

Queer Circle Time: Inviting Children's Responses to 2SLGBTQI+ Picture Books

Cayley Burton

Cayley Burton (she/they) has a master's of education (MEd) in early childhood education from the University of British Columbia. Cayley is a queer early childhood educator, researcher, advocate, and writer living on Treaty 7 territory in Calgary, Alberta (Mohkinstsis in Blackfoot). This research article is Cayley's second publication in the *Journal of Childhood Studies*. Email: cayburton@outlook.com

At a time when 2SLGBTQI+ identities are targeted with increasing hostility, criminalization, and attempted erasure by government officials, binary gender norms saturate the field of early childhood education (ECE). While there has been a surge in the publication of gender-diverse children's literature in recent years, many of these books are now banned in the United States, which impacts their reception in Canada, including BC, Alberta, and New Brunswick. This study elicits children's responses toward picture books about gender nonconformity, demonstrating how circle time can be queerly reimaged and practiced in ECE. Grounded in queer theory and trans studies, queer circle time is presented as an urgently needed and replicable pedagogical practice for ECE.

Key words: 2SLGBTQI+, early literacy, circle time, gender, early childhood education

Picture book read-alouds are a characteristic part of daily routines in early childhood education (ECE) programs worldwide, often used during circle time in daycare centres and preschools (Beltchenko, 2016). Circle time is an educational practice that often includes picture books, music, movement, felt stories, puppetry, and extension activities meant to promote early literacy through texts read aloud by the educator. Circle time is so ubiquitous in ECE that its function is often taken for granted, and there may be little creativity or critical thinking infused in its practice. However, as the *B.C. Early Learning Framework* (Government of British Columbia, 2019) suggests, “critically reflecting on circle time makes visible how theory and practice are deeply intertwined” (p. 28). With a focus on the pedagogical practice of circle time, this research paper asks: By considering children's responses toward a selection of 2SLGBTQI+ picture books about gender nonconformity, how can circle time be queerly reimaged and practiced in ECE? Set in a daycare in East Vancouver, BC,

Canada, this research project aims to provide an analysis of how queer ideas and identities can be welcomed, celebrated, and explored with children aged 3–5 through circle time practices.

Gender nonconforming is an umbrella term that describes, but is not limited to, nonbinary, transgender, and gender-creative identities. This label is descriptive rather than prescriptive, also referring to gender-diverse expressions, actions, and behaviours that children, adults, and narrative characters exhibit which subvert traditional gender norms. In other words, gender nonconformity can overtly or covertly challenge binary pairings of gender and sex that presume masculinity and femininity arise out of male and female birth categorizations. Yet there is no one way to be gender nonconforming, just as there is no singular way to be a girl, a boy, nonbinary, or queer.

2SLGBTQI+ is an acronym for Two-Spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, and intersex, the plus sign signifying the continuum of identities and diverse ways of being within queer communities. Although more picture books about “rainbow” families and queer characters have been published in recent years (Hedberg et al., 2022), most of these books are written by adults without consulting children's responses toward the lessons within—or the narrative arc of—the storyline. Unfortunately, many picture books featuring rainbow families or diverse identities,

including those discussed in this paper, are banned in states such as Florida and Iowa (PEN America, 2024). What's more, following his inauguration, U.S. President Donald Trump implemented "the policy of the United States to recognize two sexes, male and female" (The White House, 2025). This policy has incurred harsh impacts on trans people, especially concerning passports, prisons, homeless shelters, and washrooms (Redfield & Chokshi, 2025). This American policy resonates with some Canadians. During the April 2025 federal election campaign in Canada, Conservative party leader Pierre Poilievre said, "I'm not aware of any other genders than men and women" (CP24, 2025). Children are not immune to the attempted erasure and hostility toward 2SLGBTQI+ identities—they witness this state-sanctioned hatred firsthand in the media, in their homes, within their families, and at school.

Since 2016, sexual orientation and gender identity curriculum for grades 1–3 (SOGI 123) has been an inclusive resource for educators aimed at making schools safer and more respectful toward gender and sexual diversity among students and staff in western Canada (ARC Foundation, 2024a). Although provincially mandated in BC, SOGI 123 was recently delegitimized in Alberta by Bill 27, a government policy that makes sexual education an opt-in, rather than opt-out, process for families (Legislative Assembly of Alberta, 2024). More recently, the Alberta government enacted the notwithstanding clause on multiple laws impacting trans youth, including access to gender-affirming health care, the use of personal pronouns in schools, and gender-segregated sports participation for those under 16 (Johnson, 2025). Meanwhile, in August 2023, the government of Saskatchewan implemented something similar through a notwithstanding clause for Bill 127 (Walker & Adesanya, 2024). SOGI 123 has recently expanded its reach to Atlantic Canada, offering bilingual resources to support francophone students and educators in New Brunswick (ARC Foundation, 2024b).

However, SOGI 123 curriculum is only intended for children on the upper end of the early childhood spectrum, up to third grade. Since picture books are commonly used to impart important social norms and values to preschool-aged children (Crisp & Hiller, 2011), stories that represent gender nonconformity and 2SLGBTQI+ identities are also essential to include in ECE pedagogical practices. Queer circle time aligns with SOGI 123 principles while also being age-appropriate for preschoolers and prekindergarteners. Drawing on circle time as an established practice in ECE, this research project invited children to share their interpretations, thoughts, and artwork on a selection of 2SLGBTQI+ picture books.

Given the current political climate on teaching with 2SLGBTQI+ materials—and as a bisexual, cisgender, white woman who uses she/they pronouns—the author acknowledges the immense privilege of having conducted this research project with the child participants, parents, and daycare involved in this study. It is my sincere hope that the teaching strategies presented in this paper will promote renewed efforts toward teaching children, from a young age, that our differences are gifts, not threats, to collective well-being. As educators, how might reimagining circle time through a queer lens help create a more inclusive, loving future for the children in our care?

