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Queering Early Childhood Studies: Challenging the Discourse of Developmentally Appropriate Practice

This article reviews approaches to early childhood training and practice in Ontario and sets it in the wider context of feminist poststructural knowledge production. Through a feminist poststructural reading, this article uncovers dominant assumptions of universality underlying the heteronormative discourse of developmentally appropriate practice that dominates early childhood training, postsecondary program curriculum, and professional learning and practice. It argues that postsecondary studies in early childhood education must challenge the pervasive heteronormative discourse in order to shift early childhood practice toward a viewpoint that is counter-hegemonic and integrates queer perspectives.

Cet article passe en revue des approches relatives à la formation et la pratique en éducation à la petite enfance en Ontario en fonction de la production de connaissances dans une optique féministe et poststructurale. Cette approche révèle des hypothèses dominantes sur l'universalité sous-jacentes au discours hétéronormatif de la pratique développementale appropriée qui domine la formation en enseignement à la petite enfance, les programmes d'études au postsecondaire, et dans la pratique et l'enseignement professionnels. Nous maintenons que les études postsecondaires en enseignement à la petite enfance doivent opposer le discours hétéronormatif répandu de sorte à déplacer la pratique en enseignement à la petite enfance vers un point de vue qui est antihégémonique et qui intègre des perspectives gaies.

Introduction

The current early childhood training program in Ontario offers a pedagogical framework that is dominated by Anglo-American approaches to plurality and inclusion of all children and families. The seminal text often used in early childhood in training is *Developmentally Appropriate Practice* developed initially by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC, 1997) based in Washington DC, but now extensively embedded in curriculum material, field placement expectations, and course readings. In my research, I am concerned with how this text is entangled so extensively in early childhood studies, professional learning, and practice. I intend to rupture the dominant discourse of heteronormativity and the propensity to silence the existence of queer families in early childhood settings by moving *queer* from a position of *other* to one that is more apparent in early childhood affecting both parents and children. For the purpose of this article, I focus on the problem of using a text that lacks queer identity in early childhood training and practice in Ontario.

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Early childhood educators in Ontario are required to complete a minimum two-year diploma program offered at publicly funded community colleges. This consists of foundational courses in early childhood development with a focus on program skills and practices that are considered developmentally appropriate. In Ontario, early childhood educators are also governed by the *Early Childhood Educators Act* (2007), established by the new College of Early Childhood Educators to regulate the profession of early childhood education. According to the *Early Childhood Educators Act*, the practice of early childhood education:

> Is the planning and delivery of inclusive play-based learning and care
> programs for children in order to promote the well-being and holistic
> development of children, and includes,
> (a) The delivery of programs to pre-school children and school aged-children,
> including children with special needs;
> (b) The assessment of the programs and of the progress of children in the
> programs;
> (c) Communication with the parents or persons with legal custody of the
> children in the programs in order to improve the development of the children.

The Act neglects to include language that would indicate a professional responsibility to engage in reflective practice that embeds notions of diversity, equity, or inclusion, let alone queer perspectives. As a college faculty member, I participated as a member of the working group established to set up the College of ECE, where I made a concerted effort to assert the significance of including recognition of family diversity in the practice of early childhood education despite opposition from a majority of committee members including college and university ECE faculty. I share this experience because it too shaped my interest in pursuing research on the absence of queer identities in early childhood training.

In this article, I use a feminist poststructuralist lens deliberately to make room for queer perspectives in early childhood education. I have reviewed texts that are commonly used in early childhood training programs and have analyzed how dominant forms of educational practice are perpetuated through the normative assignment of roles for children and families. This is not to suggest that all early childhood educators are homophobic and unaware of issues related to queer-identified families or the processes of gender identification in young children. I am, however, suggesting that heteronormativity is implicit in early childhood studies through the texts that are selected for study, the focus on developmentalism, and the lack of critical analyses among educators involved in early childhood studies. I demonstrate how dominant assumptions of universality in early childhood training in turn limit and control program curriculum, professional learning, and practice. I also discuss the challenges of embedding a feminist poststructural analysis in early childhood studies and the implications of the dominance of developmentally appropriate practice in child development discourse.

