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Engaging Children's Spontaneous Questions about Social Diversity

Amy E. Ryken

University of Puget Sound, aryken@pugetsound.edu

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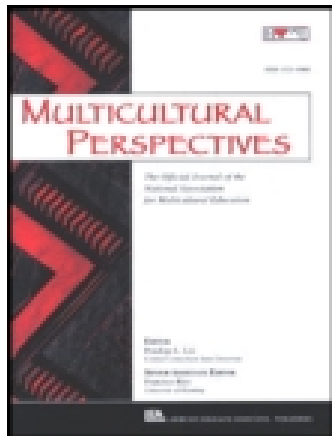
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Amy E. Ryken^a

^a University of Puget Sound

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PART IV
Personal Perspective

Engaging Children's Spontaneous Questions About Social Diversity

Amy E. Ryken
University of Puget Sound

In this article the author shares conversations she has had with elementary students inquiring about her gender identity to make visible the daily-ness of conversations about sameness and difference and to surface her own struggles with, and pedagogical deliberations about, these conversations. The conversations are conceptualized as both the unit of participation and analysis. Analyzing transcripts of conversations creates a tool for teacher reflection and proactively surfaces discussions about identity and social participation.

As a teacher educator who teaches math and science methods courses, I have the privilege and challenge of apprenticing teacher candidates into the complex and ambiguous work of teaching. In this reflective narrative article I share conversations I have had with elementary students inquiring about my gender identity during classroom visits and I describe how I use classroom narratives about controversial issues as a reflection tool with teacher candidates. Teachers' moment-to-moment decisions responding to children's spontaneous remarks can

create a classroom climate of dialogue and openness. Transcribing and analyzing classroom conversations creates a tool for teacher reflection and proactively surfaces conversations about identity and social participation.

Three Conversations: Taking a Listening Stance and Making Lived Experiences Visible

So much of our national conversation about teaching and learning is focused on academic outcomes and measuring cognitive skills through test scores. In this climate, children's authentic wonderings about themselves and the world in which they live can quickly become eclipsed and silenced. When visiting classrooms I have observed that there are many missed opportunities to engage young students thinking about identity as it naturally arises in conversation. For example, in a recent visit to a kindergarten classroom a student asked, "Miss Nelson, what do you know about drugs?" during a math lesson on triangles. In another classroom a third grader asked, "Miss Henry, do you go to church?" during a reading lesson on descriptive words. In a fourth grade classroom a student asked, "Miss Wilson, your hair is so pretty; how do you get it that way?" during a discussion about the common good. The questions, often viewed as off-task or disrupting to academic work, can be viewed as teachable moments that deserve attention and mutual engagement.

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Correspondence should be sent to Amy E. Ryken, School of Education, University of Puget Sound, 1500 N. Warner Street CMB 1051, Tacoma, WA 98416. E-mail: aryken@pugetsound.edu

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On my weekly visits to elementary school classrooms to observe teacher candidates in their student teaching placements, children often ask me if I am a boy or a girl. Listening to their question and engaging in conversations has helped me to better understand the importance of responding to children's spontaneous remarks about identity. I use the conversations, and my reflections about them, to model and teach how to open up dialogue about social issues.

I teach in a fifth-year M.A.T. program within a small liberal arts university in a mid-size city in the Pacific Northwest. The cohort program includes approximately 30 teacher candidates each year. Like the current teaching force in the United States, the majority of teacher candidates in the program are White women. While my teacher candidates are interested in exploring issues of sameness and difference with their students, they bring a wide range of skill levels and experiences to engaging such questions. They often express that they don't know how to engage young children's questions about social diversity topics such as gender expression, sexual orientation, race, class, or religion. To create a teaching tool to open up conversation with my students, I began by creating an artist's book¹ in which I juxtaposed photos of myself with text detailing my conversations with young children inquiring about my gender identity. I have also shared these conversations in professional presentations in which I explored how gender is framed in classrooms and in society. In this piece I extend my inquiry by making visible how I use conversations about identity and social participation in my teaching and I extend my analysis beyond gender expression.

To make my lived experiences visible, and to demonstrate the challenges I face in engaging students in authentic conversations, below I share three representative conversations I have had with children about my gender identity.

Conversation 1

The 24 fifth graders and my 22 college students are working at tables to set up an experiment to test the impact of differing salt concentrations on brine shrimp hatching. I move from table to table, listening to conversations and posing questions about experimental variables. As I approach one table, Zakiya² asks me a question.

"You are a girl?" she asks.

