

# “I FEEL LIKE A GIRL INSIDE”:

## *Possibilities for Gender and Sexual Diversity in Early Primary School*

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“WATCH OUT FOR HER,” a co-worker told me. “She is needy and dependent. She’d rather just cling to her support worker than integrate with peers – don’t let her get away with it.” This piece of advice was given to me during one of my first weeks as a student support worker with the Vancouver School Board (VSB). The child in question had a fragile bone condition and required adult monitoring during recess and lunch.

Given what I had been told, I was not expecting the verbose and quirky seven-year-old whom I met. It was true, however, that this student did turn down offers to join in games with peers. Once, after being prompted, this student joined a game only to come back over to me and sigh, “Anika, they’re playing fairies!” When I reflected, “And you don’t like playing fairies,” the student responded: “No! I want to be a boy!” I replied that there are boys who love playing fairies and girls who hate playing fairies but that it was also okay to want to be a boy. The student’s delight at this was palpable. Thereafter, the child appeared to seek out opportunities to repeat this exchange – expressing a desire to be a boy and then looking at me expectantly to hear affirmation.

From this point forward, the student’s expressions of gender non-conformity grew in frequency and theatricality, including a spectacular “my-mom-bribed-me-to-wear-a-dress-on-picture-day” stomp through the halls as well as a riveting performance of “The Secret Boy Name Dance” given by the student and a friend when I asked if there was a boy name I could use, should this be a preference (there was, but it was a secret and included a dance).

After a few weeks, this student had identified me as an ally in resistance to “girl”-associated social play. One day, the seven-year-old came up to me, rubbing hands together, and announced conspiratorially, “so, they’re playing boys chase girls.” “Uh oh,” was my genuine response, “what

should we do about that?” The student raised one finger in the air, a habit when making proclamations, and said: “I think I will tell them that anyone can play any part.”

I watched from a distance as the student returned to the group and yelled, “I’m on the chasing team!” I then watched as some of the boys in the group began to shout, “Now I’m on the chase-me team.” After a while, the student came back over to me, beaming. “Did you notice,” I pointed out, “not only did you find a way to make the game fit for you, you made it okay for other people to play the game the way they wanted to? You changed the game!” “I know!” was the exclamatory reply, hands thrown in the air for dramatic emphasis.

After that day, the student no longer stuck to my side and instead accepted invitations from peers to join in social games. Children who fail to live up to gender and sexuality norms run the risk of being labelled as somehow flawed and thus end up being socially isolated. The exchanges related above speak to the subtle ways gender norms can be enacted and challenged in elementary school, and it inspired the ethnographic study upon which this article is based.

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In my work with the vsb between 2006 and 2010, I encountered many educators who were anxious that feminism had gone too far and that schools now discriminated against boys. Professional development workshops and staff room dialogues asserted that boys and girls needed to be educated in different ways, lest boys fall behind. At the same time, a growing awareness of homophobic and transphobic bullying was drawing scholarly and popular media attention to the need for schools to address relationships between gender stereotypes and problematic social norms. At the time of my study in 2012, the vsb had decade-old policies against homophobia and transphobia and had also taken steps to address the damaging impact of colonialism (including residential schools, land theft, and other manifestations of violence).<sup>1</sup> But policies do not prevent school cultures from positioning queer and transgender people as outsiders.<sup>2</sup> This article depicts the inadequacies of a binary approach to gender in classroom teaching and highlights the problems

<sup>1</sup> Ministry of Education, *Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreement* (Ministry of Education, 2009), [https://www.vsb.bc.ca/sites/default/files/user-35/VSB\\_AEEA.pdf](https://www.vsb.bc.ca/sites/default/files/user-35/VSB_AEEA.pdf). See also Vancouver School Board, *Policy Manual: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Two-Spirit, Questioning* (Vancouver: Vancouver School Board, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> Catherine Taylor and Tracy Peter, with T.L. McMinn, Tara Elliott, Stacey Beldom, Allison Ferry, Zoe Gross, Sarah Paquin, and Kevin Schachter, *Every Class in Every School: Final Report on the First National Climate Survey on Homophobia, Biphobia, and Transphobia in*

inherent in conflating the terms/concepts “gay” and “homophobia” when addressing gender and sexuality in schools. It also helps to demonstrate the connection between these two timely issues in public schools and offers examples of alternative pedagogies that increase the possibilities of working for social change.

I present four vignettes from my fieldwork to provide insight into discourses about the plight of boys and issues of homophobia and transphobia in schools. The first, “Don’t Say That Word,” describes the one occasion when the terms “gay” and “homophobia” were discussed in my classroom. I explore the implications of these two concepts being taught simultaneously, discussing how this approach can reinforce gender-conforming heterosexuality as a norm from which it is dangerous to depart. The next vignette, “Feeling Like a Girl Inside,” depicts a student’s stereotypically “masculine” behaviour (i.e., acting out, rough play) and describes how this student attributed that behaviour to distress over feeling conflicted over gender norms. In this vignette, the teacher’s support of the child as an individual rather than as a gender stereotype provides an alternative approach to discourses that insist that teachers teach “boys” and “girls” as discrete groups in order to honour boy learners. Even though the teacher supported this child, the individual continued to experience conflict and isolation due to turmoil that was gendered. I contrast this distress over “difference” with the example related in the third vignette, “Those Who Feel They Are Dogs.” This depicts another student’s delight in the social connection she achieved through her non-gendered explorations of identity. The final vignette, “Rallying and Wood Chips,” illustrates student activism in which adults facilitate children’s agency and skill-building ability. Though not about gender, the educators’ pedagogies provide a platform upon which work to reduce homophobia and transphobia in primary schools could be based: solidarity in action rather than focusing on “difference.” The resulting combination of data contributes to education, gender, sexuality, and childhood studies, and it provides insight into public school issues relevant to a range of scholarship concerned with social justice.