Literature review

Cultivating awareness during early childhood about 2SLGBTQI+ identities and the gender spectrum is important because, every day, "children are creating and re-creating meanings about gender through their talk and actions" (Blaise, 2005, p. 24). By listening to children's responses toward topics, such as gender, that directly impact them, educators and researchers can gain insight into how children conceptualize social norms. Research indicates that early learning spaces are often gendered environments for young children (Blaise, 2009; Lyttleton-Smith, 2017; Mallet, 2025; Prioretta, 2018), with circle time practices that frequently privilege participation from girls (Emilson & Johansson, 2013). Another study reveals that, in preschool, "gender is highly salient and a powerful motivator of children's preferences and behaviours" (Fast & Olson, 2018, p. 622). Many children "run the risk of being ostracized

or bullied if they do not conform to what is generally upheld as appropriate boy or girl behaviours” (Robinson, 2005, p. 20). Since early education has been shown to reproduce dominant gender norms through instruction and free play (Callahan & Nicholas, 2019; Taylor & Richardson, 2005), it is worthwhile to analyze how children mobilize or challenge these discourses during circle time featuring 2SLGBTQI+ materials.

While significant scholarship exists on children’s engagement with 2SLGBTQI+ texts, most studies focus on the perspectives of elementary-school-aged children (Hartman, 2019; Möller, 2020; Schall & Kauffman, 2003; Skrlac Lo, 2018; Van Horn, 2022). Some studies that have combined gender exploration with art as a mechanism for eliciting children’s voices include those by Dyer et al. (2021), Earles (2017), and Prioletta, Davies, and Smith (2025). Insofar as 2SLGBTQI+ children’s literature is explored in educational settings with even younger audiences, read-alouds by drag queens at public libraries have become one of the main avenues for this type of learning. The original Drag Queen Story Hour (DQSH) was founded in 2015 by Michelle Tea and has since been recreated in hundreds of venues for many years amid political pushback (Keenan & Hot Mess, 2021; Naidoo, 2018). Scholarship from New Brunswick also explores the concept of “queer joy” as an avenue of possibility for thriving social worlds that positively take up queer and trans ways of being together in ECE (Burkholder et al., 2025).

Content analyses indicate that gender remains dualistically and stereotypically represented within these texts (Hedberg et al., 2022; Marshall, 2004; Mattix & Sobolak, 2014). In Crawley’s (2017) content analysis of transgender portrayals in children’s books, an overrepresentation of female-identifying characters surfaced, along with the concern that “trans individuals who identify as male may experience difficulty finding reflections of themselves in texts” (p. 32). Schall’s (2016) research revealed how “lesbians and gays are depicted in ways that promote invisibility of LGBT people of colour” (p. 98) within children’s picture books. Meanwhile, the picture book genre as a whole remains dominated by male protagonists (Casey et al., 2021). What’s more, many picture books about gender-nonconforming characters are usually about animals, inanimate objects, or mythical creatures (Barriage et al., 2024; Crisp & Hiller, 2011). Indeed, limited representation of gendered ways of being in children’s literature, even within queer library collections, communicates to children “a script about which kinds of genders and bodies are normal and which are not” (Keenan, 2017, p. 540).

In preschool children’s own words, which scripts do they glean from 2SLGBTQI+ picture books during queer circle time? As offered in this paper, queer circle time as a distinct literacy practice that uses a range of 2SLGBTQI+ picture books and art-based extension activities is specifically meant for ECE educators and researchers who are committed to disrupting binary gender norms in ways that respond to the children’s feedback within daycare or preschool settings.

Theoretical framework: Queer theory and trans studies

While queerness and transness challenge neat categorization, queer theory has primarily focused on sexuality (Berlant & Warner, 1995; Jagose, 2009), whereas trans studies typically offers a deep interrogation of gender (Keegan, 2020). Queer theory, posits Earles (2017), is ephemeral due to its “perpetual reinvention” (p. 371). The term *queer* can never fully describe those whom it seeks to represent, yet its application must continue to “expose, affirm, and rework the specific historicity of the term” (Butler, 1993, p. 21). Jagose (2009) writes about how “the refusal of normative identity categories” is “often taken as queer theory’s signature gesture” (p. 160). This refusal of identity categories is one of the sticking points in academia between queer theory and trans studies. While queer theory aims to deconstruct gender binaries, trans studies points out how gender—even if it is deconstructed—hugely impacts individual lived experiences, with tangible, sometimes deadly, consequences (Sedgwick, 1993). Even as gender is socially constructed, gender matters.

Considering the oversaturation of gender stereotypes in picture books, Berry and Wilkins (2017) argue that “children’s literature exerts a particularly powerful influence on children’s ideas of appropriate gender-role behaviour” (p. 6). Binary gender roles are rooted in cisheteronormativity (Robinson, 2005), an ideology that is either perpetuated or challenged within picture books when these stories are used as educational tools. Cisheteronormativity presumes that all children will identify as either boys or girls, be heterosexual, and express their gender and sexuality in masculine or feminine ways that reflect their male or female sex assigned at birth. Yet one in every 2000 babies is born intersex, with many infants receiving nonconsensual surgeries that medically maintain binary expectations of what children’s bodies should be and look like (Stryker, 2017). Intersex, trans, Two-Spirit, and queer childhoods disrupt binary narratives that suggest heterosexual boyhood and girlhood are the only two options available. Despite its nebulousness, queer theory is “relevant to early childhood [researchers] who wish to find new ways of understanding and challenging persistent gender stereotypes” (Blaise & Taylor, 2012, p. 88).

