PLAYING WITH GENDER:
TAKING UP AND CHALLENGING HETERONORMATIVITY IN AN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION SETTING

by

Lisa-Marie Gagliardi RECE
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ABSTRACT

This study challenges a common view that sexualities and the topic of sexuality are irrelevant and inappropriate to children's lives. In early childhood education, sexuality is generally viewed as an innate developmental experience that evolves over time as children grows. Framed in a postmodernist and queer perspective, this study upholds sexuality as a social construct influenced by cultural and societal values. This study examines how heteronormativity is discursively constructed in an early childhood education setting. Participant observation was employed and video recorded with ten kindergarten children and their early childhood educators. First, the children were found to employ a number of discourses, including: "hair;" "clothes;" "colours;" "masculinity as the rejection of femininity;" "superhero" and "princess play." Secondly, the findings suggest that play is a site for children to transgress hegemonic discourses regarding genders and sexualities. Thirdly, the early childhood educator was found to be a critical role in this transgressive play by posing questions and problematizing children's heteronormative assumptions.

Keywords: heteronormativity; childhood sexuality; sexualities; early childhood education; sexual citizenship; access to knowledge

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Introduction

Statement of the Issue

For a variety of moral and cultural reasons, childhood sexualities is a contentious topic and not surprisingly, most adults who work with children seem to tiptoe around the subject with caution. It is often assumed that childhood is without sexuality and rather, it is something children develop along their progression toward adulthood. Because the topic of childhood sexualities is riddled with taboo in Western societies (Robinson, 2005), children are expected to know very little about sexualities, let alone their own (constructed) sexual identities. The view that sexualities and the topic of sexuality are irrelevant and "developmentally inappropriate" to children's lives is problematic on a number of counts, especially since a growing number of studies have demonstrated the ways in which sexualities are very much a part of children's lives (i.e. Blaise, 2010; Gunn, 2011; Robinson, 2014; 2012; 2008; 2005; Robinson & Davies, 2010; 2008; Surtees & Gunn, 2010; Wohlwend, 2010, among others). Nevertheless, Bancroft, Herbenick & Reynolds (2003) make note of the minimal research done on basic childhood sexualities, which has led to a pervasive denial of the existence of 'normal' childhood sexual expression. This avoidance pervades social science research in general.

Corteen (2011) acknowledges the methodological, functional and moral quandaries that contribute to the limited understanding of childhood sexualities. For example, research studies in the area of childhood sexualities focus predominantly on child sexual abuse and violence (Corteen, 2011). This in turn, contributes to the narrow view regarding this topic; to accept that sexuality should only be of concern to children in the realm of abuse and violence illustrating the notion that sexuality is not an inherent aspect of children's identities. Rather, in this context, sexuality is something that happens *to* children and, and, therefore, children must be shielded

from it until they reach the 'appropriate' age of maturity. This divider between adulthood and childhood implies the children's experiences of sexuality are premature imitations of mature adult sexuality, which, in effect erases and delegitimizes the experience of childhood sexuality (Angelides, 2004). Thus, the ways in which childhood sexualities tend to be understood in both society and the social sciences includes the view that children are naturally sexually innocent and in need of adult protection. A second view refers to children as naturally sexual and in need of adult support to guide their sexual development (Corteen, 2011). In other words, in this second view, sexuality is viewed as an innate, developmental experience that evolves over time as a child grows.

This study adopts a third view, in line with a postmodernist perspective, that sexuality is socially constructed through cultural and societal values (Butler, 1990; 1994). Sexuality is an aspect of our (constructed) identities that requires a critical examination of how such identities are regulated to favour hegemonic expectations. This study defines childhood sexualities as all aspects of sexual expression in childhood, which includes talk, play, actions and interactions. This definition allows for fluid representations of sexualities, in that sexual expressions become less identifiable categories and rather they are reflective of an individual's daily-lived experience. Similarly, sexual identity is also referred to in terms of the experience of identity rather than the stability of identity as a fixed state of being; it is a socially constructed experience. According to postmodernist theories, identities are not permanent and stable, but rather temporary social positions that individuals may flexibly occupy (Gavey, 1989). This is in contrast with a modernist developmentalist view, which holds that children develop their sexuality over time.

By defining sexuality and sexual identities as a social construct in this study, I am taking up the postmodernist position that identity is not a fixed state of being. From this postmodernist perspective, children move in and out of subject positions and socially constructed identities. Such a fluid definition of sexuality contradicts heteronormative constructions that exist in our society and early childhood education settings in particular (Robinson, 2008).

Heteronormativity is the normalization of heterosexuality and heterosexual expectations (Gunn, 2011; Robinson, 2005; Surtees & Gunn, 2010). Heteronormativity is considered an invisible, hegemonic process in early childhood education and society at large (Gunn, 2011). In order to acknowledge heteronormative practices, the dominant discourses of the (sexually) innocent child and childhood innocence must be acknowledged as socially constructed rather than as an innate quality of children or childhood. The notion of childhood innocence sets an important backdrop for discussing childhood sexualities as they are constructed in early childhood education settings.

Research Question

When sexuality is constructed to align with cultural norms, oppression for non-conforming groups and individual identities can occur. Early childhood education settings are the focus of this study since educational institutions are recognized in postmodernist theories as regulators and enforcers of social expectations (Foucault, 1979). In particular, early childhood educators (ECEs) play a large role in the construction of children's sexual identities (Robinson, 2014). How they do so, then, is critical. The limited literature on the construction of children's sexual identities reveals educational institutions to be among primary regulators of heteronormative sexual behaviours (Garcia & Slesaransky-Poe, 2010; Myers & Raymond, 2010; Robinson, 2013).

Thus, the research question driving this study is as follows: "How are gender and sexuality, and in particular, heteronormativity (the construction of heterosexual dominance), constructed by children and ECEs in an early childhood education setting?" It is anticipated this study will make a contribution to the limited knowledge about the construction of children's genders, sexualities and sexual identities. Building on the study's findings, recommendations for practice and future research will be suggested.

Conceptual and Theoretical Frameworks

This study is framed using postmodernist and queer theory lens, and values the reconceptualist view of children, along with the view of children taken up in the 'new' sociology of childhood. The social constructionist perspective has largely informed my view of children. As an ECE, I value each child as an individual with unique experiences and as a flexible occupier of fluctuating subject positions. I believe that this conceptualization of children and childhoods simultaneously demands the consideration of children as competent, whole and creative agents of change. From this perspective, children experience and co-construct discourses and simultaneously exists within them (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 2013), rather than the grouping all children into one category defined by innocence, lack of knowledge and capacity to understand various social discourses, This study delves into this perspective by exploring how children co-construct and exist within heteronormative discourses in early childhood education.

A postmodernist research paradigm creates opportunities for children to step outside of 'the child' box of definitions. In this space, the reconceptualization of children emerges. Utilizing the reconceptualization of childhood as an overarching perspective in this study, a child may be viewed a competent citizen flexibly occupying subject positions across various spans of

time and context. By individualizing children, their experiences become central to discussion and, , broader definitions become insufficient. In terms of sexuality, a reconceptualist perspective recognizes the individual nature of development and challenges sexuality as a universal experience. How one child experiences sexuality differs from other children and vice versa. It becomes necessary to erase the view of *the* child and childhood, and replace it with children and childhoods (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 2013). Children are then located as occupiers of subject positions and, therefore, political citizens that challenge socially constructed power dynamics by hegemonic regulators (Robinson, 2012).

Relevant to this study is the 'new' sociology of childhood, which upholds the political position of children as experts on their own lives (Dockett, Einarsdottir, & Perry, 2005; Mayall, 2013). The 'new' sociology of childhood challenges the view that children grow in a world separate from the political and social discourses that concern adults, as though children exist outside of the public social world (Mayall, 2001). Maintaining the notion that particular discourses do not concern and are, therefore, irrelevant to children's lives, provokes the idea that children must be protected from these discourses as a means of preserving childhood. The 'new' sociology of childhood and the reconceptualization of childhood offer similar views in that both take children seriously and consider the political capacity each child embodies as a person deserving of full citizenship (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 2013; Mayall, 2001). In this study, access to knowledge is the vehicle through which children obtain and partake in sexual citizenship for their own empowerment.

Postmodernist and queer theories focus on and criticize taken-for-granted assumptions of gender and sexuality and sex (Blaise, 2009). According to postmodernist queer theory, gender is social, cultural and learned, and expressed through gender performances (Butler, 1990; 1994).

Butler defines *performativity* as "the vehicle through which ontological effects are established" (1994, p. 33). In other words, how one performs gender is how one socially creates gender and makes it known to others. In their ground breaking article, West and Zimmerman (2002) refer to the fulfillment of these social norms as *doing* gender rather than *being* a gender. Doing gender implies adhering to socially ascribed performances involving ideological expectations of masculine and feminine ideals, which are put forth as natural ways of being. To understand gender as a process of doing rather than innate being highlights the significance of exploring social forces that regulate gender expectations and their impact. This study, therefore, focuses on these representations of gender through children's play in an early childhood education setting.

Queer theory considers both sexuality and gender to be closely tied social constructions (Butler, 1990). The construction of the mutually exclusive gender binary is related to and conflated with the distinction between biological sex (male and female). Gender constructions within the gender binary infer sexuality as the prospect of desiring the opposite sex is implicit in the construction of mutually exclusive gender roles. In this sense, sexuality also becomes a performance adhering to gender constructions (Butler, 1990). Viewing sexuality as a social construction highlights the ideological assumption that heterosexuality is a normative state from which all others deviate. Further, it is assumed to be naturally linked to sex, which also informs gender. Instead, a more comprehensive definition of sexuality maintains the perspective that sexuality is an aspect of our subject positions and fluid identities much like class, ethnicity and gender (Robinson & Davies, 2008; Robinson, 2008). As a social construction reliant on social performances, one's sexuality may change over time and context rather than represent a permanent, fixed state of being.

The assumption that gender is naturally constructed in this female-male binary leads to *heteronormativity* - the taken-for-granted normalization of heterosexuality. Queer theory acknowledges and questions heteronormativity, and in doing so highlights how heteronormative practices "…have become instruments of power, positioning heterosexual relationships as the most valued and acceptable form of sexuality" (Blaise, 2009, p. 453). These assumptions are problematic as heteronormativity delegitimizes alternate sexualities (Robinson, 2014).

In summary, the postmodern and queer theoretical frameworks driving this study recognize that a child's gender and sexuality are flexible and fluid, and thus malleable depending on time and context. In particular, my data collection focused on children's performances of sexualities, and my analysis of the data also utilizes these theoretical frameworks through a discourse analysis of my observations regarding gender and sexual expressions.

Literature review

This literature review provides an overview of recent social science research on the topic of childhood sexualities in early childhood education. The review will discuss the distinction between gender and sexuality in the context of childhood. By deconstructing the concepts of gender and sexuality and recognizing them as separate and socially constructed, the contingent assumptions rooted in heteronormativity become evident and consequently, reveal the process of *heterosexualization*. This review will also outline the importance of studying children's sexuality from the lens of queer theory and explore recent studies on heteronormativity in early childhood education.

Similar to the 'new' sociology of childhood, studies in the area of childhood sexualities have found the traditional developmental perspective that pervades early childhood studies

contributes to children's misinformation and limited access to sexual knowledge (i.e. Blaise, 2010; Blaise, 2009; Janmohamed, 2010; Robinson, 2014). Traditional developmental theories are contrasted with the reconceptualization of childhood and the 'new' sociology of childhood, and these two perspectives are discussed in relation to early childhood education practices.

