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Because It's a Girl Cake!:Because It's a Girl Cake!: Fostering Dialogue About Gender Identity in Elementary Classrooms

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Because It's a Girl Cake!: Fostering Dialogue About Gender Identity in Elementary Classrooms

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Abstract

In this documentary account, a kindergarten teacher and teacher educator describe our efforts to explore how young children think and reason about gender expression in and beyond the classroom. We describe our ongoing collaboration to develop a framework for teacher-initiated and student-initiated conversations about gender, which often result from students' spontaneous remarks and questions about gender norms. We explore the question, How can educators create relevant and engaging learning opportunities to invite young learners to discuss gender norms within the classroom? In this paper we share kindergartners' conversations about gender and three examples of their writing about this topic. We conclude that an inquiry approach to teaching, that aims to be respectful of and responsive to students developing ideas about gender identity, is both possible and necessary.

The conversation below sparked our interest and curiosity, and made us consider how gender is thought about, seen, portrayed, and discussed among elementary students.

A student teacher reads a poem; kindergarteners stand up when their birth month is read and the observing teacher educator stands when May is read. Later the teacher educator works with two kindergarteners to sound segment words and spell them phonetically (e.g., iz for eyes) as the student teacher confers with individual students. The teacher educator leaves, and the class has the following conversation.

Student Teacher: Isn't my friend nice?

Female Student & Male Student: Ya!

Female Student: Is she a boy or a girl?

Student Teacher: She is a girl.

Female Student: She has short hair.

Male Student: And she's REALLY tall!

Student Teacher: Do any of us have short hair?

Students: Boys have short hair!

Student Teacher: Can't girls have short hair?

Class: NO!

Male Student: Ya.

In this paper we describe our efforts to explore two questions.

- How do elementary students understand gender identity and gender norms?
- How can we create relevant and engaging learning opportunities to invite young learners to discuss gender norms within the classroom?

Questioning Gender Stereotypes and the Binary Framing of Gender

Multicultural education advocates argue that curriculum should draw on students' experiential background and daily experiences and "be reformed so that it regularly presents diverse perspectives, experiences, and contributions, particularly those that tend to be omitted or misrepresented when school conduct 'business as usual'" (Sleeter & Grant, 1994, p. 185). We believe that "socially significant yet potentially contentious issues pertaining to identity, diversity, equity, and inequity can be shaped into useful educational experiences" (Nelson, 2009).

Despite the inroads made by feminist, gay rights, and transgender rights movements in questioning the binary framing of gender, "the notion of how each of us must look, act, and dress because of our sex is deeply embedded in our society" (Wilchins, 2004, p. 8). Identities such as man or woman are assumed to be "real, natural, and universal," suggesting a common and uncomplicated sense of identity (p. 124). Gender "difference" research demonstrates that boys and girls have very small, in fact tiny, differences in their cognitive abilities, but that a much stronger influence in how children learn stereotypical "boy" and stereotypical "girl" behavior is through the influence of parents, teachers, and messages from society (Rivers & Barnett, 2011). Children internalize and enforce binary gender stereotypes (Moss, 2007; Katch & Katch, 2010; Pelo, 2005).

While boys and girls are more alike than they are different, educators and parents are bombarded with media reports that make sweeping generalizations about differences between boys and girls. "We hear that boys are interested in objects while girls are interested in people, that boys have poor verbal skills and girls can't do math, that boys need to read books about combat and girls need to learn science through cosmetics" (Rivers & Barnett, 2011, p. 2). Educators make recommendations for boy's classrooms that are active and noisy, full of hands-on projects, and writing assignments focused on hunting or racecar driving. Educators make recommendations for girls' classrooms characterized by a gentle atmosphere and quiet and hushed tones, where girls focus on building social relationships, and writing assignments focused on writing about a dream wedding dress or perfect birthday party. These sweeping generalizations about *all* boys and *all* girls are toxic for students, educators, and parents; they reinforce rigid stereotypes about how boys and girls are supposed to behave and limit our ability to "see students as individuals and encourage them to stretch beyond stereotypes and discover a

range of talents” (Rivers & Barnett, 2011, p. 160).

