FROM THE INSIDE OUT:
CREATING A CULTURE OF ACCEPTANCE FOR GENDER VARIANT CHILDREN

by

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ABSTRACT

Young children enter the school system with a developing sense of gender identity and firmly held gender beliefs. Students’ rigid adherence to gender stereotypes can be problematic for a variety of reasons. Gender stereotypes pose challenges to children who are gender variant and who do not prescribe to gender norms. Moreover, the perpetuation of gender stereotypes only serves to constrain children, limiting them to certain ways of expressing themselves. It is important that educators recognize the influence they hold in enabling children to expand the ways they express gender and experience gender in the classroom. Raising the awareness of gender stereotypes and teaching children additional ways of understanding gender, including the fluidity with which it can be expressed, is crucial if gender variant children are to feel valued and respected. In this paper, I review current research and literature on gender identity formation, gender stereotyping, and gender variance. I also review teaching strategies and suggestions that are important in creating an accepting and respectful classroom culture, one that encourages children to freely experiment with a diverse range of gender expression.
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“This above all: to thine own self be true” – William Shakespeare
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Throughout my teaching career, I have always been intrigued by young children’s perceptions of gender identity and gender stereotyping. That is, I am interested in the way young children express their understandings of who they are as male and female and how strongly they prescribe to societal gender norms. This topic is of interest to me due to the effect gender stereotyping appears to have on children and, specifically, on those individuals who do not prescribe to gender norms (Mallon, 2000; Yunger, Carver, & Perry, 2004). In my experience, I have found gender stereotyping to be most evident in the youngest of children and they seem to be largely unaware of the negative effects of such stereotyping. In general, the Kindergarten children that I have taught walk through the classroom door with firmly fixed, preconceived ideas of gender roles and behaviour in their minds. For example, I have observed traditional gender roles being expressed by many children through their dramatic play and have witnessed, on many occasions, an insistence by some students that only girls can use the pink crayons and the pink-handled scissors. Indeed, many of my Kindergarten students appear to believe that if you are a boy you look and behave in one way and if you are a girl you look and behave in another. Any behavior to the contrary is usually met with confusion, if not outright intolerance.

It is apparent that once young children understand that they are either a boy or a girl, “it becomes highly important to them that they behave appropriately” (Macintyre, 2001, p. 59). For example, this rigid adherence to gender roles is often evident when I read a story and one of the characters is not easily identifiable as male or female. It seems to be important to my students that they determine the gender of the character and they will immediately make a decision based upon the character’s physical appearance (e.g., long eyelashes, length of hair, colour of clothing). If I challenge their beliefs about who can wear what and who can behave in a certain way, I am
usually met with blank stares. It is difficult for them to understand the fact that boys might like
to learn ballet or that girls can have very short hair and enjoy playing with cars. When “real-life”
examples of gender nonconformity are presented, their gender role beliefs are challenged even
more. For example, I have observed that some young children have little tolerance or acceptance
for peers who do not readily fall into the dichotomous gender roles expected by society. A
recent example comes to mind, as I had a little boy in my Kindergarten class last year who wore
pink laces in his shoes. His peers questioned his choice of lace colour so often that by mid-year,
he stopped wearing the shoes. Like others who have studied the effects gender stereotyping can
have on young children, I have noted that children whose gender expression is contradictory to
their natal sex are often met with harsh criticism and relentless questioning from peers and adults
alike (Mallon, 2010; Yunger, Carver, & Perry, 2004). Moreover, they are subject to “category
maintenance” (Davies, 1989) tactics by others in order to encourage a “falling in with the ranks.”

As a parent of a transgendered son, my intrigue with atypical gender expression is
grounded in a much deeper and more personal history that goes beyond my experiences in the
classroom. Over the course of my son’s life, I have witnessed the difficulties he has encountered
when his gender expression was contradictory to his natal sex. Pushing the boundaries of what
was acceptable gender behavior, my son was often met with the kind of “fall out” expected when
societal norms are challenged. For example, he was subject to unsolicited comments by children
and adults that forced him to explain his choice of clothing and hairstyle. In the classroom, my
son was constantly reminded of his natal sex when he was asked to line up with the girls, a
routine that often left him feeling upset because he felt he did not belong with that particular
group. My son’s experience as a gender variant child has inspired me to acquire more
knowledge on the topic of gender identity, gender stereotyping and gender variant children. I am
further inspired by the children I have taught over the years who find the strength to simply be themselves in a society that tends to dictate who they should be. As a parent and as an educator, I have seen the fluidity of gender, this “blurring of the lines,” that some children embrace. It is the different ways children choose to be gendered, especially those that move beyond stereotypical ideas of masculinity and femininity that inspire me to explore the role gender plays in the lives of my young students. I believe we, as educators, can find ways of interacting with children that, as Davies (1993) expressed, “disrupt the apparent inevitability of the male-female dualism” (p. ix). Creating a classroom culture where gender expression is celebrated, no matter where it falls on the male-female continuum, could be the “new normal,” eclipsing the current dichotomous model that appears only to confine and conform individuals.

**Key Terms**

For the purposes of this paper, I am using definitions of key words pertinent to my topic as formulated by psychologists and scholars in the field. The term *gender identity* refers to one’s personal and social status as a male or female (Cohen-Kettenis & Pfafflin, 2003). It refers to a person’s “internalized, deeply felt sense of being male, female, both, or neither” (Brill & Pepper, 2008, p. 4). *Gender expression* is how an individual externalizes her or his gender. As Brill and Pepper (2008) explained, “it encompasses everything that communicates our gender to others: clothing, hairstyles, mannerisms, how we speak, how we play, and our social interactions and roles” (p. 5). *Gender stereotyping* is defined as, “the encod[ing] and organiz[ing] of information along the lines of what is considered appropriate or typical for males and females in a particular society” (Levy & Carter, 1989, p. 1). *Gender variant* is a term used to define children who deviate from adhering to typical gender norms (Cohen-Kettenis & Pfafflin, 2003; Fausto-Sterling, 2012). The term *transgender* is used to describe those individuals whose gender
identity does not match their anatomical sex (Brill & Pepper, 2008). These individuals have been diagnosed with Gender Identity Disorder (Cohen-Kettenis & Pfafflin, 2003) and take the steps necessary to transition from one sex to the other. This includes hormone therapy and sexual reassignment surgery. Gender Identity Disorder (GID) is a term used to define a condition where significant distress is present “resulting from conflicting gender identity and assigned sex” (Cohen-Kettenis & Pfafflin, 2003, p. 51). It should also be noted that being transgender “does not imply any specific sexual orientation…Therefore, transgender people may additionally identify as straight, gay, lesbian, or bisexual” (Brill & Pepper, 2008, p. 5).

**Rationale**

In recent years, there has been a greater awareness of gender variance in Western society. For example, summer camps are currently offered for transgendered children, an annual family conference is held in Seattle, Washington that provides workshops and presentations, and many organizations now exist that are designed to support transgendered children and their families (L’Abate & Ryback, 2011). The Trans Youth Family Allies website, for instance, lists numerous resources for parents and children, including a parents’ blog and resources for educators and transgendered and gender non-conforming children. At the high school level, there are clubs for students who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered. Indeed, even mainstream television programs (e.g., The Oprah Winfrey Show™, Barbara Walters™, 20/20™) have addressed how more and more young children “are coming out with complex gender issues” (L’Abate & Ryback, 2011, p. 175). As a teacher, I have worked with two children in the past 4 years who have presented as gender variant to such a degree that their behavior was often discussed in the staff room amongst my colleagues. One child, a boy, very much enjoyed playing with typical “girl things.” For example, he loved Barbies, he played with the girls in the
house corner, and he wanted a Barbie Dream House for Christmas. Another child, a girl, kept her hair short, dressed in jeans and black t-shirts and lined up with the boys when they were called, as opposed to the girls. She rarely (if ever) corrected someone when they referred to her with the incorrect pronoun and she loved to play soccer with the boys on the playground. Both of these students garnered a lot of attention amongst my colleagues, their gender expression providing fodder for much discussion on how unusual these children were. Whenever this occurred, I would always share my perspective, hoping that my attitude towards these non-conforming students would somehow alter the sexist attitudes so clearly evident in some of my colleagues’ conversations. I have often wondered how educators are to create a safe and unbiased classroom culture for free gender expression if we are simultaneously condemning such expression by way of undermining it through humour in the staffroom. It is my hope that this project will draw attention to how easily educators perpetuate attitudes and beliefs about gender to our students. We need to recognize the powerful position we hold as educators in influencing and encouraging young children to express themselves free of society’s confining gender role expectations. We can start by identifying and challenging assumptions, biases and misconceptions when it comes to sexual and gender diversity (Hanlon, 2009.)

In the North Vancouver School District, where I teach, Policy 412 (2007) states the school district’s mission statement on homophobia. The policy underscores the district’s guiding principle. This principle states that schools are to, “promot[e] social, and personal development for all learners, to honour diversity, encourage equity, and practice democratic governance” (North Vancouver School District, 2007.) This policy against homophobia further clarifies that the North Vancouver School District is committed, “to raising awareness and improving the understanding of the lives of people who are identified as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered,
or who are questioning their sexual orientation or gender identity” (Policy 412, 2007). As an educator and as a parent of a transgender son, I find this policy to be encouraging as it addresses improvements to educating children about discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender expression. For example, anti-homophobia posters are now readily displayed in many elementary and high schools. “Anti-Bullying Day” is also recognized every year to raise awareness about bullying those who are “different.”

Another local school district, the Burnaby School District, has made steps towards implementing an anti-bias curriculum that addresses homophobia, transphobia, and heterosexism. This curriculum focuses on fostering tolerance for lesbian, gay, bi-sexual and transgender children; however, many parents with children enrolled in that district have expressed their outrage (Steffenhagen, 2011, p. B5). Several parents in the Burnaby School District protested the implementation of the anti-bias curriculum because they felt the curriculum was ambiguous. Additionally, some parents believed that the lessons would include discussions on sex and, as one parent stated, “I don’t want any adult to look at [my daughters] in a sexual way” (Steffenhagen, 2011, p. B5). This year also marks the beginning of a five-year plan developed by the British Columbia government to combat bullying in all of its forms. More specifically, Premier Christy Clark announced a province wide anti-bullying plan that will “help ensure every child feels safe, accepted and respected, regardless of…gender, race, culture, religion, or sexual orientation” (Ministry of Education, 2012, p. 1). The B.C. government’s ERASE Bullying plan includes 10 elements. One of these elements states that teachers are to devote one of the six professional development days in the school year to anti-bullying strategies. Clark further specified that, “What educators need are…the tools to recognize when
bullying is happening and administrators need to know that creating a positive school culture is part of their everyday job” (Canadian Press, 2012, p. 1).

My personal experiences with my son have impacted my view on children who are gender variant and have enabled me to have a deeper and more profound empathy for them. In my classroom, it is my goal to create a culture that accepts and celebrates gender variant children. Pittinsky (2009) contended that our aim should be to foster a climate of “affection, engagement, kinship, comfort, and enthusiasm towards members of a group seen as ‘different’ or ‘other’” (p. 213). Davies (1989) stated that if educators work to alter children’s attitudes towards a less rigid definition of gender and gender roles, children will be more accepting of those who challenge such norms, perhaps because such non-conformity may not seem so blatantly “different” anymore (p. 133). A recent conversation with my son about gender stereotypes shed some additional light on why it is so important to foster acceptance in allowing children to transgress gender norms. As my son expressed, stereotypes allowed him to use “gendered” objects (e.g., haircuts, clothing, etc.) to easily identify himself to others as male (S. Watt, personal communication, January 29, 2013). Expressing himself as male, even though he was born a female, made him comfortable and allowed him to present to others what he was like “on the inside.” If we at least tolerate cross gender expression, children like my son would be allowed the freedom to dress and behave however they want. We can promote tolerance by removing the insistence that it is biology that dictates what you should play with, how you should act, what you should wear, and, indeed, who you should be.

I was recently inspired by the writing of primary school teacher, Melissa Bollow-Tempel (2011), who articulated why she felt compelled to address the needs of her gender variant students. She contended that it is not her job to question why children may be gender variant.
Instead, she believes that her role is to teach, “and I can’t teach if the students in my class are distracted or uncomfortable. My job is…about preparing students to be a part of our society, ready to work and play with all kinds of people…Teaching about gender stereotypes is another social justice issue that needs to be addressed, like racism or immigrant rights, or protecting the environment” (retrieved from http://togetherforjacksoncountykids.tumblr.com).

It is not just gender variant children who will benefit from a curriculum that disrupts rigidly held beliefs about gender. This type of curriculum will encourage all children to have the social and emotional freedom to express who they really are and to know that their identities do not have to center around their natal sex (Davies, 1989). As Killoran and Jimenez (2007) posited, “Who would you be if you had never been punished for gender-inappropriate behavior, or seen another child punished for deviations from masculine or feminine norms?” (p. 315). Lamb, Bigler, Liben, and Green (2009) stated that, “every child has a right to an educational environment that is free from harassment and coercion in matters concerning their personal gender role attitudes and behavior” (p. 379). Implementing a curriculum that teaches young children about the inherent harm in gender stereotyping will provide such opportunities. Although this will be challenging, it is necessary, “…if children are to take us seriously when we tell them that oppressive male-female patterns are neither essential nor acceptable” (Davies, 1989, p. 43).