Childhood, Sexuality, and Gender: Applying Queer Theory to Early Childhood

Butler's (1994) concept of performativity refers to the notion that children actively take part in the *gendering process* – the process through which children learn their socially ascribed gender, by repetitively performing their gender. Children are often influenced by external factors including parents and teachers, the media, schooling and gender role stereotypes. Therefore, what it means to be feminine and masculine is constructed and perpetuated through daily performances such as dress, mannerisms, talk, behaviours, and so forth (Butler, 1994). It is through the repetition of these performances that masculine and feminine ideals are constructed and reconstructed in early childhood education settings (Robinson & Davies, 2008). However, it is important to note, that in this approach gender is not learned *from* others, but rather it is a learning process co-constructed by children *through* language, actions and interactions (Bohan, 1997; Davies, 2003; Thorne, 1995, 1997 as cited in Blaise, 2009).

Sexuality, like gender, is considered to be socially constructed and representative of hegemonic values (Blaise, 2009; Carrera, DePalma & Lameiras, 2012; Garcia & Slesaransky-Poe, 2010; Robinson, 2014; Robinson, 2005). Robinson (2005) argues that through the process of gendering, children are simultaneously sexualized, and as previously noted, the two processes are closely related. Sexuality is experienced, expressed and practiced through acting out gendered behaviour (Blaise, 2009). Children perform their gender through play and those gendered performances often involve some aspect of sexuality (Blaise, 2010, 2009, 2005; Garcia

& Slesaransky-Poe, 2010). Robinson (2014; 2005) explains the parallel between gender and (hetero)sexuality in early childhood education; the two are made to appear as biological and natural. The assumption that biological sex informs gender creates the notion that gender is an innate state of being. It also places female and male on opposite ends of the gender binary. Within the gender binary are mutually exclusive gender expectations. A major component of these expectations is the assumption that one desires the other. This expectation is often unquestioned and highly valued in our heteronormative society. In sum, to be gendered is to be (hetero)sexualized. Blaise (2005) expands on the concept of *genderedness* --to be gendered-- as entangled with compulsory heterosexuality, which both rewards appropriate performances of heterosexuality and punishes deviations from conventional gender roles. The term *compulsory heterosexuality* refers to the act of conformity to heterosexuality by hegemonic and social expectations (Butler, 1990). This may otherwise be known in society as *heterosexualization* (Butler 2005 as cited in Robinson, 2005, p. 19).

(Hetero)sexualization of Children

While gender construction in early childhood education has been well researched and documented, the issue of childhood sexualities and heteronormative practices in early childhood education has received much less focus. Limited attention has been given to the interconnected dynamic between gender and sexuality and the process of heterosexualization. Blaise (2009) describes the purpose of heterosexuality in relation to the regulation of gender. She explains, "…particular forms of femininity are produced in relation to and through particular, and highly valued, forms of masculinity" (Blaise, 2009, p. 453). In other words, the very same practices that work to gender children also heterosexualize children (Gunn, 2011). In early childhood education, heteronormativity dwells in the constructions of genders, sexualities, and family

forms (Gunn, 2011). The notion that children's sexuality is nonexistent is contradicted by the omnipresence of heterosexual narratives in children's literature, media and games in children's everyday lives, including early childhood education (Robinson, 2008). Robinson (2005) discusses the prevalence of heteronormative practices specifically in early childhood education as the heterosexualization of children. She explains heterosexualization as the promotion of heterosexuality as the norm while discouraging children to transgress conventional heterosexual gendered behaviour. She notes that within early childhood education settings, teachers and parents have vested interests in children's recognizably male or female performances and work to maintain the binary. Common examples in early childhood include concerns by parents and educators when a male child dresses up in girl's clothing or when children are actively discouraged if they desire same-sex relations (Robinson, 2005). It is through these gender transgressions that children learn what is considered acceptable and tolerable gendered behaviours and perform in accordance with such.

For example, it is commonplace and acceptable, to see children dramatize a mock wedding or play house; in this play, girls will typically take on the role of the bride or the wife/mother while boys will play the groom or the husband/father. These roles represent normative heterosexual unions and nuclear family structures. Gunn (2011) expands on this notion further by explaining that the nuclear family perpetuates gender assumptions and the interpreted normalcy of heterosexuality. The roles assumed within the nuclear family pertain to gender roles but are also based on desire for the opposite sex and in this regard, gender is conflated with sexuality (Gunn, 2011). Through normalized gendered performances it becomes apparent that a prominent feature of gender is to desire and be desired by the opposite gender; hegemonic gender roles relate to heterosexuality and vice versa (Blaise, 2005). To illustrate this

point, consider the construction of femininity and its position in opposition to masculinity in such a way that femininity is expected to be desired by the male gaze (Blaise, 2005; Butler, 1994). In other words, femininity is constructed to appeal to men, as masculinity is constructed to appeal to women.

Even as hegemonic discourse renders sexuality irrelevant to children's lives, they are simultaneously and consistently constructed as heteronormative subjects (Robinson & Davies, 2008). Considering gender and sexuality as performances allows for the understanding of their socially constructed nature. The interconnectedness of gender, bodies and sexualities can be better understood through Butler's (1994) concept of the *heterosexual matrix* (p. 151), which produces the assumption that bodies must present with a stable sex and gender that is positioned in opposition to "the other" through heterosexual expectations.

The heteronormative values in our society influence children's sexual ascriptions and tend to exclude non-conforming sexualities. In relation to Judith Butler's theories, a child's gender and sexuality may be read as performances that reflect normative constructions. Postmodernist and queer theoretical frameworks highlight the ways in which children are frequently compared to normative ways of being (as is the case with developmental theories, to be discussed shortly).

Overall, the process of heterosexualization and heteronormative practices in general are persistent and pervasive. The limitations of compulsory heterosexuality are only acknowledged when they are challenged or transgressed beyond normative expectations (Robinson, 2008). Ignoring the topic of childhood sexualities as it permeates through invisible heteronormative practices, leads to the silencing and diminished legitimacy of diverse sexualities as experienced

in childhood, especially since heteronormativity promotes the normalcy of heterosexuality above all (Surtees & Gunn, 2010).

Access to Sexual Knowledge

As stated at the outset of this paper, the topic of childhood sexualities is considered a social taboo and is cloaked in controversy (Robinson, 2005). A common reaction to childhood sexualities is often the assumption that they simply does not exist; the idea being that children do not have sexualities. In this hegemonic discourse, sexuality tends to be "…narrowly defined by the physical sexual act" (Robinson, 2008, p. 116), and therefore, it is rendered irrelevant in the lives of children. Constant in Western society is the view that children are "asexual, naïve and innocent" (Robinson & Diaz, 2005, p.153). Children learn early on that sex and sexuality is a prohibited topic (Robinson, 2012).

The notion of childhood innocence informs the justification of avoiding the topic of sexuality with children (Robinson, 2014; Robinson, 2012;). Withholding access to sexual knowledge and the language to talk about it (i.e. terminology) is considered a rightful protection of children's perceived innocence from corruption (Robinson, 2014; Robinson, 2012). Contrarily, as Robinson (2012) points out, to provide children with access to sexual knowledge constructs the image of the 'knowing child' who is often the equivalent to the corrupted child. This preservation of childhood in the form of restriction from knowledge, removes children's potential to full agency and sexual citizenship (Robinson, 2012).

With the inability to access alternate forms of sexual development, heteronormativity remains unabated. Historically, in Western early childhood education, healthy and normal sexual development has been linked with heterosexual development (Robinson, 2014; Robinson & Davies, 2008). This repetition of heterosexuality taught as the developmental standard

constitutes its assumed and expected normativity (Gunn, 2011). The hegemonic discourses present in current curriculum (formal curriculum in elementary schools and informal curriculum in early childhood education in Ontario citation) in effect naturalize heterosexuality and reinforce children's heteronormativity (Robinson & Davies, 2008). In this sense, educational institutions become critical sites of surveillance and regulation in place to maintain the status quo (Foucault, 1979; Robinson, 2008).

Of course this structure seems unproblematic for a child who is constructed as normal through this discourse, but Gunn (2011) asks the powerful question: what happens to the child's sense of self and worldview if or when her/his identity shifts and does not coincide with these hegemonic discourses? In particular, Gunn asks "…in whose interests do we preserve the (hetero)norm?" (2011, p. 281). Children are in the midst of constructing their self-identity in the context of hegemonic regulation in ECE curriculum. Their performances are imitations of the ideological codes instilled in them at early ages.

Queering Developmental Theories

Traditionally, developmental theories have been held in the highest regard in early childhood education (Janmohamed, 2010; Mayall, 2013). Developmental theories define children in terms of abilities as they correlate to chronological age. The developmental perspective cumulatively provides a definition of childhood that excludes many constant aspects of life, especially sex, gender and sexuality, on the basis of being not developmentally appropriate for children. This perspective fails to acknowledge the importance and impact of children's lived experiences (Blaise, 2005; Browne, 2004; MacNaughton, 2000 as cited in Blaise, 2009).

Acknowledging that childhood sexualities do in fact exist and, furthermore, are largely constructed by dominant hegemonic ideologies, suggests that children should be given the right to access such knowledge. From the perspective of queer theory, it is essential to trouble normalizations of sexuality and the hegemonic power they hold in our society, and notions of 'age-appropriate' access to sexual knowledge (Robinson, 2012). What is 'developmentally appropriate' knowledge for children is defined by the power binary between adult and child. This dichotomy has led to the construction of 'adults only' knowledge and children's limited access to said knowledge (Robinson, 2014; Robinson, 2012; Robinson, 2008). In the case of sexuality, developmentally appropriate practice also assumes that children need protection from the danger of sexual experience, and adults provide this safety net.

The binary power relationship between adult and child is constructed and reinforced by the developmental perspectives on childhood, and has further prevented children from being provided with access to certain knowledge. Children's childhoods are constructed by adults and defined by the limitations of what children are expected to be (Gunn, 2011). In early childhood education, children have been traditionally positioned at the beginning of a continuum of development. This perspective has been largely influenced by the work of child development theorists such as Piaget, Freud and Erikson (Gunn 2011; Penn, 2008). The tenets of these theories have been long regarded as standard explanations and correct insights into childhood. Janmohamed (2010) problematizes developmentally appropriate practice as an essentialized truth underlying ECE, which defines practice, quality and childhood in general. Developmentalist theories, which inform developmentally appropriate practice, have been the underlying influence of hegemonic understandings of childhood. By placing children on this continuum, they are positioned at the beginning of a journey directed for the epitomized destination: adulthood. On

this continuum children are positioned on the opposite end of an adult/child relationship; sexuality is restricted from childhood and it understood as a defining boundary and differentiation between childhood and adulthood (Robinson, 2014; Robinson, 2012). It is through a developmental lens that children are viewed as *becomings* rather than *beings*, or humans in their own right (Prout, 2011; Quennerstedt & Quennerstedt, 2014; Robinson & Davies, 2008).

This boundary between childhood and adulthood has simultaneously constructed children as innocent and has underpinned children's limited access to sexual knowledge. Children's relationship to sexuality in general has been viewed as precarious and unnatural (Robinson, 2012). Robinson and colleagues have argued that this notion of childhood innocence has been mobilized to regulate children's knowledge (Robinson, 2014; Robinson, 2012; Robinson, 2005; Robinson & Davies, 2008). However, the troubling of these hegemonic discourses leads to moral panic as new ways of thinking may potentially destabilize ideological truths. The mobilization of moral panic serves to strengthen the regulation of appropriate knowledge for children when restrictions are challenged or contravened, especially in the case of children's access to knowledge of queer identities (Robinson, 2012).

James, Curtis and Birch (2008) discuss the concept of 'risk anxiety' as a barrier to children's access to full citizenship. The notion that children are in need of protection from specific developmentally inappropriate content limits children's ability to participate as full citizens (Mayall, 2013). The ways in which children are protected ignores how children's subjectivities are created within the ideological constructions of childhood (James et al., 2008). This perceived vulnerability to sexual danger has resulted in a moral panic and a constant

surveillance and is generally part of common understandings of childhood. In fact, children today are the most supervised of all generations (Robinson, 2008).

