UNCOVERING GENDERED TEACHING PRACTICES IN
THE EARLY CHILDHOOD CLASSROOM

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Dissertation Prepared for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH TEXAS
August 2014

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For many early childhood teachers, interacting with children about issues concerning gender and sexuality is fraught with feelings of uneasiness and anxiety. For others, familiarity with research on these topics has resulted in rethinking their approaches to sex, gender, and sexuality in their early childhood classrooms. This inquiry examined the tensions associated with the researcher’s attempts to rethink gendered narratives and childhood sexuality in her own classroom. The study took place over the course of 4 months and involved a traditional public kindergarten classroom. Queer theory and feminist poststructuralism, along with a multi-voiced poststructural autoethnography were used to demonstrate the researcher’s shifting identities and the cultural context that shaped the researcher’s behaviors and perspective. Multivocal autoethnographic narratives were written to illustrate the researcher’s journey between trying on, being in, and becoming a feminist poststructural educator who uncovers and troubles gendered teaching practices in her own early childhood classroom. The following insights resulted from this study: young children actively and knowingly talk about gender and sexuality and do have a considerable amount of sexual knowledge; heterosexuality plays an integral part in children’s everyday experiences; and a lack of equity and inclusion associated with family diversity or queer identities exists in the early childhood classroom. Young children’s access to knowledge about gender, relationships, and sexuality has critical implications for their health and well-being, not only in their early years but also throughout their lives. This
knowledge can build children’s competencies and resilience, contributing to new cultural norms of non-violence in gendered and sexual relationships. With a growing diversity in the make-up of families, it is now more critical than ever that teacher training programs move away from a single way of knowing and make room for multiple perspectives, which in turn influence innovative kinds of teaching decisions and practices. This research illustrates that it is possible for early childhood teachers to use feminist poststructuralism and queer theory to deepen their understandings and responses to children’s talk, actions, and play regarding sex, gender, and sexuality and to use these understandings to inform their professional practice.
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CHAPTER 1
TROUBLING THE DISCOURSE OF CHILDHOOD

Despite the intimate links that exist between gender and sexuality (Robinson, 2005), the dominant discourse of childhood has constructed children as innocent, asexual, and too young to understand sexuality, thus positioning sexuality as irrelevant to their young lives, and yet, at the same time, a troublesome situation to them. Hegemonic discourses of childhood innocence have been constituted within the science of developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) and reconstructed as an underlying basis for universalizing childhood and reinforcing the concept of the naturally developing child (James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998). This notion of childhood, founded within DAP, fails to acknowledge the significance of sex, gender, and sexuality as having an effect on young children’s life experiences, learning, or development. These dominant discourses of childhood and child development (Piaget, 1973) have operated primarily to underpin perceptions of the irrelevance and inappropriateness of sexuality to children’s lives and have been assembled to defend and regulate social practices that have functioned in terms of children’s access to knowledge of sexuality (Robinson, 2012).

For many early childhood teachers and professionals, interacting with children about issues concerning gender and sexuality is fraught with feelings of uneasiness and anxiety (Robinson & Davies, 2010). While many early childhood teachers control expressions of sexuality as if they were biologically determined, researchers who work on sexuality argue that these expressions are more than just sex; rather, they include all of the cultural practices adopted by individuals, in this case young children. These
practices range from kissing games, through girlfriend/boyfriend practices, romantic ideals, stories, movies, and television shows, to the social and legal institutions (such as marriage) through which we organize our social lives. In questioning the belief that children are too young to understand these displays of gender and sexuality, Robinson (2005) directed our attention to the degree to which these heterosexual assumptions and behaviors are unacknowledged everyday routine practices in early childhood settings (Blaise & Taylor, 2012). Young children are gendered through early childhood practices, such as engaging in mother and father play in the dramatic play center, chasing games on the playground, girlfriends/boyfriends, mock weddings, lining up by gender, and the selection of children’s literature that portrays only the makeup of heterosexual families (Janmohamed, 2010; Robinson, 2005; Scattebol & Ferfolja, 2007). However, while oftentimes unquestioned or unobservable, sexualities are never completely silenced or removed from early childhood settings (Mellor & Epstein, 2006).

Those who draw upon scientific and Western understandings of child development, in order to make sense of young children and their behaviors, tend to have concerns about the sexualization of childhood and the loss of innocence. For this reason, most adults either quickly shut the action down or ignore it. Shutting down children’s play and conversation is typically used as a strategy for protecting them from hearing or seeing what might be perceived as too sexual in nature and therefore inappropriate for them to take part in or watch. By purposefully disregarding these types of behaviors, children are seen as asexual. Even in cases where adults consider the play or behavior sexual in nature, they may explain away children’s actions by saying they are too young to really understand what they are doing. All of these notions
of childhood are founded on the belief that sexuality does not occur until adolescence, a
time far removed from a child’s early years (Blaise, 2009). Because of this Western
belief in childhood innocence and the fact that adults commonly associate sexuality with
sexual intercourse only, very few studies have been carried out to examine the sexual
knowledge and understanding of young children (Brilleslijper-Kater & Baartman, 2000).

Challenging the revered notion of childhood innocence, there is a body of
research (Blaise, 2010) which indicates that young children are enthusiastic to talk
about gender and sexuality and do have a considerable amount of knowledge regarding
their ability to determine sex differences, name sexual body parts and their functions,
and describe what they know about adult heterosexual behaviors. Studies (Davies,
1989; 1993; Alloway, 1995; Grieshaber, 1998; MacNaughton, 2000) have increasingly
documented the process of gender construction in early childhood and has highlighted
how young children themselves are both active and knowing shareholders in seeking
and regulating sexual knowledge and engaging in the policing of gender performances
of other children and adults, within rigid boundaries of what are widely considered
appropriate masculine and feminine behaviors. Cullen and Sandy (2009) identified
dominant gendered and sexualized discourses exercised by young children within early
childhood settings, arguing that they have already established fixed, culturally
embedded, and discursively constructed ideas of themselves as gendered and
sexualized beings from a very early age. Additionally, some research has begun to
denote the significant role of the curriculum and educators’ pedagogical practices in
constructing and normalizing children’s gendered identities (Robinson, 2005; Robinson
& Diaz, 2000, 2006). For some in the field of early childhood education, this knowledge
has resulted in rethinking their approaches to the gendering of identity in their early childhood classrooms (Hughes & MacNaughton, 2001).

**Topic of Inquiry**

The purpose of this feminist poststructural autoethnographic study was to critically examine how I functioned to perpetuate or resist gender possibilities for my students, as well as to interrogate the ways in which my actions opened up or limited spaces for my students’ thinking on gender. The underlying concern of this study was how dominant discourses are constructing pedagogical practices and how these practices are supporting the formation of gendered subjects. While there is research (Karlson & Simonsson, 2011) which has suggested that young children’s access to knowledge about gender, sexuality, and relationships has critical implications for their long-term health and well-being, a moral panic has been constructed around this knowledge of sexuality, especially if it violates heteronormative values and practices (Robinson & Davies, 2010). Of particular interest to myself were the tensions associated with my attempts to rethink gendered narratives and childhood sexuality in my own kindergarten classroom. Also of interest were the ways in which young children reacted to my efforts to open up new spaces for thinking about gender and sexuality.

The study was constructed to examine the following underlying question: How do dominant gender discourses affect gender possibilities and power relationships between kindergarten students, their classmates, and their teacher within a public school classroom?
Research Significance

The ways in which early childhood teachers see, understand, and respond to young children’s work, play, and language are positioned within their knowledge of childhood, teaching, and learning. In the early childhood classroom, this mindset is oftentimes informed by developmentalism, which, in turn, is the basis for developmentally appropriate practice, or DAP, as it is commonly referred to (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). Developmentalism refers to the overdependence on developmental ways of seeing young children within DAP (MacNaughton, 2000). DAP is a knowledge base informed by developmental psychology that universalizes the child and childhood (Burman, 2008). It is grounded in a traditional narrative of the child, one that fails to acknowledge the significant role that sex, gender, and sexuality play in a young child’s life experiences, education, and growth (Blaise, 2005, 2009; Browne, 2004; MacNaughton, 2000).

There is a universal belief that young children either do not or should not have knowledge of sexuality. In the early years, efforts to engage with children concerning issues of sexuality are considered problematic for parents, caregivers, and early childhood teachers (Blaise, 2010; Epstein, 1999; Renold, 2005; Robinson, 2005; Sears, 2009; Tobin, 1997). Dominant discourses of assumed childhood innocence situate young children as naïve with little or no knowledge of sex, gender, and sexuality (Blaise, 2009; James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998). Many early childhood teachers either quickly shut down or ignore play and language that center around sex, gender, and sexuality. Within the sociology of education, there is gender and sexuality research (Blaise, 2010), drawing upon feminist poststructural and queer theories that has argued that young
children’s knowledge of gender differences and heterosexual interactions are consequential and do show that young children do possess understandings of gender and sexuality. These viewpoints consider gender and sexuality to be socially constructed and have reconsidered the relationship between sex, gender, and sexuality in ways that demonstrate how these concepts are deeply interconnected. In addition, there is research (Blaise, 2010) in education that recognizes young children as active agents in their gender identity construction and performances. That is to say, young children do not only learn the social meanings, values, and expectations of how to be a girl or boy from parents, classmates, teachers, or the media, but they also individually carry out and regulate gender by taking part in and consistently doing and redoing their gender roles.

By (re)considering the relationships that exist among sex, gender, and sexuality, it becomes possible to rethink the notion that children are born with a fixed gender or sexual identity. Butler (1990) argued that gender is the practice through which individuals make sense of their sexual identity and that by performing our genders we gain an awareness of what it means to have a sexual identity and to act out our sexuality. Feminist poststructuralism has positioned gender as a topic of inquiry, viewing it as a dynamic, political, and social construction. Instead of envisioning gender as an individual trait that human beings are neither born with nor socialized into, feminist poststructuralists see gender as a social construction which has recognized that certain acts or behaviors are understood as appropriate for either one sex or the other. According to this theoretical perspective, young children do not learn gender
from others; rather, they construct it through the social experiences in which they are situated (Blaise, 2009; Bohan, 1997; Davies, 2003; Thorne, 1995, 1997).

Queer theory extends these feminist poststructural understandings of gender identity by concerning itself with heterosexual discourses and how they affect the social construction of gender (Warner, 1993). In academic discourse, queer theory acts as both an indication of social-constructedness and the power dynamics at play in the creation of sexual and gendered identities. Queer theory challenges taken-for-granted categories of “normal” and “natural,” questioning what they mean in social, political, and religious terms (Schneider & Roncolato, 2012, p. 1). From a queer perspective, heterosexuality has become standardized as a group of power relations that are judged necessary and carried out through rewards for appropriate behaviors and punishments for those that deviate from the accepted or normal ways of being either a boy or a girl. This way of viewing gender presumes that heterosexuality operates to create regulative notions of femininity and masculinity. Queer theory acts to uncover how heterosexual ways of being have been normalized and, in this way, have become mechanisms of power, situating heterosexual relationships as the most important and accepted form of sexual identity (Blaise, 2009).

Feminist poststructuralism and queer theory open up alternate ways of thinking about the ways children become gendered, situating the early childhood teacher not as a passive observer of children’s language and actions, but as one who calls into question and challenges children’s current gender understandings (Blaise, 2005, 2009; MacNaughton, 2000; Ryan & Ochsner, 1999; Sears, 1999). Early childhood teachers are being called upon to draw from a range of theoretical perspectives to understand
the complicatedness concerning classroom life and what young children are learning related to gender and sexuality. It is time to look critically at the gender discourses accessible to young children and the ways they are being used. Early childhood teachers can rethink the ways they are able to confront and challenge the dominant understandings of gendered social order in the early childhood classroom. Reconsidering sex, gender, and sexuality opens up the possibilities for looking diversely at the ways young children are doing gender in the early childhood classroom, including the ways children struggle with a teacher’s efforts to question and challenge their gendered behaviors (Blaise, 2005).

Representation of the Dissertation

This dissertation is made up of four chapters which include an introduction, an explanation of the methodology, and a discussion of the major understandings and discourses that were identified in relation to the research questions. Therefore, the dissertation is organized as follows:

- Chapter 1: Troubling the Discourse of Childhood
- Chapter 2: Conducting a Reconfigured Feminist Poststructural Autoethnography
- Chapter 3: Understanding and Interpreting
- Chapter 4: Rethinking Gendered Practices
- Appendices
- References

Chapter 1 is an introduction to the study. It includes a statement of the problem, the purpose of the study, the research questions, the rationale for the study, the organization of the dissertation, a brief review of the study’s theoretical perspectives,
and a discussion on the construction of the child, the discourse of childhood innocence, and the development of gendered identities in Western society.

Chapter 2 describes the methodology used for the study. This chapter discusses a reconfigured multivocal feminist poststructural autoethnography, including a theoretical discussion of the benefits, limitations, and concerns of using autoethnography. It purposefully addresses concerns with coding and labeling data, ethics, and voice. Also included in this chapter is a description of the study’s initial design, including the participants, the plan for data collection, and the rationale and process for exploring and interrogating the data.

