

Early Childhood Educators' Understandings of How Young Children Perform Gender During Unstructured Play

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This study explores Nova Scotia early childhood educators' (ECEs') understandings of how young children perform gender during unstructured play. This research reveals that ECEs view gender primarily through traditional gender stereotypes and often unknowingly construct heteronormative play spaces that then inform the ways in which children learn gender. However, the ECEs also recognize the requirement to disrupt normative gender processes and challenge children to think and act outside the gender binary. There is a need for early childhood educators to discuss more regularly their gender-inclusive practices and locate new pedagogical approaches to support diverse identity expressions.

Key words: *early childhood; gender; performativity; regulatory norms; challenge*

Early childhood settings are important foundational educational sites in which to examine how children perform gender. This research explores Nova Scotia early childhood educators' (ECEs) understandings of how children perform gender during unstructured play. This inquiry is important because ECEs can often influence but also neutralize gender bias in educational settings (Aina & Cameron, 2011). Moreover, we know from previous research that young children actively construct gender in learning settings with their peers (Blaise, 2005; Davies, 2003; MacNaughton, 2000; Renold, 2000; Robinson, 2014; Thorne, 1993; West & Zimmerman, 1987). That is, children generally come to acquire a set of beliefs and ideas on gender at an early age and are routinely subjected to a system of norms that attempt to embed gender expectations in children regarding how they are supposed to be and act (Balter, van Rhijn, & Davies, 2016; Boskey, 2014;

Butler, 2004; Janmohamed, 2010). However, critical child and youth scholars similarly recognize that children come to understand gender through experiences in other settings and learn about gender at home with their parents, guardians, siblings, and caregivers. For example, research has shown that boys may avoid dramatic play areas because they have been told playing house is for girls (Cherney & Dempsey, 2010). Given the complexity of how gender is constructed for young children, it is critical to gain a better understanding of gender performativity in the early years through the lens of ECEs.

You will see in this research that the ECEs view gender predominantly through the gender binary and often unknowingly construct heteronormative play opportunities that then inform the ways in which children learn gender. However, this study also shows the ECEs recognizing stereotypical gender role play and, at junctures, challenging the children to explore their identities outside normative gender processes. There is a need to explore further ECEs' perceptions of how children perform gender and to identify ways to destabilize the reproduction of heteronormative gender practices and allow for new possibilities for self-expression in early childhood settings.

Judith Butler (2004) in *Undoing Gender* draws discussion toward the impact regulatory norms have on young

children when they experience the public spheres of school. Butler explains how norms reduce the possibilities of how life can be lived relative to how well each body accomplishes gender norms. That is, young children who do not fit neatly into the gender binary of masculine or feminine face increased scrutiny by peers in school (Keenan, 2017; Pascoe, 2007; Reddington, 2017). I purposely mention Butler's critique of normative dimensions early on in this analysis because it provides an entry for examining how ECEs' pedagogical approaches, such as predefined play areas (e.g., dramatic play, building block areas), might impose certain restrictions on how young children perform gender during unstructured play. This heteronormative paradigm is further complicated by the saturation of gender power relations that flow in and through early childhood settings and determine how a body should move within a masculine boy / feminine girl binary. In particular, it is the dominant gender discourses that circulate in early childhood settings that often come to define what it means to be a boy or a girl. These traditional gendered social practices, which are grounded in a tendency to other those who are different or who do not measure up to norms of hegemonic heterosexual gender configurations, require attention because they can limit the ways in which children express their gender.

Explicitly, for some young children, negotiating the everyday expectations of gender is a difficult and a complex process, especially if they do not fit the heteronormative representations inherent in dominant Western discourses. Therefore, it is imperative that we understand better how young children aged 4–5 years perform gender during unstructured play. The traditional gender frameworks have “particularly damaging consequences for those boys and girls who are positioned as Other to the normalizing and regulatory gendered scripts” (Renold, 2000, p. 324). In this research, I draw attention to the intensification and incitement of particular forms of desire within specific regimes of masculinizing and feminizing practices that shape how young children (aged 4–5 years) learn to relate to each other as gendered subjects. In particular, I investigate how normative structures like dramatic play areas influence the ways children perform gender as seen through the perspectives of ECEs. In exploring children's gender constructions through the perspectives of ECEs, I invite a space for increased critical reflection and dialogue among educators on how we might begin to destabilize existing gender and normative structures in schools.