In a deeper analysis of power dynamics between children and adults in regards to sexuality, Angelides (2004) discusses the necessity to value children's social positions and experiences of sexuality. Childhood sexuality tends to be delegitimized under the guise of moral panic and fear of sexual violence. Children's capacity for agency and choice is erased and they are deemed powerless in the adult/child relationship (Angelides, 2004). While ensuring safety for young children is a valid objective, children's experiences of sexuality must simultaneously be acknowledged and valued.

Another point of concern resides in the authoritarian regulations surrounding children's limited access to knowledge that contributes to their misinformation around sexuality, which, in turn, increases their vulnerability to lack of sexual health and wellbeing (Robinson & Davies 2008). Further, investment in childhood innocence has created a subversive threat leading to the corruption and eroticism of children (Robinson, 2008). An increased susceptibility to sexual exploitation (Robinson & Davies, 2008) and sexual commodification is most prevalently observed in the commodity of childhood sexualities in popular culture and advertising (Robinson, 2012). Robinson (2008) argues that the denial of children's access to sexual knowledge impedes children's awareness and promotes a notion of childhood innocence. This takes place "… through the commodification and fetishization of childhood innocence which constructs children as erotic and desirable" (Robinson, 2008, p. 116). Hence, censorship does not resolve the perceived problem, but rather intensifies the presence of it while simultaneously disallowing children's agency.

This hegemonic understanding of childhood and children has been critiqued due to its lack of historical, geographical, and cultural considerations (Robinson, 2008). By considering various subjectivities and experiences of childhood, a critical reading of the multiplicity of experiences emerges (Robinson, 2008). A more realistic and responsible solution is to promote children's access to knowledge and to encourage the development of critical skills around such issues as sexuality as it relates to their own lives (Robinson, 2012).

Surtees & Gunn (2010) consider this investment in preventing children access to sexual knowledge as disregard for children and families' lived experiences. MacNaughton (2001) notes the difficulty for children to live and grow healthily in a society that does not reflect justice and equality for their families (as cited in Surtees & Gunn, 2010). This access to sexual knowledge and queer identities is essential not only to families that identify as queer, but to the lives of all children (Robinson, 2012) since it is important to recognize heteronormativity and how it oppresses particular populations while privileging others Gunn, 2011). Gunn succinctly suggests, "it is only by seeing how we are complicit with or othered by [heteronormative practices] that we begin to desire and work for something else" (2011, p. 288). Moving beyond restrictive developmental conceptualizations of children and childhood, the reconceptualization of children and childhood promotes a more inclusive, accepting, empowering and equitable view.

The Image of the Reconceptualized and Knowing Child

A reconceptualized view of children as competent and capable of understanding sexual discourse allows the educator and children to engage in open and honest dialogue. Such an approach supports queer identities and grants children access to alternate forms of sexual knowledge. A comprehensive approach to sex education would allow for the destabilizing of hegemonic truths that are perpetuated in sites of power, such as schools (Robinson, 2012).

Similar to Blaise's (2005) *postdevelopmental* perspective and the 'new' sociology of childhood (Mayall, 2013; Prout, 2011; Quennerstedt & Quennerstedt, 2014, among others), a reconceptualization of childhood involves rejecting and questioning "modernist assumptions of truth, universality, and certainty" (Blaise, 2009, p. 452). It is important to note at this point that like the many other perspectives on children and childhood, what is presented here is not *the* truth, rather the reconceptualist view is yet another perspective suggesting *a* truth about understanding children and their experiences (Millei, 2011).

Robinson (2012) refers to Deborah Britzman's work on 'difficult knowledge' in order to discuss the necessity of disrupting hidden cultural norms that work to maintain hegemonic discourses in education. Difficult knowledge is challenging in the sense that it disrupts the taken-for-granted truths about our subjective realities that are often left unchallenged (Robinson, 2012). In early childhood education, play is an important site where these power relations are often reinforced and therefore, provide an opportunity for educators to provide new gender and sexuality discourses (Martin, 2011; Blaise, 2005).

Britzman (1998), who writes about queer pedagogy, calls on educators to acknowledge that learning is often composed of resistance to knowledge. For example, simply excluding materials that represent gender norms in an early childhood education setting reinforces the legitimacy of the gender binary by not confronting it; it disallows children's access to various gender and sexual discourses. Rather it is crucial to trouble social norms and question the hegemonic power they hold (Robinson, 2012). To do this, educators must ensure "…the 'docility of education' is unsettled and that it takes up projects that are founded in contention, a refusal to tidy categories, that allow debate, and encompass practices of possibility and impossibility" (Britzman, 1998, p. 77 as cited in Robinson, 2012, p 270). The 'docility of education' refers to

the implicit assumptions present in everyday practices; in this case, I refer to heteronormative practices in early childhood education. According to Britzman, it is the educator's role to destabilizing and challenge assumptions by acknowledging that categorizations do not represent truths. To do this, a closer look at how the construction and regulation of gender and sexuality are taken up and challenged in an early childhood education setting.

Methods

Research Design

In my study, I approach the research from a postmodernist lens; my interest lies in how the participants construct, understand and perpetuate certain discourses of gender and sexuality. To do this, I utilized participant observations as a means of investigating the ways in which heteronormativity is constructed in an early childhood education setting. Observing children's behaviours directly as a method of researching heteronormativity in early education has been utilized in past studies (i.e. Blaise, 2009; Blaise 2005; Garcia & Slesaransky-Poe, 2010; Myers & Raymond, 2010; Skattebol, 2006; Wohlwend, 2011) while others have examined the issue by focusing on the perspective of pre-service and practicing educators through interviews (i.e. DePalma, 2013; Gunn, 2011; Robinson & Ferfolja, 2008; Surtees & Gunn, 2010). Participant observations enabled me to take part in the children's play and discussions, and to ask questions and probe further when necessary.

Setting

The research was conducted in a community college based early childhood education laboratory school. A lab school is an beneficial space in which to conduct research as the value of research is publicly known and a major part of the school's mandate. This particular lab

school was chosen as I was granted ease of access to the centre since I am familiar with the policies and procedures as an employee. I am also familiar with the families and other educators at the centre. Likewise, my familiarity with the lab school may also propose limitations on the study including personal biases. This will be discussed further in the limitations and strengths sections.

Recruitment and sample

The sample of participants recruited for this research study included children between three to eight years of age. I recruited participants by seeking permission from parents for their children's involvement. To recruit participants for this study I first obtained permission from the centre supervisor to conduct the research. As the gatekeeper, she decides whether it is in the best interests of the children and families that attend the centre. Further, the Ryerson Research Ethics Board reviewed and approved this research study. Notification of the study and recruitment requests were distributed in letter form to the families and educators in the centre and posted on the classroom door (see Appendix B). A detailed consent form was shared with the families and educators interested in participating (see Appendix C). As informed consent involves the full understanding of the participant (Cocks, 2006 as cited in Powell, Fitzgerald, Taylor, & Graham, 2012), the return of consent forms was requested in a two-week time frame in order to allow parents/guardians time to review the information and make an informed decision. In other words, this allotted time frame enabled participants time to digest the information and gradually weigh their decision as it related to their personal values (Alderson, 2002 as cited in Powell et al, 2012).

During data collection, a minor amendment was made to the study. The role of the educator was highlighted as significant potential finding. As this was not part of the initial research design, which was focused on solely observing children's play between peers, the study

was amended to include the role of the educator. After this unexpected modification, educators were recruited for the study as well. Consent forms (see Appendix D) were distributed among the educators in the classroom under observation and the broader research goal was also explained.

An assent form was reviewed with each child prior to data collection and they either agreed or declined to take part in the study (see Appendix E). Employing an assent form allowed children the opportunity to voice their decisions and indicates respect for them as people with individual rights (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 2013). In this age group, it is more than likely most children have been exposed to heteronormative practices through media (films, computer games and television), peers, and interpersonal relationships. Children younger than three may not be as verbal and children older than eight do not attend the centre on a regular basis and, thus, they were not recruited for this study. No other limits were placed on the sample.

While reviewing the assent form with the children, I introduced myself as a researcher. More specifically, I explained my role in the room as an observer of their play. To the children who knew me prior as an educator, I emphasized my role was not as an educator in the room, but rather was to observe and engage in play with them.

The participant response rate was 92% among the children and 80% among the educators. The lower compliance rate among educators is due to forgetting to return consent forms and scheduling differences (i.e. the educator was not present on the days of data collection and therefore the consent form was no longer required).

Due to scheduling and convenience, two days of the week were chosen for data collection when 100% of the children had parental consent to participate in the study. In total, ten children were observed for one hour on four separate days (two days a week, for two weeks). Data was collected in the morning hours shortly after all children arrived at the centre. This time was

discussed with the educators as the most convenient time to observe the children during free play. To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms replace participants' names throughout this study.

Data Collection Tools and Processes

Participant observations were employed to record children's actions, talk and interactions with materials, peers, the researcher and ECEs in the classroom. The observations entailed entering the classroom at the scheduled time, announcing to those in the classroom that the video camera would be recording, and moving around the room with a pen and notepad as the children played, hence engaging in participant observation. At times I was involved in the play or conversations, while at other times I quietly observed. Due to the low sample size, and no more than seven children present at each observation time, I was able to observe and record much of the social play in the classroom.

I employed a hand held video camera to ensure that interactions that were not recordable via note taking were captured (i.e. body language, inaudible or subtle conversations, tone of voice, etc.). Video recordings allow for the capacity to record more data as handwritten notes of observations can be limiting. Similar studies have also employed the use of video-recordings to capture children's talk, use of materials, physical actions, body language and other visual and audio-behaviours that are otherwise difficult to record with field notes (e,g. Blaise, 2005; Wohlwend, 2011). It is important to note that my role as a participant observer in the room may have affected the behaviours of the children, however, was a necessary aspect of the study to extend children's discussions. This will be further discussed in the findings section as it pertains specifically to data analysis and in the reflection section.

During the data collection process, children and educators were notified each time the video camera was recording them. They were also reminded that they could withdraw from the research study at any time if they experienced any type of distress or discomfort.

Observations from various areas in the room (i.e. dramatic area, block area and art area) were made. By ensuring data was collected in a range of contexts, it demonstrated a larger representation of the ways in which heteronormativity is constructed in an early childhood education setting. Upon completion of data collection, the field notes and video recordings were transcribed. Dialogue from the video recordings was transcribed manually. Body language, intonation and nonverbal communications were noted and interpreted through discourse analysis.

Approach to Data Analysis

In line with this study's postmodernist perspective, the findings were interpreted using discourse analysis. Like postmodernism, discourse analysis focuses on the importance of language to the construction of shared cultural and social knowledge (Gee, 2011). Discourse analysis examines the taken-for-granted meanings conveyed in language by making it "new and strange [so that] …we can begin consciously to think about all the knowledge, assumptions, and inferences we bring to any communication" (Gee, 2011, p. 8). As one of the purposes of discourse analysis, dissecting language permits us to see and question particular aspects of normative assumptions that relate to issues of equity and human rights (Gee, 2011). Discourse analysis can be described as an innovative approach that veers away from traditional data collection methods by analysing daily representations of text, language and discourses to focus on political, legal and regulatory assumptions (Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klingner, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005 as cited in Berman & Wilson, 2009). Discourse analysis and the postmodernist paradigm of this study both insist on the importance of language in the construction of social

norms and expectations. The acceptance that discourses and language are social constructions, informs the position that discourse analysis sets out "...to understand conditions in which particular accounts are produced, rather than trying to reconstruct 'what actually happened' " (Scior, 2003, p. 793 as cited in Berman & Wilson, 2009, p. 446).

