Early Childhood Educators Reflect on Their Conversations With Families About Children's Diverse Gender Expression

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Abstract

This research captures early childhood educators' (ECEs') perspectives when communicating with families about their children's diverse gender expression. Since families and ECEs play a pivotal role in shaping young children's understandings of gender it is necessary to learn more about ECEs' communications with families. The data that informs this paper is derived from a qualitative research study that used semi-structured focus groups with 15 ECEs who work with young children, ages 3–5 years, at licensed early childhood centres in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada. The ECEs were invited to participate in two focus group sessions to discuss their experiences after recalling conversations with families whose children identify outside the traditional constructs of masculine boy/feminine girl. One central finding the ECEs observe is the displeasure fathers have when their sons engage in feminine interests, including the affective actions the fathers then take to remove stereotypically feminine coded activities from their sons' lives. This research highlights the need for ongoing early childhood education training on gender diversity to better support non-binary, transgender children, and children from 2SLGBTQIA+ families.

Keywords: early childhood education, gender, families, diversity

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Introduction

Early childhood educators (ECEs) and family members play a vital role in children's gender expression as they spend a significant amount of time with them from the ages of 12 months to 5 years. With families and ECEs being the primary starting point for gender-role socialization, it is critical to learn more about how they can inform children's understandings of self (Dyer, 2017). The emergent research in childhood studies reveals that children's gender expression can be influenced by the expectations and actions of parents, educators, and peers (Abreu et al., 2019; Callahan & Lucy, 2019; Neary & Rasmussen, 2020). Research also tells us that girls and boys are often treated differently from the beginning where traditional gender stereotypes are reinforced by the primary adults in their lives (Aina & Cameron, 2011; Servos et al., 2016; Wingrave, 2018). For example, boys are often encouraged to play with trucks and girls with dolls. Previous studies similarly show that preschool teachers and family beliefs can "affect children's ways of doing gender in preschools" (Emilson et al., 2016, p. 227) and consequently reduce children's comfortability to express their gender more openly (Averett, 2016; Blaise, 2005; Robinson, 2013; Servos et al., 2016). It is the subtleties of interactions with adult role models, their use of gender stereotypes, that can transfer to children either consciously or unconsciously (Wingrave, 2018). This qualitative research study aims to explore the perspectives of 15 ECEs who work in licensed early childhood centres in Nova Scotia, Canada to learn about their experiences when mediating conversations with families about gender. The limited literature in this area highlights the importance of exploring ECEs' perspectives when trying to support children especially when communicating with families who might adopt a more traditional binary construct of gender (i.e., boy/girl, masculine/feminine).

Gender in the Early Years

There is a need for educators who can guide children through understanding their gender identity and to respect diverse gender expression (Hill & Bartow Jacobs, 2020). However, recent research reveals that many preschool educators demonstrate discomfort and often reluctance to educate on gender diversity (Neary & Rasmussen, 2020). One constraint that preschool teachers experience is the long history of childhood innocence and the protection of heteronormativity within developmental pedagogies (Dyer, 2017; Prioletta, 2020). For example, teachers often turn to developmental logics when addressing unequal gendered power dynamics during unstructured play (Prioletta, 2020). When children are viewed as innocent, dependent individuals, attention seldom is given to the messy entanglements of gender in early childhood settings (Dyer, 2017; Prioletta, 2020; Russell, 2011). Horton (2020) identifies the requirement to move beyond discussions of gender stereotypes in primary schools and explore the everyday experiences of gender diverse children and the complexity of gender in primary schools. Given this, there is a requirement to expand our current thinking on gender in the early years and to explore ECEs' perspectives as it relates to communication with families, including the role ECEs

have in supporting children's gender expression with recognition that not all children are gender fluid, but can demonstrate awareness and allyship.