Theoretical framework

Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity suggests that nobody is a gender from the start; rather, gender is a phenomenon produced and reproduced over time. Butler describes masculinity and femininity as constructions not from biological essences but stemming from language and society as effects of norms and power relations. Butler explains that gender performance is how we act, walk, and talk in ways that consolidate an impression of being a man or being a woman. According to Butler, gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which

various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts. The effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self. (Butler, 1990, p. 140)

In Butler's performative theory, situating one's body through reenactments of stylized gendered modes emphasizes and reveals the tension young children potentially display in public spaces when faced with what is deemed acceptable. As Janette Kelly-Ware (2016) states, “who children are and how they perform who they are, that is, what they do, are also fashioned through the power of what is acceptable, desirable and rewarded” (p. 149). That is, hegemonic ideals of heteronormative masculine and feminine gendered identities can be limiting to those who do not categorize themselves within these fixed gender boundaries (Butler, 1990). Similarly, Gunn and MacNaughton (2007) assert that children do gender in multiple ways and that their gender performances can change based on

the learning setting, the context, and others around them.

In this research, by thinking through Butler's theory of gender as performative, I aim to draw attention to the intricacy in young children's gender construction and highlight how early childhood pedagogies and the role of educators potentially influence how children express their gender in an early childhood setting. Further, this research presents a unique position to see the roles ECEs might play in subverting traditionally defined gender norms and allow for more fluid forms of gender expression. When thinking about what this might look like in an early childhood setting, I connect with Harper Keenan's (2017) understandings of building a trans pedagogy that situates bodies to be viewed in multiple ways rather than through categories and single definitions. That is, Keenan suggests that educators create spaces for children to "explore and play with gender as they understand it, inviting them into mutually respectful dialogue and asking them questions about the meaning and limits of those understandings, rather than forcing them to regurgitate our own rigid definitions" (p. 552). Moreover, Keenan argues that educators need to come together and share the complexities of our own embodied knowledge and question the limitations of that knowledge. As a queer academic in the field of child and youth study, I strongly identify with Keenan's suggestion to come together and acknowledge the complexity of individual experiences. I hope by bringing 15 ECEs together, I have begun this process.

Methodology

There were 15 participants in this study, all of whom were early childhood educators in the province of Nova Scotia and employed at licensed Nova Scotia early childhood centres. These participants have been trained to provide gender inclusive opportunities for children as outlined in *Capable, Confident, and Curious: Nova Scotia's Early Learning Curriculum Framework* (Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development [DEECD], 2018). Specifically, the curriculum guideline outlines specific tools for ECEs to use when fostering a gender-diverse learning environment. The gender-diverse learning principles include not making assumptions about a child's gender, seeing the full potential of a child, and trusting the child's choices in relation to toys, play, self-identification, and expression (DEECD, 2018, p. 31). The framework states: "Exploring gender roles, identities and fluidity is a normal part of child development. Childhood is the time when an inner sense of gender emerges, and children undertake their own journeys to self-understanding" (DEECD, 2018, p. 51). ECEs are encouraged to follow these gender inclusive learning principles when designing their learning environments:

- Use gender-inclusive language as much as possible. Rather than addressing groups of children as "boys and girls," use "children" and "everyone."
- Organize children into groups rather than "boys or girls."
- Avoid using gendered terminology to make it easier for children and families who are gender nonconforming to feel valued and included.
- Ensure all children have access to materials and encourage children to explore their full range of interests without gendered expectations (e.g., "this area is for boys").
- Include a diverse selection of literature in the learning environment around gender identity, gender expression, and family diversity, such as families with same-sex parents or guardians, single-parent families, grandparents' and extended family roles, and foster families.
- Engage children in conversations that broaden their understandings of gender, being oneself, and respect for gender diversity. (DEECD, 2018, p. 50)

The participants had varying levels of experience in relation to working with children aged 4–5 years (see Table 1). Five participants had 20+ years of experience, 3 participants had between 10 and 20 years, and 7 participants had less than 5 years of experience. Thirteen of the 15 participants self-identified as women, one self-identified as a trans man, and another participant chose not to identify. All participants had either a Level II (early childhood diploma from a community college) or a Level III (undergraduate degree in child and youth study) certification.