**Theoretical Framework**

In this paper, I draw from two theoretical frameworks: Feminist poststructuralist (Davies, 1989; Weedon, 1987) and queer theory (Butler, 1990; Schneider & Roncolato, 2012). These theories inform my questions and my inquiry into young children’s perceptions of gender. These theories do not assume there is any normal expression of gender (Blaise & Taylor, 2012) and,
thus, challenge gender norms. By drawing on these theories, I will be able to promote discussions among children and colleagues about the importance of re-conceptualizing what it means to be a boy or a girl. These theories will also allow me to critically reflect on my teaching practice.

Within a feminist poststructuralist framework, individuals are seen as fluid beings, as opposed to static ones (Blaise & Taylor, 2012; MacNaughton, 2000). Davies (1989) posited that, within this theory “the individual is no longer seen as a unitary, unproblematically sexed being, but rather as a shifting nexus of possibilities” (p. 12). Davies (1989) further attested that children have the capacity to embrace both masculine and feminine characteristics provided they are given permission to do so and are assured that these “positionings” are non-problematic (p. 12). MacNaughton (2000) elaborated on the possibilities feminist-poststructuralist theory affords teachers who are interested in children’s gender identity formation. MacNaughton (2000) wrote, “Identity is formed and reformed in interaction with others...One aim of this interaction is to expand children’s ways of seeing and doing gender” (p. 33). Indeed, MacNaughton (2000) maintained that encouraging children to talk about the different ways we can be male and female, and allowing all children a voice in expressing their “gender story” (p. 33), will pave the way for a greater freedom in gender expression.

Queer theory (Butler, 1990; Schneider & Roncolato, 2012) views children and gender identity through a similar lens to feminist poststructuralist theory. This theory also examines the influence compulsory heterosexuality (Butler, 1990) has on the development of gender identity. Since our society is based on heterosexual norms, traditional gender stereotyped roles for males and females necessarily are perceived as “normal.” This is also known as the “heterosexual matrix” (Butler, 1990, p. 47). The heterosexual matrix insists upon clearly defined (and
opposite) roles for both genders and when children take up these roles appropriately, they define
themselves and others as behaving normally. Queer theory and feminist poststructuralist theory
both offer a framework for understanding “the mechanisms of power in our society and the
possibilities of change” (Weedon, 1987, p. 10). In the following chapter, I delve into both
theories within the context of the literature review for this project.

**Purpose**

The purpose of this paper is to present research findings that underscore the impact
gender stereotyping has on young children and their gender identity formation. More
specifically, the aim of this paper is to share with educators the importance of expanding the
ways children experience gender in the classroom. It is my hope that raising children’s
awareness of gender stereotypes will help to avoid limiting young children to particular kinds of
gender experiences.

**Significance and Importance:** This project addresses the ways in which teaching-style,
curriculum, and classroom environment can impact and challenge gender stereotypes. I therefore
explore the powerful position of teachers in relation to creating environments that allow gender
variant children to feel accepted and valued. Although there are several resources that address
the challenges high school gender variant children encounter, there is a limited amount of
material geared to primary-aged children (Fox, 2011). This dearth of material needs to be taken
into account, especially considering the fact that primary-aged children more strictly adhere to
and promote gender stereotypes than older children (Smetana, 1986).

Thus, this project adds to the existing literature on gender stereotypes and raises the
awareness of gender stereotyping and the fluidity of gender for young children. Given the
increase in awareness of gender variant children in recent years (L’Abate & Ryback, 2011), it is
important that classroom teachers and schools are sensitive to the unique experiences of gender variant children. To that end, this paper explores the following research questions:

1. How can teachers raise the awareness of gender stereotyping? And more specifically:
   a. In what ways can teachers create a more inclusive classroom environment for gender variant children?
   b. What are the benefits of a classroom culture that promotes inclusiveness?

Summary

In this chapter, I shared my position as a Kindergarten teacher who has frequently observed young children upholding and perpetuating gender stereotypes in the classroom. I relayed my experiences with students who are gender variant as well as my desire to create a classroom culture that is more comfortable for these children. I also shared my experiences as a parent of a transgender son who challenged gender norms throughout his education. Finally, I defined gender identity formation, gender expression, gender stereotyping, and gender variance.

In Chapter Two, I present a review of the current research on gender identity formation, gender stereotyping among young children, and the experiences of gender variant children in the classroom. In Chapter Three, I connect research findings to classroom practice through the introduction of teaching strategies. These strategies are designed to help educators raise the awareness of gender stereotyping and create a more accepting classroom culture for gender variant children. Chapter Three will also make reference to a Power Point presentation for teachers that will address such strategies (Appendix A). In Chapter Four, I summarize my conclusions and present suggestions and possible steps that can be taken to ensure that gender variant children feel more accepted and comfortable in the early primary classroom.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

As outlined in chapter one, the theoretical perspectives that frame this project are feminist poststructuralist theory (Weedon, 1987) and queer theory (Butler, 1990; Schneider & Roncolato, 2012). It is through these lenses, that I bring together foundational studies on gender identity, gender stereotyping, and gender variance among young children. Furthermore, it is from these frameworks that I reflect upon gender and the integral role it plays in children’s lives in the classroom. Feminist poststructuralist theory and queer theory afford opportunities to view children and their gender development in a way that illuminates a path to where change can occur in the classroom and throughout the school environment. Both of these theories also call for a broader examination of teaching practices that perpetuate gender stereotypes and heterosexual normativity. Perhaps even more importantly, these particular lenses view children as active players in gender identity formation and underscore the malleability of gender development. Thus, feminist poststructuralist theory and queer theory provide a framework for investigating the way gender “works” in the early childhood classroom (Blaise, 2005). That is, they take into account the inherent complexities surrounding gender, from how it is socially and politically constructed by young children (Blaise, 2005) to how gender stereotypes are reinforced and perpetuated.

Feminist Poststructuralist Theory

Poststructuralist theory, as Davies (1989) explained, “provides a radical framework for understanding the relation between persons and their social world and for conceptualizing social change” (p. xi). It recognizes that individuals are susceptible to change through ongoing discursive practices and as such are not “fixed end product[s]” (Davies, 1989, p. xi). Feminism is a political framework directed at changing power relations between men and women. In
Weedon’s (1987) words, “these power relations structure all areas of life, the family, education and welfare, the worlds of work and politics, culture and leisure…they determine who does what and for whom, what we are and what we might become” (p. 1). Feminist poststructuralist theory uses poststructuralist theories of language, subjectivity, social processes, and institutions, “to understand existing power relations and to identify areas and strategies for change” (Weedon, 1987, p. 40). In terms of understanding children and gender, feminist poststructuralist theory contends that children are not merely sponges who soak up society’s gender messages and then act accordingly (Blaise, 2005; MacNaughton, 2000). Feminist post-structuralism posits that gender is a negotiation. That is, children internalize messages about gender and then make decisions about what to believe and act upon and what to discard (Blaise, 2005; MacNaughton, 2000). It is through this negotiation that children become active in their own gender development (Blaise & Taylor, 2012) and may be inspired to “take up a range of both masculine and feminine positionings” (Davies, 1989, p. 12).

MacNaughton wrote extensively about teaching from a feminist poststructuralist framework. She maintained that educators have, for years, relied upon developmentally appropriate practice (DAP), which is informed by developmental psychology (Blaise, 2005; 2009). According to MacNaughton, DAP is limited in its view of children. She wrote, these early childhood “truths” about teaching “exclude difference and restrict potential…by relying on understandings of childhood that present simplistic images of how children learn, know and live gender” (p. xiv). Indeed, DAP has recently been scrutinized by some scholars because of its limited view of children (Blaise, 2009). Blaise (2009) posited that scholars claim this “modern, middle-class, and Western discipline is biased…it universalizes the child and childhood…and fails to recognize the importance of sex, gender, and sexuality as having an impact on children’s
life experiences, learning, or development” (p. 451). Alternatively, feminist poststructuralist theory stems from the idea that children are complex individuals. Drawing on this theory allows for an in-depth look at how traditional childhood practices have helped to create gendered children (MacNaughton, 2000) and that these practices need to be questioned (Blaise, 2005). Feminist poststructuralists believe that it is through reflexivity, the act of both recognizing and altering the forces of socialization on gender identity formation, that these truths will be challenged and a broader, more complex knowledge of the child will come to light (MacNaughton, 2000).

**Queer Theory**

Similar to feminist poststructuralist theory, queer theory adopts Foucault’s poststructuralist critique of identity (Schneider & Roncolato, 2012). Far from being expressive of some inner nature, gender is considered a “performance” (Butler, 1990). More specifically, queer theory posits that gender is a socially constructed process and underscores the influence of heterosexism in children’s construction of gender. Schneider and Roncolato (2012) wrote that queer theory “investigates taken-for-granted categories of ‘normal’ and ‘natural,’ asking what they mean in social, political, and religious terms” (p. 1). Indeed, Butler (1990), queer theory’s “most important philosopher” (Schneider & Roncolato, 2012, p. 3), wrote extensively on this matter. She maintained that the “heterosexual matrix” (p. 47) is responsible for defining the concepts of masculinity and femininity in our society. That is, heterosexuality functions to produce definitions of what is normal and what it means to be male or female. As such, it enforces and rewards people for appropriate gender behavior and punishes for deviations from the norm (Blaise, 2009, p. 453). Moreover, queer theory illuminates how the “normality” of heterosexual practices has resulted in an imbalance of power, positioning itself in society as the
most valued and accepted form of sexuality (Blaise, 2009). Because the heterosexual matrix is unquestioned in our society, boys and girls behaving in stereotypically masculine and feminine ways is viewed by most as “normal.” Queer theory asserts that gender identity formation is more about being linked to these heterosexual “norms” and less about nature or nurture (Blaise & Taylor, 2012). When educators observe and interact with children with this in mind, it allows for a reconceptualization of the relationship between children and gender and challenges us to reflect on the complex ways children are “doing gender” (Blaise, 2005) in the classroom.

**Gender Identity**

**Acquisition of gender identity.** It is widely supported by psychologists that gender, as opposed to sex, is something one acquires (Bem, 1981; Freud, 1925 as cited in Bem, 1981; Kohlberg, 1966). Determining whether a person’s gender identity is shaped by biological or social forces (or a combination of both) has been the subject of much research by scientists and scholars over the past several decades (e.g., Blaise, 2009; Kohlberg, 1966). Fausto-Sterling (2012) compiled and summarized a number of studies on gender identity and identified a significant theme in relation to the nature-nurture argument as it relates to gender identity. As Fausto-Sterling explained, studies conducted throughout North America and Western Europe indicated that gender identity “picks up steam” (p. 54) at about age three, but continues to form over the course of several years. Initially, very young children learn to correctly label themselves as either a boy or a girl. They then become aware of socially appropriate behavior and traits associated with males and females and can imitate these stereotypes in their play. As they master these skills, children “put themselves in the gender picture, learning first to accept a label of male or female and then to self-label” (Fausto-Sterling, 2012, p. 55). The play children engage in and the behaviors they adopt are further influenced by dominant gender discourses.
(Blaise, 2005). Davies (1989) noted, “as children learn the discursive practices of their society, they learn to position themselves correctly as male or female since that is what is required of them to have a recognizable identity within the existing social order” (p. 13). Ultimately, children are actively negotiating how to “be” in a society that holds heterosexuality up as “right” and “normal” (Blaise, 2005; Butler, 1990; Gallas, 1998; Madrid & Katz, 2011).

In her study of children and gender identity, Bem (1983) maintained that children typically go through a developmental stage at a young age where they learn to “sex-type” (Bem, 1983). As Bem (1981) explained, sex-typing is, “the process by which a society…transmutes male and female into masculine and feminine” (p. 354). There are three theories of sex-typing that have been particularly influential in psychology: psychoanalytic theory, social learning theory and cognitive development theory (Bem, 1983).

Psychoanalytic theory refers to Freud’s (1925) contention that “anatomy is destiny.” That is, children become sex-typed once the child becomes fully aware of genital sex differences and upon successful identification with the same-sex parent (Bem, 1981). Social learning theory posits that children become sex-typed based on the positive and negative reinforcement they receive for the gendered behaviors and activities in which they engage. According to social learning theory, sex-typing is largely the result of passively absorbing the socializing community’s messages on what is sex-appropriate behavior (Mischel, 1970). Cognitive development theory argues that it is the child who constructs his or her own sex-role and then allies with the gender attributes, behaviors, and characteristics consistent with that sex (Kohlberg, 1966). It is the child’s biological sex that is the motivating factor in why and how children organize the social world in which they live (Bem, 1983). Bem questioned why a child’s sex has primacy over other biologically produced differences, such as race or eye color.
For this reason, Bem (1981) introduced a fourth sex-typing theory that has garnered attention: gender-schema theory.