Gender nonconformity is any gender expression or identity that does not reflect gender norms associated with masculine/feminine expectations tied to one’s sex assigned at birth. For gender binaries to be challenged in ECE, children must read picture books that represent gender diversity. By refusing what Britzman (1995) refers to as “repetitions of normalcy” (p. 153), educators can use these books to disrupt cisheteronormativity in early childhood. This study relied on queer theory in its design and analysis, since “queer theory can be used to create inclusive and expansive frameworks” (Skrlac Lo, 2018, p. 92) in both ECE research and practice.

Gender-inclusive pedagogies and research methods are urgently needed to protect the lives of all gender-nonconforming children. This is a fundamental right of childhood (United Nations, Article 8, 1989). Queer theory and trans studies meet within the theoretical framework of this study, recognizing that failure to support gender nonconformity produces adverse material consequences in children’s lives (Stachowiak, 2017). How can educators teach about gender diversity, though, without slipping into “Trans 101” (Keenan, 2024) or inscribing new gendered limitations on the children with whom we are working? This study offers queer circle time as a literacy practice that positions children’s responses toward 2SLGBTQI+ picture books at the forefront of its analysis so that educators can better support children’s processes of thinking *with* (Government of British Columbia, 2019) gender, rather than telling them what to think.

Methodology

ECEs are also researchers (Government of British Columbia, 2019). Therefore, ECEs must rely on child-friendly methods to elicit children’s voices in research that directly affects their lives. There are many methods used by researchers to honour children’s perspectives and to make children’s learning visible (Government of British Columbia). Child-friendly methods in documentation or data collection address language barriers and diversity of expression (Clark, 2017), vulnerability (Faldet & Nes, 2021), agency (Teachman & Gladstone, 2020), and power differentials (Sun et al., 2023). For example, the mosaic approach is celebrated for positioning children as competent, active participants in research, “treat[ing] children as experts and agents in their own lives” (Clark, 2017, p. 24) through both visual and verbal methods. Visual methods of data collection with child participants are recognized to be methodologically complex (Deguara, 2019) and context specific (Mayaba & Wood, 2015). Many researchers use children’s photography (Matsumoto et al., 2023), drawings (Prioletta et al., 2025), or GoPro footage (Coad et al., 2020) as visual data collection methods.

The current study used picture book read-alouds and art-based extension activities as a form of child-friendly focus groups. These focus groups were classified as queer circle time.

Location and participants

Data collection took place at an ages 3–5 daycare program located in East Vancouver, BC, which is situated on the unceded traditional and ancestral territories of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh First Nations. This land acknowledgment is important. Two-Spirit Indigenous identities are represented by the “2S” at the beginning of 2SLGBTQI+. The daycare for this study is situated in a gentrified area of Vancouver predominantly inhabited by middle- to upper-class families. Recently, the daycare became a \$10aDay site, meaning that childcare costs for parents are reduced to about \$200 a month (Coalition of Child Care Advocates of BC, 2025). Of the 15 children whose parents consented to their participation in the study, two children belonged to queer families. Twelve of the children in the study were white, one child was Filipino, and two were mixed race. Three children in the study were diagnosed with support needs. At the time of the study, there were seven children aged 3 and six children aged 4; the youngest participant was 35 months old, and the age of one child was not disclosed. Only three children (Puffball, Cat, and Kittycatcorn) reported having previous 2SLGBTQI+ familiarity and knowledge ahead of participation in the study.

Recruitment and parental consent

Once the daycare manager at this licensed childcare site provided written consent for use of the physical space, recruitment posters were placed around the centre so that families, educators, and children could become aware of the upcoming study. Posters were put up at daycare entrances where children were picked up and dropped off, beside children’s cubbies. Along with the posters, this study relied on third-party recruitment. This meant the daycare manager notified families, through email, of the opportunity to participate in the study. I provided the daycare manager with the parent consent forms and child assent forms to disperse in digital and hard-copy formats. Consent forms were available for parents to complete at the daycare’s sign-in and sign-out locations. Participation was capped at 15 children; this recruitment goal was achieved. Families were given one week to provide consent before the first queer circle time occurred. This study’s method and design were approved by UBC’s Behavioural Research Ethics Board (BREB) for ethical research practice with young children.

Children’s assent

In addition to obtaining parental/guardian consent, research with child participants must also seek informed assent from participants themselves (Adler et al., 2019). Assent is an important part of recognizing children’s agency and vulnerabilities (Bluebond-Langner & Korbin, 2007). Assent includes children’s “right to dissent, that a decision not to participate will be respected, and that they can stop at any time with no consequences” (Curtin, 2001, p. 299). This flexibility ensures ethical engagement with child participants, extending the same agency to their decision making as that of adult participants in social science research. By granting children the authority to control their participation, power dynamics between researchers and child participants are negotiated. Possibilities for greater collaboration emerge (Government of British Columbia, 2019). One week before data collection, the researcher visited the daycare to meet, play with, and obtain assent from children without audio recording. For children whose assent could not be obtained during that first visit to the daycare, assent was confirmed during the next visit, before data collection during queer circle time began.

To gain assent, the researcher introduced themselves and the purpose of the visits to the daycare over the next few weeks. Children were informed that their parents/guardians had already given their permission for them to “help me with my homework,” but they ultimately were the ones who got to decide if they wanted to participate. Children were encouraged to come up with a “secret name” (a pseudonym) and draw or write their assent on the paper form. During data collection, child participants were invited to join queer circle time; they were reminded

that they could leave the circle at any time. This permission to come and go was child centered. It meant that some children participated in the reading portion of queer circle time and not the art activity, and vice versa, depending on the day. Children who expressed dissent were excused from further participation during that day of data collection unless they voluntarily expressed interest in wanting to rejoin the group later. Assent was sought on each visit to the daycare before queer circle time audio recording began.