Sparse research has been conducted on ECEs' perspectives when having conversations with families on gender. However, several studies have examined the role of families in shaping their child's gender expression in social contexts (Averett, 2016; Berkowitz & Ryan, 2011; Kane, 2012; Meadow, 2011; Pfeiffer, 2012; Rahilly, 2015). It is well established that "many adults have an internalized developmental ideology that presumes a deterministic relationship between sex and gender; males are 'boys' and females are 'girls'" (Rahilly, 2015, p. 347; see also Berkowitz & Ryan, 2011; Gunn, 2011; Morgan et al., 2022). As Berkowitz and Ryan (2011) remark, "one of the primary roles of parents is to train children to fit in appropriately with prescribed gender norms" (p. 333). Kane (2012) refers to the conforming of children to heteronormative gender constructs as an act of boundary maintenance where parents consistently take on the role of monitoring their child's gender expression to maintain gender normativity in public spaces. Kane (2012) reiterates that this type of gender maintenance regime can be referred to as a "gender trap" addressing how even the best-intentioned parents feel stuck in public spheres to adhere their children within the dominant binary of masculine boy/feminine girl (p. 3). Further, studies demonstrate that young children imitate homophobic and transphobic language they hear from family and pose questions about gender in social settings (Blaise & Taylor, 2012; Robinson, 2013). Martin (2005) signals parents can often associate gender non-conformity in the early years with future homosexuality and this elicits parents, especially fathers, to influence children's gender identity.

Kane (2006) reports after interviewing 43 parents that fathers express "negative responses to their sons wearing pink or frilly clothing; wearing skirts, dresses, or tights; and playing dress up in any kind of feminine attire" (p. 160). Nail polish similarly causes concerns from fathers as they intentionally act to steer their sons from having their fingernails painted. Kane (2006) reaffirms the length parents will go to for their sons to produce masculine ideals: "Heterosexual fathers play a particularly central role in accomplishing their sons' masculinity and, in the process, reinforce their own as well" (p. 150). Alternatively, girls are often given more leeway than boys (Thorne, 1993). Averett (2016) comparably explains that "gender non-conformity was seen as acceptable for girls, but deviant for boys" (p. 199). Hence, the pressure that families place on their children to adhere to traditional social and cultural discourses is problematic as it can impact children's future identities in profound ways (Kane, 2012; Meadow 2011; Servos et al., 2016). Alternatively, some parents work to disrupt gender norms and legitimize their children's diverse gender expression.

Rahilly's (2015) study of 24 parents with transgender children explains how parents aspire to support their children's gender variance and describes the measures parents will take protect

their children from bullying and exclusion in public spaces. Their forms of protection include only allowing small deviations in terms of gender expression. Rahilly gives the example of a parent buying their son pink socks, but not a skirt; this addresses the potential pressure parents face to produce an "overall front of normativity" (p. 347). Given families and ECEs play a pivotal position in shaping young children's understandings of gender, we need to learn more about ECEs' interactions with families and engage in more collaborative practice to support gender inclusion. Ultimately, this research provides opportunities to bring attention to the complexity of the mediated relations between children, educators, and families on gender in early childhood settings. This also calls attention for ongoing gender inclusive training within the early childhood education sector, including postsecondary childhood studies programs. I turn now to outline the conceptual framework for this study.

Critical Queer Childhood Framework:

Many critical ECE researchers and theorists suggest that discourses in developmental early childhood education have created universalized approaches that are commonly used to classify, distribute, and regulate children's bodies (Burke & Duncan, 2014; MacNaughton, 2005; Pacini-Ketchabaw et al., 2015; Richardson & Langford, 2022; Varga, 2011). Dyer (2017) describes how a "model of Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) can be destructive to some children's imaginative and social capacities when not attuned to their possible queer presents and futures" (p. 291). Dyer explains how the image of the child as innocent that cloaks normative theories of childhood development does not address the complexity of children's diverse gender expression. In this paper, I borrow Dyer's (2017) critical queer approach to early childhood development and education to disrupt developmental logic. Dyer explains that a queer approach to childhood studies is not just about a "child's potential desire for same-sex relationships or LGBTQ identity", but towards "more expansive ways to account for children's deviances from normativity" (p. 293). Specifically, I apply a critical queer childhood framework to bring gender analysis to the forefront to examine the relational process of children's gender expression in more open and fluid ways beyond universalized ways of thinking. As Dyer (2017) reminds us, there is a "need to reimagine our theories of childhood so that they are not constrained by rhetorics of childhood innocence that invalidates the child's potential queer desires" (p. 300). In this study, a critical queer approach offers a space to account for the complexity of the ECEs' experiences when mediating gender relations with family members and their children. It acknowledges that ECEs' subjectivities, knowledges, and positionalities are expansive and filled with complexity when supporting children's gender expression. The turn towards using a critical queer childhood framework is particularly pertinent as previous work shows that educators can feel limited in their practices when applying developmental logic yet fear the repercussions if they veer from these dominant discourses in early childhood education (Blaise, 2005; Prioletta, 2020).