The principles of developmentally appropriate practice form the title of a book by Gestwicki (2007) that is used in some early childhood training programs as a core foundational textbook. According to the author, the book "is designed to help teachers and students try to implement the (DAP) philosophy

daily" (p. vii). At first glance, the book has photo depictions of children from various racial backgrounds, suggesting that difference will be acknowledged. The glossary provides no explanation of any term that is connected to queer identity (lesbian, gay, same-sex) and the single reference to gender identity is defined as "awareness developed in early childhood that individual is male or female" (p. 457). The index offers no reference to queer issues (lesbian, gay, same-sex), and for diversity, it suggests that the reader refer to cultural variation. This lack of meaningful content in a foundational early childhood text, whether in representation of family difference, the development of gender identity, or the sociopolitical framing of queer rights, unreservedly silences queer identity and promotes the notion that children and families do not exist beyond the commonly understood heteronormative framework.

In their analysis of public and political response to a television show called *Playschool* aired in Australia, Taylor and Richardson (2005) demonstrate how a segment that showed a young girl visiting a park with her mothers "caused moral panic at the mere suggestion of associating young children with homosexuality, and how public debate ensued about what is and what is not appropriate for young children and who might decide this" (p. 165). They further argue that:

> Hegemonic discourses of childhood innocence and compulsory heterosexuality are consistently displayed in the metaphor of natural childhood innocence that has been subsumed within the educational science of developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) and reconfigured as a foundational premise of age-appropriate—and hence protective, nurturing and enabling - sequence and order. (p. 165)

Despite growing debate and critique among some early childhood researchers who challenge the principles of developmentally appropriate practice as a single universally accepted, normalizing approach to early childhood development (Bernhard, 2002; MacNaughton, 2005; Pence & Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2008; Robinson & Jones Diaz, 2006; Taylor & Richardson, 2005), the principles of developmentally appropriate practice continue to be prevalent in course texts, program curriculum, parent engagement strategies, and professional practice, playing a significant role in early childhood training and practice.

The developmentally appropriate text is based on a set of position statements published by the National Association for the Education of Young Children based in Washington DC. The principal authors Bredekamp and Copple (1997) write, "reciprocal relationships between teachers and families require mutual respect, cooperation, shared responsibility and negotiation of conflicts toward achievement of shared goals" (p. 22). This positioning of relationships between teachers and families is based on the premise that parents' goals and desires for their children are negotiable and that an appropriate mutual understanding is expected by parents and teachers to achieve optimal learning opportunities. In challenging the early childhood profession, Canella (1997) argues:

> When any teaching method is marketed as the best or most appropriate for a particular group of people, the assumption is that there is [are] universal truths that are discoverable concerning teaching and that the "right" method

predetermines outcomes. This pedagogical determinism is consistent with a positivist view that would scientifically reveal human truth. (pp. 130-131)

The approach of *Developmentally Appropriate Practice* (NAEYC, 1997) is to insulate early childhood educators from critical reflective practice and instead lays out the expectations of how to understand difference, albeit in a limited capacity. For example, the text states:

> Increasingly, programs serve children and families from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds requiring that all programs demonstrate understanding of and responsiveness to cultural and linguistic diversity. Appropriate curriculum provides opportunities to support children's home culture and language while also developing all children's abilities to participate in the shared culture of the program and the community. (pp. 4-20)

