INCLUSIVE CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENTS: CREATING SPACE FOR GENDER NON-CONFORMING, DIVERSE FAMILY STRUCTURES

by

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ABSTRACT

Children who are gender non-conforming (GNC) and children who have diverse family structures (DFS) often experience feelings of not belonging, peer rejection, and lower emotional well-being. Drawing on socio constructivist theory, ecological model of development, queer theory, and dynamic gender development I explore how to create inclusive and supportive classroom environments for children who are GNC or from DFS. In exploring this topic I draw inspiration from Butler's (1990) concept of “ungrounding” the heterosexual matrix and Atkinson and DePalma’s (2008) concept of the heteronormative bias. The heteronormative bias is the assumed “natural order of things” (Atkinson & DePalma, 2008, p. 27) that results in children learning that “normal” families have a mom and a dad; that “normal” boys act like boys, and “normal” girls act like girls. Some children then become “gender policers” who enforce narrow gendered stereotypes which can lead to a toxic learning environment for children who fall outside of the heteronormative bias. I examine how educators can create inclusive classroom environments by “ungrounding” the heteronormative bias while understanding how children’s conceptions of gender and families are influenced by social, family, peer, and literature values and representations. In connecting this review of the literature to practice, I have prepared two “read alouds” for preschool and kindergarten children to introduce children who are GNC or from DFS and to demonstrate how children can be powerful agents in creating inclusive classrooms environments. Based on the findings of this review, I recommend that educators take an active role in responding to instances of “gender policing” and exclusion while empowering children to “unground" the heteronormative bias.
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“The fact that I have chosen to use the pronoun she does not mean I am always comfortable with the word, or that it has ceased to chafe me in certain places. I make this choice for more practical reasons. She fits better than he does, and I am interested in stretching and expanding what the word she can encompass.” Ivan Coyote
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION AND RATIONALE

In this capstone project I examine the issue of the heteronormative bias within early childhood classrooms. Butler (1990) coined the term *heterosexual matrix*. She argued that the heterosexual matrix is a constructed hierarchical dichotomy of sex (female, male), gender (woman, man) and sexuality (compulsory heterosexuality). Atkinson and DePalma (2008) drew from Butler's heterosexual matrix to define the term *heteronormative bias*, which is the tautology based on the assumption that heterosexuality is due to the “natural order of things” which is invisible and self-reinforcing due to this unspoken rule (p. 27). This definition of the heteronormative bias has been extended to families with the assumption that families are headed by heterosexual parents or a heterosexual parent and that the heterosexual parents are normal parents (Atkinson & DePalma, 2008).

**Context and Background**

As a lesbian mom of two children, living in a northern Canadian community, the concept of the heteronormative bias is near and dear to my heart. My oldest, O., has three moms: my wife, his Mumma B. (my previous partner, who is a trans-woman who provided the sperm and is still involved in my son’s life), and myself the birth mom. We are proud of our queer family. My oldest is aware that his Mumma B. used to be a boy but is really a girl and takes hormones to be a girl. We have a mix of straight and queer friends that are aware and accepting of our family. O. has just begun kindergarten and has had to confidently clarify our family to other educators and students. O. brings home newsletters, educational pamphlets, and leveled readers that do not have any representations of same sex parents and very few representations of children not adhering to gender stereotypes. As well, I have overheard other peers question my son about his mom “that cannot be your mom: that looks like a boy” and question my son about his family “your family is missing something… a
dad.” In these instances my son’s classroom teacher has not intervened to validate my son’s queer family. Just recently, O. came home from school asking “is queer a bad word?” We talked at length as he was confused why I called myself queer but he is not allowed to say queer at school. These conversations reinforce the complex nature of families’, school policies’, and educators’ role in creating inclusive classroom environments.

As I reflect on my own childhood, I was a gender nonconforming (GNC) child and experienced both confusion and frustration from my parents¹, and little support from my educators² and peers at school. As a child, I felt I did not quite belong and often played alone or with my brothers. As a I youth, I experienced mental health issues that unfortunately are typical for children and youth who are GNC or have diverse sexual orientations (Cohen-Kettenis, Owen, Kaijser, Bradley, & Zucker, 2003; Russell, 2003). In grade nine, I was ostracised at a party and sexually assaulted, a common experience for children who are GNC or have diverse sexual orientations (Martin-Storey, 2015). During this time, I began self-mutilating and entertaining suicidal thoughts. In grade ten, I was hospitalized for anorexia nervosa, a condition that causes severe weight lost due to restricting one’s calorie intake (Outten, 2015). During university, I was hospitalized for an attempted suicide. All my life, I just assumed I was a very unlucky person. It has been through reading the extant literature and reading authors, including Ivan Coyote, that I realized that my experiences as a child and youth were not unusual. Ivan Coyote is a local trans artist and activist who tells her personal stories of growing up as a child who was GNC and recent experiences as a trans adult (Coyote, 2010). With disbelief, I feel like I finally made it to adulthood: I survived. At the

¹ I love my parents and I truly believe that they raised me with the best intentions.

² I went to school in rural communities in the United States in the late 1990s early 2000s. Although the majority of my educators were hostile or cold towards me, I did have one librarian and two teachers who were incredibly supportive and their support made a world of difference.
same time, I feel vitally aware that the same gendered expectations and assumed heterosexuality exist for children. Anytime I see a young child who does not quite fit the stereotypical gendered norms, I feel protective. This capstone project is my commitment to ensure that these children do not have to experience the mental health issues that I experienced. I believe that we, as educators, play an important role to create a supportive classroom where all children feel accepted and valued, and especially for children who fall outside of the heteronormative expectation of typical gender expression and assumed heterosexuality. We can chose to reinforce the heteronormative bias or “unground” it (Butler, 1990, p. 192), while providing a supportive space for children to imagine diverse gendered behaviours and diverse family structures (DFS).

**Key Terms**

For the purpose of this paper, I am using definitions of key words pertinent to this topic as described by both scholars and theorists. I use the term *diverse family structures (DFS)* to describe all family structures that do not fit within the expectation of a two heterosexual parent family (Clay, 2004). This term includes parents who have diverse gender identities and diverse sexual orientations for example parents who identify as gay, lesbian, trans, and/or queer (Janmohamed & Campbell, 2009). As Fox (2009) proposed and Janmohamed and Campbell (2009) echoed, diverse orientations and gender identities represent an even richer cross section of Canadian society and include diversity of culture, race, and socioeconomic status. The term *gender* is how our culture and society defines the differences of being masculine or feminine and these differences are not entirely attributed to biological sex (Salkind, 2008). The term *gender development* is defined as the dynamic factors that influence a child’s gender development (Martin & Ruble, 2009). These factors include the child’s unique interests (Salkind, 2008), social contexts (Fabes, Martin, & Hanish,
2004; Martin, Fabes, Hanish, & Hollenstein, 2005), cognitive development (Martin, Ruble, &
Szkrybalo, 2002), and peer relationships (Miller, Martin, Fabes, Hanish, 2013). The term
gender non-conforming (GNC) describes children whose behaviour falls outside of the
socially expected behaviours of boys and girls (Simons, Leibowitz, & Hidalgo, 2014). As
described earlier, the term heterosexual matrix was coined by Butler (1990) and expanded
upon by Atkinson and Depalma (2008) who argued that the heteronormative bias is the
assumption that individuals are heterosexual and typically gendered by default and the only
legitimate and valuable relationship is a heterosexual relationship (Foster, 2008). The term
othered has been used to describe the feeling of not belonging or accepted by a dominant
group based on socioeconomic status, religion, culture, race, or sexual orientation (Butler,
1990; Clay 2004).

**Rationale and Importance**

In recent years there has been an increased awareness in the unique needs of children
who are GNC. Studies have concluded that children who are GNC experience lower
emotional and social well-being (Cohen-Kettenis et al., 2003; Wallien, Swaab, & Cohen-
Kettenis, 2007). In addition, researchers, including D’Augelli, Grossman, & Starks (2006),
Killen & Stangor (2001), Miller, et al., (2013), and Wisnowski (2011) have demonstrated that
children who are GNC are more likely to be excluded or victimized by their peers. Finally,
researchers have demonstrated that children who are GNC or have diverse sexual minorities
are more likely to contemplate or attempt suicide (Burton, Marshal, Chisolm, Sucato, &
Friedman, 2013; Russell, 2003). Canadian school boards are implementing inclusive policies
that attempt to create supportive environments for children who are GNC, children who have
diverse sexual orientations, and children from DFS (Rayside, 2014; Shipley, 2014). Focusing
specifically on the heteronormative bias synthesizes the issues that impact both children who
are GNC, children who have diverse sexualities, and children from DFS. As these individuals share similar experiences due to social attitudes towards sex, sexual orientation, and gender (Frassinger & Arseneau, 2007).

In the northern community where I reside, the school board recently implemented their Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Policy (Yukon Department of Education, 2012). This policy requires schools to create supportive environments for both children who are GNC, children who have diverse sexual orientations, and children from DFS. The policy requires schools to respond to any bullying or victimization based on gender identity or sexual orientation.

Equality advocates including Rayside (2014) and Short (2013) have argued that support for children who are GNC, have diverse sexual orientations or are from families with diverse structures have been mired in political and religious controversy and only recently have Canadian jurisdictions implemented proactive policies. More specifically, Short described that most policies were reactionary to specific incidents of bullying or victimization, rather than addressing the wider school climate to promote school climates that celebrate gender diversity and family diversity. Regional activism from same-sex parents and parent advocates for their GNC children have been a momentous force for pushing schools and Departments of Education to implement policies to support children from DFS, children who are GNC, and children who have diverse sexual orientations (Rayside, 2014; Wisnowski, 2011).

Advocacy for children who are GNC or who have diverse sexual orientations have also come from mental health professionals including Cohen-Kettenis, Owen, Kaijser, Bradley & Zucker (2003). These authors have outlined that Canadian children who are GNC have higher rates of internalizing behaviours, externalizing behaviours, and more likely to be
victimized by their peers. At the same time researchers including Coleman, Bockting, Botzer, Cohen-Kettenis et al. (2012) and Zucker and Lawrence (2009) have concluded that the majority of children who are GNC do end up as adults with a gender identity that falls within the social norms of their biological sex, but with an increased percentage identifying as non-heterosexual (Wallien & Cohen-Kettenis, 2008).

As a lesbian parent of two young children, a child who was GNC and felt unsupported by my educators, and as someone who experienced significant mental health issues during my youth, I concur with Rayside (2014) and Short (2013)’s recommendations that educators take a proactive role in creating inclusive classroom environments. It is not satisfactory to simply be aware of the unfortunate statistics facing children who are GNC or children who have diverse sexual orientations. I believe it is my obligation as an educator, to actively create inclusive classroom environments where all children, including children who are GNC or have diverse sexual orientations, feel embraced and supported.

This capstone project is important, as it addresses the ways in which educators can play an active role in creating inclusive classroom environments for children who are GNC, who have diverse sexual orientations, or have DFS. Although departments of education across Canada have developed policies to support children who are GNC, who have diverse sexual orientations, or have DFS, there is a limited amount of concrete information geared towards educators of young children, between the ages of four and eight. Specifically, how to incorporate materials that move beyond the limited constraints of the heteronormative bias with the purpose of embracing and broadening the possibilities of gender expression and family structure.