I emphasize "critical" to be taken in a broad post-structural stance intended to challenge developmental logics and work towards more gender equitable and inclusive practices in early childhood education. A critical shift focuses away from the individual child produced through developmentally appropriate practice models towards more fluid understandings of gender informed by children's affective relations within early learning spaces. This turn to a more critical queer approach is important given developmentally appropriate practice continues to be highly influential and dominant in the Canadian ECE field (Richardson & Langford, 2022). As Richardson and Langford (2022) state, "as college and university educators who have taught ECE students for many years, we are troubled by this dominance because it limits opportunities for students to engage with different perspectives on children's development and experiences" (p. 409). Therefore, in this study, the use of a critical queer childhood framework allows opportunity to explore alternative ways of thinking about gender when working with educators, children, and their families.

While this study does not analyze ECEs' perspectives on the Nova Scotia early years learning curriculum framework and their approach to gender inclusive programming, it is important to briefly outline the Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development's (DEECD, 2018) *Nova Scotia Early Years Learning Curriculum Framework: Capable, Confident, Curious* gender inclusive curriculum given the participants are working in Nova Scotia. The gender inclusive learning guidelines include: "not making assumptions about a child's gender, to see the full potential of a child and to trust the child's choices in relation to toys, play, self-identification and expression" (DEECD, 2018, p. 31). In addition, the framework encourages ECEs to follow these gender inclusive principles:

- Use gender inclusive language as much as possible. Rather than addressing groups of children as "boys and girls", use "children" and "everyone."
- Organize children into groups rather than "boys or girls."
- Avoid using gendered terminology to make it easier for children and families who are gender non-conforming to feel valued and included.
- Ensure all children have access to materials and encourage children to explore their full range of interests without gendered expectations (e.g., "this area is for boys").
- Include a diverse selection of literature in the learning environment around gender identity, gender expression, and family diversity, such as families with same sex parents or guardians, single parent families, grandparents and extended family roles, and foster families.
- Educators may wish to engage children in conversations that broaden their understanding of gender, being oneself and respect for gender diversity. (DEECD, 2018, p. 50)

The framework also recognizes that ECEs can help children develop a positive sense of their own gender and help effectively counteract and even neutralize gender bias within early learning spaces. Given that the ECEs in this study are guided by this early learning framework, it

is helpful to see the curriculum approach on gender inclusion in advance of sharing their perspectives.

Methodology

Participants

A qualitative research design was used to examine ECEs' perspectives when having conversations with families on their children's diverse gender expression. The participants comprised 15 ECEs who are employed at licensed early childhood centres in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada. Five participants had over 20 years of experience, three had between 10–20 years, and seven had under 5 years of experience. Thirteen of the 15 participants self-identified as women, one self-identified as a transman, and another chose not to identify. All participants had either a Level II certification (Early Childhood Diploma from a community college) or a Level III (undergraduate degree in Child and Youth Study). The early childhood centres are in modest income urban centres and the ECEs participating in this study had varying levels of early childhood experience in relation to working with children, ages 3–5 years (see Table 1).

Table 1

Participants

Gender	Early Childhood Certification Level	Age range (years)	Years of work experience with children ages 4–5 years in a licensed early childhood centre	Focus group no.
Woman	III	56+	26	1
Woman	III	56+	35	2
Woman	II	56 +	24	3
Woman	II	46–56	10	2
Woman	II	46–56	21	1
Woman	II	46–56	26	3
Trans-Man	II	36–46	2.5	3
Woman	II	36–46	25	1
Woman	III	24–36	2.5	2
Woman	III	24–36	11	1
Woman	II	24–36	16	2
Prefer not to identify	III	24–36	3	3
Woman	II	24–36	2	3
Woman	III	24–36	4	1
Woman	III	19–24	1	1