Gender schema theory contains features of both cognitive development theory and social learning theory and proposes that sex typing derives from gender-schematic processing. That is, a “readiness on the part of the child to encode and to organize information – including information about the self – according to the culture’s definitions of maleness and femaleness” (Bem, 1983, p. 603). This theory suggests that sex-typing is mediated by the child’s own cognitive processing, but that gender schematic processing is derived from the sex-differentiated practices of society. According to this theory, sex-typing is learned. The child evaluates and assimilates new information according to the binary definitions of femaleness and maleness our culture holds. Furthermore, Bem (1981) explained that sex typing in children results from the fact that one’s self-concept also gets assimilated into the gender schema. For example, certain characteristics are routinely associated with males and females. Adults rarely remark on how physically strong a girl is or acknowledge the nurturing traits of a little boy. Children, then, “learn to apply this same schematic selectivity to the self” (Bem, 1981, p. 355). They choose only those characteristics and personality attributes that the adults around them (and, indeed, society at large) have commonly associated with their sex. This, in turn, fuels the stereotypical behaviors we value and recognize as “true” in Western culture. As Bem (1981) stated, sex-typed behavior becomes a “self-fulfilling prophecy” (p. 356).

Bem (1981) underscored the significance of the gender dichotomy in Western culture and the ubiquitous nature of this particular dichotomy. As she maintained, “there appears to be no other dichotomy in human experience with as many entities assimilated to it as the distinction between male and female” (p. 354). In her study of gender schema theory, Bem (1981) recruited
48 male and 48 female Stanford undergraduates who were presented with a sequence of 61 words in random order. The words were ones that could be categorized based on gender and included proper names, animal names, verbs, and articles of clothing (e.g., butterfly, bikini, gorilla, eagle). The study found that the participants clustered a high percentage of the words “on the basis of gender” (p. 357). Bem also maintained that because gender is given such “functional importance” (p. 362) in our society, gender-based schematic processing becomes a priority for individuals. That is, it is more readily available than other schemas to organize and categorize information.

Gender identity development must also be examined in terms of heterosexual norms embraced and perpetuated in our society (Butler, 1990). Indeed, the heterosexual matrix (Butler, 1990), at work in all corners of a child’s world, has powerful gender stereotyping effects (Blaise & Taylor, 2012). Blaise (2005) observed kindergarten children in a classroom in a northeastern urban city in the United States throughout the school year. The class was comprised of 26 children, 18 girls and 8 boys, with diverse ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds. Blaise’s (2005) inquiry centered on children’s play and their ability to “establish gendered practices and identities in their play” (p. 38). In her investigation, Blaise (2005) found that, “children build a sense of who they are, who they should be, and who they want to be as girls and boys through dominant, heterosexualized discourses” (Blaise & Taylor, 2012). Studies have shown that the traditional, heterosexual roles children reenact through play reinforce and perpetuate gender stereotypes (Ingraham, 1994 as cited in Blaise & Taylor, 2012). This, in turn, results in uneven power relations among males and females, constrains individuals, and limits their freedom (Fiske, 1993). Without stereotypes, Fiske (1993) asserted, “there would be less need to hate, exclude, [and] exterminate” (p. 621).
**Gender stereotyping.** Gender stereotyping is defined as, “the readiness…to encode and organize information along the lines of what is considered appropriate or typical for males and females in a particular society” (Levy & Carter, 1989, p. 1). Gender stereotyping is firmly embraced as early as age three (Fausto-Sterling, 2012); from this age, children are strongly influenced by society to abide by gender norms, and they accept that boys and girls are supposed to behave and act in different ways (Derman-Sparks, 1989). Children grow up in a world where the gender dichotomy permeates nearly every facet of their lives, from toys, clothing, and occupations to chores and hobbies (Bem, 1981; Weedon, 1987). There has been considerable research conducted on gender stereotyping which concludes that the younger children are, the more likely they are to adhere to strict gender roles for males and females (Smetana, 1986; Stoddart & Turiel, 1985).

In their study on children’s concepts of cross-gender activities, Stoddart and Turiel (1985) found that young children regarded gender transgressions (that is, deviations from gender norms in physical appearance and behavior) as wrong and expressed a “greater personal commitment to sex-role regularity” (p. 1241). That study included 56 participants, 14 children from each of four grades: Kindergarten, grade three, grade five, and grade eight. Participants came from one school district serving a lower-middle-class community in the state of California. Participants were presented with sixteen drawings accompanied by brief stories. These drawings and stories depicted four different categories of deviations from gender norms: sex-role, moral, social-conventional, and psychological-personal. The participants were asked to sort the transgressions according to their degree of wrongness and to provide justification for the rankings. For the youngest participants (the Kindergarteners), it was found that the alignment of physical appearance with biological sex was very important and that any deviations from the
norm were considered by these youngsters as indicative of “psychological deviance” (Stoddart & Turiel, 1985, p. 1250).

Indeed, gender stereotyping appears to be so powerful in young children that when a child violates gender norms, it can be considered by others to be as serious as moral violations, such as stealing or lying (Bank, 2007). Thus, young children’s commitment to maintain binary gender roles is particularly steadfast (Levy, Taylor, & Gelman, 1995). Moreover, studies have found that gender role transgression in boys is less tolerated than transgression in girls (Levy et al., 1995). In a study conducted by Levy, Taylor, and Gelman (1995), traditional and evaluative aspects of flexibility regarding transgressions across masculine and feminine roles was assessed in 24 four-year-olds, 40 eight-year-olds and 46 college undergraduates. Levy et al. (1995) found that evaluative judgments of masculine transgressions became more negative with age. Smetana (1986) found similar findings in her study of preschool children’s conceptions of sex-role transgressions. Study participants included 48 preschool and kindergarten children (24 males and 24 females) ranging in age from 37 to 68 months. The participants mainly came from lower middle to upper middle class families and attended one of four daycare centers in the upstate New York area. Participants were shown a series of four pictures, one each of a moral, conventional, male sex-role, or female sex-role transgression. The children were then asked a series of questions to assess their justification for the rightness or the wrongness of the act displayed in the picture. Smetana (1986) found that children judged female sex-role violations to be more permissible than male transgressions and were more likely to reason that male cross-gender behavior was a social violation.

Along with pervasive messages from society, the adults and peers who surround a child greatly influence their gender beliefs, behaviors, and attitudes (Blaise, 2005; Davies, 1989;
Hupp, Smith, Coleman, & Brunell, 2010; MacNaughton, 2000). For example, Langlois and Downs (1980) found that children received “more overall active punishment for play with cross-sex toys, especially in the forms of behavioral interference and ridicule” from parents (p. 1242). It was also found that fathers “…exhibited differential treatment of sex-typed play behaviors for both sons and daughters but also that they socialized their daughters and sons in different ways” (p. 1245.) Two studies were conducted by Langlois and Downs, one of which involved 48 three and five-year-old, middle-class Caucasian children as well as their mothers from private nursery schools in Austin, Texas. The second study involved 48 three and five-year-old Caucasian children and their fathers from private nursery schools, also from middle-class families and also from Austin, Texas. It was found that the fathers’ reactions to their daughters were more positive as opposed to their reactions to their sons, leading the authors to conclude that, “fathers may perpetuate sex-role differentiation…much more so than mothers” (p. 1245).

In another study, Hupp, Smith, Coleman, and Brunell (2010), looked at how family structures predict a child’s level of gender-typed knowledge. More specifically, the study examined the acceptance level of gender transgressions in children from single parent families and two parent families. The study involved 28 participants ranging in age from two to four-years-old and their mothers. Eighteen of the mothers were married; ten were not. Pictures of gender-typed items (e.g., football, dress, nail polish) were presented to the children and they were asked to quickly assign the pictures to either a photograph of a man and a boy, or a woman and a girl. It was found that children of single parent mothers had a more flexible belief system of male and female behavior and gender role. It was also revealed that children of single parent mothers “had less gender-typed knowledge, in part due to the unmarried mothers’ greater frequency of androgynous behaviors” (p. 389). Hupp et al. (2010) discussed the benefits of
single parent family structures, including the modeling of both masculine and feminine behaviors, which seemed to result in a reduction of gender-typed knowledge in children.

Similarly, it has been found that children who have been raised in non-traditional families have less rigid gender role attitudes and beliefs. Sutfin, Fulcher, Bowles, and Patterson (2008) conducted an American study involving lesbian parents and heterosexual parents. Specifically, they looked at how the physical environments in which the children were raised influenced their personal attitudes and beliefs about gender roles. The participants included 57 four to six-year-olds and 114 parents. Through interviews, questionnaires, and observations of the children’s environments (in this case, their bedrooms), Sutfin et al. (2008) found that lesbian parents held less traditional views about gender-related issues than heterosexual parents and they created physical environments for their children that reflected such views. In that study, the researchers noted that the characteristics of a child’s physical environment encouraged the development of different skills and behaviors. For example, the masculine toys that boys are typically provided with foster motor skills and the opportunity to invent, while feminine toys promote imitation and nurturing behavior. Sutfin et al. (2008) concluded that environments that include such stereotyped items have most likely contributed to the different socialization of boys and girls and increase the salience of gender in the lives of children (p. 502).

Artist, JeongMee (2005) conducted a project over the course of several years that attests to the pervasiveness of the gender dichotomy in children’s environments. Yoon took several photographs of girls and boys in their bedrooms surrounded by their “things,” which revealed an overwhelming collection of pink things associated with girls and blue things associated with boys. Fausto-Sterling (2012) noted that Yoon’s images are significant in terms of what the photographs conveyed. She stated, “not only is the intensity of the color scheme striking;
noteworthy as well is the preponderance of clothing, dolls, and stuffed animals among [the girls’] things...[and the contrasting] tools, sports equipment, and trucks in [the boys’] possessions” (p. 9). Yoon claimed that these differences, “deeply affect children’s gender group identification and social learning” as well as their “thinking and behavioral patterns” (Yoon, 2005).

It is clear that the gender role attitudes of parents are associated with the gender role attitudes of their children (Sutfin et al., 2008), but the impact of peers and teachers should not be underestimated when it comes to influencing gender attitudes and beliefs. There is a strong research base which indicates that it is children’s peers who often act as the “gender police,” subjecting those who stray from gender norms to criticism, harassment, and even physical assaults (Lamb, Bigler, Liben, & Green, 2009). Indeed, it has been noted that even if boys and girls do want to engage in cross-gender activities, they will keep this desire secret and will attempt to do so covertly, particularly if their friends hold traditional gender beliefs (Bank, 2007). Studies have found that children who are gender atypical risk being ostracized by peers and may fear a loss of certain privileges that gender typical children are routinely afforded (Egan & Perry, 2001). These children often succumb to the pressure of gender conformity because of feelings of high anxiety and inadequacy. Furthermore, they become “more attentive to the possibility of social threats, constraints and punishments; they become more fearful of censure for counter-normative behavior, and [therefore] strive to inhibit behaviors that are perceived as typical of the out-group” (Young, Carver, & Perry, 2004, p. 574). Peer rejection, then, holds considerable clout when it comes to a child’s gender development.

Some studies, including Levy et al. (1995), found that children can be accepting of cross gender behavior of peers, but, at the same time, be unwilling to play with those peers. A study conducted by Lamb, Bigler, Liben, and Green (2009) revealed that children would contest sexist
remarks that promoted gender stereotyping and discrimination, but they did so while simultaneously maintaining fairly rigid gender role beliefs. In that study, the participants included 81 boys and 72 girls, aged five to ten-years-old. The children were taught to challenge their peers’ sexist remarks in order to improve the school climate for gender nontraditional children and to decrease children’s gender-typed attitudes. Through peer-directed, interactive lessons, one group of children were explicitly taught how to recognize and challenge peers’ comments that worked to constrain an individual because his or her behavior was incongruent with his or her biological sex. The other group of children was taught through the use of narratives. That is, they merely heard about their peers’ retorts to sexist remarks, but did not engage in any role-play situations. It was found that the group who actively participated in the lessons was more successful in actually challenging sexist remarks, but that the training did not appear to influence their own gender role beliefs, such as who should perform gender-typed activities and occupations. This rigid adherence to gender norms makes it difficult for gender variant children to feel comfortable expressing atypical gender behaviors and attitudes to their peers (Mallon, 2000). When met with discrimination and questioning from peers and adults, the psychological well-being of the gender variant child is put at risk (Yunger, Carver, & Perry, 2004).

The influence of teachers in either challenging or perpetuating gender stereotypes is significant (Hanlon, 2009; Roulston & Misawa, 2011). Roulston and Misawa (2011) examined how the gender beliefs and attitudes of music teachers affected their classroom practices. This qualitative study included interviews with one male and five female music educators who taught music to children from five to ten years of age. Roulston and Misawa (2011) reported that the teachers in this study “commonly referenced teaching strategies that reinforce gender
stereotypes” (p. 3). For example, in order to counteract the concept that singing is an activity that is highly feminine, teachers recruited football players to the choir in order to demonstrate to other boys that singing can be masculine. As the researchers of this study made clear, this very strategy only served to reinforce the stereotype that masculinity is demonstrated through involvement with sports and not with something like singing. Moreover, it demonstrated that educators are still prone to “gender blindness” (p. 4) and are not aware of how they themselves hold and perpetuate gender norms. Other researchers, including Creighton (2011) and Mewborn (1999), similarly argued that educators who do not believe that gender inequity is an issue in today’s classrooms are unaware of how gender norms permeate our teaching practices. Mewborn (1999) insisted that schools, administrators, and teachers unwittingly promote gender stereotypes and gender inequities, and argued that it is imperative we search out strategies that enable all students to feel empowered and successful.

