. Nearly 50 years earlier, in 1967, the Supreme Court decided in Loving v. Virginia that states could not prohibit interracial [different-sex] marriage.

In Social Education, Middleton details a thorough process with which secondary social studies teachers can explore the complexities of Supreme Court decisions with their students.3 Although this process is quite helpful for middle and high school teachers, here we frame the discussion of Obergefell v. Hodges differently as to assist students in understanding how this major decision disseminated by the Court relates to their lives and communities. Avery and Barton note that while social studies in the upper elementary grades tend to separate the disciplines of social studies (e.g., history, geography, economics), early elementary grades tend to focus on the community and social life.4 We have designed a lesson to connect to both historical and current Supreme Court decisions regarding marriage equality, while also connecting those decisions to students’ communities and social life. By historicizing marriage equality to encompass both the Loving v. Virginia and Obergefell v. Hodges decisions, we provide evidence that at times Supreme Court decisions have been situated in controversy, but have brought forth significant advances for civil rights in the United States. Additionally, the inclusion of lessons on marriage equality and families with same-sex parents is about creating welcoming spaces and understanding of equality.5

The State of California’s Fair, Accurate, Inclusive, and Respectful (FAIR) Education Act calls upon educators to teach about the contributions Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and/or Queer+ (LGBTQ+) people have made throughout
History.\textsuperscript{6} In Illinois, the state senate voted to require public schools to teach about LGBTQ+ history.\textsuperscript{7} In Massachusetts, an LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum is slated to be released by the end of 2018.\textsuperscript{8} After reviewing the state of LGBTQ+ inclusion in K-12 curriculum across the United States, Cruz and Bailey posited, “from a purely academic perspective, excluding LGBTQ+ history and issues is simply inaccurate.”\textsuperscript{9} Hess writes that avoiding such issues in classroom discussions “deprives students of the opportunity to prepare to participate in the national debate over one of the most significant civil rights issues of our time.”\textsuperscript{10} The lesson plan discussed in this article provides an example of how elementary teachers can, through thoughtful exploration of this important issue, push through feelings of resistance they may encounter and provide historically accurate information and significant support for students’ academic and personal growth.

**Selecting Trade Books on Marriage Equality**

Well-chosen trade books have the ability to bring history and social issues to life. According to Brophy and Alleman, the incorporation of children’s literature adds enrichment to elementary social studies.\textsuperscript{11} Through students’ connections to stories, teachers can share the importance and power of the U.S. Supreme Court and their rulings. Ackerman, Howson, and Mulrey use trade books that connect to nonfiction stories, noting, “the inquiry process of looking for sources and analyzing content leads to the development of critical analysis.”\textsuperscript{12} The following lesson includes *The Case for Loving*, a picture book, about the true story of Mildred and Richard Loving, an interracial couple who were the plaintiffs in the 1967 Supreme Court case of *Loving v. Virginia*.\textsuperscript{13}

Not all trade books must connect to a nonfiction story in order to teach about issues in social studies. There are appropriate works of fiction as well. Tschida and Brown Buchanan traced the work of one kindergarten teacher in North Carolina that utilized an inclusive fiction text set to expand students’ understanding of diverse family compositions and experiences.\textsuperscript{14} In Missouri, Selena facilitated an afterschool book club focused on social justice topics with second-graders in Missouri.\textsuperscript{15} In this study, some students were new to the topic of same-sex parents, while others had friends and family members who identified as LGBTQ+ or knew of children with same-sex parents. The students asked questions and engaged in meaningful discussions that grew deeper with time. One question, “How do you have two moms?” opened space for students to share their own understandings and questions. After reading *Who’s in a Family* (a fictional about multiple family structures including different-sex, same-sex, and single parents), one student asked if one of the moms was the “real mom” and if the other was a “stepmom.”\textsuperscript{16} Selena invited students to offer multiple perspectives, as some of the book club members had “real moms and stepmoms.” She then told them the two moms in the book were “both the real moms.” Some students chimed in by mentioning television shows they had watched that had same-sex parents. “Yeah, they [fell] in love and they got married, so they had kids” (see p. 8 of note 5). Other students mentioned that they had classmates who had same-sex parents.