Phase 1: Observation and Documentation

During Phase 1 of this study, the 15 participants were invited to observe and document the conversations and interactions they had with families and children for a period of 8 weeks in relation to gender. Each participant during this 8-week period documented their observations through anecdotal notes. The purpose of this initial observation and documentation period was designed for the ECEs to document thick descriptions of their verbal and non-verbal interactions with families to have heightened awareness in relation to children's gender expression and how families can potentially influence children's understandings of gender and gender roles. During Phase 1, the participants were also invited to send the researcher via email a response to two questions: What comes to mind when you hear the term, "gender"? What comes to mind when you hear the term, "gender stereotype"? The purpose of these two questions was to gain initial insights on the ECEs' positions on gender and to build a space for the ECEs to begin to think about gender in advance of making their observations. The responses from the participants when asked, "What words come to mind when you hear the word, 'gender'?" were: *male*, *female*, *boy*, *girl*, *man*, *woman*, *that you can never assume a gender*, *wide spectrum of gender*, *non-binary*, *fluid*, *transgender*, *gay*, *queer*, *gender neutral*, and *pansexual*. Their responses to the second question, "What comes to mind when you hear the word, 'gender stereotype'?" were: *boys like trucks*; *boys wear black and blue*; *boys are rough, play in the dirt, you know … the goo, the guck, the muck*; *the sciency-kinda stuff*; *boys can't sit still*; *boys are loud, they are physical*; *boys do tumble play, they are aggressive, and do sporty things. Girls like dolls*, *like the colour pink*, *everything sparkly*, *girls play "house," they like dramatic play*, *they like to role play*, *they are nurturing*, *play Barbies*, *do art*, *they are quieter and calmer.*

The participants identifying with gender stereotypes and normative gender structures are consistent with previous research that illuminates the dominant developmental discourses that are prevalent in early childhood studies (Burke & Duncan, 2014; MacNaughton, 2005; Pacini-Ketchabaw et al., 2015; Richardson & Langford, 2022; Varga, 2011). To this end, the intent of asking these initial two questions was to create opportunity for the ECEs to begin the process of reflecting on gender in their practice in advance of making their observations.

Phase 2: Focus Groups

After the 8-week observation period, the ECEs were invited to participate in two semi-structured focus groups. The focus groups were designed for the ECEs to come together and discuss their perspectives after observing and documenting their conversations with families on gender. Three small focus groups were created that each comprised four to six ECEs. The rationale for dividing the 15 participants into three similarly sized small focus groups was to allow for more in-depth discussions. Each small semi-structured focus group met on two

separate occasions, 2 weeks apart. The rationale for the time between the two focus group sessions was to allow for the researcher to member check with participants and provide time for the ECEs to reflect further on their experiences prior to the second focus group session. The first focus group had six ECE participants, the second had four ECEs, and the third had five ECEs. Each focus group session lasted approximately 60 minutes in length and was audio recorded. In the first focus group session, participants were asked about their ideas, knowledge, and pedagogical approaches as it relates to gender in their early years practice. For example, some initial questions were: How would you define gender? Can you give examples of ways people might take up their gender? (For instance, someone might identify as a man or a boy.) If I were to walk into your centre, what types of activities might I see? Do you witness or see gender stereotyped play? Do you observe gender storylines in children's play? Are children free to express their gender openly?

Other questions in the first focus group session focused on gender inclusive programming and policy, such as: Are there any gender routines or gender rules at your centre? Do you have any gender specific signage? How is gender represented/reflected on your policies and forms? Do you take gender into account when designing your program? Would you consider your centre a gender-neutral learning space? Are children offered materials and activities that reflect gender diversity? What gaps in early education training do you think exist, if any, in relation to gender inclusivity in the early years?

Then, in the second focus group session, the ECEs were invited to speak specifically about their experiences when communicating with families about children's diverse gender expression with these main questions guiding the discussion:

1. Tell me about the conversations you have with families as it relates to their children's gender and gender expression.
2. Do families support their children's gender expression? Can you give some examples?
3. Do families influence how children at your centre express their gender?
4. Any challenges when communicating with families about their children's gender and gender expression?
5. Do families support you when exploring more gender diverse approaches to practice?

The data was transcribed verbatim, and a thematic analysis was conducted. Transcripts were read and re-read, and individual transcripts were coded for common words and phrases that focus on the ECEs' perspectives when engaging in conversations with families in relation to young children's gender expression. An open coding of individual transcripts was completed producing a list of thematic categories and page numbers referenced for illustrative quotes. The initial categories were then organized into potential thematic codes. The thematic codes were then reviewed and revised to ensure that each theme has enough data to support the inquiry.

I turn now to share the perspectives of 15 ECEs who work in licensed early childhood centres in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada, and their experiences talking to families about their children's gender expression. Pseudonyms were used to safeguard the identities of participants. To begin, I highlight a conversation I had with one group of ECEs who provided their insights as the recipients of a perceived displeasure projected onto them by fathers when they find out their sons have a desire to engage in feminine activities and the complexities the ECEs then experience to address the fathers' concerns.

