Exploring Children's Experiences of Gender and Heteronormative Disruptive Texts in Early

Years Classrooms

by

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Abstract

Early years classrooms are sites where children (re)create normative gender and heteronormative discourses. Research demonstrates that teachers can disrupt and broaden children's understanding of normative discourses through read-aloud sessions with particular kinds of children's literature. As a teacher-researcher, I conducted a four-week case study in my grade two classroom using poststructural feminism and queer theory as theoretical lenses to explore the ways in which the children experienced and understood literature that challenged the dominant discourses of gender and/or heteronormativity. The findings illustrate the ways in which the children misunderstood the text's disruptive messaging, rejected the text's disruptive messaging, and accepted the text's disruptive messaging. In addition, the findings reveal the importance of explicit teaching to support the children in attending to and interpreting the discursive disruptions. The research demonstrates that teachers need to enlist a critical analysis of potential texts to use with young children, and to this end, I have compiled a list of 13 indicators to support teachers' in selecting disruptive texts.

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Thank you to all the participating children in this study. Thank you for your eagerness and openness in listening to and talking about the stories we read. Your experiences are important and will help many children be themselves and help others to be their friends.

Thank you to my school division, administrator, colleagues, and friends for supporting this study. I am proud to work in such a welcoming division with passionate colleagues and friends. I am also fortunate to be part of a divisional queer committee and I thank them for sharing their experiences and knowledge.

I come from a long line of strong women and so this thesis is a milestone in my journey of honouring their footsteps. My mom always challenged my sister and I at the dinner table to consider others' experiences and perspectives—educating us beyond the days' discriminatory news clips. Both my parents valued education, and my mom defied the stifling gender norms of her time to return to school and enter the paid workforce when we were young. Thank you to both my parents for instilling a passion for kindness and equity, and for their love and support.

I owe a tremendous amount of gratitude to my wife. She too is a passionate advocate for equity and even though her life was impacted by the years it took to complete this thesis, she fully encouraged and supported me in this journey. Thank you for always keeping me grounded.

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The Study's Context

It is now four decades since Robert Munsch (1980) wrote his ground-breaking gender role reversal book, *The Paper Bag Princess*. This story is about a princess named Elizabeth who was set to marry a prince named Ronald. They were going to live happily ever after in married bliss. In this tale however, a fiery dragon burns Princess Elizabeth's castle and captures prince Ronald. Elizabeth is furious, and rather than the prince saving the day, it is the princess who comes to the rescue. She resourcefully scrounges up a paper bag to cover her body and goes on a quest to free Ronald. Elizabeth outsmarts the dragon and succeeds in freeing the prince. Rather than being grateful, Ronald criticizes Elizabeth for her disheveled look and demands she return to him only once she has cleaned herself up. Elizabeth calls him a bum, breaks off their engagement, and the story ends with her gleefully skipping alone towards the sunset.

Davies (2003) chose Munsch's (1980) story as one of the texts to read to the 4 and 5-year-old children in her landmark study. Her findings were remarkable in that they revealed how the children called upon their existing experiences and understandings of gender to make sense of the characters' worth, actions, and the narrative. The boys predominantly shunned Elizabeth for her nakedness and positioned Ronald as the main character of the story. The girls had varying interpretations of the characters and the storyline; some thought she was brave, kind, and/or smart. Some thought as the boys and rejected her for her nakedness and uncleanliness. Not all the girls thought she should have cleaned herself up and married the prince in the end. It is these varying interpretations of the same story that give hope to those wishing to disrupt children's identity constructions. Davies (2003) concluded by stating:

> It would seem, then, that it is possible to shift the metaphors through which narratives are
>
> constructed, and to provide alternative relations of power and desire, and at the same time

to relate these shifting images to the narrative structures that the children already

understand. (p. 71-72)

Davies' findings offer hope for a more gender equitable society. Yet, in the more than three

decades since her study, women continue to experience unequal career access and success, and

the discourse of a "good mother" continues to relegate women to the role of primary caregiver in

the home and in society. The traditional gender binary roles of women and men continue to

pervade early years classrooms as well. The idyllic gender constructs are present in the

discourses of curriculum, pedagogy, and practices. The very space of early years classrooms, one

of the few domains women were granted access to work because it was equated to the nurturing

role of motherhood, continues to be overrepresented by women. Early years teachers remain

shackled by the nurturer narrative.

The literature available to teachers to use in their classrooms often mirrors the

dichotomous gender division as well and reifies the harmful gender discourses (Berry & Wilkins,

2017; Casey et al., 2021; Clark et al., 2013; Filipović, 2018; Gritter et al., 2017; McCabe et al.,

2011). Normative gender discourses matter as recent studies of bullying in middle years schools

reveal the pernicious influence that gender norms wield in children's lives. Bullying is not only

about a child's victimization for their gendered expressions and behaviours outside the norms of

masculinity and femininity, but it is also how these discourses are the motivation and license for

the perpetrator's actions (Rosen & Nofziger, 2018). The hegemonic discourse of masculinity and

its expectations that boys and men are strong, aggressive, and physical sanctions young boys to

bully others. Mishna et al. (2020) argue that not only was boys' roles in bullying condoned but it

was, in essence, made invisible by the gender discourses. Boys' aggression, physicality, and

demeaning behaviour towards others was excused under the mantra of boys will be boys. Even at

the young ages of 9 and 10, students engaged in victim shaming as they held girls accountable

for boys' harassment towards them. Mishna et al. found that both boys and girls were unaware

they were upholding normative gender discourses when they were asked how boys and girls

bully others and react as victims of bullying. The children's gendered understanding of bullying

was that boys are physical when they bully, and when they are the victims, they are more

nonchalant in their reactions because they are tougher. Girls however were assumed to engage in

more emotional bullying and that as victims, were dramatic in their reactions as it was suggested

that girls like the attention. Mishna et al. argue that bullying spurred from the gender discourses

has far-reaching consequences for both the victim and perpetrator in later life if it is not properly

addressed in the early years. Mishna et al. state that, "Adult acceptance of such behaviors may

contribute to a culture that perpetuates gender inequality and promotes gendered violence and

sexualized aggression as children continue into adolescence and adulthood" (p. 417). Adult

acceptance of bullying has many forms ranging from ignorance of bullying behaviour, to

ignoring the behaviour, to victim blaming. Mishna et al. conclude that educators must support

children in recognizing and disrupting the gendered discourses and to understand the fabricated

artificiality of the discourses.

Wharton (2005) also discusses the role and influence of educators in children's lives. In

her findings of the prevalence of gendered and heteronormative discourses in early years novels,

Wharton posits that while texts yield influence for children's identity constructs, classroom

teachers are also influential in promoting and/or disrupting normative discourses. Wharton

(2005) argues:

Although children are active readers of text, bringing to it their knowledge and

experience of other discourses and other social realities, the process of reading with

adults can lend weighty authority to the social representations offered by the text. (p. 239)

The social representations Wharton refers to are the Western discursive ideals of a family—a

white, middle class, Christian, cisgender, heterosexual married couple with children conceived

through wedlock. These idealized social constructs are not only reified through the text's

storyline and illustrations, but also through the classroom teacher by virtue of the power

embedded in the teacher-student, adult-child relationship which further validates the author's

biases and understanding of society.

Dhillon (2011), in her study of homeless girls and young women in Canada, concluded

from the narratives of her participants how the normative identity discourses prevalent in the

educational system were ostracizing for them:

A third theme that consistently surfaced was that of the middle-class construction of the

public education system and the ways in which these young women's status as homeless

or "living in poverty" served to alienate them from the conventional practices of

schooling. (p. 123)

Educators' pedagogy and practices matter. Their literature selection matters. Children need to see

themselves in the books their teachers read. Dhillon argues education systems need to account

for the ostracization the girls in her study suffered at school which is "directly linked to the

social axes of race, gender, ethnicity, ability, citizenship, and sexual orientation" (2011, p. 111).

Wharton (2005) posits that "the way that gender is portrayed in schoolbooks may be less

important than the ways in which teachers and parents use these books with children" (p. 249).

Therefore, the literature choices that teachers make, the ways in which teachers share the texts,

and the ways in which children interact with and make sense of the literature are crucially

important.

My passion is for a gender equal society. Unpacking that dream gives me pause, as

Dhillon (2011) concluded how the girls and women in her study were discriminated against not

only by their gender. The gender discourse is not an island unto itself, nor is its disruption or the

dissolution of its binary befitting to everyone. While poststructural feminists theorize the

disruption of the dominant gender discourses, transgender scholars argue that some members of

the transgender community strongly identify with the idealized discourses of femininity or

masculinity. Nagoshi and Brzuzy (2010) argue that, "Questioning and destabilizing all social

identities disintegrates the individual's sense of core self within a socially oppressed group, even

though such an identity can be the basis for personal empowerment and empowerment to oppose

social oppression" (p. 432). I strive towards creating disruptions to normalized gender discourses

so that children construct a more fluid understanding of gender and sexuality. This positionality

is more aligned with drag theory where drag artists stylize and adorn their bodies to engage in

satirical performances which disrupt the identity constructs of gender and sexuality. Keenan and

Miss Hot Mess (2020) state: "Gender fluidity is a key component of drag. Rather than thinking

in binary terms, however, we position drag as a highly stylized series of twists and turns, ranging

from the satirical to the sincere" (p. 447). Drag theorists are also not alone in theorizing sexual

identity. Queer theorists have studied and written extensively about sexual identity.

Queer theorists like Warner (1991) and Seidman (as cited in Marchia & Sommer, 2019)

also challenge the societal constructs of sexuality, but unlike drag theorists, Warner and Seidman

seek to disrupt the sexuality binary where heterosexuals and heterosexuality are valued and

deemed normal, at the expense and oppression of homosexuals and homosexuality. Marchia and

Sommer summarize Seidman's definition of heteronormativity as a system of societal norms

which reinforce "the dominant hetero/homo sexual code of hierarchy, normalization, and

exclusion" (2019, p. 274). The magnitude and pervasiveness of assumed heterosexuality is

articulated by Warner (1991):

> Because the logic of the sexual order is so deeply embedded by now in an indescribably
>
> wide range of social institutions, and is embedded in the most standard accounts of the
>
> world, queer struggles aim not just at toleration or equal status but at challenging those
>
> institutions and accounts. The dawning realisation that themes of homophobia and
>
> heterosexism may be read in almost any document of our culture means that we are only
>
> beginning to have an idea of how widespread those institutions and accounts are. (p. 6)

Much societal progress and acceptance of queer folk has been made in Canada since Warner

wrote these words: the Two-Spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and/or questioning,

and intersex (2SLGBTQI) community has reclaimed the word queer; gays, lesbians, and

transgender people have had their rights protected in the Canadian Charter of Rights; same-sex

marriage is legal; conversion theory has been banned in Canada; and Canadian provinces can

now issue non-binary birth certificates. Yet, queer students continue to be disproportionately

harassed, bullied, threatened, and physically harmed in Canadian schools. The educational

institution remains saturated with and stagnated in heteronormativity. Egale's (2022) most recent

survey of queer students' schooling experiences—grades eight to 12, reveal that "62% of

2SLGBTQ respondents feel unsafe at school, compared to 11% of cisgender heterosexual

students" (p. 5). The lives of queer students have not improved since Egale's first school climate

study over ten years ago. Egale qualifies their 2022 findings as, "…deeply troubling.

Homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia remain rampant in Canadian schools" (p. 3). The

curriculum, pedagogy, and practices within the institution of education continue to reify heteronormativity.

Theorists such as Butler (2006) also argue that idealized gender identities are framed within and constructed and reified through heterosexuality. Butler posits that the social constructs of gender, sexuality, and desire are intricately woven and are "prescribed" and "proscribed" (Morgenroth & Ryan, 2018, p. 3) by "phallogocentrism" and "compulsory heterosexuality" (Butler, 2006, pp. 43-44). As Butler states:

> In other words, the "unity" of gender is the effect of a regulatory practice that seeks to render gender identity uniform through a compulsory heterosexuality. The force of this practice is, through an exclusionary apparatus of production, to restrict the relative meanings of "heterosexuality," "homosexuality," and "bisexuality" as well as the subversive sites of their convergence and resignification. That the power regimes of heterosexism and phallogocentrism seek to augment themselves through a constant repetition of their logic, their metaphysic, and their naturalized ontologies does not imply that repetition itself ought to be stopped—as if it could be. (pp. 43-44)

Butler, like Warner (1991) and Seidman (as cited in Marchia & Sommer, 2019) theorize like Foucault (1990) that there is a valued, socially constructed identity which comes at the expense of, and the oppression and devaluing of, an opposing, socially constructed identity. Those in the valued category maintain their status through social forces such as norms and power regimes. Warner and Seidman are queer theorists, and Foucault's work was influential to queer theorists as well as to poststructural feminists such as Davies (2003). Butler differs from Warner, Seidman, and Foucault as they (Butler's proper pronoun) theorized on the social identity construct of gender as well as sexuality, whereas Foucault, and Warner and Seidman theorized

on sexual identity. Butler is sometimes identified as a queer theorist and as a poststructural feminist in the literature. Therefore, this study was designed, and the data analyzed through a poststructural feminist and queer theorist lens. This study will explore children's experiences related to and understandings of gender and heterosexuality disruptive texts in early years classrooms. I aimed to disrupt early years children's construction of normative gender and sexuality identities, with the goal of inviting more fluid understandings of these identities. Throughout this thesis, I will employ Egale's (2022) 2SLGBTQI acronym as representative of the queer community when authoring my own arguments and findings. When referencing the arguments and findings of others, I will respect the acronym written in their body of work.

Purpose of Study and Research Questions

The purpose of this research was to explore the ways in which early years children experience and understand dominant discourses of gender and/or heterosexuality through the use of disruptive literature and the ways in which literature might disrupt these dominant discourses. Yeoman (1999) explains disruptive texts as "texts that challenge and go beyond conventional and limiting traditional storylines about race, gender, and class through presenting unexpected characterisations, plots, outcomes or details—for example, feminist fairy tales, or stories where the protagonists belong to visible minorities" (p. 427). The princess in Munsch's (1980) *The Paper Bag Princess* is an unexpected characterization of a princess because the traditional princess role in children's literature is that of a damsel in distress. I used disruptive texts to engage children in challenging dominant gender norms and heterosexuality with the aim of supporting more fluid understandings of gender and sexuality. I invited my class of grade two children to experience gender disruptive and/or heteronormative disruptive texts mostly through read-alouds. The literature chosen was based on a critical analysis of criteria of disruptive

literature from studies by Larsen et al. (2018), Davies (2003), Earles (2017), Bartholomaeus (2016), Yeoman (1999), Wason-Ellam (1997), Kuykendal and Sturm (2007), and Ryan et al. (2013). (See Appendix A for the selection criteria for the gender and heteronormative disruptive texts. This will be described in more detail in the methodology section).

In addition to reading the texts aloud, I invited the children to critically reflect on the stories during whole class discussions as well as follow-up learning activities. Aside from documenting the children's experiences and understandings of gender and sexuality through the disruptive texts, I also aimed to inform my own and other teachers' practices about the power of disruptive literature, and how we might best use disruptive literature with children to foster conversations that challenge the dominant gender and heterosexuality discourses. Therefore, my research questions were: 1) in what ways do disruptive texts engage children in challenging dominant gender norms and heterosexuality, and support a more fluid understanding of gender and sexuality?; and 2) in what ways can students' experiences and understandings of disruptive texts inform teachers in choosing literature and fostering conversations that challenge the dominant gender and heterosexuality discourses and support a more fluid understanding of gender and sexuality? Teachers have opportunities to challenge the discursive binary identity constructions of the characters in children's literature and their overt and/or implied heterosexuality through the introduction of disruptive literature. This research aims to inform the ways in which teachers can support children in understanding how they are, in whatever small way, like a gender disruptive character—cracking open the door ever so slightly to a kinship, an empathy for difference, or a broader understanding of theirs and other's gendered identities.

Contribution of Research

This study will further enrich the existing literature of how children understand,

(re)create, and/or challenge the dominant gender and heterosexuality discourses. It is a unique

study in that the compilation of gender and/or heterosexuality disruptive texts has been selected

based on a set of critical criteria that I developed based on a synthesis of existing feminist,

poststructural feminist, queer theorist, and transgender research. My role as a teacher-researcher

allowed me time and opportunity to support the children's learning and critiquing of gender

norms and heteronormativity. I was a teacher teaching—and not simply a researcher observing.

The study and findings are of pedagogical and practical use for early years teachers in that it will

provide critical criteria for selecting literature and provide insights into the ways in which

children experience and understand these disruptive texts.

Theoretical Framework

This study aimed to better understand children's experiences as they interacted with the

purposeful disruptions introduced through literature that challenged dominant gender and

sexuality discourses. The epistemology of both poststructural feminism and queer theory

supported the construction of this study and the interpretation of the data. Both theories posit

identity as social discursive constructions. They both seek "to analyze, critique, and reveal

normativity itself" (Cannon et al., 2015, p. 673). Poststructural feminists seek to deconstruct and

challenge the idealized masculinities and femininities which serve to value men and suppress

women. Queer theorists seek to challenge the discursive positioning of heterosexuality as natural

and its binary opposite homosexuality as deviant. Further commonalities between poststructural

feminism and queer theory are that they both argue that adults and children have agency in

positioning themselves, to some extent, within the dominant identity discourses. This agency

offers opportunities for a more fluid understanding of being within the discursive binaries. Both

theories draw upon the work of Foucault, and poststructuralism was influential in the inception

of queer theory (Namaste, 1994). Poststructural feminists argue that the discourse of gender is

the dominant categorizer of society while queer theorists posit that heteronormativity categorizes

society. A brief discussion of each theory follows, further elaborating their arguments on identity

construction, challenges to normativity, and views of agency. I will conclude with a discussion

of the construct of child and childhood and draw upon a study by Blaise (2009) to elaborate how

poststructural feminism and queer theory can interpret children's negotiations within, and

constructions of, the gender and heteronormativity discourses.

Poststructural Feminism

Poststructuralists posit that there are no universal truths. We are able to understand our

everyday experiences and surroundings through language. We bring those experiences and

understandings to life through language. However, language is not neutral. Coward and Ellis (as

cited in Gavey, 1989) argue that, "common language is not innocent and neutral, but riddled with

the presuppositions of Western metaphysics" (p. 463). For example, the presuppositions of a girl

are that she is polite, respectful, tidy, well-groomed, and caring. The presuppositions of a boy are

that he is rough, unkempt, boisterous, strong, and independent. Presuppositions are understood

by poststructuralists as discourses. Discourses "are complex interconnected webs of being,

thinking, and acting" (Gannon & Davies, 2012, p. 12). Discourses structure our society and

communicate what is natural, normal, and permitted, as well as what is unnatural, abnormal, and

not permitted. Discourses are also called "regimes of truth" (Gannon & Davies, p. 13) as they

wield power in their ability to decree what thoughts, needs, behaviours, and actions are socially

sanctioned, and which are not. Blaise (2009) argues that the "body of ideas, concepts, or beliefs

that become established" in the discourses become "the truth" (p. 455). Foucault (1980) argued

that truth "is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. Each society has its regime

of truth,…the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true" (p. 131). Foucault

(1980) posits that not only do the discourses restrict and define knowledge—thus exerting

power—but that knowledge of the discourses within our social interactions creates positions of

authority or power. Foucault (1980) states that, "Now I have been trying to make visible the

constant articulation I think there is of power on knowledge and of knowledge on power" (p. 51).

Power and knowledge are interrelated. Power is generated within our social interactions and

through the limits and restrictions defined in the discourses. Gannon and Davies (2012) qualify

this power as "capillary" (p. 14), as it is a power which circulates through us and the discourses.

Identity. The discourses of masculinity and femininity define and restrict the "truths" of

gender. Poststructuralists eschew the gender discourses and theorize that there is no one true

gender identity or core being. One's gender or sexual identity are not presupposed from their sex,

as prescribed in the dominant gender discourse. Poststructuralists argue that subjects are

continually in a "process of subjectification, in which one is subjected to available regimes of

truth and regulatory frameworks" (Gannon & Davies, 2012, p. 13). In our daily interactions with

systems and others, we consciously and subconsciously react to messaging, positioning ourselves

within the discourses to continually construct our identity. We, in fact, have some agency to

position ourselves or subjectify ourselves within the powerful normative messaging of the

discourses.

Disruption. Poststructural feminists argue that gender is the overarching categorizer of

society. Their theorizing strives to identify and challenge discursive regimes of truth about

gender. Gavey (1989) posits: "For feminist post-structuralism, goals of scholarship would

include developing understandings or theories that are historically, socially, and culturally

specific, and that are explicitly related to changing oppressive gender relations" (p. 463). The

discursive ideal of hegemonic masculinity continues to subordinate the discursive gender ideal of

docile femininity. It is these (re)constructed ideals that poststructural feminists strive to disrupt.

As poststructuralists assert, "all meaning and knowledge are constituted through language, and

that language is the key to how we create meaning as socially constructed individuals" therefore,

as "meaning is created through language, then it is neither fixed nor essential" (Blaise, 2009, p.

455). As language changes, there becomes the possibility for the social constructs of identity to

change.

   Agency. Our agency to position ourselves within the discourses enables us to resist, if

even just a little bit, their culturally and timely constructed messaging. Within social interactions

we have agency to adopt, adapt, or submit to discursive identity constraints. There are also

visible "cracks and fissures" within "the dominant discourses" (Gannon & Davies, 2012, p. 12)

that offer a way in to disrupt their messaging. These inconsistencies in the discourses, coupled

with our agency in positioning ourselves within their messaging, are what poststructural

feminists argue are the possibilities for their disruption and reconstruction. An example of a

crack or fissure is how two heterosexual women can both identify as feminists yet when one

woman married, she retained her surname while the other took her male partner's surname. It is

these little inconsistencies in discourses that invite possibilities for their disruption and

reconstruction.

Queer Theory

   Queer theory is not a theory about gays or lesbians, rather, it is a theory about identities,

or what Watson (2005) refers to as "categories" (p. 67). Queer theorists sought to question how

one identity, or category of people, became socially valued at the expense and oppression of

another. Queer theorists questioned how and what societal structures perpetuated the categories

of normal, such as heterosexuality, in opposition to abnormal, or homosexuality, and what the

defining limits of those categories were. Hall (as cited in Watson, 2005) succinctly summarizes

queer theory as: "The project of queer has been to disrupt, to render unnatural and strange, texts

and practices that are naturalised and neutralised; i.e., taken-for granted" (p. 74). Queer theorists

challenge the societal structures and norms which categorize some people as normal and others

as abnormal; and initially focused their theorizing on sexual identity.

Foucault's theories of discourse were foundational for poststructural feminism. In turn,

queer theorists looked to poststructural feminism's theories of discursive identity constructs and

theorized how sexual identities were socially constructed into a binarized value system. Foucault

(1990) wrote extensively on the discursive construct of sexuality by tracing its historical

discursive production and how sexual activity outside of the heterosexual marital bed became the

norm of abnormality and a "truth" of deficiency by virtue of the churches, the medical

profession, the scientific community, and the penal system in the late eighteenth century. The

church's requirement for confession of sin categorized and internalized proper and improper sex

acts and sexuality. The medical profession, too, began to enquire into sexual practices and began

to pathologize sex outside heterosexuality. The penal system began criminalizing what the

priests, doctors, and scientists defined as aberrant sexual behaviour. It is this socially constructed

categorization of normal and abnormal, sanctioned and punishable, that is of concern in queer

theory.

Identity. Queer theorists argue identities are constructed through our lived experiences

and are framed within cultural norms. They posit that sexual identity is a social construct, built

within a culturally sanctioned framework of expectations and transgressions which uphold a

binarized valuation system. Unlike Warner (1991) and Seidman (as cited in Marchia & Sommer,

2019) who theorized societal valuing of sexual identity, Butler (2006) theorized the relationship

between the socially constructed discourses of sexuality, gender, and desire. Like Foucault,

Butler (2006) focused on the "specific formation of power" of the "institutions, practices," and

"discourses" (p. xxxi) which created a binary categorization of society. While Foucault theorized

on sexuality, Butler foregrounded the institutions of "phallogocentrism and compulsory

heterosexuality" to "expose the foundational categories of sex, gender, and desire" (p. xxxi).

Compulsory heterosexuality and the discursive requirement for unity, or "coherence" between

one's sex, gender, and desire is presented in Butler's heterosexual matrix (Butler, 2006).

Coherence of identity is when one's sex, gender, and desires align into an "intelligible gender"

(Butler, p. 23). The intelligible gender of male enforced by compulsory heterosexuality is thus

when a man's sexual organs signify his sex as male, his bodily presentation or expression of

gender is masculine, and his sexual desires are directed towards the opposite sex. This

intelligible masculine gender, and the binarized opposing intelligible feminine gender, through

their socially constructed, and rewarding and repressive discourses, produce these gender

constructions as a natural, core, true identity.

　　　　Butler (2006) argues that the very category of sex is socially constructed through the

gender discourse. Butler states that, "The production of sex as the prediscursive ought to be

understood as the effect of the apparatus of cultural construction designated by gender" (p. 10).

In identifying a baby's sex at birth by the appearance or lack of a penis requires the medical

professionals to call upon the constructed discourses of gender—boy and girl—to identify the

baby's sex as male or female. Butler argues that cultural and political forces require the

male/female sex binary be upheld to sustain heterosexuality and subjugate homosexuality. While

gender decrees the binarized construct of sex, gender itself to Butler is a continual performance.

Butler was inspired by drag culture, specifically, drag queens' highly stylized representations of

femininity. Butler reflected on the dichotomy between the drag queen's male sex and the

feminine gender the drag queen was presenting. Butler identified and theorized through the drag

queens that gender was a performance. We all continually perform gender throughout our lives

through our clothing choices, our behaviours, and our mannerisms. Butler (2006) explains that,

"Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid

regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort

of being" (p. 45). Unlike drag queens who perform gender to critique the socially constructed

identities which cast them as being an unintelligible gender, incoherent, and/or Other, those with

an intelligible gender—with coherence of identity—perform their gender to the idealized

standards set out in the gender discourse. Butler explains, "In other words, acts and gestures,

articulated and enacted desires create the illusion of an interior and organizing gender core, an

illusion discursively maintained for the purposes of the regulation of sexuality within the

obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality" (pp. 185-186). The truth of an inner core

being, the truth of gender is, therefore, "only produced as the truth effects of a discourse of

primary and stable identity" (Butler, 2006, p. 186). Sex and gender are constructs; their

innateness and naturalness are crafted truths upheld by social and political forces to ensure the

supremacy of heterosexuality. These constructs can therefore be challenged and disrupted.

Disruption and Agency. Butler (2006) argues that when the compulsory heterosexuality

that gender identity is built upon is exposed, the regulatory forces which produce and uphold

compulsory heterosexuality are weakened. Butler states:

When the disorganization and disaggregation of the field of bodies disrupt the regulatory

fiction of heterosexual coherence, it seems that the expressive model loses its descriptive

force. That regulatory ideal is then exposed as a norm and a fiction that disguises itself as

a developmental law regulating the sexual field that is purports to describe. (p. 185)

Butler argues that drag performers, gays, lesbians, and bisexuals challenge and weaken the ideal

constructs of sex, gender, and desire which together uphold the heterosexual matrix. Renold

(2006) referred to Butler's heterosexual matrix to analyze 10 and 11-year-old children's gender

and sexuality construction in a classroom. She learned the many ways children subverted the

school's pervasive positioning of opposite-sex parings as romantically motivated. Renold

observed how some boys successfully shunned the expectation to be romantically paired with a

girl by saying they were only interested in older girls who studied at another school. One boy

was able to be platonic friends with a girl for a bit of time under the guise of the norm of being

romantically paired with her. Renold concluded that, "the heterosexual matrix is malleable and

open to rearticulation" (p. 494). The children in Renold's and Davies' (2003) studies were aware

of and navigating the dominant identity discourses, and they were constructing their identities

and enforcing the boundaries of the discourses.

        In what follows, I will discuss Foucault's theories of childhood and children, and the

interpretation of those constructs in queer theory and poststructural feminism. I will draw upon

Blaise's (2009) study of young children to present how the children's gender and sexual identity

constructions are analyzed through queer theory and poststructural feminism.

The Constructs of Children and Childhood

        Foucault spoke of children in a 1966 radio broadcast which was translated and published

into English in 1986 (Philo, 2011). The radio panel was assembled to discuss concerns that

"French (and indeed Western) society was coming to view 'childhood' and 'sexuality' as in effect wholly distinct categories that never should be allowed to mix" (Philo, 2011, p. 124). Foucault argued that children have a sexuality onto their own which adults are forbidden from, and that the boundaries to this sexuality should be honoured and safeguarded, stating that:

> This sexuality of the child is a territory with its own geography that the adult must not enter. It is virgin territory, sexual territory, of course, but territory that must preserve its virginity. The adult will therefore intervene as a guarantor of that specificity of child sexuality in order to protect it. (Foucault, as cited in Philo, 2011, p. 124)

While Foucault restricts his theorizing here to the acts of sexuality, poststructuralists and queer theorists such as Butler have shifted from Foucault's more erotic-centric theorizing and framed children's sexuality within the institutional discourses of heterosexuality. Renold (2006) argues that in framing heterosexuality as a social and political institution, it has foregrounded childhood sexuality as an "everyday practice" where children's identity work can be researched. Queer theorists and poststructural feminists argue that young children are actively engaged in creating their sexual identity. Heteronormativity, with its belief of childhood innocence, is what suppresses and renders abnormal, adults' ability to view young children as negotiating their sexual identity. Surtees (2005) argues, "Permeated by heteronormative assumptions, I argue that the code serves to regulate sexuality talk in ways that work against the teachers' best intentions through the maintenance of prevailing, narrow views of children and childhood" (p. 22). The prevailing views of childhood that Surtees refer to are those of innocence, and of a natural, lineal development of children. Taylor and Richardson (2005) posit that the view of a child as innocent and in need of protection stems from Rousseau's writings in the 18th century and are furthered by Froebel's work that same century. The view of childhood as a natural, lineal progression along

milestones stemmed from the work of Piaget. Piaget's scientific, biological view as understood

in the realms of sex, gender, and sexuality is aptly summarized by Blaise (2009). She argues that

the heteronormative view of children is, "children are first born with a sex, then learn their

gender; and finally become sexual" (p. 452). With respect to a child's sexual identity, she writes

that the heteronormative belief is that this is triggered during puberty. The dominant

heteronormative discourse thus ensures that young children are seen as asexual and that there is

no place or need for early years teachers to address a child's sexual identity. Davies' (2003)

seminal study of preschool children challenged the heteronormative discourse, and she

documented how children were performing gender and enforcing the dominant gender discourses

through their play.