Table 1. Participants

Gender	Early Childhood Certification Level	Age Range (years)	Years of Work Experience with children aged 4–5 years in a licensed early childhood centre
Woman	Level III	56+	26 years
Woman	Level III	56+	35 years
Woman	Level II	56 +	24 years
Woman	Level II	46–56	10 years
Woman	Level II	46–56	21 years
Woman	Level II	46–56	26 years
Trans man	Level II	36–46	2.5 years
Woman	Level II	36–46	25 years
Woman	Level III	24–36	2.5 years
Woman	Level III	24–36	11 years
Woman	Level II	24–36	16 years
Prefer not to identify	Level III	24–36	3 years
Woman	Level II	24–36	2 years
Woman	Level III	24–36	4 years
Woman	Level III	19–24	1 year

The participants in this study were asked to observe and document children aged 4–5 years at their early childhood centre during unstructured play for a period of eight weeks with specific attention to how the children performed gender. The participants, after making observations, were then invited to follow up with me and discuss their observations by participating in two focus groups. Each focus group lasted approximately 60 minutes. In relation to the observation period, I asked the participants to document observations related to gender and play. I did not give the participants specific cues to observe as I wanted to keep it open for interpretation and not influence their views on gender.

In advance of the eight-week observation period and the focus groups, the participants were asked to send me via email a response to two questions: What comes to mind when you hear the term *gender*? What comes to mind when you hear the term *gender stereotype*? The purpose of this inquiry was to gain initial insights on the ECEs’ positions on gender and to build a space for the ECEs to begin to think about gender in advance of making their observations. The initial responses from the participants when asked “What words come to mind when you hear the term *gender*?” were *male, female, boy, girl, man, woman, that you can never assume a gender, wide spectrum of gender, nonbinary, fluid, transgender, gay, queer, gender neutral, and pansexual*. Their responses to the second question, “What comes to mind when you hear the term *gender stereotype*?”, were *boys like trucks, boys wear black and blue, boys are rough, play in the dirt, you know ... the goo, the guck, the muck, the sciency-kinda stuff, boys can’t sit still, boys are loud, they are physical, boys do tumble play, they are aggressive and do sporty things. Girls like dolls, like the colour pink, everything sparkly, girls play “house,” they like dramatic play, they like to role play, they are*

nurturing, they play Barbies, do art, they are quieter and calmer. Keenan (2017) discusses how stereotypical gender categories “teach children a script about which kinds of genders and bodies are normal and which are not” (p. 540), hence the relevance to enter into dialogue with ECEs and learn more about their perceptions of how children perform gender.

One limitation of this study is the gender imbalance of the participants. I recognize that having a more diverse representation of ECEs would likely result in more expansive views on how children perform gender during unstructured play. This speaks to Keenan’s (2017) desire for educators with diverse experiences to enter into dialogue to better understand the limitless possibilities children experience with their bodies. As a researcher, I was also mindful of protecting my participants’ identities when sharing their experiences and observations. In particular, I was aware of the potential vulnerable position that participants who identify outside the binary might experience. Explicitly, as a queer academic, this aspect was heightened for me because I can personally relate to the potential vulnerability individuals might feel when working in the field of child and youth study when your identity does not fit within the normative binary of man/woman, masculine/feminine.

What follows are excerpts from ECEs comments after observing and documenting young children during unstructured play. Specifically, quotes from the participants are provided to illustrate their perceptions of how children perform gender during unstructured play. You will see that the ECEs drew on gender stereotypes and normative gender structures when discussing their observations. This finding shows the dominance of regulatory gender processes in schools. This data emerged from conducting a content analysis of the transcripts based on the participants’ responses during two focus groups. Transcripts were read for broad themes and then reread multiple times for specific themes. Following this, the transcripts were coded for common words and phrases that focused on gender and gender performativity. I have intentionally separated the data into themes that emerged based on the ECEs’ responses. One initial theme early on was the clear categorical distinctions the ECEs provided when discussing gender. In particular, the ECEs’ understandings of gendered play were routinely divided into “girls’ play” and “boys’ play.” This initial finding suggests that the ECEs, while trained in gender-inclusive practices, reverted back to traditional gender constructs when viewing gender in an early childhood setting. I turn now to an excerpt of data that reveals the educators’ views after observing children in a dramatic play area.