Under My Watch

Mia: *I have a boy who is not free to express himself. He is desperate to do all the princess stuff, wear pink, draw and colour in pink, and it is always shut down by the dad when he comes to get him. I was told by the dad that it wasn't allowed to happen "under my watch."*

Rea: *We had a boy and his best friend was a girl. The boy toddler was pretending to put on makeup. The boy would follow the girl's actions and dress up and play pretend makeup together. Then, the dad walks into the centre and he was so upset when he saw his son pretending to put on makeup. I had to explain to him that it was completely normal and that he might have seen his mom put on makeup or he's just imitating what the girl was doing. The dad was not impressed and since that day I have never seen the child play pretend makeup again.*

Lisa: *I was sitting at a table with a group of boys, and one of them had his fingernails painted and he was very proud of this. And I was really apprehensive about what another boy was going to say to him as he was really into hockey, he was athletic, and very tough. I saw him looking at this fingernail polish and said, "I want to put fingernail polish on, but my dad said that I couldn't". I did end up putting nail polish on his fingers and I removed it before he went home.*

Marla*: We had a situation like that recently and the little fellow always wanted to put nail polish on, but his father would get very upset with him when he would come to pick him up. So, what we did was, we let him put the nail polish on and then we took it off so that he had an opportunity to feel it, to wear it, to see what it felt like. And then still be safe.*

Diana*: I've had this conversation many times with parents because we do things where we have painted everybody's nails and I had a dad come in and tell me that they're really upset. That their boys' nails are painted. Everybody had their nails painted, but he really wants his boys to be strong men.*

> Catie: *Yeah. I've seen that with nail polish; we did like a spa thing outside. The children wanted to explore nail polish, and some of the parents were upset their boys had their nails painted because "it's for girls."*

In this opening data, we hear examples of the children engaging in a simple activity of wearing nail polish, but from the educators' perspectives, this exploratory play is subject to a system of gender norms (Balter et al., 2016; Boskey, 2014; Butler, 2004; Janmohamed, 2010). Here, the ECEs discuss the ways that the fathers respond to their sons' wearing nail polish and the hesitation this creates for the boys when they begin to question what their dads might think. Precisely, the ECEs recall the fathers having sent a clear signal to their sons that traditional gender roles are the "normal, right and only way to be" (Blaise, 2005, p. 22). Interestingly, even though the boys are highly aware of the implications they might face from their dads, the ECEs document that the boys continue to pursue feminine interests; as documented by one ECE, "I was sitting at a table with a group of boys, and one of them had his fingernails painted and he was very proud of this." Kane (2006) remarks how "children themselves become active participants in this gendering process by the time they are conscious of the social relevance of gender, typically before the age of two" (p.150). We see this emerge in the above data set, where the educators discuss how several of the boys at their centres express a desire to move outside masculine constructs, however, the weight of their fathers' expectations to perform like a boy ultimately impacts their decisions. A participant (Lisa) recalls the conversation she had with a boy who stated, "I want to put fingernail polish on, but my dad said that I couldn't."

Keenan (2017) addresses the relevance for educators to create spaces for children to "explore and play with gender as they understand it, inviting them into mutually respectful dialogue and asking them questions about the meaning and limits of those understandings, rather than forcing them to regurgitate our own rigid definitions" (p. 552). We witness the ECEs taking affective action to acknowledge the boys' desires to explore femininity and work against the dominant narrative that boys must be masculine. The ECEs also actively disrupt the fathers' regulatory practices to support the children's gender exploration: "He is desperate to do all the princess stuff, wear pink, draw and colour in pink"; "I did end up putting nail polish on his fingers and I removed it before he went home"; "The boy toddler was pretending to put on makeup." The ECEs equally recognize the ramifications if the boys do not present within a traditional masculine framework at the end of the day. They understand the consequences at stake and actively remove nail polish in advance of the fathers' arrivals. As one ECE states, "We let him put the nail polish on and then we took it off so that he had an opportunity to feel it, to wear it, to see what it felt like. And then still be safe".