Poststructural Feminist and Queer Theorizing of Young Children

The findings of Blaise's (2009) study of 5 and 6-year-old children in a kindergarten

classroom also challenged the discourse of childhood innocence. Blaise analyzed an interplay

between three students through a poststructural feminist and queer theorist framework. I will

paraphrase the children's interactions and Blaise's analysis of them as her arguments

demonstrate how young children are aware of the gender and heterosexual discourses and the

agency they embodied within the interaction. Blaise documented how a girl named Mary was

singing Christina Aguilera's (1999) song entitled, "What a Girl Wants," to two classmates

named Maggie and Felipe. The lyrics Blaise documented Mary singing were, "What a girl wants,

what a girl needs… yea, yea, yea, one, two, one, two three…What a girl wants, what a girl needs,

is bea:::u:::ty beyond belief" (Blaise, 2009, p. 450). As Mary was singing, she was also dancing,

and Maggie and Felipe were cheering her on. The discourse of childhood innocence would

require teachers to ask Mary to stop singing, believing that it is an inappropriate song for

kindergarten children to be listening to and that their innocence must be protected. Or, as also set out by the discourse of childhood innocence, teachers might ignore the performance by justifying their decision on the belief that the children were too young to know what the song was really about. This inaction would also be consistent with the discourse of the child as asexual. Blaise however recognized how the children were calling upon and constructing their knowledge of ideal gender norms and heteronormativity in their actions and dialogue. When Blaise asked the children and their classmates what the song was about, they explained it was about a girl who wanted many boyfriends. The children stressed the importance of girls having boyfriends and how girls had to be pretty to have a boyfriend. The children spoke of the need for girls to have nice clothes and pretty hair to attract boys. Felipe and Mary spoke of the need for girls to be sexy to attract boys. Through the children's talk, it is clear they are versed on the discourse of idealized femininity in maintaining that girls need to be pretty and sexy, and they are knowledgeable of the heterosexual discourse when they stress that all girls need and/or want boyfriends. During the conversation, Blaise noticed how Foucault's theory of knowledge and power was realized in the children's interactions. The children who had knowledge of the gender and heterosexual discourses had power when they spoke as the other children sat and listened. There was one child named Elena who had a different experience with the gender and heterosexuality discourses as she spoke of her aunt who was pretty but did not have or want a boyfriend. Elena's comments challenged the discursive constructs her classmates were upholding, and Blaise recognized Elana's valuing of a different femininity demonstrated how a gap in the identity discourses gave Elena agency. Blaise's analysis through poststructuralist and queer theorist thought demonstrate how gender constructs and heteronormativity are part of young children's experiences and of early years classrooms.

Positionality

Tien's (2019) work reminds me to stay true to the poststructuralist and queer theorist

theoretical frameworks of my study in reflecting on my positionality. Tien argues that when

speaking of privilege, it is important to retain the paradigm of identity as a fluid, socially

constructed subjectivity, rather than a rigid binary dichotomy of have's and have not's. Tien

frames her arguments around a commonplace activity called a Privilege Walk. In it, a group of

people are lined up beside one another and take steps forwards or backwards depending upon

their experiences to a statement of a societal attribute of privilege/disadvantage made by a

facilitator. Tien argues:

> In focusing attention on people with privilege vs. people without privilege, the Privilege
>
> Walk deflected attention away from the social relationships, conditions, and processes
>
> that constructed privilege in the first place. As a result, students themselves began
>
> identifying as "people with privilege" and using the frameworks of "privileged" vs.
>
> "unprivileged" people. (p. 539)

I shall therefore reflect on my positionality as it changes within the social contexts in which this

study operates.

My cultural background and white skin colour match the dominant demographics of the

school and neighbourhood in which the school I teach at is situated. Mine and the children's

racial experiences in social contexts are therefore similar. I am able-bodied as are most students

in the school. My religious upbringing matches the dominant Catholic faith of the

neighbourhood, however, the church's discrimination towards women and the queer community

have compelled me to separate from this faith. I identify as a queer feminist.

My position as the classroom teacher of the participants in my study creates a power imbalance in my favour. The policies and procedures of the university's ethics board, as well as the teacher code of professional conduct, are in place to make overt the power differences that exist between researchers and subjects, as well as teachers and students. As a professional teacher, I understand this ethical tension well, and as an emerging researcher, I am well aware of and am committed to ensuring I do not misuse this power.

My age compared to my students' asserts a position of power. Yet, my older age compared to the teaching staff at school positions me outside of the dominant social grouping. My older age and years of teaching creates authority in speaking with parents, which I am mindful of not using coercively. My two-income, no children household positions me as middle-class, however, the two incomes are women's incomes who hold traditional female, underpaid careers. The reality of being childless also positions me outside the dominant discourse of family, particularly more noticeable in an early years school setting. Where I am positioned inside the dominant family discourse is that I was raised in a stable, middle class, heterosexual family.

While I strive to disrupt the gender and heterosexuality binary discourses, socially and institutionally, they are still very much entrenched in society. As with the majority of people, I am cisgender as my sex at birth matches my gendered subjectivity. I am most often positioned outside the dominant discourse of ideal femininity and consistently positioned outside the dominant discourse of heterosexuality. My well-being is deeply connected to the disruption of the dominant gender and sexuality discourses.

In what follows, I will present the research on early years children's experiences with gender and heteronormative disruptive texts. I will preface this research by discussing literature

which details in what ways the normative gender and heteronormative representations are still

prevalent in children's texts. I will also present research which interpreted children's classroom

social interactions as proceeding from the discourses of heteronormativity and/or gender.

Literature Review

This research is rooted in previous scholarly research which explored how children experienced disruptive texts where either gender norms and/or heteronormativity were challenged. There is an abundance of quantitative and qualitative research of children's texts which demonstrates the many ways in which authors and illustrators continue to reify the dichotomous Western gender binary and/or the expectation of heterosexuality. The research of children's experiences with gender disruptive texts is rich—particularly regarding children older than grade three (ages 9 and up). While the literature of children's experiences with heteronormative disruptive texts is less rich, it too is more centered on children older than grade three. In the ensuing literature review, which focuses predominantly on studies centering children aged 9 and under, I will first present the scholarly textual analyses of gender and sexuality representations in children's literature. I will then discuss the literature which explored how children experienced gender disruptive texts and heteronormative disruptive texts. There are also studies which explored how children navigate and interact with the gender and heteronormative discourses in their social interactions. I chose to include these studies because it is in these unstructured classroom and school day moments when children are making sense and meaning of their lived experiences and are constructing and/or (re)constructing their and other's gendered and sexual identities. I will conclude my literature review with a discussion of the impact literature has in shaping social discourses.

Gender Representations in Children's Literature: Too Many Boys

The prevailing conclusion of many quantitative studies looking at gender representation in children's literature is that literary characters are numerically more equitably representing the male-female gender binary. There is some truth to that statement as Casey et al. (2021) who

undertook the most recent large-scale analysis of gender representation in texts for children aged

0 to 16 years which featured a single protagonist, found that the male-to-female ratio for

protagonists was 1.22:1 for texts published between 2010-2020. The ratio improved to 1.12:1 for

texts published in the latter half of that decade. Casey et al. also ran their data against several

variables. Of note is the target-audience age breakdown of the texts as well as their analysis of

texts featuring human and non-human protagonists. In texts written for toddlers, for each text

with a female protagonist, there were two texts which featured a male protagonist. In the early

elementary age range (the age of interest for my study) the male-to-female ratio improved

slightly to 1.5:1. When Casey et al. analyzed their data by human and non-human protagonists,

the results were more troublesome given the number of texts written for young children which

feature non-human characters. For each text that featured a female non-human character, three

texts featured male non-human characters. This quantitative study of 3,280 texts revealed that the

texts young children and elementary-aged children are interacting with continue to

disproportionately represent males. Without any qualitative analysis of what gender messaging

the authors and illustrators are conveying in their texts, the findings by Casey et al. could be

more troublesome. In their conclusion, they draw upon a term McCabe et al. (2011) used to

qualify the gross underrepresentation of females in children's texts. McCabe et al. defined the

female underrepresentation as a "systemic annihilation" (p. 197) of females.

 The dearth of females in children's texts was even more prevalent in texts with

anthropomorphized animal characters. McCabe et al. (2011) found that just over 30% of the

5618 texts in their sample featured gendered animal characters. 23.2% of the animal characters

were male and a mere 7.5% were female. It is important to note that McCabe et al. did not

categorize the gender-neutral animal characters—although they are most often read as male by

children (Marie, 2007). If they had done so, arguably their results would further demonstrate a

gaping disparity between male and female representation of protagonists in children's literature.

The repercussion of the chasm between male and female textual representation communicates to

children "a sense of unimportance among girls and privilege among boys" (McCabe et al., 2011,

p. 221); which is a reification of gender norms. Casey et al. (2021) also concluded that the

underrepresentation of females in children's texts simultaneously communicated a debasing of

females and a valuing of males.

Casey et al. (2021) ran their data against another interesting variable. They looked to see

how the gender of the author affected the gender of the protagonist. They found that male

authors more often represented male characters and that female authors only overrepresented

non-human female characters. This variable appears to have been considered in their study as an

earlier quantitative study by Clark et al. (2013) looked at female representation in children's

texts written by either white, Black, Latinx, or who they term are "gay-sympathetic" (p. 111)

authors. They found that female authors and illustrators more often created female characters,

and that specifically Black, Latinx, and gay sympathetic female authors created the greatest

amount of human female characters. Clark et al., while theirs is a quantitative analysis of

children's texts, touched upon the importance of character development in their discussion. They

found that in reading the 70 texts in their study, the female characters created by Black, Latinx,

and "gay-sympathetic" authors were "more impressive in their stature and in the marks they

make on the world" (Clark et al., 2013, p. 125). They suggest that this disparity in agentic female

characters is the result of white authors predominantly creating non-human female characters.

Non-human characters should be of concern to those wishing to disrupt normative gender

constructs. The studies by McCabe et al. (2011) and Casey et al. (2021) revealed significant

overrepresentation of male animal characters and the study by Clark et al. (2013) found that texts featuring human female characters were more accomplished and agentic than non-human female characters. Berry and Wilkins (2017), in their study of texts featuring inanimate characters (i.e., planes, trucks, utensils, food, etc.), found that 74% of the 103 texts depicted male characters on the cover while only 16% depicted female characters. Of those 16% with female characters, just over half were drawn with a face versus 96% of the male characters had faces with expressions. Only one text out of the 103 featured a female character showing a facial expression, and only eight of the female characters were drawn with a mouth.

Berry and Wilkins (2017) also analyzed the narrative in their study's text sample. They concluded that the characters not only reinforced Western normative gender constructs, but that some male characters were "often depicted as hypermasculine" (Berry & Wilkins, 2017, p. 10). They found sexist and demeaning language in many texts, such as a male referring to a female character as "sweet" or calling her "baby" (Berry & Wilkins, p. 10). The inanimate nature of the characters allowed authors to use this double entendre with words. The arguably feminine adjective "sweet" was being used to describe the female protagonist of the story who was a cupcake. An overt example of hypermasculinity appeared in the text *Tough Cookie* (Wizniewski, 1999) where the male protagonist is an anthropomorphized chocolate chip cookie. As the cookie—who is a detective in the story—is drinking his coffee, a blond female human character appears and the detective, who is narrating his own text, shares, "I'm knocking back a cup of java when this classy blond rolls up. Store-bought. Easy on the eyes" (n.p.). This passage not only reinforces heteronormativity, but it also communicates to the reader that males can objectify females.

In 63% of the texts which featured female protagonists, Berry and Wilkins (2017) found the females were positioned either as fragile, rejected, unstable, or self-sacrificing. The males in contrast were saviours. They were "shown as leaders and unifiers who brought others together" (Berry & Wilkins, p. 11). The negative positioning of female characters, their faceless and expressionless appearance, the portrayal of toxic masculinity, and the sexist language of many authors suggest this genre of children's texts must be critically assessed by teachers before sharing them with children.

Similarly, texts featuring anthropomorphized animal characters should be critically approached. The quantitative studies by McCabe et al. (2011) and Casey et al. (2021) simply reveal the numerical overrepresentation of males in this genre when the characters are stereotypically drawn as masculine or feminine. Both studies reference a study by Arthur and White (1996) who found that children aged 7 and older inferred gender onto the images of gender-neutral anthropomorphized bears drawn engaging in gender stereotypical activities. More recently, Marie (2007) argued that anthropomorphized animal characters lacking female attributes such as long eyelashes, long hair, feminine attire, etcetera are read as male by children. While gender-neutral anthropomorphized animal characters may provide opportunities to disrupt the gender binary, Larsen et al. (2018) found that stories with pro-social messaging were better received by children if it was delivered by human characters versus anthropomorphized animal characters. The children were also more motivated to engage in pro-social behaviours as modeled in texts featuring human characters. Some queer scholars such as Young (2019) have also argued of the need for human characters. Young posits that if we wish for children to see themselves in texts (e.g., their race, ethnicity, and gender) it is important for the characters to be human.

Textual analyses of children's literature is a never-ending endeavour. There are always new books being written and countless variables upon which to analyze them. While researchers often choose readily available texts and award-winning texts for their sample, they acknowledge that readership of these texts is lesser known. Filipović (2018) addressed readership issues by analyzing gender representation in the 15 most read texts in a daycare, as selected by the early childhood workers themselves. Filipović's gender representation findings mirror McCabe et al. (2011) and Casey et al. (2021) but are more pronounced given the older age of some of the favoured texts in the daycare setting. Her qualitative analysis of the texts found female characters upheld gender norms as they were depicted in the traditional nurturing roles of wives and mothers. The males were depicted as traditionally active and agentic.

A final study of interest is that of Gritter et al. (2017). They sought to analyze how males were textually portrayed interacting with literature or engaged in literary activities such as art, dancing, reading, or writing. Their study's motivation was elementary school-aged boys' underperformance in reading abilities in comparison to girls. Out of 21 books which featured male protagonists engaging with literacy or in literary activities, only six books featured boys engaging positively with literature in the school setting, and just over half the books demonstrated male protagonists solving story problems using literature or by engaging in literary acts. The most common protagonist type in the study's sample was Zambo's "Wildman" (as cited in Gritter et al., p. 574). The Wildman protagonist, as the name suggests, thrives in nature and is a self-determining entity. These findings lead Gritter et al. to suggest to teachers to support students in critically approaching stories and to understand what normative representations or "deficient views" (p. 580) of masculinity are being portrayed.

The textual analyses of children's literature reveal persistent gender overrepresentation of males regardless of the variable considered, and a continued reliance on Western dichotomous binary gender constructs and their ensuing discourses of masculinity and femininity. These discourses are harmful to both females and males. Texts featuring anthropomorphized non-human characters—either animal or inanimate—should be used with caution and critically assessed for normative identity representations. In what follows is a discussion of children's 2SLGBTQI literature which aims to disrupt heteronormativity as well as gender.

Limited Queer Representation in Children's Literature

The limited numbers of 2SLBGTQI children's texts in print and/or receiving literary awards, resulted in very similar conclusions drawn by the scholars who analyzed them. Even the most recent study by Wargo and Coleman (2021) similarly concluded their textual analysis as Epstein (2013) did in one of the earliest analyses of LGBTQ texts. The limited number of available 2SLGBTQI texts also meant that many same texts appeared in numerous studies such as *And Tango Makes Three* (Richardson & Parnell, 2005), *The Sissy Duckling* (Fierstein, 2002), and *10,000 Dresses* (Ewert, 2008) to name a few. Overall, scholars found that young children's LGBTQ picture books were written with a formulaic pattern. Either the protagonist was a straight child whose parents were in a gay or lesbian coupled relationship, and the child, feeling anxious about the difference in his/her family (because most of the texts upheld the dichotomous binary in their use of pronouns) sought solace from another for validation of his/her family (Epstein, 2013). Alternatively, the child protagonist—usually a male—gleefully plays at home, engaging in more traditional feminine activities. Eventually, the gender nonconforming child goes to school and encounters one or some, hegemonic masculine character(s), and must be comforted—most-often by an adult female. The resolution of this latter storyline differs

somewhat in that the child either conforms to heteronormative masculine expectations, engages

in an activity that hegemonic males find valuable, or the child himself achieves self-validation

despite others' disapproval (Sciurba, 2016).

Overwhelmingly, scholars found that LGBTQ children's literature reified white, ableist,

and heteronormative family constructs (Epstein, 2013; Wargo & Coleman, 2021; Young, 2019).

Lo's (2019) study differed in that she chose only texts that were award-wining. An LGBTQ text

was therefore included in her sample if it won an award from a list of literary organizations. Lo

analyzed how the texts represented families. She found that 34 of the 38 texts featuring coupled

parents were heterosexual. While single-headed family texts left opportunities to queer the

characters, Lo found visual clues in the texts that would imply the character's heterosexuality. Lo

also found that white people were predominant and overrepresented. She concluded that the 117

award-winning texts in her sample reified the normative family constructs of white and

heterosexual.

Young (2019) looked for representations of diversity in his analysis of 28 LGBTQ

award-winning texts. He found only two protagonists of colour and five texts that included

secondary characters of colour. Young also analyzed the texts for inclusion of LGBTQ language

(e.g., gay, lesbian, transgender). He found that none of the 28 texts in his sample used the terms

transgender or *bisexual*, and that only two books used the term *gay*, and one book used the term

lesbian. More troublesome in Young's findings was that 22 of the 28 protagonists were

straight—the lesbian and gay characters were most often secondary characters. There were no

identified queer, transgender, or bisexual characters in any of the texts. Young's conclusions

were that most of the LGBTQ texts in his study reified the queer community as second-class

citizens—not worthy of being the protagonist of a story. Also, the invisibility of transgender,

bisexual, gender nonconforming, gender queer, gender fluid, and the many other ever-evolving

gender identities is highly problematic and signals a lack of personhood. The lack of racial

diversity was misrepresentative of the queer community and marginalized the experiences of

queer Black, Indigenous, and Persons of Colour. Finally, Young argues that the positioning of

only the adults as gay or lesbian in the texts, and not the children, falsely communicates that

queer identities only arise in adulthood.

One glimmer of hope in these studies was found in Sciurba's (2016) study. She examined

texts which featured the experiences of "anatomical males" "whose gender expressions…do not

align with what is considered appropriate for their biological sex" (Sciurba, p. 277). Sciurba

defends her decision to focus on gender nonconformity of males-assigned-at-birth as texts which

feature females-assigned-at-birth acting outside the constraints of society's norms of femininity

were positively reviewed by online shoppers. In contrast, the texts featuring gender

nonconforming males were maligned. The focus for the past decades since Davies' (2003) study

has been on achieving gender equity for girls and women. Sciurba's findings suggest, as other

studies have, that girls and women are now accepted in some traditionally masculine spaces.

However, boys and men have not been allowed into traditionally feminine domains.

Critically assessing the messaging and biases of authors, illustrators, and characters is

crucial for teachers wishing to disrupt normative identity constructs. To date, 2SLGBTQI texts

reify the traditional heterosexual family construct—two parents and a child/children. They are

written with a formulaic approach and are not representative of the diversity of the queer

community. While textual analyses are imperative, the above studies represent adult

understandings of texts. Davies (2003), Earles (2017), Bartholomaeus (2016), and Wason-Ellam

(1993) remind us that children's interpretations of and meanings made from texts are most

important if we strive to disrupt normative identity constructs. I will next present studies where

researchers looked to how young children experienced gender disruptive texts and/or texts which

challenged heteronormativity.

Children's Experiences with Gender and/or Heteronormative Disruptive Texts

Children's experiences with gender disruptive texts has been widely studied by

poststructural feminists. Many of these studies were inspired by Davies' (2003) seminal study in

the 1980's where Davies sought to challenge sex-role theorists who rooted masculinity and

femininity as naturally proceeding from one's sex. Feminists like Davies eschewed the

determinism inherent to sex-role theory as the oppression of females and femininity by males

and masculinity were presumed innate and therefore sanctioned and unwavering. In working

with young children, Davies highlighted, contrary to sex-role theory, how children were

constructing and navigating gender identities by calling upon their understanding of the

normative discourses of masculinity and femininity. Davies explained, "As children learn the

discursive practices of their society, they learn to position themselves correctly as male or

female, since that is what is required of them in order to have a recognisable identity within the

existing social order" (p. 14). While the dichotomous binary categories of boy and girl were

upheld because, as Davies argues, they are the children's only known options in their only

known gender framework, she was struck by how some children were flexible in their

interpretations of the discourses inherent to the binary. Davies' findings are still cited today and

her work has inspired many scholars and educators to look to children in creating a world where

people are not marginalized because of their identities, expressions, and/or behaviours.

In contrast to the richness of studies on young children's experiences with gender

disruptive texts by poststructural feminists, the studies of young children's experiences with

2SLGBTQI literature predominantly focus on the classroom teachers and their understanding of

their students' learning and comprehension. I included these studies in the literature review as

they arguably begin the conversation of how young children experience 2SLGBTQI texts. In

what follows, I will present the common themes from the studies of teachers' experiences with

2SLGBTQI texts and of the studies inspired by Davies' work which foreground young children's

experiences and understandings of gender and/or heteronormative texts. The themes discussed

will be children's schemas, boys' and girls' varying experiences of disruptive texts, the

importance of children's identification with disruptive characters, the importance of a text's

illustrations, intertextual connections, and the role of the teacher.

Schema

A schema is the cognitive categorization of our experiences that in essence form our

knowledge of the world. Our schemas help us make sense of new experiences. Piaget worked

with children and theorized how they too called upon their schemas to make sense of new

experiences and information (Thomas & Jones, 2021). Paraphrasing Piaget's work, Thomas and

Jones (2021) state:

> Any new experiences are fitted into the existing schema (assimilation) so that equilibrium
>
> is maintained. If the experience is new or different then the child alters (adapts) their
>
> schema to accommodate this new experience. In this way, new knowledge is constructed,
>
> and cognitive gains made. Schemas are not static but continually evolve as new ideas and
>
> experiences are encountered. (p. 218)

While Davies (2003) does not write of a schema, she refers to children's constructed "narrative

structures" (p. 72). One of her observations from the children's experiences with Munsch's

(1980) *The Paper Bag Princess,* was that the children seemed to not understand, or have the

narrative structure for, the feminist messaging in this text. In this text, as mentioned, an agentic

princess slays the dragon, saves the prince, and ends their engagement by calling the prince a

bum when he tells her to go wash up. Davies concludes her chapter by stating that children's pre-

existing narrative structures obstructed their noticing of new and/or alternative narratives.

Wason-Ellam (1997) corroborated Davies' (2003) conclusion about the influence of

children's existing narrative structures. Wason-Ellam observed in her study how young girls

(re)created normative femininity in their responses to gender disruptive texts as their existing

narrative of feminine beauty interfered with their noticing of the agentic female protagonists. She

argued, "What is more crucial is to ask how young girls' lived fictions, fantasized fictions, and

the story fictions interweave, interrupt, and inform each other" (p. 437). The idealized feminine

discourse the girls in her study were (re)creating reinforced girls' position as opposite to boys in

a romantic heterosexual relationship. The gender role reversal literature, characterized by strong

and sometimes independent females and passive males, was too oppositional to the girls'

currently constructed gender discourses, and the norm disrupting messaging was ignored.

Bartholomaeus (2016) found as Davies (2003) had, that the young children in her study

relied on their binary categorization of male and female when discussing disruptive story

characters. Bartholomaeus remarked, as Davies did, how the children were flexible in their

interpretations of gender behaviours traditionally associated to the dichotomous boy-girl

framework. A difference in their findings was that Bartholomaeus observed how the children in

her study drew upon "ideas of fairness and choice" (p. 943) to permit a story's character to

engage in non-normative gender behaviours such as a girl playing with trucks. The children

seemed to accept the disruption to femininity presented in the text by calling upon their

understanding of justness and volition. Earles (2017) also interpreted the manner in which

children seemed to accept or reject a character's gender disruption based on their existing

experiences and knowledge. Earles found that situating a masculine hero in a feminine context

ripe with overtures of love and nurturing was too far removed from the children's existing

knowledge of both masculinity and femininity. Earles refers to the term "gridlock" (Massumi, as

cited in Earles, p. 375) to qualify how children experience a text where the story and setting are

the antithesis of one another. When children experience gridlock in a gender disruptive text, the

gender disruption is rejected.

Schema is a term that comes from the research in language and literacy. Essentially, it

can be thought of as our existing knowledge which interprets, reacts, and adapts when we

encounter new knowledge such as that presented in story books. While none of the researchers

used the term "schema" to describe the ways in which the children called upon existing

constructions of gender and how they used these as lenses through which they noticed,

experienced, and evaluated a new text, I posit this is akin to the phenomenon that Davies (2003),

Wason-Ellam (1997), Bartholomaeus (2016), and Earles (2017) have described.

Boys' and Girls' Varying Experiences with Gender Disruptive Texts

There are some notable differences in how children in the studies experienced the texts

based on their presumed gender identification in the boy-girl binary. Westland's (1993) study of

slightly older children (aged 9 to 11) looked at how they experienced the gender roles in

traditional and gender disruptive fairy tales. In her conclusion, she implored educators to share if

they knew how to support boys in valuing nurturing princes. Westland observed the creative

license boys took in drawing their favourite Snow White character and with their written

responses to the fairy tales she read. The boys drew many "violent and disturbing" (Westland, p.

240) images and they composed "macho" or "bloody/evil" (Westland, p. 242), or traditional fairy

tales with a heroic prince and passive princess. Bartholomaeus (2012) found in her study that some boys, rather than identify with the caring or nurturing male characters in disruptive texts, preferred to identify as the agentic gender disruptive females. Bartholomaeus' finding reiterates Davies' (2003) where boys will overlook a protagonist's sex in action stories and position themselves as the agentic hero, rather than align themselves with the perceived femininity of the male gender disruptive character.

Davies (2003) and Earles (2017), though their studies are roughly three decades apart, both observed how girls delimited their agency when aligning themselves with an agentic female protagonist in gender disruptive texts. Davies posited that the girls did not have the schema of themselves as strong or powerful, nor did they have the confidence to fully envision themselves in the role of a heroine who flew airplanes. Earles found the girls in her study positioned themselves as a text's agentic female pirate, however, they constrained their agency as they were concerned for their personal safety as the pirate.

In looking to how boys and girls differed in their experiences with gender disruptive texts, it could be argued that the children's ability to identify with a character is important to children's engagement, sense making, and their ability to adapt their narratives—or schema—of gender.

Importance of Children's Identification with Disruptive Characters

Westland (1993), as previously mentioned, implored her readers for ways to cultivate boys' valuing of non-hegemonic masculinities as the effeminate princes in the disruptive texts she read were being shunned by the boys in her study. Bartholomaeus (2012) also noticed how the boys would rather identify with an agentic female protagonist than an effeminate male protagonist. The 9 to 11-year-old girls in Wason-Ellam's (1997) study were also uninspired by

the texts' disruptive characters in her study. The girls disregarded the agentic heroines in the disruptive texts as the girls' adulation of normative feminine ideals (e.g., beauty, style, romantic engagements with males) was the standard upon which they assessed a female protagonist's worthiness. It would seem that the believability of a text's gender disruptive message lies in the characters' relatability.

Yeoman (1999) would concur as she found that some of the 9 to 11-year old children in her study were able to create their own gender disruptive stories after hearing a few. One of Yeoman's conclusions from the children's experiences with the texts was that their positive identification with a story's character invited them into the story. Calvert et al. (2007) would agree with Yeoman as in their study, the children who readily identified with the television character *Dora the Explorer* after watching an episode were more successful in a follow up problem-solving scenario that had been highlighted in the episode.

There is some debate on the criticalness for children's character identification. Bartholomaeus (2016) found that only half of the 21 children in her study could name a character they related to out of the four disruptive texts she read them. Of the children who named a character they identified with, only half chose a character who disrupted the gender norms. Bartholomaeus concluded that while the texts chosen for her study promoted many discussions about gender, she suggested that perhaps choosing texts with subtler gender disruptive messaging would better promote children's identification with disruptive characters and create more fluid understandings of gender. It would seem that story book characters must in some way resonate or be meaningful to the children for them to attend to any textual disruptive messaging.

The Illustrations

Children's stories are more complex than simply the written words the characters utter and those which the narrator speaks. The story's illustrations can support, enhance, or contradict the author's words (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2000). Sipe (2000) reminds us that the illustrations are of equal importance as words are for children when they are interacting with and making sense of stories. Wason-Ellam (1997) read *Tatterhood* (Muller, 1984) to the children in her study. She found that the physical feminine beauty of Tatterhood's sister, Belinda, superseded Tatterhood's agentic acts in saving Belinda from the witches. The children all preferred the passive yet pretty character Belinda to the unkempt yet agentic character, Tatterhood. More recently, Earles (2017) hypothesized that by introducing a masculine heroic protagonist into a feminine space would elevate the importance of that space. As mentioned, the normative masculine character in the normative feminine space created a disconnect for the children and the story was not believable. The pink flowers and red hearts of the setting too strongly represented femininity, and its lesser status to masculinity was reified in the children's interpretations of the text.

Given young children's engagement with a text's illustrations and the illustrations' capacity to draw all reader abilities and knowledges into the story's meaning, "Pictures in picture-books provide equality of access to narratives and ideas that would otherwise be denied to young readers" (Arizpe & Styles, 2003, p. 223), it is surprising that more analysis of children's experiences with the illustrations in gender disruptive texts has not been undertaken. A phenomenon that is more often discussed in studies of children's experiences with gender disruptive texts is the salience of intertextual connections.

Intertextual Connections

Sipe (2000) was an eminent researcher of young children's reading experiences. He

categorized children's understandings of texts into five areas with intertextual connections as one

area. Sipe defined intertextual connections as the texts and/or media and entertainment

previously experienced by children that they called upon to interact with and make sense of new

texts. Sipe was specific in excluding children's personal connections to texts from intertextual

connections as children who make intertextual connections are analyzing and interpreting a

story, inserting themselves into a story, and/or composing new stories. Most of the studies in this

literature review underscored the importance for children to experience numerous gender and

heteronormative disruptive texts to create rich intertextual possibilities for the children. Only

Bartholomaeus (2016) remarked how intertextual connections sometimes limited the children's

ability to attend to the disruptive messaging in a text if the disruptive text was a derivative of a

well-known fairy tale. Bartholomaeus' specific scenario contrasts with the findings of other

researchers such as Kostas (2021). Kostas concluded that because many boys in his study had not

previously encountered gender disruptive texts, they did not have the intertextual knowledge to

challenge the normative gender roles represented in the classroom texts. Kostas argues that

because of the lack of intertextual knowledge of gender disruptive texts, the classroom texts

reified the boys' normative constructs of masculinity and femininity.