In contrast to educational recommendations based on general stereotypes, critical educators advocate for classrooms that, “. . . open up discursive spaces where dominant perceptions of “normal” bodies can be explored, critiqued, and reconsidered” (Jones & Hughes-Decatur, 2012). Critical educators seek to foster and sustain cultural pluralism, create educational environments that support students to question and challenge normalized discourses, and engage education as instrumental in working toward a society that is more equitable and humane (Jones & Hughes-Decatur, 2012; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2005; Paris, 2012; Ritchie, 2012; Weaver-Hightower, 2003). As Gallas (1998, p. 13-14) so eloquently writes,

“(children) are experimenting in the laboratory of the classroom . . . These children provide us with a mirror within which to contemplate both how they approach and negotiate the murky world of social relations, and how we, as adults, are approaching it. It is sometimes a disturbing reflection for us to consider, but it is always a provocative one” (p. 13-14).

Educational psychology is a dominant framework in describing and understanding classrooms (Kohn, 1999). Developmental psychology, while helpful for naming patterns of brain develop and behavior (Wood, 2007), often focuses elementary educators on children’s developing brains and bodies, rather than the complexity of socialization within communities. Engaging the murky world of social relations can help us move beyond simplistic rhetoric and recommendations for “boy friendly” and “girl friendly” educational practices to “better understanding of the implications of the various masculinity taken up by boys (and girls!) in school” (Weaver-Hightower, 2003, p. 488). In addition, gender expression takes on different meanings in different cultural groups; reinforcing limited conceptions of race, gender, and sexual orientation essentializes communities and excludes individuals who do not conform (McCready, 2010). Listening to students’ perspectives and questions allows students and teachers to interrogate assumed definitions of what it means to be a “normal boy” or “normal girl” (Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2005).

Documentary Account and Teacher Identity

This documentary account describes our efforts to explore how the limiting binary framing of boy or girl impacts young children’s thinking and reasoning about gender expression (Katch & Katch, 2010; Pelo, 2005). We describe our ongoing collaboration to develop opportunities for children to discuss gender identity and gender norms. We are working to develop a framework for thinking about how teachers can initiate conversations about gender, or how the conversation can begin, as the result of responding to students’ spontaneous remarks and questions about gender norms.

This inquiry is the result of our shared curiosity about how young learners think about gender identity and gender norms. Through our collaboration we have engaged the tradition of reflective practice by asking as teacher-researchers questions such as, “What can I make of this?” and “What have I really been doing?” (Schön, 1983, p. 241). By asking questions about our experiences, we theorize about teaching and learning and create living educational theory (Whitehead, 2003). Cornbleth (2008) notes that when considering the growth of new teachers in relation to how they engage difference within schools and in society, not enough attention is paid to “what happens in practice in student teaching and beyond” (p. 9). By situating teacher educator, teacher, and elementary student thinking in relation to each other, we are not trying to

prove a causal connection, but instead consider how looking at student engagement and student work helps educators improve their teaching.

The two authors, a teacher educator and a kindergarten teacher, met in the Spring of 2010 in the context of an undergraduate education course focused on classroom teaching and learning. During the 2010-2011 school year we worked together in a Master of Arts in Teaching (M.A.T.) program, having frequent discussions and email exchanges about conversations occurring in Mr. Wacker's student teaching classroom—a kindergarten class. This year, during Mr. Wacker's first year of teaching kindergarten, we continued our collaboration and developed a workshop on gender and learning for M.A.T. candidates. Throughout the two-year collaboration we have intentionally written down students' remarks, documenting in writing the nature of conversations about gender identity and gender norms in the classroom. In writing this article we discussed each conversation in depth and shared our perspectives about the important moments in each conversation.