The effects of families' cultural norms, beliefs, and biases and how they are encountered by educators in the classroom in this opening set of data is powerful and concerning as previous

research shows that children come to understand their gender identity as early as age 2 (Blaise & Taylor, 2012). Thus, children who do not fit neatly within one prescribed gender construct (that of *fully* masculine or *fully* feminine) are often deemed vulnerable and potentially face scrutiny from peers and family (Butler, 2004). The ECEs openly recognize these limitations and attempt to reduce the restrictions imposed on the children by voicing their concerns to the fathers: "I had to explain to [the father] that [putting on makeup] was completely normal and that he might have seen his mom put on makeup." Despite the ECEs' efforts to shift the fathers' narratives on gender, they continue to face resistance. This data highlights the immense power that families possess in regulating children's gender even indirectly. It also signals the vital role ECEs play in navigating complex parent and child relations on vulnerable topics, like gender. Moreover, the ECEs' perspectives illuminate the tensions they embody when their messaging on gender is counter to families' beliefs and the importance of ongoing training on gender to support early childhood professionals when having difficult conversations with families on gender diversity. We also get a glimpse of the immense power that regulatory gender norms continue to have within institutions that compel both children and families at moments to adhere within a normative gender schema. This is evident when the ECEs continue their discussions on gender exploration in their centres and the dads' responses to their boys' play.

> Catie: *We had a little boy wearing a pair of daycare pink pants home and it was like he wasn't in trouble, but the dad laughed at him in his face, "Like what are you wearing?!" The boy picked them out of the bin and the boy didn't care. But his dad wanted him to immediately take them off.*

> Lisa: *I had the same instance too. I had a child come in every day and loved to wear dresses and his father was outraged picking him up. He saw him in a dress and said, "You can never wear a dress ever again." The next day he came to school and continued to put on the dress, but we made sure it was off before his dad picked him up. It was important to us that the child had the right to choose. We're not going to tell him that he is not allowed to wear a dress and he loved a specific dress. He didn't have any label, he just liked it, right.*

> Marla: *Some dads have a definite idea of how they expect their son to be. You know, one dad is like "he has to play hockey, he's gotta play hockey" while the child just wants to put on a dress. He wants to get into dramatic play, cook up a storm, put on the dresses.*

> Mia: *We have spare shirts for children to wear and I had two dads come in and say, "Why is he wearing a girl's shirt?" That just seems to be the first response, not "where are his clothes?"*

Diana: *We routinely see parents of boys having great difficulty when their son wears female clothes than girls wearing boys' clothes. In my experience, it's the dads that struggle with it.*

Rea: *I agree.*

Catie: *I agree. It's the dads.*

Here, we see the subtle ways that families can shape their children's gender expression, especially fathers, and how they inform educator–family interactions. The simple act of wanting to "cook up a storm" or wear "pink pants" sparks fathers to place restrictions on what their sons can wear and do at the centres. The ECEs emphatically agree that "it's the dads" that struggle with their sons having feminine interests. Previous research shows that it is far more acceptable for girls to explore their gender adopting a "tomboy" role, but boys who act feminine or play with stereotypical "girl toys" may be viewed unfavourably or seen as questioning their gender (Aina & Cameron, 2011; Dragowski et al., 2011). Through their conversations with families, the ECEs recognize the norms governing the public display of traditional forms of masculinity that emphasize boys must avoid feminine interests or appearances. The ECEs also acknowledge that the way the children identify with their gender roles may be contrary to what societal norms and family beliefs dictate and this can cause emotional challenges for the children and their families. Kane (2012) argues all individuals involved in a child's life (i.e., parents, grandparents, community members, family friends, siblings) must take an active role to disrupt the normative gender constructs that children are exposed to daily. Kane explains that media, advertising, peer groups, and everyday community conversations (even with strangers) can influence the ways that children think about gender. Therefore, there is a need for ECEs to have knowledge regarding gender inclusivity and to feel confident supporting children with their gender expression. For example, ECEs should have the competencies to discuss common stereotypes that circulate in early childhood centres in relation to gender (e.g., boys are tough, girls are emotional) and ways to disrupt these stereotypes that can restrict children's gender expression. This next excerpt of data outlines another discussion with ECEs in relation to gender stereotypes and the ways that families, especially fathers, reinforce dominant gender constructs on their children.