Through an analysis of the videos and field notes, language, patterns in speech, word choices and intonation were noted. Although intonation is not always considered in discourse analysis, this study values the nuances of meaning intonation carries (Gee, 2011). Through intonation, the speaker can choose to emphasize or understate the importance of certain words or phrases, which is determined by the context and the speaker's assumptions about the listener's knowledge (Gee, 2011). Intonation is part of how speakers both respond to and actively construct the context (Gee, 2011).

After reading and re-reading the transcripts several times, I interpreted three overarching discourses from the data: children's ways of making meaning of gender through play and conversations; playing with gender and transgressing the gender binary and heteronormativity; the critical role of the ECE in facilitating the transgression of heteronormativity. As I began interpreting these discourses, I organized the discourses into charts. The charts helped me to organize the data and theories or links to previous studies, and my interpretations. Thus, each chart included the transcribed dialogue, connection to theory or previous studies and my interpretation.

As a participant observer, co-constructing meaning with the children, my interactions with the children influenced behaviours, talk and interactions. My own contributions to dialogues and interactions are therefore included in the reported dialogues and inform part of the analysis. The

interpretation of the data thus reflects postmodernist values by taking into consideration reflexivity and the complex social positions of the children, educators and myself.

Warrantability

The goal of qualitative research is to be representative of a particular group, in a particular setting, rather than to produce a set of standard results generalizable to broader populations (Thomas & Harden, 2008). While this qualitative study is acknowledged as subjective, warrantability is integral to establish justification and grounds for one's claims (Wood & Kroger, 2000). Conventional criteria for reliability and validity are suited to modernist studies that maintain a perspective that an external world exists independent of context; that there is an objective reality. In the social world, rather, meaning is intrinsically tied to context, as discourse is often reflective of the context in which it is interpreted. Reality and "truth…are themselves social, that is, discursive constructs" (Wood & Kroger, 2000, p. 166). As such, the approach to analysis in this postmodernist study, discourse analysis, acknowledges that discourse is socially constructed and dependent on context, producing various meanings rather than one single existing reality (Wood & Kroger, 2000). Wood and Kroger (2000) recognize warrantability as a co-construction dependent on shared knowledge whereas validity assumes the presence of objective truth. In this regard, discourse analysis requires a set of criteria different from modernist, conventional methods in order to establish trustworthiness and soundness as means of establishing warrantability (Wood & Kroger, 2000). To implement trustworthiness and soundness, Wood & Kroger (2000) suggest a number of criteria. Of the criteria outlined, this study establishes the following: orderliness and documentation, reflexivity, demonstration, coherence, plausibility and fruitfulness.

Orderliness and Documentation

A clear description of the data collection and analysis process has been detailed to provide a context for understanding claims. The unstructured observations included the use of video recordings, which were justified as a means of capturing non-verbal communications in the classroom (i.e. body language, intonation). The videos were transcribed and reviewed with the supervising professor and the ECE after analysis. It is necessary to note, the review of the transcripts and charts was sought to fulfill accountability of my role as the researcher rather than as a form of member checking. Reviewing the charts with the ECE enabled a further understanding of the undergoing research in the classroom and the opportunity to discuss her role in constructed heteronormative discourses. Whereas conventional requirements for qualitative validity and reliability would suggest strategies such as member checking to ensure repetition of concepts and meanings, Wood and Kroger (2000) argue that this simply introduces another perspective in addition to the researcher's interpretation. Although not considered part of warrantability, repetition is regarded as an essential aspect of refinement and attention to detail in discourse analysis, however, in the form of "redoing… analyses both in the analysis and write-up stages, repeated questioning of own stance, and so on" (Wood & Kroger, 2000, p. 165-166). During the analysis stage, multiple readings of the data were performed along with constant consideration of reflexivity. Reflexive commentary is crucial in establishing credibility (Shenton, 2004) and has been incorporated. My inclusion in the dialogue transcript acknowledges my co-construction in the study as a participant observer as does my discussion of social position and reflexivity below.

Reflexivity

It is important to note the relational dynamics between the children and myself as an ECE as well as between the children and myself as researcher. The children who attend this centre are familiar with my role as a RECE. It is possible my dual position as RECE and researcher may have disrupted the data collection process since my typical role in the room is to supervise the children and facilitate learning. To reduce the impact of this limitation, I arranged with the centre supervisor ahead of time to schedule a particular time of day when my time was be devoted solely to data collection. Alternatively, this dual role may have proved to be beneficial, as the children are already comfortable around me and perhaps expressed themselves more freely than they would have with a researcher they did not know. This familiarity was especially ideal due to the perceived sensitive nature of this research topic.

Demonstration

Throughout the analysis section, discourse will be analyzed rather than merely stated and described. As will be seen shortly, the sections on transgressing the gender binary and the role of the ECE, analyse the children's capacity to play with gender and the ECE's role in facilitating the creation of new gender and sexual discourses. During the first reading of the data, my analysis focused on the children's understanding of gender through play through various discourses (hair, body parts, clothes, colours, masculinity as the rejection of femininity, superhero and princess play). Upon repeated readings of the data, larger patterns emerged. Including these new interpretations along with the transcribed dialogue, exemplifies how my interpretations of single excerpts and larger patterns are grounded in the discursive expressions.

Coherence

Coherence refers to the analysis and the interpretations of discourses derived from the data. To establish coherence, the analysis must highlight both larger patterns as well as the details of single excerpts (Wood & Kroger, 2000). Another primary strategy, Wood and Kroger (2000) consider exclusion of alternative interpretations to be a primary strategy to establish coherence. More specifically, coherence "…will show the reader how the discourse is put together and "how discursive structure produces effects and functions" (Potter & Wetherell, 1987 as cited in Wood & Kroger, 2000, p. 173). This study establishes coherence by connecting the children's exploration of gender and to larger social discourses (i.e. heteronormativity, sexual citizenship), frequently considering alternative explanations for interpretations (e.g. "The evil potion may be interpreted as a negative connotation with gender non-conformity or perhaps it is simply an imaginary vehicle through which one may change genders."), and taking into account various potential perspectives as possible explanations for children's understandings (i.e. referring to other studies to explain various interpretations).

Plausibility

Plausibility refers to connecting the analysis to other knowledge, theories or analyses. By comparing sets of claims made in the analysis to other scholarly work, the study's warrantability is strengthened. The reference to other work may be an explicit comparison between analyses and also implicit, as in the foundational perspectives of this study (i.e. gender performativity; heteronormativity; reconceptualist view of children, etc.). To establish plausibility I make reference to numerous other studies and theoretical perspectives throughout the analysis, such as Blaise (2009), Gagliardi (2014), Carrera, DePalma and Lameiras, Martin (2011), Robinson and Davies (2008). Referring to these works substantiate my sets of claims by highlighting

similarities between analyses. This does not necessarily reveal a 'trueness' of analyses due to the repetition of concepts and patterns, however, the connections between past and present work may work to highlight typically unnoticed patterns and provide a sense of insight through a deeper analysis.

Fruitfulness

Fruitfulness is an important aspect of a study that accentuates the significance of the research findings. To establish fruitfulness, the study "…should suggest productive ways to reframe old issues, create links between previously unrelated issues and raise new questions that are interesting and merit attention" (Tracy, 1995 as cited in Wood & Kroger, 2000, p. 175). The focus shifts from previous work, as in plausibility, to the implications of the present work and the potential direction of future work. This study makes links between the reconceptualization of children, sexualities and queer theory. The implications of these connections have led to the potential future focus on the role of the ECE in facilitating access to sexual knowledge and full sexual citizenship for children. A full description of potential areas of exploration will be discussed in the section on future research following the analysis.

Analysis

The findings of this study elucidate the complex factors that influence children's understanding of gender and sexuality. Firstly, through children's talk and play, they can be seen working through their meaning of gender in explicit conversations about hair, body parts, rules about clothes and colours, and through role playing heterosexual relationships. Their understanding of gender is implicitly situated within heteronormative discourses as two genders are consistently positioned as mutually exclusive.

Secondly, children often played with gender and transgressed binary limitations. Through role-play and responses to the educators' questions that challenge gender assumptions, children seemed to understand gender as a more fluid state rather than fixed and stable. Playing with gender suggests the possibility of understanding gender outside of the gender binary and adopting an acceptance of gender variance beyond tolerance.

Finally, it became increasingly apparent to me that the classroom climate differed depending on the educator in the room. At first I interpreted this as an obstacle to collecting data. I reflected on this perceived obstacle and came to realize the potential for an investigation into the educator's role in challenging heteronormative discourses in ECE settings. It was at this point that I requested the aforementioned addendum from the Ryerson Research Ethics Board to include the ECEs in my observations. Upon receiving consent forms from the educators, I continued observations with a broader and more encompassing goal in mind; to include the impact of the educators and their potential to reproduce and transgress heteronormativity in an ECE setting.

Making Meaning of Gender

Six discourses were identified through which children made meaning of gender. These discourses included: Hair, body parts, clothes, colours, masculinity as the rejection of femininity, superhero and princess play.

As in previous studies (Blaise, 2009; Gagliardi, 2014), hair plays a large role in gender assignment. Blaise (2005) also found that children practice and identify with gender through their physical appearance. Robinson (2012) notes children often rely on the stereotypes they observe via media, personal experiences and people in their lives; in other words, the discourses that are readily available to them. The children in this study explained and justified their

understanding of gender by relating visible characteristics, such as hair, to people in their lives. During morning free play, the children and I were discussing the names of their dolls. Christina decides to name her doll Kelly, which sparks a conversation on the androgynous use of the name:

> Researcher: Oh yeah? And is that Kelly a man or a woman? Because we just found out that Kelly can be a man's name or a woman's name.
>
> Christina: Like you. You're a man [laugh]
>
> Researcher: Am I?
>
> Christina: [laugh]
>
> Kayla: No, you're a woman.
>
> Researcher: How do you know?
>
> Christina: A beautiful woman.
>
> Researcher: A *beautiful* woman? Well, thank you.
>
> Kayla: With black hair
>
> Researcher: With black hair… but how do you know if I'm a man or a woman?
>
> [Kayla plays with my hair]
>
> Kayla: Just because you're a girl.
>
> Researcher: Because I'm a girl?
>
> Kayla: Yeah.
>
> Researcher: How do you know?
>
> Kayla: because you have long hair
>
> Researcher: Because I have long hair.
>
> Christina: But some boys have long hair…

Researcher: Some boys have long hair and don't some women have short hair?

Christina: Yes my mom has short hair!

Researcher: I heard about that.

Christina: And Jamie has short hair

Kayla: And he's a bo… and she's a girl…

The initial confusion over Kelly as an androgynous name sparked the conversation on how people make their gender visible. The response offered by Kayla, "just because you're a girl" indicates the automatic and inexplicable assumptions of gender. Upon further questioning, Kayla relates this assumption to apparent gender performances such as hair length: "because you have long hair." When the children attempt to relate long hair to people in their lives, they come to realize inconsistencies with their theories: "but some boys have long hair"; "my mom has short hair"; "Jamie has short hair." Through discussions, children's categorizations of gender are easily troubled and reveal valuable learning opportunities.

This conversation continued as the children referred to clothing as an indicator of gender:

Researcher: So is that the only way you know? If I am a man or a woman? How else would you know? [Kayla continues playing with my hair, Christina walks away]

Kayla: I don't know.

Researcher: Okay let's look around the room then. How about Tiffany? Is Tiffany a boy or a girl?

Kayla: A girl.

Researcher: How do you know?

Kayla: 'Cause she has a dress.

Researcher: 'Cause she has a dress. How about Luke? Is Luke a boy or a girl?