The social identities and unique biographies of each educator influence teacher actions (Nelson, 2009). Our collaboration continues to be influenced by our identities. Thus, here we share some facets of our identities and our experiences, with the understanding that our identities are not static, but always changing, and that identifying in a particular way is both helpful and problematic. Mr. Wacker is a straight man who played and coaches football. He is one of five male teachers out of the 40 teachers at the school (12.5%). The vast majority of elementary teachers are women; only 18% of elementary school teachers in the United States are men (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011). Amy is a teacher educator. She is a lesbian. She identifies as a woman, despite the fact that many people, both children and adults, regularly mistake her for a man.

Framework: Teacher Initiated Conversations and Responding to Children's Questions

As we have worked together to develop learning experiences to support young learners to discuss gender identity and norms, we have identified two ways to foster conversation and dialogue among students and between teacher and students. One strategy we have found productive is to use picture books or writing lessons to intentionally and purposefully open up dialogue about gender; we call this strategy teacher-initiated conversations. A second strategy involves being open in ongoing classroom dynamics and conversations to listen for, and authentically respond to, children's comments and queries about gender; we call this responding to children's spontaneous remarks.

Teacher-Initiated Conversations

Teachers can create an inclusive and safe environment for students by systematically and intentionally presenting diverse perspectives and experiences. Some educators suggest, "Teachers and schools need to talk explicitly about gender bullying and how to interrupt it" (Moss, 2007, p. 54). Teaching expressions like "You can't say that boys [girls] can't play" and "That's weird, being boys and girls doesn't matter here" (p. 53) can give students a language to use to challenge sexist remarks. Other educators advocate using "and" statements to help students respond to remarks that reinforce the gender binary and to stand up for who they are, and their activity choices. For example saying, "I'm a boy and a princess" (Riseman, 2009, p. 2). In our work, rather than teaching particular responses, we focus on initiating learning

conversations where students can share their thinking about their likes and interests and their perceptions of gender in the classroom and in society.

Picture books. Teachers can intentionally and purposefully raise gender identity as a topic of discussion through the use of picture books. Stover (1992) argues that youth should experience texts that “validate their own experience as young men or women, but also challenge that experience, perhaps showing them options of which they have been unaware” (pg. 94). Below is a transcript of a conversation sponsored by the book *10,000 Dresses* (Ewert & Ray, 2008).

Mr. Wacker: We're going to read a really special book today. I want everybody to have special attention while I'm reading. Let's make sure to remember the characters and beginning, middle, and end of the story (shows the cover of the book, which is orange and red and depicts a boy wearing a dress and smiling). The book we're reading is *10,000 Dresses*. What do you think the book is going to be about?

(One boy blurts out): He's gay.

Mr. Wacker: What do you mean by that? I know that word can mean a couple things.

Male student: Well, I mean....

A different Male student: It means you like boys.

(Other students respond with these descriptions of “gay”: lonely, sad, alone, weird, scary, nerd, stupid)

Mr. Wacker: Ya, you're right. It can also mean you're happy. Why do you think he's gay?

Male student: Because of the dresses.

Mr. Wacker: Ahhhh. I see, well let's read the book...

(After reading the story the students discussed whether or not they thought it would be okay for boys to make and wear dresses if they wanted to. Students had a range of perspectives, but the majority of the students felt it would be okay.)

Female student: It would be okay if it would make him happy.

Male student: It would make the boy sad if he wasn't allowed to wear dresses.

Three male students: Boys cannot not wear dresses!!

Male student: My dad told me boys can't wear dresses.

In this conversation students suggest that dresses are not appropriate clothing for boys and note that boys who wear dresses are gay, demonstrating how gender identity is used to make

assumptions about sexual orientation. One student also explicitly states how parents influence how young learners view gender norms, “My dad told me boys can’t wear dresses.” We wonder how the conversation came up between the boy and his father. Was there something on TV? Did he see a dress in a store that he liked? Did he want to wear a dress? We also notice that some students are reasoning in terms of individual happiness, “It would be okay if it would make him happy,” whereas other students are thinking about boy versus girl norms “Boys cannot wear dresses!!” The conversation allowed students to share their reasoning about individual happiness in relation to societal gender norms and to experience different points of view.