Chapter 3 briefly reviews the purpose of the study and the research questions. It also offers a description of the researcher’s cultural context, a description of the major similarities and understandings that were identified in the research, and an analysis of the major understandings in relation to the research questions presented. The chapter concludes with a multivocal narrative text, which illustrates my journey as the researcher in trying on, being in, and becoming a feminist poststructural educator.

Chapter 4 provides a discussion of the major discourses that were identified in relation to the research. In addition, it discusses the future implications of the study related to greater concerns with moving beyond child development discourses and disrupting the image of the DAP early childhood teacher. It also offers an explanation of subsequent issues related to creating proactive strategies for responding to sex, gender, and sexuality in early childhood settings. These suggestions are based on the study’s implications for the field of early childhood education, early childhood preservice education programs, early childhood teachers, and researchers in the field.
Theoretical Disclosure

In recent years, issues such as culture, economy, difference, identity, and intellect have emerged, both globally and locally, bringing about challenges in the ways we understand and live in the world. Early childhood educators have called on a variety of approaches and perspectives to meet these challenges of diversity (Grieshaber & Cannella, 2001). The reconceptualization movement in early childhood education brought about new spaces and lenses through which a different way of thinking about children as subjects emerged. Looking at early childhood educational practices through a feminist poststructural lens supports a valuable means for considering diversity and difference in both children and adults. It allows educational institutions to reflexively consider their own positions within discourses and to review the policies and practices that unconsciously perpetuate normalizing discourses which continue to other those who are perceived as different (Robinson & Jones Diaz, 2006). This research used a feminist poststructural lens to question how and why children become masculine and feminine, how their gendered identities are socially constructed (Grieshaber & Cannella, 2001), and how discourses surrounding gender sustain and are perpetuated by power/knowledge relationships (Paechter, 2001). Queer theory was used to expand on these discussions by illustrating how heterosexual discourses are imbued with power relations, how young children critically negotiate these discourses, and how children’s negotiations of these discourses generate patterns of inclusion and exclusion (Boldt, 1996, 2011; Blaise, 2005, 2009, 2014; Taylor, 2007, 2008; Taylor & Richardson, 2005; Skattebol, 2006). A reconfigured autoethnographic text was used to represent my journey of living in the transitional space of trying on, being in, and becoming a feminist
poststructural thinker and early childhood teacher. This work demonstrates the movement, contemporaneous, simultaneously in the making, and in relation to others. These reflections were written in a feminist poststructural autoethnographic format in order to write the self from a fractured and fragmented subject position (Denzin, 2003).

The following sections provide an overview of poststructural feminism in order to illustrate the ways in which it was used to trouble both discursive and material structures that limit the way we think about gender. This overview includes several key philosophical concepts, including knowledge, language, discourse, deconstruction, power, and the subject. Additionally, the section traces the development of queer theory and its relationship to the study.

Poststructuralism

Poststructuralism refers to a loosely connected set of theoretical positions influenced by Sassure’s (1959) ideas on the relations among words and concepts, Althusser’s (1971) theory of ideology, Lacan’s (1981) reworkings of psychoanalysis, feminism, new French feminists such as Cixous (1986) and Irigaray (1981), and the works of Derrida (1997), Foucault (1974), and Barthes (1978) (Gavey, 1989). While some have criticized poststructuralism for being too difficult to understand or communicate to others (Tong, 1989), Middleton (1993) defined this somewhat fleeting theory as follows:

I understand (poststructuralism) to mean a disbelief, skepticism, or suspension of belief in universal truth or in the possibility of totalizing a master narrative and, instead, a focus on the various master narratives, disciplines, or theories as regimes of truth - as historically and socially constructed knowledge with varying and unequal relations to various apparatuses of power. (p. 58)
Although the concepts of postmodernism and poststructuralism are sometimes used interchangeably, postmodernism uses grand narratives to criticize cultural movements and dominant experiences of present-day society (Lyotard, 1999), while poststructuralist work is focused on the concepts of deconstruction, texts, language, trace, absence, and difference (Derrida, 1997). For poststructuralist thinkers who draw upon the work of Foucault (1974), the possibility of a universal truth, which contributes to and privileges any single cultural tradition, does not exist. Instead, the representations of truths are constructed within discourses, thus they are continuously amended, transformed, and critiqued. Foucault (1974) proposed that “everything is never said” (p. 118) and that truths are situational, viewed from a distinct perspective, and connected to the values of a specific discourse. Rather than completely reject these truths or realities, poststructuralists study the differences, absences, and intertextuality within these realities (Koro-Ljungberg, 2008).

Feminist Poststructuralism

Feminism is a highly debated word, similarly, so is poststructuralism; therefore, it is unreasonable to suggest a comfortable union from two such unstable positions. Instead, a rhizomatic mixture has been created and is in the continuous process of becoming a strategically reconfigured feminist poststructuralism, not one that is fixed or stable, but is, instead, one with multiple systems of meaning (Delueze & Guattari, 1987). For feminist poststructuralists, the ongoing effort to get “to the bottom” of language and meaning, situates them as “lost in the play of discourse” (St. Pierre, 2000, p. 477). Feminist poststructural critiques are leery of research that seeks to find out “exactly” what is going on because it is founded in the humanist work of knowledge,
rationality, and truth, rather than the poststructural belief in difference (St. Pierre, 2000, p. 477).

While poststructural critiques are diverse, they all share the common assumption that “experience has no inherent essential meaning” and that the way we understand and express experience is constituted within language (Gavey, 1989, p. 461). Feminist poststructuralists give priority to women’s experiences as political action that has given voice to women’s oppression by, and resistance to, patriarchal regulation. The disruption of theorizing that posits essential, fixed qualities for women and others calls for a challenge to, rather than uncritical preservation of, the practices and forms of ways of being, identities, and ways of behaving required by existing cultural institutions (Weedon, 1987).

Foucault’s (1974) work on knowledge and its relationship to power has been used by feminist poststructuralists to uncover discourses that have been utilized to exploit women and men who have been oppressed or marginalized. This way of thinking allows for diverse and competing notions of reality to simultaneously exist. When dominant discourses of reality are challenged, new possibilities are limitless. There is no longer the possibility of a single truth, rather small bits of knowledge, which are situated, contextualized, contradictory, and messy. Lather (1991) maintained that by disrupting and displacing dominant and oppressive forms of knowledges we can challenge what we believe is reality, and replace our quest for absolutes with obscure notions of multiple viewpoints.

Feminist poststructuralism calls into question the very notion that any one method, belief, political system, or structure is the true or right way. For this reason,
feminist poststructural research includes continuous analysis. The goal of this methodology is not to reject everything, but to systematically reflect upon and critique it. St. Pierre (2000) suggested that feminist poststructuralists must continuously challenge knowledge, power, and truth in regards to who benefits from it and who is harmed. According to Harding (1991), questioning who created the knowledge is as critical as the knowledge that is created.

In the sections that follow, I attempt to label and describe a few of the key tenets of feminist poststructuralism, but it is important to note that in doing so I run the risk of stabilizing and oversimplifying the ideas and presenting them as potentially static and “deradicalized” (Gavey, 1989, p. 460). A critical component of feminist poststructuralism is its opposition to definition or description, presumably because such practices illustrate an attempt to uncover an essence that does not exist; therefore, some poststructuralists are hesitant to label their approaches as poststructuralist (Gavey, 1989).

Approaches to Knowledge

Poststructuralist perspectives reject the possibility of absolute truth and objectivity and consider knowledge to be culturally constructed, through “a specific kind of production with definite relations to the social and material world” (Venn, 1984, p. 150). Similarly, from a poststructuralist perspective, knowledge is viewed as transitory and innately unstable. Moreover, knowledge is understood as neither value-free nor objective and is closely linked with power. Those who have the power to govern what counts as truth are able to sustain their connection to material assets and power (Gavey, 1989).
Within poststructuralism, a plurality of meanings is encouraged. For example, traditional science is thought to be just one of many discourses, being no more or less valid as a means of truth and knowledge than any other discursive structures. From a poststructuralist perspective, one form of knowledge is not privileged over another as the best or only approach. Rather than claim that a systematic knowledge is possible, poststructuralists maintain to know only the impossibility of such knowledge (Culler, 1982). Burr (1995) referred to knowledge as “the particular construction or version of a phenomenon that has received the stamp of ‘truth’ in our society” (p. 64). How we see the world and the truths we uphold is based on the knowledge we take up in our lives. We acquire knowledge from our daily communications with the people and organizations we interact with (Fuss, 1989). This knowledge is oftentimes based on a narrow understanding of the world, on stereotypes, and on commonsense understandings that act to construct and define our perceptions of the world and those who live in it. General characteristics become universalized representations of individuals and groups, characterizing and defining who and what they are. It takes one aspect of a subject’s identity, oftentimes what is outwardly visible, and makes it representative of the individual as a whole (Lorde, 1984). This knowledge is primarily constructed within cultural binaries such as boy/girl, heterosexual/homosexual, and adult/child. Viewed as natural opposites, these dichotomies are constructed and defined in opposition to each other, thus they are embedded in a hierarchy of power where one side of the binary has the power to define and oppress the Other (Robinson & Diaz, 2006).
Language

Poststructuralist perspectives maintain that meaning and knowledge are produced through language and that language is the key to how we create meaning as socially constructed human beings (Belsey, 1980; Black & Coward, 1981; Weedon, 1987). If meaning is constructed through language, then it is neither fixed nor essential. Instead, it is a site for social and political struggle where meanings and identities are formed and reformed, challenged, redefined, and reinterpreted (Sampson, 1985, 1989; Weedon, 1997). Based on the theorizing of Sassure (1959), Weedon (1987) argued that “meaning is produced within language rather than reflected by language, and individual signs do not have intrinsic meaning but acquire meaning through the language chain and their difference within it from other signs” (p. 23). Poststructural thought adapted Sassure’s belief by suggesting that the meaning of the signified is never set once and for all but is constantly deferred. Derrida (1976) proposed the concept of difference to illustrate how the meaning of language shifts, based on the cultural context, so that meaning can always be contested. Weedon (1987) furthered this analysis of language when she suggested that language is used as a vehicle for authorization of power, knowledge, and meaning, thus communicating, producing, and reproducing the constantly changing structures of our social systems. Within a poststructural theoretical framework, language as a means of analysis would imply the following: What language is being used to communicate validation? What language is being used to communicate resistance? How does language communicate power? What discourses are being used to communicate meaning and knowledge? How is silence being used to communicate meaning?
Discourse

Feminist poststructuralism is influenced by the Foucauldian notion that language is always situated within discourse. The term discourse refers to an interrelated “system of statements which cohere around common meanings and values… (that) are a product of social factors, of powers and practices, rather than an individual’s set of ideas” (Holloway, 1983, p. 231). In broader terms, discourse refers to a means of constructing meaning that is specific to certain groups, cultures, and historical durations of time and is always in motion. Based on Foucault’s work on discourse, Weedon (1987) noted “neither the body nor thoughts and feelings have meaning outside their discursive articulation” (p. 108). In our society, discourses have become structuring principles that embody and reproduce social institutions, ways of thinking, and individual subjectivity (Weedon, 1987). For example, the discursive production of the desire to be a good early childhood teacher would involve such things as developmentally appropriate practice, a structured system of classroom management, play centers, and normalizing systems which define appropriate development. Through discourse, material power is executed and power relationships are established and perpetuated (Henriques, Holloway, Urwin, Venn, & Walkerdein, 1984).

From a feminist poststructuralist perspective, discourses are multiple, and they open up space for competing, and possibly contradictory, ways of giving meaning to the world or culture we live in. Since there are multiple ways of looking at the world and the events in it, multiple discourses coexist, operating simultaneously to construct different understandings about the world and how it operates. Within discourse, individuals take up subject positions and these positions or possibilities vary in terms of the power they
offer (Holloway, 1984; Weedon, 1987). Through our everyday interactions with people and institutions, we speak and perform discourses into existence. Discourses gain power when they are taken up by social groups and institutions that speak them as an officially sanctioned knowledge or truth about the world (Foucault, 1974). Dominant discourses, which support and perpetuate existing power relationships, tend to construct the subjectivity of most individuals, most of the time, and within any given space (Gavey, 1989). For example, alternative systems of meaning for what it means to be a good early childhood teacher are currently limited in their power because they are marginalized and unavailable, due to the dominant discourse of developmentally appropriate practice.