In response to criticism of the guidelines' definition of cultural difference, NAEYC recently (2007) adopted revisions to their position statement on developmentally appropriate practice that again remain silent on lesbian, gay, and queer identity or difference in family composition. There is not a single word on same-sex families, let alone queer families, in the index or glossary. The limited definition of diversity represented by difference in culture and immigrant status, but absence of gender identity, sexuality, and family composition, is reflective of the desire to ensure that children's learning and the knowledge that informs this practice are sanitized and dominated by a heterosexual matrix of relations. This inherent desire to deny difference beyond superficial definitions is documented by Robinson (2005), who argues that early childhood practice genders children as heterosexual beings through children's narratives of "mock weddings, mothers and fathers, boyfriends and girlfriends. Such experiences are not linked to children's own understanding of sexuality but are seen as children being children" (p. 6). These limited constructions of gender identity and sexuality consistently dominate early childhood discourse, making anything remotely different that may inherently be tied to sex to be considered non-normative (Scattlebol & Ferfolja, 2007). Early childhood educators remain resistant to examining the dominant assumption shaping their pedagogic practice and curricular choices in the classroom, and early childhood education's propensity to normatively privilege heterosexuality is reflected in the relationships between parents and educators and the selection of children's literature in early-years settings. In fact we need "frank discussion on the subject of sexual and gender identity and the issues facing those who do not conform to traditionally recognized cultural norms" (Queen, Farrell, & Gupta, 2007, p. iv). Instead, in early childhood curriculum and practice, we have superficial attempts to embed notions of diversity and equity and a refusal to acknowledge how significantly different family composition is in the current social and political context.

The further discouragement of non-normative expressions of gender and the ultimate silence around children's queer identifications, explorations, and performances and the failure of some early childhood educators to challenge the use of heterosexist and/or homophobic language in the classroom are further examples of heteronormativity (Janmohamed & Campbell, 2009). Developmentally appropriate practice has been central to the educational aims of

defining practice, measuring quality, and universalizing childhood to the extent that it establishes a discourse of one way of knowing that normalizes developmentally appropriate practice as the underlying truth. These normalized forms as suggested by Sumara and Davies (1999) can be interrupted, challenging dominant forms of gender identity, sexuality, and what constitutes development. However, in early childhood studies, notions of *developmentally appropriate practice* have become completely entangled and familiar in research and policy as well as in practice. The term is almost intrinsic to early childhood programs, but significantly problematic to the complexity of diversity and difference and how queer identity is silenced.

In addition to the more commonly understood identities, children with queer parents may be adopted or may have been conceived with a known or unknown donor. Children may be born through surrogacy or may be part of an earlier heterosexual relationship. These queer variations on conventional notions of *family* demand consideration by early childhood educators, faculty, and researchers, again challenging the discourse of normative human development. The silence of queering identities invokes a pathologization, as Butler (1993) has suggested. I argue that the term *developmentally appropriate practice* plays a significant role in relationships between early childhood educators and parents and by extension establishes a discourse that is dominated by heteronormativity in early learning and care programs. Viruru (2005) demonstrates that despite important scholarly work on the limitations and colonial assumptions underlying developmentally appropriate practice, dominant discourse of childhood continues to dominate and pervade not only Euro-western practice, but also early childhood development in the majority world. Heteronormativity is reified and "embedded in things," as Warner observed—in ordinary, everyday activities (Adams, 2004, p. 16) and played out in the daily interactions and activities in early childhood settings. Examples include lining children up by gender, ignoring boys engaged in aggressive behavior, suggesting instead "the boys are just being boys," and selecting children's books that depict only the heterosexual family make-up. The application of a poststructural analysis in early childhood studies provides an opportunity to unpack a schooling discourse still tied to Anglo-American and normatively determined standards of developmentally appropriate practice.

Early childhood studies are based on the hegemony of what is scientifically known about children's development without adequate attention being paid to how childhood is socially and culturally constructed. I do not undermine the significance of brain development in the early years. In fact, as an educator, I am actively involved in supporting professional learning related to the intricate links between brain development and self-regulation, language acquisition, and learning. I am, however, suggesting that the relationships between children, their families, and educators also play a significant role in children's healthy social and emotional development and that early childhood educators need to be more cognizant of how these relationships influence development, particularly when they do not fit the normative expectations that we may have of children and how we understand a child's social world is critical to supporting optimal development. I see the possibility and necessity to infuse queer perspectives into traditional child development to bridge a gap that could lead