“Girls’ play”

Mia: I’ve definitely had a situation where it was a group of girls and somebody had to be the dad. There couldn’t be a mom, or a dad, or two moms or three moms. There had to be a mom and a dad. And then there was the boss, a ringleader, deciding who would be who. There was quite a bit of drama around it. A teacher actually had to step in and say, “Look, you could be anything you want, there can be three moms in this situation, there could be four, it really doesn’t matter.” And then a boy entered the dramatic play area and the ringleader, a girl, told the boy he had to be the dad and he didn’t want to be the dad! He wanted to be a mom, but he was not allowed! His only other option was to be the puppy. I routinely find that girls are doing the deciding and controlling the dramatic play area.

Barb: I find the girls will try to get the boys to do things during dramatic play. They tell them, “We’re going to be the mommies, but you guys will be the babies.” But, the boys don’t want to do that. I find it interesting that the girls never want to play the role of the baby. The girls are just very vocal. I’m not going to say bossy, but they are quite demanding. There is one child in particular that will not give up. She is insistent that the boy plays the baby. She will keep pushing it and if he does not agree then she tells him or the other boys that they can’t play, or she will say, “I’m not being your friend.” We hear this regularly.

Catie: I’m just picturing the things that are happening in the classroom right now and in typical house play there

is a baby and puppy. The girls always play the mom and the boys play the baby or the puppy. The puppy is usually running away! Sometimes the boy will say they want to be a mom too and they will play that role for a little bit, but it typically doesn't last very long, as the girls then take over and control the game. But the puppy controls it too because the puppy will not listen to the mom character and will be here and there and everywhere, right? So, that throws a whole other, power, and control, to the play.

Betty: We see this too in our centre. The girls need to be the mom. So, if someone says, "You be the baby and I'll be the mom and we'll take turns," it's like, "No, I need to be the mom." The girls want to be in charge and be the ones to say, "Eat your food or go to bed." They need to be in control and the leader.

Diana: I agree there always has to be one mom and one dad. And you can't have two dads, but you can be the dog.

The ECEs describe a large number of girls engaging in traditional house play where the girls primarily perform traditional gender roles. We also see the girls actively policing other children's play to maintain the gender status quo. This is evidenced when the girls forbid the boys to play the role of mom and only offer the boys the positions of puppy or baby. Through giving the boys options, the girls are able to maintain control where the boys are situated in a border space. However, at moments we witness the boys negotiating their identities during dramatic play, as seen when one ECE stated, "*The boy will say they want to be a mom too and they will play that role for a little bit, but it typically doesn't last very long,*" or alternatively, the boy attempts to disrupt the girls' policing by playing puppy and running away: "*The puppy controls it too because the puppy will not listen to the mom character and will be here and there and everywhere, right?*" Here, normalizing regimes of gender incite particular forms of action, and it is the subtle power that circulates between the girls and the boys and operationalizes traditional gender roles.

The ECEs play a critical role during this process by either establishing or challenging gender stereotypes. For example, the ECEs' creating a dramatic play area as part of their pedagogical practice potentially evokes and reinforces the reenactment of normative gender processes. It is important for educators to address this in their program planning to ensure they produce learning environments that are gender diverse, as suggested in Nova Scotia's early learning curriculum framework. Butler (1990) reiterates how accomplishing gender often depends on the continuous reenactments of stylized gender modes available to children within the public spheres of school. If children are provided with rigid play options in relation to gender expression, they are more likely to adopt traditional gender beliefs (Thorne, 1993). Moreover, Glenda MacNaughton (2000) describes how children are frequently situated to negotiate the messages they receive about gender from adults, learning environments, and peers and from these messages make decisions regarding their gender expression. This finding brings forward the question of how educators can disrupt traditional gendered pedagogical play areas and encourage children to construct new knowledge (Keenan, 2017). While we see one ECE interject to destabilize the static gender roles (by saying "*Look, you could be anything you want, there can be three moms in this situation, there could be four, it really doesn't matter*") the continuous production of dominant gender categories prevails and situates the children to perform their gender chiefly through traditional gender stereotypes. Löfdahl and Hjalmarsson (2015) put forward the idea that ECEs need to dismantle the traditional "home corner" and distribute materials like dolls throughout the learning centre to disrupt gender-stereotypical choices that incite "only girls" and "only boys" areas. This is a call for educators to question their pedagogical play areas and open up a discussion for more fluid gender-inclusive play opportunities. Interestingly, the ECEs in this study also witnessed boys taking on traditional gender roles, as evidenced below.