Subjectivity

According to Foucault (1974), our subjectivity, or self, is constructed within the discourses that are socially available to us, the ones that we draw upon in our interactions with others. Our thoughts and feelings, our sense of self, and how we connect with the world, as well as the ways that we are individualized, gendered, racialized, and sexualized, are embedded within the discourses that we position ourselves in and take up as our own ways of being in the world (Weedon, 1987). Our subjectivity does not come from within us, but from the society in which we exist, the one where discourses are framed and perpetuated, constructing and determining the potential of who we can be and what we can think. The discourses we draw upon to construct our subjectivity determine how we perceive what we can do and cannot do and what we should do and should not do. While Western psychology generally presumes that the individual has one fundamental, coherent, and distinct nature and
subjectivity, poststructuralism does not; instead, it attempts to “decenter the subject”
and to shift importance away from the individual as the origin and sustainer of meaning
or as one who can be “fully aware and self-present” (Sampson, 1989, p. 14). In stark
contrast to humanist views of a unified, fixed self, poststructuralism, instead, suggests a
fractured, shifting, and contradictory version of the self. Power plays a fundamental role
in understanding the concept of subjectification. The power we possess as individuals
comes from the discourses we draw on as we position ourselves in the world. Certain
discourses hold more power than others, based on the ways they are supported and
acted out by individuals and institutions. It is those discourses that become the
dominant ones, holding nearly all of the power and receiving a great deal of the
approval (Foucault, 1974).

Power

A theoretical focal point in poststructural thinking is that which troubles and seeks
to locate sources and uses of power. According to Foucault (1980b), power is
conceptualized as a process at work in our social world, rather than as something held
by individual people. Power functions within all relationships and is revealed through
discourse. Consequently, power is something that circulates, while simultaneously
working to produce certain kinds of individuals. Foucault (1978) argued that “power is
exercised from enumerable points” (p. 94). Power is not something that can grasped or
held on to, even by those who find themselves situated at the top of a hierarchical
structure. For Foucault (1980b) and feminist poststructuralists who utilize his work,
“Individuals are the vehicles of power, not its points of application” (p. 98). Working
from this viewpoint, power passes through and is put to use by persons and structures at
all levels in all social systems. Additionally, one must consider not only who holds or
does not hold power, but also how strategies and techniques of power function.

Foucault’s concept of regimes of truth is helpful in illustrating how some
discourses gain power and dominance over others. Regimes of truth are represented
as a range of officially sanctioned discourses that operate together to perpetuate certain
truths and power relationships. A focal point to Foucault’s definition of power is the
understanding that where there is power there is also resistance. Meaning, no power
relationship exists that is merely one of total oppression and dominance. Social
structures are constantly in flux as a result of shifting power relationships within their
structures. Consequently, any attempt to characterize clear-cut and concise lines of
who maintains and doesn’t maintain power will be both incomplete and context-bound.
In addition, Foucault (1978) recognized that while power is sometimes negative,
coercive, or oppressive, it can also be positive and productive, depending on when and
where it is exercised in social systems.

Deconstruction

Within a feminist poststructural framework, language plays a critical role in the
construction of the individual subject, making the deconstruction of our everyday
language fundamental to an understanding of the ways power is produced and acted
out in our day to day lives. Based on the works of French poststructuralist Jacques
Derrida (1980), deconstruction was created as a theoretical tool used to expose the
various discourses that operate through texts in order to more closely examine the
power relationships and the knowledge being constructed (Davies, 1993). Contrary to
the way it sounds, deconstruction is not about tearing down. It does not concern itself
with pointing out an error, but with examining how a structure has been constructed, what produces it, and what holds it together. According to St. Pierre (2000), it is not negative, deconstructive, or rebellious, but agreeable and consenting. Deconstruction attempts to identify the normalizing discourses that construct the dominant understandings which define, limit, and regulate our representations of subjectivities and identities (McCarthy, Holland, & Gillies, 2003). The primary purpose of deconstruction is to disrupt and destabilize the dichotomous thinking that sustains many of the understandings and knowledges we take up as truths (Robinson & Jones Diaz, 2006).

Feminist Poststructuralism and the Construction of Gender

Postdevelopmental perspectives, such as feminist poststructuralism and queer theory, have been used to dispute the Western cultural belief that there is a direct, causal, and necessary relationship between biological sex and the gender role one assumes (Blaise, 2005; Connell, 1995; Nicholson, 1994; Paechter, 1998). By rethinking the relationship between sex, gender, and sexuality, it becomes possible to challenge the notion that children are born with a fixed gender or sexual identity. In recent years, poststructuralist views have become more and more important to scholars who are researching in the field of gender and education. Feminist poststructuralism sees gender as a political, dynamic, and social construction, rather than an individual trait that one is either born with or socialized into (Blaise, 2005, 2009; Robinson & Diaz, 2006; Weiner, 1994). Within this framework, young children construct their gender through their language, actions, and interactions with each other and the world around them (Blaise, 2009; Bohan, 1997; Davies, 2003; Thorne, 1995, 1997).
Feminist poststructuralism offers the field of early childhood a means of generating new knowledge by using poststructural theories of language, discourse, and subjectivity, to understand the ways power relations operate in the classroom (Blaise, 2005). It is also concerned with change and, as a result, places the teacher not as one who merely observes young children’s language and behavior, but rather as one who opens up spaces that allow children to consider and possibly rethink their current gender understandings (Blaise, 2005, 2009; MacNaughton, 2000; Ryan & Ochsner, 1999; Sears, 1999). Through this theoretical framework, the study of gender is opened up, revealing how oppression operates and how resisting gender bias is possible within the early childhood classroom (Blaise, 2005).

Queer Theory

Heavily influenced by the works of Eve Kosofsky-Sedgwick (1990), Judith Butler (1990), Lauren Berlant (1991), and Jose Esteban Munoz (1999), queer theory builds upon feminist challenges to the notion that gender is part of the essential self and supports the belief that gendered identities are not fixed or stable, but shifting, contradictory, dynamic, and socially constructed (Robinson & Diaz, 2006; Schneider & Roncolato, 2012). Emerging largely from feminist poststructuralist perspectives and the fields of queer and women’s studies, queer theory is concerned primarily with heterosexual discourses and the ways they affect the social construction of gender (Warner, 1993). The multifaceted diversity of human sexual practices and desires make universal claims about sexual orientation difficult to explain. An academic and political disconnect surfaced between “essentialists” who claim a universal nature to sexual identity and “social constructionists” who defend from anthropological, historical, and
sociological observation that sexual identity is historically modified and constructed 
(Schneider & Roncolato, 2012, p. 3). Based on Foucault’s *History of Sexuality* (1978),
queer theory adopts the poststructuralist criticism of identity in which the *homosexual* is
not a fixed or independent category but an addition that works to stabilize
heterosexuality by functioning as its dual opposite. Sedgwick (1990) proposed that
heterosexuality has not meaning apart from homosexuality and, in fact, is actually
reliant upon it. Consequently, in order for heterosexuality to prevail as a normative
practice, homosexuality must exist and be considered taboo to define and regulate the
normalcy of heterosexuality.

A queer perspective assumes that gender cannot be understood apart from
sexuality (Jagose, 1996). As a result, it reconstructs the developmental framing of the
sex-gender-sexuality relationship because it supports the notion that dominant gender
discourses and the hegemonic discourse of heterosexuality are intertwined and must be
considered together in order to more fully understand the constancy of gender
stereotypes (Butler, 1990, 1999). Young children use these discourses of sexuality to
manage what it means to be a boy or a girl. Butler, one of queer theory’s most
important philosophers, argued that gender is not expressive of some inner nature, but
is always a performance. By performing gender, young children make sense of what it
means to have a sexual identity and to practice one’s own sexuality (Blaise, 2009, 2014;
Butler, 1990). She furthered this notion when she suggested that gender is a
reproduction of fictitious origin that is created and recreated in its imitation. According
to theorists such as Butler (1990) and Sedgwick (1990), the heterosexual/homosexual
dualism is socially constructed in order to sanction certain political and cultural
institutions and for this reason the object of study should concentrate on discourses, practices, and social institutions, specifically, the ways that these cultural artifacts rely on and reproduce sexual and gender binaries (Corber & Valocchi, 2003).

Queer theory poses some challenges for early childhood educators and scholars because it requires them to think about children's behaviors as not only gendered, but also sexual. A queer perspective questions the assumption that young children are too young to understand sexuality and, in fact, calls attention to the degree in which heterosexual assumptions and practices are a common yet unacknowledged everyday happening in early childhood settings; meaning heterosexual discourses are found throughout early childhood contexts and the gender discourses young children make use of are almost entirely heterosexual (Blaise & Taylor, 2012; Cahill & Theilheimer, 1999; Robinson, 2005).

Representations of Childhood and Research

Constructivist and critical scholars suggest that the notion of child does not represent a universal human truth, but rather it is a category created through language and discourse that actually serves to limit and control the lives of those who are younger. Within postmodern and critical (Agger, 1991; McCarthy, 1991; Poster, 1989) research paradigms, the notion that younger human beings represent a separate and unique human condition called childhood has been examined and critiqued as producing power for one group of human beings over another (Cannella, 1997). Feminist poststructuralism provides a lens through which these power relations can be exposed and deconstructed.
The Construction of the Child

Emerging largely from both the enlightenment and modernist periods is the notion that younger human beings embody a separate human condition called childhood. In Western culture, childhood is typically viewed as a human state that we all experience and see as recognizably different from adulthood. Most people living in the United States view children as separate from adults and as part of a distinct group who are to be controlled, protected, and guided toward a more independent and competent self. By creating a body of human beings who must have decisions made for them and their actions carefully observed and monitored, we have constructed a group that is marginalized, belittled, and silenced, and who are not deemed able or mature enough to create themselves (Cannella, 1997).

Early childhood teachers recognize that, within enlightenment and modernist discourses, the concept of child has changed over time and through different historical contexts, therefore making it progressively more complete. These discourses that emerged were highly influential in situating adults as more powerful than children since it was believed that the progression of intellect occurred over time. Consistent with views of progress, early childhood experts believe they have learned what young children are like, and can describe how they grow, change, and think, and the types of early learning environments that are best for them (Cannella, 1997).

Traced back to the Cartesian concept of the separation of mind and matter is the reflexive discourse of dichotomies. In Western culture, children have been constructed as distinctly different from older human beings and as a group that depends on adults for food, nurturing, and care. Oftentimes, young children are characterized as innocent,
weak, needy, lacking in skill, and savage, while adults are typically characterized in opposition as intelligent, strong, competent, mature, and civilized. This Western dualistic thinking of adult/child has constructed the child as immature and uncivilized, which has led to the belief that childhood is a period in life that requires protection, reform, and control by adults (Block, 1995). This dichotomous line of thought has produced structures of power which allow those who are younger to be disciplined, silenced, and controlled. According to Burman (1994), this dichotomous construction is used to perpetuate a colonialist power for those who are created as adults. The construction of children as a group who need protection and/or to be saved has sustained forms of oppressive power, which deny young children voice and personal expression, resulting in less agency to establish themselves within dominant cultural domains and discourses (Cannella, 1997).

Postmodernist and feminist poststructuralist perspectives have been instrumental in challenging these modernist beliefs, which have dominated our Western understandings of childhood (Cannella, 1997; Davies, 1989, 1993; Grieshaber, 2001; James & Prout, 1990; MacNaughton, 2000; Robinson & Diaz, 2006; Walkerdine, 1990). These perspectives question the very notion of childhood as a universal experience, suggesting it is socially constructed through language that may actually act to limit and control the lives of those who are younger. Postmodernists and feminist poststructuralists propose that the notion of child is a value-laden construction, characterized by dominant Western understandings of childhood, and created by individuals to best fit their perceptions of particular historical periods and social contexts.
The Discourse of Childhood Innocence

There is a common assumption that young children either do not or should not know about sexuality and that any effort to communicate with them about such issues is problematic (Blaise, 2010; Epstein, 1999; Renold, 2005; Robinson, 2005; Sears, 2009; Tobin, 1997). These dominant and traditional discourses of assumed childhood innocence construct children as naive, possessing little or no understanding of sex, gender, and sexuality (Blaise, 2010). This perspective is typically based on the concern that young children either grow up too soon or are not yet ready for sexual knowledge (Epstein, O'Flynn, & Telford, 2003). In addition, many parents, educators, and child-care providers may experience feelings of doubt and shame concerning these types of conversations, due to the belief that it is not acceptable to give this kind of information to the innocent child. In fact, clinicians, researchers, and early childhood teachers frequently view young children who possess a certain degree of sexual knowledge as deviant for their young age (Bentovim & Vizard, 1988; Brilleslijper-Kater & Baartman, 2000; Gordon, Schroeder & Abrams, 1990a, 1990b; Lamers-Winkelman, 1992, 1995; Volbert, 1992). On the contrary, some adults may not be bothered by this type of play or these conversations since they do not view them as sexual, but rather as cute and funny. While this reaction is different than the first, it is still based on the notion of childhood innocence (Blaise, 2009).