Ryan et al. (2013) offer a more thematic undertaking in fostering intertextual

connections. Ryan et al. published a case study that was part of a larger scale research project

which documented the practices of three elementary school teachers who included LGBTQ texts

in their English Language Arts curriculum. The teacher featured in the case study is a grade three

teacher who began a year-long class study of gender by reading *The Other Side* (Woodson,

2001). The children in the classroom were asked in this first of four episodes to consider what

different "rules" existed for boys in comparison to girls. In the next episode, the teacher, now in

a grade four classroom, read texts which invited students to reflect on and name the many

societal systems of oppression and marginalization (e.g., racism, homophobia, classism). In the

third episode, the teacher read the chapter book, *Totally Joe* (Howe, 2005), which featured a gay

male middle years student. The teacher's fourth and final episode expanded upon the children's

discussions of transgender people in their reading of *Totally Joe*, and the teacher introduced

picture books featuring gender nonconforming and transgender protagonists. Ryan et al.

concluded that by the teacher scaffolding the children's learning and in fostering a network of

intertextual connections for the children to call upon over the four episodes, the children

broadened their knowledge of LGBTQ language and broadened their experiences of gender

diverse identities and expressions.

   Ryan and Hermann-Wilmarth (2018), whose book is the synthesis of findings from the

above-mentioned case study and two other case studies of elementary school teachers who

included LGBTQ texts in their classrooms, present another important argument for teachers to

foster children's exposure to many disruptive texts. They argue that given the undeniable

overrepresentations of Western norms and idealized identity discourses in children's texts,

teachers can diversify perspectives by selecting and presenting more than one text to be

representative of a group of people. Ryan and Hermann-Wilmarth (2018) state:

   This approach means drawing students' attention to questioning and expanding the

   categories of the heterosexual matrix—biological sex, gender, and sexuality—while also

   layering ideas about race, class, ability, religion, and other categories that shape how we

   live in the world. (p. 89)

While text selection is very important and understanding the many ways characters are oppressed and/or challenge the systems of oppression, Ryan and Hermann-Wilmarth, like many scholars presented in this literature review, argue that the role of the teacher is also important in supporting children's meaning making with disruptive texts.

Role of the Teacher

Many researchers recognized the important role of teachers in supporting children's experiences with disruptive literature. DePalma (2016) stressed the importance for teachers to consider and develop criteria for their literature selection that disrupted not only gender and sexuality norms, but the many other positionalities that marginalize people. Yeoman (1999) also emphasized teachers' role in text selection. Yeoman posited that in selecting engaging gender disruptive texts and creating follow-up discussion activities centered on critically assessing a text's messaging, teachers can broaden children's intertextual knowledge and promote their students' abilities to analyze future texts critically and independently. Bartholomaeus (2016) recognized that children's interpretations of disruptive texts were dissimilar to those of the adults who wrote them, and she argued that with teacher support young children may be better able to attend to a text's disruptive messaging as intended by the adult authors. Martino and Cumming-Potvin (2016), whose study was a case study of a teacher who integrated LGBTQ texts into her classroom, concluded that while text selection was important, the teachers themselves were crucial:

> As the research reported on in this paper illuminates, the pedagogical potential of deploying LGBTQ-themed texts in the elementary classroom for realizing both a queer and trans-embodied material reality cannot be denied, but that the role of teacher

subjectivities, threshold knowledges, and embodied positionalities are key mediating

factors in the deft execution of such a critical literacy project. (p. 824)

While Martino and Cumming-Potvin emphasize teacher familiarities with and knowledge of

LBGTQ experiences, Ryan et al. (2013) recognize the hesitancy, discomfort, and unfamiliarity of

some teachers with LGBTQ experiences and lives. They also recognize the still controversial and

sometimes career-risking consequences for elementary school teachers to broach LGBTQ

experiences. While Ryan et al. concur that LGBTQ teachers most likely have more experience in

this area, they reiterate that with critical text selections and wherever possible, teacher

professional development, heterosexual cisgender teachers can support their students to make

meaningful connections to LGBTQ characters and lives.

As the corpus of 2SLGBTQI young children's texts continues to diversify and expand,

arguably easing some pressure for teachers to integrate 2SLGBTQI perspectives into their

curriculum, queer theorists such as Blaise and Taylor (2012) argue that educators have been

striving with little success for decades to promote gender equity by reading children's disruptive

texts in their classrooms. They state:

Since the 1970s, teachers who believe gender is learned through socialization have tried

various gender equity strategies to encourage children to resist gender-stereotyped

behaviors. Such strategies include providing books, posters, and other materials that

present images of women and men engaged in roles or activities not traditionally

associated with their gender and encouraging girls to play with blocks and boys to play

with dolls. Unfortunately, these strategies have not been particularly successful and,

despite the long-term collective efforts of many teachers, children continue to reproduce

gender stereotypes. (p. 89)

Blaise and Taylor have focused their studies away from children's interactions with texts to looking at children's play. Queer theorists like Butler (2006) argue gender is not an isolated identity marker but one that is defined within the discourse of heterosexuality. Innate to the discourse of heterosexuality is the expectation of heterosexuality which queer theorists term heteronormativity. Two of the next studies discussed interpreted children's play as interacting with the heteronormative discourse. I also included two studies where children's play and interactions were interpreted using Butler's theories of gender "performativity" (p. xv) without discussion of how the norms of masculinity and femininity are prescribed within the discourse of heteronormativity.

Upholding Heteronormativity Through Play and Social Interactions

A curious phenomenon of this literature is that the predominance of studies occurred in early childhood education centers or in classrooms with children aged 10 and up. Their focus has been to dispel the discourse of childhood innocence by interpreting children's play and social interactions through a queer theorist lens or through Butler's (2006) heterosexual matrix. Their arguments are that children's play and social interactions are steeped in heteronormativity. Ryan (2016) found pervasive heteronormativity in her study of primary classrooms, explaining that, "Although the various schools in the study were diverse in terms of district, structure, geographic location and educational philosophy, heteronormativity was present in every setting, in large part through the discourse of the children themselves" (p. 88). The children in early years classrooms have already learned to value heterosexuality and subjugate homosexuality, and they are well-versed on the normative roles of men and women, and the discursive expectations of masculinity and femininity.

In what follows, I will present the findings from Ryan's study of primary school-aged

children and two studies of children in kindergarten with a brief mention of findings from a

recent study of an early childhood learning center. I will discuss the contexts in which the

children in these studies were interacting with the discourse of heteronormativity and/or where

children's gender performances were being enacted, how heteronormativity and/or gender norms

were maintained, and what pedagogies and practices were suggested for educators to challenge

the heteronormative discourse and/or discourses of masculinity and femininity.

The Learning Contexts in Which Children Interacted with the Discourses of Gender and/or

Heteronormativity

Blaise and Taylor (2012) concluded from their literature review that the heterosexual

discourse was present and pervasive in early childhood settings, stating, "In other words,

heterosexual discourses are everywhere in early childhood contexts, and the gender discourses

that children engage with are almost always heterosexual discourses" (p. 91). Blaise and Taylor

observed how children playing in their classroom's home corner were performing the normative

script of the nuclear heterosexual family in which girls and women are constrained to the role of

passively deferring to boys and masculinity. They also interpreted how children's romantic play

upheld the discourses of femininity and masculinity inherent in the discourse of heterosexuality.

Ryan (2016) observed children valuing heterosexuality and disparaging LGBT identities within

friendship groupings, in classrooms during reading and writing activities, in the games the

children played, and in washroom areas. Brito et al. (2021) remarked how children performed

gender through their attire, despite the classroom requiring all children wear an identical green

bib. They also observed how the children negotiated and policed gender in their interactions with

toys, books, and in their play. Hjelmér (2020) observed how children autonomously divided

themselves by gender in preschools that offered stereotypical gendered toys and gendered

activities. And so, the children, throughout their school day, are frequently calling upon,

performing, and monitoring the expectations inherent in the heteronormative discourse.

I will next elaborate an interaction between children Hjelmér (2020) observed in her

study as it highlights the subtle ways in which children uphold gender norms. I will follow this

with an interaction Ryan (2016) observed which describes the manners in which a young girl

upheld heteronormativity.

Upholding Norms

Hjelmér (2020) observed how three girls dancing in one of the preschool center's rooms

delimited and upheld the activity as feminine. One girl was adorned with a scarf in her hair and

the two others had scarves around their waists. A boy, who was dancing alongside the girls,

suggested they all dance a certain way. The girls ignored him. The boy went and found a scarf

which he wrapped around his head. The girls continued to ignore him. The boy then retrieved

several toys in his effort to impress the girls and gain entry into their dance. One girl finally

smiled at him but continued dancing. The boy left the dance room dejected stating to the teacher

he no longer wished to dance. Hjelmér posits through this interaction that dancing during play

time is a girl's activity and that the girls' adornment with scarves reified for others that this was a

feminine activity. The girls communicated their unacceptance of the boy into their space through

their dancing style, their body adornment, and their exclusionary nonverbal communication.

While the girls in Hjelmér's (2020) study upheld gender norms in nonverbal ways, Ryan

(2016) observed how a girl's voice inflection communicated her derision of same-sex

relationships. Ryan was in a school washroom when an older female student suggested to a

younger female student that a girl had a crush on the younger girl. The younger girl repeated

with incredulity that someone had a crush on her and that that someone was a girl. Her derision

for this was communicated by her emphasis on the word *girl*. Ryan argued that through this

student's repeated vocalization of the sentence with the derogatory tone used when saying the

word *girl*, reified this student's position as heterosexual and it reified for others the valuing of

heterosexuality in comparison to homosexuality.

Each study discussed here found children actively engaging with, reifying, and

sometimes challenging the gender and heteronormative discourses in their play and social

interactions. All researchers in these four studies called upon teachers to notice and understand

how children are acting out, upholding, challenging, and reifying gender norms and

heteronormativity. In noticing how identity norms are upheld by the children, they suggested that

teachers invite students into critical conversation about their understandings of gender and

heteronormativity.

Davies (2003), Earles (2017), and Bartholomaeus (2012) also observed children's play

and social interactions. Davies observed children calling each other out through teasing and

physical aggression when they strayed too far from their gender's expected behaviours. Davies

called the children's surveillance of one another's gender behaviours and expressions as

"category-maintenance work" (p. 31) as she found the children were monitoring each other so as

to uphold their sex's normative gender expectations. Earles remarked how the boys in her study

would also tease each other to distance themselves from femininity after an interview with one of

the preschool's staff who said it seemed the boys liked to dress-up and laugh at each other

because they thought dressing up was for girls. Bartholomaeus also remarked how both boys and

girls policed each other's gender performances through teasing and dialogue.

Understanding how children's play and social interactions are shaped by normative masculinity and femininity, which queer theorists argue are imposed by heteronormativity, is an important competence for teachers to develop. To help the children experience new ways of doing and being, teachers' literature selections remain important.

Impact of Children's Literature

The influential power of the written word is undeniable. We live in an age of media disinformation where facts and data are distorted for shock value or one's personal or political gains. Children's storybooks are an important media source for children, and as presented in this literature review, they are biased and have the power to influence children's thinking and understanding of themselves and their world. Crisp and Hiller (2011) argue that it is through children's literature that a society's values are transmitted. Crisp and Hiller state that, "the messages in children's literature have the potential to profoundly influence the lives of young readers" (p. 198). Reynolds (2011) better describes which aspects of literature Crisp and Hiller posit impact children's sense of self and world, stating:

Because children's literature is one of the earliest ways in which the young encounter stories, it plays a powerful role in shaping how we think about and understand the world. Stories are key sources of the images, vocabularies, attitudes, structures, and explanations we need to contemplate experience. (p. 4)

Children's literature is profoundly influential in children's lives and its impact is arguably more so given the teacher-student and adult-child power imbalance in classrooms. The literature teachers select and how they present it are significant.

This literature review has presented at length how the illustrations, the author's chosen words, and the author's textual narratives in children's storybooks matter. It is through literature

that children can experience new ways of being. Reynolds (2011) argues that with teacher

guidance, stories can invite children into new possibilities. In tandem, teachers recognizing how

children's play and dialogue is gendered within heteronormativity and through sustained efforts

to integrate quality literature which broadens the children's experiences with various forms,

expressions, and behaviours of gender, children can have more fluid understandings of gender

and sexuality.

Situating this Study within the Literature

This study will address the gap in the literature of how early years children experience

LGBTQ texts. My study will expand upon the findings of Ryan and Hermann-Wilmarth (2018)

where teachers designed thematic units of study using LGBTQ texts by introducing an analysis

of the children's experiences to a planned thematic study of gender disruptive and LGBTQ

literature. Further, this study will add to the literature of how children experience texts which

challenge other identity markers such as race, ethnicity, and socio-economic status as many

protagonists in the texts chosen for this study also challenged identity discourses beyond gender

and sexuality. My study will also add to the literature of how the children look to the illustrations

for narrative support in meaning making of gender and/or heteronormative disruptive texts.

Methodology

I conducted a qualitative case study for this research. Stake and Yin (as cited in Boblin et al., 2013) argue that case studies are "best suited to research that asks 'how' and 'why' questions" (p. 1268). My research sought to understand how—and in what ways—a group of young children experience and make sense of gender and heterosexuality, and how the introduction of texts that challenge traditional gender and sexuality constructs disrupt their normative identity constructions.

Case studies are amorphous and according to Yazan (2015), they are "one of the most contested methods in educational research" (p. 135). Researchers such as Yin (as cited in Boblin et al., 2013), who have a positivist epistemology seek to uncover truths through their case study research. Those who have a positivist leaning seek "objectivity" and "validity" (Crotty, as cited in Yazan, 2015, p. 136) in their research design, and they seek "generalizability" (Crotty, as cited in Yazan, p. 136) of their findings. To achieve these goals, which are most often goals of quantitative research, Yin employs a highly structured framework in his research.

Researchers with a constructivist epistemology, who theorize that there is no one reality or truth, and that our experiences which create "realities" are spoken into existence through our daily social interactions, eschew Yin's (as cited in Boblin et al., 2013) structured and inflexible case study model. The purpose of qualitative research from a constructivist epistemology, "is to understand the meaning or knowledge constructed by people. In other words, what really intrigues qualitative researchers is the way people make sense of their world and their experiences in this world" (Yazan, 2015, p. 137). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) have a more constructivist description of case study design which reflects this epistemology that seeks to understand people's experiences. Case studies "search for meaning and understanding," and

encompass "the researcher as the primary instrument of data collection and analysis, an inductive investigative strategy, and the end product being richly descriptive" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 37). This constructivist methodology and ideology best align with my beliefs about the purpose of research.

A key component of a case study is that it must be a "bounded system" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 37). A bounded system is the context in which the phenomenon being researched is situated. My research phenomenon is children's understanding of and experiencing of gender and heterosexuality disruptive literature. This phenomenon is bounded as it is the experiences of 6 and 7-year-old children in a particular grade two classroom over a four-week period. The experiences the children in this study bring to the classroom to interpret the texts cannot be bounded as their knowledge, like adults' knowledge, is in constant flux as we interact with others and make sense of new life experiences. The children will draw upon their lived experiences and experiences with other texts and media to make sense of the gender norm and heteronormative disruptions.

Merriam (1998) further refines her characterization of case studies. She posits that case studies are "particularistic, descriptive, and heuristic" (Merriam, p. 29). Merriam is referring to the bounded nature of a case study when she speaks about particularistic. Descriptive refers to the findings and discussion sections of a case study in that instead of numerical results, case studies present language-rich descriptions of the phenomenon. A heuristic goal strives to have the reader of the study gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. I am primarily drawn to Merriam's and Stark's (as cited in Boblin et al., 2013) conceptualizations of case studies. Both conceptualizations are constructivist which is a good fit for this study's epistemology and theoretical framework.

Researching with Children

Researchers have in the past thought of children as undeveloped adults and not as

"competent and complete social actors" (Greene & Hill, 2005, p. 9). Children's social

experiences were not previously of concern for researchers. Today children are recognized as

persons and have had their rights enshrined at the United Nations since 1989. Researchers

recognize that children experience the social world much like adults. Children have agency and

are purposeful in their interactions with others. Like adults, there is not one experience that

encompasses all adults' understanding of a phenomenon. We must also accord this

understanding to children when doing research. As Greene and Hill assert, "children encounter

their worlds in an individual and idiosyncratic manner and that their worlds are themselves all

different" (p. 5). I understand the uniqueness of how children experience the dominant

discourses and construct their identities; my goal is to discern larger themes from their

experiences.

Greene and Hill (2005) posit that, "in many ways children behave and think similarly to

adults" (p. 10). There are some differences to be cognizant of when working with younger

children. Their vocabulary is still developing, and it would be wiser to use less formal language

and minimize the use of metaphors. It is also advisable to offer open-ended questions when

interviewing children as Waterman et al. (as cited in Greene & Hill, 2005) found that children

gave inappropriate yes or no answers more often than adults when they were asked nonsensical

questions.

As with adult participants, Greene and Hill (2005) argue that "researchers should seek to

maximise opportunities for children's input at each stage" (p. 8) of a research project. Children

should consent to the study, understand their power to opt out at any time, be assured of their

confidentiality, and they should have some say in the evolution of the research project. In the

context of my study, children's consent was sought, they had the ability to opt out of the study at

any time, and their confidentiality was assured. The children were invited into post-discussion

learning and engagement activities. They were given agency in choosing how they wished to

engage in these activities.

An important area of concern when working with children is the unavoidable power

imbalance between adult and child, and more so the power differential between an unknown

adult researcher and child. This power differential is magnified when I am a teacher-researcher.

As the children's daily classroom teacher, that power differential was mitigated during the data

collection, in part, because I was known to the children. I maintained our classroom routines and

used my everyday classroom language and practices with the children. Furthermore, as a

classroom teacher, I always already work to disrupt the inherent power hierarchy in the teacher-

student relationship. For example, I am cognizant of my larger body in relation to theirs, so I

worked to minimize that differential by sitting on the smaller chairs, kneeling, and/or crouching

when speaking with them, so we could be fact-to-face. The children were not intimidated by

being in an unfamiliar space as the research took place in the familiar space of the classroom.

Like with all research participants, the children's well-being was always at the forefront of my

mind.

The Study Context

My study took place in my own grade two classroom situated in the suburbs of a

medium-sized Canadian prairie city. The school is a public French-Immersion school. The

school is situated in a predominantly white middle-class neighbourhood, where just over 30% of

the population identifies as Black, Indigenous, or Persons of Colour according to the census and

household survey data (citation withheld to maintain the anonymity of the city's name). The

cultural identity of this suburb is reflective of the demographics of the larger city in which this

school is situated. What is noteworthy is that a greater percentage of residents in this suburb

identify as Catholic (43%), than the overall city's percentage of the population who identify as

Catholic (30%). This is an important contextual factor in this research as the Catholic faith

continues to repress women by refuting their ability to be priests and by denying women's

reproductive rights. The Catholic faith upholds the traditional heterosexual family structure and

repeatedly denounces homosexuality. I decided to select texts for this study which did not feature

child protagonists who identified as gay, lesbian, or bisexual to ensure the greatest number of

participants in the study as possible. (I will describe the text selection process more fully later in

this chapter).

The Participants

The sample for a study needs to best "discover, understand, and gain insight" (Merriam &

Tisdell, 2016, p. 96) into the phenomenon. Patton (as cited in Merriam and Tisdell) qualifies a

case study with such a sample as an "information-rich case" (p. 96). As a teacher-researcher, my

sample is both typical and a sample of convenience. My sample is typical in that the

demographics of the area in which the school is situated reflect the demographics of the city in

which the school is situated and that it is a grade two classroom. However, I more specifically

selected this classroom as it is my classroom in which I am the teacher. Merriam and Tisdell

argue that convenience sampling provides less-credible and less-rich findings, however, Boblin

et al. (2013) argued using Kuzel's work that convenience sampling would provide the richest

data for their study. I, too, argue that choosing my classroom as the sample for my study

provides richer data. Like adults, children will try to anticipate what an interviewer wants to hear

and will answer accordingly. The rich conversations between children at school happen

spontaneously throughout the day, at recess, playtime, and eating times. I was there for those

conversations as children explored and (re)constructed the gendered world and their place in it.

As Greene and Hill (2005) explain, "The richness of an individual's life is very often not to be

found in the surface of life but in how it is lived, in the person's experiences and reactions to the

world" (p. 5). It was those spontaneous conversations between children that I aimed to observe

and document to conceptualize their experiences and understandings of gender and

heteronormativity. Furthermore, this study is, in part, about teacher practices and how these play

out for and among children in classroom settings. Therefore, it makes both pedagogical and

methodological sense that the study would take place in a classroom.

      The participants in my study were the children in my grade two classroom whose parents

consented to their child's participation in the study, and of those children, the children who

themselves assented to participate. Out of my classroom of 23 students, 15 families consented to

participate for a total of 16 children participants (one family had two children in my classroom).

Ethics, Approval Process, and Recruitment

      I completed the Course on Research Ethics (CORE) as required by the Tri-council Policy

Statement (see Appendix B for the Tri-Council Policy certificate), then I applied for and received

approval for this study from the university research ethics board (see Appendix C for the

Research Ethics Board 2 approval letter). I then sought and received approval from the school's

divisional assistant superintendent responsible for curriculum (see Appendix D for the divisional

assistant superintendent's study approval), and subsequently from my school principal (see

Appendix E for the school principal's study approval). I sent an information package to all

families in my classroom which included a letter of information explaining the study and an

invitation for them to participate in the study (see Appendix F for the study introduction letter for families). The letter was clear in advising that consent and assent were voluntary and that withdrawal from the study was possible at any time until the first draft of the thesis was written. The consent form for the parents to sign if they wished their child to participate in the study was included in the information package (see Appendix G for the parent informed consent for participation document). A child-friendly assent form for parents to discuss with their child and for children to sign if they wished to participate was also included (see Appendix H for the student assent form). This was accompanied by an overview of the study written as a script in child-friendly language for the parents to read to their child to help them understand what the study was about (see Appendix I for the child-friendly parent script). Parents were also invited to an after-school information session hosted by myself, with my research supervisor and school administrator in attendance, to be provided with an overview of the study and to ask any questions they may have (see Appendix J for the parent invitation to the after-school study information presentation). In the invitation to the after-school information session (see Appendix J for the parent invitation to the after-school study information presentation), parents were invited to request a one-on-one meeting with myself if they were more comfortable in a private meeting, or if they were not able to make the after-school information session.

 Four families requested to participate in the after-school information session. Three of the four families attended. My school administrator was in attendance for this after-school information session; however, my research supervisor was unable to attend. I met privately with another family on another day and presented an overview of the study and answered their questions. I met twice in-person with another family and spoke twice with them on the phone about the study. This parent also spoke with an acting administrator at the school about the study.

While the methods employed in this study align with the curriculum, the parent requested their

child be outside of the classroom when any learning which challenged heteronormativity and/or

gender expression which challenged the gender binary was being explored. As such, that student

worked outside of the classroom with a Learning Support teacher for seven of the 13 texts we

read throughout the study. It is important to note that the books read and the pedagogical

practices that were enlisted would have occurred regardless of this research study. The parent's

request to have their child removed from the classroom during this time would have been

similarly approved by the principal. In other words, the parent's request to remove the child from

the classroom was not because of the research project but because of the curriculum topics that

were being engaged.

      The families' consent and children's assent forms were submitted in a sealed envelope to

the school's administrative assistant who kept them in a locked cabinet in the school's office

until the end of the data collection period—which was after the first term assessment period. As

approved by the Research Ethics Board, the administrative assistant had permission to tell me if

a minimum of four consent and assent forms had been submitted prior to the commencement of

the data collection period, as this was the minimum number of participants required to undertake

the study.

Data Collection Methods

      Merriam (1998) argues that:

      Data collection is about asking, watching and reviewing. Data are not "out there" waiting

      for collection, like so many rubbish bags on the pavement. For a start, they have to be

      noticed by the researcher, and treated as data for the purposes of his or her research. (p.

      69-70)

Merriam's perspective on data collection supports my decision to voice record the experiences of

the children in my own classroom. I had more opportunities to notice the children's experiences

which likely allowed for broader and richer data from which to draw upon in working to

understand their experiences. Both Merriam and Stake (as cited in Boblin et al., 2013) argue for

multiple sources of data collection. Both advocate that observation, interviews (and in this case,

discussions), and document review be part of a case study's data collection. In gathering data

from these three sources, the findings of a case study can be thought of as richer as there will be

various perspectives of the experiences. The term for the use of three data sources is

"triangulation" (Hentz, as cited in Boblin et al., 2013, p. 1270). What I like about Stake's (as

cited in Boblin et al., 2013) understanding of triangulation is that it can be used to identify

convergence and also divergence of findings.

   I heeded Merriam's (1998) and Stake's (as cited in Boblin et al., 2013) arguments to

gather data from at least three sources. Over the four-week data collection period, my

predominant data collection means occurred during English Language Arts read-aloud time.

Over the four weeks, I read 13 texts which disrupted the gender and/or heterosexual dominant

discourses. The read-aloud sessions were audio recorded. In addition, I often recorded notes of

our read-aloud discussions on chart paper as a visual prompt for the children. Once our

discussion was over, the children were invited to engage in a reader-response activity which

served to deepen their connection to the protagonist or text. From this regular and ongoing read-

aloud practice, the data collection methods included:

1) Audio-recordings of the read-aloud sessions - I audio recorded the read-aloud sessions,

including the class discussions that occurred before, during, and/or after the read-aloud.

2) Field journal notes - During the data collection period, I reflected upon the read-alouds and discussions as a classroom teacher; making notes in my field journal recording, for example, if children seem engaged or distracted, what some of their wonderings were, what the overall understanding of the text was, and what a next step(s) might be in our learning. I used the field journal to reflect on the read alouds, the read-aloud discussions, and the documents to carefully consider and plan the next read-aloud.

3) Discussion Charts - As typical of my normal classroom practice, in order to help the students and I keep track of our discussion, I often used chart paper to record our thinking and reflections during the discussion period of our read-alouds. During the data collection period, these discussion charts were also saved and analyzed as data.

4) Reader Response products - The children were often invited to respond to the literature in writing and/or drawn format during the study. That student documentation too was saved and analyzed as data.

5) Observation Guide - A further aspect to the data collection were the incidental and spontaneous conversations that occurred among the children. As a teacher-researcher privileged to be studying in her own classroom, I was able to observe the children during other classroom activities, including informal class time, such as snack, lunch, recess, and transitions in and out of the classroom. These are the times when the rich conversations between the children occur, when they are navigating friendships and constructing their identities. I documented these observations in an Observation Guide (see Appendix K for the observation guide template). The format of the Observation Guide did not invite the needed space for rich detail so I would often refer to an observation from the Observation Guide in my field journal and elaborate upon the child or children's conversations and/or interactions.

All data (audio recordings and hardcopies) were stored in a secured cabinet in my home. After I had opened the consent forms and could determine who was a participant, I then culled and redacted all student names, comments, work products, etcetera of those who had not consented to participate.

Teaching Objectives and Texts

Table 1 gives an overview of each week's learning objective(s) and the texts read to achieve those purposes. As mentioned, the texts were chosen based on criteria derived from a synthesis of research. (See Appendix A for the selection criteria for gender and heteronormative disruptive texts). From the literature review, I realized that girls and women were being accorded some access to traditional masculine spaces, expressions, and behaviours, but that boys and men were still being strictly policed for non-masculine behaviours and expressions. The following quote by Sciurba (2016) resonated with me during my text selection: "If behaviours related to flowers, dancing, dresses, and dolls, for example, were linked to traditional/stereotypical masculinity, the [male] protagonists in these stories would have an easier time existing as themselves and being accepted by society" (p. 286). Of the 13 disruptive texts chosen for this study, the majority feature male protagonists. Four texts feature boys who disrupt normative constructs of masculine expression and three feature males who disrupt normative masculine behaviours. The study was originally planned with 15 texts—five of which featured female protagonist, however, as several texts required more than one day for discussion and learning, I reduced the number of texts to 13 given the study's four-week timeframe. I chose to remove *The Quickest Kid in Clarksville* (Zietlow Miller, 2016) and *Not all Princesses Wear Pink* (Yolen & Yolen Stemple, 2010) which were fictional texts featuring agentic girls. I found that the feminist disruptive messaging in these two texts was very similar to, but arguably weaker than, the

experiences of the girls and women in *The Girl with a Mind for Math: The Story of Raye Montague* (Finley Mosca, 2018), and *Malala's Magic Pencil* (Yousafzai, 2017). The texts in the table below are listed in the order they were read during the week. A more detailed discussion of the texts and weeks' purposes follow Table 1.

Table 1.

Weekly Teaching Objectives of the Read-Alouds and Supporting Texts

Week of Study	Teaching Objective(s)	Texts Read
Week 1	- to support children in understanding what self-expression is. - to begin disrupting the normative expressions of masculinity and femininity.	*I Love my Colorful Nails* (Acosta & Amavisca, 2018) *Morris Micklewhite and the Tangerine Dress* (Baldacchino, 2014) *El Primer Cote de Mesita de Furqan's First Flat Top* (Liu-Trujillo, 2016)
Week 2	- to present protagonists who defied normative gender expectations. - to discuss how Raye Montague defied gender expectations and racism as a Black woman. - to fashion an opening in the gender discourses by nurturing an equal valuing of a female's (Malala's) and a male's (Keith's) accomplishments. - to challenge the Western hegemonic masculine construct of hero and consider how Raye, Malala, and Keith might be heroes. - to introduce a heteronormative disruption (in this case, a family with two male parents).	*The Girl with a Mind for Math: The Story of Raye Montague* (Finley Mosca, 2018) *Keith Haring: The Boy who Just Kept Drawing* (Haring, 2017) *Malala's Magic Pencil* (Yousafzai, 2017) *The Purim Superhero* (Kushner, 2013)

Week 3	- to present characters that challenged the normative expectations of their gender.	*Interstellar Cinderella (Underwood, 2015)* *Iggy Peck Architect (Beaty, 2007)* *The Curious Garden (Brown, 2009)*
Week 4	- to build upon week 2's disruption of the heteronormative construct of family. - to continue scaffolding children's experiences from week 1 regarding disruptions to normative expressions of masculinity and femininity.	*Julián is a Mermaid* (Love, 2018) *My Shadow is Pink* (Stuart, 2020) *Love is Love* (Genhart, 2018)

Week One. The text chosen to debut the study was *I Love my Colorful Nails* (Acosta &

Amavisca, 2018). This book features a boy named Ben who loves painting his nails with vibrant

colours. Because Ben strays from the normative expectations of boy by painting his nails, he is

bullied by male classmates. Ben's father and mother are supportive of his happiness in

expressing himself through his colourful nails, however the hurt Ben feels being bullied is too

much and so he only paints his nails on the weekends, promptly removing the colour before

school on Monday morning. This simple text has a tidy ending when Ben arrives to school on his

birthday to find that all his classmates and his teacher have painted their nails in his honour. My

purpose in the post-read discussion was simply to have the students connect to Ben through his

love of colour. Each student orally shared their favourite colour and why it was their favourite

colour. The children were invited to write how they felt when they wore their favourite colour,

and then to mix and create their favourite colour out of plasticine. They were then invited to

choose from several hand templates, a foot template, or a t-shirt template to decorate with their

plasticine. I chose to nurture a connection between the children and Ben in this read-aloud and

invited the children to experience some of the joy Ben felt in finding that perfect colour with

which to express himself, rather than pursue the bullying theme which I posit reinforces Ben as a

victim, as non-agentic, and risks the children potentially "othering" him from themselves.