"Boys' play"

Taylor: It's very common for children to say blocks are only for boys. I said one day to the children, "Who said that

is a rule, because we made our rules together ... I'm reading our rules in the block area right now and it doesn't say it's only for boys." Even though we have the rule the boys insist that the block area is their space.

Emma: At our centre, the boys control the block zone and they will tell the girls, "boys only." I have witnessed the boys making walls and barriers with chairs to maintain their boy space.

Barb: I see this too ... I have seen the girls try to get in on it (play in the blocks) and the boys say, "Oh, you are not strong enough" or if they imitate gun fights from video games, they don't allow the girls to play.

Beth: I worked at a preschool with a forest school setting and there was a ring of trees and it was claimed to be boys only. And even though we had a big talk with everybody, the boys still took it over. Two girls really wanted to play, but finally decided not to try anymore. It's very powerful and it creates anxiety in the kids.

The boys' exercising of power is an attempt to exert their perceived masculinity and modify the actions of the girls to secure their more powerful position. It is by securing certain play areas, like blocks and outdoor sites, that the boys are able to transmit so-called masculine traits to secure preestablished hierarchies and keep children within distinct categories of boys and girls. The actions of the boys policing the blocks is similar to the girls policing the dramatic play area. However, we also see, again, an ECE challenging the dominant gender paradigm when saying, "*Who said that is a rule, because we made our rules together... I'm reading our rules in the block area right now and it doesn't say it's only for boys.*" The educator in this situation is sending a gender-inclusive message to the children that "there are no gender constraints at our centre." However, we still see that the cues children receive about gender from their peers largely determine their gendered play choices. Barbara Martin (2011) suggests that in early childhood settings the gender boundaries in play are often established by children, who then police each other's adherence to specific gender roles. Mindy Blaise (2005) signals the role educators can play when this unfolds by supporting the children who cross the gender boundaries.

This data brings forward the call for ECEs to pay close attention to their pedagogical choices and delivery, including how gender power relations can manifest and inform children's gender performance (Kelly, 2009). For example, we see from the data above how a predetermined block area can transmit ideas about masculinity and secure preestablished hierarchies that maintain traditional categories of what is expected of boys in relation to play. This shows the importance of ECEs being cognizant of how gender norms can persist within the power plays of learning settings and the need for educators to destabilize these power dynamics. For example, when one ECE states, "*the boys control the block zone and they will tell the girls, boys only*" we see the strong need for an educator to intervene and challenge these ideas. While the *Capable, Confident, and Curious* curriculum framework (DEECD, 2018) points out the importance of ECEs giving children opportunities to explore "gender roles, identities and fluidity" (p. 51), we see in this research that the children's own ideas and beliefs about gender are already deeply engrained within a traditional heteronormative framework, and thus ECEs must critically reflect on the impact regulatory gender norms have on young children's identities and self-expression.

Next, we explore the more intricate gender relations the ECEs witnessed between children. and their implications for how children learn gender.

Gender productions

Emma: I see children policing others, but it depends on what kind of play they're doing. If they do construction work or play as a police person, the boys are usually in control. And then the girls play the damsels in distress role and want to be saved by the boys! The whole damsels in distress thing happens quite often, and the boys seem to

be more dominant with policing girls around it when it comes to dramatic play.

Rea: We see this too... the girls will pretend to fall and shriek for the boys to come rescue them.