In comparison, feminists, sex educators, and critical scholars have long contended that the notion of childhood innocence is merely an excuse for keeping
children uneducated and powerless (Jackson, 1982; Silin, 1995). For example, young children are oftentimes denied the freedom to refuse adults the right to touch or kiss them in situations that are not perceived as abusive. Additionally, little girls are heterosexualized, while at the same time expected to retain their innocence. For example, a young girl enacting a little girl performance may know nothing about sexuality, while simultaneously knowing a great deal. Although naïve about the workings of heterosexual sex, she recognizes that being flirtatious, attractive, and cute wins a positive reaction from adults. Just as young girls are defined within discourses of heterosexuality, so are young boys. The pronounced femininity of young girls constructs them as hetero/sex objects, while challenging young boys to prove they are real boys in ways that demonstrate the dominant form of masculinity within a given society. According to both Kitzinger (1988, 1990) and Jackson (1982, 1999), the discourses of childhood innocence are profoundly damaging to both girls and boys (Epstein et al., 2003).

While some have concerns about the sexualization of childhood and the loss of childhood innocence, others draw upon scientific and Western understandings of child development in order to make sense of young children and their behaviors (Blaise, 2009). Regardless of the background, most adults will either quickly shut the action down or ignore it. Shutting down children’s play and conversation is a strategy for protecting them from hearing or seeing what might be perceived as too sexual in nature and therefore inappropriate for them to take part in or watch. By purposefully disregarding these types of behaviors, children are seen as asexual. Even in cases where adults consider the play or behavior sexual in nature, they may explain away
children’s actions by saying they are too young to really understand what they are doing. All of these notions of childhood are founded on the belief that sexuality does not occur until adolescence, a time far removed from a child’s early years. Because of this Western belief in childhood innocence and the fact that adults commonly associate sexuality with sexual intercourse only, very few studies have been carried out on the sexual knowledge and understanding of young children (Brilleslijper-Kater & Baartman, 2000).

The Construction of Gendered Identities

Many people mistake the understanding of gender identity with that of gender role. According to Honig (1983), young children develop a gender identity and take on a gender role. Gender identity is the process in which young children learn to see themselves as either male or female (Lewis, 1987), while a gender role is a group of expectations concerning which behaviors are considered appropriate or inappropriate for a girl or a boy. When young children take on a gender role, they are acknowledging the limitations determined by society for specific behaviors associated with their gender. There is far more variance in gender roles across cultures than in gendered identities (Cahill & Adams, 1997).

Within a modernist and Western understanding of the world there exists the belief that identity is singular and unitary. This discursive dominance of individualism within early childhood education refers to the over-emphasis within DAP on the individual child’s growth and development (MacNaughton, 2000). Contrary to this understanding, a postmodernist perspective suggests that the very notion of identity is socially and scientifically constructed and that it does not exist within all cultures or at all
times, but rather is multiple, dynamic, and continually situated in relation to certain
discourses and the practices created by those discourses. This understanding
suggests there are no essential feminine or masculine characteristics that are uniform
throughout all histories and contexts (Grieshaber & Cannella, 2001).

Young children typically use their gendered bodies to validate their behaviors,
demonstrating that embodiment is a point of agency in the social recreation and
transformation of gender identity and power. Some argue that identities are produced
through dialogue, while others suggest that a dialogic concept excludes embodiment as
a technology of identity, and agency as a means in which young children shape and
negotiate the ways they are interpreted apart from their bodies (MacNaughton, 2000).
In early childhood, the relationship between embodiment and gender identity seems
especially important, considering that young children are largely defined through their
smaller, less developed bodies (Davies, 2004; Skattebol, 2006; Taylor & Richardson,
2004).

Feminist poststructuralist research has shown that gender is firmly grounded in
children’s routine social practices and that by the age of three they have learned how to
do gender well (Aydt & Corsaro, 2003; Chen, 2009; Thorne, 1993). The way boys and
girls are expected to act differently is not merely a result of school culture, but rather it
demonstrates the sociocultural structure of gendered behaviors emulated and
understood in the adult world. Within a feminist poststructuralist perspective, a young
child’s identity is not permanent, but rather it is adaptable, fluid, and sometimes
contradictory (Browne, 2004). Young children are in a perpetual mode of constructing,
revising, and transforming their ideas of who they are (Blaise, 2005).
Summary

This chapter presented an explanation of the research problem, the significance of the research, and the research questions that guided the study. It outlines the layout for the way the dissertation is presented. Additionally, it includes a theoretical discussion on poststructuralism, feminist poststructuralism, and queer theory. The chapter also contains a discussion of the research on the discourse of childhood innocence and the development of gendered identities in Western society.
CHAPTER 2
CONDUCTING A RECONFIGURED AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

This chapter presents an explanation of the critical qualitative research methodology used in this study. Specifically included is a theoretical discussion of the implications for writing a reconfigured feminist poststructural autoethnography - one which awakened ruptured and fragmented subjectivities and brought about discontinuity, displacement, and estrangement (Gannon, 2006). Also contained in the chapter is an account of the study’s participants, and a description of the data collection, as the rationale and process for interrogating the data. Additionally, the chapter includes a discussion of a reconfigured poststructural autoethnography, which was used as a method for exploring the “transitional space” (Ellsworth, 2005, p. 1456) of trying on, being in, and becoming (Philips, Harris, Larson, & Higgins, 2009, p. 1456) a feminist poststructural thinker and early childhood educator. Finally, the process used to develop the initial design for the study is explained through a detailed account of my thoughts and decisions in determining the research purpose, data collection, participant selection, and data analysis.

Research Focus

The initial focus of the study was based on my interest in gender and its effects on the lives of young children. Initial research questions were based on my desire to investigate the phenomenon of heteronormativity, to analyze the ways young children construct gender discourses, and to examine how young children take an active role in doing gender. The initial questions were framed from a feminist poststructuralist perspective.
Examining the literature written on gender, sex, and sexuality in the early childhood classroom aided in developing the questions for the study. Feminist poststructural and queer perspectives on rethinking gender understandings and identity, as well as my desire for self-introspection and reflexivity, assisted in developing the following specific questions for the study.

1. How do I function to perpetuate or resist dominant meanings and understandings of femininities and masculinities in my kindergarten classroom?
   a. What social and cultural aspects of my personal experiences play a part in what I do as it relates to gender?
   b. What social and cultural aspects of my personal experiences play a part in what I see as it relates to gender?
   c. What social and cultural aspects of my personal experiences play a part in how I respond as it relates to gender?

2. How do the ways I perpetuate or resist particular views of what it means to be a girl or a boy affect the gender possibilities for my students?
   a. How do my actions open up new spaces for my students’ thinking on gender?
   b. How do my actions limit my students’ thinking on gender?

3. To what extent am I aware of the role I play and what sort of agency do I assume in this role? Through self-reflection and narrative reframing, how does an awareness of my actions help me to deconstruct my teaching narrative and reframe it in such a way as to empower both myself and my students?
   a. What are the limitations of my old ways of understanding?
b. What discursive resources exist to help in developing a counternarrative?

Theoretical Framework

Poststructuralism is concerned with the assumptions and meanings that qualitative researchers associate with the concept of research. For example, it questions how qualitative research is produced and how postmodernism impacts the qualitative research process (Koro-Ljungberg, 2008). Many researchers and critical thinkers have experimented with how to reconceptualize research in such a way that disrupts the modernist concepts of truth, power, and science. Based on the works of French philosopher Jacques Derrida (1996), poststructuralists deconstruct truth claims without constructing new truths to take the place of the ones being deconstructed. Additionally, they trouble the privileged role of theories (Richardson, 1993) and the presence of single representations of a stable reality (Adams, Causey, Jacobs, Munro, Quinn, & Trousdale, 1998; McCormack, 2000).

Poststructuralist writers presume that an absolute or universal truth which privileges any single cultural belief does not exist, but rather the representations of truths are constructed within social, political, and historical discourses which can be changed, altered, and critiqued (Koro-Ljungberg, 2008). Foucault (1974) argued that “Truths are always situational, viewed from a specific perspective, and connected to the values of a specific discourse” (p. 118). While postmodernism/poststructuralism does not completely renounce reality, it examines the differences, absences, and “intertextuality within these realities” (Koro-Ljungberg, 2008, p. 222). Through multiple readings from diverse philosophical perspectives, new spaces are opened up, allowing for ruptures, contradictions, and deconstruction (Clarke, 2005).
Baker (1997) suggested that qualitative researchers shift their role of being data collectors to that of data generators. Unquestionably, the purpose of this study was to generate new knowledges. While a fair amount of research exists on the discourse of childhood innocence, gender identity, and childhood sexuality, there is a significant gap in the literature on early childhood teacher preparation and early childhood teachers who are troubling gender and sexuality in their classrooms from a feminist poststructural perspective. This study utilized a feminist poststructural framework to deconstruct the researcher-research subject relationship (Varga-Dobai, 2012) through the (im)possibilities of writing the self (Gannon, 474).

What is Autogethnography?

This study is the narrative representation of a researcher's journey of living in transitional space (Ellsworth, 2005). It is a story of wandering, thinking, and writing within my own spaces of unrest – spaces which moved me intellectually, spiritually, emotionally, and physically. This study called upon a reconfigured poststructural autoethnography to reflect theories of subjectivity and transitional space, including the ruptures, the paradoxes, and the capability to transform answers I have into new questions and to alter the paths I take to arrive at understanding (Phillips, Harris, Larson, & Higgins, 2009). While poststructural theorists challenge assumptive humanist notions of the subject as capable of knowing and articulating the self, they simultaneously offer a justification for situating the self into the written text. A multi-voiced autoethnography (Mizzi, 2010) was chosen to reflect theories of subjectivity, diverse voices, shifting identities, and transitional space. Multivocal autoethnography provides a representational space for the plural narrative voices located within the
researcher, in this case, me. While multivocality can focus on the interactions between the researcher and the participants, for the sake of this study, multivocality refers to the multiple voices, thoughts, and identities of, me, the researcher (Mizzi, 2010). The following section is an attempt to address poststructuralist concerns with writing the self, while also providing a rationale for the use of reconfigured autoethnography.

Reconfigured Autoethnography

Shaken by criticism from poststructuralist, postmodernist, and feminist writers, some social scientists turn to personal narrative as a method of inquiry in order to frame an alternative relationship between researcher and subject. This postmodern moment is defined by a yearning for storytelling, a desire to compose ethnographies in new ways, and an urge to find alternative ways to write, including locating one’s self within the text. As a result of this movement toward personal narratives, autoethnographic writing emerges, offering with it a way to organize and frame a research study that positions the researcher as the subject (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). In recent years, and as part of a corrective shift against ethnographic practices that erased the researcher’s subjectivity, while permitting him or her absolute authority for representing the “other” of the research, there has been an upsurge in autoethnographic writing. While autoethnographic written text may seem to be just “me” writing “my story” in a specific context, Denzin (2003) suggested that these “mystories” may also be “reflexive, critical, multimedia tales and tellings” (p. 26). The authorization for the narrative emerges from the body and memories of the autoethnographer at the location of lived experience. From a poststructural paradigm, this speaking/writing stance is already discredited in that “the subject of the speech-act can never be the same as the one who acted
yesterday” (Barthes, 1989, p. 17). Within autoethnography, the subject and the object of the research give way to the body, thoughts, and emotions of the (auto)ethnographer situated in his or her distinct time and place (Gannon, 2006). From a poststructuralist point of view, one’s subjectivity produces “tiny explosions of the self that refuse to repeat the same I” (St. Pierre, 2008, p. 123). Ethnographic research assumes that experience is the “great original,” thus persuading readers that there is both a “there” and “beings” who are “there” (Britzman, 2000, p. 28). Autoethnographic writing endows the authority of being “there” to the self of the researcher, who has given himself or herself the power to speak. However, this writing the self back into the research does not signify the researcher as the center of the research, as a “master of truth,” or as the chosen one to reveal truths or to speak for those who are unable to speak (Lather, 1991, p. 157).

Clough (2000a) argued that by “disrupting the ontology of the presence, (putting) origins and authenticity under erasure,” poststructuralism creates the unexpected by making philosophy both “impossible” and “imperative” (p. 6). When translating Derrida’s notion of deconstruction, Spivak (1976) suggested that we examine the subject and other categories “under erasure;” in writing, this often means writing down a word and then crossing it out in order to free it from its old essence or meaning (p. xv). Lather (2007) further explained the concept of under erasure as “keeping something visible but crossed out in order to avoid universalizing and monumentalizing, keeping it as both limit and resource” (pp. 167-168). Rather than throwing away the old concepts, Butler (1992) proposed we reuse them for new purposes, repeating them subversively. Probyn (1993) argued that autoethnography abandons theory, stating that it leads to
writing where “the force of the ontological is impoverished… through an insistence on
the researcher’s self” (p. 5). While Ellis (2002) avoided taking on a critical persona,
autoethnographers, such as Ronai (1998, 1999), have illustrated the ways theory might
“dance” with the personal in autoethnographic narratives that are strong, provocative,
and theoretically complex. The “evidence of experience” that the autoethnographic
writer attempts to seize in his or her writing runs the risk of discounting “questions about
the constructed nature of experience, about how subjects are constituted… (through)
language (or discourse) and history” (Scott, 1991, p. 777). Poststructural theoretical
perspectives challenge humanist assumptions of the subject as capable of self-
knowledge and self-articulation. By rupturing positivist research practices and
regulative boundaries, poststructural theories synchronously offer a rationalization for
fusing the personal into research, thus believing the body, emotions, and lived
experiences are texts to be written and read in autoethnography. While
autoethnography appears to suppose that subjects can speak (for) themselves,
poststructural thinking fractures this assumption and stresses the possibilities of writing
the self from a ruptured and fragmented subject position. In poststructural
autoethnography, knowledge is derived from our exact locations in unique bodies with
particular emotions, flesh, and thoughts that are made possible through certain socio-
cultural spaces. While autoethnography recognizes that the body is “a site for the
production of knowledge, feelings, emotions and history, all of which are central to
subjectivity” (Probyn, 2003, p. 290), poststructural autoethnography insists that bodies
are connected to other bodies, thus they dwell and take in meaning in cultural spaces.
Probyn (2003) restated this thought by saying “the body cannot be thought of as a
contained entity; it is in constant contact with others… subjectivity (is) a relational matter” (p. 290).