Selena’s study with the book club showed the value of guiding students through their questions about same-sex parents and diverse family structures, as well as the importance of continued on page 29
**Introduction to the Lesson**

In order to teach about the Supreme Court decisions on marriage equality, teachers will need to understand what students already know, what questions they may have, and potential areas for exploration. Some students may have questions about what same-sex marriage or marriage equality means, but others may already be familiar with the terms and have friends, or family members, or both who identify as LGBTQ+. For example, in Utah, Andrea's two-year-old daughter, Marin, often exclaims proudly to her daycare classmates, “I have two moms!” when families are discussed during circle time. Marin's classmates and teachers also recognize both of her moms when one, or both, pick her up from school each day.

After teachers identify their elementary students' background knowledge, experiences, and questions, students can examine the two Supreme Court decisions that affected the status of marriage equality in the United States. Students can be asked how lives are different now that same-sex couples are legally able to marry, just as they can reflect on how lives were different after interracial marriage became legal.

Finally, after a thorough discussion of the historic trajectory of marriage equality, students can develop and engage in social action around creating inclusive and welcoming spaces for all families in their school and community. The action component of the lesson intends to provide space for students to become active members of their community. They are able to teach others about what they learned and understand that all members of our communities are affected by Supreme Court decisions.

**Compelling Question**

“How do Supreme Court decisions impact our community and our lives?”

**C3 Framework Focus Indicators**

- D1.2.3-5. Identify disciplinary concepts and ideas associated with a compelling question that are open to different interpretations.


- D2. His.12.3-5. Generate questions about multiple historical sources and their relationships to particular historical events and developments.

- D3.4.3-5. Use evidence to develop claims in response to compelling questions.

- D4.3.3-5. Present a summary of arguments and explanations to others outside the classroom using print and oral technologies (e.g., posters, essays, letters, debates, speeches, and reports) and digital technologies (e.g., Internet, social media, and digital documentary).

**Developing Questions and Planning Inquiries**

The compelling question “How do Supreme Court decisions impact our community and our lives?” represents a complex issue for students to consider. To gain insight into students’ prior knowledge, begin by exploring responses to a series of supporting questions. Use chart paper to record student responses and keep record of additional supporting questions they generate through the opening discussion.

- What are the responsibilities of the Supreme Court?

- What do you know about the Supreme Court and its decisions?

- What impact do Supreme Court decisions have on your life?

Based on their responses to these questions, guide students to the conclusion that the Supreme Court influences their lives in a variety of ways. Upon examining prior knowledge, students may need a primer activity exploring the functions of the Supreme Court using an infographic from usa.gov or accessing Congress for Kids, a student-friendly website with information about the Supreme Court. In this lesson, however, focus attention on one area in which the Supreme Court influences society, that is, through examining cases related to marriage equality. Focus the discussion with the following supporting questions:

- What was the Supreme Court’s decision in the *Loving v. Virginia* case?
What was the Supreme Court’s decision in the *Obergefell v. Hodges* case?

What does marriage equality mean?

**Historicizing Marriage Equality**

In order to thoughtfully respond to the compelling question, students must develop historical knowledge about the two Supreme Court decisions at the center of this lesson. Several trade books associated with marriage equality are key resources. As you begin reading aloud *The Case for Loving: The Fight for Interracial Marriage*, draw students in with the opening line, “Imagine not being able to marry the person you loved.”

Pause to allow students time to consider their responses to this statement. To contextualize this question for students in a developmentally appropriate way, ask them to “imagine if members of our families or communities could not marry the person they love.” Throughout the lesson, students can track their own thinking and emerging questions (Handout, p. 32) for consideration later in the lesson.

Stop periodically throughout the reading to ask students to reflect on how their community might be different today if interracial couples could not marry. Add new insights and questions to the handout section on *Loving v. Virginia* and check for understanding about the Supreme Court with the following supporting questions:

- What was the decision of the Supreme Court in the *Loving v. Virginia* case?
- How did this decision affect the Loving family?
- How did this decision affect other interracial couples?

After discussing how this decision affected interracial couples at that moment in history, invite students to reflect on interracial marriage today, 50 years later. Additional supporting questions include:

- How does the Supreme Court decision in the *Loving v. Virginia* case still affect our community and lives today?
- How might our communities be different if interracial couples could not marry or be in relationships?
- What challenges do we still face in society despite the Supreme Court decision?
• With the whole class, create descriptions of the decisions in both *Loving v. Virginia* and *Obergefell v. Hodges*.

• Gather a list of sources that students have found helpful.

• Create a timeline of key events, Supreme Court decisions, and publication dates for the sources.