The ECEs observed that the girls' gender productions involved positioning themselves as helpless, weak, and vulnerable to appeal to the boys, as seen when the girls "*will pretend to fall and shriek for the boys to come rescue them or when the girls play the damsels in distress role and want to be saved by the boys.*" Here, sexuality comes into play as the girls situate the boys as powerful and find pleasure in performing a "damsels in distress" role (Ringrose, 2013). MacNaughton (2006) explains that the most powerful gender constructions are those that reinforce the "normal" ways to be a boy or a girl when children look to locate more desirable fashionings of masculinity and femininity. This is evidenced when the ECEs observe children policing one another in relation to what is acceptable for a boy or girl.

Taylor: The children watch Paw Patrol and then the boys think they are the ones that have superpowers. They can destroy and save the world at the same time. And the girls are the princesses, you know, like you should be prim and proper all the time.

Rea: We play music on our iPod and we had the Frozen song "Let Her Go" playing, and a boy said, "Oh no, that's a girl song, let's listen to a boy's song." The boy song was The Chipmunks. The boys all agreed that was what they wanted to listen to. The children labelled boys' and girls' songs.

Catie: At our centre, the boys wrestle, and when a girl tries to get in on it, they will say "you are not a boy and you are not strong enough."

Bias and stereotypes that put children in the societal binary of feminine or masculine can be limiting and the educators working with young children need to recognize the impact normative gender practices have on children's lives (Chapman, 2016). It is through these dominant gender discourses that children learn that heterosexuality is the "normal, right and only way to be" (Blaise, 2005, p. 22). These compulsory forms of gender performance draw attention to the intricacy in subjectivity and the decisions young children must make when negotiating their gender expression in the public spheres of school. They also draw attention to the importance of ECEs talking with children about gender and supporting diverse gender expression. This includes encouraging nonstereotypical play and offering diversity in the books and materials we use in our early childhood settings. As Blaise and Taylor (2012) explain,

young children are no longer simply "learning" or "soaking up" the social meanings, values, and expectations of how to be a girl or a boy exclusively from their parents, teachers, peers, or the media. Rather, children themselves are producing and regulating gender by constantly "doing" and "redoing" femininities and masculinities that are available to them. (p. 83)

In examining further, the ECEs also brought attention to how children become fashioned as particular types of gendered subjects. This was evidenced when the ECEs shared examples of how media, clothing, and the way a child wears their hair informs children's understandings of gender. As Karen Wohlwend (2012) states, "children use layers of media to accomplish social work in the classroom in complicated ways: to restrict peers but also to create spaces for accessing, improvising, and animating otherwise unreachable identity texts" (p. 607). The excerpts below further illustrate how children become the gatekeepers for compulsory heteronormative ways of being based on what children wear and how they fashion themselves as gendered subjects.

Hetero compulsory fashionings

Beth: I had a boy who wore a dress, and the children said to me, "He's a boy, he can't have that on." "Why is he wearing that? He's a boy." I informed the children that "he is our friend and he can dress in ways that make him happy," to which the children responded, "That's not right." The children had to place him in a category that met the stereotypical gender format.

Catie: Children will also say to each other, "You're not allowed to play unless you're a girl and wearing 'the dress.'"

Hanna: I had a girl with very short hair and children would question her appearance: "Why does she look like a boy?" The girl was very sensitive about it and it made her pretty angry. The children continually asked her, and she really struggled with having short hair.

Rea: Most boys and girls have preconceived notions that short hair equals male. And long hair for children means you are a girl. We have a girl in our classroom with short hair and she always gets the question "Are you a boy?" The children are always questioning her about her hair and if she is a boy. But we recently had a boy enter our program who has long hair, and when the children saw this it broadened their minds a little. We have the conversations with them about the hair length and it's just hair, and it doesn't mean whether you're a boy or girl.

Catie: Every now and again, you'll have a child say "Are you a boy or are a girl?" Like typical lunchtime conversation. They go around the table and talk about it. If a child stereotypically looks like a girl and the child says, "I am a boy!" the children want to correct that. "No, like you're a girl, that's silly." They really want to categorize, and they want it to be right. They want it to match the stereotypical gender they look like.

Sam: I have seen children question another child's gender. I think they are questioning this child because they don't understand. I think it's completely nonjudgmental.