Instructional materials

The picture books featured in this study and read during queer circle time were selected by the researcher and approved by UBC's BREB. Books featured in this research project did not have a gendered signifier (e.g., "boy" or "girl") as part of the title. 2SLGBTQI+ themes (e.g., they/them pronouns, coming out, Pride parades) are represented in the words and illustrations. Gender is an expansive rather than a limiting factor by the end of each story. All books read during queer circle time contain a concluding message of acceptance or pride in being one's true self despite facing misinterpretation, maliciousness, or misrecognition. As well, every book was published in the last 10 years—an important criterion so as to communicate contemporary language about gender (Stryker, 2017). The daycare had some of the books characterizing this study on its shelves, indicating potential popularity and a potentially influential factor for parents' willingness to consent. Children were vocal about already knowing the books presented during the circle; some children self-reported having these texts in their home libraries. Children's familiarity with these books before they participated in the study reflects the demographics of the children, as they belong to queer-affirming families that can afford to have home libraries.

In order of appearance, the picture books listed below met all the above criteria and were read out loud during data collection in this study.

Table 1: Picture Books Used During Queer Circle Time

Title	Authors and Illustrators	Published
<i>Bunnybear</i>	Andrea J. Loney and Carmen Saldaña	2017
<i>Red: A Crayon's Story</i>	Michael Hall	2015
<i>This Day in June</i>	Gayle E. Pitman and Kristyna Litten	2014
<i>Peanut Goes for the Gold</i>	Johnathan Van Ness and Gillian Reid	2020
<i>Julián Is a Mermaid</i>	Jessica Love	2018
<i>Neither</i>	Airlie Anderson	2018
<i>M Is for Moustache</i>	Catherine Hernandez and Marisa Firebaugh	2017

Data collection

Fifteen child participants committed one hour per week for three consecutive weeks to this research, totalling three hours of participation in queer circle time. Participants voted on the order to read books during each session. To make queer circle time more dynamic for the children, props, songs, and movement breaks were incorporated alongside the read-aloud of each book. Afterwards, children were invited to the art tables, where provocations had been prepared in advance. Since not all children attending the daycare had parent or guardian consent, queer

circle time took place in separate areas from regular activities. Specifically, children gathered in the nap room of the daycare for the read-aloud portion of queer circle time; art extension activities took place while the majority of children who did not have parental consent were playing outside.

Audio-recorded data was collected during the read-aloud and art activities, with three out of five visits to the participating daycare resulting in data collection. (The first visit was to collect children's assent; the final visit was to wrap up the study.) Audio recordings captured the entirety of the activities, including transitions between the read-aloud and art activities, resulting in a collective three hours of data for transcription. Photographs of the children's artwork and field notes taken after each daycare visit were used as the second and third data sets, allowing for data triangulation and important reflexivity (Government of British Columbia, 2019) during the research process. Researcher reflexivity is necessary to mitigate bias and reflect on the data-gathering process, maximizing inclusivity for children of different skillsets and participation levels. Children in this study were encouraged to take home their art creations, and leftover art supplies were gifted to the daycare.

Data analysis

Queer circle time featured two components: read-alouds of 2SLGBTQI+ picture books and art activities based on these books. Data from queer circle time included audio recordings of both components, photos of child participants' artwork, and field notes that the researcher took after each visit to the participating daycare. Audio data was listened to repeatedly to flag sections worthy of transcription. To determine which sections of audio to transcribe, the discussion in the recordings had to relate in some capacity to the research question. In other words, a direct connection to gender or 2SLGBTQI+ themes had to be mentioned by the child participants on the audio recording for these conversations to move forward into the next phase of analysis. I then spent time reading, thematically coding, and categorizing the transcriptions (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003). This same process was followed for the audio-recorded field notes. Once the thematic coding was complete, constant comparative analysis (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007) revealed which theme reoccurred across the data types. Children's artwork, as well as their verbatim descriptions of what they were making during the art process, were used to visually demonstrate key themes of the data. As Malin (2013) discusses, "children's perceptions of their own art making are important for research and practice" (p. 6). The artwork presented in this paper best illustrates the themes that emerged from the data.

Results

Data analysis showed four varying responses from child participants during queer circle time. Enthusiastic responses appeared most frequently in the data as coded themes, followed by disengagement, curiosity, and—lastly—second thoughts. Data shows that the richest conversations related to 2SLGBTQI+ concepts occurred when children made art that allowed them to express their individuality and ideas related to the text, including through self-portraiture, sculpture, and mermaid shape decoration. These findings have important implications for teaching practice, demonstrating how circle time can be queerly reimaged and practiced in ECE. Examples of children's enthusiasm, disengagement, curiosity, and second thoughts as responses to queer circle time are elaborated on below.

Enthusiasm

Enthusiastic responses in this study were demonstrated by child participants through their excited engagement with concepts of gender nonconformity or 2SLGBTQI+ topics during queer circle time. Often, this enthusiasm manifested as joyful emotions on faces, prosocial behaviours toward others, and energized body language during

read-alouds and art-making. For example, child participants expressed eagerness to know more about the stories being read and made connections to their own gender identities, sexuality, or lived experiences when certain concepts or images were introduced through the picture books. In particular, out of all the picture books shared in this study, the reading and extension activity for *Julián Is a Mermaid* (Love, 2018) elicited the most animated discussion and vocalized excitement from child participants as they reacted to the illustrations and plot line of the book, specifically in relation to the idea that mermaids are relevant and relatable to all genders.

The transcript excerpt below demonstrates children's enthusiasm toward mermaids being relevant and relatable for all genders, including boys.

Potato Head: I have that one—tail.

Researcher: You have a tail like that?

Potato Head: Yeah.

Puffball: Me too!