Kayla: Boy

Researcher: How do you know?

Kayla: ‘Cause he has a dinosaur shirt

Researcher: A dinosaur shirt? Oh, I didn’t know dinosaur shirts were just for boys… are they just for boys? Can girls wear them too?

[Kayla continues playing with my hair]

Jake – Yeah

Children’s ideas of gender revolve around appearance since it is the most obvious attribute of a person. Through questioning children’s explanations of gender, inconsistencies were revealed. Jake agrees that girls can also wear dinosaur shirts, which problematizes Kayla’s theory that Luke is a boy because of his dinosaur shirt. Children became aware of their contradictory assumptions, providing a point from which to build new theories. As the conversation continues, the children create new theories to explain their understanding of gender:

Researcher: But when a baby is born, babies don’t have long hair, so how would you know if the baby is a girl or a boy?

Dylan: Uhhh… uh no! well, no! …the … the …when its born you can’t, you can’t see if it’s a it’s a baby when its born ‘cause its in your tummy!

Researcher: When the baby comes out though, how did your mom and dad know that Blake was your brother and not your sister?

Dylan: ‘Cause we saw that […] that he was a brother! [looking around classroom]

Researcher: How?

Dylan: [looks at me] the legs!

Researcher: Because of the legs. What about the legs?

Dylan: Sometimes legs grow longer than girl legs. Sometimes, times boy legs grow longer than girl legs. That's how you know! The other people have really long legs and he had really short legs so we knowed… and I have long legs and so we know that he was a brother. The legs can be a part of them to see if you're a boy or a girl.

Dylan explains a link between biology and gender, that biological traits must explain gender differences. Although his theory itself presents inconsistencies, the conflation between sex and gender is representative of societal assumptions.

Colours also indicate an important relation to gender. The colour yellow came up as an androgynous and flexible colour that appeared to be acceptable for boys, but not one's first choice. Pink, however, is always designated to be for girls.

Dylan: Bathing suits for mommies or daddies

Researcher: [holding up a yellow girl's bathing suit] These ones are for mommies or daddies?

Dylan: Uh huh. No these ones [points to floral bathing suit] no these ones [points to yellow bathing suit] are for the boys and these ones for girls.

Researcher: Which one?

Dylan: This one for girls [floral bathing suit] and this one for boys [yellow bathing suit]

Researcher: The yellow one is for boys?

Dylan: M hm

Researcher: Is that the one you would wear?

Dylan: M hm

Researcher: Why is this one for girls? [hold up floral bathing suit]

Dylan: Because it has pink

Researcher: Because it has pink?

Dylan: And purple

Researcher: What about, uh, the yellow bathing suit?

Dylan: Yup

Researcher: Yellow is for boys? I see yellow on this bathing suit too though [floral bathing suit]

Dylan: But it, but it all, it has more pink

In a two-year study conducted in the U.S, focused on interactions between children as they constructed meaning of gender, Martin (2011) found that boys would avoid associating with the colour pink as strictly as possible, knowing it represents femininity. The association of pink to femininity is also read as the rejection of femininity. In various discussions, it was apparent that rejecting femininity was understood as an integral aspect of performing masculinity. In the following discussion, which includes the ECE Rose, Jake rejects girls outright:

Rose: Jake, how come only boys are coming to your birthday party?

Jake: Because!

Rose: Because why?

Jake: Because the girls are bad for me

Rose: Girls are bad? Why are girls bad?

Jake: Because they are bad.

Rose: Well what kinds of thing that … do they do that you think are bad?

Jake: They … push me

Rose: Hmm… all girls push you?

Jake: Nnn yes.

Rose: Do I push you?

Jake:[…] Not you. Big girls don't push little girls push.

Rose: Little girls push? I wonder why. Why do you think they push?

Mary: I do *not* push!

Jake: Because. Because. Because. Because they're *babies!* Baby can push. And

Rose: Why do you think babies can push?

Jake: And baby hit us.

Mary: [sobs]

[…]

Rose: Is there anything you like about girls Jake?

Jake: No.

Rose: Nothing at all?

Jake: Nooo!

The girls in the class also uphold masculinity as the rejection of femininity. The conversation of birthday parties, a popular topic in this centre, continued with Christina and her plans for her birthday party. After announcing that everyone will be invited to the party, she makes it clear that having an alternative cake to the feminine princess cake will accommodate the boys. Christina explains:

Christina: Because its going to be, and whoever is a boy gets to have the angry birds cake!

[Jake looks up at Christina]

Rose: Oh. Are you interested to go now?

Christina: [stands up] Mary, you get to come! You do. And you get to have…

Kayla: Is Charlie allowed?

Rose: So Christina it sounds

Christina: Yes, he, he is! He gets to have the angry birds cake.

Rose: So Christina it sounds to me like…

Tiffany: All of it?

Christina: Y… some.

Jake: What about Dylan? What about Dylan?

Kayla: And we get the princess cake.

Christina: Yeah! [smiles] Princess!

The educator questions this practice by simply asking why:

Rose: So why do you have to have different cakes?

Christina: [laughs] So my brother can eat 'em.

Rose: Why can't your brother eat the princess cake?

Christina: Because he doesn't like princesses!

Christina accepts her brother's rejection of femininity and acknowledges that an alternative must be provided so that he *can* eat some cake. The educator continues questioning the idea of feminine and masculine cakes.

Rose: So Christina I'm just a little confused about this boy cake and this girl cake stuff. Can you explain it to me?

Christina: [giggles] Yeah, I can.

Rose: Why do the boys have to have a boy cake? Because I didn't know a cake can be a boy or a girl. And the girls have to have a girl cake. I'm just a little confused.

Christina: Because, the boy… that's Daniel doesn't like the princesses.

Rose: But doesn't the cake taste the same whether it's a princess cake or an angry bird cake?

Christina: Yes. Because, because, because the angry birds are going to taste different because because angry birds taste like, gonna taste like grape and and uh princess cake takes like raspberry! [Stands up with arms open]

Rose: Oh, so you think the flavour's different between a girl cake and a boy cake.

Christina: I that's what I want.

Kayla: But my brother likes like… raspberry, he likes raspberry.

The educator's attempt to problematize the concept that a cake can be feminine or masculine by questioning the concrete characteristics of cake such as flavour is taken literally. Christina assigns cake flavours to genders. Again, however, referring to personal experiences and people in her life, Kayla troubles the gender binary by mentioning that her brother also likes raspberry.

Children's understanding of gender is primarily based in their understandings of heterosexual relationships (Robinson & Davies, 2010). Robinson (2012) uses the term *hetero-gendered* to refer to heteronormative, cisgender (biological sex matches gender) performances. These hetero-gendered performances emerge from the normalization of gender constructions and are linked with the process of heterosexualization (Butler, 1990 as cited in Robinson, 2012). This heteronormative understanding of gender is especially visible through children's role-play with dolls. Princesses and royal families are a particular interest amongst this group of children and often the characters are described in the context of a heterosexual family or marriage.

Jane: There's fifteen rooms in there? So who lives in all those rooms in those two houses?

Christina: [inaudible]

Jane: The prince and the princess?

Christina: And the prince and the princess turn into a queen and a king!

Jane: The prince and the princess turn into a queen and a king? What about who lives in the five bedrooms?

Christina: Five bedrooms? Those are their bedrooms, they share all the bedrooms.

Jane: They share? Who who's all they? Who's they that share all the bedrooms?

Christina: They share them with them! They the queen shares them with the king and the king shares them with the queen.

Christina displays the expectation that a princess and prince will eventually become queen and king. Although she does not explain that the prince and princess must be married first, it is understood that they share a heterosexual, domestic union in which they share bedrooms; very similar to expectations of typical heterosexual marriages.

While the children were at the table drawing pictures, a conversation about domestic living arrangements comes up:

Mary: I made a castle!

Brad: Who lives in the castle?

Mary: The princess

Brad: Just the princess lives in the castle? Does anyone else live in the castle?

Tiffany: And the queen

Brad: And the queen? What about…

Tiffany: And a king.

Brad: Oh and the king. Is there anyone else who lives inside of the castle?

Tiffany: No.

Brad: No?

Jake: No.

Christina: Don't forget the prince!

Brad: Oh, and the prince.

Mary: And the princess

Jake: And the princess

The people living in the castle represent the commonly accepted nuclear family form. In order to have a king and queen, there must first be a prince and princess. In the previous conversation, Christina makes it clear that the prince and princess eventually become king and queen. Her announcement: "don't forget the prince!" makes clear the assumption that a princess cannot be without a prince. Robinson and Davies (2010) refer to children's view of marriage as the habitual state of heterosexual relationships, especially when discussing having babies.

"A boy and it has a dress on" or "A girl and she has a penis": Transgressing the Gender Binary through Play

While play provides a context in which children can express their understandings of certain concepts, such as gender, it is also a space to explore new discourses and push the boundaries. The children in this study troubled hegemonic notions of gender in the midst of reinforcing them. The segments below recount examples of children playing with ideas of gender and transgressing the gender binary. Often, this play took the form of transgender (transition from one gender to another) or gender variant (a separate gender existing outside of the feminine/masculine binary) expression. Children expressed a fluid understanding of gender

through responses to questions that troubled their assumptions and the hegemonic perspective of gender :

Me: Yes? So what if I was wearing a dinosaur shirt? Would I be a boy or a girl?

Kayla: Boy!

Me: A boy? So I can change?

Dylan: Yeah.

Me: If Luke was wearing a dress would Luke be a boy or a girl?

Dylan: A boy still

Kayla: No girl!

Dylan: No…

While Kayla's response may be interpreted as a playful response, she is nonetheless referring to the possibility of changing genders. If her intention was to poke fun at Dylan, her response may be read as her understanding that a boy performing girl exits the strict gender framework she regularly observes.

To further explore children's perceptions of non-conforming gender performances, I brought up the topic of hair:

Researcher: You know what I noticed? I have long hair here [points to left side of head], but I have very, very short hair here. It's shaved.

Dylan: [turns around, takes off chef hat, smiles] like me

Researcher: Am I half and half? What does that mean?

Dylan: You're just… you all of us.

Researcher: I'm all of us. What does that mean?

Dylan: You're us. You're us.

Dylan's response to the hair predicament acknowledges my hair cut as representative of both genders; long hair representing femininity and shaved hair representing masculinity. This response may imply a notion of acceptance: "you're just…you all of us." Carrera, DePalma and Lameiras (2012) make note of the complexity transgender or gender variant expressions present in light of heteronormativity, a discourse that relies heavily on the conflation of sex and gender. Dylan previously described the difference between girls and boys as a biological difference, conflating sex and gender. Complicating these ideas by questioning "am I half and half?" challenges these assumption and encourages Dylan to consider a new theory. His response, "you're us" contradicts his previous definition and may also signify the possibility to exit the mutually exclusive gender binary and be more than one gender at one time.

During doll play, children are again at a loss for proper pronouns and categorizations for a gender variant expression. A conflict arises when a group of children decide to play with the dolls and one child does not want to play with the doll that has a penis. Tiffany and Kayla are discussing who gets to play with which doll, when I overhear Tiffany say that Christina does not want to play with boy. I question:

Researcher: How do you know that one's a boy?

Tiffany: Because it has a penis

Researcher: And do any of these?

Tiffany: No this one…

Christina: And this one has a penis! [points to doll in Tiffany's hand]

Tiffany: Well Christina likes being it, so Kayla has to have a boy

Researcher: So wait, you said this one does too [I lift the dress on the doll. Children look at penis]. So is this one a boy?

Tiffany: Yes.

Researcher: But that one is okay to have but not this one [pointing to doll on couch next to Kayla]

Kayla: [laughs] Yeah

[Christina smiles]

Researcher: How come?

Kayla: Because it's funny

Researcher: What's funny?