The text that followed Ben's story was, *Morris Micklewhite and the Tangerine Dress*

(Baldacchino, 2014). This text follows the same story lines as *I Love my Colorful Nails* (Acosta

& Amavisca, 2018) in that there is a young boy who strays from the normative expectations of

being a boy in his gender expression, he gets bullied by classmates, and in the end, he is accepted

by his peers. Both Ben and Morris are given masculine pronouns by the author. For my study's

purpose, which was to invite children to construct more fluid understandings of gender, I argue

that the masculine pronouns in these texts helped create a stronger disruptive message for my

younger children who, like Davies (2003) and Bartholomaeus (2016) found, continue to

categorize their experiences within the dichotomous boy-girl binary. I posit that had Ben and

Morris used feminine pronouns, the children may have simply categorized them as girls, and

their feminine expressions would have thus reified normative femininity.

In *Morris Micklewhite and the Tangerine Dress* (Baldacchino, 2014), Morris loves to don

a tangerine dress in the dress-up corner of his classroom. He pairs the dress with shoes that click

as he walks. Both boys and girls tease Morris, and he gets a tummy ache from the teasing. Morris

stays home from school one day and starts to feel better while in his mother's care and after he

paints a picture of himself in the tangerine dress. He shows his mother the painting and she is

supportive of his depiction of himself in the dress. Morris returns to school with self-confidence,

dons the tangerine dress, and his creative play wins his bullies over. Our post-read discussion

was a compare and contrast between Morris and Ben using a Venn diagram. The children were

then invited to make a collage of their favourite clothing items and/or accessories from pictures I

had pre-assembled. Through this activity, I again attempted to nurture a kinship between the children and the gender nonconforming protagonist rather than dwell on the bullying theme.

The final text for the first week was *El Primer Cote de Mesita de Furqan's First Flat Top* (Liu-Trujillo, 2016). This text is about an Afro-Latino boy who goes for his first flat top haircut. Furqan is very hesitant about getting the new style and his father talks him through his worries. Furqan does not challenge any gender norms, however, he does get the cold shoulder from some classmates when he returns to school as they are not fond of his fresh haircut. I chose this book with gender conforming Furqan to pair with gender-nonconforming Ben and Morris in an attempt to "normalize" gender expressions. Ben, Morris, and Furqan were similarly their happiest selves when expressing their identities and I wanted my children to connect self-expression with happiness. Another commonality in the three texts was that the protagonists were all bullied at school, and I wanted to introduce the idea that classmates are the perpetrators of bullying and begin to scaffold the children's knowledge of their complicity in upholding gender norms.

Our post-read discussion was again a compare and contrast—this time between Ben, Morris, and Furqan. For the reader-response activity, I created a PowerPoint slide show of various models with flat top haircuts and designs shaved into their hair. The students were invited to design their own hair design using a crayon resist technique and watercolour paint. They were offered the choice of a gender-neutral head template or they could draw their own model. Again, with this activity, as with the others, the children were invited to explore self-expression—this time through hairstyle. As the children were designing and painting, I met with small groups of children and asked which character they connected to the most of Ben, Morris,

and Furqan, and why, and which character they connected to the least and why. I made notes

about these conversations in my field journal.

　　　　Week Two. To follow up the learning from week one, I chose to focus on stories where

the characters demonstrated perseverance in the face of adversity where the adversity was

brought on by their gender nonconforming actions as opposed to their expressions. The first two

texts are biographies, and the third one is an autobiography. The first text read in this second

week was, *The Girl with a Mind for Math: The Story of Raye Montague* (Finley Mosca, 2018).

Raye Montague was a Black female American engineer who designed submarines for the United

States Navy beginning in 1971. Raye developed a love of submarines when her grandfather took

her to see a real submarine when she was just 7 years old. From that moment on she dedicated

her life to becoming an engineer and she succeeded despite the many times and the many ways

she was told that she could not because she was a girl and/or because she was Black. For the

post-read discussion, I had assembled nine images from the text that represented each time Raye

faced a barrier or barriers to following her dream of becoming an engineer. I presented the

images one at a time and asked the students to explain how and/or why Raye was being told in

that picture why she could not do something that she wanted to do. After this, the students were

invited to be engineers and engage in a Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics

(STEM) activity where they manipulated a large piece of tinfoil into a craft that floated. The

discussion about Raye Montague carried over to the following day as the children had connected

the segregated schooling system Raye was confronted with, to the residential schooling system in

Canada. To me this was an unforeseen but teachable moment and I wanted to help the children

better understand how the two systems were similar yet different.

As mentioned, I began our next read-aloud with some explicit teaching about the similarities and differences between segregated schools and residential schools. I wanted to reinforce to the children that white people were responsible for the creation of both schooling systems. I also wanted the children to understand that segregated schools were purposefully underfunded by white people to give Black children a lesser education and that residential schools were designed to erase Indigenous culture and identities. Following this discussion, we then read our next text, *Keith Haring: The Boy who Just Kept Drawing* (Haring, 2017). Keith Haring was a world-renowned pop artist and this book was written by his sister. The text begins with Keith as a young child and we learn that Keith developed his love of drawing as he and his sisters drew with their father. Growing up, Keith constantly drew, and he was asked by everyone he knew why he kept drawing. His mother even asked him why he drew instead of going outside to ride his bike. As Keith aged and his art began to be noticed, Keith would often give his art away for free and/or donate the money he made to charity. Keith frequently drew in public places like on sides of buildings, on derelict fences, and on subway walls, and did so to make his art accessible to everyone. Keith had a special place in his heart for children and children's charities often received his earnings.

My adult construct of gender identified Keith, a white American male, as gender non-conforming because of his altruistic behaviour and because of his engagement and concern for children, which stereotypically is the domain of women. My positioning of Keith's defiance of masculine norms is supported by the literature. Bernard (1981) wrote on the origins of the male as breadwinner gender construct. She traced how the expectation for men to financially provide for their family morphed into an expectation of amassing wealth and what is today currently understood as an expectation of hegemonic masculinity. Bernard states:

To be a man one had to be not only a provider but a *good* provider. Success in the good-

provider role came in time to define masculinity itself. The good provider had to achieve,

to win, to succeed, to dominate. He was a bread*winner*. (p. 4)

Some current scholars dismiss the male breadwinner gender construct as they look to the

statistics of women's participation in the paid workforce. Fulcher et al. (2015) categorize that

"most women" (p. 174) in the United States are employed. Further, not only are most women

employed but Wang et al. (2013) found that women in "40% of all households with children

under the age of 18…are either the sole or primary source of income for the family" (p. 2). While

that statistic is hopeful, it is dampened by the fact that 63% of the female breadwinners are

single-parent households and women are therefore the sole provider of the family.

The statistics of women's workforce participation are undeniable in that some shifts have

occurred for women to participate in the paid workforce. However, the male breadwinner gender

norm is persuasive in Western society. Williams et al. (2010) found that like most entrenched

norms the "male-wealth stereotype…operates largely outside of awareness" (p. 7) and is present

in the gendered wage gap. The gendered pay gap Williams et al. refer to is itself transforming

and the economic inequity in Western society is now defined on one end by an elite minority of

uber wealthy males with everyone else positioned outside of that wealth. This current societal

economic inequality also substantiates and reinforces the normative masculine breadwinner

construct. Moreno-Bella et al. (2019) found that economically unequal societies are perceived as

masculine as the masculine normative traits of "independence, competitiveness, and

aggressiveness" (p. 1) are valued and rewarded. I posit that Keith Haring's altruism challenges

those masculine traits of competitiveness and aggressiveness, and the expectation to amass

personal wealth.

As we had spent substantial time prior to reading *Keith Haring: The Boy who Just Kept Drawing* (Haring, 2017) in this session discussing residential schools and segregated schools, the children were simply invited to use their sketch pads to draw some figures in motion which were prominent in the text and for which, Keith Haring is renowned. For our next day's follow-up discussion to Keith Haring's experiences, I created a PowerPoint slide show of Keith's actual art as the text is illustrated by a cartoon artist and the children were very interested in Keith's colourful art. After the slideshow presentation, I had pre-grouped the children into groups of two or three and assigned them a question or two to answer about Keith and the text. They were then to share their responses with the class. The possible questions were: a) Why did Keith give his money away?; b) Do you think lots of people are like Keith and give their money away?; c) Why did Keith keep drawing?; d) Why did Keith invite kids to draw with him?; e) Why did Keith draw everywhere?; and f) Where do you usually go to see art? After the groups presented their answers, I wondered with them, who were the wealthiest people in Canada. I then projected an image of the wealthiest people in Canada for the children to comment on and notice any similarities and/or differences between the people. In showing this montage of white men, I wanted the children to connect that Keith, being a white male, was expected to abide by the hegemonic masculine norm of amassing his own personal wealth, rather than altruistically donating it all to charity. For the reader-response activity, the children continued in their design of a figure in motion which we assembled into a large collective mural for the classroom. This art project met many art curriculum objectives and deepened the children's connection to Keith Haring.

The following day, we read the third text of the week, *Malala's Magic Pencil* (Yousafzai, 2017). This is an autobiography written by Yousafzai that focuses on her childhood and the

retelling of her experiences that led her to become the world-renowned women's and human

rights activist she is today. In a child-friendly style, Yousafzai tells readers how girls were not

allowed to go to school in Pakistan because there was a change in governmental power and the

men in the new regime denied girls the right to go to school. Malala defies the men by speaking

out and writing about this stripping of rights in her country. Malala explains in her text that the

men in power hurt her as they tried to silence her. She survived their attack, and her voice

became even stronger and more powerful as the world heard of her experiences. The follow-up

discussion to this text focused on comparing and equally valuing the experiences and

accomplishments of Malala and Keith. My hope was that the children would equate the

accomplishments of Malala—a female, with the accomplishments of Keith—a male, as both

engaged in altruistic behaviour that had an international impact. We created a Venn diagram to

hold our thinking and show our learning.

The final book this week was *The Purim Superhero* (Kushner, 2013). This is a fictional

book about a boy named Nate who is told by other boys that he must wear a superhero costume

to the Purim celebration at Hebrew school. Nate likes superheroes but he loves aliens and he had

wanted to dress up as an alien. Nate worries about the gender-based peer expectation and turns to

his two dads for guidance. Nate comes up with a novel solution that blends his love of aliens

with the pressure to conform and dress as a superhero. I loved that this book presented Nate's

family headed by two males as simply de-facto. This text served as a subtle challenge to

heteronormativity for my students. However, I chose this book more for the gender-based peer

pressure and its disruption of the hegemonic Western construct of hero. I invited my students to

reflect on who they thought out of the week's three readings was a hero—Raye, Keith, or

Malala. I had wanted to see if the children would choose a protagonist of the same gender as

themselves or would some children value the accomplishments of a cross-gender protagonist.

Each student recorded their answer on a paper and justified their reasoning. After their writing,

the children were invited to make their own hero mask and I had four different templates from

which they could choose.

        Week Three. The stories this third week presented fictional characters who solved a

story problem in a gender disruptive way. The first story was *Interstellar Cinderella*

(Underwood, 2015). This text is a classic gender-role reversal text in that the hero is Cinderella

and the "damsel" in distress is the prince. The story takes place in outer space where Cinderella

dreams of becoming a spaceship mechanic. She goes about her days fixing the household

appliances and studies ship repair in the evenings. Following along the traditional Cinderella

storyline, Interstellar Cinderella lives with evil stepsisters and an evil stepmother; there is a

prince who is hosting a ball and falls in love with her; there is a fairy godmother who helps

Interstellar Cinderella attend the ball; and there is the stroke of midnight at which time the magic

stops working. Prior to the ball there is a space parade and that is what Interstellar Cinderella

really wished to see. Once there, she notices the prince's spaceship is on fire. She quickly fixes

his craft, and he invites her to the ball. When midnight strikes, Cinderella drops her wrench in

her haste to hurry home. The next day the prince searches the kingdom high and low for the girl

who knew how to fix his ship. The story ends with Interstellar Cinderella refusing the prince's

marriage proposal, however, she negotiated with him to be his chief mechanic. This book is rife

with gender disruptions and a heteronormative disruption. Given the divergent literature on the

effectiveness of gender-role reversal stories and being mindful of Davies' (2003) findings that

many children in her study considered the prince to be the hero of Munsch's (1980) gender-role

reversal text *The Paper Bag Princess*, I was curious to see my students' responses to this

Cinderella text. I invited the children to write who they thought the hero of the story was, and why; as well as if they thought Interstellar Cinderella should have married the prince, and why or why not. After this, the children were invited to engage in small-group STEM-based activity centers, which also nurtured an intertextual connection to *The Girl with a Mind for Math: The Story of Raye Montague* (Finley Mosca, 2018).

The following day we reread *Interstellar Cinderella* (Underwood, 2015) and then in our post-read discussion, we did a character analysis of Interstellar Cinderella as most children had responded the previous day that the robotic mouse was the hero of the story. The children had also not finished rotating through the STEM centers, so we finished that rotation up after the character analysis. The following day, I again began by discussing *Interstellar Cinderella*. This time, I asked the children what was unexpected about Interstellar Cinderella in the text—hoping they would realize how her gender made being a mechanic unexpected and how refusing the prince's marriage proposal was heteronormatively unexpected.

Our next text was *Iggy Peck Architect* (Beaty, 2007). It is a story about a boy named Iggy who loves building things. His love of building began when he was just two years old when he fashioned a tall tower with his many dirty diapers. Iggy's story takes place with him in grade two and he has the misfortune of having Miss Lila Greer as his teacher. Miss Greer forbids Iggy from building in the classroom and threatens to send him to the principal's office should he continue. Iggy obeys but is morose in class. One day, Miss Greer takes the class to a park for a picnic. She leads the kids across a footbridge that spans across a small body of water. The footbridge collapses and strands the kids and teacher on the little island. What is disruptive about this text is that Iggy works collaboratively with his classmates in rebuilding the footbridge, rather than Iggy hegemonically directing them on the design or building the bridge alone, as would be a more

expected portrayal of a male hero. While reading this text, I stopped just after the bridge

collapsed. I had pre-grouped the students into groups of two or three, and I invited them to write

the ending of the story, reminding them that this text was being read because Iggy's actions were

unexpected. The students then presented their story ending to the class and we finished reading

the text.

The final text for this third week was, *The Curious Garden* (Brown, 2009). This text

features Liam, a boy who transforms an abandoned railway line into a beautiful garden that he

and everyone in his community can enjoy. Gone are the industrial smokestacks and drabness of

the concrete buildings. Liam's external presentation is gender non-conforming, and he engages

in some gender non-conforming activities such as gardening and singing to his plants. As a class,

we did a character analysis of Liam to better understand his actions and motivations. We then

discussed if Liam was a hero or not using our understanding of a hero from *The Purim*

Superhero (Kushner, 2013) text. It is important to note that rather than reading this text to the

children, I played a YouTube video of a male teacher reading the story and he had set it to

background music and animated the text with fade-ins and fade-outs. In presenting this text

through YouTube, I hoped to better engage the children into the text as I personally found it less

vibrant and slower paced than the other texts in this study. After the class discussion, the students

created a section of a beautified railway track using construction paper, tissue paper, plasticine,

and pipe cleaners, either on their own or in a partnership, as a way to connect to Liam and his

gender disruption.

Week Four. The purpose of the three texts this week were to disrupt heteronormativity

by broadening the children's constructs of family. The first text shared was *Julián is a Mermaid*

(Love, 2018). Julián lives with his *abuela* (Spanish for grandmother) and one day they take the

subway to the pool. In the subway, they see three beautiful women exquisitely dressed as mermaids and Julián fantasizes about being a mermaid as he swims in the pool. Julián continues to be mesmerized by the mermaids and once back home, he fashions his abuela's curtains and potted plant into mermaid attire for himself as his abuela bathes. When Julián's abuela finishes her bath and sees him as a mermaid, her face becomes stern. She leaves the room, and we see the worry on Julián's face. His abuela returns with a beautiful necklace for him to wear and the story ends with abuela taking Julián to a mermaid parade at the beach. Julián's gender-fluid expression ties nicely with Ben's and Morris' texts from the first week and offered my students another opportunity to broaden their dichotomous construct of gender expression, as well as add another text upon which to make intertextual connections. The grandmother and grandson household construct served to disrupt the children's Western construct of family. Our post-read discussion focused on abuela, and the children reflected on and shared why she was a good grandmother or not. After our discussion, the students engaged in an art activity where they could either colour in a mermaid's tail or a fish on a transparency using permanent markers. They then put the coloured transparency over a foil sheet. It is important to note that the mermaid tail and fish template were chosen as the scales on each were very similar so that in essence, all students were able to maintain the integrity of the text in that it was a text about a mermaid.

The following day's read-aloud began with a picture talk of the father in *My Shadow is Pink* (Stuart, 2020). The father is hegemonically depicted, and I wondered how the children would make sense of his overt masculine expression. I then invited the students to reflect on the title of the text, *My Shadow is Pink*, and to predict what that might mean. This text was chosen primarily for its disruptive family construct of a father and son; however, the text is about a boy who disrupts the gender norms by preferring stereotypical feminine toys and activities and

expresses himself in stereotypical feminine attire. The story is told from the son's perspective in

a first-person narrative, so it is not stated how he self-identifies, which pronouns he uses, or even

what his name is. We the reader know that his sex requires him to have a blue shadow but

because of his feminine interests and self-expression, his shadow is pink. This text was inspired

by the author's own son who loves Elsa from Disney's *Frozen* movies and likes dressing as her.

Stuart included a page in his text which challenges many gender norms and heteronormativity as

he names family members who also had shadows that better expressed their identity than their

external gender presentation and behaviours did. Our follow-up discussion centered on the father

and his social/emotional growth throughout the story. In doing this, I hoped to disrupt the

normative expectation of an emotionally detached father, and to continue disrupting the

unexpectedness of a male child wearing a dress.

The last text of the week and the study was, *Love is Love* (Genhart, 2018). This text is

also a first-person narrative told by a boy. The boy in the story is upset because someone told

him his rainbow shirt was gay. The boy shares how he constantly gets teased for having two

fathers who are married to each other. The story is about the boy explaining why his family is

just like any other family. As the reader turns each page, a new character is, or new characters

are, depicted wearing the same rainbow shirt. Each new character or grouping of characters are

also depicted in a different part of the world. A mass of kites is flying in the air on each page and

progresses through the colours of the Pride rainbow. One of the last pages of the text has a

grouping of mostly same-sex headed families all wearing the same rainbow shirt, with the

implied message being that gay people are everywhere in the community. The narrative on this

page reveals that the protagonist has found confidence and self-validation for his family. The

final page of the text features all the rainbow-coloured kites together in the shape of a heart,

which in effect becomes a big Pride display. This text, along with *The Purim Superhero*

(Kushner, 2013) were the most overt disruptions of heterosexuality in that they each featured a

family headed by gay males.

I personally found the text *Love is Love* (Genhart, 2018) well-written and it validated

families headed by same-sex couples. I wondered how much of the inferred disruptive messaging

the children understood from the illustrations—specifically why different children were depicted

on each page wearing the same rainbow shirt, and why new geographical markers were being

shown on subsequent pages such as the Eiffel Tower, Mount Everest, and what appears to be the

Spring Temple Buddha in China. Our follow-up discussion thus centered on those two areas. I

then engaged the children in critically thinking how *I Love my Colorful Nails* (Acosta &

Amavisca, 2018), *Morris Micklewhite and the Tangerine Dress* (Baldacchino, 2014), *El Primer*

Cote de Mesita de Furqan's First Flat Top (Liu-Trujillo, 2016*), Julián is a Mermaid* (Love,

2018), *My Shadow is Pink* (Stuart, 2020), and *Love is Love* (Genhart, 2018) were similar. I drew

a massive six-circle intersecting Venn diagram and enlarged the part where the six circles

overlapped to help the kids visualize the discussion. After this, the children were invited to work

alone or in pairs and to design a poster for the school to help children who did not read all the

books we did, understand how to be kind, welcoming, and inviting, as well as, how to be

yourself and accepting of differences.

Managing the Data

All data collected (except the audio recordings) during the study only identified the

students by their initials. The audio data was regularly transcribed by me during the data

collection period. The transcripts identified students by their initials only. After the data

collection period was completed (and after the first term report cards were sent home), I gained

access to the consent and assent forms. I cross-referenced the consent and assent forms with the data that had been collected. All data for whom I did not have consent was redacted and/or destroyed. Where children worked together on a written or drawn response, I redacted the non-consenting child/children's work from the response. If it was not possible to sort the contributions of consenting children away from the contributions of the non-consenting children, the data artifact was destroyed. Once I was left with only consented-to data, the participating students were given a pseudonym based on the protocol established in the ethics board application, and all the children's initials were replaced with their pseudonym.

The audio transcripts, my field journal, and the observation guides were all stored in a locked cabinet in my house. While the data was being collected, my field journal and observation guide were transported between school and home in a locked dossier. All electronic files were password protected and encrypted on my computer. As per the ethics board approval, the data will be safely stored and then destroyed by December 2023.

Redaction and/or Deletion of Non-Consented to Data in the Audio Transcripts

Given the dynamic and spontaneous conversations which arose during the read-alouds and classroom discussions, it became apparent early on that in redacting non-consenting children's words, whole conversations and learning of consenting children stemming from a non-consenting student's words would also be lost. In effect, there would be very little data left in the audio transcripts as even I often took up what children had said and turned it into a teachable moment. Therefore, upon consultation with my research advisor, I adhered to the following guidelines in redacting data from non-consenting children in the audio transcripts:

- Redact all spoken words from the non-consenting students.

- Redact all words (from myself, consenting students, and/or non-consenting students) which were directed specifically to non-consenting students.

- No redaction of my paraphrasing of a non-consenting student's words which generated further group discussion.

- No redaction of a consenting student's words that were motivated by the words of a non-consenting student which were not directed back to the non-consenting student.

In the discussion section, when I am referring to a discussion which stemmed from a non-consenting child's words be included in this thesis, I shall reference it as "based on a classroom conversation," or "in response to a student's comments."

By developing and following these guidelines, the integrity and richness of our many discussions was left intact and the directives of the nonconsenting families and children were maintained.

Data Collection Challenges

The reality of an early years classroom is that it is a busy environment. There are 23 children all wanting and needing attention for a plethora of reasons, some of which were audio recorded like children needing band aids for paper cuts, needing cups because they forgot their water bottle, needing their shoelace tied, getting a zipper unstuck, needing social support, and/or needing academic support, to name a few. Then there are the other daily interruptions/distractions such as phone calls from the office, visitors to the classroom, other children in the hallways making noise, and so on. All of this made recording observations in the Observation Guide very challenging. The moments I documented were often the larger moments where several children were involved as I more easily remembered them when I found the time to enter them on the Observation Guide.

A further challenge was encountered during the read-alouds. As I was alone in my classroom with the children, my focus was on reading the story, facilitating the discussion, and documenting our thoughts on chart paper. I had little opportunity to observe body language. I chose to audio record the data as I felt it was less intrusive than a video camera and would lead to more natural conversations. Transcribing the audio recordings was also challenging. To support more natural discussions and to truly understand how children were experiencing the texts, I had to invite the children to share their thoughts and be flexible in giving them time to share. This led to lots of children over-talking each other and many times in the data where I had to write "UC" for unknown child, or "UCs" for unknown children. It was helpful that I transcribed the audio files as promptly as possible after recording them. I also became very familiar with each child's voice and speech patterns so that was also helpful in identifying the speaker and their words.

Data Analysis

Merriam (1998) most succinctly describes the "recursive and dynamic data collection and analysis" (Yazan, 2015, p. 145) I heeded. Merriam argues:

> Making sense out of the data involves consolidating, reducing, and interpreting what people have said and what the researcher has seen and read—it is the process of making meaning. Data analysis is a complex process that involves moving back and forth between concrete bits of data and abstract concepts, between inductive and deductive reasoning, between description and interpretation. (p. 178)

My analysis during the data collection period, when I was blinded to consent and assent forms, included reflecting on the children's experiences of the texts and calling upon my professional judgement and pedagogical purpose to plan for the next read aloud. I continued in this inductive reflection throughout the research period and made notes about these reflections in my field

journal. I enhanced the validity of my data analysis here through a form of member checking

when working with the students. During the read-alouds and discussions, I often asked a child to

clarify their words, or I would paraphrase their words or reiterate their words to confirm their

meaning. When I realized that there was not equal participation during the group discussions, I

created opportunities to meet one-on-one or in smaller groups with the children who were less

vocal during the whole-group discussion to elicit their experiences to a text.

Once I gained access to the consent and assent forms after the data collection period and

redacted and/or destroyed all non-consented to data, I began to make sense and meaning of the

data. I continued to interact with the data as Merriam (1998) posits by reading through the data,

reflecting on the data, making notes on the data, and searching out literature on my observations.

I continually moved between the data and my research questions—ensuring I was reflecting on

the data in such a way that I was searching to answer my research questions. The rich meaning

came from looking at all the data together and seeing the patterns in the data and reflecting on

the language the children used throughout the study. I coded each consenting child's statements

and reader-response activities, as well as my statements, observation guide entries, and field

journal notes, always being mindful of the purposes for my study, with themes which I

inductively arrived at through the data. I then sorted through my themes and reflected on their

commonalities and differences, and how they could be grouped to uncover the larger themes in

the data. In my analysis of the data, I also sought the "cracks and fissures in the discourses"

(Gannon & Davies, 2012, p. 12), looking for divergence from normative gender and sexuality

discourses in the children's understandings. In doing so, I recognized how children were

upholding the normative discourses; how children misunderstood the disruptive messaging; how

children understood the disruptive messaging; how the children activated their schema to make

sense of the disruptive messaging; and how sometimes the children challenged the author's

normative messaging in the texts.

In reflecting on the data and my research questions, I recognized that the richest

conversations about the normative disruptive messaging stemmed from explicit teaching; the

children having a foundation of intertextual knowledge; and the children's engagement in picture

talks. While there were many moments of rich conversations, there were also moments of

faltering. This was a more unique study in that early years children engaged in a thematic study

of gender and/or heteronormative disruptive texts, I was a teacher-researcher in my own

classroom, and the majority of the texts shared with the children were authored within this

current decade. As is typical in teaching, there were moments when my teaching did not go as

planned and moments where the books were not experienced as anticipated. From these

moments, I learned how teachers can better disrupt the discursive gender constructs and

heteronormativity.

The data and my interpretation of it stemming from further research and reflection,

resulted in the emergence of four themes. The four themes were: the children's misunderstanding

of the disruptive messaging; their rejection of the disruptive messaging; their adaptation of the

disruptive messaging; and the crucial role of the teacher. I found that the concept of schema was

useful in conceptualization how the children appeared to call upon their prior knowledge and

experiences to make sense of the texts.

Findings: The Children's Experiences with Disruptive Messaging in Texts

This study sought to explore the ways in which early years children experienced and understood the dominant discourses of gender and/or heterosexuality using disruptive literature. My first research question addressed the ways in which disruptive texts engaged children in challenging the dominant gender norms and heteronormativity, and how these texts supported a more fluid understanding of gender and sexuality. Through the data analysis, I found instances when the disruptive messaging was too unfamiliar to the children's schema for them to understand the disruption; too dissimilar to the children's schema and the disruption was rejected; and instances when the disruptive messaging aligned with the children's schema and was adapted and assimilated.

As discussed in the literature review, a schema is the cognitive categorization of our experiences that in essence form our knowledge of the world. Our schemas help us make sense of new experiences. The volume and cacophony of the children over-speaking each other on the audio recordings of the read-alouds attest to their engagement and thinking. It was quite exciting as a teacher and a researcher to hear how the children were making sense of the new information from the texts when they vocalized their wonderings and/or interpretation of events in calling upon various schemas.

The texts for this study were selected for their potential to engage children's schema, to disrupt the children's normative constructs of gender and heteronormativity, and to invite an adaptation of a more fluid construct of gender and sexuality. It is important to note that identities are not just comprised of these two categories. The texts for the read-alouds also represented identity categories beyond gender and sexuality, such as race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, and religion. The children in this study were bright, observant, and knowledgeable, and so,

insightfully, their observations also led to discussions of racism, classism, and capitalism. Lo (2019), in her analysis of family diversity in children's texts, stressed the importance of not only challenging the heteronormative construction of the family nucleus, but to also include an analysis of a "family's race and ethnicity; their linguistic, socioeconomic, and cultural backgrounds; and the ways family members' abilities are portrayed" (p. 16). Therefore, although the study purposed to understand how children experience normative gender and heteronormativity disruptive texts, I must also articulate a more fulsome picture of their experiences as they engaged with identities beyond gender and sexuality.

In what follows, I will present the experiences of a student named Thomas who often vocalized his thinking during our read-alouds. Thomas' statements and questions invited me into his meaning making of the texts' disruptions, which, in essence, allowed me to hear how his schema was processing the disruptive information. Next, I will discuss how the systemic racism in, *The Girl with a Mind for Math: The Story of Raye Montague* (Finley Mosca, 2018), was too unfamiliar to the students; as was the gender discrimination in, *Malala's Magic Pencil* (Yousafzai, 2017), and the masculine hegemony disruption in, *Keith Haring: The Boy who Just Kept Drawing* (Haring, 2017). The children's unfamiliarity and lack of experience with the disruptive messaging in these texts (specifically, the racist purposes of the segregated schooling system, the misogyny in denying girls an education, and the nonhegemonic masculine trait of altruism) caused many children's schemas to reject it. I will next present how the children's deeply entrenched gender norms and heteronormativity as observed through their daily classroom social interactions caused them to reject the same-sex headed family structure in *The Purim Superhero* (Kushner, 2013). The lure of the classic fairy tale *Cinderella* with its gender norms and heteronormative messaging overshadowed the disruptive messaging in *Interstellar*

Cinderella (Underwood, 2015) and interfered with the children's ability to attend to and adapt

the disruptive messaging. While there were many moments in which the disruptive messaging

was rejected and/or unnoticed, there were times it was accepted and adapted into the children's

schemas. I will present how through a culminating activity of the second week's texts—*The Girl

with a Mind for Math: The Story of Raye Montague* (Finley Mosca, 2018), *Keith Haring: The

Boy who Just Kept Drawing* (Haring, 2017), and *Malala's Magic Pencil* (Yousafzai, 2017),

many children appeared to accept a gender disruption by equally valuing a female's

accomplishments with a male's. When analyzed within a reconstructed framework of a hero,

some children seemed to equate Raye Montague's and/or Malala Yousafzai's accomplishments

with Keith Haring's. I will then discuss some children's acceptance of a character's gender

disrupting identity in *Julián is a Mermaid* (Love, 2018) and of the son's in *My Shadow is Pink*

(Stuart, 2020). I will conclude my findings by describing the important role of the teacher in a

thematic unit of study such as this that sought to challenge systemic discrimination. This

concluding section begins to address my second research question which explored the ways in

which students' experiences and understandings of disruptive texts can inform teachers in

choosing literature and fostering conversations that challenge the dominant gender and

heterosexuality discourses and support a more fluid understanding of gender and sexuality.