I use the term “gender” to refer to all ways of being male, female, intersex, masculine, feminine, androgynous, and/or other sexually related identifications. I look at homophobia and transphobia (fear or hatred of gay and transgender people, respectively) and sexism (unequal treatment of men and women). I also address heterosexism (everyday privileging

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*Canadian Schools* (Toronto: Egale Canada Human Rights Trust, 2011). Available at <https://egale.ca/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/EgaleFinalReport-web.pdf>.

of heterosexuality) and cis-sexism (the privileging of non-trans genders) when examining the implications of everyday actions on gender and sexuality norms.

Studies of primary schools have examined how gender norms in elementary education recapitulate male control: the threat of becoming “like a girl” is used as a weapon against boys, signifying a loss of power, while the label “tomboy” can be a point of pride for girls, accepted without risk of losing status with their peers.<sup>3</sup> In *Who’s Invited to Share?* Roxanne Henkin urges educators to “examine why the worst thing you can call a boy is a girl” and to ask, “What does this do to a girl’s self-esteem?”<sup>4</sup> I would add: What does this do to male-assigned children who identify with or as girls?

Notions of sexuality are deeply bound to binary gender norms. Scholars in transgender studies discuss how, when the gender binary is disrupted, sexuality can become more complex than categories of gay/straight/bi allow. Angie Fee points out that heterosexual discourse and the homophobia associated with it rest on “binary sex and gender” categories.<sup>5</sup> She examines how normative ideas of sexuality and gender run as deep as familial names (e.g., wife, daughter, son). This illustrates the extent to which individuals may be othered in educational and familial life when they do not fit clearly into a gender binary. However, some schools of educational thought would entrench gender divisions in teaching rather than make any changes to the binary system.

In *Boys and Girls Learn Differently!*, popular author Michael Gurian expresses concern that 90 percent of kindergarten to Grade 6 teachers in the United States are women, claiming that this creates an environment in which “the female brain’s learning and teaching style dominates, and more boys are left out”; he therefore advocates that all teachers “get trained in male biology and male culture.”<sup>6</sup> Scholars who examine masculinity and schools critique the feminization of education discourse,

<sup>3</sup> Judith Halberstam, “Oh Bondage Up Yours! Female Masculinity and the Tomboy,” in *Curiouser: On the Queerness of Children*, ed. Steven Bruhm and Natasha Hurley, 191–214 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004); Barrie Thorne, *Gender Play: Girls and Boys in School* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1993).

<sup>4</sup> Roxanne Henkin, *Who’s Invited to Share? Using Literacy to Teach for Equity and Social Justice* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1998), 43.

<sup>5</sup> Angie Fee, “Who Put the ‘Hetero’ in Sexuality?,” in *Trans Gender Identities: Toward a Social Analysis of Gender Diversity*, ed. Sally Hines and Tam Sanger (New York: Routledge, 2010), 214.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Gurian, *Boys and Girls Learn Differently! A Guide for Teachers and Parents* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001), 66.

claiming this overlooks a variety of complexities,<sup>7</sup> from colonial histories embedded in current educational norms to power differentials between various populations of boys.

All Canadian schools are located within a colonial context that saw British imperial rule usurp Aboriginal land and take control of local cultures. This included forcible efforts to obliterate Indigenous concepts of gender and sexuality and to replace them with the Western cultural norms taught in government-mandated and funded residential schools.<sup>8</sup> To address the gender and sexuality norms of the British-model school system in Canada and the United States without acknowledging that such norms were imposed upon existing cultures further normalizes institutional colonialism.

Further, the problems facing boys in education are often linked to expectations that they sit quietly in class, listen to the teacher, and work from textbooks. In English Canada, such expectations date back to the founding of public schools.<sup>9</sup> While many girls may do well in a learning environment that promotes passive learning, claims that this approach caters to and is productive for them reinforces a culture that rewards female passivity. Moreover, “boys” are not a monolithic group. Blye Frank et al. contend that seeing “boys as a cohesive group enables a particular reading that highlights injustices assumed to impact on *all* boys, without acknowledging the privileged elements of masculinities that advantage *some* boys over other boys and over some girls.”<sup>10</sup>

Although much scholarship contests the possibility of researching sexuality in elementary school, it is scholarship that critiques interventions to reduce homophobia and transphobia in senior grades and university that provides me with a conceptual framework for my data analysis. For example, in “Against Repetition,” Kevin Kumashiro discusses how one of the obstacles to the implementation of anti-oppressive education is that both children and adults have a tendency to subsume information into their most familiar framework. He gives the example of how his teacher education students were much more ready to examine

<sup>7</sup> Blye Frank, Michael Kehler, Trudy Lovell, and Kevin Davison “A Tangle of Trouble: Boys, Masculinity and Schooling – Future Directions,” *Educational Review* 55, 2 (2003): 119–33; Michael Kehler, “Who Will ‘Save the Boys’? (Re)Examining a Panic for Underachieving Boys,” in *Adolescent Literacies and the Gendered Self: (Re) Constructing Identities through Multimodal Literacy Practices*, ed. Barbara J. Guzzetti and Thomas W. Bean (New York: Routledge, 2013), 121–31; Michael Kimmel, “The War against Boys?,” *Dissent* 53, 4 (2006): 65–70.