Crab: I don't have a tail like that. I don't have a tail like that.

Researcher: That's okay. I think.

Puffball: I do!

Researcher: You do?

Potato Head: I do!

Researcher: You both do. I think he just took it off of the curtain ...

Here, child participants demonstrated enthusiasm toward the protagonist's gender nonconforming expression by relating Julián's experience to their own. Who has mermaid tails at home, and is it okay to not have one even if you *are* a boy? The narrative was flipped from the usual gender stereotype of mermaids being only for girls. Children's comments were free of judgment for Julián's decision to dress up as a mermaid, despite being a boy, as well as for having or not having their own tail at home. For instance, Crab appeared forlorn and a bit left out for not having a tail at home. However, he later proudly bragged to the researcher about having a dress, expressing his proximity to gender nonconformity similar to Julián's in the book. A similar response occurred for the child participants during the read-aloud of *Peanut Goes for the Gold* (Van Ness & Reid, 2020), which tells the story of a nonbinary guinea pig who loves gymnastics. Child participants were excited to show off their gymnastics moves in the middle of the story, performing a variety of movements based on their gross motor skills rather than their gender: cartwheels, somersaults, balancing tricks, horse kicks. This enthusiasm toward characters and concepts in 2SLGBTQI+ picture books conveys a general sense of acceptance toward gender nonconformity, a finding that has important implications for ECE teaching practice.

Children's enthusiasm for *Julián* and *Peanut* carried into art activities as well, as children explored materials using the visual prompts or provocations provided by the researcher. While the use of the mermaid premade shapes in this activity may be contested, providing a shape-based prompt was deemed necessary since children in this study struggled to draw on their own during an earlier activity (crayon drawing following *Red: A Crayon's Story* and *Neither*, see below). Taking children's varying fine motor skill development into consideration, thematically related shapes were provided through which children could engage with art materials in open-ended ways, where "the intention [was] not to provide answers or a predictable goal for children's learning" (Government of British

Columbia, 2019, p. 51) but to spark exploration through a prompt provided by the researcher. Even with the mermaid shape provided, children asked the researcher multiple times to colour the shapes during the activity.

As can be seen from the images below, none of the children's mermaids resulted in the same outcome, a pedagogical intention encouraged by the B.C. Early Learning Framework. In this queer circle time art activity, "the role of the educator has shifted away from being a transmitter of knowledge toward being a collaborator who creates conditions so that children can invent, investigate, build theories, and learn" (p. 17). The mermaid shape was the condition; children used markers to colour in and outside the lines, gluing googly eyes and sequins, etc., as they explored the idea of mermaids being gender inclusive rather than only for girls. During this activity, children did not identify their art by gender at any point in the creative process. Child participants of all genders seemed to relate to Julián's appreciation for mermaids and, likewise, Peanut's gymnastic tricks. Children in this study expressed enthusiasm for having shared interests and commonalities with the gender-nonconforming protagonists in the 2SLGBTQIA+ picture books read during queer circle time and the extension art activities.



Image 1. Mermaid art activity.

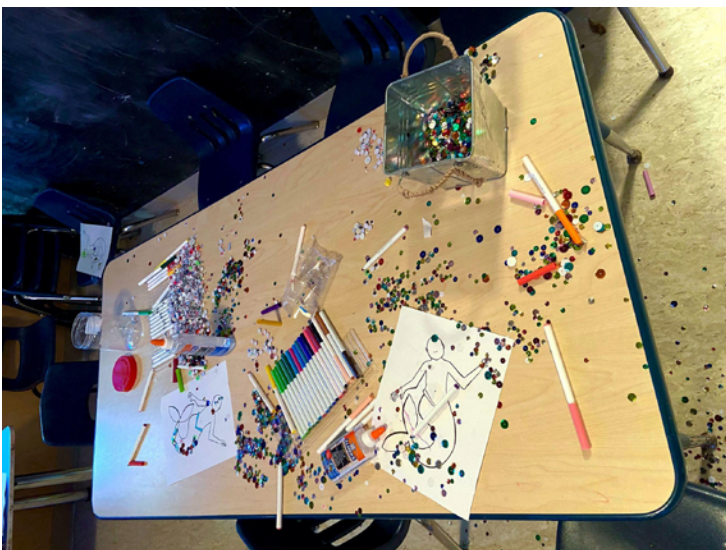


Image 2. Open-ended exploration of mermaid shapes.

Disengagement

The second most common response from child participants to 2SLGBTQI+ picture books during circle time was disengagement. This response felt to the researcher a stark contrast from the lively enthusiasm displayed at other times from child participants! Often, the disengaged response manifested among child participants as either silence or non sequiturs unrelated to gender or 2SLGBTQI+ concepts *following immediately after something queer had been read aloud or explained*. They did not comment when something 2SLGBTQI+ was introduced, but did not hold back their visual or vocal expression around more predictable topics like rainbows. Often, they seemed unchanged or neutral following the introduction of something queer. Take *This Day in June* (Pitman & Litten, 2014). During group discussions, sometimes there were no observable reactions from child participants when gender nonconformity was represented through illustrations in this book and others. Yet children were enthusiastic about the mechanics of a parade (e.g., marching around the room with flags and toys in their hands). In these moments, children seemed to either shift into a non sequitur or disengage from the pictures or words read aloud. They did not express fully developed or strongly stated positions on queer things being discussed.

In another example, during the reading of *M is for Moustache* (Hernandez & Firebaugh, 2015), child participants did not comment about the introduction of a new word (queerspawn) but were verbose and made personal connections when the topic moved to rainbows.

Researcher: "P is for Pride." Do you know what Pride is?

Puffball: No!

Researcher: Pride is when you celebrate if you're LGBTQ. [Turns page] "Q is for queer! Queerspawn." That means if your parents are LGBTQ and you're their kid.