Processing the Disruptive Texts: Thomas' Schema in Action

Throughout the study, the children were invited into whole class discussions and small

group discussions, hands-on learning activities, art activities, and writing activities. These were

the many ways the children were invited to reflect on, connect to, understand, disagree with,

challenge, and enjoy the texts. The rich meaning derived from the data came from looking at all

the data together and seeing the patterns in the data and looking at the language the children used

throughout the study. Thomas' statements and questions as we read the texts that challenged

normative gender expression revealed how he was calling upon his schema of *boy* and trying to

make sense of the disruptive messaging. On the first day of our study, I introduced, *I Love my*

Colorful Nails (Acosta & Amavisca, 2018), a story about a boy named Ben who loves to wear

colourful nail polish. When I showed the children the front cover, Thomas quickly interjected,

"Wait. It's a boy. That's a boy." Thomas did not phrase this as a question but stated it more as a

confirmation of his understanding of the main character, Ben's, gender. Thomas's statement

demonstrates that his schema of *boy* either already includes painted nails as a sanctioned form of

self-expression or that he is willing to add this to his existing schema. In confirming Ben's

gender as *boy*, Thomas also appears to have a binary construct of gender. Thomas' acceptance of

painted nails was reflective of the views of many students in the class. From the children's

discussion, many students could name boys in their life who had painted, or continue to paint,

their fingernails.

Thomas again appeared to interpret a male character's nonnormative gender expression

through his schema of *boy* during our second text, *Morris Micklewhite and the Tangerine Dress*

(Baldacchino, 2014). In this text, Morris is a boy who likes to put on a favourite dress from his

classroom's dress-up play area. Morris' gender presentation in the tangerine dress appeared more

challenging for Thomas than Ben's nail painting. Early in the text, Thomas asked a question

about Morris' gender rather than reaffirm his knowledge of it. Thomas queried, "Is he a boy?"

Thomas' schema of *boy*, like the other children in the class, did not seem to include wearing

dresses. While Ben and Morris both love to paint their nails, Ben adheres to the normative

masculine attire of young boys attending school, wearing pants, a shirt, and comfortable athletic

shoes. Morris' gender expression, however, is a greater challenge to Thomas' understanding of

normative masculinity than Ben's. The children's responses to which character they connected to the most and least suggests that Morris' self-expression may have been too different from their existing schema of *boy*. Morris was not chosen by any of the students as a character they most connected to, and he was the character many children said they least connected to. Jason said that Morris was the character he connected the least to because, "I just like normal clothes." For Thomas and Jason, dresses seem to not be an expected attire for boys in their schema of *boy*. Thomas' questioning of Morris' gender suggests his schema of *boy* is more fluid than Jason's (or at least open to being challenged) as Jason's statement demonstrates a rejection of Morris' self-expression. Thomas' question suggests he was trying to reconcile how a boy wearing a dress fit into his schema of *boy*.

During our reading of *Julián is a Mermaid* (Love, 2018), in which a boy identifies as a mermaid, Thomas interrupted the story to ask, almost in wonderment, "A boy is a mermaid?" There was a debate raging in the classroom at this time on whether mermaids were real. The way Thomas posed his question reveals both his belief that mermaids exist and that his schema of mermaids is that they are female. His schema of *boy* did not appear to include the possibility to express oneself or identify oneself as a mermaid or that mermaids could be male. It seems that his posing of the question implied that his schema of *boy* was open to expanded possibilities as he could alternatively have stated, "Boys can't be mermaids!" In response to Thomas' question, a student suggested the term "merman." Thomas accepted that suggestion and said to me, "Yeah, a merman," as if to correct my reading of the story. Thomas had adapted his schema of *boy* to accept the self-expression and/or identity as a mermaid, but on the condition that the gender in the language was altered to merman—a masculine term. In so doing, we also see how Thomas's schema of gender continued to uphold the male-female binary.

Thomas' experiences demonstrate the ways in which his existing schematic knowledge aligned with or was disrupted by the non-normative gender performances presented in the texts. His vocalized thinking is reflective of how students process new information and assess them against their existing schematic knowledge. While Thomas seemed willing to adjust his schema of *boy* to accommodate the gender disruptive messaging presented in the texts, there were times when the disruptive messaging was too unfamiliar to him (and the other students), and so he and they resisted the disruption. For example, the systemic discrimination presented in *The Girl with a Mind for Math: The Story of Raye Montague* (Finley Mosca, 2018) and in *Malala's Magic Pencil* (Yousafzai, 2017) seemed to be too unfamiliar to the students. These experiences will be discussed more fully in the following sections where I articulate the main themes that arose from the data, specifically the children's resistance to the disruptive messaging because of its unfamiliarity; their resistance to the disruptive messaging because of its dissimilarity to their entrenched normative expectations; and their adaption of the disruptive messaging.

Unfamiliarity with the Disruptive Messaging and Students' Resistance

Resisting Systemic Racism

Finley Mosca's (2018) text, *The Girl with a Mind for Math: The Story of Raye Montague,* is the true story of Raye Montague, a Black woman who dedicated her life to becoming an engineer. Raye succeeded in her profession despite the many times and the many ways she was told that she could not because she was Black and/or a woman. I anticipated that Raye's identity as a Black woman would be challenging for the students to understand based on my experience of having read this text to a previous class. Thus, I prepared a PowerPoint slideshow of the text's images that represented the nine times Raye was told she could not do something because of her race and/or gender, such as study engineering, be an engineer, be invited to the launch of her

submarine, etcetera. The first time Raye was told she could not design a submarine was when her grandfather took her to see a real submarine when she was 7 years old. The illustration depicts four white men, one of whom is patronizingly patting Raye's head as she stands with her grandfather. When I asked the children why people were telling Raye she could not build a submarine here, many children shouted out: "'Cuz she's too short." Presumably, the children were making this inference based on the illustration and perhaps, their own personal experiences of being told they could not do something because they were not tall enough. They did not seem to draw on the narrative that explicitly stated that Raye was treated differently because of her race and gender:

> Stay strong, said her mom. Use your brains. You'll be fine. There will always be people who pay you no mind—just because you're a girl, and because you are black. Don't let them or the state of your school hold you back. (Finley Mosca, 2018, p. 8)

Finley Mosca explicitly states in this passage that Raye was discriminated against because of her female sex and her racial identity as a Black person.

Further in our discussion of the images in the PowerPoint, where Raye, newly graduated from business school, was hired as a typist for the United States Navy, Raye was sitting in front of a typewriter and three white men were standing behind her talking. I asked the class why she was told she could not design submarines here. A student again inferred from the illustration that her height was the reason. He also noticed her youthful appearance in comparison to the men's. Evan stated, "Because she is too short, and she is too young." Raye's experiences of racial and gender prejudice did not appear to be a part of Evan's life experiences. Evan, in trying to understand why Raye was being treated unfairly, seemed to call on his own personal experiences where he had been told that he was not allowed to do something. Age and height are often

barriers for grade two children. For example, many wish to watch movies or play video games beyond the suggested age restrictions. When children participate in athletic activities, their age is often used to categorize them into groupings. Their height as well restricts their play and independence, such as reaching the higher bars on a play structure and having to ask adults for things beyond their reach. The author overtly described that Raye could not be an engineer because she was Black, and at that time, the segregated schooling system did not offer engineering as an area of study for Black students. Yet, Evan could not understand or integrate this meaning, as he did not seem to have the schema to support the systemic racial discrimination in this context.

The segregated schooling system was challenging for the students to understand. Their entry point into the conversation was to draw upon their understanding of residential schools. Maria was one of the students who first commented on the likeness of the two schooling systems. When I asked how a segregated school was like a residential school, Evan commented on the separation by race and said, "And they have to have the same um skin colour." Isaiah supported Evan by saying, "They need the same colour to be there." In connecting segregated schools to residential schools, Evan and Isaiah could then identify that race, or in their words, skin colour, was used to separate children into segregated schools and residential schools. When I invited the children to think a little more critically about the schools for Black students and the schools for white students, I asked them which school was better. In doing so, I showed them the illustration with Raye in the foreground looking sadly at the three happy white students walking to their sprawling campus building with books in their hand. The text on those pages reads, "You see, schools in those days were what's called segregated. The black and white students were kept separated. That's wrong! you exclaim. It was dismal, no fooling. And worst of all, white kids

received better schooling," (Finley Mosca, 2018, pp. 9-10). Here, too, the words seemed ineffective as many of the children did not have the schema for the systemic racism Raye faced. This was demonstrated by Haley who responded that the schools for Black students were better. After a student corrected her and pointed to the image of the school for white students, I reiterated that indeed, the schools for white students were better. Haley was baffled. She asked, "Why was it better? Why wouldn't they let the Brown people in?" We discussed the schooling systems in greater detail the following day. I shared how all schools need money to buy supplies and equipment, and that it was the government who funded schools. I told the children that the government purposefully gave more money to schools with white students than Black students. I also discussed with the children how residential schools were different from segregated schools. I shared how the children in residential school were forbidden from speaking their own language, eating their own food, celebrating their own holidays, and that the churches who ran the schools did not let the children see their own parents.

Most children did not comprehend the nefarious purposes of segregating schools by race, nor did they comprehend the goal of the erasure of Indigenous people and their culture through the residential schooling system. Isaac, however, seemed to have a more developed schema of residential schools. He summarized our learning about residential schools by stating, "Um, that residential schools are like brainwashing." I answered, "That, whoa, that is exactly what they were doing. They were brainwashing. Can you explain that a bit more?" Isaac answered, "Um, brainwashing is where someone takes away people's memories and replaces it with new ones." I replied, "Right. And the new ones would be how to be a white person, right?" While our discussion appears to have strayed from Raye's experiences in the text, it is important to remember that the children seemed to be connecting segregated schools to their previously

established schema of *residential schools* which, for these grade two students, was fostered in their kindergarten and grades one and two schooling experiences when honouring Orange Shirt Day and Day of Truth and Reconciliation. Through this connection, the children could understand that there was segregation by race and that with more teacher support and guidance, the schools for white students were unfairly better.

Resisting Gender Discrimination

While some children had the schema to connect Raye's racial identity to the discrimination she faced, Raye's gender was rarely offered as a reason for discrimination. The reality of the field of engineering today is that women are grossly underrepresented in the profession. Just over 13% of engineers in Canada are female even though half of the Canadian population is female (Engineers Canada, 2018). I had selected the story of Raye Montague given the deeply entrenched gender bias and discrimination within the field of engineering. The children, who only learned what an engineer was in my introduction to this text, had no knowledge of the gender inequities in the field and the text's faint gender disruptive message was seemingly not understood.

The children's unfamiliarity with gender discrimination was also evident in *Malala's Magic Pencil* (Yousafzai, 2017*)*. This text is an autobiography written by Yousafzai that focuses on her childhood and the retelling of her experiences that led her to become a leading women's and human rights activist. Our read-aloud discussions suggest the children had no schema with which to process the fact that a child's gender could permit or deny them access to an education. Nor did they have the schema to understand the purposes or repercussions of denying girls an education.

For example, Yousafzai (2017) included in her text how she was viciously attacked for speaking out against the governmental regime in her country when they decreed girls could no longer go to school. However, because the book's audience is young children, Yousafzai superficially describes the attack, and the supporting image is not overt enough for young children to fully comprehend the impact of the attack. Yousafzai simply writes, "My voice became so powerful that the dangerous men tried to silence me. But they failed" (p. 29). I had anticipated children's confusion at this important part of the story based on having read this text to a previous class. I paused in my reading of the text at this page to better describe the image on the page. I said, "That's her in a hospital. You can see her hospital wrist band there." Haley immediately asks, "Wait. Why is she in the hospital?" Caleb was also incredulous and said, "Why is she?" I responded by saying, "Because the, the people in power, the men in power didn't like that she was talking about what was happening in her country, and how these men were stopping girls from going to school." Malala's attack is a shocking event that these grade two children have most likely never encountered in their experiences or in other reading. Allison's statements best exemplify the children's disbelief and confusion: "I just don't get it. Why would they do that to her?" When the children had an understanding that Malala was physically hurt enough to go to a hospital, they began to try to understand the motivation for someone to hurt her. Haley asked, "But why? Why? Why would they not want girls to go to school?" To help support the children's understanding of the gender discrimination towards girls and women, I reread the following passage of the text that specifically outlined the grim future for girls in Pakistan:

> That night I thought about families who didn't have enough food. And the girl who
>
> couldn't go to school. And even about how when I was older, I would be expected to

cook and clean for my brothers, because where I came from, many girls weren't allowed

to become what they dreamed of. (Yousafzai, p. 16)

After I reread the passage, I asked the children, "What is the future of girls?" Haley replied,

seemingly drawing upon her schema of *girl* "They, they can, ah, they can do, they can do

whatever they want." Haley's schema seems to be impermeable to Malala's experience. I tried

again by reading the last sentence in the same passage: "I would be expected to cook and clean

for my brothers" (Yousafzai, p. 16). The students started chattering as they realized what

Malala's future was and the future of girls in her country. I then asked them when the chatter

died down, "What are the girls growing up to be? They are expected to take care of…?" Haley

was first to answer and shouted, "Boys!" The realization that Malala and the girls and women in

her country grow up to take care of the boys and men, for Haley and many children in the class

appears to remain a phenomenon unique to Malala. Haley and the children had not connected the

gender discrimination faced by Malala to their own and Western societal realities, and Haley

likely still believes that girls can "do whatever they want."

       Near the end of our read-aloud discussion, I re-attempted to support the children to

understand how refusing to educate girls kept girls dependent on men and restricted their

experiences to their immediate familial surroundings. I approached the conversation by inviting

the children to share what they themselves learned at school. Our discussion went as follows

(with some editing of non-relevant and non-consenting students' comments):

Teacher: What do you learn at school?

Caleb: Lots of things.

Teacher: Haley, what do you learn at school?

Haley: I learn I learn French and to read in French.

Teacher: Ok. You learn to read. You learn language.

Maria: You learn math.

Teacher: You learn math, Maria.

Haley: Homework.

Teacher: You learn about the…

Unknown children (UCs) and teacher: world!

Teacher: Right? Ok. Music!

Thomas: Drawing!

Haley: Drawing, drawing, and we go to gym!

Teacher: Ok, now. Ok. Hang on. I'm thinking. I'm thinking. You learn all this at the,

you learn all this at school.

Allison: We didn't do friends.

Teacher: Yeah, you make new friends. You make friends. Ok. So, if you don't go to

school, can you really go out in the world to buy things if you don't know math, if you

don't know how to read, can you get a job?

UCs: No.

Teacher: No, if you can't write, can you get a job?

UCs: No!

Teacher: No, if um, like if you don't have your music and your art…

Haley: Would you be able to like make stuff? Like if you don't know, like how to use the

scissors, if you don't know how…

Teacher: Right and appreciate all that is beautiful in the world, and you learn about the

world and that makes you want to go and travel. Like remember when we talked about

Paris yesterday? [during the read-aloud session of *Keith Haring: The Boy who Just Kept Drawing* (Haring, 2017)] And you were all like, Oh my gosh! Paris!

UCs: [excited chatter]

Teacher: Like you learn about…

Isaiah: I already knew about art when I was when I wasn't even in school, I already knew about art.

Teacher: You learn about the world and in learning about the world you want to go see the world. So, Malala's government, in keeping girls out of this [points to list of what we learn at school]

Haley: School.

Teacher: What are they guaranteeing will happen? Haley?

Haley: That girls won't like, do, if they take care of boys, they don't know what to do so that's actually being dumb that they take girls out of school.

As we can see, the children's lived experiences and their Western schema of *girl* were vastly different from Malala's. Haley's summarizing statement suggests she has distanced Malala's experience from her own as she appears to have accepted the fate of girls and women in Malala's country and their role of servitude to the men.

The gender disruptive messaging from this text was too unfamiliar to most of the children to be adapted into their own schema of *girl* or for them to even make a personal connection between their own life and Malala's. Only one student made a personal connection to the gender discrimination. Allison recognized how the normative gender roles are present in her home and said, "My mom takes care of my dad a lot." I had hoped more children would make this connection given women's continued role as primary caregivers and responsibility for a larger

share of household chores. I posit that the expectation of women's caregiving role in the home is too normalized for most children to critically consider how this is inequitable and to consider a parallel to Malala's experiences. Schuette and Killen (2009) found that children relied on gender stereotypes to suggest which child should help a parent in completing a traditionally gendered household chore. For example, children suggested that a mother should ask a daughter to help with the vacuuming which is a traditional female chore, and a father should ask a son to help with yard work which is a traditional male chore. And so, the truisms of the gender discourses appear deeply entrenched in the children's schema.

The Unfamiliarity with Western Capitalist Hegemony

A final text where much of the disruptive messaging was too unfamiliar to the students was *Keith Haring: The Boy who Just Kept Drawing* (Haring, 2017). Keith was a world-renowned artist who frequently drew in public places such as the sides of buildings, on derelict fences, and on subway walls. He did so to make art accessible to everyone–defying the classist norms of the art world. Brody (2022) describes the luxury experience of collecting art as: "An elitist activity predicated on financial resources and in-network expertise" (p. 195). Keith often thwarted the elitism of the art world by frequently giving his art away and/or by donating the money from his art sales to charity. His altruism challenged the hegemonic masculine norm to continually amass personal wealth (Moreno-Bella et al., 2019; Williams et al., 2010). In the text, the author also highlighted Keith's involvement with children and children's charities. In this, Keith is challenging the Western positioning of males as detached from family and children, and women as primary caregivers. From our discussions, I posit that the children did not have the schema to understand how Keith's actions challenged those facets of masculine hegemony as they had not experienced and/or been invited to reflect on those norms before.

This resistance was demonstrated during our read-aloud discussion. To help the children recognize and/or vocalize some knowledge of the capitalist expectations of masculinity, so that they could begin to make a connection to Keith's experiences, I showed the children an image of the ten wealthiest people in Canada from Vizaca website (2020). The image includes nine pictures of men and one picture of a husband of wife who are members of the wealthy Saputo family.

> Teacher: Ok. So, Keith gave most of his money away. So, Keith was pretty exceptional in ah, sharing his art, making others enjoying art. In Canada, I have Googled the richest people. Who do you think are the richest people?
>
> Isaac: Mr. Beast.
>
> Haley: I was going to say Mr. Beast.
>
> UCs: [now chanting together] Mr. Beast! Mr. Beast!
>
> Teacher: I don't even know who that is!
>
> Teacher: Oh, he's a YouTuber. Ok. They're not, they're not. They may be wealthy, but they are not the top richest people in Canada.
>
> Makayla: He makes like 10 grand a video or more.
>
> Mme T: Haley?
>
> Haley: The mayor.
>
> Makayla: The government!
>
> Teacher: Haley is saying the mayor. The government. They are wealthy but they are not the richest people. Those are excellent guesses. Alright I am going to show you a picture. These are Canada's top 10 richest people. What do you notice about them?
>
> Makayla: They are all old.

Teacher: Right, they are all old.

Maria: Well look Madame, one picture has 2 people.

Caleb: And they are all boys.

Teacher: They are all boys!

Teacher: 'Kay. So. They are all boys. Keith is a boy.

UCs: Yeah.

Teacher: So, what do you think about Keith giving money away now? Is it expected that

he will give his money away or is he expected to try to make as much money as he can?

Maria: I think so that he can give it away to people who have cancer and stuff.

This conversation demonstrates not only the influence of media in the children's lives, but also their unawareness of Western capitalist masculine hegemony. Makayla first noticed their age in comparison to hers and her classmates. Age appears to be a prevalent schema used for making sense of their world as the children called upon this age schema to make sense of the race and gender discrimination experienced by Raye Montague in *The Girl with a Mind for Math: The Story of Raye Montague* (Finley Mosca, 2018). Maria believed that Keith made money so that he could give it away to those in need. There were many children who similarly thought as Maria. In the follow-up reading activity to *Keith Haring: The Boy who Just Kept Drawing* (Haring, 2017) the children were invited into a discussion of Keith's actions with a small group of peers. I had pre-grouped the children and pre-assigned them a question or two to answer. In responding to the question of why Keith kept drawing, Luke and Jason understood Keith's altruistic actions as Maria did. They said:

Luke: Because he wanted to get money for the kids.

Teacher [paraphrasing Luke's response for the class]: So, their question was why did

Keith keep drawing and their answer was because, Luke, he wanted to make money for

the kids?

Luke: No but that wasn't our whole part.

Teacher: Oh.

Jason: He wanted to make the world a better place.

Teacher: Wow. And make the world a better place. Wow. Thank you.

While the deeper knowledge that Keith is challenging masculine hegemony is not evident to the

children, it is important to note that children like Maria, Luke, and Jason valued Keith's altruism.

The children's valuing of male altruistic actions could be an entry point to explore in disrupting

the hegemonic masculine discourse—or as Gannon and Davies (2012) identify as, "a crack and

fissure" (p. 15) in the discourse.

Raye's gender norm and systemic racism defying actions, as well as Keith's and Malala's

gender norm disruptions were difficult for the children to understand. They did not have the life

experience or intertextual knowledge to critically reflect on how the characters were challenging

societal expectations and systemic norms. The children relied on their schemas of age, height,

and gender—likely reflective of their individual and personal experiences—which overrode the

disruptive messaging of systemic discrimination. As we have seen here, the children resisted the

disruptive messaging of systemic discrimination because they did not have a schema to

understand this complex and conceptual structure. However, there were times when the

children's resistance was seemingly because they were unwilling to have their schemas

challenged—as we will see in the next section.

Entrenched Norms and Resistance to the Disruptive Messaging

Embedded Heteronormativity in the Children's Social Interactions

The presentation of two fathers in, *The Purim Superhero,* (Kushner, 2013) provided an opportunity to challenge heteronormativity. However, the children's daily social interactions underscore how heteronormativity is upheld through an expectation of same-gender friendship. During our read-aloud of Kushner's text, as we learned that Nate, the protagonist, lives with his two fathers, Allison asked, "Um, how come, um, how did, how, how come he has two dads 'cuz boys can't have babies?" We can see even in the asking of the question that Allison is unsure as to how to phrase the question. Haley offered this reply to Allison's question, "Um maybe that, maybe that um he did have a mom and the mom just passed away." Haley is defaulting to her heteronormative schema of *family* in suggesting that there was a mother and given that children's fairy tales are replete with dead mothers and stepmothers, this suggestion makes a lot of sense. Haley's statement also demonstrates that her schema of *family* requires children have a genetic connection to their parents. Reflective in Allison's question and Haley's statement is an appeared acceptance of the same-sex relationship (or at least not a challenge to it), but their concern lies in how the children came to be in the family. Perhaps the children's disregard for the romantic pairing of same-sex couples is deeply rooted in heteronormativity. In the classroom, heteronormativity appears to manifest in the children's expectations for, and policing of, same-gender groupings and friendships—rather than mixed-gender groupings. The focus and energy the children devote to upholding heteronormativity in their social interactions perhaps leaves little time for them to concern themselves with adult relationships—a social category which the children recognize they have very little agency in.

There is much empirical data on the phenomenon of children's same-sex peer groups (Maccoby, 2002; Martin et al., 2013; McCormick et al., 2015). The field of psychology focuses on the phenomenon of how children, beginning around the age of three, form predominantly same-sex friendship groups. Their findings demonstrate that children typically choose their friends based on their sex, and then, select children from among those friendships, those who have similar play interests. Martin et al. (2013) explain that, "Knowing another child's sex provides children with information to define whether that child belongs to the in-group versus the out-groups, and they form expectations that same-sex children share similar interests and that other-sex peers do not" (p. 933). While this data is helpful, it does not theorize why children have chosen gender upon which to create a binarized categorization of an "in-group" and an "out-group," nor does it recognize or theorize the incredible effort required by the children to uphold and police this tenuous and artificial binary through what Davies (2003) calls "category maintenance" (p. 31).

The data from my Observation Guide demonstrates that the children were very uncomfortable with mixed-gender friendships. These observations are similar to findings by Renold (2006) and Wason-Ellam (1997). Renold found how children aged 10 and 11 were able to circumvent for a short amount of time, the heteronormative romantic construct of a boy-girl pairing by pretending to be romantically coupled. Soon though, the children's classmates caught on and began policing the cross-gender friends with taunts and teasing. Wason-Ellam studied slightly younger children. She found it was difficult for the children to disrupt the heteronormative romantic construct of a boy and girl pairing. The intertextual connections the girls in her study made to outside media featuring heteronormative romantic pairings of men and women together superseded the gender disruptive texts she was reading to them. Wason-Ellam

adapted her text selection and began reading texts which featured heterogenous friendship

pairings of boys and girls and stated:

> We chose picture storybooks that had images of cross-gender relationships based on
>
> friendship and collegiality. We shared texts that showed boys and girls as friends…to
>
> help girls and boys related to one another as friends, not as potential romantic partners.
>
> (p. 436)

During my four-week study, I observed numerous instances when children struggled

with—and actively resisted—the concept of heterogenous groupings and friendships. One area

the children policed same-gender groupings was at their worktable. New table seating plans are

highly exciting times in grade two. In creating a seating plan, I aim to support and foster

friendships as well as positive learning communities. Balancing a table by gender has never been

one of my considerations nor have I focused on creating same-gender tables. Yet, the following

excited statements by some students demonstrate their attention to same gender groupings:

> Maria: "Since (name of absent male student) is not at our desk, we have all girls."
>
> Evan: "All boys at our desk! Yay!"
>
> Isaiah: "All boys at our desk! Yay!"
>
> Makayla: "Oh! (name of absent female student) is at our table! Oh! I think we are an all-
>
> girls table!" [Makayla proceeded to clap her hands.]

We see in these statements, the children's excitement at having their table groupings consist of

same-gender students.

On occasion, the children are invited to select their own seats at the worktables. This

same sorting by gender is also evinced. Mid-way through the study, I invited the children to find

their own seating at the tables as many children were absent due to a seasonal cold. Three girls

commented on the same-gendered groupings of the worktables. Allison, speaking to Brooke and Makayla said, "That's the boy section and this is the girl section." The eschewing of cross gender friendship supports Wason-Ellam's (1997) findings that girls and boys continue to view each other paired together only in romantic relationships, and in denouncing cross-gender friendships the children are communicating a refusal to be part of, or seen as, involved in a romantic relationship.

By upholding same-gender groupings many students communicated their understanding of the norm that boys and girls are only together for romantic partnership, as evidenced by Evan's comments. Shortly after school one day as Evan was leaving, he walked beside me and shared in his playful way that he had "a friend who was a girl." I said, "That's nice. Who is it?" By then, I had stopped walking and he continued on his way, turning his head back to say, like it was a secret, "I'm not telling." And he walked away with a smile on his face. Evan's choice of words in that he has a singular friend who is a girl, demonstrates the rarity of this occurrence. In addition, the fact that it is a secret suggests this is not simply a playmate, but rather someone a person grade two children define as having a crush on. Or alternatively, Evan understands that the heteronormative construct of cross-gender pairings is such that he must keep this friendship a secret or else he will get teased by his classmates as being romantically paired with her.

There was also a "crack and fissure" (Gannon & Davies, 2012, p. 15) in the same-sex friendship discourse during the study. I had paired Haley and Cameron together for a reader-response activity for the book, *Iggy Peck Architect* (Beaty, 2007). Cameron groaned at the pairing, presumably because he was with a girl and felt compelled to communicate to his classmates his displeasure to stave off any possible teasing that he and Haley were romantically partnered. It appeared though that Haley and Cameron had a similar keenness for planning and

building bridges like Iggy—the main character of the book. Haley and Cameron collaboratively composed and designed an elaborate back story to how Iggy and his classmates would rescue themselves and their teacher from the island. When the activity was done, Haley excitedly shared that she and Cameron were going to chat after school about building bridges on a child-friendly social media app. Further, when I picked the class up from gym that day, Makayla, who is a good friend of Haley's, said that she and Haley had met a new friend. I was excited, thinking it was someone they had met at recess from another class. I asked Makayla who it was, and she said, "Cameron." I paused and then asked which class Cameron was in. Makayla laughed and said, "Our class." It was surprising to me that we were almost half-way through the school year and Makayla was classifying this friendship as a new friendship. That Haley and Makayla only now identified Cameron as a friend, reinforced how infrequently boys and girls think of each other as friends.

The children's positioning of cross-gender pairings as romantic reflects heteronormative discourses and plays out in their eschewing of cross-gender friendships and pairings. Same-gender friendships uphold the male-female gender dichotomy which can maintain and reinforce normative gender roles and identities for children, and ultimately risks reifying, the valuing of masculinity over femininity. As Wason-Ellam (1997) concluded, to disrupt the valuing of masculinity over femininity, she had to first disrupt the romantic ideation of cross-gender pairings. It appears there is much work to be done to support the children to disrupt the firm grasp heteronormativity has on their daily classroom social interactions. As we will next see, the grip of gender norms and heteronormativity inherent in classic fairy tales also interfered with the children's ability to attend to a text's disruptive messaging

Embedded Gender and Heteronormative Expectations in the Classic Fairy Tale Cinderella

The children's experiences with *Interstellar Cinderella* (Underwood, 2015) were another

time when the children's prior knowledge was too entrenched in their schema, and therefore, the

disruptive messaging was initially rejected. Underwood's fractured fairy tale takes place in

space, and Interstellar Cinderella's household chores include fixing the various robotic

appliances in the house. Interstellar Cinderella's dream is to be a mechanic and fix spaceships. I

chose to include this text in the study because it positioned Interstellar Cinderella and the prince

in gender-disruptive roles, it challenged heteronormativity as Interstellar Cinderella declines the

prince's marriage proposal, and there is an obvious intertextual connection between Interstellar

Cinderella and Raye Montague, as they both built ships. Also, as mentioned, there is much

debate on the effectiveness of gender-role reversal texts and I wanted to understand how my

students were interpreting the disruptive messaging here.