<sup>8</sup> Beverley Jacobs, “Response to Canada’s Apology to Residential School Survivors,” *Canadian Woman Studies* 26, 3/4 (2008): 223–25.

<sup>9</sup> Kimmel, “War against Boys?”

<sup>10</sup> Frank et al., “Tangle of Trouble,” 120. Emphasis is in the original.

how gay and straight people are the same than they were to look at how routine discussion in the classroom was *othering* to those outside gender and sexuality norms.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, in “Leave ‘Those Kids’ Alone,” Lee Airton critiques mainstream approaches to anti-homophobia education, citing the ways in which they can reinforce the othering they purport to address.<sup>12</sup> Airton’s observations were confirmed in my fieldwork, which indicates that, when “gay” and “homophobia” are discussed simultaneously, gay identities end up being marked in stark contrast to the depictions of heterosexual relationships, which are ubiquitous in routine conversations and curriculum. Thus, while claiming to embrace queer identities, such mainstream approaches tend to construct queer individuals as *others*. Chandra Mohanty describes this type of approach as pedagogy designed to “manage diversity” while leaving the status quo intact.<sup>13</sup>

During three months of ethnographic research with a kindergarten class in Vancouver, British Columbia, I took notes regarding the everyday talk, play, and curriculum. I also held focus groups with students and interviews with educators after Valentine’s Day, Pink Day/Anti-Bullying Day, and Mother’s Day, exploring the themes of love, bullying, and family, respectively. The reflections of both children and educators provided me with key insights into how gender norms are taken up or challenged within everyday school life.

My overarching research questions are as follows:

- What informal practices (e.g., talk, storytelling, comments on the student’s play) that refer to attraction, coupling, sexuality, and gender take place between students as well as between educators and students?
  
- What practices demonstrate students’ relationships to gender and sexuality norms?

<sup>11</sup> Kevin K. Kumashiro, “Against Repetition: Addressing Resistance to Anti-oppressive Change in the Practices of Learning, Teaching, Supervising, and Researching,” *Harvard Educational Review* 72, 2 (2002): 67–92.

<sup>12</sup> Lee Airton, “Leave ‘Those Kids’ Alone: On the Conflation of School Homophobia and Suffering Queers,” *Curriculum Inquiry* 43, 5 (2013): 540.

<sup>13</sup> Chandra Talpade Mohanty, “On Race and Voice: Challenges for Liberal Education in the 1990s,” *Cultural Critique* 14, 1 (1989–90): 179–208.

I did not know anyone at South Side Elementary School<sup>14</sup> before I conducted my research.<sup>15</sup> The classroom teacher, Margaret Rovella, was made aware of my project by a co-worker who knew some of my colleagues, and she e-mailed me stating her interest in hosting my fieldwork. She said she wanted to make her classroom an inclusive space and hoped that the results of my research would become a resource for teachers such as herself who were frustrated by the lack of material on gender and sexuality in primary grades.

The students in this study are ethnically diverse: five have European backgrounds, seven have Asian backgrounds, and two are Aboriginal. The school is in a well-off neighbourhood in which there is a discrepancy between those who own property and those who rent basement suites. While I did not have access to information regarding families' income levels, some children and their families dressed in expensive clothes while others dressed in clothes that would be available in inexpensive department stores. There are no lunch programs at South Side, but all the students had adequate food every day.

During my first morning with the class, I sat in a circle with the students. One youngster asked me about a tattoo on my arm, saying it was "really beautiful" and looked like someone took "lovely lines and squished them" into my skin.<sup>16</sup> This reminded that, when in mainstream gender environments, there are ways in which I do not entirely blend in – from the "lovely lines" on skin to my occasionally visible leg hair. I have pondered the possible ways my departures from certain norms might have influenced the children's responses to me: by giving them implicit permission to break norms, by inducing them to try to give the "right" answers (i.e., those expressing open-minded sentiments), and/or by motivating them to vigilantly adhere to norms in order to see how I would respond. I paid close attention to how the children were responding to my presence and how I was responding to them.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>14</sup> The name of the school and the names of all the participants are pseudonyms.

<sup>15</sup> The study was reviewed by the University of British Columbia's Behavioural Research Ethics Review Board and the Vancouver School Board. I obtained written consent from the classroom student support worker, the student teacher, the school administrator, and the children's parents. Fourteen out of eighteen parents gave their consent for their children's participation in the study. I did not take notes on the other four children, and they were not part of the focus groups.

<sup>16</sup> Anika Stafford, fieldwork notes, 13 February 2012.

<sup>17</sup> All of my research data were transcribed and coded according to themes that I identified from the interviews, focus groups, and observations. I coded the five hundred pages of raw data twice using a grounded theory analysis. The first round brought forward general topics (such as pedagogy and identity) while the second round illuminated subsections (such as difference discourse and advocacy).

My observations took place in the classroom, playground, lunchroom, and gym throughout the school day. Once I obtained a visitor's pass, I wandered the school quite freely. This freedom to wander was undoubtedly facilitated by my whiteness and cis-gender female appearance, both of which are culturally constructed as non-threatening in children's spaces. My white privilege situated me outside experiences of racism and its relationship to gender and sexuality norms.

My goal was to be an affirmative presence in the classroom. Often children would tell me something about their imagination games, at which point I would smile and repeat what they said (e.g., "Oh, you have to escape from dragons!"). At times I struggled to resist interfering with their play, particularly when one student, Duncan, would mock the toys with which the girls were playing or, worse, mock the girls themselves. For example, one day Duncan used streamers as a mock bra and paraded around exaggerating a certain "femininity," to the laughter of many boys. At such times Duncan would turn to me as though to assess my response. I was afraid that my lack of disruption would imply tacit approval or normalize mocking particular bodies, and I was concerned about the impact this would have on different students. Despite my discomfort, however, I did not want to establish myself as a source of judgment and so forced myself to remain unresponsive at these times.