The impact teachers can have on disrupting gender norms and creating a classroom culture that encourages the transgression of gender boundaries is also significant (Giraldo & Colyar, 2012). When a teacher is both aware of gender stereotyping and is committed to challenging such stereotypes, children begin to learn to “broaden the spectrum of gender possibilities and to exercise their choices” (Giraldo & Colyar, 2012, p. 36). In a qualitative study conducted in an early childhood development laboratory in a U.S. public university, Giraldo and Colyar (2012) followed four teachers who worked with children from six weeks to six years of age. The children were from diverse backgrounds, including Black, Hispanic, and Asian ethnicities and were from mostly middle-class families. Through interviews and observations, the researchers asserted that these teachers were sensitive to gender bias and worked hard to address stereotypical play and behaviour among the children. They described the physical layout
of the classrooms as not having defined “gender specific” areas, and they revealed that the teachers promoted cross-gender play by offering a variety of different centers to the children. From encouraging boys to play with dolls and to dress up in high-heels to inviting a female truck driver to the school to talk about her occupation, the teachers in this study were very aware that providing alternative (and additional) ways of being male and female is crucial to promoting more fluid expressions of gender. Fox (2011) argued that challenging gender stereotypes and encouraging cross gender behavior makes the classroom a more comfortable place for gender variant children. Indeed, Hanlon (2009) maintained that it is a teacher’s moral and professional obligation to keep students feeling safe from harassment based on such things as gender expression.

Direct teaching of an anti-bias curriculum can also be effective in challenging gender stereotyping (Lamb et al., 2009; Rainey & Rust, 1999). In their study, Rainey, and Rust (1999) explored how the teaching of an anti-bias curriculum, *Words Can Hurt You*, reduced gender stereotyping in Kindergartners. The participants in their study consisted of 36 students from a rural, Southern, public elementary school in the United States. The researchers used two groups of participants, an experimental group of 19 children (7 females and 12 males) and a contrast group of 17 children (7 females and 10 males.) The experimental group received weekly, 1 hour sessions for 8 weeks where the participants were involved in role-play activities where they could practice talking about and acting out non-traditional roles. These participants were also read stories that had stereotypical characters and themes. Participants were taught to recognize the stereotype and to address alternative ways of presenting the character or theme. The contrast group received no direct instruction, only the same teacher who taught the curriculum to the experimental group. She interacted with the children in the classroom and assisted with various
classroom activities. Rainey and Rust (1999) concluded that the students who received direct training of the anti-bias curriculum showed significantly reduced stereotyping behavior than those students who did not receive training. The authors also concluded that when children hold less rigid views of themselves in terms of gender, they are more likely to explore a wider range of cross-gender activities and roles and to respect the decisions of others to do the same.

**Gender Variance.** Children who deviate from adhering to typical gender norms are considered gender variant (Brill & Pepper, 2008; Cohen-Kettenis & Pfafflin, 2003; Fausto-Sterling, 2012). Gender variance may be expressed for a number of reasons, from being raised in an environment where gender stereotyped behavior and attitudes are de-emphasized (Sutfin et al., 2008), to experiencing distress resulting from conflicting gender identity and assigned sex (Cohen-Kettenis & Pfafflin, 2003). Since it became an official diagnosis in 1980 (Cohen-Kettenis, Owen, Kaijser, Bradley, & Zucker, 2003), children who exhibit extreme cross gender behavior are often diagnosed with Gender Identity Disorder (GID). When children are diagnosed with GID, they often suffer from gender dysphoria, distress related to a felt discrepancy between biological sex and identification with the opposite sex (Cohen-Kettenis & Pfafflin, 2003).

It was not long ago that any gender variance among children was considered deviant and disturbing, something that needed immediate professional intervention. A little more than three decades ago, psychologists Rekers, Rosen, Lavaas, and Bentler (1978), posited that gender variant children - specifically, boys - were in need of immediate “correction” by way of behavior therapy in order to blend more seamlessly into society. They explained:

Our intervention approach for child gender disturbance consists of reinforcing masculine sex-typed behaviors, interests, preferences, and verbalizations, and extinguishing selected
feminine behaviors, attitudes, interests, preferences, and verbalizations. The child’s parents and teachers are taught to use behavior-shaping techniques...At the social level, the intended benefit is to reduce peer rejection and social ridicule. At the cognitive level, the intended benefit is to eliminate gender identity confusion and to establish positive, non-conflicted self-sex-labeling and a self-assured identity that is consistent with physical and social realities. (Rekers et al., 1978, p. 127)

The researchers outlined the benefits and time sensitive nature of professional intervention in young boys who are “gender disturbed” because “it is unrealistic to believe that we can change society so that a person [who displays cross-gender behavior] could survive without major psychological hardship” (p. 134). Although Rekers et al. (1978) lamented society’s intolerance of those whose ideas of gender are more fluid, they also insisted that it is best to provide psychological help to “individuals with deviant sex-role behaviors” (p. 127). The intervention tactics proposed by the psychologists aimed to provide a child with a “gender adjustment” to within the “normal range” (p. 130). Intervention strategies included using videotaped feedback from peers to help the child learn to discriminate behaviors that are labeled feminine, the exposure of masculine toys, and to teach the “skills necessary to play with other boys and...refrain from other, more obvious expressions of femininity that seem to isolate him from his peers” (p. 132).

In discussing the intervention strategy of exposing a young boy to feminine toys, Rekers et al. (1978) stated, “Admittedly, the very exposing of the boy to feminine toys may give him an opportunity to practice taking the feminine role, but there is no other way for the clinician to determine objectively whether a pronounced gender problem exists” (p. 130). The psychologists reassured the parents that, in regards to this strategy, “the risk is judged to be quite small, since the child is exposed to the feminine toys for a relatively brief period of time” (p. 130). Rather than
accepting children’s freedom of expression and working towards changing the rigid gender stereotyping pervasive in our society, the message Rekers et al. (1978) conveyed is to change the children so that they will fit in and conform to social and gender norms.

According to Egan and Perry (2001) and Yunger, Carver, and Perry (2004), the mental (and sometimes physical) well-being of children who do not adhere to gender norms is jeopardized in our gender dichotomous society. The gender variant child feels at odds with what the dominant culture upholds as “true” and as Chen-Hayes (2001) contended, “the emotions of being in a gender-dichotomous culture and not fitting in are powerful and intense” (p. 41). Indeed, Hanlon (2009) observed that gender variant children are often seen as abnormal because they threaten the male/female dichotomy and cannot be easily placed into society’s masculine and feminine categories. Brill and Pepper (2008) insisted that it is crucial that gender variant children be exposed to a range of gender expression to allow them to see “reflections of themselves in others…[and] help them clarify who they are” (p. 31). Mallon (2000) examined the childhood development of gender variant children from a holistic viewpoint. That is, he considered the child and her or his environment as one unit. Parents, he maintained, are rewarded for socializing their children to gender-bound roles. Since children are eager to please their parents, many gender variant children attempt to suppress their gender non-conformity, especially once it is pointed out to them by peers and adults. This is incredibly hard to do as it goes against what transgendered children, in particular, perceive as “natural” (Mallon, 2000).

Yunger, Carver, and Perry (2004) conducted a two-year longitudinal study that looked at the influence gender identity has on children’s psychological well-being. The first year involved 171 participants from grades three through grade seven, and the second year involved 171 participants from grades four through grade eight. Participants were ethnically diverse and
attended school in the United States. Participants were given a self-concept questionnaire which assessed gender identity and self-esteem, a peer nomination inventory that assessed peer-perceived adjustment, and a sociometric assessment to measure their acceptance by their peers. Yunger et al. (2004) found that the self-esteem of children who identified themselves as gender atypical declined over time. More specifically, children who appraised themselves as gender atypical suffered internalizing problems, including low self-esteem, anxiety, sadness, social withdrawal, and self-deprecation when they felt strong pressure for gender conformity. It is the combination of gender variance and pressure to conform that Yunger et al. (2004) maintained, “was especially conducive to internalizing symptoms” (p. 578).

Mallon (2000) argued that children who refuse to adhere to gender norms are consequently at risk for being diagnosed with a medical condition “because it is popularly assumed that there is a ‘natural’ relationship between sex and gender” (p. 52). Mallon added that children who questioned their birth assignment are often pathologized. It is encouraging to note that the terms *transgenderism* and *transgenderist* have been increasingly used in the psychiatric community as an attempt to decrease the stigmatization that is attached to terms like Gender Identity Disorder (Cohen-Kettenis & Pfafflin, 2003). It goes without question, however, that gender variant children (medically “diagnosed” with a disorder or not) face harsh criticism and treatment by society and are at risk for developing behaviour problems that may lead to depression and other serious mental health issues (Mallon, 2000; Wallien, Veenstra, Kreukels, & Cohen-Kettenis, 2010; Yunger, Carver, & Perry, 2004). These diagnoses are not caused by the child’s gender variant nature however, but by a society that refuses to allow for fluidity in gender expression (Mallon, 2000). Davies (1989) noted that children who deviate from gender norms are at risk of being perceived as “social failures” and are consequently subject to “category
maintenance” (p. 29) by other children. That is, the peers of gender variant children may resort to teasing in order to “let the ‘deviants’ know they’ve got it wrong” (p. 29). Thus, living in a society where the male/female binary is so prevalent prevents children from exploring their many possible selves. In addition, it leaves those children who try to experiment with the boundaries of what is expected of males and females vulnerable to a compromised emotional and mental well-being (Egan & Perry, 2001).

In a U.S. study conducted by Egan and Perry (2001), a number of dimensions of gender identity were looked at, including the degree to which a child was content with her or his gender assignment, the degree to which a child perceived that she or he typified his or her gender category, whether the child’s sex was superior to the opposite sex, and whether a child felt free to explore cross-gender activities and behaviors. Participants in this study included 182 children from grades four through eight attending a school in Florida. The participants represented the same demographic composition of the school itself, 68% White, 18% African American, 13% Hispanic, and 1% Asian. Egan and Perry (2001) found that children’s psychosocial adjustment was optimal when they perceived themselves to be typical of their sex, and had the freedom to explore cross-sex options if and when they so desired. This finding underscores the importance of removing the “straightjacket” that gender stereotypes impose and urges us to allow children, even encourage them, to explore a more fluid concept of gender expression (Egan & Perry, 2001). Bem (1983) maintained that raising gender-aschematic children in our gender-schematic society is one way to “temper society’s insistence on the functional importance of sex” (Bem, 1983, p. 609). However, Bem (1983) recognized how difficult it is to create this type of culture in our schools. In the classroom, a “gratuitous emphasis” on the gender dichotomy is in full effect when children are referred to as “boys and girls,” or are lined up separately or alternately.
Bem further illuminated what a taken-for-granted procedure this is by noting, “Children…are not lined up separately as blacks and whites…black and white dolls do not alternately mark the days of the calendar” (p. 609). Why, then, do we make this sex distinction? Doing so, only serves to illuminate a perceived “difference” between the sexes and perpetuates the male-female dichotomy so taken for granted in our society (Bem, 1983).

**Summary**

In this chapter, I presented a review of foundational studies on gender identity, gender stereotypes, and gender variant children. Research clearly shows how gender stereotypes can have a profoundly negative effect on the gender non-conforming child (Egan & Perry, 2001; Yunger, Carver, & Perry, 2004). Moreover, the endorsement of rigid gender roles on young children only perpetuates confining stereotypes to the gender typical child and draws attention (often in a negative way) to the gender atypical child (Davies, 1989; MacNaughton, 2000; Yunger, Craver, & Perry, 2004). In the following chapter, I connect research findings to classroom practice. Through a feminist poststructuralist and queer theory framework, I explore in depth the ways in which educators can create an environment that allows for children to step out of the gender constraints society has placed upon them and be given the opportunity to exercise freedom of gender expression.
CHAPTER THREE: CONNECTIONS TO PRACTICE

In this chapter, I connect the reviewed literature addressing young children’s gender identity formation, the adherence and perpetuation of gender stereotypes, and what affect gender stereotyping has on gender variant children to teacher practices. The objective of connecting the literature to teacher practice is to demonstrate how teachers of young children can create a culture of acceptance and respect for all children in the primary classroom. More specifically, I provide strategies that raise the awareness of gender stereotyping and help children become cognizant of how restrictive gender role expectations are on individuals. I propose how teachers can create a classroom culture that encourages and celebrates a reconceptualization of gender roles. Because children who are gender variant are often targets of bullying and teasing (Hymel, Schonert-Reichl, & Miller, 2006), this chapter also addresses the importance of empathy, perspective taking, defending the rights of others, and minimizing the discomfort some gender variant children feel in the classroom (Fox, 2011). It is important to note that human and social development is one of the major goals of the B.C. Ministry of Education. Indeed, British Columbia is currently the only province in Canada that has “explicitly targeted social and emotional development as well as citizenship as goals of education” (Hymel et al, 2006, p. 161). It is a teacher’s responsibility then, to create a classroom culture that fosters the social and emotional well-being of children. As a teacher, and as the parent of a transgendered son, I believe it is incredibly important to educate young children about valuing diversity and celebrating what makes us each unique.

Finally, this chapter also includes information that accompanies a workshop (Appendix A) for elementary school teachers. The workshop is suitable for a professional development workshop and is geared to educators who wish to challenge gender stereotypes and encourage
their young students to transgress gender boundaries and experiment with alternative ways of being gendered.