The children initially struggled to understand this gender-role reversal and fractured

fairy-tale text. Twice we read *Interstellar Cinderella* (Underwood, 2015), and we had

discussions over a three-day period. The data collected from the first reading demonstrates an

overall rejection of the gender and heteronormative disruptive messaging as the children were

excited by and focused on comparing this fractured fairy tale to its traditional story. By uniquely

focusing on how this text differed from the traditional *Cinderella* text, this, in effect, served to

uphold the gender norms and the heteronormativity from the traditional version. For example,

the children noticed that both versions had a mouse, the witching hour of midnight when the

magic ended, a prince, Cinderella leaving something behind at the ball, a stepmother, stepsisters,

and a fairy godmother. After the post-reading discussion where I invited the children to identify

the various characters and main events of the story, I asked them to reflect on and write about

who the hero was in the story and why. Prior to the children going to write on their own we had

had a brief discussion about the hero of the story. In our discussion when the children were

discussing the role and importance of the robotic mouse, Isaac reminded us that the mouse was

indeed one of Interstellar Cinderella's tools. He said, "The mouse is the tool." I followed up his

observation with a leading question, "Who do you think made the mouse?" Haley answered,

"Her!" I replied, "Yeah! Cinderella. Smart." Yet despite this conversation, nine out of the 12

children present that day wrote that the mouse was the hero of the story because he chewed the

rope off Interstellar Cinderella's hands after her stepmother had tied her up. Even Isaac wrote

that the mouse was the hero of the story because, "The mouse untied Cinderella." During the

discussion Makayla stated that Interstellar Cinderella was the hero and yet in her writing, said

that the mouse was the hero because, "The mouse bit through the door to save Cinderella and get

the wrench." Only two children—Caleb and Robert—wrote that Interstellar Cinderella was the

hero. Caleb wrote she was a hero because, "She fixed the spaceship," which suggests his schema

of *girl* includes some accessibility to agency, and his seeming adaptation of Cinderella's gender

disruptive actions. Robert wrote that she was the hero because she flew spaceships. Earles (2017)

may argue that Robert's response, which focuses on Interstellar Cinderella's more traditional

masculine endeavours, suggests that for him, this story setting of outer space and the female

protagonist are disconnected and produced what Massumi (as cited in Earles, 2017) defined as

"gridlock" (p. 377). For Robert then, Underwood's text was unbelievable, and his schema of *girl*

was unchallenged. Overall, the nine children in choosing the mouse as a hero are showing us that

their schema of *girl*, as understood through fairy tales, is deeply entrenched as victim or in need

of saving and therefore, as helpless. These findings are similar to Davies' (2003) findings when

she read the children in her study Munsch's (1980) gender-role reversal text. There, too, the

children did not recognize the female protagonist's agency and positioned either the unkind

prince or the outsmarted dragon as the hero.

For the written reflection, the children were also asked to share if they thought Interstellar

Cinderella should have married the prince, and to justify their answer. Prior to the written

reflection, we also had a brief class discussion. Caleb appeared to call upon his schema of the

traditional *Cinderella* story and argued that the story always ended with her marrying the prince.

He said, "It's 'cuz the book always has the ending." I rephrased the following back to him, "'Cuz

it always has to have a happy ending? And is Cinderella not marrying the prince not a happy

ending Caleb?" Evan interjected and said, "No, it's not a happy ending." Haley entered the

discussion and suggested, "It kind of is a happy ending because she got to follow her dreams."

Caleb, after listening to the discussion, appeared to adjust his thinking and suggested that, "If she

marries the prince then she's not going to be an engineer." Caleb's thinking is demonstrating an

intertextual connection between Interstellar Cinderella and Raye Montague from earlier in our

study. His schema of *girl* appears to include engineering as an acceptable profession. What is

also of interest is that Caleb believes Interstellar Cinderella is faced with an either-or decision:

marriage or career.

Many children thought as Caleb did in their written responses that Interstellar Cinderella

had to choose between marriage or career. Consider the following responses to the question,

should Cinderella have married the prince (the writing has been edited for spelling):

Haley: No she shouldn't marry the prince so that she could follow her dream.

Jason: No she shouldn't marry the prince because then she couldn't get her dream job.

Luke: No she shouldn't marry the prince because if she marries the prince, she would

have to not be a mechanic.

In accepting the heteronormative disruption where Interstellar Cinderella refuses the prince's marriage proposal, the children have upheld a pervasive gender norm for women where women must choose between a career and family.

The children's integration of the norm disruptive messaging was also hindered by the text's illustrations. Meg Hunt, the illustrator, has drawn the characters in *Interstellar Cinderella* (Underwood, 2015) in a somewhat caricature fashion. The characters' bodies are proportioned similar to that of children's bodies; shorter and stockier. Hunt has also drawn distinct nose freckles on Cinderella's face that are markers of youth, and the jetpack on her back often looks like a child's school backpack. It is not surprising then that when the prince proposed marriage to Interstellar Cinderella, the children questioned the plausibility of this given her youthful appearance. Underwood herself subverts the realism of this event when Interstellar Cinderella herself declares she is too young. "I'm far too young for marriage, but I'll be your chief mechanic" (Underwood, n.p.). Makayla wondered aloud how old Interstellar Cinderella was given her response. From the illustrations, many children guessed her age to be a mere 10 or 11 years old. The unbelievability of marriage because of Interstellar Cinderella's youthful appearance weakened the gender and heteronormative disruptive rejection of the prince's marriage proposal, and perhaps, may even have left the children with hope that as she grows up, she will one day marry the prince.

The children's experiences of our first reading and discussion of *Interstellar Cinderella* highlighted the tenacity of gender norms and heteronormativity in fairy tales. In our subsequent reading and discussions of the text, with much explicit teaching, some children appeared able to attend to and accept the disruptive messaging. Next, I will discuss how the intertextual

connections nurtured in this study supported the children to adapt some of the texts' disruptive

messaging.

Adaption of the Disruptive Messaging

New Heroes: Raye Montague, Keith Haring, and Malala Yousafzai

In striving to scaffold the children's experiences to create more fluid constructs of gender

and sexuality, I was mindful of designing my study to foster intertextual knowledge to support

the children in making connections and gaining experiences with which to call upon to discuss

the texts. I also thematically grouped the texts to scaffold the children's knowledge of gender

expression, gender norms, and heteronormativity. Some of my goals for the second week of the

study were to disrupt gender norms, to explore how children experienced Raye's identity as a

Black woman, and to nurture a common valuing of Raye's and Malala's achievements with

Keith's achievements. To do this, I read Kushner's (2013), *The Purim Superhero* as our fourth

text that week where I hoped to draw upon her gender disruptive definition of a *hero* as a

reference point upon which the children could discuss and compare Raye, Malala, and Keith.

Cross-gender comparisons and their equitable valuation has been found challenging for children

by Bartholomaeus (2016) and Wason-Ellam (1997). I wished to explore the disruption of this

phenomenon by means of Kushner's reconstructed hero framework as a possible "crack and

fissure" in the gender discourses (Gannon & Davies, 2012, p. 15).

Kushner's (2013) text features a boy named Nate who manages to circumvent gender-

based peer pressure by designing his own superhero costume for his class's Purim celebration.

Kushner's redefining of a hero to equally value strength of character with physical strength,

appeared to create a "crack and fissure" (Gannon & Davies, 2012, p. 15) in the gender discourses

for the children in my study. In reflection on how Raye, Keith, and Malala were heroes through

the reconstructed definition of hero, an equal number of children chose Malala and Keith as a hero, with several children defying the heteronormative expectation to identify with a protagonist of the same-sex by choosing a cross-gender hero. Westland (1993) found that after reading three classic fairy tales to 10 and 11-year-old children, the girls predominantly drew a princess as their favourite character, and the boys most identified with the traditional princes. Given this same-sex character preference phenomenon in early years children, some children's cross-gender choosing of a hero in my study suggests the children were perhaps willing to attend to and evaluate the characters on their actual merits from our texts and discussions. Three children—Thomas, Allison, and Jason—each wrote that Raye, Keith, and Malala were all heroes because they helped the world or strove to make the world a better place. It can be argued that while Raye did not set out to better the world, her defiance of the racist and gendered norms did in fact make the world a better place by paving the way for others to follow in her footsteps. Thomas, Allison, and Jason appeared to adapt their schemas of *hero,* and both *boy* and *girl* in equating Raye's, Keith's, and Malala's accomplishments, and in bestowing on them equally the status of hero.

The deeper knowledge of systemic discrimination I sought the children's understanding of from each of these texts individually was resisted by the children as the characters' experiences were too unfamiliar to their existing schema. However, in discussing the characters together and in providing Kushner's (2013) *hero* framework to support the children's thinking, each student was able to articulate and justify who was most like a hero. In choosing even one of these norm-defying characters as a hero demonstrates that the children were in a way able to hold a less hegemonic masculine notion of *hero*.

Julián is a Mermaid (Love, 2018) and *My Shadow is Pink* (Stuart, 2020) feature gender nonconforming boys. As previously discussed, Morris's gender expression (from *Morris*

Micklewhite and the Tangerine Dress [Baldacchino, 2014]) strayed too far from the children's

schema of *boy*. Because of this experience and in anticipation of similar resistance to disruptive

gender expressions presented in *Julián is a Mermaid* and *My Shadow is Pink*, I took time to

provide more scaffolding. Bartholomaeus (2016) found in her study where she read gender

disruptive texts to kindergarten students, children's exposure to one gender disruptive text was

insufficient for children to adapt the disruption into their existing schema as children are

bombarded by gender norms in their everyday lives. As Ben's, Morris', Julián's, and the son's

gender expression in *My Shadow is Pink* strayed progressively further from the children's

schema of *boy*, I believed the children needed more opportunity to interact with characters who

challenged both gender norms and heteronormativity. I will present how in the final week of the

study, some children adapted Julián's presentation as a mermaid into their schema of *boy*, how a

discussion of Julián's abuela (grandmother) demonstrated some children's acceptance of Julián's

gender disruption, and how many children defiantly spoke back to Stuart in protest of his gender

normative representations in *My Shadow is Pink*.

"A Boy Can be a Mermaid?"

Julián in *Julián is a Mermaid* (Love, 2018) self identifies as a mermaid. At the beginning

of the text, Julián is travelling on a subway with his abuela to go swimming at a local pool.

Julián notices three beautiful women dressed in flowing dresses, each holding a fabric mermaid

tail in their arms. Julián shares with his abuela that he too is a mermaid. Julián imagines himself

as a mermaid as he swims in the pool and once back home, as his abuela is bathing, Julián sheds

his shorts and shirt to dress as a mermaid using a curtain and potted fern. Love's story is

communicated through beautiful illustrations with the pages having minimal to no written words.

Julián's identity as a mermaid is reflective of the acceptance of mermaid iconography in the

transfeminine community.

Campbell Galman (2018) would concur with Love's (2018) literary decision to have

Julián's character identify as a mermaid. Campbell Galman found that the majority of transgirls

aged 3 to 10 in her study called upon mermaid imagery in their drawings. Of the 32 transgirls in

her study, 25 drew themselves as a mermaid in self-portraits. Through her discussion with the

transgirls, Campbell Galman found that to them, mermaids were representational of the ultimate

feminine beauty–beauty above even that of a princess. Mermaids were also regarded as "more

than women" (Campbell Galman, p. 176) which aligned with how one participant in her study

articulated her identity, "I'm a girl but also more than a girl" (Campbell Galman, p. 174).

Transgirls identify mermaids as female but position them beyond the dichotomous binary

construct because of their uniqueness and magical qualities. Transgirls are empowered by

mermaid iconography and Campbell Galman found that the children in her study proudly self-

identified as or with mermaids. The mermaid iconography in Love's text was highly engaging

for many children in my classroom. They excitedly engaged with Love's beautiful illustrations

and the storyline. My children's written reflections of Julián's experiences demonstrate how

some children adapted the gender disruptive messaging by accepting Julián's identity as a

mermaid.

Thomas was one of the children who appeared to accept Julián's identity as a mermaid.

Thomas was the student who initially queried if a boy could be a mermaid and then accepted the

term "merman" into his schema to make sense of Julián's identity. Love's (2018) text concludes

with a large mermaid parade at the beach. As Julián and his abuela arrive at the parade, Julián

notices in wonderment that everyone at the parade is a mermaid. His abuela responds to him

saying, "Like you mijo. Let's join them" (Love, n.p.). Thomas reaffirmed the text's ending and

said, "They're all mermaids." Thomas's statement might be reflective of his abandonment of the

term "merman," to a seeming acceptance that Julián, a boy, can be a mermaid. Thomas' written

response to what the story was about also supported his acceptance of Julián as a mermaid.

Thomas wrote that the book was about, "Mermaid and festival joyful." Other children also

appeared to accept Julián's self-expression and wrote similar responses. Luke wrote, "Julián is a

mermaid," and Robert wrote that the book was about a "Mermaid and their grandma." Makayla's

written response also demonstrated an adaption of Julián's gender expression to her schema. She

wrote, "Julián can be whatever he wants to be, so he chose to be a mermaid which is fine. And at

the start of the story he sees some fake mermaids." Makayla demonstrates a deeper

understanding of Julián's identity by distinguishing between the women at the beginning of the

story dressing as mermaids and Julián's identity as a mermaid, which is reflective of how

transgirl children in Campbell Galman's (2018) study self-identified.

Other students such as Isaiah, Maria, and Evan appeared to have resisted Julián's identity

by separating his being away from the mermaid iconography. In response to the question "What

was the story about?" they wrote:

Isaiah: "Mermaids and Julián and imagination."

Maria: "1. Mermaids 2. Julián 3. The grandma!"

Evan: "Julián and party and and mermaids, grandma."

While Isaiah, Maria, and Evan seem to have distanced Julián from his gender identity, the

children were invited to again reflect on Julián's gender disruption framed within our discussion

of whether Julián's abuela was good or bad. In inviting the children into this discussion, I had

hoped their recognition of abuela's unconditional support for Julián would create a "crack and

fissure" (Gannon and Davies, 2012, p. 15) in the children's construct of *boy*. If the children

recognized that Julián's abuela was good because of her love and support for Julián, it could

imply by extension, it is acceptable for Julián to identify as a mermaid.

Julián's Abuela

When Julián takes a billowing curtain off a window and removes a potted fern to adorn

himself as a mermaid, his abuela emerges from the washroom with a stern face and appears

angry at him. Love (2018) leaves the reader hanging in suspense as we watch Julián looking in a

mirror, seemingly to question his decisions. Abuela returns to the room on the next page and

hands Julián a beautiful pearl necklace. At the end of the story, abuela takes Julián to a mermaid

parade where he is still wearing the curtain, the fern, and now the pearl necklace. Jason's

response as to whether abuela was a good grandma or not surprised me. He shared that she was

not a good grandma because she did not support Julián's identity.

> Teacher: Do you think she is a good grandmother?

> Jason: No.

> Teacher: No? Why not?

> Jason: Because um she got mad at um her when she um um put the thing put the thing

> Makayla: You mean the blanket on?

> Teacher: Dressed as a mermaid?

> Jason: Yeah.

Abuela's initial reaction to Julián's attire was more powerful for Jason than her actions of

support. Jason's justification seems to demonstrate an acceptance of Julián's identity and

expression; however, Jason used a female pronoun to refer to Julián. He did that in his written

reflection as well. In using female pronouns, I question if Jason has more knowledge of

transgender people and perhaps, he is inferring that Julián is a transgirl. Or perhaps the disruptive

message is too far from his schema of *boy* and the only way he can make sense of Julián is to

categorize him as *girl*. Knowing that Jason also rejected Morris' self-expression in *Morris*

Micklewhite and the Tangerine Dress (Baldacchino, 2014), saying that he himself just liked

"normal clothes," suggests that Jason has maintained his normative schema of *boy* and Julián's

gender expression is too dissimilar from that schema.

My Shadow is Pink (Stuart, 2020)

Love's (2018) text is the only gender expression disrupting text in the study that did not

feature a bullying theme. The other gender expression disrupting texts featured instances of

bullying and they generated strong feelings in the children as the children spoke back to the

authors of these texts during the read-alouds. For example, when Ben was being called a girl by

two boys in his class in, *I Love my Colorful Nails* (Acosta & Amavisca, 2018), Robert booed the

author, and later, Robert said that the boys bullying Ben were rude. Allison quickly stated during

the read-aloud of *I Love my Colorful Nails* (Acosta & Amavisca, 2018) that she would paint her

nails to support Ben. At the beginning of *Morris Micklewhite and the Tangerine Dress*

(Baldacchino, 2014), Maria defiantly said, "Boys can still wear dresses," and when the author

wrote that astronauts don't wear dresses, Robert retorted, "Yes they can." The children had all

this experience and intertextual knowledge from these earlier texts to draw upon in our final

week and their speaking back to the bullies and author of *My Shadow is Pink* (Stuart, 2020)

demonstrates a possible adaption of many children's schema of *boy* to include dress wearing.

The children knew that Morris in *Morris Micklewhite and the Tangerine Dress*

(Baldacchino, 2014) was being bullied (in this instance by a girl) because, as Allison explained,

"Yeah, she thought that wearing dresses was only for girls and [that] boys can't wear dresses." In

reflecting on why Ben in *I Love my Colorful Nails* (Acosta & Amavisca, 2018) was similarly

bullied as Morris, Makayla said, "I think it's because they didn't like that they were wearing nail

polish." In *My Shadow is Pink* (Stuart, 2020), the children have moved from tentative

understandings to making insightful predictions for the son in the story. As I read the part of the

story where the son is going to start school and his teacher sends the students a note to dress as

their shadow, Robert and Caleb activated their knowledge from the previous texts in the study

and predicted that students were going to be mean to him because they were going to think that

he was a girl because of his pink shadow.

> Teacher [reading from text]: You'll need pencils and books and lunch you must bring.
>
> Dress up as your shadow in its favourite thing.
>
> Robert: Oh, something is going to go on!
>
> Teacher: Right Robert! What's going to happen?
>
> Robert: They are going to try to do something mean to him.
>
> Teacher: Oh, because why?
>
> Robert: Because they are gonna say, think he is a girl 'cuz his shadow's pink.
>
> Teacher: And they are going to tease him, right?
>
> Caleb: Like every other book!

Jason, too, became involved in the conversation and shared his opinion on the impending

teasing. Jason said, "Um they're gonna um he can wear a dress a dress if he wants because um

it's his choice. It's just like the second book we read [referring to *Morris Micklewhite and the*

Tangerine Dress (Baldacchino, 2014)]. This is an interesting statement from Jason who changed

Julián's [in *Julián is a Mermaid*, Love, (2018)] pronouns to the feminine in his seeming

acceptance of Julián's identity as a mermaid. In hearing Jason defend the son's choice to wear a

dress suggests that Jason may be altering his gender normative schema of *boy*.

Stuart (2020), the author of *My Shadow is Pink,* also received much talk-back from the

children for his normative gender reifications. The children did not like the classic upholding of

pink is for girls and blue is for boys, nor the following gender normative expectations he

detailed: "My shadow is pink! My shadow loves ponies and books and pink toys, princesses,

fairies, and things not for boys." Evan quickly interjected in the reading to counter, "Everything

is for boys." Isaiah confirmed Evan's statement and said, "Yeah." Jason also jumped into the

conversation after Evan and defiantly stated, "My sister likes blue." It seems Jason is directly

challenging Stuart's proclamation that colours are gendered, as many other children did.

However, a deeper analysis of Evan's comments and his participation throughout the

study suggest that his talkback may be more of a hegemonic masculine revolt to Stuart's dared

imposition of limits and/or restrictions on what boys can do or have. Reflecting on Evan's

experiences of the study's texts, he appeared to have rejected Julián's identity as a mermaid, he

choose Keith Haring as a hero which suggests he is more comfortable with same-gender

characters, he chose Ben as his preferred character in that first week of the study but only

because he said he enjoyed the learning activities we did around the story. Also, when a male

classmate shared during our study that he wanted to wear nail polish, Evan said, "People's gonna

make fun." Perhaps Evan was looking out for his friend and not wanting him to get hurt as he felt

people would make fun of him. Or perhaps Evan was sending out a warning and trying to uphold

masculine gender norms. It appears more likely given Evan's contributions to our read-alouds

that his backtalk to Stuart was motivated by masculine hegemony and he was communicating his

rejection to Stuart's audacity that there be restrictions imposed on boys.

Near the end of *My Shadow is Pink* (Stuart, 2020), the boy's father understands that his

son's true gender expression is stereotypically feminine, and he shares how various extended

family members had shadows (or, true inner beings) that differed from their outer appearance.

The text reads, "Your shadow is you and pink it will be, so stand up with your shadow and yell

this is me!" Immediately Evan added, "And then beat them up," thus offering a hegemonic

masculine solution to deal with bullies. Bartholomaeus (2013) found in her study of primary

aged children that by shifting her interpretation of hegemonic masculinity to a discourse and not

as a rigid checklist of behaviours, the discourse of hegemonic masculinity could be applied as a

lens through which to analyse children's articulations, behaviours, and interactions in upholding

a valued masculinity. Bartholomaeus (2013) explains:

> It was apparent that with the research discussed in this present article, and with the
>
> reframing of hegemonic masculinity as a discourse, there did appear to be particular
>
> practices which were privileged and produced complicity and consensus as being the
>
> "right" way to be a boy. (p. 282)

Evan's reflections in this study, including this retort to violence, concur with Bartholomaeus'

findings in that some young boys are indeed aware of masculine hegemonic norms, are

performing them, and are actively policing them in the classroom. While Evan's statements

suggest he is interpreting and experiencing Stuart's text in a manner which reifies normative

masculinity, many children such as Robert and Jason appear to demonstrate an acceptance of the

disruption and have constructed a more fluid schema of *boy*.

Throughout the findings, I presented the experiences of Thomas who, in vocalizing his

thinking during our read-alouds, invited us into his meaning making of the texts' disruptions,

which, in essence, gave us a sense of how his schema was processing the disruptive information.

The findings suggest that the children's classroom social interactions were deeply entrenched in

heteronormativity and resistant to the heteronormative disruptive messaging, yet there were also

many moments when the normative messages were seemingly accepted and perhaps, their

schemas adapted. In reflecting on the research, the literature review, my practices as a teacher,

and the thematic findings presented, I can see the importance of the role of the teacher in not

only choosing disruptive texts, but in how to present them, how to meaningfully engage the

children into the learning, and the importance of the scaffolding required for their learning.

The Vital Role of the Teacher

I found like DePalma (2016), Yeoman (1999), Bartholomaeus (2016), Martino and

Cumming-Potvin (2016), Ryan et al. (2013), and Ryan and Hermann-Wilmarth (2018) that my

role as the classroom teacher was crucial in supporting children's understanding of the

challenges to the gender and heteronormative discourses. Kelly and Moses (2018), in their study

of grade one children who were learning to read, also found that the role of the teacher was vital

in supporting early years children to learn how to infer during read-alouds. Inferencing is an

important skill for readers as texts are rarely explicitly written, so children must be attentive to

the print, the illustrations, and call upon their experiences to make meaning as they did

throughout this study. While the texts chosen for this study were the result of my integration of

the literature with a systematically developed criteria, all the texts required explicit teaching to

support the children's understanding of them, and more specifically, to support the children in

understanding how the texts challenged gender and heteronormative expectations. In what

follows, I will demonstrate how with explicit teaching the children were able to be more attentive

to the disruptive messaging in the text, and how some children were able to articulate how the

text challenged gender norms and heteronormativity. I define explicit teaching as those moments when the teacher's voice was dominant and directive in the read-alouds.

As we commenced our second reading of *Interstellar Cinderella* (Underwood, 2015), I first began by summarizing the learning from the previous day and I set a specific purpose for the children to listen for Interstellar Cinderella's actions in the story. I was concerned that most of the children had understood from our previous day's reading and discussion that the mouse was the hero of the story and not Interstellar Cinderella. The following is the section of transcript where I am explicitly teaching and setting the purpose for the read-aloud (edited for length and relevance):

> Teacher: So, you know, I go home, and I read what we did, and I have to write notes about what we did, and I type up what we did and um I realized something, and I had to learn how to teach something and this something is called a character analysis. …So, I would like to re-visit *Interstellar Cinderella*. Um, a lot of you understood from the story that um the mouse was the hero in the story because the mouse chewed off the the um rope that was tied around Cinderella's wrists, right? …So, I'd like us to reread the story … and then we will discuss how Cinderella, what is her part in the story. So, it's called *Interstellar Cinderella*.

As I began reading, I again reminded the children to look for Cinderella's actions:

> Teacher: [begins reading] Once upon a planetoid, amid her tools and sprockets, a girl named Cinderella dreamed of fixing fancy rockets. She fixed the robot dishwashers and zoombrooms in her care, but late each night she snuck away to study ship repair. [stops reading] So I want you to kind of focus in on Cinderella and what her actions are. And what kind of person she is.

With this explicit purpose, I wanted the children to attend to the gender disruptive messaging.

When Interstellar Cinderella's stepmother and stepsisters tried to stop her from going to the gala, Makayla incredulously asked, "Did they take um the toolbox?" The noticing of the toolbox is important as the children did not really understand that Interstellar Cinderella fixed the prince's ship or built her own jetpack, so this suggests Makayla is beginning to connect Interstellar Cinderella with tools and has some knowledge to see how Interstellar Cinderella could be a hero in the story. When we read the part of the prince's burning ship, the children were surprised—they had not noticed this on the previous day's reading.

Haley: I see her!

Allison: Where?

Teacher: There she is in the bottom. And there's the prince's spaceship all on fire.

Robert: Where, where, where, where?

Makayla: I just see the fire.

A student shared they had not seen the smoke before and Makayla said, "Me too."

Allison: Why is it even burning? How did that even happen?

Thomas: There's no fire.

Makayla: It probably broke down.

Before the children could understand how Interstellar Cinderella helped the prince, they had to first understand that his ship broke down. It is evident here that the children did not notice the craft breaking down in the first reading.

Further into the text, Interstellar Cinderella's stepmother locked her in a room and bound her wrists together, the mouse bites through the ropes enabling her to go get her wrench back

from the prince. Makayla's question at this moment highlights the children's shifting focus away

from the mouse. The text reads:

> Teacher: [reading] He gave the socket, the sonic socket wrench to one, then to the other.
>
> Alas, they couldn't fix the ship, and neither could their mother. Cinderella struggled, but
>
> the space rope held tight, till Murgatroyd's robotic teeth cut through it with one bite. The
>
> ship! It's leaving! Wait—what's this? She made a fast repair, then strapped the rusty jet
>
> pack on and blasted through the air.

Makayla then asked, demonstrating confusion of Interstellar Cinderella's gender disruptive

actions: "Why does, why isn't she fixing the jet pack herself if she is a an engineer?" Her query

of the text created an opportunity for me to support the children to interpret this important part of

the text.

> Teacher: She did fix it. This one she fixed by herself. [Rereads text] She made a fast
>
> repair—meaning, she fixed the jet pack.
>
> Makayla: Oh.

Throughout the second reading, there was much explicit teaching, guiding the children in

understanding and interpreting the text, in order to help support the gender disruptive messaging.

The children did not initially understand that Interstellar Cinderella studied ship repair at night to

help make her dream to be a mechanic come true. I walked them through the part when the

prince is at Interstellar Cinderella's house trying to find the girl the wrench belonged to. I

pointedly asked the children if they thought that Cinderella ran to the prince because she wanted

to be with him or did she run to him to get her wrench back. Understanding all these textual

details is critical in understanding the disruption to the gender norm and/or challenge to

heteronormativity that the author is presenting. However, it was a difficult text for the children to

consider the disruptions due to their solidly established schemas of traditional fairy tales

The children's new noticings of Interstellar Cinderella's actions invited an opportunity

for them to accept and adapt the gender and heteronormative disruptive messaging. We revisited

Interstellar Cinderella (Underwood, 2015) again, on a third day, as their understandings were

still not as deep and meaningful as previous texts. I wanted to introduce a term into our

discussion that we were becoming familiar with in our study: *unexpected*. I asked the students

what was unexpected about Interstellar Cinderella in the story. Here were their responses which

suggest deeper, more critical thinking of normative expectations:

Haley: She likes to build.

Makayla: She didn't marry the prince.

Haley: It was unex--it was weird um when she um when she was like when she, I didn't

that like she was going to sneak out of her room and go to like a--

Teacher: Oh.

Haley: I thought she was going to just stay in her room.

Teacher: So, to defy what an adult has told her, that's very unexpected.

Luke: Um her tools got stolen by her mom and sisters.

Teacher: She what? What was unexpected? She?

Luke: Um um um it was unexpected the tools and and like they stole-ded the tools.

Haley and Makayla were able to articulate how Interstellar Cinderella's behaviour was

unexpected for her gender (i.e., to build things) and in regard to heteronormativity (i.e., to not

marry the prince). Haley also articulated how it was unexpected for a child to defy an adult. Luke

appeared to call upon his schema of *family* and reflected on the unexpectedness of a close family

member to be deceitful. Through setting a purpose, knowing the critical disruptive messaging in the text, creating possible intertextual knowledge for the children to draw upon, and scaffolding the learning for the children, the children appeared able to attend to the disruptive messaging and to adapt their schemas. As Luke and Haley demonstrated here, grade two children are able to apply their knowledge of critically assessing a text's normative messaging in ways meaningful of their lived experiences.

Teaching with Attention to Visual Literacy

An important consideration for teachers is the influence of a text's illustrations. Children are inferring meaning from the illustrations, and this was particularly observed in *Love is Love* (Genhart, 2018) where the illustrations overshadowed the disruptive messaging, and in *A Girl with a Mind for Math: The Story of Raye Montague* (Finley Mosca, 2018) where an illustration contradicted the text's disruptive messaging.

Overshadowing the Disruptive Messaging. *Love is Love* (Genhart, 2018) was a visually stimulating text for the children. The children were mesmerized by the rainbow kites and how the illustrator was building a rainbow through groupings of kites. As I turned the page, the colour of the kites changed. A crucial heteronormative disrupting narrative is on pages 15 and 16 of the text. On these pages, Genhart presents the many people the protagonists encounter in their lives such as their teacher, their sibling's soccer coach, their town's mayor, etcetera, who are gay. Genhart is inviting the children to challenge their heteronormative assumptions about the people in their everyday life. My students could not attend to the narrative as they were engrossed in predicting the colours for the next page's rainbow kites. I share the following section of transcript to highlight the children's focus on the rainbow-coloured kites and disregard for arguably much of the text's heteronormative disruptive message.

Teacher: [continues reading] And my dads love me very much. Just like my friend's

mom and dad love her.

Allison: There's orange!

Teacher: [continues reading] We both have families who love us. That's not so different

either.

Jason: No! It's yellow!

Teacher: [continues reading] I know lots of other gay people. My teacher Mrs. Adams is

gay. Mayor Sanchez is gay. Police Chief Carter is gay too. And my sister's coach is gay.

There are even lots of famous gay people.

UCs: Blue! Blue!

The dialogue continued in this manner with the children becoming more and more excited about

the colour of the kites. Thomas, usually a very calm student was standing and screaming by the

end of the book shouting his predictions for the next colour of the kites. While for the children

the kites and rainbow were the stars of *Love is Love* (Genhart), initially resulting in a weaker

heteronormativity disruptive message, a subsequent reading and further discussion of this text

held promise to broaden children's heteronormative constructs. I posit this as the children,

seemingly through their schema of *kindness*, even with the lure of the kites, were able to attend

to the sadness the protagonist felt when he was being teased for having same-sex parents.

Contradicting the Disruptive Messaging. During the reading of *A Girl with a Mind for*

Math: The Story of Raye Montague (Finley Mosca, 2018), I found the children called upon the

illustrations to help them understand the systemic racism Raye Montague faced. The transcript

below suggests the illustrator's artistic decision to include a child of colour with light brown skin

in the group of white children mocking Raye created interference with the author's narrative of

racism. The illustration in question depicts Raye as a young girl sharing her engineering dream to

four of her classmates. The classmates are laughing at her, and one classmate is pointing at her

while laughing. I included this image in my PowerPoint slideshow as one of the nine times when

Raye was told she could not do something either because she was Black or because she was a

girl. The conversation was as follows:

Teacher: Who's not letting her follow her dream here? Maria?