As students evaluate sources, they can use the evidence to support their emerging answers to the compelling question “How do Supreme Court decisions impact our community and our lives?” The whole-group discussion and gathering of sources will allow students to review information they may have missed, make clear connections among the sources, and allow the teacher to clear up any misconceptions before students communicate their conclusions. Although student responses will vary, be mindful of fostering dialogue that is advocacy-oriented and demonstrates inclusivity.

**Dimension 4: Communicating Conclusions and Taking Informed Action**

In the final dimension of the Inquiry Arc, students can take informed action based on their conclusions and answers to the compelling question. Invite and encourage this action through the following activities. First, share a trade book where the main character has same-sex parents. *Stella Brings the Family*, similar to *Asha’s Mums*, is the story of a student with same-sex parents who is confronted with issues involving a school event. This read will allow students to synthesize what they have learned throughout the lesson and apply their conclusions to a new situation.

*Asha’s Mums*, while including characters of diverse racial, ethnic, and sexual identities, was published in 1990, more than two decades before the 2015 Supreme Court ruling that affirmed same-sex marriage. For this reason, the students and teacher in the story provide more resistance to the fact of Asha having two moms. *Stella Brings the Family* was published in May of 2015, just before the Supreme Court decision on same-sex marriage, and its characters are much more inclusive and accepting of a different family structure (Stella’s two dads) than were some characters in the earlier book. If students do not call attention to this difference on their own, ask the following questions:

- When was each book first published?

- Where on our timeline (whole-class chart) do we place these two publication dates?

- How might the time period in which a work was published play a role in how the authors portray the characters?

- How might Asha’s teacher and classmates act differently now that the Supreme Court has ruled in favor of marriage equality?

Through these questions and class discussion, students are able to take the information they have learned throughout the lesson, connect it to the sources they have evaluated, and communicate their conclusions to each other.

Next, moving to social action, students can work in partners or small groups to research the effects of the *Obergefell v. Hodges* decision in their local community. Students will teach others about how their community is or could be more inclusive of diverse families. After students have completed their research, facilitate a dialogue around specific individual and group action plans. Students could then present a summary of findings and explanations to a wider community, using print and oral technologies (e.g., posters, essays, letters, debates, speeches, and reports) and digital technologies (e.g., social media or video documentary).

Throughout the lesson, students evaluate sources seeking answers for their emergent questions. When invited to take part in social action, some students may be interested in responding differently than others. Encourage students to take on individual social actions in addition to the whole-group actions. Here we suggest some whole-class projects.

**Analyzing Parent Permission/Student Administration Forms**

Some students (and teachers) may not have considered the ways official school forms can be limiting and/or discriminating to diverse families. In *Asha’s Mums*, students learn that parent permission forms may ask for the names of, and information from, a mom and a dad, thereby restricting parent roles and excluding families that do not fit within this heteronormative paradigm. For this whole-class social action, students will analyze your school’s/district’s parent permission forms (e.g. for field trips) and student admission forms (e.g. to enroll students in school). As a group, you can review the language that is used to describe parents. Below are some questions to ask:

- What are the titles for parents? (e.g. Mother/Father,
Mom/Dad, Parent or Guardian, etc.)

• Do the forms limit/restrict the number of parents (e.g. only two parents, excluding step-parents)?

• Do the forms assume parent roles (a label for mom and dad), or do they ask for parents to identify their roles (parents or guardians fill in the blanks to describe their roles)?

After students analyze the current forms used by your school/district, they can write a letter(s) to the superintendent, school board, or equivalent administrators about their findings. If students find that the current forms are limiting, they can share their findings, back them up with evidence from the sources they have reviewed throughout the lesson, and request that revisions be made to the documents. They can even create their own forms and/or revisions to the current forms to show the possibilities. If students find that the current forms are already inclusive, they can write a letter detailing the importance of the inclusion, supported by evidence from their sources, and thank the administrators for continuing to support an inclusive form. This activity supports and encourages students to take what they have learned and apply it to social action, seeing the possible and actual outcomes of their actions.

Multimedia Presentations of Diverse Families

Students can take social actions by creating mini-documentaries or public service announcements about how Supreme Court decisions affect our lives, and about the value of diverse and inclusive communities. They can create videos about the diverse families of the students in the classroom and about welcoming more diversity to their school. Students can then present their videos to their classmates or school community in support of creating a more welcoming and inclusive environment.

The Inquiry Arc is completed when students have had the opportunity to present their explanations and answers to the compelling question How do Supreme Court decisions impact our community and our lives? They will see that societal changes and social action are not achieved by one individual, but by many people over time.