Overview of the Theoretical Framework
In this paper, I draw on social-constructivism to understand the concept of the heteronormative bias. I utilize Vygotsky's concept of the social nature of learning (Kozulin, 2003; Langford, 2005; Vygotsky, 1978), Bruner’s concept of scaffolding of children’s learning (Bruner, 1963; Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976) and Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model of development to understand the heteronormative bias, and more specifically, to what extent children’s microsystems influence their gender development. I also utilize queer theory, and in particular Butler’s (1990) concept of the heterosexual matrix to understand the social expectation to adhere to the heteronormative bias. I explain how the heteronormative bias exists on multiple levels within a schools’ (Lamb, Bigler, Liben, & Green, 2009; DiDonato Martin, Hessler, Amazeen, Hanish, & Fabes, 2012), children’s (Hupp, Smith, Coleman, Brunell, 2010; Jackson & Scott, 2010), and educators’ (Atkinson & Depalma 2008; Pahlke et al., 2014) ecologies, and that this creates a dynamic environment with multiple actors and influences (Martin & Ruble, 2009), some of which remain invisible because they are privileged and fall within the dualistic nature of the heteronormative bias which requires both supportive and critical reflection on the part of educators (Butler, 1990; Atkinson & DePalma, 2008). I also examine the concept of children’s gender development focusing on dynamic systems theory as discussed by Martin, Ruble, & Szkrybalo (2002), Martin & Ruble (2004 & 2009), and DiDonato, Marin, Hessler, Amazeen, Hanish, & Fabes (2012).

**Introduction to the Literature Review**

In this paper, I outline the extant literature that illustrates the complex social constructivist, ecological, and developmental processes that reinforce the heteronormative bias. I outline research findings that illustrate the powerful role of individual interests and preferences (Campbell, Shirley, Caygill, 2002; Martin & Dinella, 2011), families (Hupp et al.,
2010; Stufin, Fulcher, Bowles, & Patterson, 2008), peers (Lamb et al., 2009; Miller et al., 2013), and children’s literature (Blaise, 2010; Sapp, 2010) in a dynamic process of children’s gender development and conceptions of typical families. I end the review of the literature with research that demonstrates how educators have attempted to “unground” the heteronormative bias and include diverse representations of gender and family structures within their classrooms (Atkinson & DePalma 2008; DiDonato et al., 2012; Lamb et al., 2009; Palke et al., 2014).

**Purpose and Guiding Question**

The purpose of my capstone project is to gain a deeper understanding of how to create inclusive classroom environments for children of same sex, trans or queer parents and for children who are gender non-conforming; at the same time, I have created a research brief and two “read alouds” that are supported by current research and includes an awareness of children's complex and dynamic understanding of gender and family structures to support educators to “unground” the heteronormative bias within their classroom (Butler, 1990, p. 19). The two “read alouds” provide educators with concrete tools to create an inclusive environment through constructivist dialogues with children while reading a book about a child who is GNC and while reading a book about a child from a DFS. As described earlier in this chapter, Butler (1990) argued that gender is a fiction that needs be “ungrounded” to allow for multiple and diverse conceptions of gender diversity that, in turn, is not limited by narrow representations of male and female and heterosexual relationships. Both Atkinson and DePalma (2009) and Riggs and Augoustinos (2007) drew from Butler’s concept of “ungrounding” the heteronormative bias and argued that educators also need to move beyond narrow stereotypes of same sex families that only represent dominant middle class, and white families. The heteronormative bias is so ingrained in our society that often educators do not
realize how alienating it can be for children who cannot identify with the mainstream conception of family or gender that is often represented in early childhood classrooms and early childhood literature (Atkinson & DePalma, 2008, 2009; Fox, 2009; and Janmohamed & Campbell, 2009).

Guiding Questions

My main guiding question is, “In what ways can early childhood educators create a thriving learning environment that is inclusive of children’s diversity of gender and children’s diversity of family structure (same sex parents and/or trans parents)? More specifically, two sub-questions that follow are: a) in what ways does the heteronormative bias influence early childhood educators’ abilities and comfort to create an inclusive classroom environment? And, b) in what ways can educators “unground” the heteronormative bias within their classroom environment?”

Summary

In Chapter One, I shared my experience as both a lesbian parent and a child who was GNC. I introduced the theoretical framework guiding this project with sociocultural theories, queer theory, and gender development theory. I provided a summary of the literature to be reviewed and I outlined my purposed and guiding question. Both my personal experiences and statistics reinforce my desire to create more inclusive and supportive learning environments for children who are GNC, children who have diverse sexual orientations, and children who have DFS. In Chapter Two, I present a review of the current research on socio constructivist theory, queer theory, dynamic gender development, and the powerful role that educators can play to “unground” the heteronormative bias. In Chapter Three, I connect research findings to classroom practices that draw on socio constructivist practices to “unground” the heteronormative bias within the early childhood classroom. In Chapter Four,
I summarize my conclusions and recommendations, where I present suggestions and possible steps that can be taken to ensure that children who are GNC, children who have diverse sexual orientations, and children who have DFS are supported and included in early childhood classrooms.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

As outlined in Chapter One, the theoretical perspective that frames this project is the social constructivist theory (Bruner, 1963; Vygotsky, 1978), and including Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological theory of human development. It is through the lens of social constructivism that I explore the development and maintenance of the heteronormative bias within the early childhood environments. I also draw from queer theory (Butler, 1990) and gender development theory (Martin & Ruble, 2004) to illustrate the socially constructed nature of gender and sexuality and the complexity of children’s gender development.

Social Constructivist Theory of Children’s Learning

Social constructivist theory, as positioned by Vygotsky (1978), described learning as socially situated and occurring with dynamic interactions between individuals. Vygotsky (1978) explained, “children’s learning begins long before they attend school… any learning a child encounters in school always has a previous history” (p. 32). Robins (2005) described learning as occurring through children’s active participation in the unique and relevant community contexts. Bruner (1963) focused on learning as requiring “a dyadic relationship” that allows for the “exchange of information, mutually, or even of accepting information and working on it until you make it your own” (p. 527). Therefore, social constructivist theory described learning as occurring in the context of social interactions, rather than in isolation. Wood, Bruner, and Ross (1976) clarified the social interaction of learning as a “scaffolding process that enables a child or novice to solve a problem, carry out a task or achieve a goal which would be beyond his unassisted efforts” (p. 90). Wood et al. (1976) broke the scaffolding process into the following six components: “recruitment” to gain interest in the task, “reduction in degrees of freedom” and focusing on a small number of concepts, direction or motivation maintenance, “making critical features” or discrepancies, “controlling
frustration”, and “demonstrating or modelling” (p. 98). Similar to the concept of scaffolding, Rogoff’s concept of “guided participation” is a dynamic process, where the child is being influenced by the adults around them and the adults around them are being influenced by the child (Rogoff, Mosier, Mistry, & Goncu, 1989, p. 231). Rogoff (2008) added that “guided participation” is not solely focused on the adult, but instead “guided participation” is influenced by community values and ideals. Earlier on, Rogoff et al. (1991) had described learning as creating bridges from a child’s existing understanding towards new understandings. As Bruner (1963) argued, there is no script to ensure that learning has occurred, but rather a dynamic social process between at least two individuals.

In the next section I explore Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological model that builds on the social constructivist concept of learning, while focusing on the unique layers of a child’s ecology.

**Ecological Model of Development and Children’s Learning**

Similar to social constructivist theory, Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological model of development focused on the socially situated nature of human development in each child’s nested ecologies. Bronfenbrenner (1994) argued that the human development occurs within proximal processes which are the reciprocal and dynamic interactions between individuals, objects, and environments. Human development is also influenced by the distal processes that act indirectly, and continue to influence proximal processes, including cultural beliefs and government policies (Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Goelman & Guhn, 2011). Bronfenbrenner contended that human development is influenced by the unique individual characteristics as well as intimate and broader environments, or proximal and distal processes. From these premises Bronfenbrenner argued that human development occurs within the dynamic interaction between the individual and their microsystems, mesosystems, exosystems,
macrosystems, and chronosystems. Bronfenbrenner defined microsystems as the interactions between the child and the intimate settings of home, family, school, and friends. He defined the mesosystems as the connections between two or more settings for example the relationship between the family and school, and namely, “a mesosystem is a system of microsystems” (Bronfenbrenner, 1994, p.40). Bronfenbrenner defined the exosystem as the interactions of one of the child’s contexts and a context that the child does not have direct connection with, for example, the child’s parents work context (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). He defined the macrosystem as the overarching knowledge, beliefs, expectations, and values that exist within specific cultures or subcultures. Bronfenbrenner defined the chronosystem as the historical context that the child develops within, for example the great depression or mass immigration due to political unrest. Bronfenbrenner (1979) argued that unique environments influence not only the individual, but that they also create ripple impacts on parenting and cultural values that continue to influence future generations.

Bronfenbrenner’s ecological model of development is relevant to this project as it gives insights into how children learn within their unique ecologies. Specifically, how development is influenced by not just by proximal processes including relationships with parents and educators, but also by distal process including cultural norms around gender and family structures. Bronfenbrenner also insisted that children’s learning is influenced by distal processes including societal expectations and norms. Goelman and Guhn (2011) elaborated on both Bronfenbrenner’s ecological model and social constructivism to understand a child’s development through understanding the child as a unique individual who is influenced by their unique family, cultural, and community contexts. These contexts also include the macrosystems, with the values and beliefs that surround the constructs of identity, gender, and sexuality (Goelman & Guhn, 2011).
In the next section, I discuss the social construction of gender and sexuality as seen through the lens of Queer theory and Butler's (1990) heterosexual matrix.

**Queer Theory**

Queer theory suggests that identity, in particular sex, gender, and sexuality are not innate but rather socially constructed (Butler, 1990; Jackson & Scott, 2010). Butler (1990) first used the term heterosexual matrix and argued that the heterosexual matrix creates and limits the cultural expectation of possible identities while the possible identities become an unachievable moving gender ideal. Butler explained that approximating the gender ideal is only the imitation of cultural expectation that results in a narrow set of “intelligible identity” that continue in repetition and maintain the heterosexual matrix (p. 198). Butler concluded that although identity is constructed, it is not “fatally determined nor fully artificial and arbitrary” (p. 201). She argued that individuals can move beyond the heterosexual matrix not by denying the constructed identities, but by multiplying the possibilities of gender, sex, and sexualities as this would “displace the very gender norms that enable the repetition itself” (p. 203). Atkinson and DePalma (2008) drew from Butler’s heterosexual matrix and described heteronormative bias as the tautology based on the assumption that heterosexuality is due to the “natural order of things” which is invisible and self-enforcing due to this unspoken rule (p. 27). Atkinson and DePalma (2009) argued that the heteronormative bias is actively constructed and educators unconsciously reinforce the heteronormative bias within their classrooms through language that reinforces the cultural expectation of possible identities and behaviours.

More recently, Jackson and Scott (2010) described the recent history of the social construction of both sexuality and gender. Jackson and Scott outlined how in 1974, Gagnon and Simon first published their concept that gender identity is socially constructed and then
sexual identity is socially constructed, while both are intricately interrelated. Gagnon and Simon’s (2005) defined “sexual scripts” as the ways that individuals act sexually, which also included gendered behaviours (p. 27). These sexual scripts are influenced by social norms; yet, individuals modify these scripts, usually without having consciously chosen a script (Gagnon & Simon 2005). Earlier on, Laumann et al. (1994) had built on the concept of sexual scripts to define “cultural narratives” as the socially constructed concepts of sexuality and gender that are represented publicly (as cited in Jackson & Scott, 2010, p. 15).