Butler (1990) suggests that bodies are inscribed within a system of subjectification where normalizing regimes of practice converge in and around the body. It is the traditional gender schema, a form of power, that drives certain social practices and relations of masculinity and femininity in the early learning space. These excerpts show that children work to achieve a heteronormative physicality to strengthen their hierarchical position to others. Therefore, ECEs should offer increased opportunities for children to have access to a diverse range of clothing options and materials and be encouraged to explore their full range of interests without gendered expectations. In the excerpt above, we also see how language and power are tied. Children stating "*He is a boy, he can't have that on*" or inquiring "*Are you a boy or girl?*" has direct implications for how the children develop meaning making around their own gender and that of their peers. As Elizabeth Meyer (2007) states, "children learn at a very early age that it is not biological sex that communicates one's gender to the rest of society; rather it is the signifiers we choose to wear that will identify us as male or female" (p. 19). In this way, their bodies are governed and constructed by hierarchical and dichotomous forms of identification. This signals a call for ECEs to be vigilant about language that might contribute toward establishing hierarchies of identity and power. We witness glimpses of the ECEs using language to disrupt normalizing gender performances, as evident when one ECE says, "*He is our friend and he can dress in ways that make him happy.*" This statement shows the degree to which the ECE understands the fluidity and flexibility of gender and the importance of expanding children's gender constructions. This is also evidenced when another ECE challenges short hair as a dominant signifier of masculinity by explaining to the children that hair is just hair and it "*doesn't mean whether you're a boy or girl.*" That the ECEs actively work to critique unconscious views on gender in their learning spaces speaks to their dedication and passion to incite change and create more gender-inclusive opportunities for their children.

Conclusion

In this research, I engaged with Nova Scotia ECEs to explore their perceptions of how young children aged 4–5 years perform gender during unstructured play. After conducting focus groups with 15 early childhood educators, this research shows how dominant paradigms of identity categorization continue to proliferate in early learning settings where children largely engage in traditional gender-stereotypical play despite a curriculum that encourages more gender-inclusive pedagogy. Butler's theory of gender performativity is useful here because it shows how these reenactments of stylized gender modes consolidate a strong impression of what it means to be a boy or girl. Such acts leave a lasting impression on the children as they work to navigate normalizing regimes of gender practice. Thus, children's gender expression cannot be separated from normalization practices through which power is circulated. Given this, there is a strong requirement for ECEs to actively challenge dominant identity categorizations and raise important questions of how early childhood pedagogy, policy, and practice can begin to destabilize normative gender construction processes.

In particular, the findings of this study call for ECEs to challenge hegemonic hetero compulsory norms for fashioning masculinity and femininity and to critique traditional Western constructions of gender identity. That is, there is a need to reconfigure the rigid heteronormative landscape of masculine boy / feminine girl from which the participants in this research speak. MacNaughton (2000) highlights the role ECEs can potentially play to free children of the gender constraints they experience in the classroom. She suggests that "teachers need to find alternative ways of integrating alternative gender storylines into children's play" and that "teachers can also help children recreate their storylines by creating classroom communities in which children are in constant dialogue and in which multiple and conflicting voices are heard, are allowed and encouraged" (p. 123). As Taylor and Richardson (2005) remind us, an emphasis on the "fluidity of children's gender identity performances and their strategic negotiation of multiple and shifting identity positions [can] challenge ... the heteronormative assumptions of stable, discrete and coherent gender categories" (p. 171). Similarly, Allyson Jule (2011) suggests that ECEs should consider using "alternative and varied metaphors for gender roles when choosing books, stories, and learning activities for the classroom" (p. 33). I hope this research will ignite ECEs to increasingly consider professional development in the areas of gender and equity. There is a need to understand the complex ways in which traditional gender configurations can dictate, limit, and constrain young children's capacities to express their gender freely. I would argue that a more ontological space needs to be attended to where educators prioritize the conception of bodies as "open and in the constant state of transformation" (Reddington, 2017, p. 61). To move in this direction, we need to critically reflect on our daily pedagogical practices and in this process actively dismiss dominant paradigms of identity categorization that limit the possibilities for children to explore their identities in more open ways.

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