Writing. Another way teachers can initiate conversations about gender norms is to create writing lessons focused on the topic of gender norms in the classroom. “[C]hildren’s storytelling activity is embedded in the ongoing framework of their everyday group life—in the “real world” of their classroom mini-culture” (Nicolopoulou, Scales, & Weintraub, 1994, p.104-105). Dyson (1997) argues that, “diversity is a potential classroom resource for individual and collective growth” and that classroom conversation and writing can develop “newly imagined ways of depicting human relationships” (p.6). Below we describe a writing lesson focused on the different choices student make during free time. We then analyze three representative examples of student writing.

Mr Wacker: So, I was noticing during choice time some girls like to play with certain things in the classroom, while the boys play with different things. Are there things in the classroom that only boys and girls play with?

(Several hands go up, some students shout out “yes” or “no”)

Female student: Ya, girls only like Playdoh.

Male student: I play with the Playdoh during choice time too!

Mr. Wacker: Oh...so do only girls play with the Playdoh?

Female student: I don’t think so. No.

Mr. Wacker: Well, I always see a lot of boys playing with the trains. What do you think about the trains?

(Several boys agree with wiggles of excitement and hands in the air)

One female student shouts: I like the trains. I play trains with Marcos.

The discussion continued with the teacher and the students suggesting different activities and objects around the classroom. The majority of students agreed that there weren’t things only girls or boys played with during choice time. After this conversation students had twenty minutes to draw a picture related to the discussion and then write about “boy things” and “girl things” in the classroom.

We examined the writing of all sixteen students in the class. As we examined and analyzed the students' writing we noticed three different approaches to the writing prompt. Some children's writing emphasized that boys and girls like the same types of classroom activities, some children described activities at home, and some children shared things they like to do. We sorted the writing samples into these three categories and discussed each writing sample in detail. After discussing each writing sample in a group we selected one student's writing that we felt best represented the student work for that category. We wish we could have included all sixteen written responses in this paper. Below are representative writing samples we selected for each type of response the students wrote and our analysis of the written work.

Example 1: Boys and girls like the same activities. Responding to the given writing prompt, this student writes specifically about classroom spaces noting that both boys and girls use the writing center and play with blocks. She writes, "Every time I see BOYS like to play with the BloCS. And some of the GRILS Like to RRitine sentR AnD some ofof the Boys Come to the RRiDIneR sentr anD som GRils RPlay with the BloCS. ☺" Translation: "Every time I see boys like to play with the blocks. And some of the girls like to writing center and some of the boys come to the writing center and some girls play with the blocks. ☺"