**Creating a Culture of Awareness**

When teachers are aware that children are actively negotiating how to "perform" their gender, it affords opportunities to challenge or question such behavior (Blaise, 2005; Butler, 1990). Teachers who wish to disrupt persistent gender norms do so in order to remove the constraints such stereotypes place on children. Moreover, they do so in order to minimize the discomfort gender variant children feel when confronted with gender role expectations they do not subscribe to (Fox, 2011). A recent statement by my son on his experience as a gender variant child reflected this. He stated, “I think the biggest source of discomfort was probably being an object of interest and having to field a lot of questions from other kids about my gender presentation and identity” (Watt, 2012). He further surmised that this questioning from his peers was likely due to “a lack of education about gender variant people and transgenderism” (Watt, 2012).

Understanding gender through feminist poststructuralist and queer theory frameworks enables teachers to create a space where gender norms are challenged and discussions can occur regarding why they should be challenged. Engaging in conversation with my own Kindergarten students about gender stereotyping has provided me with insight into their understandings of gender. For example, we recently had a discussion about toy aisles in stores. I asked them if they had noticed that toys are separated into pink aisles for girls and dark coloured aisles for boys. I tried to convey to my young students that they can shop in whichever section they choose, regardless of their gender. The looks of revelation on some of their faces was inspiring, to say the least, as this appeared to be new information for some of them. I followed this
discussion with a story about my own childhood. I explained that when I was about their age I
desperately wanted a racetrack for Christmas. We had a great conversation about how unfair it
would be if my parents had denied me my wish just because racetracks are a “boy’s toy.” To
demonstrate this point further, I had one little girl talk about her choice of backpack. It is one
that is typically considered suitable for boys as it is black in colour and has a logo from the Cars
movie on the front. This student proudly explained that her big brother loved the movie and so
did she and that was why she chose this particular backpack. I pointed out that it was great that
her parents supported her unorthodox decision. This conversation took a slight turn, however,
when I realized that some students thought I was telling them that they did not have to listen to
their parents. I must admit, that getting into conversations about the unfairness of abiding by
what (some) parents and dominant society deem as appropriate for boys and girls felt a bit risky.
I wondered how parents who perhaps held more traditional beliefs than I did might react to my
encouragement and support of gender nonconformity. However, discussing gender and
understanding the constructs of gender identity ultimately calls for teachers to take risks (Blaise,
2005). These risks, moreover, will pay off when children understand the many “ways of being
gendered,” ways that do not regulate, “but are full of possibilities” (MacNaughton, 2000, p. 3).

Indeed, raising the awareness of gender roles and the insistence in our society that boys
and girls act, play, dress and behave in different ways has allowed my students to begin to “test
the boundaries.” After one class discussion we had about clothing, two of my male Kindergarten
students approached me during center time to show me what they were wearing. One little boy
had on a pink, sparkly dress and a crown and the other had on several beaded necklaces. They
stood there, holding hands and smiling, waiting for me to take their picture. These little boys are
beginning to learn that their expression of masculinity is fluid and that it is not only possible to
present alternative ways of being male, it is accepted and, indeed, encouraged (Blaise, 2005). According to Blaise (2005), engaging in conversation with children on gender will help teachers create a culture of awareness about gender stereotyping and the limitations such stereotyping can put on children. It means re-examining gender matters in the early primary classroom and “open[ing] up new ways for listening to, observing, and interpreting children’s talk and actions” (Blaise, 2005, p. 183).

Teacher Gender Bias

From my perspective, acknowledging that our own gender biases are at play when we teach and interact with children is imperative if we are to work towards disrupting pervasive gender stereotypes. Recently I have closely scrutinized and reflected on my own verbal exchanges with my Kindergarten students. Being a parent of a transgendered son and also having studied gender and gender stereotyping for the past two and a half years, I see myself as socially conscious in the classroom, especially as it relates to discouraging gender stereotyping. It was not until very recently, however, that I realized I was still taking part in perpetuating gender norms. For example, I found that if I complimented anyone’s clothing, it was more often than not a girl’s, thereby reinforcing the feminine ideal of physical attractiveness. I have also been guilty of engaging in dialogue that reinforces masculine norms. I have been more inclined to comment on a boy’s athletic ability in gym or to praise a male student’s architectural skills in the block corner. In terms of student behavior, I am also quicker to comment and redirect a female student if she is loud or hyperactive than I am a male student. I believe I have come to expect such behavior from male students and therefore have a higher tolerance level for that type of behavior. That is, I consider it “normal” behavior for a boy and my comments illuminate this belief. I recognize now that the beliefs and assumptions I hold about gender informs my
teaching practices and also sends strong messages to children about gender (Blaise, 2005; Madrid & Katz, 2011).

Researchers have noted that verbal exchanges between teachers and students demonstrate gender bias in terms of having different expectations for boys and for girls (Blaise, 2005; Wilson, 2011). In a study conducted in a Waldorf daycare setting, girls, Wilson (2011) noted, “were more often told to be quiet during meals, were expected to be more helpful and attentive to one another and gentle with the environment around them” (p. 13). Alternatively, boys were expected to “be more obedient and more tough when they got hurt” (p. 13). Wilson (2011) found that the teachers in her study held typically stereotyped views of boys and girls; that the boys were loud, rambunctious and demanded a lot of the teacher’s time and the girls were generally more social, quiet, and well behaved. Moreover, it was found that the teachers privileged such stereotypical behavior.

In the past, I frequently used gender as a means of class management and instruction and consequently drew attention to the children’s “maleness and femaleness as central features of their identity” (Davies, 1989, p. 112). Like many teachers, I drew attention to gender differentiation in everyday practices (Chick, Heilman-Houser & Hunter, 2002 as cited in Wilson, 2011; Madrid & Katz, 2011). For example, I lined boys and girls up strategically in order to demonstrate pattern making. I used the division of the sexes to clean up the classroom or to put away equipment in the gym. Even the physical lay out of my Kindergarten classroom revealed inherent gender biases. In most Kindergarten classrooms I have visited (there are four in the school in which I currently teach), the play centers are often created based around gender norms, for example the house corner and the block corner. I have noted that these centers often contain many stereotyped toys (e.g., dolls, Lego, blocks, cars). It is commonplace to see such toys in
their segregated centers (just as the boys and girls usually are when they play with them) rather than to see them intermixed. The cars, blocks, and Lego are never a feature in the house center, nor are the dolls ever situated near the cars and car track. Indeed, the pervasiveness of “the functional use of gender” (Bigler, 1995) is staggering when one really reflects on his or her teaching practice. We draw attention to gender and, hence, draw attention to difference every time we use such seemingly innocent management strategies or teaching practices. Furthermore, drawing attention to the gender dichotomy and assuming that boys and girls will simply fall in line accordingly fails to recognize the discomfort gender variant children may feel when forced to categorize themselves (Fox, 2011). An example from a few years ago comes to mind when I taught a grade three student who very much presented opposite to that of her natal sex. She was consistently mistaken for a boy and seemed fine with that. I remember that I used to sometimes line my students up by calling the girls and then the boys. This little girl, I soon noticed, would pretend to be engrossed in tying her shoes or some other activity if the girls were lining up. Once I called the boys to line up, she bounced out of her chair and joined them.

It is easy to change these practices of using gender to categorize or manage students simply by becoming aware of how and when we do this in the classroom. I can still line my students up and demonstrate pattern making based on children’s hair color, clothing, or the numbers of letters in a name. I can engage my students in clean up by utilizing the color groups to which they belong. Even using sexist language like fireman, mailman, and policeman draws attention to a binary gender system and, hence, creates a climate where anyone embracing cross gender roles or behaviors might elicit criticism from peers (Lamb, Bigler, Liben, & Green, 2009). By refraining from using gender to separate and organize students, I am providing opportunities for children to create an identity based on something other than their gender. In the
following section, I share examples of strategies that will help teachers raise the awareness of
gender stereotyping with young children and create a classroom culture that accepts and
celebrates gender diversity.

**Raising Awareness through Conversation**

Understanding how gender influences children’s choices and behaviour in the classroom
creates opportunities for discussion about how we can bend gender boundaries and engage in a
less restrictive way of being. In my Kindergarten classroom I will often intervene in
conversations I overhear that exclude children on the basis of gender. For example, girls will
talk about creating a “girls only” club or boys will often exclude girls in their play simply
because they are girls. Interrupting such sexist play and explaining that exclusion on the basis of
gender is not fair is a way to heighten their awareness of sex discrimination (MacNaughton, 2000,
p. 41). I have also tried to illuminate how gender is socially constructed and can change over
time (MacNaughton, 2000). I have talked about how, not so long ago, pink was the colour
associated with boys because it was considered a “watered down” version of red, a strong, bold
colour. Blue, alternatively, was associated with girls as it was considered a passive and calm
colour (Fausto-Sterling, 2012; Yoon, 2005). Teachers can also discuss with children the roles of
females and males in other parts of the world (MacNaughton, 2000). For example, Hoy
Crawford (1996, as cited in MacNaughton, 2000) suggested explaining to children that it was
once the norm that affluent men in China grew long fingernails and that at one point in history
women led men into battle.

The way children present themselves in terms of how they dress, the way they speak,
gesturing, the toys they choose to play with, and the dialogue that accompanies such play all
have an integral role in a child getting his or her gender “right” (MacNaughton, 2000).
Understanding how and why children make the gendered choices they make enables teachers to recognize how children typically work very hard to present themselves as “normal” to the rest of the world. It also enables teachers to begin to disrupt or challenge such gendered ways of being and begin to make room for opportunities to “free children from the constraints and inequities that gender places on them” (MacNaughton, 2000, p. 84). In my own classroom, I take advantage of opportunities to do this when I hear comments like, “he can’t use a pink crayon, he’s a boy” or I observe boys who I purposely give a pink or purple handled pair of scissors to quickly try to trade them with a female peer. Engaging in impromptu discussions at moments like these can help to raise children’s awareness of how placing stereotyped notions of something like colour can limit the choices of boys and girls. “Colours are for everyone,” I often hear myself saying to my young Kindergarten students. Last year, one of the most rewarding experiences I have had as a teacher occurred when I realized my teaching about gender stereotyping really resonated with one little boy in my class. It was during a gymnastics lesson and I was helping Rhys\(^1\) across the balance beam. I glanced down at his bare feet and noticed his toenails were painted bright red. I immediately exclaimed, “Rhys! I love your red toenail polish!” Without missing a beat he answered, “I know. I can do it because colours are for everyone, right Ms. Watt?” (R. C., personal communication, April 11, 2012).

The idea of gender fluidity and change (Davies 1993; MacNaughton, 2000), so evident in students like Rhys who suddenly feel confident with a new expression of gender, is only possible when children are presented with alternative ways of being male and female. When my transgendered son was about six years old he pondered aloud the use of the male and female pronoun. Already feeling like he did not belong in the female category into which his natal sex

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\(^1\) All of the Kindergarten children’s names in this paper are pseudonyms.
immediately placed him, he lamented the fact that there was not a third category for people like him. I remember he adamantly maintained that he should be referred to as a “shim” (a hybrid pronoun of “she” and “him”) as that would allow him to take part in activities and wear clothing that best suited his mood that day and not be dictated by his sex. My son’s understanding of gender, even as young as age six, parallels many researchers’ findings which revealed that it is important to dismantle the binary opposites of male and female and, instead, create a new understanding of the genders as linked which will allow for a vision of a “third gender” (Fox, 2011; MacNaughton, 2000). Creating meaningful classroom discussions about the binary opposites of male and female and how it is possible to deconstruct such binaries allows students to have expanded conceptions of gender expression (Blaise, 2005; Davies, 1989; Davies, 1993; MacNaughton, 2000).

An effective way to draw attention to the gender stereotypes children inherently hold is to present students with various items typically associated with males and females. Items could include a football, a doll, a pink shirt, hair accessories, a toy airplane, a vacuum, and others. As children are presented with these items they could be asked to decide the gender (male, female, or both) of each item in relation to where they perceive it belongs. Additionally, students could be presented with pages from catalogues and flyers and asked what they notice about the pictures and who or what is portrayed in them. These activities are a great springboard to question students about their preconceived notions of gender and whether or not they think this is fair (e.g., girls typically depicted with toys that relate to cooking/care; boys depicted with toys that relate to adventure/sports). Appealing to children’s sense of justice – that is, what is fair and what is not fair – is an effective way to illuminate for them the reasons why holding boys and girls to certain gender rules is detrimental to their well-being (MacNaughton, 2000.)
Raising Awareness in Play

One of the most demonstrative ways that children reveal what they know about gender and gender roles is through play (Davies, 1989; MacNaughton, 2000). Children uphold and perpetuate certain gender stereotypes through their play and are influenced by their gender in the type of play they engage in (MacNaughton, 2000). Reflecting on my own teacher practice, I currently have one or two girls who appear to have absorbed society’s messages of what it is to be female. For example, Rosie, in particular, seems to be a teenager trapped in a five-year-old’s body. This is because her play often revolves around putting on concerts for me (or any other adult in the room). She grabs the hand of her best friend, Annie, and immediately pulls her over to the microphones we have in the book corner. They then practice singing popular songs from bands and vocalists, such as One Direction and Katy Perry. What is interesting about Rosie is that she not only knows every word of these “teen sensation” songs, but she also moves her body in a very provocative and sexualized way. It is obvious that she has carefully monitored the facial expressions and body movements of the likes of Katy Perry, and performs confidently, complete with hip gyrations and coy looks to the audience. I have asked myself, what does this reveal about Rosie’s gender knowledge? How does this role-play serve her socially? What kind of social power does it give her, if any? How can I use Rosie’s gender knowledge to inform my teaching and provide an expanded understanding of what it means to be female? And how can I help her experience alternative ways of wielding social power?