to a deeper understanding of inclusion instead of perpetuating research and practice that I believe continue to be responsible for a traditional view of childhood development. The dominance of a singular construct in early childhood can be challenged through queer theory. As Jagose (1996) suggests, queer theory enables us to understand "how gender operates as a regulatory construct of heterosexuality" (p. 83), and by extension, Robinson (2005) describes queer pedagogy as enabling educators to critically examine the natural order of things. I am interested in proposing a view of early childhood study and practice that challenges notions of universality because, as Battiste (2005) has suggested, "universality underpins cultural and cognitive imperialism, which establishes a dominant group's knowledge, experience, culture and language as the dominant form" (p. 124). With a growing diversity of family composition, it is now more critical than ever that early childhood training programs move away from a "single way of knowing, in this case developmentalism and make room for multiple perspectives, which in turn influence innovative kinds of teaching decisions and practices" (Blaise, 2005, p. 184). In deconstructing the influence of a positivist approach to early childhood studies, I choose to use the term *queer* especially in the education context as Sears (1999) so aptly describes in *Queering Elementary Education*, "queering education happens when we look at schooling upside down and view childhood from the inside out. Teaching queerly demands we explore taken-for-granted assumptions about diversity, identities, childhood and prejudice" (p. 4). My research interests are driven by a desire to raise the salience of perspectives outside the normative approaches to child development. The work of Butler (1993) creates a space to challenge, shift, create discomfort, and make noise about the gendering of children in early childhood programs. In *Bodies that Matter*, Butler suggests:

> To what extent, then, has the performative "queer" operated along side, as the sanction that performs the heterosexualization of the social bond, perhaps it also comes into play precisely as the shaming taboo which "queers" those who resist or opposed that social form as well as those who occupy it without hegemonic social sanction. (p. 226)

In essence, we do (perform) gender whether we want to or not and implicate children who may not fit normative expectations of what we expect as acceptable behavior. Kumashiro (2002) has argued that the norms of schooling and its manifestations can be perceived as oppressive, arguing, "changing oppression than requires constantly working against this norm" (p. 11). The propensity to focus on developmentally appropriate practice seems overbearing and indeed oppressive. Children's identities would be better understood through a critical deconstruction of Western theories of child development and of the normative pedagogical frameworks that dominate early childhood practice.

Walkerdine (1981) set an early course in challenging the assumptions behind the notion of developmentally appropriate norms. By using Foucault's (1993) analysis of how societies create notions of truth, she questioned the production of truth in child development. Despite these early challenges to ideas of appropriateness and truth in development, early childhood training programs continue to espouse a construction of childhood based on Western hegemonic assumptions. Western truths about child development dominated

by the gendering of children, the denial of sexuality, and a sanitized under-standing of difference are reinforced among discourses that "transmit and produce power and as such are an important instrument of power" (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 2007, p. 31). The work of Foucault provides a method by which to examine the regimes of power organizing normative discourses and categories of human development. According to MacNaughton (2005),

> Despite Foucault's deep and continuing influence in diverse fields of study, early childhood students (and instructors) rarely meet Foucault's work or the work of post-structuralist thinkers. It's hard to find, for example, Foucault's ideas of disciplinary power, docile bodies and power and knowledge in mainstream early childhood texts. (pp. 3-4)

As I demonstrate in the following sections, early childhood education's desire normatively to privilege heterosexuality is reflected in relationships between parents and educators, the selection of children's literature in early childhood settings, the enrollment forms that families complete, and ultimately in the silence around children's queer identifications and explorations of the self. Foucault's analysis of universities as places of normalizing knowledge has relevance to early childhood studies. He suggests, "a university's primary function is of selection, not so much of people as of knowledges. It can play this selective role because it has a sort of de-facto—and dejure—monopoly" (p. 183). Universal knowledge in early childhood education needs to be deconstructed and reconstructed to reveal how heteronormative values frame queer-identified families or children and to provide infrastructures that will support these families and children in early childhood settings.