According to Laumann et al., these cultural narratives of sexuality and gender create the basis of the heteronormative bias that results in the assumption of truth and common sense knowledge of typical gendered behaviour and heterosexual relationships. Jackson and Scott contended that these sexual scripts and cultural narratives do not necessarily determine individual’s behaviour, and that instead, they influence how individuals make sense of sexuality and gender. Jackson and Scott outlined that differing perspectives on gender and sexuality, including Queer theories and social constructivist theories that are important to illuminate different aspects and complexities in various ecologies. Queer theory, with the acknowledgement of no ‘true’ sexuality or gendered behaviour, illuminates the power of society's values towards specific gendered behaviours and sexual identities and how power influences individuals imagining of possible gendered behaviour and sexualities (Butler, 1990; Jackson & Scott, 2010). In contrast, social constructivist theories focus on the day-to-day experiences of gender and sexualities within individual’s microecologies (Jackson & Scott, 2010).

In the next section I discuss gender development theory, in particular Martin and Ruble’s (2009) research on the dynamic process of gender development that interweaves the biological, social, and ecological influences on gender development.
Dynamic Gender Development

Theorists investigating gender development have come to understand gender as a complex and dynamic process of the interaction of social ideals, family expectations, unique environments, and individual characteristics (Jackson & Scott, 2010; Martin & Ruble, 2009). According to Martin and Ruble (2009) gender development unfolds within a dynamic system of factors that influence the child’s gender development and the child influencing their own development. Cognitive factors influence a child’s gender development, how the individual child understands gender categories, identifies within these categories, labels others, and understands gender consistency (Martin et al., 2002). This creates a ripple effect of children beginning to make broad assumptions about gender differences and a rigid concept of gender (Martin & Ruble, 2004). These biological and cognitive factors interact with how the child is socialized by their parents, with parent’s concepts of gender influencing how they interact with their child (Martin & Ruble, 2009). These social, cognitive and biological factors interact with the social dynamics within groups, with small differences among traditional genders becoming magnified as children self-organize into same sex peer groups which act to reinforce gender stereotypes and social gender norms (Maccoby, 2002; Martin et al., 2005; Martin & Ruble, 2009). At the same time, children adapt their behaviour to fit the gender norms of the context where they are: for example, boys engaged with more feminine activities when playing with a group of girls and girls, engage in more masculine activities when playing with a group of boys (Goble, Martin, Hanish, & Fabes, 2012).

In the next section I examine the literature that explores the role of several social constructivist, ecological, and developmental aspects that reinforce the heteronormative bias.

Review of the Literature
In this review of the literature, I begin with outlining research that has illustrated the powerful role of individual patterns in gender development, families, peers, and children’s literature in a dynamic process of children’s gender development and conceptions of typical families. I end the literature review with research outlining how educators have attempted to “unground” the heteronormative bias within their classrooms.

**Gender Development**

Factors that influence a child’s gender development are the child’s individual preferences that in turn influence to which extent they may take on masculine or feminine behaviours (Salkind, 2008). Most children will develop typical gendered behaviour that mostly matches the expectations based on their own biological sex, but some children develop gender non-conforming behaviour where the majority of their behaviour does not match the expectations of their biological sex (Simons et al., 2014). At two years of age, there is no significant preference for children to play with same sex peers nor is there an attempt to self-segregate based on sex (Campbell et al., 2002). Around three years of age, most children can identify their own gender and begin to prefer same sex peers (Fabes et al., 2004). At this time, children spend the majority of their free play with same sex peers, but not exclusively (Fabes, et al., 2004; Martin et al., 2005). As early as four years of age, children can become more flexible about their gender stereotypes and concepts of gendered social norms (Pahlke et al., 2014). By five years of age, children become less rigid with their gender stereotypes and gender norms (Ruble, Taylor, Cyphers, Greulich, Lurye, et al., 2007). This flexibility does not always occur, but is promoted through experiencing their own personal likes that are exceptions to rigid gender norms (Martin & Dinella, 2011), or through direct counter examples of gender stereotypes (Pahlke et al., 2014). Children with more flexibility towards gender roles have less externalizing problems, more adaptive use of
gendered behaviour, and show greater psychological adjustment (DiDonato et al., 2012).

Other researchers have argued that it is developmentally beneficial for children to spend time with mixed peer groups (Goble et al., 2012; Martin & Dinella, 2011). Children have different experiences when interacting with mixed gendered peers: for example, children may engage in more imaginative play when playing with girls, and this has been linked to increased language development (Goble et al., 2012). Children interacting with boys may engage in more active play, and this has been linked to more developed gross motor skills (Goble et al., 2012). These two observations seem to really reinforce gendered binaries – is this problematic?

**Family Influences**

Canadian society is diverse and so too are children’s families. Preschool children may be raised by their gay fathers, lesbian moms, trans mom, trans dad, single mom, or single dad (Janmohamed & Campbell, 2009). In addition, Canadian children are being raised in a society that is becoming more flexible with respect to adult gender roles (Sweeting, Bhaskar, Benzeval, Popham, & Hunt, 2014). Several researchers have investigated the relationship between family environment and children’s attitudes about gender or types of family structures. In a study on family environments, Hupp, Smith, Coleman, and Brunell (2010) investigated the relationships between family structure and reactions to gender atypical behaviour. Hupp et al. (2010) found that children from single mother families had more flexible attitudes about gender roles than children raised in a heterosexual two-parent family. Hupp et al. concluded that children raised by single mothers were more likely to experience their parent doing a vast array of tasks that were not differentiated by gender. In a similar study, Sutfin, Fulcher, Bowles, and Patterson (2007) studied parents’ gender stereotyping and gendered attitudes between heterosexual parents and lesbian parents. Sutfin
et al. (2007) found that heterosexual parents created physical environments that matched their children’s gender, such as a girl having a pink or doll themed bedroom, and lesbian parents to a lesser extent. More specifically, parents who had more liberal attitudes about cross gendered behaviours created less gendered stereotypical environments for their children and children’s attitudes about gender were positively related to their environments (Sutfin et al., 2007). Sutfin et al. concluded that both heterosexual parents and lesbian parents reinforce gendered stereotypes through the environments that they create for their children.

These findings from Hupp et al. (2007) and from Sutfin et al. (2007) resonate with Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological theory and Martin and Ruble’s (2009) theory of the dynamic nature of gender development. The findings from Hupp et al. (2007), Sutfin et al. (2007), and Martin and Ruble (2009) illustrate how microecologies influence how parents choose to socialize their children, how children think about gender, and how children experience gender — all of which interact with their unique interests and preferences to create a dynamic system of gender development (Martin & Ruble, 2009).

Peer Influences

Another impact on children’s gender development is peer relationships, specifically the influences of “gender policers.” “Gender policers” is a term used to describe those children who will ensure either directly or indirectly that each child is adhering to the appropriate gender stereotypes (Lamb et al., 2009, p. 362), and children are able to recognize who the “gender policers” are in their classroom (Miller et al., 2013). Lamb et al. (2009) investigated 81 elementary school aged boys’ and 72 elementary school aged girls’ attitudes about gender stereotypes and enforcement of stereotypical gendered behaviour. The authors found a significant main effect of gender with boys reporting a greater impact of gender policing than girls ($F_{1,52} = 14.11, p < .01$). Out of the 67 children, only 6 challenged
gendered-stereotypes in a hypothetical situation, five girls and one boy. In a similar study, DiDonato et al. (2012) found no relationship between preschoolers’ gender non-conforming (GNC) behaviour and psychological adjustment at the beginning of the school year, but at the end of the school year GNC behaviour was related to poor psychological adjustment. Authors including D’Augelli et al. (2006), DiDonato et al., Martin & Dinella (2012) and Martin et al. (2005) have also reported that children who are GNC may learn from their peers and educators that their GNC behaviour is not accepted, causing them to attempt to mask their atypical behaviour which can cause isolation and psychological distress that increases over time.

The next section outlines how children’s literature continues to reinforce gender stereotypes and narrow representations of heterosexual families.

**Children’s Literature Influences**

As a parent and educator, I rely on children's literature to provide an engaging introduction to topics of interests to my children. Most educators may be oblivious of how glaring the heteronormative bias is within early childhood and kindergarten classrooms, especially with regards to children’s literature. Most educators are aware of cultural bias and seek to create classrooms that reflect the cultural diversity of their communities (Baker, 2012). Educators are including literature that represents diverse cultural groups and communities and seek to integrate these resources within their classrooms (Mathis, 2001). Many popular authors are including diverse cultural characters in their children’s story books. For example Robert Munsch’s, “Up, Up, Down” (2011) features an African American family and “A Promise is a Promise” (1992) features an Inuit family. This is in contrast to a lack of any Robert Munsch books about non-heterosexual parents or children who are GNC. As well, many of the educational leveled readers now include culturally diverse characters for
example “The Porcupine Collection” and “Eagle Crest.” These two examples of leveled reading collections privilege non dominant cultures and include Canadian minority and First Nations’ families participating in mainstream activities for example, skiing and mountain biking as well as cultural specific and traditional activities. These leveled readers reposition cultural minorities as valuable without over emphasizing on their differences. In a similar way, non-heteronormative families have expressed a need for balancing visibility without being seen as other or being discriminated against (Lee, 2010).

Children’s books. Authors including Blaise (2010) and Sapp (2010) have reported that most educators are unaware of the heteronormative bias entrenched within classroom images and materials and educators’ silence unintentionally reinforces the assumption that these representations are the only valued families. For example, neither the Robert Munsch books nor the levelled readers privilege children who are GNC or a family with a diverse structure for example a same-sex couple or a trans-parent.

Family structures. Riggs and Augoustinos (2007) provided a critical analysis of research and inclusion of DFS, sexual orientations, and genders-based research. The authors critiqued the current arguments to support the rights of diverse families who are limited to the heteronormative bias — which was also found in Hosking and Ripper’s (2012) analysis of arguments for supporting children of same-sex parents. Riggs and Augoustinos reviewed the extant children’s literature on diverse families and found that the majority of the books fell into five categories of representing diversity: (1) heterosexual people are a monolithic group which are the norm and diverse families are divergent from this norm; (2) diversity is only valuable and achieve value when it can help the dominant and discriminating group; (3)

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3 see [http://www.eaglecrestbooks.com/aboutthebooks.htm](http://www.eaglecrestbooks.com/aboutthebooks.htm) for examples of leveled readers that privilege First Nations culture
Clay (2004) also found that diverse families were not solely concerned with issues related to parents’ sexual orientation, but also concerned with issues including adoption and trans-racial identities. These were issues that educators did not initially expect to be a priority for families with diverse structures.

Riggs and Augoustinos (2007) and Hosking and Ripper (2012) both argued that diverse families are predominantly addressed through a lens that only reflects white, privileged, and heteronormative ideals. Clay (2004) also found that educators over rely on the heteronormative lens by "their belief that lesbian or gay headed families are more like straight families than they are different from them" (p.36). These authors maintain that this is reinforced by children’s books that focus on predominantly gay, lesbian parents who are white, monogamous, and enjoy financial security. They argued that this approach silences the experiences of families from non-dominant cultures, those experiencing financial insecurity, or single parent families, or individuals in non-monogamous relationships, because these types of individuals and experiences do not mirror the heteronormative lens, and these individuals are not represented or validated within classroom resources and children’s literature.

**Young children’s participation rights.** In their study about the participation rights of young children, Dunphy (2012) highlighted that it is important to understand the unique interests and experiences of each child in order to engage them in discussions that might help expose the heteronormative bias (Dunphy, 2012). In a similar study of the participation
rights and literacy practices of young children from low socioeconomic status, Levy (2008) argued that even young children have already adopted scripts that devalue their lived experiences. When interviewed by a classroom teacher, these children devalued their out of school knowledge and sought to pick ‘correct’ answers. Levy concluded that young children have “already forsaken their own constructions in favour of what they regard as more ‘in keeping’ with schooled discourses” (p. 63). Based on Dunphy and Levy’s findings, educators need to be conscious of the scripts children draw on that might lead to their devaluing of non-heteronormative experiences or gender non-conforming behaviour.