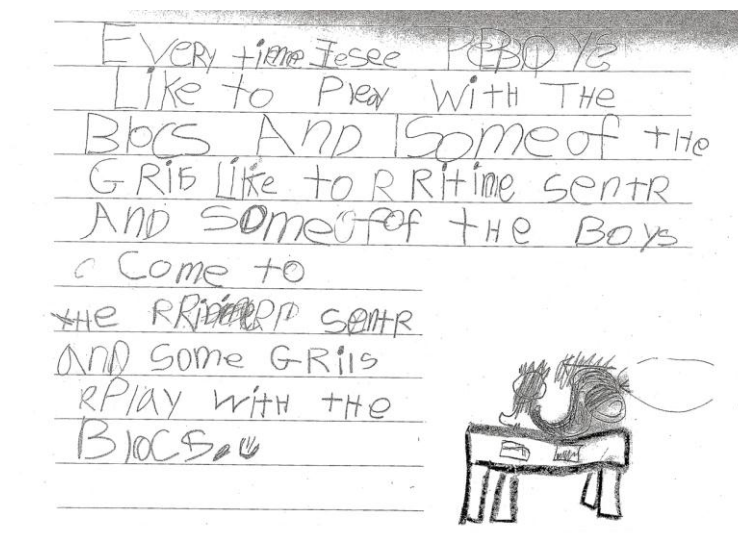


Figure 1. The Writing Center and blocks

She begins her writing with "Every time I see," suggesting that her observations of classroom experiences inform her thinking about what activities are acceptable for boys to do and what activities are acceptable for girls to do. In her drawing she represents herself with long stylish hair and bangs covering one eye, pulled up in a ponytail. In front of her on the table is a piece of paper with writing on the entire page. We notice that there is more detail in the drawing of the girl figure, particularly the hair. She also labels herself with her name (removed to protect student privacy). She has also drawn and scratched out a second arrow and figure with short hair. Is she identifying a mistake by crossing it out? Is she suggesting in her drawing that boys are not welcome at the writing center? She states that both boys and girls in the classroom choose the writing center and blocks during free time.

Example 2: Clothing gender norms at home and school. This student writes that her

father has a pink shirt that can be worn on a special occasion like Easter and that she has a “cute pink dress.” She writes, “MY DAD HAS A PINK Srte AND He’s GOING too wire it to EStr But I A CUte PINK DRESS. Mr. WACKer DoS Not HAVE A PINK Srte BeCUS I DID Not See it.” Translation: “My dad has a pink shirt and he’s going to wear it to Easter. But I [have] a cute pink dress. Mr. Wacker does not have a pink shirt because I did not see it.”

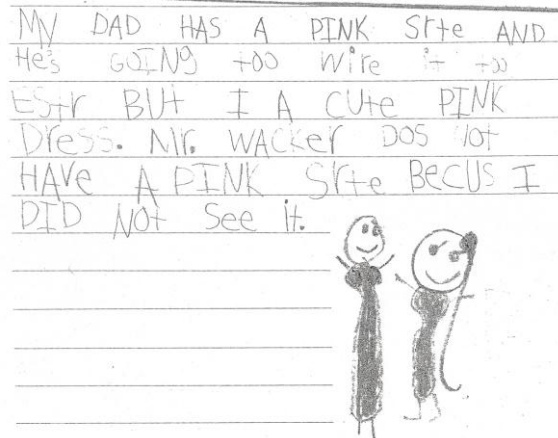


Figure 2. Dad and Mr. Wacker's shirts

She connects her observations about her dad's clothing to the classroom context by noting that she does not believe Mr. Wacker wears pink because she has never seen him in a pink shirt. This, like the example above, reminds us that students are constantly observing the people and things around them and searching for patterns of behavior. Her drawing shows two figures wearing dresses. One figure has eyelashes and long hair in a bun extended with a ponytail. Both figures have hourglass shaped frames suggesting a curvy female body. The second figure has no eyelashes, hair or feet. Maybe she did not finish her picture? Is the second figure another girl? A female adult? Her father in his pink shirt? Rather than focusing on choice time activities, she writes about the clothing of her teacher and her father connecting gender norms observed at school and at home.

Example 3: Describing activities they like. This student writes the chorus from the Justin Bieber song Love Me. She writes, “Ya Man, LOVeMeLOVeMeSAY YouLOVeM” Translation: “Ya man. Love me, love me, say you love me.”



Figure 3. Princesses, cheerleading, and Justin Bieber

This student primarily focuses on drawing rather than writing. She draws three female figures each wearing a three-pointed crown. Two of the figures are wearing high heels and dresses, suggesting curvy female bodies. One of the figures holds pompoms and is wearing a short skirt and T-shirt and has her mouth open cheering. All three figures have eyelashes and long hair that extends below the waist. Two have heart shaped lips. Her drawings reveal many normative female characteristics, such as long hair, wearing dresses, and long eyelashes. From this drawing we infer that the student is communicating she likes Justin Bieber's song, cheerleading, and princesses or queens. We wondered if we would look at this picture differently if a boy had drawn it.

Student drawing and writing helped us consider the range of ways that students see gender identity and gender norms in school and in society. All the writing samples were unique, but focused on gender, even if not directly addressing the writing prompt about gender norms during choice time in the classroom.