Silence.

Researcher: [Turns page] "R is for rainbow."

Potato Head: I love rainbows.

Likewise, following the reading of *This Day in June*, rainbow tactile materials of air-dry clay, feathers, and pipe cleaners were arranged in a simple provocation. Children were more interested in making snakes than engaging with Pride or queer concepts from this book. Although the activity was intentionally designed to inspire children's artistic interpretation of the picture books they had just read and discussed on the carpet, children demonstrated disengagement with the 2SLGBTQIA+ texts. Even if the story was still present during this activity (e.g., propped up in view of the materials), children's text-material connections were not explicit in speech or artistic representation. Thus, disengagement is shown to be the second most common type of response among child participants during queer circle time using *This Day in June*, *Peanut Goes for the Gold*, and *Neither*.



Image 3. "My long, long, long, long, long, long blue snake."



Image 4. Art provocation using clay, feathers, and pipe cleaners.

This theme is a good reminder to educators that while rainbows may be a gentle way to introduce more queer content in ECE spaces, it is barely the tip of the iceberg. If children appear distracted, reserved, or confused about vocabulary, people, communities, and ideas related to 2SLGBTQIA+ identities, the learning will need to develop gradually. Children's families must also be supportive and involved in the process, so that queer identities are made visible and valued in the early learning classroom. Deeper learning about queerness takes time and is built around trust, acceptance, and celebration. Normalizing conversations about queerness—and fostering children's curiosity about being aware and proud of who they are, the next theme—is essential for children to fully engage in queer circle time.

Curiosity

Curiosity expressed by children often appeared on the tail-end of having just expressed enthusiasm toward the 2SLGBTQI+ picture books shared during circle time. The theme of curiosity as a response to these queer narratives was distinct from other themes, such as enthusiasm or disengagement, however, because it indicated children's uncertainty toward the books or materials during extension activities. Curiosity as a response was characterized by children's questions about the books or the concepts within them, such as when they speculated about what was happening in the story without making value statements or judging the characters for their actions, gender expression, or sexual identities.

The following dialogue excerpt from the read-aloud of *Neither* (Anderson, 2018) illustrates children's sense of

curiosity about the vibrant and diverse collection of animals depicted in the story. In this picture book, there exists a gender nonconforming protagonist who is neither just a bunny nor a bear like the other animals in its community—the character called Neither is a hybrid of both types of animals, and faces discrimination from the other animals as a result. Even in field notes, most of the children’s comments are categorized as curiosity rather than enthusiasm during this reading, as shown below. Children’s curiosity about the animals in this book but their lack of awareness of nonbinary and nonconforming gender and sexual identities suggests a limited understanding of how the bird and bunny binary in this story relates to real-life inclusion and exclusion behaviours toward the 2SLGBTQ1A+ community.

- Monkey: What is that?!
- Researcher: And what is that? [Laughs]
- Monkey: A cat?
- Raindrop: Potato Head, do you see it?
- Researcher: A cat? A cat butterfly!
- Monkey: A cat butterfly?
- Researcher: “I’m from the Land of This and That.”
- Raindrop: Potato Head, they’re pedalling!
- Researcher: “But I’m neither ... ”
- Raindrop: They’re pedalling!
- Researcher: “ ... so I’m looking for somewhere else to fit in. This isn’t somewhere else, but you will fit in here!”
- Monkey: I know, I know! A cat and a butterfly!
- Researcher: “So many different kinds!”
- Potato Head: Oh, they’re playing together! They said they can play with ...
- Researcher: Yeah!
- Crab: A eyeball? Why’s there an eyeball?

This excerpt highlights children’s verbal interaction with a picture book featuring a creature that is neither a blue bunny nor a yellow bird. The expressed curiosity toward the illustrations in the book, however, did not indicate an enthusiasm toward gender nonconformity. Child participants asked questions about the illustrations and seemed curious about the animals depicted on the pages, yet they remained disengaged toward 2SLGBTQ1A+ concepts in the book. More specifically, while children were interested in the overall message of inclusion in this book—and made note of animals they already recognized, like cats and butterflies—they did not outwardly express comprehension toward the gender nonconforming characters within the binary context of birds and bunnies in the story. They saw “so many kinds of animals,” but gender nonconforming creatures like the protagonist did not merit comment or special attention, as can be seen from the above dialogue.

Likewise, during extension activities, children’s visual responses did not reflect an interest in drawing their own

chimeras based on the book; instead, they mostly opted for drawings of single-colour animals, their families, or their names (not shown due to confidentiality). Rather, curiosity emerged from the idea that creatures could be more than one animal, but children did not take up this idea in ways that revealed enthusiasm toward queer gender or sexual identities. While making art, they were curious about the concept that their personal identity could be represented through colour choices or the animals they drew, but they did not connect this curiosity to the gender nonconformity of the main character in the book. *Neither* captured their imaginations and curiosity in terms of an appreciation for cute animals, but the lesson of acceptance for gender nonconforming characters and how this might apply to real-life 2SLGBTQIA+ identities and people did not fully materialize into enthusiastic understanding for these child participants.

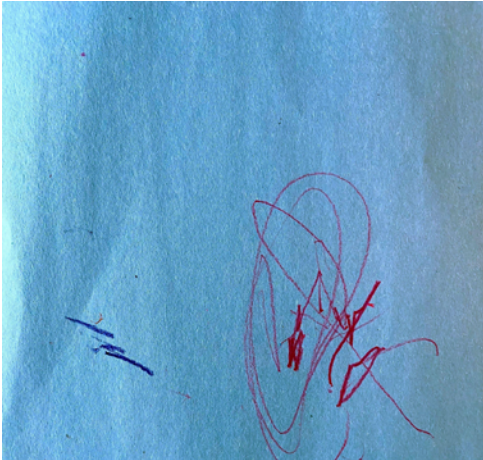


Image 5. "I wanna draw an elephant."