Exploring the works of French poststructuralists such as Foucault, Barthes, Derrida, and Cixous, who have written themselves and have situated those selves under erasure, a reconfigured poststructural version of autoethnography emerged - one which traces textual strategies, arouses fractured and fragmented subjectivities, and wakens discontinuity, displacement, and disunity. Through a poststructural autoethnography, the text writes the author as complicated and multiple, located in a world where the (self) knowledge can only be partial, contingent, and situated. Even though the personal story remains privileged and the body and memory are sources of knowledge, a reconfigured poststructural autoethnography weaves theoretical texts into autoethnographic texts, thereby “author-izing” different technologies of writing (Gannon, 2006, p. 477). Believing that truth is not internalized but acquired, Foucault (1997) maintained that the purpose of writing “is nothing less than shaping the self” (p. 211) through unintentional and imaginative consideration of our daily lived experiences and disciplinary principles of living. This implies that autoethnographic texts might be constructed to bring about our own foundational criticism directed at the repressive structures in our daily lives (Denzin, 2003). By taking up writing practices intended to displace or “disassemble” the self (Rabinow, 1997, p. xxxviii), autoethnographers write themselves as dialogic rather than self-contained. Despite its tendency toward partiality and possibility, most autoethnography leaves the written self somewhat untroubled in the text; however, reconfigured poststructural autoethnography stresses discontinuities, disconnectedness, and jarring moments, thus steering away from linear stories of
coming to “know” our hidden selves (Lather, 2000, p. 22). Written within a poststructural perspective, autoethnographic writing bends toward the ancient imperative of self-care, for the self is in a continuous practice of reflexive consideration on the past, present, and future moments of subjectification within complicated and contradictory discursive spheres. Poststructural autoethnography is dialogic rather than self-contained. The truths written in this reconfigured form of autoethnography are “liminal, dynamic, and conditional,” just as are the selves that are brought to the writing (Gannon, 2006, p. 480).

Autoethnographers understand that autoethnography moves forward, in part, from memories that are enfolded in the body, but poststructural autoethnography takes up Barthes’s (1978) strategies of estrangement, situating memory writing not as a veridical act that recreates the original occurrence as it was lived at the time, but rather recognizes it as always constructed from a specific time and place and within a discursive space. Barthes used a variety of strategies, including photographs, to illustrate how poststructural autoethnographers can hold the author, writer, present, and past in motion. Barthes pointed out that poststructural autoethnographic writing does not search for “sacred originary,” but instead for small remnants and unreliable fragments of discursive and multiple lived experiences (1978, p. 304).

Derrida challenged any writing about oneself, calling it risky writing (Bennington & Derrida, 1993). In Circumfession (Derrida, in Bennington & Derrida, 1993), Derrida presented a fragmented text which emphasized that no experience, regardless of how personal or individual, can be solely represented in relation to oneself (itself). Instead, everything, including (especially) our bodies, is always already embedded within culture
and all that has been stated before. Derrida argued that rather than dismantle the subject, it must be situated. Through textual tricks such as layout and voice, the poststructural autoethnographer creates possibilities for breaking up the hegemony of the self in the writing. For example, Ronai (1999) used “layered accounts” to erase, adjust, and readjust her written text, thus allowing for “traces of difference to remain at play” (p. 128). Lather and Smithies (1997) used the works of Derrida to suggest an alternatively framed “Derridean (anti)autoethnography” which appears as a “messy text” that “interrupts and exceeds and renounces its own force toward a stuttering knowledge” (p. 214). Bakhtin (1981) used “multi-voicedness” to illustrate a “plural consciousness” in his writing to work on language. Criticizing the use of a single voice as “monologic” discourse, he located a “dialogic” discourse that developed through his own writing (p. 278). Bakhtin’s plural consciousness embodies a multivocality involving multiple identities, desires, and voices within the subject. Mizzi (2010) pulled from Bakhtin’s work in suggesting a multivocal autoethnographic text. In relation to autoethnography, he defined multivocality as “providing a representational space in the autoethnography for the plural and sometimes contradictory narrative voices located within the researcher” (p. 2). This multivocal autoethnographic text opens up space to demonstrate the researcher’s shifting identities, the cultural, political, and historical context shaping the researcher’s behaviors and perspective, and the silent tensions that lie underneath observable behaviors.

Drawing upon the fragmented (anti)biographical works of Barthes, Derrida, and Cixous, poststructural autoethnographers have reconfigured autoethnography, allowing researchers to write themselves as uncertain and contradictory authors who speak the
multiple selves that each of them is and have been the fragmented bits informed by memory, the body, other texts, and most importantly, other subjects. Through various textual strategies, autoethnographic writers misplace the speaking self that is the “subject, object, and the (im)possible production” of the autoethnographic narrative (Gannon, 2006, p. 474).

Data Sources and Analysis

I took field and journal notes daily as gender-related events occurred in the early childhood classroom. In some cases, I made notes at the time of the experience, but in other cases I wrote them at the end of the school day after the students were dismissed. When possible, I recorded the exact words used. Other times, I constructed scenes and dialogue, based off my memory of the event. The purpose of the notes was to record the dialogue and behaviors young children displayed as they constructed gender and heterosexual discourses within their early childhood classroom. The notes were also reflected on throughout the journaling process. I wrote notes based on the observations I made, using a feminist poststructuralist and queer lens. The purpose of the reflections was to think on, question, and open up the space for trying on, being in, and becoming a feminist poststructural early childhood teacher.

Construction of Field Notes

In order to keep a written record of the children’s talk and actions in the classroom, I made field notes throughout each school day. Field and journal notebooks serve as what Foucault (1983) termed hypomnemata or “account books, public registers, and individual notebooks serving as memoranda… constituted as a material memory of things read, heard, and thought” (p. 246). I wrote field notes using the
following sources: (1) observations of children playing and talking, (2) my interactions with students in the classroom, and (3) student interviews. The field notes I recorded addressed (1) how young children construct gender discourses in the early childhood classroom, (2) how young children take part in doing or performing gender in the early childhood classroom, (3) how young children use their understandings of heterosexuality to regulate space and the gendered social order in the classroom, and (4) teacher and student talk and behavior, as well as classroom events which demonstrate the ways gender and sexuality are understood within the early childhood classroom. The field notes were used to show recurring patterns of behavior and relationships among the students, to allow for the researcher to respond to the research questions, and to document and describe actions and interactions which provoked the researcher to make changes in her teaching practices.

As part of the field notes, I used narrative text to document teaching sessions and to explore and illustrate teaching practices related to sex, gender, and sexuality. These narratives also documented specific events of my everyday life in the kindergarten classroom. In some cases, I recorded pre-planned lessons, while in other cases I made notes of those that occurred as a result of impromptu conversation that emerged from the students. Lessons were used and recorded to show the ways that I changed my teaching practices in reaction to the research. Three specific transformational events were described and deconstructed as part of a multivocal autoethnographic text. I used field notes and journal entries to select the text included in the autoethnographic pieces. The events chosen were based on three pivotal happenings which exemplified my journey of living in a “transitional space (Ellsworth,

Construction of Reflective Journal

In the context of this dissertation, I used journaling to refer to the process of sharing my thoughts, ideas, feelings, and experiences through writing (Chabon & Lee-Wilkerson, 2006). I used diary-like free writing to document self-introspection and interactive introspection concerning my understandings and responses to sex, gender, sexuality, and professional practice. As part of this research, journaling also served as a means of documenting and reflecting on the research practices involved (Banks-Wallace, 2008).

In order to keep a written record of personal reflections during the study, I made journal entries throughout or at the end of each school day. I made journal entries to address my (1) reactions to classroom events, language, and behaviors related to gender and sexuality; (2) revelations concerning, reactions to, and/or changes with the methodology; (3) reflections on feminist poststructuralism and queer theory as lenses to view gender discourses and how they influence the social construction of gender in the early childhood classroom; and (4) emotional reactions to student talk and actions, the methodology, and the theoretical lens’ used for the study.

Data Analysis

There were several components that made up the exploration and interrogation of data analysis. A central component of the interrogation was myself as the researcher. Therefore, this section includes a narrative describing who I am as the researcher and the cultural, political, and historical contexts in which the research was
situated. Also included in this section is the design I used for exploring and questioning the data. An explanation for how I labeled and categorized the data is included, along with a feminist poststructural critique and troubling of coding as problematic, but necessary (Varga-Dobai, 2012).

**Representation**

Qualitative inquiry and critical research represent a shift away from the singular and unproblematic to complicatedness and difference, suggesting there can be more than one reality and more than a single structured way of accessing such realities. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), these multiple meanings are difficult to interpret as they are contingent upon other systems of meaning. Therefore, the knowledge created from this discipline is perceived through socially constructed and subjective interpretations. Critical research is not about searching for a truth; rather, it is about asserting value to the theoretically imbued analysis. Qualitative and critical researchers presuppose that research is value-laden, arguing that “social inquiry is only meaningful because it involves values” (Smith, 1983, p. 47). Critical researchers enter the field already positioned within the research. For that reason, it is important to situate myself as researcher within this study.

I entered the teaching field with more than 16 years of having been a student and rather than critically reflecting upon the ideas I was bringing to my teaching career, I felt fated to repeat the practices I had experienced. The origin of this study lies in how my struggle to reconcile postmodernism with the dominant discourse of early childhood education fostered critical reflection on my instructional practices. Due to my Western education and schooling experiences, child development knowledge dominated my
educational teaching experiences, thus shaping my beliefs as an early childhood educator. I developed a concrete, play-based approach to early childhood education and, consequently, both the desire to be the good early childhood teacher and a definition of the good teacher, created in DAP terms (Cannella & Grieshaber, 2001). Additionally, my parents were devout Southern Baptists, raising me within strictly defined religious boundaries, which constituted children as asexual and too young to understand or experience sexuality, thus rendering it as a taboo subject in both my life and education (Robinson, 2005).

Drawing upon this Western understanding of child development (Blaise, 2009; Lubeck, 1998; Cannella, 1997; Fleer, 1995) and concerns about the sexualization of childhood (Levin, 1998), I clearly remember striving to be the good early childhood teacher by quickly shutting down and ignoring play that was thought of as too sexual and therefore inappropriate for young children to take part in or watch (Blaise, 2009). This regulation of my teaching practices was dependent on both the dominant discourses of childhood and sexuality, along with the religious discourses that governed my thinking. Within this understanding of young children, I neglected to consider diversity, equity, or inclusion in the lives of my students and their families. It was not until my own divorce that I began to make a concerted effort toward acknowledging family diversity in my classroom. When my family dynamics changed, so did my thinking, thus moving me beyond the notion that children and their families do not exist beyond the commonly understood normative framework of a mother and a father. I changed the way I addressed families in the class notes I sent home, I rephrased the way I asked students to remind their family members of upcoming events, and I opened
up school events such as *muffins for mom* or *donuts for dad* to all family members, regardless of who they were or the role they played. Despite these efforts at recognizing diversity in the make-up of my students’ families, I continued to privilege heterosexuality in the relationships between parents and family members.

These memories compel me to reflect upon my idealized image of the early childhood teacher, my classroom teaching practices, and the range of overlapping and competing discourses in which I am situated. When I began doctoral coursework, my identity as the good DAP early childhood teacher collided with my introduction to postmodernism, causing my idealized image of what it means to be a well-accepted early childhood teacher to shift and change, based on the new discourses in which I was situated. I have since developed two definitions of child and theory - one which is universal and normative and one which is socially constructed, historically derived, and contextually specific (Lubeck, 1996). Teaching in a public kindergarten classroom, I am entangled in developmentalism and dominant DAP practices on a daily basis, yet this research has allowed me to create a space for challenging these principles as a single, universally accepted, normalizing approach to classroom teaching and child development. Consequently, these aspects of my identity link me to a range of political and cultural tensions which have positioned me inside a set of belief systems in which I am conflicted (Giugni, 2006).