Why Bring a Queer Perspective to Early Childhood Studies?

In the last decade, Canada has seen a significant increase in queer parents having children through birth, adoption, and surrogacy (Fenlon & Agrell, 2007). Combined with legal reform and social change, the definition of what constitutes a family has been turned on its head. In 2005, the Canadian government granted same-sex couples the right to be married in a civil union. In 2006, the rights of same-sex parents in Ontario were also granted, enabling the names of both parents to appear on a child's birth certificate (Rayside, 2008). In 2007, an Ontario court recognized three people as the legal parents of a child (Epstein, 2009). At the same time, Census Canada (2006) indicates that a growing number of same-sex parents are rearing children, an increase of 33.9% since 2001. This estimate includes only those parents who self-identify as queer (an inclusive term I use in this article to designate people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, or queer). This suggests that the reported numbers would be much greater if all queer parents identified their sexual orientation and family status. Queer parents are a growing demographic in Canada, and I assume that like other working parents with young children in the workforce who use both informal and formal early childhood services (Beach, Friendly, Ferns, Prabhu, & Forer, 2009), queer parents are also likely to enroll their children in early childhood education (ECE) programs. Understanding the changing face of families that goes beyond single parents or bi-racial families raises the importance of understanding radically different and less familiar forms of family composition.

In an examination of eight lesbian mothers' experiences in early childhood programs in an urban community in Australia, Scattlebol and Ferfolia (2007) found that as a result of homophobia experienced in their own families, these mothers anticipated that their children would experience the same in educational settings. In a study of lesbian and gay parents with young children in early childhood settings in an urban community in Canada, Collison (2005) found that these parents perceived that they were more closely scrutinized than other parents. Common assumptions were made that the birth parent had more importance than the non-birth parent. The parents also noted less dialogue with the early childhood educators about family composition, weekend activities, and a consistent pattern of encouraging gendered play. In Collison's study, parents overheard children discussing how families are defined by the presence of one mother and one father. When one child said to another, "You can't have two mommies! You have to have a mommy and daddy," the staff present made no effort to challenge the children's heterosexist assumptions about family composition.

According to Ochner (2000), the process of identifying diverse beliefs about gender and reflecting on what we say and do influences children's learning about gender concepts. Early childhood educators need to be cognizant of how their silence on, and the resistance of, queer identification is as unacceptable as an educator's silence about racism. I believe that further research that informs early childhood educators' knowledge in how to respond to children's conceptions/misconceptions not only about queer identity, but about other significant factors including parents' employment status, ability, who lives in the home, immigration status, hunger, homelessness, and race to name a few is important to support a more critical perspective to child development and family relations. The absence of critical pedagogy may be a result of a lack of critical pedagogy in preservice training. If in fact there is heavy reliance in many early childhood training programs on notions of developmentally appropriate practice, than the text becomes the focus of the study rather than the experience of the children, families, and educators engaged in teaching and learning. As MacNaughton (2005) described, Foucauldian knowledge rarely makes the rounds in early childhood training.

A recent legal case has put the limitless possibilities of family composition that challenge the normative family unit into the limelight. The Ontario Court of Appeal recently granted three parents the legal right to parent a child in *AA v. BB*. This landmark ruling signals a shift from an era of the conventional family composed of one father and one mother to one that recognizes the multiple parent-child relationships characterizing "trans"- formative modern families (Gananathan, 2008). Queer formations of family "push us to reconsider our many family relations and experiences that are not governed by the strict codes of biology" (Goldberg & Brushwood Rose, 2009, p. 9). The child in the legal case of *AA v. BB* has not yet started elementary school. It is quite possible that he is involved in an early childhood program. Educators must develop an understanding and acceptance that this child has three and not two legal parents. His early childhood teachers and elementary school teachers can certainly expect interesting parent-teacher nights.