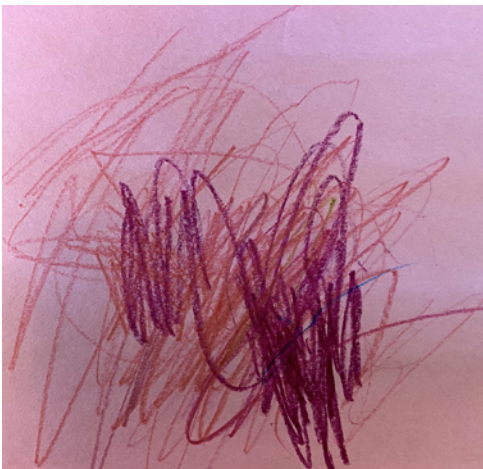


Image 6. "Pink!"

Consequently, curiosity acted as a stepping stone toward other responses, sometimes branching toward enthusiasm, as it did during the readings of *Julián* and *Peanut*, or moving quietly into disengagement, as it did during *This Day in June* or *M is for Moustache* (perhaps children were unfamiliar with the diverse queer representation in these two books and therefore needed more time to process their internal/external responses). Curiosity for aspects of queer picture books manifested without a deep understanding of the applicability for real-life interactions with 2SLGBTQIA+ identities, as during the reading of *Neither*. As well, curiosity as a response to queer circle time was shown to also sometimes shift into hesitation or conflicting emotions in the fourth and final theme—second

thoughts.

Second thoughts

Although the children were for the most part enthusiastic about the concepts presented during queer circle time reading and art activities, moments arose where they seemed to vacillate in their thinking and level of participation, perhaps due to surprise at new concepts or a desire for familiarity or comfort. Second thoughts as a theme is defined as an unenthusiastic response to or perplexity about at least one aspect of queer circle time or the 2SLGBTQI+ picture books, where children seemed to express doubts and change their minds about some aspect of the experience. Distinct from dissent, second thoughts were demonstrated when children wavered on their stance toward the picture books or extension activities, whether in attitude, participation, or discussion.

For example, one child with diagnosed special needs was crying during the reading of *Bunnybear* (Loney & Saldaña, 2017), but field notes indicated that he would also come back to the circle willingly, and then leave again, moving around the room, exercising agency in his choice to stay or leave. This behaviour was coded as “second thoughts” in this research because the child participant seemed to be navigating adverse emotional reactions during queer circle time, but did not want to completely exit the focus group, being interested in the props the researcher had brought to “hook” the children’s attention at the beginning of the activity. Since he was nonverbal, the audio-recorded data only reveals his crying, information which is complicated by the fact that the relationship he had with the researcher was completely new, limiting insight into his behaviour. Thus, the vacillation demonstrated by this child participant is an example of the theme “second thoughts”, since there were aspects of queer circle time that captured his participation, but aspects that also created complicated emotions for him.

However, this child who cried during *Bunnybear* later showed enthusiasm and curiosity for other readings and art opportunities, especially *Julián Is a Mermaid* and its extension activity—he was especially mesmerized by the sequins. Thus, rotating responses among themes during circle time sessions suggests that children’s second thoughts may be about any aspect of this study, from the 2SLGBTQIA+ content in the picture books, to the structure of queer circle time, to the materials featured during art extension activities. Even open-ended circle time can lead to second thoughts about the learning process!

The excerpt below further illustrates the second thoughts theme, which happened during the reading of *Red: A Crayon’s Story* (Hall, 2015). In this example, child participants wavered on their interpretations and conclusions of the book’s message, despite demonstrating enthusiastic and curious responses too.

Researcher: “He’s really reaching for the sky. [Turns page] “And he really was.”

Crab: He did the sky.

Researcher: So, actually, what colour was he after all?

Puffball: Um, blue!

Researcher: Yeah, but red on the outside.

Twinkle: [Pointing at page] Pink!

Researcher: So, what do you think, does that mean that someone can ...

Twinkle: Teacher, look!

- Researcher: What do you think that means?
- Twinkle: [Pointing at page] Green! Pink!
- Unicorn: So someone can, can change the marker, so someone can change the marker to red.
- Researcher: Right, they can change it. And that's okay? Or not okay? What do you think?
- Puffball, Cat: [In unison] Okay!
- Unicorn: But, but, but you can change the other marker to a different one.
- Researcher: That's right.
- Cat: But you can't—but if you change the wrapper, also, it will make people think red is blue, or pink is yellow.
- Researcher: Yeah, is that okay, for people to think that?
- Unicorn: No.
- Researcher: No?
- Cat: No.

Here, Cat and Unicorn initially provided acceptance of the crayon's colour change before then refusing to accept it. They experienced second thoughts about what the takeaway of the story should be. Are they only talking about the colour of the crayons, in a literal sense? It is possible that the adult parallel to gender in *Red* does not transfer to child readers. Rather, does the lesson in the story transfer to differences writ large? Some books may require multiple readings or experiences with the stories to allow for further interpretation by children.

The children enthusiastically received this book, yet its messages were not wholly or easily accepted, and it is unclear whether they were applying its metaphorical narrative to real-world applications of gender. Child participants may have accepted that mislabelling was possible in the world of crayons, but whether they applied this same likelihood to the misgendering of people is not conclusive based on this interaction. It is unclear whether this means that the children refused this as a reading of gender diversity, as their vacillation suggests ambiguity of thought (but the wheels were turning!). As a finding, this response compels educators to support the nuanced development of children's gender schemas to promote inclusion for gender nonconformity and trans and nonbinary identities in ECE through further exploration of children's second thoughts on 2SLGBTQI+ picture books.