On the other end of the gender spectrum, I have a couple of boys who only seem to want to play with Lego. They spend their center time building spacecrafts with lasers and engage in battles where they fly around the room and shoot at each other. Again, I ask myself how I can provide alternative ways of being male to these students. I certainly do not want to stifle their
play; however, providing a different dynamic to their conversations within their play is important if they are to understand alternative ways of expressing their masculinity. Since certain ways of being masculine and being feminine are more highly valued in Western society (MacNaughton, 2000), it stands to reason that children will engage in recreating certain masculine and feminine roles. Typically, being macho and highly physical is a valued form of masculinity. Highly valued forms of femininity, on the other hand, involve being quiet, controlled, and attractive to the opposite sex (MacNaughton, 2000). In my classroom, I can see the effect of Rosie’s Katy Perry imitation on the rest of the students. She holds them captive with her singing and dancing and consequently wields significant power among her peers, both male and female. It is a similar case with the boys. Their rough and often violent storylines with their Lego spaceships inevitably attracts a larger group of boys, all vying to be a part of the play.

As a teacher, I find myself contemplating two notions in relation to young children’s gender identity formation. First, I reflect on what narrations about gender are taking place in my class (MacNaughton, 2000). Second, I find myself wondering what messages are being sent to students when this type of stereotypical play occurs. In particular, what messages are the children who are gender variant receiving? With these children in mind, I try to provide a forum for children who do not necessarily subscribe to typical gender norms. For example, one day a group of three or four girls decided to make a block tower with some coloured wood blocks. This was not a typical choice of play for these girls, so, after creating their masterpiece, I immediately took a photograph of the finished product and displayed it in our classroom photo display area. I have since noticed an increase in the number of girls choosing to build castles and other things with blocks and Lego. As Blaise (2005) contended, using this “student-led activism” is a way to relay to others that atypical gender choices can be both “reasonable and desirable” (p.
This was recently demonstrated in my classroom when my students rotated through four different centers that involved lots of building materials, like Lego. As Ainsley took her seat to begin, she proclaimed, “Oh! Girls can play with Lego?” (A. T., personal communication, March 4, 2013). Although, taking advantage of these teachable moments is important in trying to shift the focus away from recreating stereotypical gender play, I believe that it is not enough. It is argued that the dichotomous gender play so often found in primary classrooms is largely due the reproduction of power relations found in our patriarchal society and the children’s understandings of what it means to be male and female (Blaise, 2005; MacNaughton, 2000). Indeed, Davies (1989) posited that as long as children adhere to the belief that boys and girls are supposed to look and behave in certain (and opposite) ways, they will “find themselves excluding ‘other sex’ possibilities because of the apparent incompatibility with their sex/gender” (p. 113). In order to interrupt these understandings, it is our job as teachers to “change the discourses through which they make sense of themselves as masculine and feminine…We have to take them apart…and remake them” (MacNaughton, 2000, p. 121). If we can accomplish this, children will be released from understanding their “place” as that which casts them as “normal” boys and girls.

In order to raise the awareness of how gender influences children’s play choices, MacNaughton (2000) urged teachers to ask children why they choose to engage in specific types of play. After teaching primary-aged students for the past thirteen years, I have almost come to expect my drawing and house center to be dominated by girls and the Lego and block play center to be dominated by boys. It had never occurred to me to ask my students why they were making the choices they made. MacNaughton (2000) argued, though, that raising such a simple question helps to “uncover children’s gender knowings” (p. 94). MacNaughton insisted that allowing children a voice in explaining their choices of play provides a “powerful source of gender
knowledge” (p. 96), a knowledge which can subsequently be used when talking with children about alternative ways of being gendered. Indeed, MacNaughton (2000) posited that if teachers do not explore the motivation and reasoning behind the gendered choices children make, it will be difficult to provide an alternative framework for imagining the many ways they can be boys and girls.

**Raising Awareness through Storytelling**

Utilizing stories and the characters and themes presented in them is another way teachers can raise the awareness of gender stereotypes and, at the same time, draw attention to the challenges involved in maintaining and perpetuating those stereotypes. When reading stories to my Kindergarten students I routinely change the sex of the characters, especially if they include a disproportionate number of male or female characters. Teachers can also be aware of masculine and feminine characteristics being associated with story characters in stereotypical ways. When I am reading, for instance, Jan Brett’s *The Mitten*, I will change the pronoun of the large, lumbering bear to a female one and the tiny mouse to a male one. Books that portray characters engaging in non-traditional activities and situations will aid in breaking down male and female stereotypes. For example, reading stories where male characters are in roles where they are nurturing and caring or where female characters defy the characteristics commonly associated with femininity can help challenge dominant stereotypes and redefine what it means to be male and female (MacNaughton, 2000). Moreover, comparing and contrasting these stories to fairytales, nursery rhymes and stories that cast males and females in very traditional gender roles will help illuminate the limitations of such roles.

According to Davies (1989), when alternative themes are presented to children through stories, these themes can come under suspicion and even outright rejection from some children
This is because stories that cast characters in traditional, stereotypical roles have come to symbolize not only a social order but a moral order as well (Davies, 1989). Indeed, this sort of adherence to stereotypes is evident when I read literature that challenges such stereotypes. My Kindergarten students will go to great lengths to explain why a character, whose gender is not immediately evident, is a male or a female based on physical characteristics (e.g., eyelashes, length of hair, clothing) and the character’s behavior and demeanour. Davies (1989) noted that when unorthodox characters or themes are presented to children through stories, they are often rejected. After presenting stories with feminist themes, children saw them as “straightforwardly wrong” (p. 27). As Davies explained, “Princess Elizabeth in The Paper Bag Princess was often seen as bad once she had stepped out of her female place. There was no place in the narrative structure…for a feminist hero” (p. 27). Davies (1989) posited that children buy into the social order that has been established in society as it “provides a predictable social world through which they can know and be known” (p. 43). The safety and orderly nature of stories that promote gender stereotypes, though, must be disrupted if children are to embrace alternative ways of expressing gender.

In addition to presenting children with alternative ways of being male and female, utilizing storybooks in the classroom can foster the skills necessary to stand up for those children who are criticized for their atypical gender expression. In many ways, my son was one of the lucky ones. There is a much higher tolerance for girls who transgress gender boundaries (hence, the term “tomboy”) than there is for boys (Fox, 2011; Levy, Taylor, & Gelman, 1995; Smetana, 1986). Books like Marcus Ewert’s 10,000 Dresses can help draw attention to this fact and create a forum for meaningful conversation about allowing both sexes the freedom to explore who they really are. In Ewert’s story, Bailey, a transgendered female, loves dresses and dreams of wearing
them every night. Bailey knows exactly who she is, however her family is having difficulty accepting that their son/brother loves dresses. This is a story about a transgender female child who wants others to accept her efforts at having her “outside” reflect exactly who she is on the “inside.” Bailey is a very relatable character, even though many children may not understand what it feels like to be trapped in the wrong body. What is great about using this story to teach about valuing diversity and acceptance is that the author uses female pronouns to refer to Bailey throughout the book. As Epstein (2012) stated, “this suggests that the narrator has accepted Bailey for who she is and that, therefore, so should the reader” (Epstein, retrieved from http://www.huffingtonpost.com/bj-epstein/transgender-books-for-children_b_1278473.html). I wonder how a book like Ewert’s would have helped my son when he was a young child in a primary classroom. He would undoubtedly have identified with a character like Bailey. More importantly, he may have come away from hearing a story like Ewert’s knowing he was not alone or abnormal in feeling disconnected from his natal sex (Epstein, 2012).

Using literature as a catalyst, students can learn to defend atypical gender choices and celebrate gender diversity. Importantly, students can learn to recognize when people are being discriminated against on the basis of gender. In doing so, students develop empathy for others, and they learn how to defend against sexist talk and discrimination and value diversity. One of the most effective ways of teaching children to defend the choices of others is through perspective taking. In my classroom, I have used strategies that enable a child to step into the shoes of someone who has challenged gender norms. A list of children’s literature that highlights and celebrates such characters is included in Appendix A. A description of strategies and activities that accompany some of the stories is explored in depth in the following section.
Raising Awareness through Role Play

I have found that engaging children in drama activities is another way to alert them to gender stereotyping and the emotional toll such stereotyping can have on children who are gender variant. Role-play activities can provide opportunities for perspective taking and assist children in understanding the choices some gender variant children make. There are some excellent examples of children’s literature that address gender stereotyping and making gender atypical choices. For example, books like *Oliver Button is a Sissy* (dePaolo, 1979) can be used to illuminate the angst the main character feels when being teased for not liking to engage in typical “boy” activities. Students can take part in an activity where they can pretend to be Oliver Button and answer questions from students about why he makes certain choices. Imagining what Oliver is thinking when he is bullied by kids at school for enjoying dance and how he is feeling when his father frowns on his passion allows us insight into how this gender atypical boy feels. The aim of this role-play activity is to cultivate empathy and to provide students with opportunities to understand that sometimes we do not have good reasons for insisting a person act and behave in a certain way. Appealing to a child’s sense of justice, of what is fair and unfair, is an effective way to raise awareness surrounding the injustices of holding people to gender norms (MacNaughton, 2000). Indeed, Oliver’s Dad can also be asked such questions as, “Why are you unhappy that Oliver wants to dance?” Before role-playing can occur, I typically brainstorm with students the art of asking “deep” questions, ones that will elicit answers that involve more than a simple “yes” or “no.” Additionally, using thinking and speech bubbles allows me to demonstrate to students the possibilities of what a character is thinking, which in turn, enables students to acquire a more robust understanding of different characters.

*The Paper Bag Princess* by Robert Munsch, is another children’s story that can be
utilized for role-play purposes. Students can get into partners and decide who will be Princess Elizabeth and who will be Prince Ronald. Students can be encouraged to ask and answer questions about the different roles and then swap roles. For example, Princess Elizabeth can ask Prince Ronald questions about his ungratefulness at being saved. Prince Ronald can ask Elizabeth why she does not dress like a real princess. The way in which students answer these questions will undoubtedly reveal their gender biases and their gender knowledge (Davies, 1989). This, in turn, can inform our teaching. Because this story highlights some stereotypes we are very familiar with (e.g., the dragon and Prince Ronald) as well as a character that challenges stereotypes (Princess Elizabeth), engaging in role-play activities around this story will allow for deep conversation about stereotypes and will hopefully illuminate for students the likeability of a refreshingly “new” type of princess.

In sum, learning to understand and defend the choices of characters such as Oliver Button and Bailey will demonstrate to students how they can defend the choices of their peers.

Rehearsing dialogue and practicing role-play situations where someone is being unfairly judged or criticized for atypical gender choices can help children recognize when to advocate for themselves and for others. Lamb, Bigler, Liben, and Green (2009) have provided a catch phrase that can be used by children when they are told (or witness others being told) they cannot play with something or wear something because they are a boy/girl. Lamb et al. (2009) stated that having children practice role-play situations and using the phrase, “Not true! Gender doesn’t limit you!” can help children challenge sexist talk and behavior. Indeed, I have noticed in my classroom that my students are using the catch phrase, “colours are for everyone” that I introduced at the beginning of the year. In fact, it is a catch phrase that has been tailored to fit all types of situations where gender biases typically exist (e.g., “Lego is for everyone;” “Cooking is
for everyone”). It has become a popular and easily recalled scripted line that reminds students that we are more alike than different and that things need not be separated along dichotomous gender lines.

**Professional Development Workshop**

*“From the Inside Out: Creating a Culture of Acceptance for Gender Variant Children.”*

Appendix A includes a PowerPoint presentation suitable for a professional development workshop for elementary school teachers. This workshop consists of current research on young children’s understanding of gender, includes strategies and activities that raise the awareness of gender stereotypes, and is designed to encourage teachers to foster a culture of encouragement and acceptance of gender diversity. The workshop consists of three main parts.

In part one of the workshop, current research is presented which briefly outlines the construction of gender identity in young children, gender stereotyping, and the experiences of gender variant children in the classroom. A testimony from my son who shares his experiences in the classroom as a gender variant child is also included. This video clip will be a springboard for transitioning to part two of the workshop.

Part two of the workshop includes activities designed to encourage educators to reflect on their own experiences with gender in the classroom, including their own gender biases. Participants will be asked to engage in discussions with colleagues about the pervasiveness of gender stereotyping in our classrooms and schools and to share examples with the group to raise awareness of gender stereotyping. In addition, the literature and role-play activities summarized in this chapter are presented which demonstrate the importance of encouraging a more fluid gender expression and advocating for others who are gender variant.
Part three of this workshop summarizes the ways in which teachers can foster a culture of encouragement and acceptance of gender diversity in their classrooms. Gender variant children are becoming more commonplace in the primary classroom and they are vulnerable to teasing and bullying because of their gender non-conformity. Relating back to the video clip presented in part one, this part of the workshop focuses on how to create a classroom that is a more comfortable place for gender variant children, from the physical layout of the class to verbal interactions with students. This workshop concludes with how the suggested strategies and activities connect to the social responsibility curriculum requirements, specifically the Social Responsibility Curriculum, and the mandate to combat bullying put forth by the B.C. Ministry of Education (2012).