Each focus group involved three to five children at a time. The purpose of the questions asked in these groups was to explore how children establish and navigate gender and sexuality "norms" and what this says about the role of students in normative school life. The use of focus groups helped to ensure that I would hear from all the students and prioritized, as Kitzinger describes, "*their* language and concepts, *their* frameworks for understanding the world."<sup>18</sup> Although the "reliability" and "generalizability" of information derived from focus groups has been criticized,<sup>19</sup> my focus groups provide insight into what children retained from the lessons presented in class and the ways in which they constructed their creative worlds.

Interviews with the classroom teacher, Margaret Rovella, and support worker, James Hughes, began with questions about the activities taking place on various special occasion days (e.g., Valentine's Day, Pink Day/Anti-Bullying Day) and how the educators planned and reflected upon

<sup>18</sup> Jenny Kitzinger, "The Methodology of Focus Groups: The Importance of Interaction between Research Participants," *Sociology of Health and Illness* 16, 1 (1994): 108. Emphasis is in the original.

<sup>19</sup> Molly George, "Teaching Focus Group Interviewing: Benefits and Challenges," *Teaching Sociology* 41, 3 (2013): 258.

them. This added educators' insights and reasoning to my analysis of the class. I also conducted a single interview with the Aboriginal enhancement worker (AEW), Michelle Everett, concerning her role in the school and her observations of the interplay between gender and her cultural work. A single interview with the school principal, Caroline Nelson, addressed school culture, history, and demographics.<sup>20</sup>

The role of the AEW was significant to my research findings.<sup>21</sup> Despite having close to five hundred students, South Side received only a few hours of biweekly support from the AEW. Both of the two students in my study who met with Michelle in her capacity as AEW benefited from having culturally relevant moments in their educational experiences. Sometimes Michelle would spend fifteen minutes of one-on-one time with Kieron and Duncan; other times they would engage in small group activities with Aboriginal students from other classes. Despite the absurdly brief time they got to spend with her, Michelle's students spoke of her favourably, and her work appeared to help equip Kieron to speak with pride about his background. Moreover, her ability to provide culturally appropriate resources for speaking with teachers and families about gender and sexual diversity illustrates possibilities for conducting such inclusion work while challenging dominant Western norms.

#### "DON'T SAY THAT WORD"

While heterosexual couples were depicted in the classroom every day through talk about family life, play, and picture books, queerness was mentioned only once, in a lecture on homophobia. Before the lecture in question, the teacher sent home a notice informing students' parents that the topic of homophobia would be part of a school day focused on anti-bullying. On 29 February, the teacher, Margaret, gathered the children in a circle. A poster with the heading "Homophobia Free Zone" was

<sup>20</sup> My questions focused on the participants' professional roles rather than on their backgrounds. While I asked the school principal about her work around anti-racism and multiculturalism, I did not ask her about how her ethnic background informed this work. The AEW was identified as having a Métis and Jewish background. The other participants appeared to be of European descent and did not discuss their ethnicities. In hindsight, I would include more questions about social location as my focus resulted in identification along racialized lines.

<sup>21</sup> In order to address some of the barriers faced by Aboriginal students in the aftermath of residential schools and the ongoing injustices of colonialism, the Vancouver School Board and local Aboriginal leaders drafted the Aboriginal Enhancement Agreement in 2009. This agreement involved the development of what is known as the Aboriginal enhancement worker (AEW) position. The AEW's role is to help Aboriginal students to experience a sense of belonging, culture, and community in local schools. The AEW may perform tasks ranging from social work with families to tutoring students to running groups for Aboriginal students within the school to going on culturally relevant field trips.

taped to the middle of the flip chart, and the word “homophobia” was written in large letters above it. I had noticed the “Homophobia Free Zone” poster in the classroom on the first day of my fieldwork. Below the title was the phrase “That’s So Gay!” with a line drawn through it. Underneath was written:

Homophobic slurs like this one will NOT be tolerated here

They are just as hateful as racism<sup>22</sup>

Bullying can happen to ANYONE!<sup>23</sup>

These posters were distributed to schools throughout the VSB in 2004 as part of a project conducted in association with Gay and Lesbian Educators (GALE) British Columbia (now Pride Education Network). Although these posters remain in schools, they are no longer issued. As an employee, I noticed them in many elementary school common areas and classrooms, though as a general rule they were located very high on the wall. I am 1.7 metres tall, and the poster in this classroom was above my eye level. This sends an interesting message about sexuality and otherness: they are present but not in plain sight. The poster’s usual placement was changed on this day, thus marking the conversation as something unusual. Every effort was made to convey down-to-earth information with which students would connect.

Margaret took down the sign that read “That’s So Gay!” and asked the students if they knew what “gay” meant. One student, Natasha, said “no” and asked for an answer. Another student, Dylan, also stated that he didn’t know. Kieron stood up and proudly announced that he knew what it meant: “When a boy likes another boy and they get married. The same with girls.” Margaret confirmed that Kieron’s answer was right and followed this up by asking, “Is there anything wrong with that?” The class said “no” in unison. Margaret stressed that being gay is “okay and fine,” and she read the sign on the poster out loud. She explained that when people say “that’s so gay” they mean “that’s so stupid,” and she asked how people who are gay would feel when they heard that. The class replied in unison: “Bad.”