Discussion

In this study, when 2SLGBTQI+ picture books were shared with child participants during circle time, four types of responses emerged: enthusiasm, curiosity, disengagement, and second thoughts. Children's overwhelming enthusiasm toward 2SLGBTQI+ picture books during queer circle time suggests that gender is a salient and engaging topic for children to explore, both during read-aloud and art activities. One possibility for disengagement here is that while some children were relating their own world to text connections, others were hearing new vocabulary for the first time. In these instances, any uncertainty or hesitation from child participants was often paired with their willingness to understand or learn more about what was being discussed or portrayed in the 2SLGBTQI+ picture books. Children's curiosity deserves nurturing!

On the other hand, children may also demonstrate disengagement when they disagree with or feel less comfortable

commenting on, or visually representing, 2SLGBTQI+ content, as evidenced by Puffball putting the drawing of his queer family immediately in his backpack after completing it. As researchers and educators, “our goal is to surface children’s ways of being *as knowledge*” (Yoon & Templeton, 2019, p. 57, emphasis in original) about all social issues related to early childhood, normalizing the diversity of gender identity, family relationships, and self-expression.

Adult interpretations and goals for children too often get in the way of things; children live what they know of their lives. In this study, child participants eagerly searched for points of connection between their own experiences and those of the characters in the 2SLGBTQI+ picture books during circle time. Although they rarely used terms such as *gay*, *lesbian*, *trans*, or *pride* when expressing their thoughts, they *wanted* to have things in common with the characters. Children were shouting over one another to share that they, too, have a mermaid tale like Juliàn’s at home! Children did not flinch—as some adults still do—at the use of “they/them” pronouns in *Peanut Goes for the Gold* but instead offered to demonstrate their gymnastic expertise. For this reason, they may (or may not) have been speaking about queer concepts in ways that were explicit in their mind but not in ways recognized by adult-determined research conventions.

As part of language development in the early years, how children verbally communicate often carries forward implications, mispronunciation, multiple meanings, and mistakes. This study demonstrates the role of art based on 2SLGBTQI+ picture books in eliciting children’s responses toward queer identities and stories. Art brings visibility to children’s ideas, discussions, and viewpoints (Deguara, 2019) in both research and educational contexts. For children whose language is still developing, art supports expressivity through materials, which equate to data or “traces” (Government of British Columbia, 2019, p. 54). The clay and feathers activity elicited a family of snakes as children physically grappled with concepts and identities related to Pride parades. Gender-neutral mermaid shapes allowed child participants to express their creativity, with googly eyes being one of the defining features of the characters regardless of gender. This study offered children the opportunity to engage with and build on their interactions with 2SLGBTQI+ picture books through artmaking in a process referred to as queer circle time. Thus, this queer circle time method provides children with the space to explore ideas, materials, identities, and concepts beyond the confines of traditional binary gender norms in ECE.

Children’s second thoughts about gender are likely due to the pervasiveness of cisheteronormativity from before the moment they are born. Yet to be informed, safe, caring, and socially conscious human beings, children must learn that gender is expansive and exists in more ways than just “boys and girls are different.” In this study, child participants expressed enthusiasm when they discovered a commonality between themselves and the protagonists in the picture books read during queer circle time, regardless of gender. Picture books are only the invitation. How does this empathy extend beyond the page so that children are free to accept and explore queer ways of being in our common worlds (Taylor & Giugni, 2012)?

As results show, queer circle time with 2SLGBTQI+ picture books elicited mostly enthusiastic responses from child participants. However, picture books about nonhuman characters may not communicate the lessons authors intend, as children in the current study demonstrated a disconnect between applying gender nonconformity as a metaphor to its real-world application with non-binary and trans identities. Educators implementing queer circle time are encouraged to continue the conversation about gender nonconformity and rainbow identities with children during daily teaching practice so that children’s understanding of queerness and the 2SLGBTQI+ community develops robustly and comprehensively.

Conclusion

This study presents an interrogation of gender by eliciting children's responses to 2SLGBTQI+ picture books during circle time. The four types of responses to these books—enthusiasm, disengagement, curiosity, and second thoughts—are specific to the child participants involved in this research. Future scholarship could explore how the methodology of queer circle time applies to other early learning contexts to gain stronger insight into children's learning and literary extension explorations of these books. By considering children's responses toward 2SLGBTQI+ picture books about gender nonconformity, circle time can be queerly reimaged and practiced in ECE, as children will indicate concepts to be further explored.

Although these books are imperfect in their representation of the diversity of the 2SLGBTQI+ community as a whole, including them in circle time in ECE settings remains essential for debunking gender binaries that children may otherwise internalize or take for granted, with acknowledgment by educators whose stories continue to be absent from this canon of children's literature. Art projects using materials such as rainbows, feathers, sequins, and other materials reminiscent of Pride parades and sparkly celebrations further reimagine this classic ECE activity. While DQSH and previous studies in ECE have primarily focused on queer representation in children's literature, this study examines the importance of making queer concepts, identities, and stories more accessible to children through the pedagogical practice of queer circle time in daycare settings—perhaps, even, as queer joy (Burkholder et al., 2025).

Providing creative opportunities for children to share their experience of queer picture books situates artmaking as an exploratory extension of literacy in the stories. Given that the B.C. Early Learning Framework (Government of British Columbia, 2019), the guiding document for ECEs in BC, fails to outline how 2SLGBTQI+ topics can be meaningfully included and discussed within early years settings and that SOGI 123 curriculum begins at grade 1, queer circle time proves to be a versatile and necessary component of preschool and daycare learning. This paper provides an outline for educators to teach about, think with, and create alongside 2SLGBTQI+ picture books, concepts, and queer communities in early childhood education.

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