The next section outlines the powerful role that educators can play in “ungrounding” the heteronormative bias, a process that will support children from DFS and children who are gender non-conforming.

**Early Educators’ Influences in “Ungrounding” the Heteronormative Bias**

In this section I include a review the extant research illustrating several ways of “ungrounding” the heteronormative bias through addressing sexist stereotypes, creating inclusive classroom environments, supporting educators to have reflective practices, and supporting educators to balance celebrating diversity rather than focusing on differences.

**Creating Inclusive Classrooms**

Recent articles about creating inclusive classrooms including those by Espelage, Hong, Rao, and Low (2013) and Hymel, Schonert-Reichl and Miller (2006) have revealed the importance for teachers to support all children to have a sense of belonging, be respected, and be valued as unique individuals. This is especially important for children who are gender non-conforming or children from diverse family structures (Janmohamed & Campbell, 2009; Sweeting et al., 2014). Hymel et al. (2006) reviewed the literature examining what are mediating factors that influence children’s academic performance. Hymel et al. concluded
that creating inclusive classroom environments, in particular improving peer acceptance, leads to fewer interpersonal problems and increased academic performance. Echoing Hymel et al.’s findings, Espelage et al. (2013) conducted a review of school engagement and academic achievement and children’s experience of peer victimization. Espelage et al. concluded that there is a significant relationship between peer victimization and negative academic outcomes. Espelage et al. concluded that “it is critical that prevention and intervention programs are put into place that promote social competence and peer acceptance” (p. 237). In their study on the relationship between flexible gender roles, children who were GNC, and children’s psychological well-being, DiDonato et al. (2012) found that children who were gender nonconforming did not have poorer psychological well-being prior to attending preschool, but that by next Spring, these children had lower levels of positive emotions and increased negative internalizing behaviours. DiDonato et al. found that children who were GNC did experience a lack of peer acceptance and they concluded that children who were GNC experienced less peer acceptance while at preschool which impacted had an impact on their the psychological well-being. Moradi, Mohr, Worthington, and Fassinger (2009) conducted a review of current research on sexual and gender minorities, with a focus on psychological well-being. Moradi et al. (2009) emphasized the importance of valuing diversity and viewing the need to support children who are GNC as a right and act of social justice. In an earlier study, Killen and Stangor (2001) investigated children’s reasoning and acceptance of exclusion using hypothetical scenarios. Killen and Stangor found that children were more likely to exclude others based on gender than race ($F_{1,124} = 5.45, p < .05$). When children were asked to explain why they choose not to exclude another child, they cited fairness or equal rights.
In the next section I outline Pahlke et al.’s (2014) study on a program that has been shown to create an inclusive classroom environment for children who are GNC.

**Anti-sexist program.** Pahlke et al.’s (2014) evaluated an anti-sexism program geared for kindergarten to grade 2 students. Their anti-sexist program used direct instruction to counter sexist attitudes and incidents of gender exclusion. Pahlke et al. compared two treatment groups to promote prosocial behaviour with Treatment 1 focusing on general prosocial behaviour and reducing exclusion and bullying, and Treatment 2 directly addressing sexist stereotypes and gender exclusion. Only Treatment 2, the treatment which directly addressed sexism and gender exclusion, increased children’s ability to recognize sexism and gender exclusion in media clips immediately and after six months ($F_{1,96} = 8.05, p = .01$). Children in Treatment 2 were more likely to create their own reasons why their peers should not stereotype or exclude based on sex ($F_{1,110} = 4.26, p = .04$) and were more likely to be accepting of peers who are GNC ($F_{1,110} = 77.97, p < .001$). The authors cautioned against simply using passive depictions of children who are GNC. Rather children benefit from opportunities to confront gender exclusion or sexist attitudes when they occur in the classroom.

**Educators reflecting on the heteronormative bias.** In their studies about the prevalence of the heteronormative bias in pre-service education authors Atkinson and DePalma (2008, 2009) and DePalma and Atkinson (2009) drew from Butler’s (1990) heterosexual matrix to understand the heteronormative bias within education. These authors have focused on the educator’s role in illuminating heteronormative bias within their classrooms. Their studies have demonstrated how entrenched and invisible the heteronormative bias is within pre-service education programs and elementary classrooms.
Atkinson and DePalma (2008) investigated the heteronormative bias through two university online discussion forums and interviews with pre-service educators that explored attitudes towards including DFS and diverse genders within the classroom. The resulting themes illustrated the invisible presence of the heteronormative bias prevalent in discussion posts and interviews, even among respondents who indicated they were from a diverse sexual orientation. Based on their analysis of pre-service educators’ discussions, Atkinson and DePalma concluded that most educators were unaware that schools “teach straight” by including many representations of heterosexual relationships through books, posters, and discussions that focus and privilege heterosexual relationships and families (p. 32). Furthermore, Atkinson and DePalma recommended that in addition to including diverse family structure, orientation, and genders that allow for the reinvention and recreation of identities, educators also need to be supported by their administrators. This was echoed by a later study by DePalma and Atkinson (2009) where educators felt nervous addressing sexual and gender diversity within their classrooms and feared parental backlash.

In a follow up study on instances of educators attempting to move beyond the heteronormative bias, Atkinson and DePalma (2009) analyzed teacher student vignettes through the lens of Butler’s heterosexual matrix. The vignettes illustrate the possibility of educators creating tensions by countering the heteronormative bias. Atkinson and DePalma concluded that educators can be effective in “ungrounding” the heteronormative bias when they persistently include diverse family structures and gender expression during natural student-educator interactions. Atkinson and DePalma emphasized that it is important that educators are reflective of their “unconscious participation” in the heteronormative bias and move beyond the fiction of the heterosexual matrix (p. 26).
The above works by Atkinson and DePalma (2008, 2009) illustrate the importance of educators becoming aware of the heteronormative bias through self-reflection. Self-reflection allows educators to reflect on the relationships between how they identify and behave within the heteronormative bias which silences diversity of gender and diversity of family structures.

**Heteronormative bias and family structures.** Findings from DePalma’s and Atkinson’s (2009) study described above resonated with Hedge, Averett, White, and Deese’s (2014) study on what factors influenced educators attitudes towards DFS. Hedge et al. (2014) found that a combination of pre-service programs as well as the educator’s attitudes towards social justice and equality influenced educators’ attitudes towards DFS. Hedge et al. also emphasized that educators should reflect on their own beliefs towards DFS, and that it is the educator's responsibility to ensure that all families are welcomed and included in their child’s education.

Findings from DePalma and Atkinson (2009) also echoed Clay’s (2004) findings from their study on gay and lesbian parents’ experiences. In Clay’s study, the parents described a need to balance their minority sexual identity while still wanting their children to feel like part of their school community and not be made to feel like “outsiders.” They maintained that diverse families be represented and celebrated within the school (p. 35).

Finally, Hosking et al. (2015) analyzed instances of children from DFS speaking about their families and experiences in the media. Hosking et al. concluded that children of gay and lesbian parents experienced the sense that their families were not normal and most of them described moments of not being viewed as a valid family. Hosking et al.’s findings from children from DFS speak to the need for educators to “unground” the heteronormative
bias, and to include alternative representations that move beyond the narrow representations of heterosexual families.

**Summary**

In this chapter, I presented a review of social constructivist theory of learning, ecological theory, Queer theory, and dynamic gender development theory illustrating the powerful role that family, peers, literature, and educators play in reinforcing or “ungrounding” the heteronormative bias. I also described examples from the extant research that illustrated important factors that can be utilized to create an inclusive classroom environment, as well as outlined the benefits of supporting children to not be confined by the rigid assumptions of the heteronormative bias. This is of particular benefit to children from diverse families and children who are gender non-conforming. In Chapter Three, I connect the theory and the findings from the extant research to classroom practice.
CHAPTER THREE: CONNECTIONS TO PRACTICE

In Chapter Three, I connect social constructivist theory, ecological theory, Queer theory, and dynamic gender development with findings from extant research to discuss how to create an inclusive classroom environment. This includes vignettes that occurred in my son’s Kindergarten classroom and two “read alouds” of children’s literature with suggestions of how to “unground” the heteronormative bias through Rogoff’s concept of “guided participation” and Brunner’s concept of “scaffolding”.

I utilize socio constructivist theory, specifically how O.’s and each child’s understanding of gender and family structure were socially situated and much of each child’s understanding was developed before they entered school (Vygotsky, 1978). Their understanding of gender and family was grounded in their own experiences in their unique ecologies (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). At the same time, O. and his peers’ understanding occurred within dynamic interactions of proximal and distal processes (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). The conversations of children asking O. about his family illustrate Bruner’s (1963) concept of the “dyadic relationships” (p. 527) in which children “scaffold” each other’s learning beyond what they could understand independently (Wood et al., 1976, p. 90).

In my hypothetical responses to each vignette I utilize Rogoff’s (1991) concept of “guided participation” and Butler’s (1990) concept of “ungrounding” to illustrate how early childhood educators can “unground” the heteronormative bias through scaffolding children’s understandings of diverse gender expression and DFS. I illustrate how to “unground” the heteronormative bias based on the dialogues that I observed in O. kindergarten classroom. My responses to these dialogues provide a vehicle to move beyond the restrictive conceptions of gender and family with the goal of co-constructing more flexible conceptions. I in turn connect my responses to these dialogues to the theories and literature that I reviewed. I end
with two examples of exemplary children’s literature that provides further examples of 
“ungrounding” the heteronormative bias through examples of children who are GNC and 
examples of children who have DFS. For each book, I include examples of dialogue where 
children and educators are welcomed into the dialogue of questioning restrictive conceptions 
of gender and family and co-construct new conceptions. The dialogues are based on 
dialogues that I have had or have observed between my son and his peers.

The following four vignettes are from my personal experiences in my role as a lesbian 
parent as discussed in Chapter One. I use each one of the vignettes to illustrate the existence 
of the heteronormative bias within an early childhood classroom. Each vignette, just as 
similar dialogues that continue to occur, are the motivation for this capstone, as both a lesbian 
parent and a former GNC child. My suggested co-construction of “ungrounding” the 
heteronormative bias will be shared with other professionals to create more inclusive and 
supportive learning environments for children from DFS and children who are GNC.

**My Son’s Experiences in Kindergarten**

As I described in Chapter One, I have two sons, a one-year-old and a five-year-old. 
O., my oldest son, started kindergarten in the fall of 2015. I was concerned about O.’s 
transition into Kindergarten and sought to be as direct as possible with his teacher. Before 
school started I met with his teacher and discussed our family composition and my desire that 
O. feel included and not ‘othered’ due to his family (Butler, 1990; Clay, 2004). The teacher 
commented that she has taught children of same-sex parents before and did not think O. 
would have a problem. I then explained that O.’s mumma B. has transitioned and used to be 
a boy but is really a girl. O. knows that mumma B. takes hormones to be a girl. O. 
sometimes talks about wanting to be a girl like his Mumma B. O.’s teacher did not say 
anything for a while, and then finally said, “I have never experienced that before.” I left
feeling unsure of O.’s teacher’s abilities to be inclusive of their family. My wife encouraged me to drop into O.’s classroom regularly. I made a habit of spending Friday mornings in O.’s classroom with my one year old son.