"Yes I am," I reply.

¹Artist's books are an art form that integrates book production with thematic and/or aesthetic issues. This format supports the presentation of personal voice in relation to social issues.

²All student and teacher candidate names are pseudonyms.

"You're wearing a suit," she observes.

"Yes I am," I reply.

"Girls can wear suits?" she asks.

"Yes they can," I reply.

"I did not know that. That's neat!" she exclaims.

Without another word she returns to measuring teaspoons of salt into a plastic cup.

Conversation 2

A few months later I'm in a different classroom with 25 second graders and my college students; together we are using laptops to research animals and habitats in Africa. I am sitting at a table assisting two students—Zach who is researching black rhinos and Nora who is researching zebras. Nora turns toward the girl sitting next to her.

"I don't know if my partner is a boy or a girl," she nervously states.

Overhearing her question I ask, "What do you think I am?"

"I think you are a girl, but I don't know why," she replies.

Zach looks up from his computer screen and loudly states, "She is a girl! Her name is Amy."

"Her name is Amy," Nora repeats quietly.

"Does that make me a girl?" I ask.

"I'm not sure," she replies.

Nora then looks at the computer screen image of zebras standing in the savannah.

"What should I write?" she asks.

"You could draw a zebra based on the photograph, that's one way to take notes," I reply.

For the next 45 minutes Nora, Zach, and I read web-pages, learn about wildlife and threats to it, and take notes. Nora didn't ask any more questions about my gender identity. After school my student, Alice, who was student teaching in this classroom, sent me an e-mail message sharing that Nora enjoyed the research session and wanted to know when I'd be back to class to help out.

As evidence that gender identity is a primary social organizer, I note that school context does not seem to impact whether or not children pose the “Are you a boy or a girl?” question. These two conversations took place in two very different elementary schools within a three-mile radius of my university campus. One school’s student population is predominately White and few students qualify for free or reduced price meals (often used as a proxy measure of economic inequality). The school boasts some of the highest reading and math scores in the district. The other school’s student population is predominately Black and Hispanic/Latino of any race(s) and over 95% of student’s qualify for free or reduced price meals. Reading and math scores at this school are among the lowest in the district.

These two conversations with elementary students are powerful reminders to me that young children actively work to sort individuals into category systems, such as the limiting binary framing of boy or girl, that they have been taught through daily observation and interactions.

These two conversations with elementary students are powerful reminders to me that young children actively work to sort individuals into category systems, such as the limiting binary framing of boy or girl, that they have been taught through daily observation and interactions. In each conversation I am reminded that body movement, clothing, and tone of voice are interpersonal symbols of gender identity (Wilchins, 2004). My tall height, slim build, short hair, androgynous style of dress, and high voice send mixed signals about which gender box I may (or may not) be categorized into.

Gender development and differentiation occur across the life span and are the result of complex interactions of psychological, biological, and socio-structural elements. Gender is a primary categorization system that affects our daily lives. From very early infancy and throughout adulthood observational learning, self-reflection, and others’ modeling of gender roles can reinforce and disrupt gender categories. Questions posed about gender identity are authentic because they highlight how categories so powerfully shape our lived experiences and how categorization arises within social interactions

(Bussey & Bandura, 1999; Butler, 2006; Shutts, Pemberton Roben, & Spelke, 2013).

As I reflect on these conversations I debate the pros and cons of giving children honest and authentic answers, like, “Yes, I am,” versus posing questions, like, “What do you think?” I wonder if my answers about how I self-identify reinforce a binary conception of gender? Or, do they validate and normalize a range of gender expression? I wonder if asking questions is better for learning more about how children understand gender norms? I’m particularly struck that the questions about my gender identity come up even when the lessons are focused on teaching science. These conversations, while full of tensions, also demonstrate the potential for how locations of cultural exchange, or third space, create opportunities for authentic interaction, shared humanity, and transformation of what counts as knowledge in a classroom setting (Chang & Conrad, 2008; Ciwko, 2013/2014; Gutiérrez, 2008; Katch & Katch, 2010; Wacker & Ryken, 2012).

Conversation 3

A few months after the previous two conversations, I am observing a student teacher in a third elementary school and I face the question again.

As Monica teaches a lesson on graphing functions such as $y = 2x$ I observe the class from a table located on the side of the room. After the lesson Monica and I discuss her reflections about what worked and what could be improved in the lesson while her fourth grade students enjoy free reading time. Midway through our conversation Daniel stands up, puts his book down on his desk, and walks over to the table where we are seated.