At this point, Kieron exclaimed that it would be like saying “that’s so Native!” He then jumped to his feet and proclaimed, “Duncan and I are

<sup>22</sup> This statement may imply that the harms of racism are universally and institutionally acknowledged and that those of homophobia ought to be similarly recognized. Such a statement erases the profound racism at play not only within public schools but also within the larger culture in British Columbia.

<sup>23</sup> Stafford, fieldwork notes, 29 February 2012.

both Native!” He then stated that he hoped they would have their group that day. Margaret articulated that being Native was part of Kieron’s culture and was important to him, to which Kieron adamantly called out “Yeah!” before sitting back down.

After the talk about the poster, Margaret introduced the word “homophobia.” Most of the children had not heard it before. She stated: “English has great-great-grandparents, just like you have great-great-grandparents.” I would have anticipated the children losing interest as she talked about the Greek meanings of the words “homo” and “phobia,” but they gave her their rapt attention, emitting excited “ohs” and “ahs” when hearing about how “‘homo’ refers to homosexual, another word for gay,” and “‘phobia’ refers to being afraid. She then repeated that the word “gay” refers to “the kind of love where you’d want to get married or where you’d want to be boyfriend or girlfriend.” The students appeared to understand the definition within this scope, nodding their heads as Margaret explained that “homophobia” refers to people being afraid of people being gay. She then asked: “What does it mean when people are afraid of people being different? Is it okay to bully them?” Again, the class repeated: “No.” Thus, while being gay was defined in positive terms, it was immediately positioned as “different,” as other. The talk concluded with an explanation of what it meant to have a line drawn through the phrase “That’s So Gay!” on the poster. Margaret stated: “In this classroom, this space, it is not okay to be homophobic.”

It is noteworthy that Kieron was the first student to state that he knew what “gay” meant and to be comfortable talking about it in class. This prior knowledge could account for why he was so engaged with how homophobia was unfair to gay people. Moreover, though his time spent with the AEW was segregated from the rest of the day-to-day routine of class life, it took place with peers and, whenever he spoke of it, it was clear that it excited him and made him proud. It enabled his cultural background to be articulated within the institution of the school. When I spoke to Michelle Everett, she stressed the ways in which she focused on children being able to understand their Aboriginal backgrounds not only as distinct but also as part of a larger network of cultures.<sup>24</sup> Kieron’s ethnicity was not mentioned at school solely within the context of discrimination or othering, and he was able to draw on this understanding in the conversation regarding homophobia.

While Margaret emphasized that it was not okay to say “that’s so gay” because it was not okay to say bad things about gay people, none of the

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<sup>24</sup> Michelle Everett, interview with the author, 16 May 2012.

children recalled this message. During focus groups the next day, they demonstrated the implication of only mentioning “gay” in the context of discussing homophobia. The following excerpt is typical:

Anika: Do you remember what she talked about with the poster?

Ashley: Uhhhhh ... don't say that word!

Anika: Do you remember why not to say that word?

Ashley: 'Cause it's a mean word.

Anika: What word is mean?

Ashley: That's so gay!

Anika: What if someone says “I'm gay.” Is that mean?

Abigail and Ashley: No!

Ashley: 'Cause they're saying it to themselves! [*sic*]

Anika: Because they're saying it to themselves. And what does that mean when they say it?

Abigail: They're saying it to themselves!

Ashley: So that you don't have to say that, please stop. And you say, “please stop do that self!” [*sic*]

Abigail: And if I say, “I so gay,” and if I say, “I so,” “I'm so gay” to myself, that means I feel like saying it but I don't want, but I know not to say it to other people, so I say it to myself.<sup>25</sup>

Despite Margaret's insistence that gay is okay and that homophobia is not okay, the specialness of the topic and its segregation from everyday talk resulted in the students' conflating being gay with an insult. How would children who are aware of queer desires experience this message? Rather than being able to fit into everyday life, which is represented in a range of topics with a range of conversations and images, one's potential queer identity is marginalized as a special topic – it is a thing you could be bullied for even though you shouldn't be.

<sup>25</sup> Pink Day focus group 2, 1 March 2012.

“FEELING LIKE A GIRL INSIDE”

As an educator, Margaret dedicated much time to building a community in which children would feel “empowered” to speak their minds. Rather than admonishing students who got too rowdy to listen to each other in a group discussion, she would suggest that they check in with their own bodies to see what they needed in order to be able to listen respectfully to whoever happened to be speaking. The children generally responded by shifting in their spots, breathing deeply, and adjusting their attention.

When Margaret talked with the class about the growing trend of students moving from the floor to their desks during morning circle, several children said that sometimes they were not comfortable in the circle and needed their own space. Margaret suggested that they try to notice how they were feeling and just sit with it, staying in the circle to show respect for their peers. However, one student, Katy, stated strongly that sometimes this was “not comfortable” for her and that she needed to get up.<sup>26</sup> She added that she could turn herself towards the person speaking and listen respectfully from her desk. Margaret agreed that this was what Katy was doing and suggested that other students demonstrate the same respect if they, too, needed to get up. Later, in the staff room, Margaret expressed her appreciation of Katy’s self-awareness and her ability to insist on her needs while remaining respectful of the group.