Maria: The student.

Teacher: The students! What are they doing to her?

Maria and UCs: They are laughing at her.

Teacher: Yeah.

As a class, we continued to analyze the other images and instances when Raye experienced

sexism and/or racism. Haley had had her hand up for some time to share so I asked her for her

thoughts. She brought us back to the above image of Raye being laughed at by her classmates

and said, "Um, um, so, this page, this girl is Black [points to Raye] and this boy is white [points

to the white boy], but this girl is Black [points to one of the classmates laughing at Raye] and she

is blaming her." The class and I were drawn back to this image, and this was our ensuing

conversation:

UC: Oh yeah!

Teacher: Yeah.

Haley: [pointing between Raye and the classmate of colour with lighter brown skin]

She's darker. I'm mean she's darker, she's a little bit darker, and she is darker than her.

Teacher: She is smiling and not laughing, right? But still.

Haley pondered that fact and said of Raye's classmate with the lighter brown skin, "I think she is actually listening to the idea." Maria joined the discussion and offered support for Haley's suggestion that this classmate was kind, "She's a nice person 'cuz it says that half of the people were laughing." I looked to the narrative and Maria was correct. I concurred and said, "Yeah, it says most people not…" [words interrupted by Haley] who shouted, "Look it! Laughing [points to the white boy] laughing [points to white child in the back], she's just smiling [points to the girl of colour with brown skin]." Our discussion of this image continued some more:

Teacher: Ok. Nice observations.

Haley: Maybe, maybe she maybe she wants to be an engineer too!

Teacher: [Gasps] That would be so cool! We will leave it to Isaac and then I will tell you what we are going to do. Isaac?

Isaac: Um, um, the girl's not actually Black. She is Brown. [talking about the girl who is smiling]

Teacher: Pardon me? What? Oh, yeah, correct. You are correct. That is a nice observation. She is ah has brown skin and she has black skin.

Maria: I am wondering...

At this point, Caleb has had enough of this discussion and asks to take over, and in so doing, ends with a strong understanding of the racism Raye faced:

Caleb: Just gimme it! [grabs a marker from the whiteboard to use as a pointer]

Teacher: Ok Caleb! [laughing as Caleb begins to point at the figures in the illustration]

Caleb: She is Brown, and she is Black, and she that's why she [the Brown girl] likes the idea [of Raye being an engineer] and they [the white children] don't like it because they are white. And these [points to Raye and the Brown girl] are the same colours because

they are friends and they think that's cool and they want to invite, and I think that she

[the Brown girl] was thinking that that she [Raye] was gonna invite her [the Brown girl]

on the ship but instead the boss [a white man] that didn't even make it [build the

submarine], didn't listen, and that's not that's not really nice, and you can't, you can't

control anything that you want, that you made and you worked hard on, and you don't, so

they, the other people won't get it if you demand 'cuz that you would just ask, if you [the

white boss] could just ask if they [Raye and her friend] want to come on, come on the

boat [for the submarine's ceremonial launching]."

This single illustration had the power to upset Finley Mosca's biographical story of the racism

Raye Montague experienced. Haley, in bravely lifting her hand to call our attention back to the

image, invited us to discuss the nuances of the illustration, such as the smile on the Brown girl's

face versus the open mouth laugher by the white students. Haley, Maria, and Caleb inferred a

friendship between Raye and this girl, and as such, the stark truth that Raye was discriminated

against by the white children for being Black appears to have been understood by them.

Arizpe and Styles (2003) argue that, "When children are given the time they need to look

at visual texts and talk, listen, draw, reflect and think about them, the results can be outstanding"

(p. 241). In structuring read-aloud sessions, teachers should consider how a pre-read picture

analysis could support the children to attend to the text's disruptive messaging, or how a post-

read picture analysis could support the children's comprehension of a text's disruptive

messaging. In teaching with attention to the illustrations, teachers can support and assess their

students' meaning making.

In the final section of this thesis, I will elaborate upon my study's findings and discuss

the possible implications for early years teachers wishing to disrupt heteronormative and gender

discourses and create in their students a more fluid understanding of those constructs.

Discussion: "The Cracks and Fissures" in the Discourses

The children showed me through their insightful discussions, thoughtful writing, and creative art where it may be possible for teachers to support them in constructing more fluid understandings of gender and sexuality. I will discuss those "cracks and fissures" (Gannon & Davies, 2012, p. 12) in the discourses which arose throughout the study. The students' noticings and responses to the chosen texts, as well as consideration of other research, have also resulted in a refinement of my disruptive text selection criteria for teachers.

Gannon and Davies' (2012) characterization of possible entry points into normative gender and sexuality discourses was one of the guiding principles in this study's inception, methodology, and findings. During our four-week study and over the course of the thirteen texts, I found five possible "cracks and fissures" (p. 12) into the children's already gendered and heteronormative identity constructs. Challenges to the children's entrenched identity norms were possible when: they reflected on how a character's behaviours, actions, or expressions were *unexpected*; they called upon their schema of *family* and the unconditional love that family represented for them; they called upon their schema of *kindness*; they evaluated gender nonconforming protagonists using a nonhegemonic definition of a *hero*; and through teacher-led opportunities for cross-gender pairings.

The Term *Unexpected*

While I love the text, *Keith Haring: The Boy who Just Kept Drawing* (Haring, 2017), my understanding of Keith's nonconforming masculine behaviours—his artistic creativity and his eschewing of personal wealth—were not attended to by the children. As mentioned, I attempted to scaffold their learning by presenting images of the ten wealthiest people in Canada in hopes the children would notice they were all men, and from there, infer that men were expected to be

economically successful. The children noticed they were all men but the inference for males to amass personal wealth was too unfamiliar of a concept for them. The other texts I read alongside Keith's that week (the stories of Raye Montague and Malala), as mentioned, were also too removed from the children's lived experiences for them to understand the systemic discrimination and structural norms the authors presented. It was in response to the children's experiences from these texts that I introduced the term *unexpected* into our discussions. I would often preface our readings with "I want you to notice what is *unexpected* in the character's behaviour." As we saw in Luke's and Haley's response to *Interstellar Cinderella* (Underwood, 2015), they readily adopted the term and critically applied it with Luke articulating how it was unexpected for Cinderella's family to steal her tools, and Haley stating it was unexpected for a child to defy an adult. Many of the other children also adopted the term in their thinking throughout the remainder of the study, identifying how gender norms were being challenged.

Schema of *Family*

Luke and the other children often called upon their schema of *family* to make sense of the texts. Focusing on family construct was a natural entry point in challenging heteronormativity with grade two children. There is much talk of family in the classroom as the children are at the age where they spend most of their outside-of-school time with their family. During the study, the children independently noticed the family structures in the texts, and they made predictions for story events based on their knowledge and experience of how a family is to care for one another.

Luke was the first child to comment on the family structure in a text. We were comparing the characters Ben and Morris in our first week when Luke noticed that Morris lived with his mother. Luke asked, "Hey, did this book have a mom in it?" Luke was pointing to, *I Love my*

Colorful Nails (Acosta & Amavisca, 2018). His noticing invited other children into the

discussion:

> Teacher: Oh yes! That's different about the two books.
>
> Allison: I was going to say that.
>
> Teacher: Morris lived with his mom and then Ben lived with mom and dad. Nice
>
> observation.
>
> Allison: Is Morris ever going to have a dad?
>
> Teacher: I wonder. Does he need a dad?
>
> Allison: I think he has a good mom.
>
> Teacher: Yeah.
>
> Allison: At least every child has to have a mom.
>
> Thomas: Or how else are you going to be born?
>
> Maria: They both have a good mom.

This discussion occurred after our second day of the study. At the time, I was most interested in

hearing their thinking and I recognized their conversation as a possible entry into disrupting

heteronormativity and the Western family ideal.

During our follow-up discussion to *Keith Haring: The Boy who Just Kept Drawing*

(Haring, 2017), Isaiah relied on his existing schema of *family* when he did not understand

Keith's classist and capitalist disruptive motivation for making art accessible to all. Isaiah

suggested that Keith drew everywhere because his father had taught him to draw. Isaiah is

correct in that the text stated that Keith's father taught him how to draw; however, it was his

altruistic nature and anti-establishment beliefs which motivated him to draw in public spaces.

That knowledge was not yet gained from Isaiah's life experiences and Keith's challenges to

hegemonic masculinity were unrecognizable to Isaiah.

Through the children's schema of *family*, they were able to make intertextual connections

between the texts in the study. The children noticed that Keith had two sisters. This was

important as in our comparison of Keith and Malala, Isaac was able to draw on that knowledge

and make an intertextual connection between the two protagonists as Keith and Malala each had

two siblings. While this connection between Keith and Malala is tenuous, I suggest that in

making this connection the texts are linked in the children's schema and future connections may

arise as the children experience more disruptive stories. Evan also made an interesting

intertextual connection about family when we were discussing *My Shadow is Pink* (Stuart, 2020).

In the last few pages of the text, the father in the story is telling his son to be who he is meant to

be, despite what others may say or do. The father says, "And some they will love you, and some

they will not." Immediately, Evan made a connection and stated, "Like Cinderella and her dad."

Evan's statement suggests that he is reifying a heteronormative construct of family by reasoning

that Interstellar Cinderella's father is absent from the story as she was abandoned by him because

he did not love her for who she was. The absence of a father in Underwood's (2015) *Interstellar*

Cinderella story appears unsettling for Evan and the father's words in Stuarts's text invited a way

for Evan to (re)construct the heteronormative mom, dad, and children family ideal for Cinderella.

Evan's experience demonstrated that for him, he connected knowledge from one text to make

meaning of another through his schema of *family*, even though this is an example where

heteronormativity may have been reified instead of disrupted.

The children were also invited to reflect on family, most pointedly in our last three texts

of the study as the books that week were chosen for that purpose. In a post-read discussion to

Julián is a Mermaid (Love, 2018) I invited the children to think about what families do for each

other. Luke beautifully articulated what families do:

> Luke: They care, they care, they care um, and they take care of you.

> Teacher: They take care of you

> Luke: And they… (words cut off by the teacher)

> Teacher: Abuela took care of Julián.

> Luke: And they protect you and they love you.

> Teacher: Perfect.

> Luke: And sometimes they get mad, but they still love you.

I paraphrased Luke's definition of a family and connected it to abuela's actions towards Julián. I

said to the children, "To me, that's the abuela. That's who she was in this story." I then invited

the children to reflect on Julián's genderfluidity through his abuela's eyes:

> Teacher: And is it expected that Julián would dress up as a mermaid?

> Haley: Yes.

> UCs: No.

> Teacher: It is? It's not overly, I mean, we've read a ton of books and I love that you said

> yes because now we're like, bah, yes it would be expected. It's still a little unexpected

> and grandma, does she love Julián in the end?

> UCs: Yeah.

The discussion of a loving family gave me a natural entry into disrupting normative gender

expression through abuela's acceptance of her grandson's gender nonconformity.

The children's schema of *family*, in tandem with their experiences with gender

nonconforming protagonists from the previous read-alouds in this study, also provided a lens

through which the children could engage with *My Shadow in Pink* (Stuart, 2020). Near the end of

Stuart's text, the young boy has just come home from school after being teased for wearing a

dress. He throws the dress on the floor and vows to never wear it again. But then, there is a

knock on his bedroom door and his father enters the room. The children began activating their

schema of *family* and their schema of *boy,* which for the following children now included the

possibility for boys to wear dresses, and the children started predicting what colour the son's and

father's shadow would be:

> Thomas: His shadow's going to be pink.
>
> UCs: Yeah!
>
> Teacher: You think dad's shadow is going to be pink?
>
> UCs: Yeah!
>
> Teacher: Ok, ok. Any other predictions? Haley?
>
> Haley: The dad's shadow is going to turn pink.
>
> Teacher: Ok.
>
> Evan: That's what I was going to say.
>
> Maria: The dad is going to wear a dress.

Elijah predicted using his schema for *family* and suggested that the father (whose shadow was

blue) would do what makes his son the happiest—which is to not be teased or bullied. Elijah

said, "I think ahm, they will swap shadows to make the son happier." In calling on their schema

of *family,* the children inferred a parent's support for their child's non-normative gender

expression, and through their convictions in predicting the text's outcome, appear to have

constructed a more fluid schema of *boy*.

Schema of *Kindness*

The texts featuring instances of bullying generated strong feelings in the children. The

children appeared to call upon their schema of *kindness* and they often spoke back to the authors

of these texts during the read-alouds. As previously mentioned, Robert, Allison, and Maria were

quite vocal during our first week readings of *I Love my Colorful Nails* (Acosta & Amavisca,

2018) and *Morris Micklewhite and the Tangerine Dress* (Baldacchino, 2014). The texts in the

last week of the study also featured genderfluid characters. In *Love is Love* (Genhart, 2018), the

children did not like how people were making fun of the children for wearing a shirt with a

rainbow heart on the front. Their talking back to the author began on the second line of the

story's text:

> Teacher: Ok. Here we go. [Starts reading] I've got a problem. Today some kids were
>
> laughing at my shirt.
>
> Haley: No. I love that shirt.
>
> Allison: I like it.
>
> UCs: I like it.
>
> UC: I have a shirt like that.
>
> Teacher [continues reading]: They were teasing me for wearing it. One of the kids said
>
> my shirt was gay.
>
> Thomas: It's not gay!
>
> Haley: No!

Further in the text, the author wrote how the children with gay parents were being bullied by

other children who taunted them that their family was not a real family. Evan interjected to say,

"That's rude." He was supported by several classmates and their individual voices were lost in

the rising voices of the children speaking from their schema of *kindness* in support for the

children being bullied.

The children also seemed to understand Keith Haring's altruism through their schema of

kindness. Keith's altruism challenged hegemonic masculine capitalist expectations as Keith often

donated much of his earnings to children's charities. He also challenged normative masculine

expectations in his concern for children. The children's noticing and valuing of Keith's

altruism—or what they understand as his *kindness*, suggests this may be an entry into the

normative masculine discourse.

Heroes

The nonhegemonic reconceptualization of the word *hero* was one of the more compelling

ways for children to disrupt their normative gender constructs. Kushner (2013) had redefined a

hero to include someone who is also brave or strong on the inside. The children and I called upon

Kushner's newly defined term of hero throughout the study. As mentioned, the reconstructed

framework of a hero allowed the children to position Raye Montague—a Black woman who

became an engineer, Malala Yousafzai—a champion of girls' and women's rights, and Keith

Haring—a philanthropic artist, as heroes.

The hero framework generated some interesting discussion during our reading of *The

Curious Garden* (Brown, 2009) as well. I had chosen this text as I understood Liam's character

in the story to challenge gender norms through his physical appearance, his attire, and his

behaviours—such as gardening and singing to plants to help them grow. In our follow-up

discussion, I asked the children if Liam was a hero. There were a handful of children who firmly

disagreed with the categorization of Liam as a hero, despite most of the children heatedly

supporting Liam as a hero. To my surprise, the children denying Liam the status of hero was not

because he challenged any gender norms, but rather, it was because his career choice of

gardening was to them, not worthy. Here is the relevant section of the transcript:

> Teacher: Would you say he is a hero or no? Oh! I put this up here today [pointing to the
>
> poster of Kushner's (2013) disrupted definition of a hero on the whiteboard]. A hero is
>
> someone who is brave and strong on the outside or the inside. And that's from the…
>
> [words then interrupted by Robert]
>
> Robert: I say no.
>
> Evan: What?
>
> Isaiah: That's impossible!
>
> Teacher: Why do you say no? Hang on! We're all entitled to our own opinion. Why do
>
> you not think he is a hero?
>
> Robert: Because he's not even strong on the outside. He's just a gardener.

Robert's reasoning demonstrates some understanding of classism, where some careers are valued

by Western society over others. Those who engage in the normatively constructed less-valued

careers are also deemed to have less value. Luke, in positioning the plants as the heroes of the

story, too demonstrated an understanding of the Western valuation of careers. Luke argued,

"Actually, because actually, the plants are the heroes because you can see them growed, the

gardener, he is just… [words then interrupted by students]". While Luke's reasoning was lost in

the student's chatter, his phrasing choice, "he is just," sufficiently communicates his devaluing of

gardening. The debate over Liam's hero status raged on in the classroom with the pro-hero side

stating he saved the city with the plants. In listening to his classmates' arguments and in

reviewing the illustrations of the grey and drab city before Liam recued it with plants, Robert

began to shift his schema. He started saying, "Yes and no. Yes and no. Yes and no." to the

question of whether Liam was a hero. When Jason shared that Liam was simply trying to make others happy, Robert adapted his schema of *hero* and *gardener* and seemed to accept Liam as a hero. He can be heard chanting, "Yes! Yes!" above his peers.

Cross-Gender Pairings

As previously mentioned, Wason-Ellam (1997) was able to disrupt the children's heteronormative schema which positioned boys and girls together solely for romantic pairings through stories which featured male and female protagonists together in friendship. In my study, also as previously mentioned, Haley and Cameron were purposefully paired in a follow-up activity to Haring's (2017) text, *Keith Haring: The Boy who Just Kept Drawing*. Haley and Cameron created a friendship from this pairing and invited Makayla in as well. Given the tenacity of children in supervising and upholding same-sex friendship groupings, and their seeming openness to challenges to this heteronormative construct with some teacher support, it is an important area to be pursued by educators.

The children's schemas of *family*, *kindness*, and *hero* seemed to provide an opening for disrupting their established schema in regard to gender and heteronormative disruptions. The term *unexpected* appeared to support children in identifying and articulating normative and nonconforming behaviours. These along with explicit teaching and the promotion of collegial cross-gender partnerships provided "cracks and fissures" (Gannon & Davies, 2012, p. 12) in the children's normative constructs of gender and heteronormativity.

Text Selection Criteria for Gender Norm and Heteronormative Disruptive Texts

The initial text selection for this study was created by using a criteria of nine items that I had compiled from previous researchers' studies. No text could ever meet all the criteria—and yet, that was not its purpose. The criteria was a means through which classroom teachers could

critically analyze a text and become cognizant of its strengths and weaknesses. Given the data

from this study regarding children's experiences the texts, the teaching support they needed, and

my own further research, I have since revised the criteria. For example, in the original criteria

there was no analysis of family structure, my poststructural feminist focus upheld the gender

binary rather than challenge it, and it did not invite an exploration of a text's potential

intertextual connections. As well, it did not account for texts like *Malala's Magic Pencil*

(Yousufzai, 2017) or *The Girl with a Mind for Math: The Story of Raye Montague* (Finley

Mosca, 2018) where the protagonists had marginalized identities beyond their gender and sexual

orientation. Subsequently, I have a revised list of 13 indicators upon which teachers can assess a

disruptive text to determine how and where it upholds norms and how and where it challenges

them (see Appendix L for an overview of the indicators to consider in selecting disruptive texts).

A more detailed discussion of the indicators is next presented.

The first area of consideration in selecting a text is the protagonist of a story. The

protagonist is often the focal point of the story, and it is important to understand what values and

norms the character is communicating to the children. I reference Lo's (2019) analysis of family

diversity in children's texts and propose that educators reflect on a main character's gender; race;

ethnicity; sexual orientation; socioeconomic status; age; abilities; and religion to understand

whose experiences will be presented in the story and whose will not. Like Young (2019), I

continue to argue that educators look for texts with human characters as opposed to

anthropomorphized characters when seeking to challenge identity norms.

The second indicator is an analysis of the prominent supporting characters. I would also

assess the prominent supporting characters in the same manner as the protagonist using Lo's

(2019) analysis of family diversity presented above.

The relationships between the characters is the next area of analysis. If the characters in the text are a family, we can assess how the family structure supports or disrupts the normative Western ideal family nucleus (Shema, 2016). While texts headed by queer identifying characters challenge the Western family norm, they can also uphold it by being a couple, by their race, ableness, religion, and/or socioeconomic status. In knowing how texts simultaneously challenge and uphold norms, educators can more effectively support their students in critical reflection. If the prominent characters in a text are friends, educators should assess the composition and dynamics of that friendship. If the characters are children, are the friendships same-gender friendships, or do they challenge the norm and are cross-gender friendships? If the friendships are cross-gender, are there any nuances of a romantic partnership in the narrative or illustrations?

There is also a family and friendship trope to be aware of. Sciurba (2016) analyzed twelve children's picture books featuring boys who defied normative masculine expectations by dressing more effeminately and/or by enjoying traditionally feminine activities. The trope to be cognizant of in such texts is who the gender nonconforming boy finds comfort, solace, and strength from in the text when he is bullied or harassed. Most often, Sciurba found it was a female figure, which reinforced the female stereotype of girls and women as kind and nurturing, and concurrently reified those qualities as unmasculine.

The fourth indicator is based on the findings of Kuykendal and Sturm (2007) who identified that the first-person narrative is an effective writing strategy to give female protagonists agency. The protagonist who narrates his/her/their own story controls what the reader sees, hears, and experiences. An analysis of who the storyteller is in a text will help educators and children understand whose voice and perspective is being heard and whose voices and perspectives are not being heard.

The fifth indicator is relevant to texts with prominent male characters. Are the boys in the text upholding the masculine norms of a busy, unkempt, rough, loud, strong, brave, and/or independent child? Are the men upholding the hegemonic ideal of a strong, emotionally detached, fearless, rugged, and independent male? Ryan et al. (2013) and Gritter et al. (2017) implore teachers to analyze which masculinities are being portrayed and valued by the author and illustrator, and which are not.

Similarly, in texts with prominent female characters, are the girls and women in the text upholding the feminine norms of calm, pretty, caring, nurturing, kind, and/or respectful? This sixth indicator invites us to assess which femininity or femininities are being portrayed and valued by the author and illustrator, and which are not.

This seventh indicator invites educators to reflect on how the protagonist solves the story problem. Traditionally, male characters use their strength, quick-thinking, and independence to solve a story's problem. Traditionally, females have needed the help of a male character and/or others, magical powers, and/or someone with magical powers to help them solve the story.

The eighth indicator is an assessment of the story's setting. Males are traditionally agentic in most areas outside of the home and in most areas without children. Women are traditionally agentic in the home and classroom, and in most areas associated with children. Educators should look to see how the author supports or disrupts these norms. Another consideration is how has the illustrator supported the text's gender disruptive message in detailing the setting (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2000).

The ninth indicator is an assessment of the text's illustrations. Children are searching the illustrations for meaning as well as attending to it in the narrative. This was evidenced by the

many picture talks the children initiated throughout the study. Some areas Villarreal et al. (2015)

posit educators should reflect on are:

- Has the illustrator supported or interfered with the author's norm disruptive message?
  (e.g., is the bedroom of the gender nonconforming female protagonist a gender-neutral
  colour or is it the stereotypical feminine pink?)

- The characters' physical appearance and their attire (e.g., is the gender nonconforming
  female protagonist's hair long and is she/they always wearing a skirt?)

- The characters' placement on the pages and who or what is the focal point on the page
  (e.g., is the gender nonconforming protagonist drawn prominently on the page or tucked
  away and off to the side?)

- What, if any, elements have been drawn in the illustration for interest and how do they
  support or detract from the identity disruptive narrative (e.g., what toys have been added
  to an illustration and how do they support the gender nonconforming narrative for that
  character?)

The tenth indicator is an assessment of how the characters uphold or challenge the

dichotomous gender binary. Characters which challenge the binary can express themselves or

have interests and/or behaviours that diverge from their sex's normative construct of *boy* or *girl*.

The next indicator invites us to reflect on texts which feature non-traditional family

structures such as single-parent households or same-sex parents. In what ways can these texts

invite opportunities for educators to support children in challenging the presumption of

heterosexuality? Similarly, texts which feature boys and girls paired in friendship also challenge

heteronormativity.

The literature and this study has made clear the importance of the twelfth indicator—to foster children's intertextual connections. Intertextual connections give children an entry point into read-aloud discussions. Also, manifold experiences with genderfluid characters arguably "normalizes" the protagonists' gender disruptive or heteronormative disruptive expressions and behaviours. Reading disruptive texts alongside others scaffolds learning for the children and supports them in adapting their schemas with more fluid understandings of gender and sexuality. Educators should reflect on possible groupings of texts and support their students in making those connections.

The final indicator to consider is how engaging a text might be for children. The children in this study were most engaged in the texts that evoked an emotional reaction from them. Those texts were: *I Love my Colorful Nails* (Acosta & Amavisca, 2018), *Morris Micklewhite and the Tangerine Dress* (Baldacchino, 2014), *Malala's Magic Pencil* (Yousafzai, 2017), and *My Shadow is Pink* (Stuart, 2020). It is interesting to note that these texts invited the children to interact and interpret them through their schemas of *kindness* and *fairness*. The children also enjoyed the texts with popular childhood imagery such as the kite theme in *Love is Love* (Genhart, 2018) and the mermaid theme in *Julián is a Mermaid* (Love, 2018). The rhyming structure of some of the texts, while highly engaging for the children, often made it difficult for them to attend to and understand the disruptive messaging. While some stories were less appealing for the children than others, the children continued to engage in the stories and the learning as they were able to relate to these stories through the other texts they had read and enjoyed in the study.

This text selection criteria was designed to help guide me and other teachers in critically reflecting on the ways in which a text upholds identity norms and the ways in which it challenges

them. No one text is perfect and even if it were, the literature tells us—as do the findings of this study—that a single reading of a gender or heteronormative disruptive text is ineffective in supporting children's adaptation of more fluid constructs. As new texts are written and more studies are undertaken, this criteria will continue to evolve.

Limitations of the Study and Opportunities for Future Study

A limitation of this study was that the children's experiences were not video recorded. As mentioned, I intentionally chose to audio record the read-alouds as it is an effective yet minimally invasive research tool. A future study might include video recording as a way to look to how the children and teachers are performing gender and how gender is read on the children's and teacher's body. Further, the study could explore how the children's performative gender changes with disruptive teaching and through readings of disruptive texts.

Another limitation of this study was that the "intersectionality" (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 140) of multiple identities was not fully explored. Crenshaw argues that the discrimination experienced by people with intersections of marginalized identities is compounded. Some of the characters in the texts chosen for this study had intersecting identities, and a future study should look more closely at these intersecting identities and experiences and interpret the data through such a lens.

Lastly, the unanticipated role that illustrations played in this study, their power to support and/or interfere with a text's narrative, their entry point for readers into challenging texts, and the dearth of literature in this area—particularly in regard to how children experience identity disruptive texts—would suggest that future studies of children's experiences with identity disruptive texts look purposefully for the meaning making children are engaging in from the illustrations.

Conclusion

In this research, I inquired into the ways in which students' normative gender and

heteronormative experiences and understandings could be disrupted. I strove to inform teachers

about the importance of choosing disruptive literature and the ways to foster conversations and

practices that challenge the dominant gender and heterosexuality discourses. Teachers have an

influential role over children in shaping and re-creating their experiences that define and delimit

gender and sexual identity construction. I found that the concept of schema was useful in

conceptualization how the children appeared to call upon their prior knowledge and experiences

to make sense of the texts. Through the children's oral, written, and artistic participation over the

four weeks, I was able to gain insights into how the children made meaning of the disruptive

messaging by often interpreting the texts through their schemas of kindness, fairness, family,

boy, girl, and hero.

I aimed to inform my own practice and to support teachers in choosing quality disruptive

literature and to learn about and demonstrate how, as teachers, we can challenge the discursive

binary identity constructions of the characters and any overt and/or implied heterosexuality. In

doing so, I compiled 13 indicators upon which teachers can assess where a text upholds gender

norms and heteronormativity, and where it challenges those norms. Teachers can support

children in understanding how they are, in whatever small way, like a gender disruptive

character. Teachers can seek out those "cracks and fissures" (Gannon & Davies, 2012, p. 12) in

the children's discourses to nurture ever so slightly a kinship with characters who express

themselves or behave in unexpected ways.

While this study was designed around children's experiences with disruptive texts, some

of the texts chosen would arguably have not meet Yeoman's (1999) definition of a disruptive

text. Yeoman defines disruptive texts as texts which have more overt unexpected characterisations such as those found in fractured fairy tales or gender role reversal stories. In this study, three of the texts featuring white males—Keith Haring, Iggy Peck, and Liam in the *Curious Garden* (Brown, 2009)—were included as I recognized their disruptive potential based on my previous research of and knowledge of gender norms. It was my interpretation and teaching of these texts which made them disruptive—or rather, queered them. I posit that the findings of this study support teachers in teaching disruptively.

Teachers can support children in recognizing how they are similar or different from a text's character(s), and scaffold experiences so that children may develop an empathy and respect for that difference, and ultimately an adaption in their schemas to more fluid ways of being.

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Appendix A

Selection Criteria for Gender and Heteronormative Disruptive Texts

I synthesized the findings of researchers Larsen et al. (2018), Davies (2003), Earles (2017), Bartholomaeus (2016), Yeoman (1999), Wason-Ellam (1997), Kuykendal and Sturm (2007), and Ryan et al. (2013), and highlighted those factors which they found to be most influential in their ability to disrupt heteronormativity and the dominant gender discourse. I then created a checklist of nine criteria against which to evaluate a story's ability to broaden children's narratives of gender and sexuality. My definition of quality disruptive literature is literature that will invite children to think critically on the entrenched gender binary and the norms stemming from that binary, their own gender identity, heteronormativity, and will promote a more fluid understanding of these discourses.

Human Characters

The first criterion is that the story's characters are human. This was the only criterion that if it were not met, would by itself, disqualify a book from being chosen. If children are going to believe a character and the gender disrupting message, he/she/they is communicating, children must in some manner identify with that character (Larsen et al., 2018; Yeoman, 1999).

First-Person Narrative

The second criterion is that the story is written in the first-person narrative. Kuykendal and Sturm (2007) identified this as an effective writing strategy which gives female protagonists agency. The protagonist has voice and is narrating her own story. First-person narrative children's storybooks are uncommon, however, I found three to include in this study: *Malala's Magic Pencil* (Yousafzai, 2017), *My Shadow is Pink* (Stuart, 2020), and *Love is Love* (Genhart, 2018).

Norm Disruption Literary Strategy

The third criterion is that the author employed literary strategies other than gender-role reversal to disrupt the dominant gender discourse. The gender-role reversal feminist writing strategy has resulted in the creation of characters that the children find unbelievable and unrelatable. Further, Bartholomaeus (2016) found in her study that children categorized a gender-role reversal character based on the perceived masculinity or femininity of that character's behaviours, rather than by the character's physical appearance. If characters are unbelievable then the messages they are conveying are also unbelievable. I did not disqualify a book based on this criterion alone because if such a text is read with other gender disrupting texts, and if there are teacher-led follow-up discussions, these books can support children to make meaning of the dominant discourse challenging messages.

The Illustrator's Support for the Disruptive Narrative

The fourth criterion is an assessment of the illustrator's artwork in supporting the author's gender disrupting message in the story. Wason-Ellam (1997) found that a book's stereotypically drawn images superseded the gender disrupting message the author was trying to convey through the story. So powerful was the lure of the stereotypically drawn characters and settings that the children in her study inferred a character's self-worth from the character's physical appearance rather than his/her actions or dialogue.