“Are you a girl or a man?” he asks with urgency.

“A girl,” I reply.

“I thought you were a man,” he states.

“What made you think that?” I ask.

“Your hair. It’s really short hair. It’s man’s hair,” he observes.

He turns away from the table, walks back to his desk, sits down, and resumes reading. Monica, having already analyzed and discussed conversations like the ones described above in my math and science pedagogy course the previous semester, smiles knowingly and we continue our debriefing conversation.

From these children’s authentic inquiries I have learned to reframe how I hear the “Are you a boy or

girl?” question. Instead of hearing the hostile statement, “You don’t look right!” I hear an invitation for discussion about the category systems that both help us make sense of our world and limit how we engage the variety and complexity of people around us. By engaging the “Are you a boy or a girl?” question, I’ve come to see the very real dilemmas of teaching for social justice. Social justice education asks that educators critically interrogate individual differences and intersectionality of identities while also analyzing larger systems that create inequality (Hackman, 2005). Public schools are at once described as sites of both social transformation and social reproduction (Biegel, 2010; Chen, Nimmo, & Fraser, 2009). Teachers, especially teachers of young children, are constantly navigating opening up conversations about sameness and difference while trying not to devalue family values, traditions, and/or points of view.

Difference impacts how we experience and navigate these tensions (Horvitz, 2011); for example, a gender conforming teacher is not going to trigger the “Are you a boy or a girl?” question. In a world that remains stratified by a binary conception of gender, I find that for people like me these conversations are not a choice, but a regular occurrence. I’ve wondered if it is easier for me to hear these questions because I self-identify as a woman and because it is children, rather than adults, who are asking. Can I hear and engage the questions because I’m a temporary guest in the classroom? I debate the pros and cons of expanding the examples of boy and girl versus disrupting the idea that the categories boy and girl hold any meaning at all. I wonder if I’m in fact complicit in reproducing a system of oppression by validating a question that assumes a binary framing of gender and by putting myself, a gender non-conforming educator, on the line to engage the question each time it arises. While I might bring a certain set of experiences to these interactions, I remind myself that all educators can play a role in eliciting students’ developing thinking and creating classroom environments that are grounded in care and critical examination of assumed societal norms.

Conversations: The Unit of Participation and Analysis

As I repeatedly experienced the “Are you a boy or a girl?” question, I began to write out the conversations as way to process them. I found the act of documenting helpful because I could make visible to myself and others the lived consequences of not fitting normative gender stereotypes. Each time I informally shared conversations with friends and colleagues, I found they opened up space to discuss cultural exchanges and sponsored powerful conversations about gender norms and roles. In addition, observing missed opportunities to

engage children’s spontaneous questions made me wonder about whether, and how, I was preparing teacher candidates to discuss identity and social participation in the context of academic work. Over the past few years I’ve intentionally developed resources to support new teachers to grapple with this very complex and controversial dimension of teaching.

I conceptualize conversations as both the unit of participation and analysis. Students and teachers regularly encounter questions of identity and social participation as they participate in classroom interactions. Transcribing and analyzing classroom conversations is one reflection tool that supports teacher candidates to listen more closely to children’s authentic questions and to reflect on conversations about topics that they may not yet feel comfortable engaging with young children. I use written transcripts of conversations to purposefully bring forward controversial issues and to support teacher candidates in the processes of listening and rehearsing a range of possible responses (Pasque, Chesler, Charbeneau, & Carlson, 2013; Welcoming Schools, n.d.). This process helps to build habits of making teaching practices public, expressing uncertainty, and negotiating tradeoffs. We analyze conversations about a range of social diversity, including gender expression, sexual orientation, race, class, and religion.

By engaging the “Are you a boy or a girl?” question, I’ve come to see the very real dilemmas of teaching for social justice.

By sharing my own experiences, struggles, and reflections with my students I validate and normalize these kinds of conversations in the context of math, science, and reading lessons. In class discussion I emphasize that there is not one right way to respond—we may respond in the moment, or later when the lesson is completed. We consider that responses can be statements of validation, such as, “Yes they can” in response to a student’s query if girls can wear suits, or questions, such as, “What do you think I am?” in response to a student’s question about gender identity. As a community of practice we work collectively to enhance our capacity to listen to students spontaneous remarks.