Hannah: *We had a little fella who wanted to have long hair. This lasted for over 2 years and each day he came in he would ask for a towel and we would put it on so he could have long hair. Mom was okay with it, Dad not so much.*

Lucy: *We went through a phase where all the children in the centre wanted a ponytail. The father arrived one day, and he was very upset that his son had his hair in a ponytail. We ended up having a staff meeting around it to see how we could work with the family, but the father couldn't accept that his son wanted to have ponytails in.*

> Barb: *We have a boy whose hair is long enough for a ponytail, and we put it up in a ponytail and the next day he came in with his head shaved. Every day he comes to school and immediately puts on a dress then before his parents come to pick him up, he takes the dress off. It was like we provided this little safe haven.*

The ECEs' perspectives highlight the impact heteronormative constructs have on young children when negotiating public spaces and this is evidenced above when one boy expresses a desire to wear his hair in a ponytail. One educator recalls the boy wanting to take up an alternative position leads to family disapproval and a drastic head shaving. This is highly problematic for boys as they can become tied to the expectation to act in hypermasculine ways to appeal their bodies to others. As Kelly-Ware (2016) states, "who children are and how they perform who they are, that is, what they do, are also fashioned through the power of what is acceptable, desirable and rewarded" (p. 149). In the above examples, normative ideals of masculinity place limits on how the boys get to wear their hair. The ECEs in this process also feel constrained as their attempts to support the child and educate families falls flat. As Gunn (2011) reminds us, "norms not only define how one may have a hold over others' bodies, but they govern how one may work to perfect his or her own—hence they connect with notions of power, correction, surveillance and discipline" (p. 288). This data shows the relevance and importance of enhancing early childhood education training on gender. If ECEs had the language, gender theory, and previous gender training to draw on prior to having conversations with families, they might feel more confident to engage in difficult conversations about gender identity. This is where a critical queer theoretical approach can offer something new and important to the field of early childhood education. As Dyer (2017) explains, queer theory provides opportunities for ECEs to "theorize how children narrate themselves beyond trajectories of normative development" (p. 294). In addition, queer theory can potentially assist ECEs in analyzing how normativity is reproduced within early childhood settings and shift to attend more readily to children's imaginative and social desires (Dyer, 2017). ECEs having this prior knowledge on queer theory is helpful as one central and dominant discourse that remains is the requirement for young boys to maintain "big boy" status (Thorne, 1993). The ECEs from my third focus group discuss the pressure the young boys experience to meet masculine ideals.

"Be a Big Boy"

> Susanna: *I'm picturing drop off time. We have a little guy who is looking for more love from his father, but he gets the whole, "you're a big boy," like, "you're not going to cry when I leave." Instead, his dad gives him a high five, not a hug or kiss that he's looking for. I find he seeks it out more from all of us throughout the day and he is a lot more emotional over everything.*

Emma: *We also have a boy who is very emotional, and the dad is like, you know, "you have to suck it up and take a big breath, buck up, it will be fine, you don't need to have a big cry"; "don't be a cry baby," you know.*

Taylor: *There's one example that I can really point out. There was a child in my group that had a really huge fall; I reported it to the dad right away and he said, "No, he's okay, he's going to be okay, he's a boy, he's mine, he's brave, he's tough, and he shouldn't cry about that." I said: "Just so you know, it was a huge fall and I'm an adult and I would have cried because he fell and smacked his face on the rock in the playground. It is really a crying moment. The dad just said: "No he's going to be fine, he's fine, he's tough as a rock, he can take that easily."*

Emma: *I've heard of fathers say to a boy, you know, "big boys don't cry."*

Linda: *They want them to grow up and be men.*

Gemma: *I think the dads want their boys to grow up and be like them. Be boys and be males.*

Oransky and Marecek (2009) explain the reluctance of boys wanting to express their emotions is a global concern and frame this as "the crisis of contemporary boyhood" (p. 219). Here, we see the ECEs' accounts of the boys and how their desires to show emotion are often conflated by their fathers' expectations for them to present as tough and occupy big boy status (Thorne, 1993). If a boy fails to present in this way he is cast as a typology of some other sort, a wimpy boy, a soft boy, a girly boy. Men traditionally within a Cartesian modernity have understood their bodies as machines that must maintain control rather than acknowledging feelings of vulnerability, sadness, or fear (Connell, 2005). Emotional practices are understood as signs of weakness to be concealed and not revealed. To lift this tension, we must start with recognition of the emotional dimensions of human experience and liberate boys from normative hyper-masculine gender structures (Reddington & Price, 2017; Reddington, 2020). This involves educating early childhood professionals on the reconceptualization of gender inclusive approaches beyond developmental models. There is also a requirement to develop early childhood education courses on queer theory, gender theory, and post-feminist theory to enhance future early childhood educators' knowledge on the ways gender has been constructed through social and cultural discourses. By enhancing their knowledge, early childhood practitioners can engage more readily and confidently in educating children, families, and staff on gender diversity.

What to Say to Families?