Assessment of the Text's Setting in Supporting the Disruptive Narrative

The fifth criterion is drawn from Davies' (2003) work. I again look to the artwork of the illustrator, this time in how successfully the story's setting was gender-neutrally depicted. I also included the story's setting as written by the author in this criterion. In looking to the setting, I assessed where the protagonists had agency. If a female protagonist was agentic only in the

traditional feminine spheres of home or school, I gave an unfavourable rating for this book on

this criterion. I was looking for females to be agentic in non-traditional feminine settings, or for

males to be agentic in non-traditional masculine settings.

Nonhegemonic Masculine Representation

The sixth criterion is relevant to stories with prominent male characters. I was looking for

the author to depict and celebrate non-hegemonic masculinity. Researchers Ryan et al. (2013)

posit that the masculine ideal inherent in the dominant gender discourse can be identified and

questioned by children if there is a sustained effort on the part of educators to present quality

disruptive literature. "The findings show that by making discussions of gender and its hegemonic

construction a recurring theme in her teaching, she was able to help students build their

knowledge of this topic over time" (p.85). As such, I searched for stories where the boys and

men were intelligent, creative and/or collaborative rather than strong, brave, and/or heroic.

Female Agency

The seventh criterion is an assessment of how the author positioned women as agentic. I

did not wish to select a story with a female protagonist who solved her problems or the story

problems with magic, nor did I select a story where the female protagonist looked to male

characters for direction or guidance.

Assessment of Heteronormative Disruptions

The eighth criterion is an analysis of any implied, assumed, and/or overt

heteronormativity. I looked to the parings and groupings of the story's characters in both the

story and illustrations. I looked for stories that went beyond the traditional male/female pairings.

Engaging Text

The ninth and final criterion is a value judgement based on my teaching experience. I assessed a story based on its ability to engage young children in the reading and the follow-up discussions.

Appendix B

Tri-Council Policy Certificate

PANEL ON RESEARCH ETHICS
Navigating the ethics of human research

TCPS 2: CORE

Certificate of Completion

This document certifies that

Nicole Trottier

has completed the Tri-Council Policy Statement:
Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans
Course on Research Ethics (TCPS 2: CORE)

Date of Issue: **7 December, 2019**

Appendix C

Research Ethics Board 2 Study Approval

University of Manitoba | Research Ethics and Compliance

Human Ethics - Fort Garry
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PROTOCOL APPROVAL

Effective: October 29, 2021   Expiry: October 28, 2022

Principal Investigator: Nicole Trottier
Advisor: Melanie Janzen
Protocol Number: HE2021-0083
Protocol Title: *Exploring Children's Experiences of Gender and Heterosexuality Disruptive Texts*

Andrea L Szwajcer, Chair, REB2

Research Ethics Board 2 has reviewed and approved the above research. The Human Ethics Office (HEO) is constituted and operates in accordance with the current *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans*- TCPS 2 (2018).

This approval is subject to the following conditions:

  i.   Approval is granted for the research and purposes described in the protocol only.

  ii. Any changes to the protocol or research materials must be approved by the HEO before implementation.

  iii. Any deviations to the research or adverse events must be reported to the HEO immediately through an REB Event.

  iv. This approval is valid for one year only. A Renewal Request must be submitted and approved prior to the above expiry date.

  v.   A Protocol Closure must be submitted to the HEO when the research is complete or if the research is terminated.

  vi. The University of Manitoba may request to audit your research documentation to confirm compliance with this approved protocol, and with the UM *Ethics of Research Involving Humans*Ethics of Research Involving Humans policies and procedures.

Appendix D

Divisional Assistant Superintendent Study Approval

Your signature on this form indicates that you have understood to your satisfaction the information regarding the research project and give me permission to run this study in my classroom. In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the researchers, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities.

The University of Manitoba may look at my research records to see that the research is being done in a safe and proper way.

This research has been approved by the Education/Nursing Research Ethics Board 2. If you have any concerns or complaints about this project, you may contact any of the above-named persons or the Human Ethics Coordinator at (204) 474-7122 or humanethics@umanitoba.ca. A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference.

Assistant Superintendent's Name: ███████████████████

Assistant Superintendent's Signature: ██████████████████████

Date: ___November 1, 2021_____

Request for a Copy of the Completed Thesis

I would like a PDF copy of the thesis upon completion (around March 2022):

___✓___ Yes, I would like to receive a copy of the completed thesis.

_____ No, thank you. I do not require a copy of the completed thesis.

Appendix E

School Principal Study Approval

Your signature on this form indicates that you have understood to your satisfaction the information regarding the research project and give me permission to run this study in my classroom. In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the researchers, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities.

The University of Manitoba may look at my research records to see that the research is being done in a safe and proper way.

This research has been approved by the Education/Nursing Research Ethics Board 2. If you have any concerns or complaints about this project you may contact any of the above-named persons or the Human Ethics Coordinator at (204) 474-7122 or humanethics@umanitoba.ca. A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference.

_____

School Administrator's Name: _____

School Administrator's Signature: _____

Date: _November 5th, 2021_____

Request for a Copy of the Completed Thesis

I would like a PDF copy of the thesis upon completion (around March 2022):

__✓____ Yes, I would like to receive a copy of the completed thesis.

_____ No, thank you. I do not require a copy of the completed thesis.

Appendix F

Study Introduction Letter for Families

Faculty of Education
Room 203 Education Bldg
71 Curry Place
Winnipeg, Manitoba
Canada R3T 2N2
T: 204-474-9000

November 10, 2021

Dear ▓▓▓▓▓ Parents/Guardians,

I am writing to share information with you about a research project that I am pursuing and to request your consent in having your child participate. I am currently working towards my Master of Education degree at the University of Manitoba and this research will be part of the required thesis for my degree. The research is being conducted under the supervision of my thesis advisor, Dr. Melanie Janzen. The title of my research is *Exploring Children's Experiences of Gender and Heterosexuality Disruptive Texts in Early Years Classrooms.*

What the Research Tells Us

Children are competent, capable individuals who understand and explore the world in different ways. Many years of teaching experience has taught me this as well as my readings of academic research on children and their classroom experiences. Children come to our classrooms with important life experiences and understandings of the world in which we live. They have a considerable amount of knowledge of the social expectations on them about the ways of being in the world. They have a vast understanding of what it means to be a girl and what it means to be a boy. Children also have an understanding of how girls and boys are to interact with each other, and like the classic fairy-tale storybook ending, how they are expected to marry each other when they grow up.

These social expectations of gender and heterosexuality can be stifling for many children and are the basis of much of the teasing, harassment, and bullying that occurs in and out of schools. It is our responsibility as teachers to create safe and inclusive spaces for all children. A powerful way in which teachers can support children's gender and sexuality understandings is through the literature they share in the classroom. My research centers on sharing story books with the children that challenge the stereotypical understandings of what it means to be a boy

and/or a girl. As mentioned, heterosexuality is the assumed expectation for boys and girls (that girls "like" and marry boys), and I will share some stories that also challenge that expectation.

My Research Purpose

The **purpose of my research** is to explore the ways in which children experience and understand literature that challenges the dominant expectations of gender (being a boy or girl) and/or heterosexuality (that girls marry boys and boys marry girls). I will explore the ways in which literature engages the children in challenging the gender stereotypes and the presumption of heterosexuality, and how the literature can support a more fluid understanding of gender and sexuality in the children.

The Study Timeline

The study will take place over a four-week period beginning on November 22, 2021, and ending on December 17, 2021. I will read three to four new stories a week, for each of the four weeks of the study. The texts are in English and will be read during our English Language Arts time in the classroom. The province-mandated English Language Arts curriculum stresses that children should be read aloud to daily and have at least 30 minutes of time on text as well as targeted instruction time during which children can connect directly to the larger ideas and questions. So these read-alouds are a part of everyday classroom routines. The Manitoba curriculum reflects what research shows and that is that read-alouds are an engaging way to encourage children to think more deeply and critically about themselves and their world.

Data Collection

There are three ways that I will collect data:

1)   The first way is part of the regular read-aloud and discussion process. As the curriculum suggests, in order to support children in thinking more critically about the world we live in, teachers plan for discussions around the sharing of any story. Just like any other read-aloud, I will plan for discussion time before, during, and after the reading of a story. Just like any other read-aloud, I will also invite the children to engage in a follow-up learning activity such as writing, drawing, and/or small group discussion with some of their classmates. The only difference between the read-aloud time for this study and a regular classroom read-aloud is that I will audiotape the read-aloud session. *It is important to note that all students will participate in the English Language Arts read-alouds as this is a part of our regular classroom routine. I will audio record these read-alouds, and if your family consents, I will*

use the data from the audio recordings to inform the study. If you do not consent (which is your right to do so) I will not include your child's perspectives in the study. This research will not interfere with the regular learning and activities of the classroom, nor is the structure of read-aloud time any different than what we normally do in our class.

2) The second part of the data collection involves me noticing and making notes of the children's everyday conversations as they relate to their understandings of gender and heterosexuality. It is those unstructured times of your child's day such as eating snack, getting ready to go outside for recess, while walking to gym or music, and/or playing outside at recess where children often engage with their classmates in casual conversation. The research tells us that it is in these moments that children make sense of their social world and enforce and police the gender and heterosexuality expectations. An example I have seen in the past involves children teasing a boy and girl for playing together—taunting them that they are going to get married. Another is when a child comments on a classmate's backpack saying it is a backpack for girls not boys. This kind of information will be important to see if the stories we read have an influence on the children's understandings. The observations of the conversations will be collected in a field journal (a place where I will record handwritten notes).

3) The third form of data collection will be the children's work samples from the follow-up activities about the read-alouds. As part of our everyday work and as directed by the curriculum, I often plan activities in which the children do writing or drawing about what we read. The work that the children produce will also be part of the data that I collect.

Protecting Your Child's Identity:

All of the data I collect will be identifiable by the children's initials only. The data from the audiotapes will be transcribed by myself. I will use students' initials when transcribing the data as well. The transcribed data will be encrypted and password protected on my computer. All of the observations I write about in my journal will also only use the students' initials. The reader response activities (the written or drawn work), will also only be identifiable by student initials as well.

I will collect all this data and keep it stored safely in locked cabinets. Once I actually begin to look over the data on December 20, 2021, which is after the first term report cards are sent home and after the data collection period is over, I will create a coding system and the

consenting families and assenting students will be given pseudonyms (made-up names). Only I
will have the coding system key. After I know who has consented, I will sort out the data and
destroy all data for children whose families have not provided consent.

Consenting to the Study

I am seeking your consent, as well as your child's assent, to use the data collected to
inform my thesis. To provide your consent, you must read and sign the enclosed Consent Form.
For your child to provide assent, you and your child should review the *Possible Ways to Talk to
Your Child About Considering His/Her/Their Assent for the Study* document that I have included.
Both the signed Consent form and the signed Assent Form must be placed in the envelope
provided, sealed, and returned to the school secretary by November 18, 2021.

Your consent and child's assent would allow me to analyze the data I collected about
your child and to refer to your child's contributions to conversations and work samples that may
provide insight into children's meaning-making experiences. Excerpts of students'
conversations, as well as work samples, may appear in the final thesis but will in no way identify
students. When I refer to students, pseudonyms will be used to keep their work, experiences, and
conversations anonymous.

Ensuring Voluntary Consent

Your consent for me to use the data about your child must be given voluntarily. I want to
assure you that absolutely no consequences will arise from giving or withholding permission. To
ease any pressure you might feel, I have arranged for you to send your consent and assent forms
in the envelope that I have provided, to the school office and not to me. Included in this package
is an envelope addressed to ███████, the school secretary. If you choose to consent to this
project, you will return your consent forms sealed in this envelope to the secretary who will store
the envelopes in a locked cabinet in the office. I will not be able to access these consent forms
until the completion of the data collection phase and after the end of the first term reporting
period (December 19, 2021). At this time, I will open the envelopes and compile the data for
only those students for whom I received assent and consent. Any students whose families did not
provide consent will have data about them redacted or destroyed, and their ideas, experiences, or
work will not be included or referenced in the final thesis or any other subsequent presentations
or publications. If at any point you or your child changes your mind regarding consent during the
data collection period, you are free to withdraw at any time by submitting a note in writing to the

school secretary in the second envelope I provided. The secretary will store that document with the other consent and assent forms in the locked cabinet.

Withdrawing from the Study

Your written withdrawal from the study will be added to the consent forms and I will not have access to this information until December 20, 2021. If permission is not given or is withdrawn at any time, no data regarding your child will be included or referred to in the thesis. You may withdraw your consent any time up until the final draft of the thesis has been prepared, likely around March 2022. If you wish to withdraw after the consent forms have been opened on December 20, 2021, and before March 2022, you may email me at umtrottn@myumanitoba.ca or call me at the school at (204)███████. You may also email my research supervisor at melanie.janzen@umanitoba.ca or call her at (204)474-9000.

It is important to note that the school's secretary to whom the consent and assent forms are being returned, will notify me on November 22, 2021, prior to the commencement of the data collection period if at least four families have consented to the study. If there are less than four consenting families, the research study will not proceed. She will not disclose the names of the families who have dropped off envelopes.

Other Permissions that I am Required to Receive

I have received permission to conduct this research from the university's Research Ethics Board 2, as well as the school's divisional Assistant Superintendent ████████████. I have also sought and received approval for this study from the school's principal, ████████ ████. If you have any questions or concerns about this study you are welcome to contact the school's principal at (204) ███████, my thesis advisor Dr. Melanie Janzen at (204) 474-9000 or melanie.janzen@umanitob.ca, or the Human Ethics Coordinator at (204) 474-7122 or humanethics@umanitoba.ca.

If you decide to give consent/assent for me to use data pertaining to your child for the purpose of my research, I would be delighted to share the final thesis with you and your family. My hope is to complete the writing of this thesis by March 2022. Included is a form where you may indicate whether or not you would like a copy of the completed thesis. In addition, a copy will be available at the school office.

I will also be available to discuss this research study with you. You are encouraged to email me at umtrottn@myumanitoba.ca or call me at school (204) ███████ for further

information or with any questions or concerns you may have. Additionally, I have scheduled a
virtual parent information session on November 15, 2021. Please see the attached information for
more details. You are invited to attend the virtually meeting where my research supervisor and
school principal will be in attendance. You may also wish to schedule a one-on-one virtual
meeting with my research supervisor and myself if you are more comfortable.

Please discuss this letter with your family, including your child, to determine whether or
not you and your child agree to provide consent and assent for this study. I have attached a
parent information sheet which includes a simplified list of what the research entails to help
support families with these conversations. Your signature and your child's printed name signify
that you are providing permission for the use of your child's ideas, experiences, and work. Please
return a copy of the consent and assent forms ██████████ in the school office by November
18, 2021.

Thank you for taking the time to read about my research and for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Nicole Trottier

Appendix G

Parent Consent Form

Faculty of Education
Room 203 Education Bldg
71 Curry Place
Winnipeg, Manitoba
Canada R3T 2N2
T: 204-474-9000

Informed Consent for Participation in a Research Study (Parent/Guardian)

November 10, 2021

Study: Exploring Children's Experiences of Gender and Heterosexuality Disruptive Texts in Early Years Classrooms

Principal Investigator: Nicole Trottier
Masters Student
Faculty of Education, University of Manitoba
Phone: (204) ▮▮▮▮▮▮
Email: umtrottn@myumanitoba.ca

Research Supervisor: Dr. Melanie Janzen
Associate Professor
Faculty of Education, University of Manitoba
Phone: (204) 474-9000
Email: melanie.janzen@umanitoba.ca

This consent form, a copy of which will be left with you for your records and reference, is only part of the process of informed consent. It should give you the basic idea of what the research is about and what your participation will involve. If you would like more detail about something mentioned here, or information not included here, you should feel free to ask. Please take the time to read this carefully and to understand any accompanying information.

Purpose of Study

Through this study, I wish to explore the ways in which early years children experience and understand the societal expectations of gender and the societal expectations that everyone is heterosexual using literature which features non-stereotypical characters. Through this study, I aim to support the children in developing a more fluid understanding of gender and sexuality.

Procedures

This study will be a four-week case study predominantly taking place during the classroom English Language Arts read-aloud time. The daily Language Arts time is 60 minutes and often includes a read-aloud as reflected in the curriculum. The children are invited to discuss the story before, during, and/or after the read-aloud as part of the regular routine. They will then

be invited to engage in a follow-up reader response activity that could involve writing and/or drawing. It should be stressed that this is a normal structuring of an early years English Language Arts period, and it has not been altered for the purposes of this study. The research will not interfere with the regular learning of the classroom.

Recording Devices

An audio recorder will be used to capture the read-aloud discussions. I will transcribe the recorded conversations shortly after recording them and identify the speakers by their initials. The transcripts will be password protected and encrypted. As the audio recordings are transcribed, the recordings will be deleted.

Data Collection

Data will be collected for a four-week period beginning November 22, 2021 and ending December 17, 2021. As mentioned above, the read-aloud and discussion period following the read-aloud will be audio recorded. This will be my first source of data. The second source of data will come from my observations and field journal entries about the children's informal conversations. It is those unstructured times of a student's day such as eating snack, getting ready to go outside for recess by the hallway lockers, while walking to gym or music, and/or outside at recess where children are free to engage with their classmates in informal conversation when they are enforcing the gender and heterosexuality expectations. The final source of data for my study will be the collection of students' writing and drawing which was generated in the follow-up learning activities to the read-alouds. I am seeking parental consent and child assent to use data that I collect from these three sources for use in my study.

Benefits

As learning from the stories chosen for this study will be part of our English Language Arts program, which is based in the Manitoba English Language Arts curriculum, there are no benefits to participating in the study.

Risks

There are no anticipated risks to participants in this study, other than those experienced in everyday classroom activities. As per the Government of Canada Tri-Council Policy Statement for research on humans, this study qualifies as involving minimal risk. More specifically, this is "research in which the probability and magnitude of possible harms implied by participation in the research is no greater than those encountered by participants in those aspects of their everyday life that relate to the research."

In more clear terms, any social risk that a child feels left out from the study or worries that I may negatively judge them for not consenting/assenting to the study has been removed by the fact that I cannot have access to the consent and assent forms until after the first term reporting period and after the completion of the data collection period. Children will be reassured that I will not know if I know if they consented/assented or not. Therefore, all children will be treated the same—whether they consent/assent or not.

Any psychological risk the children may feel because I am documenting their knowledge and learning is minimized as these are the current practices that are in effect in the classroom. The children will experience no more observation than normal. This study is not set apart from the everyday learning of the classroom. The children are used to me documenting as they read,

write, and do mathematics, or science. That is what early years teachers do and is part of our formative and summative assessment practices.

Anonymity and Confidentiality

While the data is being collected, all the children's words and works will only be identifiable by their initials. The audio recording will also be transcribed with the students' initials. As mentioned, the audio recordings will be electronically stored, encrypted, and password protected. Once the data collection is over and the first term reporting is done, on December 20, 2021, I will have access to the consent and assent forms. I will then begin sorting away the non-consented to data from the consented to data. All consented to data will be anonymized in that the children's initials will be replaced with a pseudonym. All of the non-consented to data will be redacted and/or destroyed.

All physical data will be stored in the Principal Investigator's home in a locked cabinet. The Research Supervisor will have access to the data prior to it being anonymized with pseudonyms.

Compensation: Participants will not be compensated or renumerated for their participation in this study.

Withdrawal from the Study: Parental consent and student assent must be given voluntarily and can be withdrawn at any time without consequence. If parents or students change their minds about participation, they are free to withdraw from the study by submitting a quick note in the second envelope that was provided to the school's secretary until December 19, 2021. After this date, students and parents are still free to withdraw their consent and assent until the final draft of the thesis has been prepared (February 2022) by contacting the Principal Investigator or by contacting the Research Supervisor at the emails or phone numbers provided above.

Research Dissemination

Findings from this study which include the children's words and work—which include drawings and writings, will be used in the final thesis and may also be used in subsequent publications or presentations. The anonymity of students, school, and district will be upheld in any publication or presentation relating to this study. Participants' spoken words, written words, and copies of their drawings may be used in the research products. Names or other identifying information will not be included or shared.

Sharing of the Study: A copy of the final thesis will be made available to all participants (in or around March 2022). Families who would like to receive a copy of the thesis may indicate their interest below.

Destruction of Data: Data will remain locked in a cabinet in the Principal Investigator's home until it is destroyed in December 2023. All encrypted electronic data will also be deleted in December 2023.

Your signature on this form indicates that you have understood to your satisfaction the information regarding participation in the research project and agree for your child to participate as a subject. In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the researchers, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time, and/or refrain from answering any questions you prefer to omit, without prejudice or consequence. Your continued participation should be as informed as your initial consent, so you should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation.

The University of Manitoba may look at your research records to see that the research is being done in a safe and proper way.

This research has been approved by the Research Ethics Board 2. If you have any concerns or complaints about this project you may contact any of the above-named persons or the Human Ethics Coordinator at (204) 474-7122 or humanethics@umanitoba.ca. A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference.

I consent to Nicole Trottier to use the following data related to my child for the purpose of this study:

a) conversations during read-alouds that were audio-recorded
b) written documentation taken through observation of conversations
c) work sample, either written, illustrated, or otherwise produced

I consent to Nicole Trottier using my child's words and work as defined in the above statement, in her master's thesis, in educational presentations, and in academic journals. I understand that my child will not be identified by name in the final thesis or other publications or presentations about this research.

I grant permission for my child to participate in this study.

Child's Name: _____

Parent's/Guardian's Name:

_____

Signature of Consent:

_____

Date:

_____

Request for a Copy of the Completed Thesis

An electronic, PDF copy of the completed thesis will be available for you upon its completion. The estimated timeline for its completion is March 2022. A copy of the thesis will also be made available at the school office. Please select whether or not you would like to be emailed a copy of the final thesis.

_____   Yes, I would like to receive a copy of the completed thesis.
         Please email a copy of the completed thesis to the following email address:

_____

_____   No, thank you. I do not require a copy of the completed thesis.

Appendix H

Student Assent Form

University of Manitoba | Faculty of Education
Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning

Faculty of Education
Room 203 Education Bldg
71 Curry Place
Winnipeg, Manitoba
Canada R3T 2N2
T: 204-474-9000

Student Assent Form

November 10, 2021

Please talk about this study with your child. (You may want to refer to the document I provided called, Possible Ways to Talk to Your Child About Considering His/Her/Their Assent for the Study).

If your child assents to have me, Nicole Trottier, include data about them in the research study, then please have *him/her/they sign the form by printing their name on the line below.*

I, _____ (student name), provide assent for Mme Trottier to use my words and my work in her university work. The work Mme Trottier chooses to use could be the pictures I have drawn, the stories I have written, and things I have said during our read-aloud story time. Mme Trottier could also use the things I said at school that help her and other adults learn how children understand what it means to be a boy or a girl.

I understand that Mme Trottier will never use my name on any work she shares of mine. In fact, she will purposefully hide my identity if she shares my work by giving me a made-up name. If I feel at some point that I no longer want my work or words shared, I can tell my family at any time. They will get in touch with the school secretary or Mme Trottier's research supervisor to let them know. Mme Trottier says it is absolutely okay for me to say I no longer wish to let her use my work or words—there are no consequences for doing this. There are also no consequences if I do not wish to let Mme Trottier use my words or work at the beginning of the study.

_____   _____   _____
(Parent/Guardian Signature)   (Student print name here)   (Date)

_____
(Parent printed name)

Appendix I

Child Friendly Parent Script

Faculty of Education
Room 203 Education Bldg
71 Curry Place
Winnipeg, Manitoba
Canada R3T 2N2
T: 204-474-9000

There is a lot of information for you and your child to consider about this study. Due to the Research Ethics Board's requirements, much of the information as well as the consent and assent forms are very technical and wordy. In an effort to help you have a conversation with your child and talk about the study, I am including some possible ways you might want to word the discussion with him/her/them. It is very important that your child have all of the information they need so that they may make an informed decision about whether or not they would like to give their assent.

I have provided suggestions of things you might say below. It's a good idea to stop frequently during the conversation and ask if your child understands or if they have any questions.

- Mme Trottier is working on a research project for her university program. She is interested in understanding how children make sense of stories that challenge the ways in which the world says girls and boys are to behave.
- For four weeks during English Language learning time, Mme Trottier will read stories each week that challenge our expectations of how girls and boys are to act. You will have conversations about the books, and you will be invited to sometimes do art activities and/or writing activities after the discussions. The sharing of stories and the drawing and writing after the stories are shared are the same as what you usually do during read-aloud time. The only difference here is that Mme Trottier will be audio recording as she reads the story, and as you discuss the story. It is important to know that you will still hear the stories, draw and/or write about the stories even if you don't want to be part of Mme Trottier's study. Sharing stories and digging more deeply into the stories to better understand them are part of what teachers must do during a regular school day.
- By joining the study—by giving your assent—you will be allowing Mme Trottier permission to use your words and your work in her research project for university. By not joining the study and not giving your assent, you are simply not allowing Mme Trottier to use your words and work in her research project; and that is absolutely your decision to make. Mme Trottier will not be upset if you don't want her to use your words and your work in her project.
- Through her research project Mme Trottier wants to help other children and teachers learn from kids and better understand how to let kids be who they want to be.
- If you do allow Mme Trottier to use your words and your work, Mme Trottier has promised that she will not use your name in her research project. She will replace your name with a pseudonym (a made-up name) whenever she refers to you, your experiences, your conversations, and your work. She will make sure that you stay

anonymous (that nobody will know it is you).
-   I, your parent/guardian, will also have to decide to give Mme Trottier permission. We can say yes or no, and it will not change what you get to do in the classroom. In other words, there will be no consequences to saying yes or no! Mme Trottier will not know what we decide until after the four-week study period is over AND even after the first term report cards are written and sent home.
-   To make sure that Mme Trottier does not know if we joined the study or opted out, we will send our forms back to the secretary in the office and she keeps the forms locked up until after the first term report cards have been sent home.
-   Do you understand the things I have been saying? Do you have any questions? If we have questions, we can email or ask Mme Trottier, or her supervisor Dr. Janzen. We can also change our mind about being in the study until March 2022, even if we said yes to the study in the beginning.

Appendix J

Parent Invitation to After-School Study Information Session

Faculty of Education
Room 203 Education Bldg
71 Curry Place
Winnipeg, Manitoba
Canada R3T 2N2
T: 204-474-9000

November 10, 2021

Dear ███████ Parents/Guardians,

I am currently working on my Master of Education degree at the University of Manitoba. The title of my research is *Exploring Children's Experiences of Gender and Heterosexuality Disruptive Texts in Early Years Classrooms*. Through this study, I wish to explore the ways in which early years children experience and understand the societal expectations of gender (what it means to be a boy or a girl) and the societal expectations that everyone is heterosexual by using literature which features non-stereotypical characters. The study will primarily take place during our English Language Arts learning time over a four-week period beginning November 22, 2021. It is important to note that sharing stories during English Language Arts time is part of the provincial English Language Arts curriculum expectations, and as such, there will be no disruption to our everyday routines, nor is other learning being negatively affected.

Along with this letter, you will have received several sheets that are intended to provide information regarding my research and the use of student data. I have also included parental consent and student assent forms which I am hoping you will read over, sign, and return to the school office in the envelope provided. There is a fair amount of information to digest, so with this in mind I would like to invite you to a virtual information session about the study.

Thesis Information Virtual Session

November 15, 2021, 3:30pm

Video call link: https://meet.google.com/hws-efyo-twx

This session is intended to provide you with the opportunity to hear first-hand about the study and to ask any questions you may have. I will present a brief summary of the thesis plan as well as information about the use of student data for which I am asking your permission to use. I will also provide time to respond to any questions you may have. The school's principal, ███████ ███████████, and my thesis advisor, Dr. Melanie Janzen will attend the session as well.

If you would like to attend this information session, please contact me via email at

umtrottn@myumanitoba.ca or by phone at (204)█████. If you are unable to make it on this

date, we can arrange for an alternate meeting, or you can call or email me with your questions. If

you are more comfortable with a one-on-one virtual meeting with myself and my research

supervisor, please email or call me to make arrangements at the above coordinates. Thank you

for your time and consideration regarding my study.

Sincerely,

Nicole Trottier

Appendix K

Observation Guide Template

Observation Guide

Date : _____

Observation Number	Setting	Participants	Activity	Conversation	Non-Verbal Communication	Teacher/Researcher Involvement

Appendix L

Indicators of Consideration in Selecting Disruptive Texts

Indicator	Rationale	Possible Considerations
The protagonist	- the protagonist is the focal point in a text, and it is his/her/their norms and values that are communicated to the children.	- what is the main character's gender; race; ethnicity; sexual orientation; socioeconomic status; age; abilities; and religion?
The prominent supporting characters	- the prominent supporting characters are also visible in texts, and their norms and values are also communicated to the children.	- what is the prominent supporting characters' gender; race; ethnicity; sexual orientation; socioeconomic status; age; abilities?; and religion?
The relationship amongst the characters	- this indicator analyzes how the characters challenge and/or uphold the Western family ideal.	- who is in the family?; what is their race; religion; socioeconomic status?; are they able-bodied? - how are any friendships portrayed?
The narrator	- narrators have the privilege of telling the story from their perspective and it is their norms and values that are communicated.	- who is telling the story? - who is not telling the story?
Depiction of masculinity	- this indicator analyzes which masculinities are being valued by the author.	- are the boys normatively portrayed as busy, rough, strong, or brave? - are the men normatively portrayed as strong, fearless, independent, or detached from nurturing roles?
Depiction of femininity	- this indicator analyzes which femininities are being valued by the author.	- are the girls and women normatively portrayed as calm, pretty, kind, dependent, helpless, or nurturing?
Protagonist agency	- this indicator analyzes how the story problem is resolved by the character(s).	- do the boys or men solve the problem with strength and independence? - do the girls and women solve the problem collaboratively or with the help of magical powers?

The text's setting	- this indicator analyzes where the story takes place.	- does the story take place outdoors where males are traditionally agentic or in the home or school where women are traditionally agentic?
The illustrations	- this indicator analyzes the messaging inherent in the illustrations.	- how do the illustrations support and/or contradict the text's disruptive messaging?
Disruptions to the gender binary	- this indicator analyzes how the characters uphold and/or challenge the dichotomous gender binary.	- what are the characters' interests? - how do the characters express themselves? - how do the characters behave?
Disruptions to heteronormativity	- this indicator assesses how the text and characters challenge the presumption of heterosexuality.	- are adults heteronormatively coupled? - are there opportunities for single-parent families to challenge heteronormativity? - are the children paired in cross-gender friendships or normatively paired in same-sex friendships?
Fostering intertextual connections	- this indicator invites an analysis of how various texts can together scaffold for children more fluid constructs of gender and sexuality.	- in what ways do the various disruptive texts scaffold children's learning?
Student engagement	- this indicator invites a reflection of children's possible enjoyment of the story.	- what parts of this text are engaging for young children?