Building on my work as a math educator focused on eliciting and probing students developing thinking, I support teacher candidates to take a listening stance, rather than a corrective or judgment stance toward student questions (Ball, 1997). In class discussions we use two lenses to analyze the conversations. First, the lens of generosity:

What strengths do we see in the student's actions? and How did the educator attempt to engage the student's question? For example, in considering the conversation with Daniel about my hair we might consider that he felt comfortable to move about the classroom and ask a question that was of interest to him. We could note his question as evidence of a safe classroom community, in that Daniel felt comfortable to approach his teacher and an adult guest with his question. We could discuss that the answer, "A girl," and the question, "What made you think that?" invited Daniel to share more of his thinking. Second, the lens of skepticism: What questions do we have about the student's actions? and What other responses might we imagine? For example, we could discuss other possible motives for Daniel's question, such as leaving assigned work to walk around the classroom, wanting to disrupt academic routines of the classroom, or whether his question came from his desire to assert a certain definition about maleness and femaleness. We could consider the pros and cons of saying "I'm neither" or "What do you think I am?" after Daniel's initial question.

After a whole class discussion analyzing the conversations, I then ask teacher candidates to write reflections on index cards about (a) an insight they have had and (b) a possible action they might take in their own teaching. Below are two sample reflections written by teacher candidates after analyzing conversations about gender identity:

Even very young children have already deeply internalized what it is to be a boy and a girl and that you are one or the other. One action I will take is not to be afraid of these types of conversations and use them as learning points for everyone involved. I hope to not shut down students when they might say something that seems inappropriate at first.

I finally realized just how uncomfortable I am with how my mentor teacher handled a situation with a male student who said he liked Barbies. I am certainly not trying to pass judgment at all, I just feel that there is a better way to deal with that situation.

These teacher candidate reflections, especially terms like "afraid," "seems inappropriate," and "uncomfortable," demonstrate that analyzing conversations supports teacher candidates to express discomfort and to consider how to use challenging conversations as learning opportunities. When children make spontaneous remarks or pose questions, teachers make moment-to-moment choices about whether and how to respond. By ignoring students' remarks teachers may communicate to students that they cannot ask questions about the world around them, that they have said something wrong, that they should keep their ideas to themselves, or that their ideas do not matter in the classroom. Analyzing conversations and rehearsing possible responses is one strategy to support

teacher candidates to listen and respond to the many different kinds of questions that young learners ask.

Creating a Culture of Collegial Sharing About Challenging Conversations

In my teaching I work to create a culture of collegial sharing about challenging conversations about social diversity. Having had the transcription process explicitly modeled, teacher candidates and alumni regularly share transcripts of their classroom conversations about identity. This sharing of conversations has helped to extend my analysis from gender identity to include many different facets of identity, such as race, socio-economic status, religion, and sexual orientation. As described above, I use these conversations as texts to sponsor teacher reflection in my math and science pedagogy course. Below I share two such conversations.

A program graduate who is a first year teacher in a 5th grade classroom recently sent me this conversation:

Had a wonderful moment today I wanted to share with you. Every Friday we have "Backpack Shares" in the afternoon where two students get to share three things that are important to them, one at a time. One of my students "G" is new to our school and was sharing one of her items with the class. The item was a rock from Mt. Kilimanjaro that her mom's partner had brought back with her for G. The conversation that follows is how my class learned about the term "partner."

G: My mom's partner, Dillan, brought this back for me. It's a piece of Mt. Kilimanjaro in Africa.

Students: Coo!!!!!!

Student 1: Your mom's what?

G: My mom's partner, Dillan.

Student 2: What's a partner?

G: You know, partner. My mom's partner, Dillan.

Student 3: Partner, like her rock-climbing partner?

Student 4: Nooo, like business partner.

Several students still look confused at this point. . .

G looks at me and smiles shyly.

Ms. M.: G, do you want me to explain what a partner is? Is it ok if I explain who Dillan is? (I have met both of these people prior.)

G: Yes please.

Ms. M.: In this case, partner means girlfriend. Dillan is G's mom's girlfriend.

Several students: Ohhhhh.

Student 2: Can I see the rock?!