Summary

In this chapter I connected the reviewed literature to strategies and ideas that can foster awareness of gender stereotyping and create a culture of acceptance for gender diversity. I explained how engaging children in conversations about gender identity creation and maintenance is best done from feminist poststructuralist and queer theory frameworks. These theories allow for an understanding of gender as fluid and enable teachers to recognize the agency children hold in constructing their gender roles. I have attempted to underscore how important it is that teachers challenge gender norms and encourage their young students to do the same. This chapter also described a workshop designed for elementary school teachers that addresses gender stereotyping and creating a culture of acceptance and encouragement in the classroom for gender variant children. In Chapter Four, I present my concluding thoughts and suggest recommendations and directions for future research.
CHAPTER FOUR: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The current literature on gender identity and gender variant children provides us with new understandings of how gender stereotypes can negatively affect young children who do not conform to gender norms (Egan & Perry, 2001; Yunger, Carver, & Perry, 2004). The literature reviewed underscores how influential the environment can be in valuing and respecting gender identity in young children (Hupp, Smith, Coleman, & Brunell, 2010). It is clear that teachers are in powerful positions to create a culture where children can experiment with multiple gender expressions without fear of being penalized in some way. Ultimately, embracing non-stereotypical expressions of gender will create a culture of inclusiveness in the primary classroom by providing opportunities for gender variant children to express gender behavior opposite to that of their natal sex. For example, if there is less emphasis placed on a strict adherence to gender norms, children will be less likely to question a male wearing a pink, heart shaped necklace. They may, instead, look at him as experimentating with what makes him comfortable. They may allow him the freedom to express himself in whatever manner he wants and they may even be inspired to experiment with their own expressions of gender.

Areas for Further Research

Children who identify as transgender have recently been the focus of mainstream discussion. For example, a sixteen-year-old transgender male was recently featured on the Vancouver Canucks website (Jory, 2013). Cory’s Story relayed the transitioning experience of Cory Oskam, who chose his name because his favourite hockey player is goalie Cory Schneider from the Vancouver Canucks. Indeed, my own son’s experience as a gender variant child was recently a feature of the North Vancouver School District’s Curriculum Implementation Day. That day focused on a sense of belonging in schools, and paralleled the B.C. Government’s
mandate to ERASE bullying within five years. My son had videotaped a clip for one of the keynote presenters in which he highlighted his experiences as a gender variant child in the school system. *Seth’s Story* was highlighted as a success story in terms of the efforts of some teachers took to make his experiences at school more comfortable. In the video clip, my son reflected, “My teachers were very open minded, intuitive, understanding people who I think understood my situation even before I did” (Watt, 2012). Although, in retrospect, my son looks back on his years at school with many positive feelings, I know that there were struggles. Like him, I am grateful for those “open minded, intuitive, understanding” teachers. I am also aware that there are teachers who are not so understanding or intuitive, particularly in elementary school settings. This may, in part, be due to the lack of education on gender variant children in elementary schools (Fox, 2011).

Many high schools demonstrate inclusiveness in regards to gender variance by providing a space for GSA clubs and by including an anti-homophobia focus in their curriculum. However, there is a lack of material in the elementary school setting that addresses educating professionals on being aware of and sensitive to the experiences of gender variant children. In addition to educating teachers, the responsibility of schools and administrators is paramount in creating ideal learning environments for gender variant children. Indeed, action must be taken on the part of the entire school community to promote a culture of acceptance and respect, including tangible signs such as the school’s mission statement and bulletin boards that represent the diversity of the school’s population.
Educating Teachers

A common thread throughout the current literature available on disrupting gender stereotypes in the classroom and encouraging young children to embrace a more fluid understanding of gender is the importance of educating teachers. According to Geraldo and Colyar (2012), raising the awareness of how educators unwittingly promote gender dichotomous beliefs and behaviors is an effective beginning to creating a classroom culture that resists such stereotypes. Based on my experiences, there have been many instances where gender variant children have been fodder for insensitive conversation in the staffroom at my school, perhaps due to an ignorance surrounding the challenges of these children. I have found that some teachers undermine gender variant expression through humour, or even outright disdain. Admittedly, since it has become public knowledge in my school that I have a transgender son, the insensitive remarks towards gender variant youth have diminished. However, I cannot help but wonder how the gender-typed attitudes and beliefs some teachers hold have already impacted the students they teach. Even more distressing to me is the impact these attitudes and beliefs may have had on gender variant students. However, as the review of the literature revealed, there are not many resources available on this topic, particularly as it relates to young children, which may explain the lack of attention focused on gender identity and gender expression in the classroom. From my perspective, providing training to educators through professional development workshops or lunch hour workshops would help educators create inclusive environments for gender variant children.

As addressed in previous chapters, educators have a responsibility to create a classroom culture where all children can learn and feel safe. Brill and Pepper (2008) noted that in order to provide a safe learning environment for gender variant children, “The teacher has to be proactive
and set the tone for the entire class…both for the students and their parents” (p. 156). Thus, I recommend that teachers be educated on how children create and maintain their gender identity and how influential teachers are in promoting less restrictive gender roles. Providing training and teaching strategies on this topic may result in educators being more inclined to address such issues in their day-to-day teaching (Hanlon, 2009). Although valuing diversity is part of the Social Responsibility Curriculum in British Columbia, other curriculum areas, such as Language Arts, Math, and Science, often demand more of our attention and time. Therefore, ready-made teaching strategies, activities and recommended children’s literature would help educators deliver the important message that all individuals should be respected and appreciated for their unique contributions to the classroom and school climate. Mewborn (1999) suggested that administrators should provide release time to teachers in order to observe one another in the teaching environment and then reflect on the ways gender stereotypes were perpetuated and/or challenged in the classroom. I think this is very important, as engaging in discussion and reflection with other colleagues can help us become aware of how we unwittingly promote gender stereotypes, from the physical layout of the classroom to the very language we use in our daily interactions and teachings (MacNaughton, 2000).

From my perspective, educating pre-service teachers on young children’s understandings of gender and the implications gender stereotyping can have on children should also be mandatory. Rather than providing teacher education courses that are dominated by a developmental perspective, MacNaughton (2000) argued that teacher education programs need to include a feminist poststructuralist theoretical perspective to allow for an understanding of the power relations that exist between children and between children and teachers. Moreover, MacNaughton (2000) insisted that this theoretical perspective will enable pre-service teachers to
acquire insight into feminist concepts of discourse and provide a foundation for challenging prevailing beliefs about what it means to be masculine and feminine. Indeed, the teacher education program in which I was enrolled fifteen years ago clearly addressed the range of academic skills and abilities that I might find in any given classroom. It seems that this type of instruction continues to be standard practice in current teacher education programs. However, in my opinion, it should also be standard practice to educate pre-service teachers on children’s understandings of gender and the diversity of gender expression one may find in the classroom.

As stated earlier in this paper, gender variance is becoming more commonplace in today’s primary classrooms (L’Abate & Ryback, 2011). In order to be effective teachers, it is imperative that educators are provided with opportunities to understand the influence they have on a child’s gender identity construction. Roulston and Misawa (2011) maintained that educating pre-service teachers in teacher education programs will help reduce the perpetuation of stereotypical constructs of masculinity and femininity in the classroom. Similarly, Creighton (2011) argued that teacher education faculty must ensure pre-service teachers have a solid understanding of the impact their perceptions of gender can have on the learning environment.

The Responsibility of Schools

All schools have a mission statement, highlighting the philosophies and goals of the school. Although many schools typically have their mission statement displayed in the school and/or posted on their website, it is not enough to simply adopt a statement and post it somewhere for all to see; schools must also “talk the talk and walk the walk,” so to speak. As Brill and Pepper (2008) asserted, “A school must authentically understand and convey the value of inclusiveness and reinforce this message at all levels” (p. 163). That is, all staff (including teachers, administration, support staff, and custodians) should promote an acceptance of
difference and value diversity at all times. Everyone in the school “should know and understand the school’s commitment to treating every person with respect, valuing and affirming differences, and confronting harassment and discrimination of any kind” (Brill & Pepper, 2008, p. 163). In particular, incorporating a statement specifically addressing freedom of gender expression can help create a sense of comfort and safety for gender variant children and their parents (Brill & Pepper, 2008). Moreover, the bulletin boards in the school should also be representative of the school population. As Mewborn (1999) asked, “Can all children see themselves or people with whom they can identify represented in [the displays?]” (p. 108). The library and resource center should also contain books, resources, and multimedia that depict males and females in non-stereotypical roles (Mewborn, 1999).

Brill and Pepper (2008) identified additional actions that can be taken by the school to meet the unique needs of gender variant children. For example, having “gender neutral” washrooms available for children who do not identify with their anatomical sex would allow them privacy and would avoid any potentially uncomfortable situations in gender specific washrooms. Additionally, using the preferred pronoun and name of a child who identifies as transgender would demonstrate the staff’s respect and acceptance of that child. Educating the parent community of a school’s policy regarding gender expression, and making resources available on gender variance is also recommended (Brill & Pepper, 2008). Elementary schools should also consider having anti-bias curriculum resources available for teachers to access and implement. Research has demonstrated that an anti-bias curriculum can be effective in diminishing gender stereotyping (Rainey & Rust, 1999). If this is readily available to teachers, they may be more inclined to implement some of the strategies included in the curriculum.
I also recommend inviting role models to the school who can demonstrate alternative ways of being gendered. This would include having people such as my son speak to groups of children or even engaging with children in a more informal manner. This interaction would allow the students to appreciate his particular brand of masculinity, that of a transgender male. Moreover, similar to a high school’s Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) club, I also recommend creating a diversity club in elementary schools where children who identify as gender variant can meet and interact. Again, this would create a space for children to see others who are like them and it may reassure them that they are not alone or abnormal in any way. My son has often reflected that it was not until high school that he met another biological female who presented as male in her gender expression. It was at that moment that he suddenly realized he was not alone in his gender variance (S. Watt, personal communication, February 4, 2012). In my opinion, it is unfortunate that he had to wait until grade eight to feel a sense of belonging. Creating a culture of acceptance for gender variance in the primary classroom and, indeed, celebrating the diversity of gender, will promote that sense of belonging in all students.

**Conclusion**

Researching, reflecting, and engaging with children and other educators about gender issues provides opportunities for real change in the school environment (MacNaughton, 2000). This perspective would enable educators to provide gender variant children with what the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) maintained is every child’s right: “the right to freedom of expression” (Article 13, p. 4) and the right to an education that develops the child’s “personality, talents, and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential” (Article 29, p. 10). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child also agreed that a child’s education should prepare him or her for “understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and
friendship among all peoples” (Article 29, p. 10). It is the responsibility of teachers and schools to provide these fundamental rights to children. Taking the necessary actions to create a more inclusive classroom culture, one that fosters a sense of belonging and community for all children, will ultimately help us achieve these rights.

MacNaughton (2000) insisted that teachers must question the “truths” of developmentally appropriate practice, which subsequently informs our plans for children’s learning. She maintained that in order to move away from an “essentialist” account of gender (that a child’s gender expression is a natural extension of his or her anatomical sex) we must view children through a feminist poststructuralist lens. This would enable teachers to “challenge gender as a ‘natural’ fact of life” (p. 238) and to deconstruct the male/female dichotomy that underscores differences between children. Although the British Columbian Kindergarten curriculum is largely framed within a developmental perspective, I have contested this notion by drawing on a feminist poststructuralist lens in my teaching. For example, I often challenge my Kindergarten students to question the stereotypes placed on males and females by society and to recognize similarities, as opposed to differences, among the sexes. I want to engage them in a discourse about the limitations and restrictions such stereotypes impose and create a safe and inclusive classroom culture in which students are encouraged to transgress gender boundaries. Doing so will enable them to discover the possibilities of gendered identities that perhaps, at one time, were only imagined. This can occur by first raising the awareness of gender stereotypes in our classrooms. This includes being mindful of our own gender biases and how we unwittingly perpetuate and reinforce gender norms. Refraining from using sexist language, being aware of heterosexist norms, and avoiding drawing attention to differences between genders is a necessary action in our attempt to create a more inclusive classroom culture. Encouraging children to
defend the rights of others to express their gender in atypical ways is also a necessary action to foster a culture where diversity is appreciated and celebrated.

MacNaughton (2000) posited that we must involve our young students in discussions about gender, including “intervening in, and extending, [their] storylines and challenging category-maintenance work on less traditionally-gendered children” (p. 239). MacNaughton (2000) further recommended that teachers talk with children about their gendered play and invite them to examine the “gender-fairness of particular desires, understandings and actions” (p. 240). Ultimately, this will allow teachers and their young students to slowly deconstruct the gender norms so firmly embedded in our society (MacNaughton, 2000). Blaise (2009) discussed the importance of creating a classroom culture in which students feel “brave enough” to add another perspective about gender in the mix and where teachers, too, “bravely contest the existing and limited notions of children’s sex, gender, and sexuality” (p. 459) that we currently hold. This will be achieved if it is demonstrated to children that there are additional “meaningful and legitimate ways” they can position themselves as gendered beings (Davies, 1989, p. 138) and that they need not limit themselves to roles and behaviors that “fit” into a gender dichotomous society.