Hannah: *I have had positive and negative experiences with families. I have experienced both where a family was shutting it down and said, "No, you're a boy, this is it, none of that." Boom. And then on the other hand, I had a family who was like, "We want our child to be happy, it doesn't matter to us, however he or she chooses to express, to dress*

> *themselves, is perfectly fine by us. And we will take it a day at a time, period." And they just wanted to provide a very loving environment. It makes me feel really heartbroken when a child is denied. It is really sad to watch, and it really affects them.*

> Lucy: *I also have had parents who are a little fear based if a child wants to explore their gender as they didn't think that they would have to have these conversations this early on. But, you know, the reality is, and this is over 21 years of teaching, I've seen lots of children identifying as the opposite.*

> Barb: *We have to be there for the children, and they have rights to express who they are. I want them to be comfortable in expressing who they want to be.*

> Kelly: *It is hard as often I do not know what to say to parents and how to teach them to be more open.*

> Hannah: *I agree. What do you say and how do you say it? I could use more professional development on gender to understand ways to teach parents about this.*

The ECEs acknowledge their own level of uncertainty when wanting to support children in their centre and express a desire for their child's rights to be recognized. They similarly identify their interest in learning more about how to communicate with families as they acknowledge their own gaps of knowledge on the subject matter: "It is hard as often I do not know what to say to parents and how to teach them to be more open"; "I agree. What do you say and how do you say it? I could use more professional development on gender to understand ways to teach parents about this." Kroeger and Regula (2017) explain the important role early childhood professionals can play by encouraging families to be accepting of children's playful gender exploration. This illustrates the importance of supporting ECEs and providing adequate training on topics like gender and sexuality.

Conclusion

The ECEs' perspectives in this study highlight the immense power families, especially the fathers, have in influencing their children's gender expression. By contrast, the ECEs show a more progressive lens on gender, but feel ill-equipped on the subject matter when having conversations with families. This research identifies the value of integrating more gender education into postsecondary early childhood education programs and the relevance of preparing early childhood professionals on ways to engage with families about gender diversity to better support children who identify outside the binary of boy/girl.

As Barrera et al. (2003) explain, ECEs require purposeful course training on gender to "build their competence and confidence in responding respectfully, reciprocally, and responsively to children and families in ways that acknowledge the richness and limitations of families' and practitioners' sociocultural contexts" (p. 34). Explicitly, there is a need for early childhood

postsecondary courses on gender theory and post-feminine theory, including gender-neutral curricula, to show children and families new ways to think about gender outside developmental models. For example, there is merit in ECEs being exposed to queer theory as it can serve as a mechanism for reflection and imagination when teaching and researching sexuality education (Dyer, 2017; Meyer, 2007). As Meyer (2007) states queer theory can support educators in disrupting the "rigid normalizing categories" and expand them "beyond the binaries of man/woman, masculine/feminine, student/teacher, and gay/straight" (p. 15). Pillow (2003) reiterates that it might also require individuals in the field of early childhood education to engage in uncomfortable levels of reflexivity to interrogate the unstable and reconceptualize gender in less normative ways.

Warin and Adriany (2017) suggest there is a strong need for gender flexible pedagogy in early years contexts. They describe gender flexible pedagogy as applying a post-structural lens on gender that disrupts essentialist views and incorporates "ideas about the resources and activities that young children themselves may be encouraged to engage in, with an emphasis on playful and experimental approaches" which allow for gender transgression (p. 375). With applying a flexible gender pedagogical framework, it is also important to have resources available, like generative texts to support this dialogue. Souto-Manning (2017) suggests that generative texts provide multiple entryways to topics that represent multiple perspectives and varied points of access. Generative texts open a space for children to have difficult conversations with their ECEs and not feel like the topic is taboo. Souto-Manning (2017) explains it is imperative that ECEs when using generative texts are critically reflexive of their own personal position and bias in relation to their own cultural and social beliefs. "For example, while many think that being white, monolingual, heterosexual, and able-bodied signify just being 'normal', unless we challenge this idea, we will continue imposing normative (and over/privileged identities) as the standard against which all others are scaled and rated, ethnocentrically" (Souto-Manning, 2017, p. 81). Moreover, early childhood professionals should be alert to the subtle ways that traditional gender norms are regulated within institutions. As well, ECEs must acknowledge that families will differ in their readiness for rethinking gender constructs and to provide the crucial support they need. It is the hope that this study will open dialogue with families on complex issues and that educators entering the profession will feel increasingly prepared to offer gender inclusive programming in their centres.

Acknowledgements

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