Kayla: That [points to doll's penis]

Me: Why is that funny?

Kayla: Because that a girl and she has a penis

Researcher: Oh, interesting…

Tiffany: No, it's a boy and it has a dress on

[Kayla laughs]

Researcher: What's the difference?

Kayla: A boy and a girl [laughing]

Researcher: A boy and a girl?

Kayla: And a vagina!

At the beginning of the conversation children assign gender based on sexual body parts. Once I highlight the fact that the 'girl' doll that Tiffany is playing with also has a penis, the children begin distinguishing sex and gender somewhat abstractly. Kayla laughs "because that a girl and she has a penis" while Tiffany disagrees and decides, "…it's a boy and it has a dress on." The contradictory labels assigned to the dolls emphasize the inadequacy of the strict gender binary

and its limitations. The labels ‘girl’ or ‘boy’ are both applicable in this scenario; a boy may choose to perform femininity by wearing a dress and a person with a penis may choose to identify as a girl. The perceived absurdity interpreted by the children’s laughter further stresses the absurdity of the gender binary limitations and its conflation with sex.

While playing with the dolls and the dollhouse, Christina presents another gender transgressive scenario:

> Christina: [walks over to basket, pulls out black man doll] She drank the evil potion… now is… it’s a he.
>
> Researcher: Pardon me? She drank an evil potion?
>
> Christina: Yeah
>
> Researcher: And now?
>
> Christina: He’s he.
>
> Researcher: She’s a he? That’s really interesting. She just changed. So the queen turned into a man.

The possibility to change into a man is caused by drinking an evil potion. The evil potion may be interpreted as a negative connotation with gender non-conformity or perhaps it is simply an imaginary vehicle through which one may change genders. Later, I ask:

> Researcher: Where did the evil queen go?
>
> Christina: He, she, he went to jail!
>
> Researcher: He went to jail?
>
> Christina: She, he, it’s a he, remember he drank, she drank the evil potion and then he turned into he?
>
> Researcher: That’s right. So what do we call the queen now, a he or a she?

Christina: He. He's a king now!

Researcher: Now the queen is a king. This is a very interesting story line.

In my research, I argue that the use of pronouns tends to cause confusion when referring to an individual who identifies as transgender or gender independent (Gagliardi, 2014). The English language provides only feminine or masculine single, third person pronouns, aside from 'it', which suggests a non-living subject (Arter, 2011). Gagliardi (2014) found that children used masculine and feminine pronouns interchangeably to refer to a transgender character in children's literature. Similarly, Christina finds a lack of a proper pronoun with which to refer to the transgender king in her imaginary play. Christina plays with gender fluidity but remains within the gender binary (forcibly, one may argue, due to the lack of gender-neutral pronouns) as she adheres to the gender binary with language and refers to the transgender queen by saying "he's a king now!" The lack of gender-neutral pronouns makes it difficult for children to fully escape the gender binary.

As the children transgressed the gender binary through play, the role of the educator presented as a critical position from which the children's play could be promoted or discouraged. The ways in which the ECEs challenged and questioned children's assumptions of gender provided children to reflect on their thoughts and consider a variety of perspectives. Building on children's transgressive gender play, I consider the role of the ECE.

The Role of the Early Childhood Educator: Introducing New Discourses Beyond Heteronormativity

The role of the Early Childhood Educator (ECE) is a relevant aspect of the early childhood education environment to consider since they are a great influence on the structure of

the day, the tone of the room, and they guide children's learning. The questions an ECE asks can encourage the children to trouble their assumptions about gender and sexuality. Blaise (2009) points out the critical role of the ECE in challenging normative gender assumptions in the class by avoiding the role of the passive observer, which also links how to my role as a participant observer in the research project.

A deeper analysis of the role of the ECE is warranted since the ECE often guides learning by facilitating discussions and can either reproduce hegemonic gender expectations or challenge them. Rather than compare and contrast different teaching styles, due to the risk of providing yet another binary, I focus on the principles of a reconceptualist teaching style and discuss the ways in which it promotes opportunities for learning about multiple sexualities beyond heteronormative expectations.

The reconceptualist approach to ECE holds an educator's image of children at the core. and maintains that children are competent and capable citizens, deserving of access to knowledge (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 2013). It is apparent that one of the ECEs in the room, Rose, maintains what can be recognized as a reconceptualist's image of children:

Rose: Hmm… so how do you think you can change that?

Tiffany: Well he's the last.

Rose: Well does that matter? Does the game change if you're first or last?

Tiffany: No but we're not changing the rules of the game

Rose: Oh, so does anybody else want to change the rules and let Luke be the brother?

Tiffany: No!

In this brief segment, Rose empowers the children's voices and enables their capacity to change the rules to represent fairness and equality. The power dynamics are challenged. Although the

conversation does not explicitly challenge heteronormativity in the classroom, the notion that behaviours and rules may be changed, and further, that children have the capacity to change them, is an implicit recommendation for children to advocate for themselves. Rose also suggests that Tiffany reflect on her own choices, as the urge for fairness in one's own actions towards others is the first step toward promoting inclusivity.

Rose: …So do you think you can find it somewhere to be more fair?

Tiffany: I can't

Rose: Why not?

Tiffany: Because I don't want to…

Rose: Well that means you don't want to it doesn't mean that you can't.

The conversation continues with children not included in the study as Rose refers to the ongoing discussion of kindness and empathy; something the children have been working on. Rose's approach to this situation highlights her trust in Tiffany that she can make her own choices.

The reconceptualist view also translates to confidence in children's capability to understand certain topics and discuss their own theories. Encouraging children to think about their assumptions provides them with the opportunity to revise their thinking and consider multiple perspectives. For example, when the children discuss hair as a defining characteristic of gender, I pose the following question:

Researcher: But when a baby is born, babies don't have long hair, so how would you know if the baby is a girl or a boy?

The question challenges the children's reliance on appearance as an indicator of gender and connects to their prior experiences with babies. In Dylan's case, he refers to the birth of his baby brother and recalls his hairless head. Upon this realization, Dylan begins to explore new theories

and possible explanations. When Jake decides that girl are not invited to his birthday party, the ECE introduces a possible complication to his definitions of gender:

Rose: But what about if a girl dresses like a boy and comes to your birthday party?

Jake: No.

Rose: How are you going to be able to tell?

Jake: [bounces paintbrush on paper and looks at paper]

Jake's previous definitions of boy and girl are complicated by the notion of performativity; that one may perform a gender alternative to the one they have been assigned. Although he rejects even a girl dressed as a boy, the educator provides a new discourse and introduces the possibility of transgender performances.

In conversation with another group of children, Rose also demonstrates a reconceptualist view of children, as she trusts them with big theoretical concepts and proper terminology for sexual body parts. She also introduces the idea that gender can be just a label, a social construction. The children respond genuinely and inquisitively by reflecting on their own positions and opinions. During this conversation over morning snack, three children are sitting at the table with Rose as they discuss colour as it relates to gender.

Rose: Interesting. So colour doesn't make who you are from a genetics …so from your genitals.

Peyton: [stands up] Sometimes you can tell by here [points to genitals]

Rose: How's that? How can you tell by there?

Peyton: [whispers] Vagina penis.

Rose: M hm. But can you see that over your clothes?

Peyton: No.

Rose: You can't see that over your clothes.

Peyton: But when you're born, you're naked.

Rose: That's true. And I guess that's how they can identify whether you're a female or a male, right? That's probably how they can tell. So do you think it matters what label they put on you? Whether they call you a girl or a boy?

Alexis: No

Rose: Does that affect the way you dress?

Jamie: No [shakes head]

Rose: …And what you do and how you talk… no? Has no influence…that's a big word, like it doesn't… for example you love wearing pink

Peyton: [looks down at her dress]

Rose: Do you think you love wearing pink because you like the colour or because you're a girl?

Peyton: [looks around the room]

Jamie: Because she likes the colour.

Peyton: I like the colour

Rose: So that's why you like wearing pink.

Peyton: Well I do like purple too but I just have more pink clothes than purple clothes.

Rose: Interesting.

Rose's questions seem to dig beneath the social construction of gender to highlight to the children that gender performances are a result of hegemonic gender expectations. When Peyton is questioned as to whether she likes pink because she likes the colour or because she is a girl, it takes her some time to ponder the question. Once Jamie responds for her, Peyton seems

confident to respond that she simply likes the colour. This is a largely theoretical question that many academics continuously debate, and yet, Rose was able to get Peyton to think about the implications of the social construction of gender in her early childhood. Together, the educator and children explore gender openly and co-construct a safe space to discuss their thoughts. Moreover, Rose uses proper terminology for sexual body parts. Peyton is apprehensive at first and simply points to her genitals, signalling a hesitation to talk about sexuality. Once Rose questions Peyton further, implying that it is safe for her to speak about the topic, Peyton quickly whispers the words "vagina penis." Further on in the conversation, Peyton whispers the word 'underwear', which again denotes a perceived inappropriateness of sexual type talk.

Rose maintains an open and honest environment with the children by speaking about generally contentious topic with little tension. She brings up an event when a parent thought Jamie was a boy and Rose asked her permission to support her rather than assume that it bothered her and wanted support. Instead, Rose poses the question:

> Rose: M hm… I was asking you if that, if that bothered you, or if you wanted me to support you with that in any way and you said no. So does that matter to you Jamie?
>
> Peyton: And
>
> Jamie: [looks down at cereal and shakes head]
>
> Peyton: And some people, um, um, think, um, that, um that I, that people with short hair are only boys but I have short hair and I'm a girl.
>
> Jamie: No you don't
>
> Rose: You think that Peyton's hair is short?
>
> Peyton: And Jamie's a girl [laughs] and she has short hair.

Rose: So it sounds to me Jamie, that you think it's just a label. It doesn't really matter what somebody calls you, what gender they call you. Is that right? Am I understanding that right?

Jamie: [nods head]

The frequent repetition of the children's thoughts is a pragmatic teaching strategy to fully understand the children's point of view and also gives the children the opportunity to reflect on their own thoughts as they are reframed in someone else's words.

Rose continues the conversation by relating gender ambiguity to her own personal experiences and shares her story with the children:

Rose: Okay, that's interesting. Because when I was young like you, Jamie, I had very short hair like that as well. And I remember the same thing happening to me. People calling me a boy. And it didn't really bother me too much if I can remember that far back, because that was a really really, really long time ago. Back in those days they thought, if you cut your hair really really, really, really short, that it would grow back thicker and you would have nice hair. Kind of silly. So they actually shaved our heads [laughs]

Peyton: Oh! [laughs]

Rose: So we had shaved hair. So we looked like…

Peyton: [whispers] Boys

Rose: Boys, I guess. But I guess the point is, boys and girls really… its just their appearance that looks different. Hmm…

Rose's story, again, draws attention to the power of gender performances through appearance. By retelling a childhood story similar to Jamie's experience, Rose problematizes the gender binary. Interestingly, Peyton whispers 'boys' as if to signify secrecy or shame associated with a

girl performing masculinity. It seems as though Peyton acknowledges the disapproval of gender transgressions and hesitates to accuse the educator of having looked like a boy.

Rose: How come a baby can't tell if you're a boy or a girl?

Peyton: Because, uh, um, well Alexis thinks they can't tell but I think they can tell because of are, are, th, we, we might be getting changed, um and um and um um… they might look at us when we're changing and then they might see, like…

Rose: Your genitals?

Peyton: Yeah. Our genitals.

While the point that babies can or cannot tell if an individual is a boy or girl was not fully explored, Peyton refers again to genitals without whispering the word. This may be interpreted as a clear shift in her comfort, at least in this context, to discuss sexuality and sexual body parts. This may be attributed to the Rose's use of proper terminology or Peyton's growing comfort with the topic of conversation.