Margaret did not frame this aspect of her work as challenging gender norms; however, Katy (along with the other children) did not appear to be learning to engage passively in order to please the teacher. Instead they seemed to be getting support for knowing, and advocating for, their own boundaries. In our interviews, Margaret and I spoke about the factors that had influenced her teaching. She described the pressure she had felt from colleagues to incorporate a binary, gender-difference approach into her teaching, and she also described her hesitation to do this as she did not want to engage in stereotyping. Although she recognized some gendered trends, she feared that teaching *for boys* and *for girls* would omit children who departed from these gendered norms:

The work of Michael Gurian ... was recommended to me. I read part of [his] book, not all of it, but it’s basically reinforcing yes, boys’ brains are different and that’s okay, and allow them to be different. And boys might like to, um – you know, they like to bond very physically with each other, so that tussling that happens, that sort of colliding of bodies that happens that we often stop because it’s too violent or

<sup>26</sup> Stafford, fieldwork notes, 23 February 2012.

not gentle enough, allow that to happen because, um, that's how boys develop bonds with each other, is through that physical interaction. And girls like to be more verbal, and know that's okay and that when girls first come to school, they – the verbal part of their brain is more developed than it is in the boys' part of the brain, so they're going to excel at tasks that, you know, require listening skills or speaking skills or writing skills and comprehension ... And I was reading this and I'm thinking, that's not resonating well with me somehow ... I've seen from the kids that I teach that that's not always true ... And I'm thinking, rather than teaching for a gender base, I'm teaching individual people. So sometimes for me, the gender argument just gets a little tiresome, especially when it's, you know, purporting the differences of one over the other ... I'm going to just teach to this child, rather than the fact that he's a boy or she's a girl. 'Cause for me, it seems that's more of an issue rather than a gender issue, that there are some children that are very physically assertive, and they love that physical contact with each other, and yeah, they want to tumble around and wrestle and it's not always the boys. From what I've seen, more often it is, but every now and then you get a girl who comes in and just, you know, like, wants to just – I don't know, plough into somebody and wrestle them to the ground and – so I always say, okay, that's not okay in the classroom, just regardless of who you are, like, no: "that's too rough for ... gentle in the classroom!"<sup>27</sup>

Margaret's thoughtful grappling with how to make room for different learning styles and personalities within her classes enables her to challenge the notion that one must ascribe definitive, essentialist meanings to gendered trends in order to create room for a variety of learners. The implications of this are well illustrated in the case of the child who felt "like a girl inside" (see below).

During the first week of my study, Duncan was away. The support worker, James,<sup>28</sup> informed me that the classroom dynamic would change drastically when Duncan got back as this child would be much more concerned with gender norms. James told me that Duncan was the first to tell someone that the picture he or she was drawing couldn't be a boy if the figure wore pink or displayed earrings or had other qualities that didn't "fit." James noted that, of all the boys in the class, Duncan was the

<sup>27</sup> Margaret Rovella, interview with the author, 15 May 2012.

<sup>28</sup> James Hughes did not provide one-on-one support for Duncan, but he was part of the class due to his work with another student.

one most comfortable moving between social groups. He summarized Duncan as follows: “Well, he’s kind of an alpha.”<sup>29</sup>

Duncan lived up to this reputation. Physically larger than the other children, Duncan was very comfortable using size to assert dominance. Duncan’s play instigated much of the disparagement of femininity that occurred in the class; however, Duncan was greatly affected both by gender binaries and their hierarchies. As the months progressed, the student’s aggressive behaviour became an increasing problem, manifesting itself in regular “meltdowns,” lashing out, throwing objects at students, yelling, and running away.

Margaret ensured that there was time and space for Duncan to gain the skills needed to safely express “strong feelings” and to manage emotions. At the beginning of their time together, Duncan would draw freely and then talk about the drawing with her. When the first picture was finished, she would ask Duncan to draw a portrait of what it felt like to have strong feelings. They would first talk about this picture and then have a conversation about what tools might be used to handle these feelings in productive ways.<sup>30</sup> During the first session they had together, Duncan and Margaret developed a safety plan in which Duncan would hide against the wall where the children hung their coats. They came up with a code, according to which an adult would say, “Duncan, what do you need?” and Duncan would reply either “Nothing” or “I need space.” The portraits with the transcribed safety plans were posted on a bulletin board in the classroom, and Duncan would regularly grin at them.

Perhaps as a result of Margaret’s skill as a teacher and her openness in assisting children to listen to and speak for themselves, these sessions made room for Duncan to share more of this intense behaviour. At lunch on 26 April, Margaret told me that Duncan had begun to talk about feeling “like a girl inside.” She related that Duncan had mentioned this to her every day for the past five days and had identified frustration over needing to “squish down” the girl part of “himself” as the cause of the “strong feelings” and Duncan’s subsequent acting out in class. The child had reported wanting to have long hair and dresses, and had begun to draw self-portraits of this “girl side” in their drawing sessions. Duncan had told Margaret about wanting to be Rapunzel (one of the pictures on the classroom corkboard featured a smiling character who wore a dress and had hair that flew around the entire page).

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<sup>29</sup> James Hughes, interview with the author, 22 February 2012.

<sup>30</sup> Stafford, fieldwork notes, 2 May 2012.

I pored over my notes on the gendered classroom scenarios of which Duncan had been a part, struck by the implications this revelation had for the ways in which I could (re)interpret such interactions. What if part of the motivation for Duncan's mocking of femininity had been a desire to gauge my response to an aspect of identity this young person wanted to be able to express? Had I expressed my disapproval, Duncan might have understood this as my frowning on such exploration rather than as discouraging the mockery in this feminine caricature.