**Vignette 1: Questioning Gender Diversity.** The first morning I spent in O.’s classroom, I was helping a group of children complete puzzles while breastfeeding my one year old son. A child came up to me and glared. Finally he said, “you are a boy, you cannot be a mom.” The teacher glanced up but did not say anything. As I reflect back on this vignette, I would now consider working with the teacher to help the child understand that “gender policing” is an unacceptable behaviour in this classroom. I would explain how the comment, “you cannot be a mom,” elicits feelings of sadness for me, and feelings that I cannot be who I am. This echoes DiDonato et al.’s (2012) and Lamb et al.’s (2009) findings that “gender policing” behaviour can have negative impacts on children’s psychological well-being. I would also work with the teacher to help her and the other children to understand O.’s unique ecologies: his microsystem of having two married moms and a trans mom, and his macrosystem of a community of trans and queer positive friends and family who celebrate his diverse family (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). I would also suggest that the teacher consider O.’s proximal processes such the interactions that O. has with his family that are also influenced by distal processes such as his family’s values of respect for diversity of gender and family structures (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). I would also suggest that the teacher consider the other child’s microsystem, of possibly not experiencing individuals with diverse gendered behaviour or the child’s macrosystem of possibly a value of typical gendered behaviour. I would explain that discussing these differences of experiences could help both children appreciate the other’s experience with the intention of celebrating diversity through taking new information and co-constructing their understanding of gender and family structures.
(Bruner, 1963, p. 527). I would also explain to the teacher that remaining silent reinforces the assumption that typical gendered behaviour and appearance is the “natural order of things” which continues to reinforce the heteronormative bias (Atkinson & DePalma, 2008, p. 27). The lack of engaging the children in a discussion about what is normal gendered behaviour results in reinforcing the assumption that there is a single “true” way of being a ‘boy’ or a ‘girl’ without providing space for children to question the power of gender (Butler, 1990; Jackson & Scott, 2010).

As I continue to reflect on this child’s comment, I understand the comment through the expectation that gender is dichotomous, with ‘boy’ and ‘girl’ being discrete categories that do not overlap (Butler, 1990). If this child were to make this comment, “you cannot be a mom,” to me now, I would attempt to “unground” the heteronormative bias through “scaffolding” his understanding of the diversity of gender (Wood et al., 1976). I would engage the child by asking, “why do you think I am a boy?” This would recruit the child, gain their interest, and focus their attention to critical features (Wood et al., 1976). At the same time, how the child responded would allow me to bridge the child’s existing understanding of gender (Rogoff et al., 1989) and to understand what social scripts the child is utilizing (Jackson & Scott, 2010). For example, if the child focused on my short hair as the reason I could not be a mom, then I could point out how both girls and boys have long hair or short hair. I would explain to the teacher that often children tell me that I am a boy because I wear boy clothes. I would explain that the child’s assumption that individuals must wear clothing that matches their gender offers a bridge to discuss the more subtle nature of gender, such as identity and how individuals feel they are (Butler, 1990). I would explain to the teacher that discussing the diversity of clothing that an individual wears or the length of hair helps children broaden their rigid categories of gender and become to understand the
flexibility of gender (Martin & Ruble, 2009). I would also explain that, I often tell children that “I am mostly a girl but sometimes I feel like a boy too,” and then I ask them if they feel like a boy or a girl? I would also describe how these conversation allow children to question the assumptions of the heteronormative bias such as binary genders and sex (Butler, 1990).

In similar conversations in O.’s classroom, I have had children be persistent, and tell me that if I am a “mom” then I should wear “girl” clothes. I would engage with this child and question why they feel it is acceptable to “police” my gender. I would talk about how sad I feel when they laugh at me and tell me I have to wear clothes that I do not like to wear (Moradi et al., 2009). I would draw on their understanding of fairness (Killen & Stangor, 2001) and emphasize that every child has the right to be welcomed and accepted (Moradi et al., 2009). I would end by explaining to the teacher that “gender policing” should not be acceptable as it can elicit feelings in other children like they are not welcomed in their classroom and that is not fair (DiDonato et al., 2012; Killen & Stangor, 2001; Miller et al., 2003).

**Vignette 2a: Questioning Diversity of Family Structures.** On another Friday morning I overheard another child tell O., “your family is missing something… a dad?” then the child laughed. Shortly after, another child asked O., “is it sad you do not have a dad?” In both of these instances O. just ignored the question and continued playing as if nothing happened. As I reflect on this vignette I realize how not responding to the laughter may have reinforced a classroom environment where bullying, exclusion, and belittling are acceptable (DiDonato et al., 2012; Killen & Stangor, 2001; Lamb et al., 2009). If I were to discuss this vignette with O.’s teacher today, I would be more direct and concrete with my concerns about ensuring that the classroom environment be inclusive and supportive of gender diversity and diverse family structures. I would begin by discussing findings from Lab et al. (2009),
Hymel et al. (2006) and Espelage et al. (2013) that have connected inclusive school environments with academic achievement, school retention, and emotional well-being. I would include information from DiDonato et al. (2012) that demonstrated the importance of all children developing flexible conceptions of gender and supported to move beyond narrow stereotypes. I would also describe how Pahlke et al. (2014) were able to support children to confront exclusion and sexist attitudes. I would use this vignette as an opportunity for the teacher to simply observe an instance of the how O. seemed to avoid the insult by ignoring it. I would ask the teacher if it would be acceptable if O. was of a minority descent and the child laughed at his ethnicity, as educators and children are generally aware that exclusion or teasing based on ethnicity or race is unacceptable (Baker, 2012; Hedge et al., 2014; Killen & Stangor, 2001). I would hope the teacher would become aware of how prevalent the heteronormative bias is in the classroom. I would also explain to the teacher how these instances may contribute to O.’s feelings of being excluded and different than the other children (Hosking et al., 2015; Hosking & Ripper, 2012; Riggs & Augoustinos, 2007). Reflecting on this vignette, I would explain to the teacher that responding to this vignette would support O. in feeling included and would reinforce a classroom expectation that diversity be celebrated, including diversity of family structure (Hosking et al., 2015; Clay, 2004).

As I reflect on this child’s comment, I understand the comment through the expectation that “normal” families are heterosexual (Atkinson & DePalma, 2008). This dialogue is more difficult for me to respond to calmly as the child laughed afterwards, which at the time I assumed was part of an attempt to belittle O. As O.’s parent, if I were to engage with this child now, I would take a breath and first attempt to understand this child’s family influences and how their microsystem may influence how they are devaluing O.’s family or
even devaluing their own family (Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Levy, 2008). I would then ask the child why they thought O. was missing a dad. I would “scaffold” the child’s understanding of families by providing counter examples of families that do not have a dad (Wood et al., 1976). For example, children can be raised by a single mother, a grandmother, two moms, or three moms such as O.’s family. I would provide many diverse examples of families to reinforce the diversity of all families, not just non-heterosexual families (Hosking & Ripper, 2012; Riggs & Augoustinos, 2007). The child may ask further questions of how anyone can make a baby without a dad. I would then introduce the child to Zak’s Safari as described below. These conversations would allow the child to question the assumption of compulsory heterosexuality, that all parents are heterosexual (Butler, 1990). To continue to support an inclusive classroom environment, I would end with emphasizing that it is wrong to tease anyone based on their family, that in this classroom everyone is to be treated fairly and respected (Hymel et al., 2006; Killen & Stangor, 2001).

**Vignette 2b: Understanding Scripts.** A few months later, I was playing cars with a group of children and I overheard O. tell a child “I have three moms” another child responded, “well… I have ten moms.” I could not help laughing at this, as I often take these dialogues very seriously and am on the lookout for possible exclusion or teasing. As I reflect on this particular dialogue, I understand how it illustrates the unique social interactions that occur between peers. I assumed that the child was drawing on scripts to devalue non-heteronormative families (Dunphy, 2012; Levy, 2008). With further reflection, I understand that this child was drawing on the script of more is better than less, without even considering the value of one or more moms.

**Vignette 3: Questioning the Stability and Dichotomy of Gender.** A couple of weeks later I overheard a child ask O., “how do boys become girls?” then the child asked “do
your three moms live in the same house?” O. did not respond to the first question but answered “my Mumma B. lives in Vancouver.” Again, this question is an important question in helping children understand the illusion of gender consistency and that yes, some people and children feel that their gender does not match the social expectations of their biological sex (Butler, 1990; Simons et al., 2014).

As I reflect on this child’s question, I understand the comment through the expectation that gender and sex are stable and dichotomous constructs (Butler, 1990). Exploring the question of girls who wish to be boys or boys who wish to be girls provide a space to “unground” the heteronormative bias by discussing diverse gender identities such as a child or adult whose gender identity does not match their biological sex. I would begin by asking the child what they think makes a boy a boy or what makes a girl a girl? This would provide information about their level of flexibility with regards to gender (Martin & Ruble, 2009) and possibly their level of understanding of the social construction of sex and gender (Jackson & Scott, 2010). This information would help me to choose how to best build a bridge and co-construct their conception of gender diversity. The child may respond that it is “wrong” for a “boy” to turn into a “girl.” This represents the child responding to cultural and parents and the schools’ expectations of gender consistency (Butler, 1990; Goble et al., 2012). I would then talk directly about O.’s Mumma B.’s experience becoming a “girl” and how sometimes she feels that people think it is wrong for her to be a girl but that she feels she is really a girl and is happiest when she is a girl. The child may respond that other children would laugh at a child who turned into a “girl.” This represents the child responding to “gender policing” either in the classroom or at home; this child has internalized the expectation that all children adhere to typical gendered behaviour (Lamb et al., 2009). I would then model how to advocate for Mumma B. if someone is teasing her for not being a
“real girl.” Again, I would rely on fairness and the expectation that children be respectful of everyone. I would say that Mumma B. is a “girl” and that it is mean to question if someone is a “real girl” because it is mean to challenge “who you are.” I would ask the child who is teasing, how they would feel if some said they were not a “real girl” or a “real boy.”

As I discussed above, the children in O.’s classroom often focus on behaviours or physical appearance when asking if I am a girl or a boy. Discussing the diversity of gendered behaviour can support children to develop more flexible and less stereotypical conceptions of gender which has been linked with less internalizing and externalizing problems (DiDonato et al., 2012; Goble et al., 2012; Martin & Dinella, 2011). At the same time, an open discussion of the diversity of gender may create space for those children who are GNC to discuss their experiences as they may feel pressure to mask their atypical behaviour or feelings from both peers and educators (DiDonato et al., 2012; Martin et al., 2005).

My observations of the conversations illustrated that the heteronormative bias was prevalent in O.’s classroom. It also provided me with hope as children were indeed curious about O.’s family, curious about me, and O.’s Mumma B. The children continued to ask questions, illustrated their desire to make sense of diversity of gender and diversity of family structures. I was mainly concerned by the limited support that I observed the teacher provided, while I was in the classroom, to help the children broaden their conceptions of family structures and gender behaviour and ultimately “unground” the heteronormative bias while ensuring that O. felt he and his family was included. As I illustrated, these conversations provided meaningful, rich, and relevant material to begin to “ungrounding” the heteronormative bias by co-constructing more diverse conceptions of gender and family structures.
Although, O. is happily settled into school and the majority of his classmates have stopped questioning him about his diverse family, they continue to question my gender. Each one of these interactions illustrate the heteronormative bias that exists so prevalently in early childhood classrooms. During the times I spent in O.’s classroom I noticed how O. bore the majority of the weight of clarifying and explaining his family to his peers. In connecting with the reviewed literature, I realized how simple dialogues could have supported O. to feel included in his classroom and help all the children develop more flexible conceptions of gender and family structures. Ultimately, these dialogues would support children to value the diversity of gender and family structures as part of the beautiful mosaic of Canada.