Responding to Children's Spontaneous Remarks

There are many missed opportunities in public school classrooms to engage young students thinking about identity as it naturally arises in conversation. Children's spontaneous questions and remarks, "if [we] do not shut them down by shushing or lecturing," are opportunities for us to learn more about how they view gender categories. Posing questions, like What do you think? "suspends certainty that there are clear answers" (Chang & Conrad, 2008). Katch and Katch (2010) argue that it is most important for teachers to listen carefully to what children say and pose questions to learn more about their thinking. Below we share two examples of how students spontaneously initiated the topic of gender identity in relation to teacher body movements and a classroom toy.

Teacher body movements and voice. We have found that moving, or speaking in a particular tone, that contrasts with how students perceive normative gender roles can invite students to raise questions about gender norms. Body movement, dress, and tone of voice are interpersonal symbols of gender identity (Wilchins, 2004). We agree that "...the teacher's body *is* pedagogy, that her students and others will perceive her in multiple ways that will fundamentally shape their learning experiences" (Jones & Hughes-Deactur, 2012).

Mr. Wacker is standing at the front of the room leading the morning calendar routine, as he moves across the front of the room he flicks his wrists, snaps his fingers, and jerks his neck.

Female student: You did a girl thing!

Mr. Wacker: What? What'd I do?

Female student: This! (Impersonating the wrist flicker and neck jerk)

Mr. Wacker: Oh...What about that makes it a girl thing to do?

Female student: I don't know!

Later in the morning routine, while singing Twinkle Twinkle Little Star

Mr. Wacker: How I wonder what you arrrrreeeee....

Female student laughing: You sing like a girl!

Mr. Wacker: Whaaa?! How do I sound like a girl? (Smiling)

Female student: You go like this (starts singing a tone while holding an arm in front of her)

Mr. Wacker: Ooohhhh I didn't know that. Well, am I a boy? I think I am.

Female student: Yes! (giggling)

Mr. Wacker: Okay, but I sing like a girl?

Female student: Yes.

In these conversations students notice body movements and tone of voice that seem in contradiction with the gender identity they have created for Mr. Wacker. We notice that students impersonate the body language or tone of voice and state confidently, "That's a girl thing." In questioning the binary framing of gender (e.g., boys have low voices and girls have high voices) students seem to accept that Mr. Wacker can move or sing like a girl, but still be male. Although these teacher expressions were unintentional and sponsored spontaneous commentary about perceived gender norms, we now realize that teachers can use body movements and tone of voice to intentionally raise a contradiction to sponsor student conversation.

Classroom resources. Classroom resources can also sponsor spontaneous remarks about gender identity. Below we share a conversation a student initiated in relation to fairy-princess puzzle pieces in the classroom. Two girls approached Mr. Wacker proudly with a green bin that contained puzzle pieces put together in the form of a cake. They removed one piece from the puzzle cake and handed it to him.



Figure 4. Classroom toy

Girls: This is for you Mr. Wacker!

Mr. Wacker: Oh my goodness! Thank you so much! What is it?

Girl #1: It's a cake! For her birthday (pointing to Girl #2) she is going to get a Cinderella cake with candles on it. But don't let any boys have it (with a smile on her face).

Mr. Wacker: Why not?

Both girls: Because it's a girl cake! A GIRL CAKE! (shoving the 'cake' very close in front of Mr. Wacker's face while pointing at the princess. Still smiling.)

Mr. Wacker: Well, why can I have it then? I'm a boy.

Girl #1: It's not for a little-kid boy.

Mr. Wacker: It's not for little-kid boys?

Girl #1: It's for big boy kids.

Mr. Wacker: Oh, so it's okay for big-kid boys to have this but not other boys? What about this makes it a girl thing?

(Girl #2 interrupts with the puzzle piece in hand): Because it's a princeesssss!

Girl #1: It's okay for big-kid boys to have this, but not little-kid boys. No little kid-boys.

Mr. Wacker (to girl #1): Hm. What is it about this cake that makes it a girl cake?

(Both girls run off towards the animals and dinosaurs.)