As a teacher working with the youngest students in our school system, I feel I am in a unique position to “open the eyes” of these children to new possibilities of how they can “be.” I feel both privileged and obligated to take opportunities that demonstrate that gender is fluid. Doing so fosters the social and emotional well-being of gender variant children, in particular. Additionally, all children learn to value diversity and defend the rights of others to express themselves in unique and varied ways. In addition to a professional obligation, my effort to create a classroom culture that celebrates and values gender variant children also originates from
a personal place. As the mother of a transgender son, I am, perhaps, more sensitive to the unique challenges and experiences of gender variant children. My passion for encouraging others to be the same is an effort to create a space, at least within primary classrooms, where a child’s identity is not only constructed around being male or female (Davies, 1989). It is my hope that once children are made aware of the gender division so pervasive in our society, they will have the courage to challenge gender norms and construct an identity based on characteristics other than biological sex. Indeed, it will be an uphill battle so long as society revolves around two separate and opposite genders. However, it is a battle we must take up if we truly want to create a classroom culture that recognizes and celebrates the diverse qualities of all children.
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From the Inside Out:
Creating a Culture of Acceptance for Gender Variant Children.

Presented by: Anne Watt
- Review “Shape of the Day” with workshop participants.
Participants will sort words on table into categories. Be sure to label your categories.

- Each table group will share the categories they created.
- This activity will be referred to after slide #11 (words are taken from the word magnet toys).
Initially, very young children learn to label themselves as either a boy or a girl. They become aware of socially appropriate behavior and traits associated with males and females.

- Initially, very young children learn to label themselves as either a boy or a girl.
- They become aware of socially appropriate behavior and traits associated with males and females.
The Heterosexual Matrix

- Heterosexual norms are embraced and perpetuated in our society.

- Kindergarten children “build a sense of who they are, who they should be, and who they want to be as girls and boys through dominant, heterosexualized discourses” (Blaise, 2005).

- These traditional, heterosexual roles reinforce and perpetuate gender stereotypes.

(Blaise, 2005; Butler, 1990)

- Judith Butler (1990) talked about the “heterosexual matrix”
- Blaise (2005) observed a Kindergarten class in a northeastern U.S. city, taking note of their play and the children’s incorporation of gendered practices and identities in their play.
Stoddart & Turiel (1985) conducted a study that included 56 participants: 14 children from each of four grades (K, grade 3, grade 5 and grade 8). The participants were presented with 16 drawings accompanied by brief stories. The drawings depicted four different categories of deviations from gender norms: sex-role, moral, social-conventional and psychological-personal. The children were asked to sort the transgressions according to their degree of wrongness.

- For the K’s, it was found that the alignment of physical appearance with biological sex was very important and that any deviations from the norm were considered indicative of “psychological deviance” (p. 1250).

(Levy & Carter, 1989; Stoddart & Turiel, 1985)
Studies have shown that when children violate gender norms, it can be considered by others to be as serious as moral violations, such as stealing or lying.

Levy, Taylor, and Gelman (1995) and Smetana (1986) found that gender transgressions in boys was less tolerated than transgressions in girls. In Smetana’s (1986) study, 48 preschool and Kindergarten children were shown a series of four pictures, one each of a moral, conventional, male sex-role or female sex-role transgression. The children were then asked a series of questions to assess their justification for the rightness or the wrongness of the act displayed in the picture. It was found that female transgressions were more permissible than male transgressions.

Langlois and Downs (1980) conducted a study with mothers and their preschool children and fathers with their preschool children. After observations of how mothers and fathers influence the play choices of their children, it was found that fathers perpetuated sex-role differentiation more so than mothers.

Hupp, Smith, Coleman, and Brunell (2010) looked at how family structures predict a child’s level of gender-typed knowledge. They looked at the acceptance level of gender transgressions in children from single parent families and two parent families. It was found that children of single parent mothers were less gender stereotyped, perhaps “in part due to married mothers’ greater frequency of androgynous behaviors” (p. 389).

There are similar findings in children who have been raised in non-traditional families. Sutfin, Fulcher, Bowles, and Patterson (2008) looked at the physical environments in which children were raised (in this study, their bedrooms.) The researchers noted that the characteristics of a child’s physical environment encouraged the development of different skills and behaviors (e.g., masculine toys foster motor skills and the opportunity to invent, while feminine toys promote imitation and nurturing behavior.) It was found in this study that environments that include stereotyped items most likely contribute to the different socialization of boys and girls.

- Children act as the “gender police.”
- Take part in “category maintenance” to ensure that boys and girls dress/behave/play in gender appropriate ways.
- There is a higher tolerance for gender transgressions in females (e.g., “tomboy” vs ?)
- The adults in children’s lives significantly influence their understandings of gender.

(Hupp, Smith, Coleman, & Brunell, 2010; Langlois & Downs, 1980; Levy, Taylor, & Gelman, 1995; Smetana, 1986; Sutfin, Fulcher, Bowles, & Patterson, 2008)
The Pink and Blue Project

- Artist JeongMee Yoon (2005) conducted a project over the course of several years where photographs were taken on boys’ and girls’ bedrooms to demonstrate the pervasiveness of gender stereotyped “things” in the children’s environments. Yoon claimed that these differences “deeply affect children’s gender group identification and social learning.”
- Fausto-Sterling (2012) noted that these images clearly display the “preponderance of clothing, dolls, and stuffed animals among [the girls’] things…[and the contrasting] tools, sports equipment, and trucks in [the boys’] possessions” (p. 9).

http://www.jeongmeeyoon.com/aw_pinkblue.htm
A Gender Dichotomous World

- Items available today that have been categorized into the male/female dichotomy.
- Note the sorts of doodles in the boys’ book: space, vehicles, aliens, robots, animals
- Note the sorts of stickers in the girls’ book: fairies, flowers, bunnies, ladybugs
- Reveal to participants that the words they were asked to sort at the beginning of the workshop were actually from these fridge magnet toys.
- Discuss the implications (e.g., everyday objects being categorized as masculine/feminine.)
- Discuss how this categorization may affect a child’s gender identity.
Gender Variance

- Gender variance may be expressed for a variety of reasons, from being raised in an environment where gender stereotyped behaviors and attitudes are de-emphasized (Sutfin et al. 2008) to a desire for “inner” self to be aligned with outer physical expression.
- GID is listed in the DSM-IV; The Criteria for GID is: “A strong and persistent cross-gender identification; persistent discomfort with his or her sex or sense of inappropriateness in the gender role of that sex; the disturbance is not concurrent with a physical intersex condition; the disturbance causes clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning” (Cohen-Kettenis & Pfafflin, 2003, p. 53).
- Gender variant children are often seen as abnormal because they threaten the male/female dichotomy and cannot be easily placed into society’s masculine and feminine categories (Hanlon, 2009).
- Yunger, Carver, and Perry (2004) conducted a two-year longitudinal study that looked at the influence gender identity has on children’s psychological well-being. The authors found that the self-esteem of children who identified themselves as gender atypical declined over time.
- More specifically, these children suffered internalizing problems, such as low self-esteem, anxiety, sadness, social withdrawal, and self-deprecation when they felt strong pressure for gender conformity.
Seth’s Story

- Retrieved from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6rtlnb5K37I
In Your Table Groups...

- Describe any stereotyped behavior you have observed in your classroom.
- Have you intervened when seeing/hearing sexist comments and/or play? Why or why not?
- Reflect on the ways in which gender stereotypes may be perpetuated and reinforced in the classroom.

- Have individual table groups share their reflections.
North Vancouver School District
Anti-Homophobia Policy

“The North Vancouver School District is committed to raising awareness and improving the understanding of the lives of people who are identified as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, or who are questioning their sexual orientation or gender identity.”

“...Schools are expected to provide learning environments where students can attend without fear or threat of unsafe conditions, violence, or harassment.”

(Policy 412, North Vancouver School District, 2007)

- It is our obligation and our responsibility to create an inclusive culture for gender variant children.
- The North Vancouver school district backs teachers up when it comes to supporting these children (Policy 412)
ERASE Bullying Initiative (2012)

- 5 year plan developed by the B.C. government.

- Aim is to combat bullying in all its forms.

- ERASE Bullying plan will “help ensure every child feels safe, accepted and respected, regardless of...gender, race, culture, religion, or sexual orientation.”

- The BC Ministry of Education (2012) has developed a five year plan to combat bullying in our schools.
- Plan includes 10 elements, one of which states that teachers are to devote one of the six professional development days in the school year to anti-bullying strategies.
Giraldo and Colyar (2012) followed four teachers who worked with children from six weeks to six years of age. Through interviews and observations, the researchers concluded that these teachers promoted cross-gender play by offering a variety of different centers to the children and by avoiding having a “gender specific” play area (e.g.: a house center, a block corner, etc.)

- Rainey and Rust (1999) used an anti-bias curriculum, *Words Can Hurt You*, to reduce gender stereotyping in Kindergartners. The participants were involved in role-play activities where they could practice talking about and acting out non-traditional roles. The participants were also taught to recognize stereotypical characters in literature and to address alternative ways of presenting the character and/or theme.
- Examples of children’s literature that challenge gender stereotypes
- Read *William’s Doll*, by Charlotte Zolotow
- Choose a participant to play “William.” Have her/him stand on cut-out speech bubble and answer questions from workshop participants
- Have workshop participants ask William questions, e.g.: “How did you feel when your brother called you a sissy?”
- Choose a participant to play William’s Dad. Have him/her stand on cut-out speech bubble and answer questions from workshop participants
- Have workshop participant’s ask William’s Dad questions, e.g.: “Why don’t you want William playing with dolls?”
- Do same with thinking bubble; demonstrate how a student could present what William/Dad/brother may be thinking rather than saying aloud.
Role-Play Activities

- Engage children in role-play activities where they learn how to advocate for others who make atypical gender expression choices.
- Give children scripted lines that are easily remembered.

- These children’s stories are particularly useful for teaching children that there is strength in numbers and to value inclusiveness and diversity.
- Scripted lines that are easily remembered and, as well, are effective in getting the point across to others that we should value diversity in others include, “Not True! Gender doesn’t limit you!” and/or “_________ is for everyone!” (e.g., colours are for everyone; Lego is for everyone, etc.)
Part Three
What Can Teachers Do?

“All of my teachers were very open minded, intuitive, understanding people who I think understood my situation even before I did.”
- Seth Watt

☑ Examine physical layout of classroom.

☑ Be aware of your own gender biases. Refrain from using sexist language and from organizing children based on sex (e.g., boy/girl line-ups).

☑ Intervene in children’s play and conversations.

☑ Determine children’s gender knowledge (through conversation, play, etc.)

☑ Read literature that assists in raising the awareness of gender stereotypes as well as literature that challenges gender stereotypes.

☑ Have discussions with children about gender stereotyping.

☑ Engage children in role-play activities where they practice how to challenge sexist remarks.

- Summarize effective ways teachers can raise the awareness of gender stereotypes and work to challenge them in order to create a more inclusive culture in the classroom.
In referring to the B.C. government’s newly developed ERASE Bullying plan, Christy Clarke stated that, “…administrators need to know that creating a positive school culture is part of their everyday job” (Canadian Press, 2012).
Connections to the Social Responsibility Curriculum

- Students develop an understanding of gender stereotypes and the difficulties such stereotypes pose to children who are gender variant.

- British Columbia is the only province (to date) that has explicitly targeted social and emotional development, as well as citizenship, as goals of education.

- Through raising the awareness of gender stereotypes and respecting gender variance, students will:
  - Identify their personal skills and interests
  - Identify opportunities to make choices
  - Identify practices that contribute to emotional health
  - Value diversity and defend human rights

- Review how the activities included in this workshop meet the Social Responsibility IRPs.
- Above pictures: Lego advertisements from 1981.
- Talk about history of pink and blue (that blue was once associated with girls because it was considered a calm and gentle colour; pink was associated with boys because it was considered a “watered down” red, a strong and bold colour.)
- Recently, toy ads have become more gender neutral.
These resources, in particular, are useful for learning more about children’s understandings of gender. They also help illuminate how our own gender biases affect our interactions with children and our instruction in the classroom.
Children’s Literature
Raising the Awareness of Gender Stereotypes

The Piggybook, by Anthony Browne

Oliver Button is a Sissy, by Tommy dePaolo

The Sissy Duckling, by Harvey Fierstein

The Princess Knight, by Cornelia Funke

Elena’s Serenade, by Campbell Geeslin

The Only Boy in Ballet Class, by Denise Gruska

Pinky and Rex and the Bully, by James Howe

Paper Bag Princess, by Robert Munsch

A Fire Engine for Ruthie, by Leslea Newman

Boy Can He Dance, by Eileen Spinelli

William’s Doll, by Charlotte Zolotow

Transgendered Children

10,000 Dresses, by Marcus Ewert

My Princess Boy, by Cheryl Kilodavis
Children’s Literature

**Transgendered Children**

10,000 Dresses, by Marcus Ewert  
My Princess Boy, by Cheryl Kilodavis

**Standing up for Others and to Others/Valuing Diversity**  
The Crayon Box that Talked, by Shane DeRolf  
Mean Jean the Recess Queen, by Alexis O’Neill  
One, by Kathryn Otoshi  
The Juice Box Bully: Empowering Kids to Stand up for Others, by Bob Sornson and Maria Dismondy
The aim of raising the awareness of gender stereotypes with our young students is to nurture critical thinking and to encourage acceptance and appreciation of gender diversity.

“Riley’s Rant” is a video clip from YouTube. This toddler encapsulates for me the idea of fostering critical awareness in our young students!
References