It was exciting to see a conversation like this go the way it did. No students reacted in a "grossed out" or surprised manner. I think I'm chalking it up to the culture of the community around our school and the familiarity of the students with homosexuality. Just thought I'd share :)

This first year teacher wrote up the event in conversation format, as I model in class sessions, demonstrating her comfort in engaging student questions about identity and her awareness that the narratives of our lived teaching experiences are sources of knowledge. In the conversation she offers validation and support to her student G by asking her, "G, do you want me to explain what a partner is?" Her actions demonstrate that in this teaching moment, she took a listening stance by acknowledging the students' questions. Her reflections highlight common concerns that teacher candidates' share as I work with them to engage students' spontaneous remarks about identity. In her reflections she highlights that, "No students reacted in a 'grossed out' or 'surprised manner'" and acknowledges a school and community culture that is open to discussions about homosexuality. Teacher candidates often express concerns that conversations about identity and social participation may upset families and might be viewed as teaching a certain set of values. They often pose questions like, "How do you make sure that kids are exposed to these topics without upsetting parents?" "If families complain about certain books or class conversations, should I respect the family's wish or continue with my actions?" "What kind of techniques can I use if students are stubborn and won't accept others?" These kinds of critical questions show an awareness of the challenges in engaging questions of social diversity and provide a beginning point for conversation with colleagues, families, and school administrators. Questions such as these above do not have simple formulaic answers; when children bring forward questions about social diversity we can create a space for conversation. By highlighting the questions that children ask, teachers have a reflection tool to engage each other, and students' family members, in conversations about contested social values. Part of our ongoing work as educators is to stretch ourselves to understand the community in which we teach, to work to build productive relationships amongst students, and to create a classroom community grounded in caring and shared humanity. These conversations may not be easy, but we cannot build a language of inclusion if we do not speak with each other.

A teacher candidate wrote up this conversation and his reflections after a classroom visit with a 5th grade elementary class focused on creating a personal coat of arms.

While working on the "10 years from now" square on the coat of arms a girl asked me, "Is 19 too young to be a mom?"

I was in the mindset of pushing the kids into wanting college, I said, "Yeah, that's pretty early."

Boy was I surprised when the boy sitting across from me threw me a curveball. "My mom had me when she was 16," he said.

Now I had to back-pedal as to not upset my students and make sure it was clear that I meant no derogatory comment toward his mother. It is important to keep in mind all of the different points of view there are in the world, and no matter how positive I am that my opinion is best, it is not my place to tell students what to believe. Instead of immediately giving my opinion on the subject, I should have probed her more, led her to make her own decision. Amy taught us the best way to deal with controversial topics that are brought up is not to shut them down, or avoid them, but to look into them and find out why they are being asked—by jumping to an answer right away I missed out on a positive teaching opportunity, as well as backed myself into a corner with the student across from me.

Teacher candidates often express concerns that conversations about identity and social participation may upset families and might be viewed as teaching a certain set of values. They often pose questions like, "How do you make sure that kids are exposed to these topics without upsetting parents?"

This teacher candidate specifically names his own mindset "of pushing the kids into wanting college" and his desire to "keep in mind all of the different points of view there are in the world." His reflections suggest the struggles that all teachers face as we work to negotiate our own experiences and beliefs in relation to the experiences and beliefs of our students. His use of the phrase "backed into a corner with the student across from me" suggests the deeply felt dilemma of a missed opportunity

to connect with one student's lived experience. Also note his growing awareness about making a shift from "jumping to an answer" to considering why students are posing questions about particular facets of identity.

By documenting and sharing transcripts of classroom conversations about identity and social participation teacher candidates learn to make the dilemmas of their teaching practice public (Lieberman & Pointer Mace, 2010), express uncertainty, make themselves vulnerable, and develop a systematic process for reflecting on their willingness and ability to engage in conversations about controversial topics with young children. By sharing narratives with each other teacher candidates and teacher educators can expand our knowledge of the kinds of questions that children pose and the contexts in which such questions arise.

Spontaneous Remarks: Invitations to Conversation

In addition to teaching the mandated curriculum, an important aspect of our work as teachers is to help students think about who they are, who they are becoming, and how they make sense of the people and the world around them. Curriculum is not only the lessons we design, but also how we engage students in the to-and-fro of classroom conversation and the kind of classroom community we work to foster. It is our responsibility as educators to open up dialogue with students, to listen carefully to what young children have to say, and to respond naturally and authentically to their questions.

I believe deeply that we need curious, critical, and reflective teachers who will willingly enter into the relentless and fragile space of conversation where social equality and identity is negotiated again and again. By making my own conversations and struggles visible, I surface social controversies and invite teacher candidates to share their struggles to engage children's spontaneous remarks about identity. By documenting and critically analyzing conversations my teacher candidates and I work to question dominant and normalized discourses about identity and to envision a society that is more equitable and humane. We are each uniquely situated within the wide range of social debates. Each child's question or spontaneous remark is an invitation and a moment of accountability where we can choose to listen and engage in conversation with openness.

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