Margaret also spoke to Michelle Everett, hoping to find culturally relevant support and to assess Duncan's family situation before deciding whether or not to share these aforementioned disclosures with family members. Due to her role as the AEW, Michelle knew Duncan's family and felt comfortable discussing gender with them, believing that their awareness of the situation would probably be beneficial. She recounted to me:

In Aboriginal culture, um, the whole realm of two-spiritedness and connectedness with the two-spirits and two-spirited people has started to become accepted again 'cause this is a very ancient concept. So I've told, you know, his mum and the teacher that, this is where I'm coming from with it, so if it ends up being something to do with gender, I'm open and I'm okay and if he wants to talk to me or if I can lend any support that way ... I'm more than happy to.<sup>31</sup>

As part of this process, Margaret got information from Michelle about two-spiritedness.<sup>32</sup> At the end of my fieldwork, she was still trying to make time for Michelle to speak with the class about Aboriginal culture (to this point, time constraints related to the underfunding of AEW support had made this impossible).

After a few weeks of talking with Margaret and receiving support from Michelle, Duncan's gendered behaviour lost some of its jeering edge. For example, on 30 April Duncan put on a fancy taffeta crown, walked up to me, and announced: "I'm the queen of the ship."<sup>33</sup> Without engaging in caricature, Duncan walked around, including me in the make-believe, and asked what I had accomplished while on the ship.

<sup>31</sup> Everett, interview.

<sup>32</sup> The term "two-spirit" was coined at the 1991 Annual Meeting for Gay and Lesbians of the First Nations, at which "attendees decided to replace the European terms of lesbian, gay or berdache with the term Two Spirit" in order to "honour the sacred and unique roles that Two Spirit people held before colonization and reclaim their place in society." See Maddalena Genovese, Davina Rousell, and the Two Spirit Circle of Edmonton Society, *Schools for Two Spirit Youth: A Guide for Teachers and Students* (Edmonton: The Society for Safe and Caring Schools and Communities, 2011), 8.

<sup>33</sup> Stafford, fieldwork notes, 30 April 2012.

I was happy to join in the game. During this time, however, Duncan became increasingly isolated from peers. It began with lagging behind at recess and lunch, demonstrating a reluctance to leave the classroom. Duncan spent increasing amounts of time at a desk while the others sat on the floor. Margaret respected this need for space, and some of Duncan's aggressive and frustrated behaviour decreased.

Crossing the boundary between boy and girl was a source of social isolation and distress for Duncan, regardless of the potential for creative self-determination (e.g., becoming the queen of a ship). I contrast this, in the next vignette, with the sense of joy and social connection one child demonstrated when she experienced herself crossing the boundary between animal and human.

"THOSE WHO FEEL THEY ARE DOGS"

Abigail, Katy, Lily, Kyung, and I sat at one of the three lunch tables with attached benches in the open lunch area nearest the classroom. During a discussion on siblings, Abigail made one thing clear: her dog is her sister because she, Abigail, is actually a dog. I would say that her peers believed her but that would imply that they found there was something to believe or to disbelieve; rather, they excitedly elaborated on her daily navigation between being a dog and being a human. One such interaction played out as follows:

Abigail: I have a sister dog 'cause I actually am a real dog.

Anika: You have a sister dog?

Abigail: Yeah, and I am a real dog. Except! I can turn back into a human.

Katy: Abigail! Abigail! I see where you ...

Abigail: [...] Then human, then dog, then human, then dog ...

Katy: Abigail, I see that you have a bit of hair everywhere, cause you're a dog. And I see that you have little ears.

Abigail: Except that I'm half person so I've just got little teeny-weeny-weeny-weeny ears right now ...

Katy: And hair that no one can see.

Abigail: So I always walk on my tippy-toes, I never walk on my whole feet. 'Cause my whole feet are just for sitting down ...

Katy: Wait! Aaaaah! Yeah! You *are* on your tippy-toes.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Valentine's Day focus group 1, 16 February 2012.

During my fieldwork, Abigail began to talk about a “dog-sledding party” – an event that involved people taking turns standing on a chair and “those who fe[lt] they [were] dogs” taking turns pulling them.<sup>35</sup> Abigail would come alive while talking about this, galloping wildly while recounting details: if no kids were people and all were dogs, then adults could be pulled; most adults would probably watch (but could participate if they wanted to); and children could watch if they didn’t want to pull or be pulled. Abigail’s quirky ways of understanding herself did not remove her from relationships with peers but, rather, gave her increased areas for connection. Within this framework, people had a choice regarding social roles, and these choices expanded to accommodate everyone’s needs. Individuals were positioned as competent to know how they would like to engage. However, this framework did not apply to gender and sexuality norms.

On 27 February, Margaret read aloud Robert Munsch’s book *We Share Everything!*,<sup>36</sup> a rhythmical story about a boy and a girl on their first day of kindergarten. As they move through their day, the kids in the story fight over toys and supplies, only to be met with their kindergarten teacher’s sugary instructions: “In kindergarten we share, we share everything!”<sup>37</sup> The teacher, often depicted with hearts, flowers, and even birds surrounding her as she gives directions, is shocked when the boy and girl decide that, if they should share, then that should include sharing their clothes, and so promptly trade them. Upon seeing that the boy is wearing pink clothes, the teacher’s tone changes from one of sweetness to one of dismay. At this point in the story, Margaret paused to inquire what the students thought about the teacher’s choice to get upset. She asked: “If you were the teacher, what would you do?”<sup>38</sup>

While a few children disagreed with the teacher’s choice, Abigail stated that if she were the teacher, then she, too, would tell the boy not to wear pink, that “it’s not okay, because most boys don’t like pink.”<sup>39</sup> Thus, according to Abigail, while one could be considered competent to know whether one is a person-person or a dog-person, one could not be a boy who liked something most boys did not like (let alone be assigned the designation of “boy” but feel like a “girl” or identify as both/neither of those genders). One could argue that being a dog is clearly not real and therefore not taboo, that it is fantastical and humorous. However, to the

<sup>35</sup> Stafford, fieldwork notes, 26 March 2012.