Rose: Jamie, do you think babies can tell if you're a boy or a girl?

Jamie: [shakes head]

Rose: No?

Peyton: Babies…

Jamie: They're colour-blind aren't they?

Rose: Hmm… that's interesting. So you're associating colour with telling if you're a girl or a boy. That's interesting. We talked about that right?

Although in a previous discussion, Jamie deems colour insignificant to gender, these gender assumptions seem to be pervasive. She refers again to colour as an indicator of gender. Rose is quick to identify Jamie's assumption that colour is associated with gender and refers back to

their previous conversation. Rose takes on the role to acknowledge and constantly challenge hegemonic gender assumptions. According to Blaise (2010), Britzman (1998), Robinson, (2014) and others, the educator's role is to constantly challenge these pervasive ideological assumptions. This role is perceived as a critical position from which gender transgressions and the introduction of new sexual discourses can be facilitated. Specific strategies related to the role of the ECE will be discussed in further detail in the recommendations section that follows.

Recommendations

This study challenges the notion that sexuality is irrelevant and inappropriate for children. By deconstructing notions of gender and sexuality through a postmodernist and queer lens, the experience of childhood sexualities is framed as a socially constructed, performative aspect of identity. Whereas ECE practice is heavily reliant on the developmentalist lens, more recent postdevelopmental theories encourage ECEs to consider children outside of the rigid expectations and to challenge developementally appropriate practice (Blaise, 2005). This study provides a new space to discuss childhood sexualities that is open and recognizes the influences of cultural and social factors and lived experiences. Through acknowledging the construction of sexualities, heteronormativity becomes visible and new discourses may emerge as valid.

As a result of the analysis, it is clear the role of the ECE is critical in order to challenge heteronormativity in an early childhood education setting. Blaise (2010) states the educator's responsibility is to provide opportunities in early childhood curricula for children to think critically about sexual knowledge. In order to do this, children's voices must be heard and valued. To value children's voices, entails a reconceptualist perspective, in which children are capable and competent citizens (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 2013). Through the reconceptualist perspective children are trusted with access to knowledge. To effectively challenge

heteronormative discourses, access to sexual knowledge must be granted. Building on open and honest discussions of gender and sexualities, ECEs have the opportunity to facilitate children's access to various sexual discourses, otherwise excluded from heteronormative assumptions. Since children often look to adults for feedback (Martin, 2011), an ECE who consistently challenges gender norms and heteronormative assumptions exemplifies the transgression of normative expectations. Janmohamed (2010) highlights a particular study by Collison (2005) in which lesbian and gay parents overheard children discussing the obligation to adhere to normative heterosexual family composition in their childcare centre and the ECEs did not attempt to challenge the heteronormative assumptions (Janmohamed, 2010). Avoidance of confronting particular exclusive normative assumptions does not disrupt dominant discourses. DePalma explains, "…queer (as a verb) is the process of consciously engaging in this troubling" (2013, p. 1). Hence, it is crucial to queer heteronormativity in the form of constantly questioning its perceived normalcy and naturalness (DePalma, 2013).

Further, it is recommended that ECEs encourage children to play with gender and sexuality by transgressing the gender binary and provide positive feedback for doing so. It is not enough, however, to provide opportunities to for children to temporarily move from one side of the gender binary to the other, as they do not disrupt the perceived validity of the binary (Jones, 2001). Janmohamed (2010) suggests ECEs can acknowledge the fluidity of gender and sexuality identities by offering an alternative script to that of heteronormative discourses. Through having access to more options, changing normative gender and sexual discourses is possible (Martin, 2011). For example, an educator's support is critical when a child is observed traversing gender norms since such transgressions are the beginning steps toward dismantling hegemonic gender and sexual expectations (Martin, 2011). The opportunity to explore discourses beyond

heteronormativity is present in any sexual expression that strays from heteronormative expectations (Scattlebol and Ferfolja, 2007).

To create early childhood education environments in which children think critically about their social position and experiences of identity, ECEs require the strategies and tools to facilitate and guide such thinking. Thinking critically about how educators influence the early childhood education environment must begin early on in ECE education programs. Jones (2010) and Barron & Jones (2012) urge educators to be reflective when working with children and to be critical of our own positioning. Since ECEs influence children's construction of their identities by enforcing or resisting heteronormativity, ECE students need the tools and strategies to challenge gender and sexual norms rather than reproduce them.

First, the role of the educator in transgressing heteronormativity in the early childhood classroom requires prior acknowledgment and theoretical knowledge of heteronormative discourses. This would involve ECE education programs offering courses on childhood sexualities, rather than including the topic within other courses on development or child abuse in which it is added as a brief consideration or framed in hegemonic discourses. An entire course devoted to childhood sexualities would allow ECE students to think critically about hegemonic discourses and the way we view children, sexuality, innocence, access to knowledge and so on. Such an exposure to critical thinking would challenge ECE students to step outside the traditionally accepted developmental perspective and view children and childhood from another angle.

Secondly, I recommend the application of queer and feminist theories to early childhood studies, not only in courses about childhood sexualities, but all aspects of ECE education. Often, inclusive education specifies disability and race however, feminist [and queer] theories have

found minimal space in early childhood studies (Rachel Langford, personal communication, March 24, 2014). Applying these theories from a postmodernist perspective to early childhood studies, encourages students to also reflect on their social position within political and power discourses that relate to the ECE field.

Future Research

As a result of conducting this study, I have gained understanding of how heteronormativity pervades a particular early childhood setting, and how there is room to talk about 'difficult knowledge" with children. Children's constructed heteronormative assumptions were communicated through discussions during play. Allowing the research study to flow openly, I was able to acknowledge the potential to slightly shift the research goal and to include children's interactions with ECEs in the data collection. This amendment was a beneficial learning experience and shed light on the importance of maintaining an open mind while conducting a study.

In the future, I intend to further investigate the role of the ECE and the capacity to facilitate transgressions of genders and sexualities. This role of the ECE relates to Ahmed's (2011) concept of the 'willfulness' and the 'willful subject', as one who disrupts taken-for-granted truths often hidden in daily practice by not complying with particular norms, either purposefully (i.e. questioning assumptions) or as a result of their perceived social position (i.e. a queer ECE may disrupt heteronormativity as a result of non-conformity to gender and sexuality norms). Utilizing postmodernist, queer and feminist theories, I plan to explore the position of the 'willful ECE' as one who facilitates the transgressions of genders and sexualities in early childhood education. Since "willfulness might be required to speak out about the injustice of

what recedes…" (Ahmed, 2011, p. 249), the willful ECE can acknowledge the fluidity of gender and sexuality identities by offering an alternative script to that of heteronormative discourses, as suggested by DePalma (2013) and Janmohamed (2010). Research on the role of the 'willful ECE' may contribute to the current movement toward professionalization of the early childhood education field

As a growing area of research, this study contributes to the understanding of the children's sexualities as they are constructed in an early childhood education setting. The children observed in this study were found to understand genders and sexualities through a number of discourses, including hair, clothes, colours and masculinity as the rejection of femininity. Conversations during play revealed the children's conception of genders through heteronormative assumptions. Often, the statements about gender ascriptions lacked reasoning (i.e. Dylan knew his baby brother was a boy because he "...saw that [...] that he was a brother"). In this case, the children worked through their ideas to present a reason for their response, which often relied on biological characteristics (i.e. Dylan explains, "sometimes, times boy legs grow longer than girl legs. That's how you know!")

Through the analysis, it became apparent that play is a site for children to play with gender. Multiple examples of gender transgressions took place during play. Christina played a queen who drank an evil potion and turned into a man; the doll with a penis wearing a dress was described as, "a girl and she has a penis", "a boy and it has a dress on" and "a boy and a girl". While children played with genders and gender transgressions, they also lacked the language with which to refer to these characters. Pronoun use remains an area of difficulty when referring to an androgynous or gender ambiguous subject.

The role of the ECE during these explanations of gender constructions and transgressions is critical. How the ECE responds, co-constructs and challenges gender and sexuality norms guides the climate of the classroom and facilitates children's understanding. In this study, it was found that the ECE with a reconceptualist perspective often challenged hegemonic discourse regarding genders and sexualities by posing questions and problematizing children's assumptions. The view that children are competent and deserving of access to knowledge contributed to rich discussions and exploration of gender and sexualities. For example, Rose asks, "so do you think it matters what label they put on you? Whether they call you a girl or a boy? This line of questioning presents the idea that gender is a social construction and encourages the children to reflect on their opinions. When the children shared their notion of long hair as representative of femininity, I asked the children about my partly long and partly shaved hair; troubling their preconceived assumptions about gender. Their response represented an interpreted portrayal of trans acceptance: "you're just… you all of us". This response encompasses the potential children have to understand the flexibility of genders and sexualities beyond binary constructions.

While this study contributes to the growing area of research on heteronormativity in early childhood education, the role of the educator warrants further investigation. As this study unfolded, the decision to include children's interactions with ECEs was made during the data collection process. The interesting findings on the effectiveness of the reconceptualist ECE on challenging hegemonic gender and sexuality discourses filled this gap in the research. Further and more in-depth studies building on this finding would increase our knowledge on the role of the ECE and the construction of heteronormativity in ECE settings.

Appendices

Appendix A: Newsletter

RYERSON UNIVERSITY

School of Early Childhood Studies
Faculty of Community Services

Researcher: Lisa-Marie Gagliardi, RECE

Research Participant Recruitment

May 26, 2014

Heteronormativity in Early Childhood Education

I am conducting a research study as part of the requirements for completion of the Master of Arts in Early Childhood Studies at Ryerson University.

I am currently recruiting participants for this study by requesting consent of your child's participation. Upon your consent, your child will also be asked if she or he would like to participate. This study involves observations of your child during free play. My role as participant observer will involve simply observing the children in their regular classroom setting, during their regular classroom schedule, doing their regular classroom routine.

If you are interested in supporting this research study, please pick up an informed consent form in the office. Please read the informed consent form carefully, sign and return to the office by June 6, 2014. Data collection will begin June 10, 2014.

This study has been reviewed and approved by the Ryerson Research Ethics Board.

Purpose of this study:

Since childhood sexuality is often considered taboo and its existence is denied, the purpose of this study is to investigate childhood sexuality and its relevance to children's lives. It will reveal how children's gender and sexual identities are influenced and shaped in an ECE setting. Specifically, this study aims to answer: How is heterosexuality constructed as a social norm in early childhood education settings?

Please contact me via email if you have any questions or concerns: lisamarie.gagliardi@ryerson.ca

Appendix B: Parental Consent Agreement

School of Early Childhood Studies
Faculty of Community Services

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Heteronormativity in Early Childhood Education

Your child is being invited to participate in a research study. Please read this Consent Form so that you understand what participation will involve. Before you consent to participate, please ask any questions necessary to be sure you understand what participation will involve.

INVESTIGATORS

This research study is being conducted by Lisa-Marie Gagliardi from the School of Early Childhood Studies, Faculty of Community Services at Ryerson University. The results of this study will contribute to my Major Research Project in fulfillment of my Master Degree requirements. If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact me at lisamarie.gagliardi@ryerson.ca or Dr. Rachel Berman at rcberman@ryerson.ca

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Since childhood sexuality is often considered taboo and its existence is denied, the purpose of this study is to investigate childhood sexuality and its relevance to children's lives. It will reveal how children's gender and sexual identities are influenced and shaped in an ECE setting. Specifically, this study aims to answer: How is heterosexuality constructed as a social norm in early childhood education settings? The results of this study will contribute to an action plan promoting inclusive practices in early childhood education.

DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDY AND YOUR PARTICIPATION

If consent to your child's volunteer participation in this study, your child will not be asked to do anything in addition to regular routine. The research will take place at Seneca King Observatory Lab Teaching School (KOLTS). I will simply be observing the children in their regular classroom setting, during their regular classroom schedule, doing their regular classroom routine.