Critical researchers aim to understand and interrogate human behavior rather than to generalize and predict causes and effects. Therefore, a central understanding to this study is that motives, meaning, reasons, and other subjective experiences are time and context bound. I situate myself as researcher to inform the reader that this
work is value-laden. It stems from my lived experiences, personal beliefs, and perceptions about the issues surrounding this study. As a good DAP early childhood teacher, I strive to provide my students with a child-centered and interactive pedagogy, informed strictly on child development knowledge and developmentally appropriate practice guidelines. As a doctoral student whose work is grounded in poststructuralism, I am troubled by the universal assumptions embedded in child development knowledge and early childhood teacher preparation. From a feminist poststructural perspective, I am concerned with the way power operates to produce particular types of subjects, specifically how it produces different kinds of girls and boys. This study resulted from a personal desire to question the constructs, categories, and theories I used in the classroom and to open up the space to new possibilities.

Exploring the Data

In recent decades, qualitative researchers have been attracted by the methodological possibilities of postmodern/poststructural thinking. Some have fractured the concept of data (Lather & Smithies, 1997; St. Pierre, 1997a), the field (St. Pierre, 1997b), and conventional forms of data presentation (McCarthy, Holland, & Gillies, 2003; Richardson, 1995; Wolf, 1992). Some researchers have probed the notions of response or dream data, while others have questioned traditional forms of writing by playing with multilayered texts and collective stories (e.g. Adams et al., 1998; Lather & Smithies, 1997; McCormack, 2000; Torres, 2001). Many of these researchers have been influenced by the works of French philosophers and critical thinkers such as Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Felix Gutattari, and Jacques Derrida.
Drawing upon the research and work of Derrida (1997), poststructuralists focus their inquiry on deconstruction, texts, language, trace, absence, and difference. In addition, Derrida proposed that no label or identifier can capture or illustrate the meaning of a concept because the meaning is always slipping away through references to other identifiers. Trihn (1989) suggested that to seize the true meaning of the Other through words or stories is, in fact, inconceivable and Scheurich (1995) claimed that what actually develops through interpretation is a mirror of the researcher’s mindset, rather than a mirror of reality itself. The researcher remains in complete control of the transcribed words and the coding process becomes the means in which the researcher constructs his or her story. According to Burr (1995), the language we use performs as a “bag of labels” through which we describe our thoughts and feelings to others through words and signs (p. 6). For the poststructuralist thinker, the meaning of a word changes based on the context we use it in or on the person we are addressing it to (St. Pierre, 2008). The recorded language of codes and labels, which appear to carry truth about the participants, is merely interpretations and imitations of the real that is no longer real.

While I chose to highlight and label data, it is problematic to imply that the names, labels, or categories determined illustrate the essence of a concept or idea; rather, they represent a situated understanding produced within the discourses and classroom community. I recognize the ways labels themselves perpetuate generalizations and produce situated understandings of the word, privileging what is labeled over what is not. Moreover, labels act within their label only when inside of the discourse that produced them (Koro-Ljungberg, 2008). Although coding is problematic, in that it leads to universalities and either minimizes differences or hides them,
deemphasizes complexities and oversimplifies issues, and is neither value-free nor objective, the labels used to describe the data in this study are “inaccurate yet necessary” (Spivak, 1997, p. xii), and, in this way, this research can be considered poststructural (Koro-Ljungberg, 2008). Clarke (2005) offered an alternative to traditional coding through the process of open coding, which allows for the possibilities of fractures, contradictions, and even adaptability, if the researcher is open to looking at the data differently, exploring and thinking about it in terms of what is missing. In this way, silent voices can be heard.

For the sake of organization and out of necessity (Spivak, 1997), I colored-coded small units of text based on similarities and common understandings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As I color coded field and journal notes, descriptive names and labels were added to the units of text to draw attention to similarities, understandings, differences, fragmentation, plurality, and irregularities associated with sex, gender, and sexuality, young children, and the early childhood teacher. This process facilitated my exploration of the data as well as assisted in organization of large amounts of text data into workable chunks. I compared the similarities that emerged with each other, looking for common discursive understandings. In some cases, I made additional hand-written notations in the margins of the field and journal notes. Lincoln and Guba (1985) referred to these jottings as short messages that the researcher makes and uses to aid in the process of data analysis. These added notations included 1) additional thoughts and reactions to the text, 2) a change in thinking about the written text, 3) a thought connecting the text to new readings or information, and 4) new questions or ideas to consider in future talk, conversations, and lessons.
Limitations of Qualitative Inquiry

Troubling Observation

Foucault (1975) explored the ways in which power is acted out within and through practices such as observation. Additionally, he submitted that observation is neither value free nor objective; rather, it is embedded in a teacher’s theoretical knowledge that is oftentimes defined by child development. This notion of observation as problematic indicates that transcription of observation is also neither neutral nor value-free. This indicates that a researcher makes choices based on his/her own subjectivities about what to put in his/her notes or which method of recording devices to use, and all of these choices, in turn, impact which data get recorded. For example, a traditional developmental interpretation of a child’s talk and play values and privileges developmental forms of knowledge over other ways of knowing the child. All of these choices influence the exploration of the data.

In order to address these problems with interpreting observations, I 1) used both developmental and feminist poststructural perspectives to undertake multiple rereadings of my observation notes; 2) asked questions such as “Who and what was observed?” “How were children excluded or excluded through the observation?” “How were my observations recorded and documented?” and “Did my observation function as a practice of equity and fairness?”; and 3) situated myself as the teacher/researcher.

Troubling Voice

In response to the “voicelessness” of positivist quantitative research, postpositivist feminist and critical qualitative research surfaced to “give” voice to research participants, to bring voices out from the obscurity of numbers, and to valorize
the genuineness of voice (McCoy, 2011, p. 751). However, the possibility of voice, as an absolute representation of truth, reality, and intent, has been interrogated, even pronounced an “epistemological fiction” (McCoy, 2011, p. 751). Similar to the way positivist work uses language to constitute the illusion of objectivity, postpositivist work uses language to constitute the illusion of subjective trustworthiness. Alcoff (2009) argued that power relationships amid researcher and researched open up and shut down possibilities for what voices might reveal to us. Mazzei and Jackson (2009) pointed out that researchers shape voice through their questions and leading discussions.

While some researchers have played with textual innovations to address the problem of voice by working to make it more authentic, spontaneous, or realistic, these practices have yet to deal with the most troubling limits of voice, as previously characterized. Mazzei (2007) expressed concerns that divided and multiple voices may produce a “rigidity and intransigence” that would misrepresent the fluidity and flux that represents what it means to “stay close to the complexities and contradictions of existence” (Lather, 2007, p. 152). That is to say that voice is not linear, stable, or simplistic, but rather it is partial, incomplete, and always in the process of telling. Rather than beckoning voices to “speak for themselves” (Mazzei & Jackson, 2012, p. 745) or reducing complicated and conflicting voices to investigative “chunks” that can be understood free of context and circumstance, we must complicate voice by “plugging in” “intertitles,” images, and out-of-field voices that function to convey voice (Deleuze, 1985/1989, p. 216). The term plugging-in stems from the works of Deleuze and Guattari (1987) and, for the sake of this study, refers to the method of complicating
voice by plugging-in the multiple texts which add in to the spoken word to produce something new. It is an ongoing continuous process of making and unmaking, which arranges, constructs, and fits together to create a different relationship among the texts. The Deleuzian act of plugging in includes both audible and silent voice data, such as the mental images created by the voices that both guide and constrain the students in the study (parents and other teachers), the sounds that fill the field (a door opening that interrupts a conversation), and journal reflections and assumptions (intertitles or written dialogue and narration that are part of the field and journal notes) (Deleuze, 1985/1989). Additionally, what children do not respond to, omit, or ignore has the potential to demonstrate more about their voice and perspective than what they verbally state (Spyrou, 2011). Drawing upon the works of Deleuze (1993) and, in conjunction with her research with teachers, Mazzei (2007) urged researchers to withstand the desire to fill the silences with their own voice and motives and, instead, remain open to the messy truths that thoughtful silences might speak.

This work is presented with the full disclosure that voice is necessary as much as it is a problem. To deal with the epistemological and ethical limits of voice, I constructed the written study in three layered, multi-vocal narrative texts. In writing the texts, I turned to the works of Davies and Deleuze and considered my subjectivity as a place of multiplicity and intersections. In doing so, I opened myself up to difference, to seeing differently, to being different, within the familiar place of my classroom life and experiences (McCoy, 2011).
Troubling Authenticity in Voice

Working from a feminist poststructural perspective and given the indeterminacies of language and the workings of power in the will to know, we must deconstructively assume that both the researcher and the researched are unreliable narrators (Mazzei & Jackson, 2012). Lather and Smithies (1997) located voice within what they called a *theory of deferral*, meaning that voice is situated not as a presence, but as a limitless interruption, thus producing a stumbling, messy text, full of contradictory, ruptured voices that cannot possibly pledge to transport a message to its proper receiver. Therefore, voices in the text neither illustrate authenticity nor represent lived experiences that can be instantly put to use by a reader in an uncomplicated, orderly narrative. Diverse experiences and subjectivities, the deficiencies and overflows of language, and the fluctuating power relationships between those who speak and those who listen make it inconceivable to get to the heart and authenticity of voices (Jackson, 2010). Poststructuralism separates itself from an authentic individuality and aims its attention instead on one’s subjectivity, “the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of the individual, her sense of herself and her ways of understanding her relation to her world” (Weedon, 1997, p. 32). Voice renders itself problematic, as a deception, since it can never possess anything more than partial truths (Clifford, 1986) spoken from voices that are driven by the contexts in which they are situated. Therefore, voice is neither original nor authentic, but located and expressed by conflicting, partial voices which construct certain versions of the truth. From a poststructural perspective, rather than authenticate voice, the researcher acknowledges the partiality of it, questions how discourses become neutralized as knowledge through
it, and views it within a process of becoming, thus creating multiple ways of understanding (Jackson, 2010).

Research Implementation

The final section of this chapter spells out the procedures I followed as I prepared to begin the study. The first part of the section details the ethics involved in autoethnography, followed by a piece on why and how participants were chosen, and finally, the measures that were taken to obtain informed consent.

Participants in the Study

By definition, qualitative research is about exploring concerns, understanding phenomenon, and answering questions by analyzing and making sense of unstructured data. It is oftentimes more involved with matters of description rather than those of quantity, thus qualitative research studies typically involve a small number of participants (Goodwin & Goodwin, 1996). This study involved a traditional public kindergarten classroom located in a suburban city in the Northern region of Texas. The classroom consisted of 18 students (7 girls and 11 boys) aged 5-6. The children came from a range of socio-cultural and economic backgrounds.

Ethical Concerns

Autoethnography, as a method, raises unique ethical concerns about how the rights of the other are weighted against the interests of the self when the origin of the research is one’s own sociological imagery and thought and is likely to involve others (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Autoethnographers have struggled with how to depict others in the stories they tell (Chatham-Carpenter, 2010). Does the autoethnographer own the story just because she tells it? More distinctly, do those mentioned in the
narrative have rights? If the text were truly the author’s story, its ethical considerations would be easy. However, they are much more complex and “the narrative is rarely entirely one’s own” (Morse, 2002, p. 1159). According to Chang (2008), autoethnography falls within an unparalleled ethical position whereby protecting the confidentiality of others is much more difficult than in other studies involving human subjects. In *Autoethnography as Method*, Chang (2008) wrote,

> Since most autoethnographers focus primarily on self, you may feel that ethical issues involving human subjects do not apply to your research design. This assumption is incorrect. Whichever format you may take, you still need to keep in mind that other people are always present in self-narratives, either as active participants in the story or as associates in the background. (p. 1600)

The Congress of Qualitative Inquiry’s (2007) position statement stipulated that qualitative researchers should iron out conflicts of interest, detail research plans in advance, respect participant’s voluntary participation, and cite the informed consent process when taking part in qualitative inquiry, which means that qualitative researchers must anticipate ethical issues before beginning their research (Tolich, 2001).