<sup>36</sup> Robert Munsch, *We Share Everything!* (Markham: Scholastic Canada, 1999).

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, n.p.

<sup>38</sup> Stafford, fieldwork notes, 27 February 2012.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

students, this experience was real; therefore, the differential treatment bears examining.

Margaret's focus on children knowing and advocating on behalf of themselves provided a template that supported Duncan's shift away from mocking traits deemed "feminine" as this self-perpetuated repudiation was causing distress. However, the pedagogy did not provide for larger change within the classroom and school. Abigail's creative deployment of self-determined identity provides an example of celebrating rather than fearing diverging self-expressions. This invites the question: What would it look like for diverse genders and sexualities to be integrated with the same inclusive sense of excitement?

#### RALLYING AND WOOD CHIPS

On 4 May, I came across a picture drawn by a small group of students. It depicted two children putting wood chips in the water drain next to the playground while two other children stood nearby, looking shocked. Under the picture, Abigail had written: "MAC A NODIS FOR MiZ NILSUN ABOWT The WOTR SICLO. I AM SEREIS!" When I asked what it said, she read out with pride: "Make a notice for Ms. Nelson about the water cycle. I am serious!" Margaret overheard this and told Abigail that she believed that if Abigail took the note to the principal, then Ms. Nelson would understand the seriousness of the issue. Abigail and her immediate peers were very excited by this and encouraged Margaret to show the picture to their principal. Afterwards, Margaret had tears in her eyes as she told me how this represented everything she works for – that children understand literacy not just as an assignment but as a tool they can use to express themselves. The following Monday, Margaret had an afternoon meeting scheduled between two of the children and Caroline Nelson. When I asked them if it would be okay for me to come with them, they beamed and said, "Yes!"

When the time came for the meeting, Caroline Nelson welcomed the students into her office. She treated them as I believe she would have treated any parent or employee who might come to express concerns. She took notes and confirmed that throwing things down the drain was a serious problem (the year before they had hired someone, at great expense, to suction all of the wood chips and garbage out of the drain). The children smiled and nodded, conferring seriously, and Caroline asked what they would like her to do. Abigail stated that they would like to make an announcement, and, together, the three of them filled out

an announcement form. When Caroline left the office to get the form, the children talked about how they couldn't believe that "this was really possible," and they asked each other "how many kids" had something this amazing happen (the amazing event seemed to be getting to take their concerns to the principal). Back in class, I asked the children how they knew that putting wood chips down the drain would be a problem. They talked about how the wood chips did not belong in the ocean and could hurt the fish. A cluster of them continued to talk about issues of water pollution and fish, demonstrating both environmental knowledge and deductive reasoning.

The next morning, the class was humming with excitement. After the morning announcements, the students jumped up and down and many hugged each other, appearing to believe they had achieved celebrity status after hearing the names of their classmates read over the morning announcements. At least ten children rallied to make posters to put up around the school urging their peers not to throw wood chips down the drain. Their talk created a co-learning environment as they supported each other's work on the posters. Margaret put metal rings in the pictures and laminated them. She then helped three children to deliver the posters to different classes, where they would discuss the issue. As the group got more comfortable moving from class to class, Margaret hung back more and more, affording the children increased independence.

While the science of their understanding might not have been robust, the important point is that, when the students identified an issue, they were provided with the space, respect, and tools to change their environment. As I watched the class bond over poster-making and gain courage to make announcements, I could not help but ponder what such activism would look like in terms of genders and sexualities should these topics be removed from the realm of moral judgment and become part of everyday school life. In a classroom environment in which queer and transgender subjectivities were as commonplace and jubilantly expressed as Abigail's self-proclaimed identity as a dog-person, would there be young people who would be driven to activism after learning about cultural homophobia and transphobia? What changes would the replication of Caroline's and Margaret's models of valuing children's literacy, sense of justice, and creativity make possible?

## CONCLUSION

Throughout Canada's public education history, gender and sexuality norms have been institutionally ingrained. Current anxieties regarding the plight of boys in public schools fail to acknowledge that such challenges stem not from feminism but, rather, from rigidly set standards of behaviour that have been in place from the onset of public schools in British Columbia. Based on observations made during my fieldwork, it is evident that gender dynamics that appear to favour one gender may enforce complicated forms of power and privilege. The foregoing vignettes depict how teaching towards a gender binary can fail to recognize the individual experiences behind gendered behaviour. Further to these complications, there is the fact that attempts to educate against the norm may inadvertently reinforce hierarchies. For example, queerness was labelled as "different," and this difference was automatically paired with fear and the threat of violence. Such a trend can frame and normalize departing from gender and sexuality norms as a painful and isolating experience. The vignettes I relate offer alternate forms of engagement with "difference" – forms that are not based on othering – as well as examples of how children can demonstrate their agency and ability to work for change and how adults can support this change.

Even if a variety of genders and sexualities were accepted as part of everyday discussion in schools and were integrated into everyday classroom life, issues of homophobia and transphobia would still exist within the larger culture. However, public educational institutions would then be in the position to address such issues as separate from identities themselves. While not all explicitly related to gender, the vignettes presented in this article provide solid examples of (1) children's exploration of identities and (2) child-driven activism. Educators responded to both by encouraging students' communication and sense of power. This approach could easily be applied to other social justice issues, and it provides practical insight for those concerned with children and gender justice in public schools.