**Including School Administration and Leadership**

Furthermore, I would advocate for the school administration to support staff to reflect on the heteronormative bias within their classroom. I would emphasize findings from Clay (2004) that illustrated gay and lesbian parents’ experiences of being “outsiders.” If staff responded by saying that they felt their school was already inclusive, I would discuss my experience in O.’s classroom which was also echoed by Hoskings et al. (2015) findings that children of gay and lesbian parents report that they felt their families were not normal or not a valid family. I would also discuss the Yukon’s Policy, *Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Policy*, that mandates that schools create an inclusive and supportive environment for children who are GNC and children from DFS. I would seek a strong sense of support from the administration so that educators and other staff members would have the confidence in both school leadership and public policy to provide examples of diverse genders and DFS without fearing parental backlash echoing Atkinson and DePalma’s (2008) and DePalma and Atkinson’s (2009) findings.
Once school administration has clearly voiced their support for staff to create inclusive classroom environments for children who are GNC and children with DFS, I would advocate for staff to actively reflect on their “unconscious participation” in the maintenance of the heteronormative bias within their classrooms (Atkinson and DePalma, 2009, p. 26). I would emphasize, echoing DePalma and Atkinson (2009), that sexual identity, family diversity, and gender diversity is fluid and often changing. I echo Hedges et al. (2014) in that supporting educators to be reflective while providing information on the social construction of the heteronormative bias allows educators to be conscious of their own personal beliefs towards gender diversity and DFS. As Atkinson and DePalma (2009) found, this step of reflection is a critical step in creating inclusive classroom environments for children who are GNC or children from DFS.

**Sharing My Project through Exemplary Children’s Literature**

The insights I have gained through the review of the literature, my experiences from being a GNC child, and my recent experience spending time in O.’s classroom have led me to design two classroom “read aloud” activities intended for preschool and kindergarten children. My intention is to present the two “read alouds” to educators and parents. A “read aloud” is an educational technique where children are read a book while discussing the content of the book with the reader and with each other (Johnson & Griogis, 2003).

My goal is to support educators and parents to feel empowered to “unground” the heteronormative bias through everyday dialogues or stories. I provide a transcript of the “read alouds” with discussion prompts, not as scripted programs but rather as an example that can be modified to suit the needs of individual educators and parents (see Appendix B and Appendix C for transcripts) and a complementary research briefing (Appendix A). The two “read alouds” focus on illuminating the heteronormative bias by providing diverse examples
of gender and family structures. The intention is to use the children’s literature as a starting point to engage in dialogues with young children to broaden conceptions of gender and family.

**Literature on Diversity of Gender**

Children’s literature should include positive and diverse representation of children who are GNC. Some examples of children’s literature that have positive representation of children who are GNC are: Craig Pomranz and Margaret Chamberlain's *Made by Raffi*, Marcus Ewert’s *10,000 Dresses*, Cheryl Kilodavis’ *My Princess Boy*, Andrea Beaty’s *Rosie Revere Engineer*, and Cornelia Funke’s *The Princess Knight*. This is not an exhaustive list. Awareness around gender stereotypes and children who are GNC is increasing and new books are being created to counter restrictive stereotypes and represent the vast diversity of experiences that children who are GNC have. Our classroom libraries should not become stagnant or outdated.

**Book 1: “My Princess Boy.”** I chose *My Princess Boy* by Cherly Kilodavis (2010) because it focused on a child who is GNC. The main character, My Princess Boy, is African-American. *My Princess Boy* also models an older brother and mother advocating and supporting My Princess Boy. Kilodavis is also My Princess Boy’s mom and is able to capture both the child’s pain and a mother’s pain of seeing her child excluded and teased. This book supports children to understand gender exclusion and “gender policing” as morally wrong based on fairness, which Killen and Stangor (2001) found is the most effective reasoning for young children. The author depicts individuals laughing at My Princess Boy for buying “girl things” and the author states, “they laugh at him and they laugh at me. It hurts us both.” (p. 10). The author also depicts individuals laughing at My Princess Boy for wearing a dress for Halloween and tells My Princess Boy, “Some people don’t think boys
should wear dresses.” (Kilodavis, 2010, p. 14). At the end of the book the author asks, “If you see a Princess Boy… will you laugh at him? … Will you like him for who he is? Our Princess boy is happy because we love him for who he is.” (Kilodavis, 2010, p. 22-23).

When I read the last two pages of this book, I always cry. During the “read aloud” I do not hold back my tears; instead, I allow my past to be included in the dialogue. Most children notice that I have tears in my eyes and ask why. I explain that this story takes me back to being a child who was GNC, and that I felt I did not have a mom who accepted my GNC behaviour. I still hear my mom’s comments, “I never really had a daughter.” In high school I remember her saying, “If you want friends you just need to shave your legs and wear nicer clothes.” All children are happy because we love them for who they are and this is a powerful statement to convey to both children who are typical and children who are GNC. I will end the “read aloud” with children discussing how they can be supportive of someone who may be a little different, so that everyone in our class can feel supported to be themselves. Initially, I find myself playing the primary advocate role but once children have a chance to identify instances of “gender policing” or gender exclusion they can begin to take ownership during instances of exclusion. My experiences resonate with Pahlke’s et al. (2014) findings that children can be empowered to both be themselves and stand up for each other during instances of exclusion or teasing.

Children’s Literature on Family Diversity

Children’s literature should include positive and diverse representations of DFS. Some examples of children’s literature that have positive and inclusive representations of DFS are: Cory Silverberg’s What Makes a Baby, Jonny Valentines’s One Dad Two Dads Brown Dad Blue Dads, Justin Richardson and Peter Parnell’s and Tango Makes Three, and
Christy Tyner’s Zak’s Safari. Again, this is not an exhaustive list and more families are writing and publishing stories based on their own unique experiences.

**Book 2: “Zak’s Safari.”** I chose Zak’s Safari by Christy Tyner (2014) because it depicted a mixed race lesbian couple creating a family through a sperm donor. Of all the books that my wife and I have of non-heterosexual families, our two sons request this one the most. It begins with the main character, Zak, taking us on exciting safari adventure. He has to change his plans due to rainy weather so he invites us “to join me on a very special, incredibly rare tour of my family” (Tyner, 2014, p. 3-4). Tyner begins with how Zak’s moms “fell in love” (p. 9). The two women are depicted curled up on the couch arms around each other, while dreaming of a baby. Zak then describes how you need an egg and a sperm to make a baby. Tyner then describes a multitude of families such as “a mom and dad”, “one or two dads”, and “one or two moms” (p. 11-12). Zak then describes how his moms picked sperm based on a donor from a sperm bank. Zak then describes how excited his moms were to meet him and “that is how we became a family” (p. 20). Towards the end of the book, Tyner depicts the family curled up together in a bed. The last page is blank, welcoming children to write their story of how their family became a family. This is where I would invite children to talk about how they became a family, what they love about their family, and how their family makes them feel. This would provide space for not only children of non-heterosexual parents but also for children who have blended families, were adopted, whose parents are their grandparents, or whose parents immigrated. The emphasis is how each child has their own unique story of their family, and the diversity of family is a wonderful part of our classroom. I would end with telling the story of how O.’s family became a family, as O. has three moms: His Mumma B. who provided the sperm to make O., his Mumma C. my wife, and me, his birth mom. I will talk about how O.’s Mumma B. lives far away but still
loves O. and O. still loves his Mumma B. This provides another space for children whose parents are separated or whose parents have to live in different cities due to work. Again, the emphasis is how diverse each family is and how each child has a valuable family that should be included within their classroom environment.

After each of the “read alouds,” I would welcome parents and educators to express their feelings about being able to “unground” the heteronormative bias and create an inclusive space for children who are GNC and children who have DFS. I would share that, even as a queer lesbian parent, I sometimes feel unsure of how to respond to a child’s questions or instances of gender exclusion or “gender policing.” The most important part to remember is that our children want to be accepted and included for who they are. We need to ensure that our classrooms support this inclusive environment, especially for children who are GNC and children who have DFS.

**Research Briefing**

The research briefing (Appendix A) is a summary of the research and theory that outlines the importance of creating inclusive classroom environments for children who are GNC and children who have DFS. The research briefing summarizes the Yukon’s current policy and outlines that educators are mandated to respond to incidents of exclusion based on sex or gender and educators are responsible for creating inclusive environments for children who are GNC and children with DFS. The research briefing ends with a list of websites on diversity of gender or DFS that I have found helpful or organizations that provide professional development for educators or workshops for students. It includes: Bridging Bridges document which focused on creating inclusive early childhood environments, Egale Canada website which focused on national advocacy and policy development, and the Yukon’s Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Policy (see Appendix A).
CHAPTER FOUR: CONCLUSIONS

In this capstone project I have examined the heteronormative bias within early childhood classrooms and how educators can “unground” the heteronormative bias to create inclusive classroom environments. Through the literature review, I have learned that although children are active in their own gender development, their conceptions of gender and family structures are also influenced by the dynamic interactions of their unique interests and preferences (Salkind, 2008), family expectations (Hupp et al., 2010; Sutfin et al., 2007), peer expectation (DiDonato et al., 2012; Lamb et al., 2009; Miller et al., 2013), and children’s literature (Riggs & Augoustinos, 2007; Hosking & Ripper, 2012). I have realized that educators can play an effective role in “ungrounding” the heteronormative bias and in creating supportive and inclusive learning environments for children who are GNC and children who have DFS (Atkinson & DePalma, 2009; DePalma & Atkinson, 2009; Palke et al., 2014). These findings are of great importance when researchers have demonstrated that children who are GNC or have DFS often face social exclusion from peers and may feel unsupported by educators which has been connected to poor emotional well-being (Clay, 2004; Cohen-Kettenis et al., 2003; DiDonato et al., 2012; Hosking et al., 2015; Moradi et al., 2009). I have also come to understand the importance of creating a supportive environment for children. In particular, when children feel accepted by their peers these children are more likely to be engaged in their learning, have positive attitudes towards school, and experience academic achievement (Espelage et al., 2013; Hymel et al., 2006).

Reflections and Concluding Thoughts

I began this project by asking, “In what ways can early childhood educators create a thriving learning environment that is inclusive of children’s diversity of gender and children’s diversity of family structure (same sex parents and/or trans parents)?” and more specifically,
“in what ways does the heteronormative bias influence early childhood educators’ abilities and comfort to create an inclusive classroom environment?” And, “in what ways can educators ‘unground’ the heteronormative bias within their classroom environment?” These questions were grounded in my personal experiences as both a child who was GNC and as a lesbian mom. Through these questions I have learned about the poorer outcomes that children who are GNC face or children who have diverse sexual orientations face, such as higher rates of internalizing behaviours (Cohen-Kettenis et al., 2003), more likely to be victimized by their peers (D’Augelli et al., 2006; Killen & Stangor, 2001; Miller et al., 2013, Wisnowski, 2011), more likely to attempt suicide as teens (Burton et al., 2013; Russell, 2003) and more likely to be sexually assaulted as teens (Martin-Storey, 2015). These findings resonated with my experiences as a GNC child and GNC youth. My assertion that educators can play an effective role in “ungrounding” the heteronormative bias and can create inclusive classroom environments is grounded in both sociocultural (Vygotsky, 1978), ecological systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), Queer (Butler, 1990), and dynamic gender development (Martin & Ruble, 2009) theories. The review of the extant literature uncovered that once educators reflect on the prevalence of the heteronormative bias within their classrooms (Atkinson & DePalma, 2008; 2009; Hosking et al., 2015; Hosking & Ripper, 2012; Riggs & Augoustinos, 2007), they can begin to create inclusive learning environments where both children and educators are empowered to “unground” the heteronormative bias by confronting gender exclusion, “gender policing,” or narrow gender stereotypes (DiDonato et al., 2012; Lamb et al. 2009; Pahlke et al., 2014).