Foreseeable Risks

The activities and lessons used in this study did not go beyond what we normally do in class each day. The only foreseeable risk involved in this study was the possibility that students might become embarrassed if asked to further explain a statement they made, an idea they shared, or a behavior they displayed. In the event that a child became embarrassed or uncertain about answering or responding, I was prepared to stop the line of questioning and discussion or move it away from the child and onto something else.
Informed Consent

All of the children who participated in the study acted as active research partners, giving verbal consent for their stories to be told and helping to collect data through classroom discussion, storytelling, writing, and drawing. On a regular basis, we talked over with one another the nature of my study, how our classroom discussions and activities contributed to it, and how I was writing about what we were doing and talking about in the classroom. Information was sent out to parents, outlining the research and what their child’s involvement entailed. Students’ parents and/or guardians were asked to sign an informed consent form (Appendix B) for their participation in the study. The purposes of the informational letter (Appendix C) and consent form were to describe the purpose of the study, explain how the study was being implemented, and request their approval for their child’s voluntary participation in the study. Specifically, the letters addressed the storage of the research data, the anonymity of the data and who it would be shared with, and assurance that the data would be eradicated after three years. Additionally, I maintained active anticipatory consent from my teammates, daughters, and boyfriend, all of who played an integral part in my field and journal notes and multivocal narratives (Tolich, 2001). They were regularly made aware of how their talk, stories, and behaviors were being documented in my notes for the sake of my study and written dissertation. I sustained “process consent” with these participants by checking at each stage to verify they still wanted to be a part of the study (Ellis, 2007, p. 24). My campus administrator and district administration gave consent for the study (Appendix C and Appendix D). The research was granted ethics approval by the Institutional Review Board (Appendix A).
Summary

This chapter presents a description of the critical qualitative research methodology used in this study. Specifically, it includes a theoretical discussion of the implications for writing a reconfigured poststructural autoethnography. The chapter also contains an account of the study's participants and a description of the data collection. A discussion of reconfigured poststructural autoethnography as a method for exploring the researcher's multiple and shifting subjectivities is provided at the beginning of this chapter. Finally, the process used to develop the initial design for the study is explained through a detailed account of the researcher's thoughts and decisions in determining the research purpose, data collection, participant selection, and data analysis.
CHAPTER 3

UNDERSTANDINGS AND INTERPRETATIONS

This chapter presents a multivocal (Mizzi, 2010) narrative of the researcher’s journey of living in a “transitional space” (Ellsworth, 2005) of \textit{trying on, being in, and becoming} (Phillips, Harris, Larson, & Higgins, 2009, p. 1456) a feminist poststructural thinker and early childhood educator. While traditional dissertations often present research findings in chapter 4, the term findings will not be used in this study. Since it is problematic to suggest that the research process is value free or objective, or to imply that findings can emerge from data and be represented as truths, this research simply represents the conclusion of a study which was instituted in a singular time and place and for a distinct purpose, rather than a universal statement or generalization for all young children or early childhood practitioners (Ryan & Campbell, 2001). What it may offer is a more thorough awareness of the complexity that sex, gender, and sexuality play in the lives of young children, including the ways children take up, experience, and resist gender discourses in the context of their early childhood classroom environment (Giugni, 2006). Additionally, this research may serve as support for those teachers who are willing to take risks as they question early childhood norms and begin the troublesome and problematic work of constructing and acting out new images of what it means to be an early childhood teacher (Blaise & Andrew, 2005). This is not a study of intention, but one of wandering in-between while making sense of sex, gender, sexuality, and my role as an early childhood educator, through theory (Phillips, Harris, Larson, & Higgins, 2009).
This chapter consists of several sections: 1) a review of the purpose of the study and the research questions, 2) a description of my cultural context, 3) a summary of the major similarities and understandings that were identified in the research, 4) a summary of the major understandings in relation to the research questions presented, and 5) multivocal narrative text illustrating my journey in trying on, being in, and becoming a feminist poststructural educator who troubled sex, gender, and sexuality in the early childhood classroom.

Summary of the Research Study

This study explored the ways in which dominant gender discourses affect gender possibilities and relationships between kindergarten students, their classmates, and their teacher, within a public school classroom. Of particular interest was how I functioned to perpetuate or resist dominant meanings and understandings of femininities and masculinities in my kindergarten classroom. I recorded daily field and journal notes using feminist poststructural philosophical and queer perspectives to explore systems of power, structure, and normativity. I arranged this chapter not by theme or findings, as is often the case in qualitative studies; instead, the first two research questions are explored within this chapter. The third research question is explored within chapter 4.

Derrida (1997) proposed that no label or identifier can capture or illustrate the meaning of a concept because the meaning is always slipping away, through references to other identifiers. Therefore, the labels or codes used to describe the data in this study are “inaccurate yet necessary” (Spivak, 1997, p. xii), and in this way, this research is considered poststructural (Koro-Ljungberg, 2008). Through multiple re-readings of
the field and journal notes, I used descriptive labels to draw attention to similarities, understandings, differences, fragmentation, plurality, and irregularities associated with sex, gender, and sexuality, young children, and the early childhood teacher. It is problematic to imply that the names, labels, or categories determined illustrate the essence of a concept or idea; rather, they represent a situated understanding produced within the discourses and classroom community.

During this process, there were several understandings that were revealed within the text. These included the following: 1) young children actively and knowingly talk about gender and sexuality and do have a considerable amount of sexual knowledge; 2) new spaces were opened up for students’ thinking on gender; 3) heterosexuality and heterosexual desire are an integral part of children’s everyday experiences, including their early education; 4) a lack of diversity, equity, or inclusion associated with family diversity or queer identities; and 5) while students sometimes indicated they understood what I wanted them to believe, oftentimes, their expressions turned out to be words spoken for the teacher’s sake rather than their lived realities. Each of these themes also assisted in addressing the research questions.

Shifting Subjectivities, Multiple Voices, and the Making of a Teacher

Poststructuralist theories of subjectivity call into question the humanistic belief in a unified, fixed self and, instead, suggest the self as a place of discord and conflict that is constantly in process and constructed within power relations (Britzman, 1995; Flax, 1990; Kondo, 1990; St. Pierre, 2000; Weedon, 1997; Jackson, 2001). From a feminist poststructuralist perspective, subjectivities are conceptualized as multiple positions within varied discourses (Weedon, 1997), thus opening up space for “conscious raising
and resistance” (Jackson, 2001, p. 386). The social structures and processes that shaped my subjectivities are situated within discursive fields of knowledge, where the language and social institutions of developmentalism, DAP, sexuality, motherhood, and feminist poststructuralism have all intersected, thus producing competing ways of giving meaning to and constructing my subjectivities (deLauretis, 1986; Kondo, 1990; Weedon, 1997). Embedded in the normative discourse of the DAP good early childhood teacher is the fortitude of developmentalism, and subsumed in this is the notion that the use of developmentally appropriate practice is an expected and unproblematic experience. Being educated in the United States, child development knowledge dominated my educational teaching experiences, thus shaping my beliefs as an early childhood educator. I developed a concrete, play-based approach to early childhood education and, consequently, both the desire to be the good early childhood teacher and a definition of the good teacher created in DAP terms (Cannella & Grieshaber, 2001). It was my undergraduate and graduate educational foundation that constructed the voice of the DAP good teacher.

When I began doctoral coursework, my identity as the good DAP early childhood teacher collided with my introduction to postmodernism, causing my idealized image of what it means to be a well-accepted early childhood teacher to shift and change, based on the new discourses in which I was situated. Suddenly, my DAP good teacher identity struggled to negotiate and claim ownership within a discursive field that it did not set up. Competing discourses constructed by the values and beliefs of those in power, primarily other teachers, my university professors, and school administrators, competed for my subject position. Being constructed within conflicting discourses, lending myself
to poststructural analysis, and opening up space for agency, I developed the *bad teacher voice*. As I attempted to work out the tensions and conflict stemming from a shift in my thinking and teaching practices, I experienced stress, confusion, and extreme emotion, causing me to no longer feel like the DAP good teacher, but rather a complicated, political, and risky self, thus situating me as a *bad* teacher. This became a wrestles, uneven process as I negotiated the jarring terrain of being and becoming a feminist poststructural teacher who espoused opposing discourses about teaching and learning (Jackson, 2001). Drawing upon the bad teacher voice, but stemming primarily from my own sexualized identity; the *sexualized teacher voice* went beyond my thoughts and feelings related to engaging in risky teaching practices to include my own sexual interests and desires, as they related to the study. While not dramatically different from my subjectivity as a bad teacher, multiple subject positions are never seamless or without tensions. The sexualized teacher voice illustrated why I chose to initiate particular conversations and discussions, comment on certain incidences, and regularly share about my own experiences with sex, sexuality, and relationships.

Taking a feminist poststructural stance and believing that our knowledge claims are locally situated, my *mother voice* folded and unfolded on the DAP good teacher and bad teacher voices, consequently keeping them intertwined. As I made decisions about how I questioned my students, opened up discussions, and allowed classroom interactions between students and myself to unfold, I invariably considered those actions from my subjectivity as a mother. Persuaded by the discourses of developmentalism and DAP, yet shifted by resistance and in an effort to accommodate new structures imposed by feminist poststructural thinking, my mother voice remained
contradictory and multiple, always questioning my ability to analyze, contest, and change practices that were constructing me in the world. Power was implicated in the early childhood discourse which situated the good early childhood teacher with the good mother, permitting me to make certain statements and not others, while contesting and reconfiguring these structures and discourses through feminist poststructuralism allowed me to open up new possibilities of multiple and contingent knowledges and experiences for what it means to be a mother. Thus, my mother voice was reflective of a vulnerable subject who occupied multiple conflicting subject positions, remaining in productive tension throughout the duration of the study. Out of a concern for honoring the different voices of my subjectivity, using a multiplicity of data, and starting with my own personal experiences, the voices in this study were constructed and utilized to illustrate my shifting subjectivities and to carve out a space for experimenting with new teaching practices (Jackson, 2001).

Young Children Eager to talk about Sex, Gender, and Sexuality

As the teacher and an active participant observer, I spent seven hours a day, five days a week, in the classroom observing and taking part in daily classroom routines. Feminist poststructuralism and queer theory informed my research practice by influencing how I made sense of sex, gender, and sexuality and the kinds of questions I asked my students; it also guided the observations I made and what I considered important. Instead of being alarmed by children’s talk, actions, and play, I was curious to find out how they understood and actively constructed relationships with each other and their gendered identities; therefore, I released my students to speak freely, interact with one another, and carry out discussions which allowed them to challenge gender
norms and to reconceptualize what it means to be a boy or girl. As it is problematic to insinuate that findings can emerge from the data and be represented as truths, these understandings are presented with the full disclosure that they were formed in a particular time, were socially constructed, and are thus in continual need of critical reflection and reconstruction (Thayer-Bacon, 2003). Overall, the young children involved in this study were eager to talk about gender and sexuality and showed they had an extensive amount of sexual knowledge. Additionally, they took pleasure in performing and responding to particular forms of femininities, masculinities, and sexuality. For the sake of this study, pleasure refers to the “enjoyment or satisfaction derived from what is to one’s liking; gratification; delight” (Merriam-Webster’s, 2014). Although coding and labeling tend to perpetuate generalizations and produce situated understandings of the word, they were utilized out of necessity and for organizational purposes. Through an open coding system, field and journal notes were highlighted and labeled with descriptive terms (Koro-Ljungberg, 2008). The discursive understandings which emerged from the color coding and labels suggested that the children in this study displayed indications of pleasure and delight through 1) an increase in their participation during large group discussion concerning children’s picture books about love, kissing, and relationships; 2) an increase in their questions asked related to love, kissing, marriage, and my personal relationship with my boyfriend; 3) an increase in constructing themselves as boyfriends and girlfriends; 4) an increase in the rate of speech, raised voice levels, and a heightened level of laughter and smiles during read-alouds and classroom discussion in regard to falling in love, kissing, holding hands, boyfriends/girlfriends, getting married, and gender bending; 5)
an increase in individual and small group conversations having to do with love, kissing, boyfriends/girlfriends, showing skin, and being sexy; and 6) an increase in the usage of words typically associated with sex, gender, and sexuality (for example: words such as sexy, naked, marriage, panties, boxer shorts, kissing, etc.).

Opening Up New Spaces for Young Children’s Thinking on Gender

According to Foucault (1973), a researcher’s positivity determines his or her being in the context of research, as well as the “concepts around which they are organized, the type of rationality to which they refer and by means of which they seek to constitute themselves as knowledge” (p. 356). In these terms, Foucault defined positivity as “an organized field of knowledge” (as cited in O’Farrell, 2005, p. 79) and, for the sake of this study, positivity is not affiliated with the term positivism (Audi, 1995; Crotty, 1998). Positivity embodies practices which are connected to particular conditions, submissive to particular rules, and vulnerable to particular changes (Foucault, 1978). Foucault argued that a researcher’s positivity creates the conditions of existence, functions, and transformations of knowledge within a particular discourse. Positivity can fuse simultaneously interdependent, alternate and unstable ways of knowing and unknowing when developing an organized field of knowledge at any specific time. Since a researcher’s positivity is shaped by the acts, beliefs, and possibilities of discourse and by the knowledge in which the self is constituted, it maintains the subject as fallible and socially constructed and continually in the process of reconstruction (Thayer-Bacon, 2003). In History of Sexuality: An Introduction, Foucault connects this notion of positivity with “order exits” that illustrate organized fields of knowledge which enable individuals to define themselves at any particular
moment; however, simultaneous positivity makes it impossible for individuals to understand themselves through an ideal or single self (Foucault, 1978, p. 218). This notion of “order exits” is illustrated in the way developmentalism and developmentally appropriate practice have constructed the image of the DAP early childhood teacher in such a way that many preservice and experienced teachers strive to emulate it. Madison (2005) expounded upon this notion of positivity by saying that positivity allows the research to shift beyond the subjective self toward broader ethical responsibilities that withstand the pitfall of unnecessary self-centeredness or of presenting a reading as though it has not “self”, as if it is not liable for its consequences and effects (p. 8).