In this conversation two girls bring forward the topic of gender in relation to a classroom toy. In anticipation of one of their birthdays they see foam puzzle pieces as pieces of birthday cake. They distinguish between "little-kid boys" and "big-kid boys," asserting that boys in the classroom cannot have princess cake, but that Mr. Wacker, an adult, can have princess cake. The girls note that princess items are girl things. This conversation occurred in the flow of choice time, as the two girls envision a birthday party. The dialogue flows in the coming and going of interaction. Mr. Wacker joins the conversation by repeating what the girls say and inviting them to share more of their thinking. At the end of the conversation the two students run off to re-engage in classroom choice time activities. This is an important reminder that students may not take up our invitations to share more of their thinking and that these conversations are embedded in the broader social world of the classroom.

Identities "are relational; they are positionings; they are negotiated and renegotiated through social interactions" (Nelson, 2009, p. 103). We learn about whom we are and each other in ongoing social interactions. Showing interest in the gender-related comments, rather than being defensive or uncomfortable, invites students to openly talk about gender norms in the

classroom and society and helps students understand that gender identity is not a taboo topic.

Concluding Remarks

Colleagues have asked us, ‘Aren’t you afraid of what parents and families might say if they hear you are talking about gender with young children?’ Our response is that it is our responsibility to create a classroom climate of openness, to open up dialogue with students, to listen carefully to what young children have to say, and to respond naturally and authentically to their questions. In addition to teaching the mandated curriculum, an important aspect of our work as educators is helping students think about who they are, who they are becoming, and how they fit within the world around them. Teachers should not “shoehorn girls and boys into little pink and blue boxes,” but instead “see students as individuals and encourage them to stretch beyond stereotypes and discover a range of talents” (Rivers & Barnett, 2011, p. 160). As teachers we work to “envision gender in its relational interdependencies” (Weaver-Hightower, 2003, p. 489-490), to create curriculum and pedagogy to help ourselves and our students understand the categories of “male,” “female,” and “other” in complex and interrelated ways.

Students pose all kinds of questions daily. When they make spontaneous remarks or pose questions, teachers make choices about whether and how to respond. By ignoring students’ remarks about gender identity and gender norms educators may communicate that students cannot ask questions about the world around them, that they should keep their ideas to themselves, or that their ideas do not matter in the classroom.

As we have described, teachers can raise the topic of gender for discussion by using picture books or writing assignments, and teachers can invite students to bring forward the topic by engaging students’ spontaneous remarks about gender. When gender identity and gender norms are discussed in a way that is relevant to students and in a classroom climate of openness, students are supported to share and consider the complicated perspectives they themselves and their peers hold. Opening up the conversation gives students an opportunity to ask questions they didn’t think they could ask and to make comments when teacher actions are not perceived to be in line with binary gender norms. Teacher openness to conversations about gender supports students to talk about gender norms and to understand that gender is just one of many things in their everyday life that they can speak about in the classroom.

We are still learning how to foster dialogue about gender identity with young children. Although our work focuses on gender norms we believe that the framework we have developed can be used to engage a range of identity conversations, for example race, culture, sexual orientation, religious beliefs, political beliefs, and disability status. We believe that “we must charge education with the important task of crafting a generous and open language to address the infinite ways people may choose to live in their bodies and in relation to others” (Gilbert, 2006). As we continue our collaboration the following questions focus or exploration:

- How do we begin to raise the importance of discussing gender identity and norms with other teacher educators and teachers in a climate of curriculum and test score accountability?
- How can we, and students, become more intentional in challenging how language reinforces gender norms (e.g., congressman, mailman)?

- How does a teacher's identity impact the perspectives about gender identity that the teacher feels comfortable voicing?
- How do we begin to address the hidden fear amongst some educators about talking about gender identity with young children?

We and our students live in a complicated world where we engage in an ongoing search for meaning about ourselves, others, and the world around us. Children will ask questions about gender identity and norms whether we invite them to or not. Our openness to their questions expands the possibilities of inquiry for children and adults about the centrality of gender identity in shaping life experiences.

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