The other case challenging existing heteronormative family structures is that of trans fathers considering parenting. The Queer Parenting Program at the 519 Community Centre in Toronto offers an 11-week Trans Fathers 2B Parenting Course. This program is significant because it too poses serious challenges to the medical, legal, and education systems in Western democracies. Will the law recognize these men as fathers, or will it insist that they be identified as the mothers of the child? Once the child enters early childhood programs and schools, what experiences will he or she have? Will the child's existence be pathologized and stigmatized, or will his or her presence bring about new respect and understanding of the child, the parent, and the family? These queer parent-child relationships rupture the normative familial ideology and structures determining early childhood policy and practice and challenge what is being taught and learned in early childhood training programs. Yet when analyzing seminal texts like developmentally appropriate practice or equity and diversity education course work, these types of cases are generally not discussed, thus preventing early childhood educators from developing a more critical pedagogical framework for professional practice. Making a shift from a superficial understanding of diversity to deeper reflective practice can be informed by the work of Robinson and Jones Diaz (2007) and Blaise (2005), who offer perspectives beyond the heteronormative norm so often found in early childhood training.

In early childhood programs, a common practice involves setting up dramatic centers that encourage children to explore play that involves forms of cognitive development including language acquisition, role exploration, and higher levels of reasoning. Children are known to explore gender roles or often imitate adults in their lives. For example, if a male child has never been exposed to a male figure being nurturing, he may struggle with boys who enjoy playing with dolls, confusing nurturance with expectations of gendered behavior and challenging the boy who "wants to be the mommy." Problematizing why preschool-aged children are so attuned to gender-specific roles is not central to early childhood practice, ensuring silence around children's exploration of gender roles. Yet a heteronormative understanding of gender reinforces the normative performance of gender common to children's learning experiences. The silence of early childhood teachers when faced with children who do not fit gender norms is exacerbated by a lack of education about variations on gender development and by their own anxieties about what it means to be male and female. Robinson and Jones Diaz (2007) suggest that more recently, explaining gender through biology has been seriously critiqued. Current research recognizes that "gender is considered to be much more dynamic, fluid and contradictory amongst both males and females" (p. 132). Yet in early childhood training, the focus on gender as a biological formation continues to permeate discourse.

Butler (1993) argues that gender formations are performative and views gender not as a natural, biological attribute, but as a collection of repeated acts that over time constitute gender of the subject. The early childhood years are undoubtedly the most important time of life to expose children to a variety of life options that should not be limited to dominant ways of knowing. Educators who can challenge the dominant discourse of normative forms of child

development can develop curriculum and practice that provide opportunities to explore safely the fluidity of gender roles and how *normal* it is for children to explore this. However, there is also a need to recognize, as Butler suggests, that if we do not act out the gender norms that are expected of us, then we are not recognized fully as human subjects. People who fail to enact gender norms as expected are pathologized and punished with social exclusion. Children quickly learn to fall into gender expectations for fear of exclusion or social sanction. Children learn early in their lives about the signals that represent boys and girls in society, and this is often demonstrated daily in early childhood programs by the dominant-gendered nature of play and the role children take in the block area, sociodramatic play, or the playground.

To illustrate how gender conditioning operates in the family and in collusion with early childhood education, I turn to my own work. Recently I was invited to make a presentation on how to work with lesbian, gay, and queer families in early childhood settings. I typically hear a question on what "to make of" a child who is exhibiting characteristics of the opposite sex. This time, the question was about a boy of about 7 years old who continues to behave "like a girl." The boy wants to dress up as a princess all the time despite his father forbidding him to do so. The school communicates its concerns by informing the father. This unintended collusion (forbidding the child to play with princess clothes) contradicts how gender identification in children is reflected by their capacity to play and interpret themselves much more fluidly than permitted by the gender binaries established by adults. Yet more problematic is the inability of the educator to support the child by advocating through early childhood development knowledge that in fact exploring gender fluidity is perfectly normative.