Along my journey I uncovered exemplary examples such as Pahlke et al.’s (2014) anti-sexist program which illustrates educators effectively “ungrounding” the heteronormative bias within their classrooms and creating a supportive classroom
environment. When educators use clear and direct language to “unground” the heteronormative bias, while emphasizing an expectation that children be accepting of their peers, children have the power to move beyond the confines of the heteronormative bias and celebrate the diversity of gender and family structures. As a result, educators have the power to create inclusive and supportive environments that support all children to feel they belong and are valued regardless of the gender expression or family structure.

My understanding of children’s gender development through the lens of social-constructivism was deepened by including Queer theory, in particular Butler's (1990) heteronormative matrix and Atkinson’s and DePalma’s (2008) heteronormative bias. Focusing on the heteronormative bias allowed me to understand similar issues that children who are GNC and children who come from DFS experience. Drawing on Butler’s concept of “ungrounding” the heteronormative bias, Wood et al.’s (1976) concept of “scaffolding,” and Rogoff et al.’s (1989) concept of “guided participation” strengthened my confidence to engage in dialogues with children as partners as we both co-construct and multiply our conceptions of gender and family structures.

Developing the two “read alouds” has allowed me to understand the importance to have children’s literature that includes children who are GNC or families with diverse structures. At the same time, I believe that the literature needs to celebrate and embrace all aspects of human diversity and not reinforce demeaning or narrow stereotypes. Drawing on the findings from Martin (1995), I propose that these depictions not be limited to children who are GNC as one dimensional or stereotypical. I propose that images ought to include children who are GNC from diverse ethnic backgrounds, and not limited to a white middle class student who is GNC (Moradi et al., 2009). The stories about DFS would then include representations of ethnic, socioeconomic, and religious diversity. Authors such as Clay
(2004) and Riggs and Augoustinos (2007) illustrated that the majority of children’s literature about DFS overly focus on white, middle class families that closely mirror heterosexual parents, which continues to excluded many families.

Through this capstone project and developing the “read alouds,” I have come to understand children’s questions about my gender and my son’s family as their attempt to understand our unique gender and family structure that falls outside of the heteronormative bias. In the past I have been resentful of children’s questions. On a day that I was feeling particularly vulnerable, a child’s statement “you cannot be a mom, you are a boy” felt like an assault on my identity, and I felt like all eyes were on me. This particular day I did not feel welcomed at my son’s school. Through the extant literature, I have come to appreciate these questions as rooted in how children learn through social interactions and social values about what is “normal” gendered behaviour and what is a “normal” family structure. I have come to value these questions as a springboard to engage in dialogues to multiply and broaden children’s understanding of gender and family structures, which in turn would create an environment that is both more understanding and respectful of other children and adults like myself.

**Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research and Practice**

The scope of this capstone project was focused on how to create an inclusive learning environment for children who are GNC or children from DFS. I focused primarily on the role of educators to “unground” the heteronormative bias within their own classrooms. The literature reviewed focused on classroom educators role in creating flexible attitudes about gender, and did not include a thorough analysis of policy documents or individual school’s policies. The literature reviewed did not investigate national or international policy documents that promotes inclusive classroom environments.
In terms of recommendations for future research I am encouraged by Atkinson and DePalma’s (2008, 2009) research which focused on supporting pre-service educators to reflect on the prevalence of the heteronormative bias within classroom practices and attempt to “unground” the heteronormative bias within their practicums. I would recommend that similar research be conducted in Canadian pre-service programs to support pre-service educators to better support children who are GNC or from DFS. I am also encouraged by Pahlke et al.’s (2014) anti-sexist program that focused on both creating an inclusive environment and empowering peers to stand up for fellow GNC peers during instances of “gender policing” or exclusion. I would recommend that similar research be conducted in northern Canadian communities.

To further support educators to create inclusive classroom environments for children who are GNC or from DFS, I would recommend that future research address some of the tensions identified in this project including homophobia or internalized homophobia that educators may experience and effective methods to resolve tensions. This research could build on the strong history within Canada of celebrating diversity and valuing human rights. For recommendations for practice, I would encourage all early childhood educators to openly talk to non-heterosexual parents to understand their unique perspective and goals for their child and what type of inclusive environment they feel is important for their child. “Ungrounding” the heteronormative bias results in celebrating the multiple ways of being and identifying which is a benefit to all children (DiDonato et al., 2012; Goble et al., 2012; Martin & Dinella, 2011).

Reflecting on my own practice, I recommend that all early childhood educators, continue to have an ear out for instances of “gender policing” or exclusion and intentionally seek to address these instances when they happen. I will always feel protective of individuals
who do not fit the narrow categories of “boy” or “girl.” I do not want anyone to go through the mental health issues, feel excluded by peers, or unsupported by educators as was my childhood experiences. At the same time I will continue to openly discuss my experiences as a child who was GNC and as a queer lesbian parent. I will continue to promote children’s literature that represents diversity of gender and family structures in early childcare settings, as this will benefit all children, but especially individuals who are GNC or who have DFS to feel that they are not alone and they have a right to an inclusive and supportive classroom environment.
References


I want to begin by thanking you for being interested in how to create inclusive classroom environments for children who are gender non-conforming (GNC) or from diverse family structures (DFS). As I have shared before, this is very personal to me. I was a child who was GNC and felt victimized and excluded by my peers. I am now a lesbian mom of two boys and continue to hear and see “gender policing” and exclusion that can be damaging to young children. Below is a summary of my personal experiences, current research and theory outlining why it is so important for both our children’s emotional well-being and academic success that they feel supported for who they are.

To begin with, in Yukon schools, all school staff members are expected to create inclusive environments for children who are GNC or who are from DFS (Yukon Ministry of Education, 2012). School staff members are expected to immediately address incidents of bullying, exclusion, and teasing based on gender, sexual orientation, or perceived sexual orientation. This policy clearly supports educators to create inclusive classroom environments for children who are GNC or from DFS. It also clearly supports parents and children to advocate for their right to have a supportive and inclusive classroom environment.

Before children come to preschool or kindergarten they have learned much of what it means to be a “girl” and a “boy.” Much of what children understand of gender can be understood through Butler’s (1990) heterosexual matrix: a hierarchy of male versus female, boy versus girl, the expectation that everyone is heterosexual, and that families must have a mom and a dad. This hierarchy and dichotomy of boy versus girl results in the heteronormative bias, or the assumption that this hierarchy and assumed heterosexuality are
the “natural order of things” (Atkinson & DePalma, 2008, p. 27). Children begin to internalize the heteronormative bias based on the dynamic interaction of: how their parents interact with them (Hupp et al., 2010; Sutfin et al., 2007); based on “gender policers” peers enforcing gendered stereotypes (Lamb et al., 2009; Miller et al., 2013); on representations of solely heterosexual parents in literature and classroom resources (Hosking & Ripper, 2007; Ripper & Augoustinos, 2007); and on broader family, cultural, and community values (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

The issue of the heteronormative bias in education is very personal to me. As I reflect on my own childhood I was a gender non-conforming (GNC) child and experienced both confusion and frustration from my parents, and no support from my educators and peers at school. As a child, I felt I did not quite belong and often played alone or with my brothers. As a youth, I experienced mental health issues that unfortunately are typical for children and youth who are GNC or have diverse sexual orientations (Cohen-Kettenis et al., 2003; Russell, 2003). In grade nine, I was ostracised at a party and sexually assaulted, a common experience for children who are GNC or have diverse sexual orientations (Martin-Storey, 2015). During this time, I began self-mutilating and entertaining suicidal thoughts. In grade ten, I was hospitalized for anorexia nervosa, a condition that causes severe weight lost due to restricting one’s calorie intake (Outten, 2015). During university, I was hospitalized for an attempted suicide. All my life, I just assumed I was a very unlucky person. It has been through reading the extant literature and reading authors’ including Ivan Coyote that I realized that my experiences as a child and youth were not unusual. Ivan Coyote is a local trans artist and activist who tells her personal stories of growing up as a child who was GNC and recent experiences as a trans adult (Coyote, 2010). With disbelief, I feel like I finally made it to adulthood: I survived and I am not alone. At the same time, I feel vitally aware
that the same gendered expectations and assumed heterosexuality exists for children. Anytime I see a young child who does not quite fit the stereotypical gendered norms, I feel protective. I am committed to ensure that these children do not have to experience the mental health issues that I experienced. I believe that we, as educators, play an important role to create a supportive classroom where all children feel accepted and valued, and especially for children who fall outside of the heteronormative expectation of typical gender expression and assumed heterosexuality. We can chose to reinforce the heteronormative bias or “unground” it (Butler, 1990, p. 192), while providing a supportive space for children to imagine diverse gendered behaviours and diverse family structures.

Most children develop typical gender identities but some children do not. Children who are GNC are those whose identity and behaviour does not match the expectations of their biological sex (Simons et al., 2014). The majority of these children do become typical gendered adults (Coleman et al., 2012; Zucker & Lawrence, 2009), but with a greater likelihood of having a sexual orientation that is not heterosexual (Wallien & Cohen-Kettenis, 2008). Researchers such as DiDonato et al. (2012) have shown that poor psychological well-being develops after GNC children attend preschool. Children who are GNC did not have poor psychological adjustment prior to attending preschool but had a greater likelihood than typically gendered peers of having poorer psychological well-being by the end of their preschool year (DiDonato et al., 2012). Children who are GNC have higher rates of internalizing behaviours, externalizing behaviours, and more likely to be victimized by their peers. As youth, these children have a greater likelihood of attempting suicide (Burton et al., 2013).

Children who have DFS (whose parents are gay, lesbian, trans or bi-sexual) experienced feelings of being ‘othered’ at school, or that their family was not a real family
Researchers emphasized the importance that children have a sense of belonging and feel accepted by their peers. A sense of belonging and peer acceptance has been linked with increased well-being and increased academic performance (Hymel et al., 2006); while peer exclusion and teasing has been linked with negative academic performance (Espelage et al., 2013).

While these statistics can be overwhelming, researchers such as Atkinson and DePalma (2008, 2009) have demonstrated that pre-service educators can begin to “unground” the heteronormative bias. Atkinson and DePalma (2008) defined the heteronormative bias as the tautology that heterosexuality is the “natural order of things” which results in an assumption that families are only headed by heterosexual parents (p. 27). Pre-service educators can reflect on the expectation of typical gender and compulsory heterosexuality to create space for children to understand the diversity of gender and sexuality. “Ungrounding” the heteronormative bias provides a starting point for children to understand that excluding and “gender policing” is wrong and unacceptable, just as racism and excluding based on religion is wrong. Researchers such as Pahlke et al. (2014) have implemented effective programs that utilized clear and active depictions of why “gender policing” and gender exclusion is wrong. Their program was able to create an inclusive classroom environment that empowered children to counter gender based teasing and bullying. These researchers provide me with great optimism that our children, with support from educators, can be powerful agents in creating an inclusive classroom environment that celebrates diversity of gender and family structure.

As a lesbian parent of two young children, a child who was GNC, who felt unsupported by my educators and experienced significant mental health issues as a youth, I concur with Rayside (2014) and Short (2013), it is not satisfactory to simply be aware of the
unfortunate statistics facing children who are GNC or children who have diverse sexual orientations. I believe that it is my obligation as an educator, to actively create inclusive classroom environments where all children, including children who are GNC or have diverse sexual orientations, feel embraced and supported and therefore can thrive.