As a participant observer I will be in the classroom while I observe the children's play. I may ask for clarification about the children's play such as: "Tell me more about what you are doing;" "Why did you say ____?" "What/who are you pretending to be?" The questions will relate to the children's play as it is observed. I will not discuss sexuality with the children. My role as participant observer is to ensure I collect the most accurate data and avoid making assumptions about what the children are doing.

The use of video recording will allow richer data to inform this study. The video will record things such as body movement, facial expressions, use of props (dress-up clothes) and peer interactions. The purpose of video recording is to capture data that cannot be otherwise recording by handwritten notes.

Your child's age, sex and gender will be documented. A pseudonym will replace your child's name to maintain confidentiality. You will not be contacted for a follow-up session or subsequent related study. Research findings will be made available via a hardcopy in the KOLTS office. If you request, I will email you a copy of the final paper. A further revised and possibly altered paper will be submitted for publishing in an academic journal.

POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS

The potential risks associated with this study are very low. While I conduct observations of children's play, your child may potentially feel uncomfortable. If your child appears to feel uncomfortable while I am observing, I will take a step back and rely on the video recordings. If I see a child expressing discomfort, I will reassure the child that participation is not mandatory and she or he may move to another area in the room not included in observations. If your child chooses to stay in that area of the room and wishes to no longer participate in the study, I will shut off the video recording equipment and rely only on handwritten notes, omitting your child from the data collected. The child may wish to withdraw from the study at that point. In this case, data will be used prior to that point or, if you or your child requests, all data will be omitted from the study.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO PARTICIPANTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY

Participants may potentially benefit from this study indirectly. The findings from this study will inform inclusive practices at KOLTS, and upon dissemination, will contribute to the growing academic work in the area of heteronormativity, children's sexualities and inclusive education. I cannot guarantee, however, that you will receive any benefits from participating in this study.

PAYMENT FOR PARTICIPATION

You will not be paid to participate in this study.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Confidentiality will be maintained to the extent allowed by law.

Video recordings will be kept securely in Dr. Rachel Berman's office under lock until the data is transcribed. Only Dr. Rachel Berman and I will have access to the video recordings. Video recordings will be retained until September 1, 2014. After this date, the videos will be deleted. Participants will have the right to review the video recordings. Participants and parents/guardians have the right to review the transcripts in which the children's names will be replaced with pseudonyms. This will ensure and maintain confidentiality and the privacy of the children.

Transcribed and handwritten notes will include children's ages, sex, gender and pseudonyms to replace names. Handwritten notes will be retained until September 1, 2014, after which, they will be destroyed. Transcribed notes will be retained for one year as they may be required at a later date to rewrite or make changes once the paper is submitted for publishing.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL

Participation in this study is voluntary. You can choose whether your child participates in this study or not. Your child will also be asked to give assent to participate in this study. If your child volunteers to be in this study, she or he may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind. If he or she chooses to withdraw from this study, data from the study may be withdrawn. You may also to choose to withdraw your child from the study. The choice of whether or not to participate will not influence your or your child's future relations with Ryerson University or Seneca College.

QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY

If you have any questions about the research now, please ask. If you have questions later about the research, please do not hesitate to contact any of the following people:

Primary Investigator:
Lisa-Marie Gagliardi, MA Candidate
School of Early Childhood Studies
Ryerson University
lisamarie.gagliardi@ryerson.ca
416-491-5050 ext 55102

Research Supervisor:
Dr. Rachel Berman, Professor
School of Early Childhood Studies
Ryerson University
rcberman@ryerson.ca
(416) 979-5000 ext. 7695

This study has been reviewed by the Ryerson University Research Ethics Board. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant in this study, please contact:

Toni Fletcher, Research Ethics Coordinator
Research Ethics Board
Office of the Vice President, Research and Innovation
Ryerson University
350 Victoria Street
Toronto, Ontario M5B 2K3
416-979-5042 or toni.fletcher@ryerson.ca

SIGNATURE OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANT/LEGAL REPRESENTATIVE

Your signature below indicates that you have read the information in this agreement and have had a chance to ask any questions you have about the study "Heteronormativity in Early Childhood Education" as described herein. Your questions have been answered to your satisfaction, and you agree to participate in this study. You have been given a copy of this form.

_____
Name of Participant (please print)

_____
Name of Parent/guardian (please print)

_____ _____
Signature of parent/guardian of participant Date

_____
Name of Legal Representative (if applicable)

Your signature below indicates your consent allowing your child to be video recorded for the sole purposes of this study. Again, video recordings will be maintained securely (locked and only available for review by Lisa-Marie Gagliardi and Dr. Rachel Berman) and will be destroyed by September 1, 2014.

_____ _____
Signature of parent/guardian of participant Date

Appendix C: ECE Consent Agreement

School of Early Childhood Studies
Faculty of Community Services

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Heteronormativity in Early Childhood Education

You are being invited to participate in a research study. Please read this Consent Form so that you understand what participation will involve. Before you consent to participate, please ask any questions necessary to be sure you understand what participation will involve.

INVESTIGATORS

This research study is being conducted by Lisa-Marie Gagliardi from the School of Early Childhood Studies, Faculty of Community Services at Ryerson University. The results of this study will contribute to my Major Research Project in fulfillment of my Master Degree requirements. If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact me at lisamarie.gagliardi@ryerson.ca or Dr. Rachel Berman at rcberman@ryerson.ca

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Since childhood sexuality is often considered taboo and its existence is denied, the purpose of this study is to investigate childhood sexuality and its relevance to children's lives. It will reveal how children's gender and sexual identities are influenced and shaped in an ECE setting. Specifically, this study aims to answer: How is heterosexuality constructed as a social norm in early childhood education settings? The results of this study will contribute to an action plan promoting inclusive practices in early childhood education.

DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDY AND YOUR PARTICIPATION

If you consent to volunteer participation in this study, you will not be asked to do anything in addition to regular routine. The research will take place at Seneca King Observatory Lab Teaching School (KOLTS). I will simply be observing the regular classroom setting, during regular classroom schedule, doing regular classroom routine.

As a participant observer I will be in the classroom while I observe the children's play. I may ask for clarification about the children's play such as: "Tell me more about what you are doing;" "Why did you say ____?" "What/who are you pretending to be?" The questions will relate to the children's play as it is observed. I will not discuss sexuality with the children. My role as participant observer is to ensure I collect the most accurate data and avoid making assumptions about what the children are doing. I will also observe interactions between ECEs and children.

The use of video recording will allow richer data to inform this study. The video will record things such as body movement, facial expressions, use of props (dress-up clothes) and peer interactions. The purpose of video recording is to capture data that cannot be otherwise recording by handwritten notes.

Your age, ethnicity, sex, gender and number of years in the field will be documented. A pseudonym will replace your name to maintain confidentiality. You will not be contacted for a follow-up session or subsequent related study. Research findings will be made available via a hardcopy in the KOLTS office. If you request, I will email you a copy of the final paper. A further revised and possibly altered paper will be submitted for publishing in an academic journal.

POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS

The potential risks associated with this study are very low. While I conduct observations of children's play, you may potentially feel uncomfortable. If you feel uncomfortable while I am observing, you may ask to not participate any further. You may wish to withdraw from the study at that point. In this case, data will be used prior to that point or, if you request, all data will be omitted from the study.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO PARTICIPANTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY

Participants may potentially benefit from this study indirectly. The findings from this study will inform inclusive practices at KOLTS, and upon dissemination, will contribute to the growing academic work in the area of heteronormativity, children's sexualities and inclusive education. I cannot guarantee, however, that you will receive any benefits from participating in this study.

PAYMENT FOR PARTICIPATION

You will not be paid to participate in this study.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Confidentiality will be maintained to the extent allowed by law.

Video recordings will be kept securely in Dr. Rachel Berman's office under lock until the data is transcribed. Only Dr. Rachel Berman and I will have access to the video recordings. Video recordings will be retained until September 1, 2014. After this date, the videos will be deleted. Participants will have the right to review the video recordings. Participants and parents/guardians have the right to review the transcripts in which the participants' names will be replaced with pseudonyms. This will ensure and maintain confidentiality and the privacy of the participants.

Transcribed and handwritten notes will include participants' ages, sex, gender (number of years working in the field for ECEs) and pseudonyms to replace names. Handwritten notes will be

retained until September 1, 2014, after which, they will be destroyed. Transcribed notes will be retained for one year as they may be required at a later date to rewrite or make changes once the paper is submitted for publishing.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL

Participation in this study is voluntary. You can choose whether to participate in this study or not. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind. If you choose to withdraw from this study, data from the study may be withdrawn. The choice of whether or not to participate will not influence your future relations with Ryerson University or Seneca College.

QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY

If you have any questions about the research now, please ask. If you have questions later about the research, please do not hesitate to contact any of the following people:

Primary Investigator:
Lisa-Marie Gagliardi, MA Candidate
School of Early Childhood Studies
Ryerson University
lisamarie.gagliardi@ryerson.ca
416-491-5050 ext 55102

Research Supervisor:
Dr. Rachel Berman, Professor
School of Early Childhood Studies
Ryerson University
rcberman@ryerson.ca
(416) 979-5000 ext. 7695

This study has been reviewed by the Ryerson University Research Ethics Board. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant in this study, please contact:

Toni Fletcher, Research Ethics Coordinator
Research Ethics Board
Office of the Vice President, Research and Innovation
Ryerson University
350 Victoria Street
Toronto, Ontario M5B 2K3
416-979-5042 or toni.fletcher@ryerson.ca

SIGNATURE OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANT/LEGAL REPRESENTATIVE

Your signature below indicates that you have read the information in this agreement and have had a chance to ask any questions you have about the study "Heteronormativity in Early Childhood Education" as described herein. Your questions have been answered to your satisfaction, and you agree to participate in this study. You have been given a copy of this form.

_____
Name of Participant (please print)

_____ _____
Signature of participant Date

_____
Name of Legal Representative (if applicable)

Your signature below indicates your consent to be video recorded for the sole purposes of this study. Again, video recordings will be maintained securely (locked and only available for review by Lisa-Marie Gagliardi and Dr. Rachel Berman) and will be destroyed by September 1, 2014.

_____ _____
Signature of parent/guardian of participant Date

Appendix D: Child Assent Agreement

School of Early Childhood Studies
Faculty of Community Services

Assent Form

Project Title: Heteronormativity in Early Childhood Education

Principal Investigator: Lisa-Marie Gagliardi

I want to tell you about a research study I am doing. A research study is a way to learn more about something. You have been asked to join this study because I am interested in how children in preschool play.

If you agree to join this study, you will not be asked to do anything differently from your usual days here at KOLTS. You will notice me sitting nearby writing things down on a piece of paper about things I see when you play. There will also be a video camera recording you while you play. This video will help me to remember things that happen in the classroom so I can write about it later. I will come to do this during morning free play for two weeks.

From doing this study, I may learn something that will help other children and early childhood educators learn about how children play. This study will help us learn more about how children play in childcare centres.

You do not have to join this study. It is up to you. You can say yes now and change your mind later. All you have to do is tell me you want to stop. No one will be upset with you if you do not want to be in the study or if you join the study and change your mind later and stop.

Before you say **yes or no** to being in this study, I will answer any questions you have. If you join the study, you can ask questions at any time. Just tell me that you have a question.

Check one of the boxes:

☐ Yes, I will be in this research study.
☐ Yes you can video record me.

☐ No, I do not want to do this.
☐ No, I do not want to you video record me.

_____
Child's name

_____
Child's signature or special mark

_____
Date

_____
Person obtaining Assent

_____
Signature

_____
Date

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