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WELCOMING DIVERSE FAMILIES

addressing misconceptions. Across these studies, evidence indicates that elementary teachers and students can explore issues related to diverse families, marriage equality, and civil rights. In contrast, omitting trade books and discussions of LGBTQ+ people and marriage equality in general denies the multiple experiences of our students.

Sharing trade books on marriage equality—and making specific time to discuss same-sex parents and the challenges characters face—can be woven into the teaching of Obergefell v. Hodges. In addition to learning that same-sex marriages are now recognized, accepted, and protected legally, students can share multiple perspectives of what the ruling means for their home state and city. Through the Inquiry Arc, teachers can support students’ questions and even challenge their thinking. Just as teachers challenge students to understand the Brown v Board of Education decision did not end racism, teachers can encourage students to explore how the Obergefell v. Hodges decision did not end prejudices toward same-sex couples or their families. Opening discussions about same-sex marriage and LGBTQ+ inclusion starts a dialogue that broadens the understanding of family. If this topic has not been discussed in classrooms yet, the Supreme Court ruling provides a reason to begin including it in our elementary curriculum.

Conclusion

As educators invested in LGBTQ+ teaching and justice, we recognize that talking with young students about marriage equality may be a challenging undertaking. We would be remiss not to acknowledge that teaching has always been and continues to be a political endeavor. The decisions we make to include and exclude content in our classroom impact our students’ understanding of themselves and society. However, just because a task may be difficult, teachers should not shy away from engaging students in such investigations. (Classroom and Background Resources, p. 31) For readers who are new to teaching about marriage equality, the following are a few ways to become familiar with the topic and prepare for this lesson: (1) read more about how other teachers and researchers have engaged with these topics and questions; (2) keep an open line of communication with parents at all times (some may even be interested in sharing their knowledge and experiences); and (3) address the questions of parents, colleagues, and administrators up front.

Throughout this article, we referred to the many ways LGBTQ+ histories, marriage equality, and the intersecting identities of people are being taught in states with diverse regions and political affiliations. Teachers who have been looking for space and support to include LGBTQ+ identities and
discussions of marriage equality in their lessons may draw on landmark Supreme Court decisions as a foundation for including diverse identities, experiences, and knowledge in their social studies curriculum.

Engaging students in dialogue about how Supreme Court decisions affect our communities and lives will help them understand the historical and social implications of marriage equality. In addition, these discussions are essential to assisting students in understanding the world in which they live. Using trade books to engage elementary social studies students in a dialogue about the impact of the Loving v. Virginia and Obergefell v. Hodges decisions is a powerful instructional activity to facilitate the development of students’ individual and community identities as well as calls to social action.

![Image](image.jpg)

**Notes**

6. Katy Steinmetz, “California is Adopting LGBT-Inclusive History Textbooks. It’s the Latest Chapter in a Centuries-Long Fight,” *TIME* (November 14, 2017), time.com/5022698/california-history-lgbt-textbooks-curriculum. The plus (+) sign in LGBTQ+ indicates the ever-changing and numerous gender and sexual identities. There is no singular authority on defining these identities, but here are a few resources to support our learning and understanding: “Ready, Set, Respect!”
20. Heteronormativity is the socially constructed belief in dichotomous and complementary categories (i.e. female/male, woman/man, masculine/feminine). With this understanding, a heteronormative view of parenting restricts roles to only that of mother and father, ignoring the many families with two moms or two dads (i.e. same-sex and/or same-gender parents). M. Warner, *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press) 1993; N. Sullivan, *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory* (New York: New York University Press, 2003).

**Classroom and Background Resources, and a Handout, are on the following pages.**

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Trade Books on Marriage Equality


Trade Books on The Supreme Court


Websites on The Supreme Court

ITT Chicago-Kent College of Law. (n.d.). www.oyez.org Oyez (pronounced oh-yay), a free law project at Chicago-Kent, is a multimedia archive devoted to making the Supreme Court of the United States accessible to everyone.


Background Sources for Teachers

Loving v. Virginia


Obergefell v. Hodges


Additional Resources


The Respect For All Project (2013), groundspark.org/respect-for-all.

Track Your Thinking on Marriage Equality

Directions: Use this graphic organizer to track your thinking throughout the lesson.

*Loving v. Virginia*
What sources have been helpful to you?
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_________________________________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________________________________
What new information did you learn from the sources?
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What new questions do you have?
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*Obergefell v. Hodges*
What sources have been helpful to you?
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