My goal in sharing my experiences with you and sharing the above research and theory is to impress upon you the great importance that educators begin in preschools and kindergartens. At these young ages, we can work together to create supportive classroom environments. We can “unground” the heteronormative bias. Children’s literature can be an excellent way to celebrate diversity of gender and family structures in our classrooms. We can celebrate diversity of family structure by including books such as: Cory Silverberg’s *What Makes a Baby*, Jonny Valentines’s *One Dad Two Dads Brown Dad Blue Dads*, Justin Richardson and Peter Parnell’s *and Tango Makes Three*, and Christy Tyner’s *Zak’s Safari*. We can also celebrate diversity of gender by including books such as: Craig Pomranz and Margaret Chamberlain's *Made by Raffi*, Marcus Ewert’s *10,000 Dresses*, Cheryl Kilodavis’ *My Princess Boy*, Andrea Beaty’s *Rosie Revere Engineer*, and Cornelia Funke’s *The Princess Knight*. We can make meaningful changes in the lives of children who are GNC and children from DFS. We can start in the preschool years, so that all children value diversity of gender and family structures. This will help to create classroom environments where all children feel they belong, are able to engage in school, and are able to thrive.

The following is a list of websites, in alphabetical order by name, that have further information of how to create supportive classroom environments. The resources also include advocacy groups that can provide professional development and further supports for educators to “unground” the heteronormative bias.


3. Egale Canada [http://egale.ca].


7. For more information contact Cai Krikorian at caikrikorian@gmail.com
TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

**GENDER NON-CONFORMING**
This describes children whose behaviour falls outside the socially expected behaviours of boys and girls. Children who are gender non-conforming experience higher rates of peer exclusion and teasing, which has been linked with decrease emotional well-being and lower academic achievement (Barron et al., 2013; Espelage et al., 2019; Hymel et al., 2006).

**HETERO NormATIVE BIAS**
This is the invisible hierarchy that results in the assumption that everyone is straight and that their is a dichotomy of “girl” versus “boy” (DeLue, 1990). Before children come to school they have already learned much of what it means to be a “girl” and a “boy”. The heterosexual bias results in questions such as “everyone has to have a dad”.

**DIVERSE FAMILY STRUCTURES**
This is used as a blanket term for all family structures that fall outside the two heterosexual parent headed household. This includes parents who have diverse gender identities such as trans parents. This also includes parents who are gay, lesbian, or bisexual.

*GENDER POLICING*
Children begin to internalize the heteronormative bias which may result in enforcing gendered stereotypes and excluding and teasing children who do not fit the narrow stereotypes of being a “girl” or “boy” (Lamb et al., 2009; Miller et al., 2017). Children police by simple statements such as “pink is a girl’s colour” or “boys only”.

CONCLUSIONS
As educators we can play a powerful role in the preschool and kindergarten years to create learning environments where diversity of gender and family structure are celebrated. It is up to us, to become aware of the heteronormative bias within our classroom and take an active role in providing an environment where diversity of gender and family structures are embraced and celebrated. Children can be powerful advocates when they are empowered to counter gender based teasing and bullying. We can support this by including classroom literature that represents diverse genders and diverse family structures. Classroom literature can provide a catalyst to engage in dialogues that model how children can be advocates to counter gendered based teasing or exclusion.

WHAT THE RESEARCH TELLS US

**CELEBRATING DIVERSITY OF GENDER**
Children who are GNC need to feel accepted and valued to thrive in the classroom. When “gender policing” or exclusion occurs educators need to respond immediately and clearly that excluding and “gender policing” is wrong (Pahilie et al., 2014). Children understand excluding and “gender policing” as wrong based on fairness. Children also need to see diverse representation of gender to understand the diversity of gender that moves beyond narrow stereotypes of what it means to be a “girl” or a “boy” (Atkinson & DePalma, 2008).

**CELEBRATING DIVERSITY OF FAMILY**
Children who have DFS also need to feel that their family is accepted and valued. Children whose parents are gay, lesbian, trans or bi-sexual have reported feelings of being excluded at school because their family was not a real family (Blosking et al., 2019). Children also need to see diverse representation of family structures. These representations need to include diverse cultures, race, and socioeconomic status (Fox, 2009; Jamshahmi and Campbell, 2009).
APPENDIX B

Transcript for “Read Aloud” of My Princess Boy by Cheryl Kilodavis

This is the culmination for my graduating project for my MED at UBC. This “read aloud” is to be conducted in a northern Canadian community, with a small group of preschool children. Early childhood educators and parents will observe the read aloud with the expectation that they adapt the read aloud for their classrooms or families. The goal is to provide educators with an example of how to support children to celebrate diversity of gender.

Show and Read Pages 1-2.

Cai explains to adults: This is a time for children to talk about the book and any thoughts that come to mind. There is no right or wrong answer.

Cai: What do you think about Princess Boy?

Child 1: I like his dress and crown.

Cai: Me too.

Child 2: His favourite colour is pink?

Cai: Yes, he likes pink. What is your favourite colour?

Child 2: Green.

Cai: I like green too.

Child 2: He can not like pink.

Cai: Why not?

Child 2: It is a girl’s colour and he is a boy.

Cai: Would you think it is fair that he can wear the colour he likes.

Cai: Pause.
Cai explains to adults: This is a time for the children to absorb the positive and happy images of the Princess boy with his family.

Cai: How do you think Princess Boy feels in these pictures.

Child 3: I love my big brother too.

Cai: Yes, Princess Boy loves his brother. Princess boy looks happy?

Child 2: Why is he wearing a dress?

Cai: Princess Boy loves to wear dresses, he looks happy in the dress. What makes you feel happy?

Child 2: I love swimming.

Cai: Yes, swimming is fun. Does swimming make you feel happy?

Child 2: Smiles.

Cai: How does the Princess Boy look in these pictures?

Children: Happy.

Cai explains to adults: This is a time for the children to connect with how it can make people feel to laugh at them.

Cai: How do you think Princess Boy felt when the other kids laughed at him for wanting a sparkly dress?

Child 2: He should not want a dress, he is a boy.

Cai: But he is happy when he wears a dress and loves dresses. What do you like to wear?

Child 2: I love my superman shirt, with a cape.

Cai: Is that your favorite shirt?

Child 2: Yes.
Cai: What if these other kids laughed at your superman shirt? How might you feel?

Child 2: That would be mean.

Cai: Yes, how would you feel? Would that hurt your feelings. I would tell the other kids to stop because it is wrong to be mean and tease. Right?

Child 2: Yes.

Show and Read Pages 15-16.

Cai: Would you laugh at Princess Boy?

Child 1: No.

Show and Read Pages 19-20.

Cai: Would you play with Princess Boy?

Child 3: Yes.

Cai: How do you think that would make Princess Boy feel.

Child 3: Happy.

Cai: Yes, it makes me feel happy.

Child 2: Why does it make you feel happy?

Cai: Because Princess Boy needs good friends to play with. Just like you need good friends to play with. If no one would play with you, it would make me sad. As your teacher, I would work hard to make sure that you had good friends to play with.

Show and Read Pages 21-24

Cai explains to adults: This is a time for the children to generalize about being accepting and welcoming of diversity of gender, as well as, supporting children to take an advocacy role if another child is being teased.

Cai: Will you like Princess Boy for who he is?

Child 2: Why are you crying?
Cai: I always cry when I read the end of this book.

Child 2: Why, it is not a sad book?

Cai: This story reminds me of being a kid, and although I was a girl, I felt more like a boy. And when I was a kid, I did not have any friends because other kids thought I should be more like a girl. But being more like a girl made me feel sad. I was happiest when I played soccer or climbed high in the trees. And I wished other kids would play with me because I just wanted to be liked.

Child 3: I like you.

Child 2: I love climbing trees.

Cai: Thank you.

Child 2: You do look like a boy.

Cai: Yes

Child 3: You are really a girl?

Cai: I am a lot like a boy and a lot like a girl. Is that ok?

Child 3: Yes.

Child 2: But you are really a girl. Really a girl.

Cai: What do you mean?

Child 2: You do not have a penis. I have a penis.

Children: Laughing.

Cai: You are right, I do not have a penis.

Cai: In this classroom everyone should be liked for who they are. It hurts others feelings and it is mean to stop liking another child because they play with different toys or wear different clothes. It is not fair to treat other children like that.
Cai: How would you help me if you saw another child saying, “Cai can not play soccer with us, she is a girl.”

Child 2: I love soccer. I would play soccer with you.

Cai: I love soccer too. But what would you say to the other kids.

Child 1: I would say, “stop being mean. You have to let everyone play. That is only fair.”

Cai: Thank you. That makes me feel happy.
APPENDIX C

Transcript for “Read Aloud” of Zak’s Safari by Christy Tyner

This is the second part of the culmination for my graduating project for my MED at UBC. This “read aloud” is to be conducted in a northern Canadian community, with a small group of preschool children. Early childhood educators and parents will observe the read aloud with the expectation that they adapt the read aloud for their classrooms or families. The goal is to provide educators with an example of how to support children to celebrate diversity of family structures.

Show and Read Pages 1-6.

Cai explains to adults: This is a time for children to talk about their family.

Cai: Who is in your family?

Child 2: I have a new baby sister, she cries a lot.

Cai: Yes, and who else is in your family?

Child 2: I have a dog too. He always wants to go outside.

Cai: What about your parents?

Child 2: My mom and dad.

Cai: Yes. Thank you. Who is in your family?

Child 3: I have a big brother and a mom.

Child 2: What about a dad. You have to have a dad.

Child 3: I have a dad but he does not live with us.

Cai: Thank you.

Child 1: I do not have a brother or sister.

Cai: What about your parents?
Child 1: You know my parents, my mom and my dad. Did you forget?

Cai: Laughing… No. I was just asking about your family.

Child 1: OK

Cai: Let's see who is in Zak’s family.

**Show and Read Pages 7-8.**

Cai: Who are Zak’s parents?

Child 2: Where is the dad?

Cai: Zak has two moms. They love each other.

Child 3: My mom and dad love each other.

Cai: Yes.

Child 2: Zak has to have a dad.

Cai: Why?

Child 2: Because all families have a mom and dad, even animals.

Cai: Let’s read more about Zak’s family.

**Show and Read Pages 9-12**

Cai: So families can have a mom and a dad, two dads, one dad, two moms, or one dad.

Child 2: I have a mom and a dad.

Cai: Yes.

**Show and Read Pages 13-20**

Cai explains to adults: This is a time for children to connect to the love that most families share and welcome the diversity of families that each child has.

Cai: How do you think your parents felt when you were born?

Child 2: My mom was so happy she held me and held me.

Child 1: My mom said I grew in her heart, I did not grow in her body.
Cai: Yes, your parents adopted you. When your parents first held you, how do you think they felt?

Child 1: Happy.

Child 2: What does “adopt” mean?

Child 1: I grew in my mom’s heart not my mom’s belly like you did.

Cai: Yes.

Cai: How do you think your parents felt when you were born?

Child 3: Happy.

Show and Read Pages 21-24

Cai: Zak loves spending time with his two moms. What is your favourite thing to do with your parents?

Child 3: I love to go swimming with my mom and dad.

Child 2: I love to go swimming too. It is my favourite thing to do with my mom and dad.

Child 1: I like to make cookies with my mom.

Show and Read Pages 25-28.

Cai: Zak loves his two moms and they look like a happy family. Did you know that every family is different. Some children are adopted, some children have parents who are their grandparents. Some children have parents who speak different languages. Some children like my son O, have three moms.

Child 2: Three moms is too many. How can O. have three moms?

Cai: O. has me, and he grew in my tummy. He has my wife, C., who loves him. He also has his Mumma B., who gave the sperm to make O. O. loves all his moms but lives with me and C.

Child 1: That is like me, I live with my mom but still love my dad.
Cai: Yes.

Child 2: I have a mom and dad.

Cai: Yes. Each family is a little different, but your parents all love you.

Child 3: I love my mom. But I do not know the tummy I grew in before I was born.

Cai: Yes. How does that make you feel?

Child 3: I love my dad too.

Cai: Yes. We are all lucky to have people who love us and make us feel happy just like Zak has two moms who love him.