The above example of how family, society, and school deny the child who refuses his or her gender assignment is common to many. In *Doing Justice to Someone*, Butler (2001) describes the painful medical transformation of a male child born with female sexual organs into a female child in the name of normalization. She challenges the desire of the medical and educational professions seeking to normalize by any, and often inhumane, means to fix the gender of the child and investigates human desire to restrict queer identities. In the case of John/Joan, this desire to impose normalization set him up for a life of emotional suffering and dysfunction. Butler writes,

> The very criterion by which we judge a person to be a gendered being, a criterion that posits coherent gender as a presupposition of humanness, is not only one that justly or unjustly, governs the recognizability of the human but one that informs the ways we do or do not recognize ourselves, at the level of feeling, desire and the body, in the moments before the mirror, in the moments before the window, in the times that one turns to psychologists, to psychiatrists, to medical and legal professionals to negotiate what may well feel like the unrecognizability of one's own gender, and hence, of one's personhood. (p. 622)

The story of John/Joan exemplifies Butler's (2001) argument that if individuals fail to enact gender norms, they are often sanctioned at best and dehumanized at worst. Despite surgery and significant socialization to transform the baby into the opposite sex, as a young child John/Joan preferred

active masculinist play, reinforcing the idea that children adapt to what is expected, but that their desire to be what they want to be is also powerful. As with the child to whom Butler refers, the early childhood educators also do not know "what to make of" the child exploring other gender norms and wish to develop strategies to help him fit into normative expectations. As with Butler who wishes we could do someone justice, in the case of the father having difficulty with his son's choice of gender play, I also wished he had let the child be; let the child be a little boy who wants to be a little girl. The boy may want to be a girl or may want to be like a girl or be a boy who prefers to engage with his feminine side. However, the little boy, like other little boys, is trapped, as Blaise (2005) suggests, by a "hegemonic masculinity is heterosexuality, which shapes the structural order of gender relations" (p. 86). Regardless of what he may become, if enough pressure is placed on him, he will be forced and expected to fit into normative gendered roles and become a sad little boy. The irrational fear of something queer or different creates a desire to produce gender norms enacted by what is expected.

Another example raised in a professional learning workshop involved a 5-year old girl who believes she is a boy and engages with the world around her using her masculine traits. She prefers to dress in clothes that are sold in the boys' section of the department store; she plays primarily with boys engaged in active play like climbing, running, and building blocks. She recently cut her hair, and she urinates standing up. Her mother seeks to find a way to respond to her child's expression of identity as she understands it, and the early childhood educators are confused about what they should do. As with the little boy, adults are unsettled by the child's non-normative gender identity.

Many early childhood educators do not have adequate capacity to demonstrate a response that goes beyond the normative expectations of how gender identity is developed and how to deal with difference. The desire to *want to do something* to try to resolve the child's identity crisis is typical of early childhood educators' support of children and their families. In her analysis of identity and difference, Minh-ha (1997) argues, "to raise the question of identity is to reopen the discussion on the self/other relationship in its enactment of power relations. Hegemony works at leveling out differences and at standardizing contexts in the smallest details of our lives" (p. 416)

Returning to early childhood studies, the focus on development needs also to include more explicit discussion on how children learn gender and what influences their experience. Children are influenced by how adults interact with each other and how they interact with the child. Children are also actively engaged in choices that they make in constructing their own gender. Early childhood educators can offer an alternative script of gender identity that recognizes that identity is not static. Gender identification is actually fluid, and if gender role exploration is not part of early childhood discourse, early childhood educators will not have the educational capacity to support children who rupture gender norms. Children's exploration of gender roles brings to life Butler's (2001) questions about who defines gender.

> What counts as a coherent gender? What qualifies as a citizen? Whose world is legitimated as real? Subjectively, we ask: who can I become in such a world

where the meanings and limits of the subject are set out in advance for me? By what norms am I constrained as I begin to ask what I may become? (p. 621)

In the preschool years, boys and girls use dramatic play centers similarly. But as they get older, children live the questions that Butler asks by mixing the rules, adding caution to their play, and being watchful of the constraints around them both from their peers and the adults in their life. Children will play with these norms until they experience the threat or violence of social sanctions.

Queering early childhood education would permit non-normative as well as normative gender-role identification, exploration, and adoption. As Butler notes, "queer has been used to mobilize hatred and repressive legislation against lesbians and gays" (Britzman, 1995, p. 155) through the denial of parental rights, the violence of gay bashing, the renewed same-sex marriage debate in Canada, and the exclusion and isolation of queer identity discourse in education. *Queer* is also a term that pushes the boundaries of what is deemed acceptable and creates discomfort because of its historical context. In the case of the boy who seems to want to be a girl, my proposal to the child's teacher is that the little boy may indeed identify as queer. The hushed whispers in the room told me I had created noise. It tells me that introducing *queer* into early childhood discourse has the potential to lift the silence on non-normative gender formation in early childhood studies. Children's construction of gender identity and their humanity are often based on how their peers and adults relate to them. Children's value systems and sense of morality are connected to the expectations established in their networks of family, friends, teachers, and extended community. Is it not the responsibility of educators to shift beyond normative expectations to a pedagogical framework that enables the exploration of queer identity by both children and adults?

Conclusion

The construction of identity in the early childhood years is a complex narrative that is infused with confusion, denial, acceptance, and emotion. It is neither static nor based on the hegemonic binary of masculine and feminine. To be a girl child is also to be a boy child. To be a boy child is also to be a girl child. Children's curiosity about gender identification is more fluid and evolving than the dominant expression of heteronormative gender that is often imposed by others. The desire for binary understandings of gender identity enables order. However, exploration and inquisition in children's cognitive development is also experienced in the child's emotional development and social relations—nothing orderly about that process. Texts such as *developmentally appropriate practice* do not address these issues because they are messy and do not fit in the orderly fashion that some developmentalists prefer. The extent to which the child can play with her or his identification depends on the capacity of adults to create possibilities for children. Why do we prevent boys from dressing in princess clothes or even question a girl who wants to urinate standing up? Why are we uncomfortable when two men want to raise children regardless of their sex? Why are we fearful of diverse expressions of gender? What is so important about the need for children to have father figures in their lives? Cannot women in their roles as mothers have the capacity to provide

whatever it is that a father figure offers? These questions and many more unsettle the heteronormative value systems that regulate children, the books we choose to read during story time, and the reinforcing of parallel structures that strengthen the idea that girls do look pretty in pink. When was the last time a boy was told he looked pretty in pink?

Early childhood training does not adequately prepare educators to face heteronormative ideology in early learning environments. The imagery of an ideal family life and the gendered roles for girls and boys and women and men make it impossible for a child to feel a sense of belonging if she or he does not fit the expectations of this imagery. This desire for idealness may stem partly from societal values, but these patriarchal dominant values are no longer acceptable in justifying the lives of some at the expense of others. Early childhood educators can instead act as agents of social change, advocate a position that is critical of Western hegemony: one that embeds queer perspectives in the early childhood curriculum. However, before meaningful change can happen, early childhood studies need to shift radically how educators are trained to work with children and families from uncritically embracing a dominant familial ideology to critically embracing the ideologies of all families. Advocating a pluralistic approach to early childhood studies is no longer adequate in its limitations.

Riding the wave of developmentally appropriate practice enables the control of the subordinate and lays down expectations that suit the dominant norm of heteronormativity and gender binaries. This approach maintains that early childhood education is engaged in inclusive practice that does not perpetrate racism or homophobia. However, I would argue that the dominance of Western forms of knowledge does in fact perpetuate unitary forms of childhood construction. In the Canadian context of early childhood studies, a critical analysis of this knowledge has begun to challenge the singular and universal approach to child development. Although the exploration of the hegemony of the Anglo-American reality is necessary, there needs to be further exploration of how queer-identified children and parents experience stereotyping and homophobia through a dominant glare of nonexistence. The early childhood experience of children who do not fit the normative forms of gender identity deserve attention—not to question their existence, but to support their exploration so that if 4-year-old child senses that she or he does not belong in the body she or he was born into, that child will always belong to the early childhood community.

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