With these ideas in mind, I examined my field and journal notes for the assumptions, patterns, and beliefs related to the ways I opened up new spaces for my students’ thinking on gender. My romantic image of the DAP early childhood teacher struggled against my growing understandings of poststructural feminisms. I experimented with teaching practices and slowly released the desire for truths and right answers. In constructing and (re)constructing my data collection, in trying on, being in, and becoming a feminist poststructural thinker/researcher/early childhood teacher, I located moments of being “lost” and pivotal moments of “direction” (Jagodzinski, 1993, p. 160). It is through this transitional space that I explored how to trouble gender stereotypes and gendered teaching practices within my early childhood classroom.

Initial recordings showed how I played with ideas of feminist poststructuralism, even though I yearned for truth, concrete answers, and direction. At first, and only through self-talk and reflection, I tried the language on again and again, reframing my thinking and teaching practices in my mind only. Feminist poststructuralism troubled my
constructed sense of confidence as a good early childhood teacher. My head was full of thoughts and questions: Could I release my students and let them sit by who they wanted and where they wanted? What about DAP classroom management? Could I learn to compliment my students without gendering? Could I respond to gender stereotypes without reinscribing the original assumptions about gender, identity, and sexuality that led to my intervention in the first place? Could I disrupt my own heteronormative assumptions so that I could comment and respond differently to my students? Was it appropriate to talk with my students about my relationship with my boyfriend and being in love? While silently rethinking my teacher education and teaching practices, I began to allow students to make changes in their talk and behavior without intervening. Rather than shutting down or ignoring talk, play, and behaviors related to gender and sexuality, I quietly listened in, recognizing the importance of these ideas in their life experiences, learning, and development (Blaise, 2009).

Early notes recorded my belief that I could just flirt, dabble, and try on feminist poststructuralism for the sake of the study (Phillips, Harris, Larson, & Higgins, 2009, p. 1464). My notes were rife with feelings of disagreement, resentment, and disharmony. In the beginning, the voice of the DAP good teacher dominated my thoughts. I was torn between spending time on opening up discussions about gender and teaching the academic curriculum. The discourses of childhood innocence and moral panic caused me to question and debate over whether I should even be talking with my students about issues concerning sex, gender, and sexuality. Rather than share the details and happenings of my study with teammates, I maintained the image of the good early childhood teacher by keeping them to myself. Gradually, the discord of subjectivity...
created “tiny explosions of the self that refuse to repeat the same I” and that became my “great shattering revolution” (St. Pierre, 2008, p. 123). Transition filled with discontinuities, contradictions, and the ability to change answers into new questions opened up the space and time between my experiences with trying on feminist poststructuralism and my constructed sense of security as a DAP early childhood teacher. This transition gave me the time and space needed to come up with alternative ways of being in relation to that particular moment.

Gradually, I started to respond to my students’ comments and ask questions of my own. I moved from thoughtful listening to my students’ conversations to joining in with them. I no longer had to think so intently about what questions I wanted to ask or how to take part in their conversations. The voice of the Bad Teacher began to dance with the DAP Good Teacher Voice, urging me to engage in these conversations. While I once noted the desire to remain in the spaces I had previously occupied, I eventually shifted toward a desire of wanting to construct and enact new images of what it means to be an early childhood teacher. I began to yearn for this new knowledge and this new way of being and teaching, but I fumbled in truly understanding it. I began to grapple with new classroom management strategies by grouping students differently and allowing them to sit and line up with who they wanted. I looked for picture books that talked about love, kissing, and relationships. I began to share more about my own thoughts and feelings related to love, boyfriends/girlfriends, and intimacy. I released students to draw and write free from the confines of fixed gender boundaries. For example, boys and girls were no longer required to draw themselves with long or short hair or with stereotypical gender features. Additionally, when students responded to
picture books through writing and drawing, they were allowed to portray themselves as any character in the book regardless of their gender. As another illustration, when students responded to *The Little Mermaid* (Randall, 2013), boys were allowed to draw a mermaid or a merman for their response and vice-versa. I was in the process of *being in* feminist poststructuralism and the fissures of my former subjectivities were collapsing (Phillips, Harris, Larson, Higgins, 2009).

I became proactive rather than reactive in responding to my students’ identity construction, gendered performances, and sexuality. I started to speak out about the ways I had reframed my teaching narrative with my own students. I joined in on my students’ laughter and smiles and took pleasure in our conservations about sex, gender, and sexuality. My students were both interested and concerned that I was an adult and not married. On a regular basis, they asked me if my boyfriend had asked me to marry him, if he had given me a ring, and if we were going to get married. I used these opportunities to talk about marriage and the possibilities for being an unmarried adult. These conversations about my relationship with my boyfriend sparked other conversations about popular fairy tales, *true love’s kiss*, and the phrase *happily ever after*. The voice of the *Sexualized Teacher* encouraged me to respond differently to kissing on the playground, to my students’ talk about body parts and childbirth, and my students’ use of words such as sexy and naked. Along with the *Sexualized Teacher* voice came the *Mother* voice, which once again brought up concerns with childhood innocence and moral panic, questioning whether it was even my place to address and discuss such issues with my students.
It is difficult to read back over my early notes and see the limits of my understandings. Why did I think reframing my teaching practices through a feminist poststructural perspective or opening up space for my students’ thinking on gender would limit my teaching time or take away from my students’ learning? How did I not see all of the ways students are gendered in their everyday educational practices? In the beginning, I struggled with my role in this study and the way feminist poststructuralism shattered my DAP world. I grappled with different theories, different discourses, different language and questions about my teaching, and different frameworks of normalcy and regularity which constructed me differently (St. Pierre, 2001).

Heteronormativity in Early Childhood Education

During my data collection, I became aware of the ways my students were consistently grouped through dominant discourses of femininity and masculinity, heteronormalyzed in their educational experiences, and constructed as heterosexual beings. This process of heterosexualization occurred through my students' regulation of their own gendered performances, as well as the performances of others and my own fears in transgressing the fixed boundaries of what is perceived to be normalized heterosexual gendered behaviors. The following similarities and understandings were recorded throughout the study, but do not serve as generalizations made across all participants throughout all experiences, or at all times. They are merely situational approximations, viewed from a specific perspective, and connected to the values of a specific discourse (Foucault, 1974). Generally speaking, the children, in this study, actively constructed identities and enforced norms through the process of
heterosexualization 1) in the ways they performed their gender in order to do it right in front of their classmates; 2) by how they policed the gendered performances of other classmates within rigid boundaries of what they considered appropriate behaviors for a girl and a boy; 3) through the ways they talked about boyfriend/girlfriend relationships related to picture books, popular magazines, on television, in the movies, and amongst themselves; and 4) in how they perpetuated the ideology that everyone has to get married, thus carrying on the fantasized notion of the heterosexual happy ending (Robinson, 2005). These indications of heteronormativity were evident among my students when boys avoided using pink paper, pink paint, and pink markers, saying it was a girl color, when they made fun of classmates for liking books, clothing, and activities deemed inappropriate for their gender, and in their unending conversations and talk about my relationship with my boyfriend, getting married, and being boyfriends and girlfriends with each other.

In addition, heterosexuality was privileged through my own normative desires, reflected in my relationships with my students’ parents and other educators, evident in my selection of children’s literature, and mirrored in my talk about mothers and fathers, boyfriends and girlfriends, and my own personal dating relationship. I began to notice that I only referred to couples as boy and a girl or man and a woman. While I tried to disrupt gender stereotypes about marriage and true love, I continued to do so within the heterosexual matrix. Even when I read books about insects mating, I coupled them as a boy and girl. My intention was not to exemplify or favor any particular type of relationship or sexuality, and while journal notes illustrated my continuously shifting and fluid understandings of gender and sexuality, they also indicated the ways my actions
served to limit my students’ thinking on gender and sexuality. The tensions and perceived risks associated with my students’ access to sexual knowledge were widespread among my notes. Foucault’s theory of discourse demonstrates the ways language assembles itself together, conforming to socially constructed rules and uniformities that allow certain statements to be made and not others (St. Pierre, 2000a).

The dominant discourse of childhood innocence and risk anxiety associated with negative job repercussions troubled my attempts in resisting and questioning gender and sexual norms with my students and constituted the words I felt comfortable using and those I did not. I avoided using words such as “gay,” “lesbian,” and “sex” with my students. I steered clear of books about families involving same sex couples and I shifted talk with students who brought up the word gay in whole group discussion to private conversations between only the student and me. According to Texas law, educational materials which mention homosexuality and that are written for children less than 18 years of age are required to state that homosexuality is an unacceptable lifestyle and criminal offense (2 Texas Health and Safety Code § 85.007(b). While some of my tension and debate rested in the law, most of it was situated in my own struggle to bring up queer identities because my students rarely used the word gay and, in many cases, were confused about its meaning. I held private one-on-one conversations with students who openly used the word gay during classroom discussions. My own interest in how young children construct sex, gender, and sexuality propelled me to pursue what children knew about this word and where they had learned it. One student thought it was another word for nasty, one thought it meant that you could not find a girlfriend, and two said it was “when a boy kisses another boy.”
The two students who stated that it was “when a boy kisses another boy” said they learned this from a television show and from an older brother. Despite my awareness and understanding of various perceptions and explanations of sexuality, the pre-existing model and definition of heterosexuality as the one true sexuality did not cease to exist for me. Compulsory heterosexuality did, however, become a mere representation of one particular discourse and space for critique, allowing me to call into question who actually gets to decide its importance and value (Koro-Ljungberg, 2008).

My undergraduate and graduate teacher training programs failed to educate me on the topic of gay and lesbian families or to equip me with the tools necessary for working with queer-identified families and children. In relation to this study, queer-identified refers to those which deviate from heteronormative talk, behavior, and relationships (Robinson, 2002). While the field of early childhood education has increasingly emphasized anti-bias education (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010), it continues to remain silent on lesbian, gay, and queer identities (Janmohamed, 2010), thus perpetuating the stereotype that family stands for White, middle-class, English speaking, and living with a mother and father. This normalized image of family was evident in the way my students talked with each other about their families. When checking books out in the library, students oftentimes showed surprise and asked questions when a classmate requested a book written in Spanish because someone in their family could read to them in a language other than English. When asking each other questions about family members and family events or activities, students always asked their questions assuming that both a mom and dad were involved. Even though I was once guilty of these same assumptions, my own divorce had caused me to reframe
my statements and questions concerning families a long time ago. However, despite my recognition of the diversity that existed among my students’ families, my understandings were partial at best because I continued to remain silent on same-sex families.

Several years ago, I worked with a teacher who had a student with two mommies. I remember the teacher being anxiety ridden and apprehensive about including the child’s mommies in classroom discussions and events. She was concerned about including same-sex relationships in her classroom because of her own religious, moral, and cultural beliefs. This study caused me to reflect on this. Although I understood the importance of recognizing and valuing a child’s family, my own lack of comfort and knowledge regarding lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) issues as well as a concern for reprisal from parents, teammates, and administrators kept me silent on these issues.

A body of research on young children and families has proposed that children flourish when family members are involved in their education and when a positive relationship exists between schools and families (Galinsky & Weissbound, 1992; Redding et al, 2004; Caspe & Lopez, 2006; Weiss, Caspe, & Lopez, 2006). The NAEYC Code of Ethical Conduct states, “Above all, we shall not harm children. We shall not participate in practices that are emotionally damaging, physically harmful, disrespectful, degrading, dangerous, exploitative, or intimidating to children. This principle has precedence over all others in this Code” (NAEYC, 2005, p. 3). Oftentimes, and without even realizing it, early childhood teachers harm children and their families through personal assumptions or prejudices and institutionalized silence. When young
children in early childhood classrooms never hear words or see visual images that emulate their families or themselves in positive ways, they are being harmed (Burt, Gelnaw, & Lesser, 2010). Through critical reflection and in relation to the NAEYC Code of Ethical Conduct, I noted in my journal that if I had a child with same sex parents, I would include his/her family in the picture books I choose to read, in classroom discussions, and in school and classroom events and activities. If I had a child in my class with gay or lesbian parents, I would feel like I was able to justify and protect myself in the event of job repercussions related to including children’s books about different type families, adapting stories and songs to include LGBT families, and in openly speaking out during classroom discussions to include same sex parents.

Systems of Power and Normalization

Power normalizes and produces realities (Foucault, 1975). Through multiple re-readings of my field and journal notes, I became aware of how I retained power in the context of my own research, but, at the same time, I was also constructed by it. As the teacher and researcher, I maintained power over my students in my teaching practices and the data I chose to record, while at the same time my subjectivities and the notes I recorded were informed by the dominant discourses of developmentalism and developmentally appropriate practice. Throughout the study, I was apprehensive about using my notes to literally conceptualize the classroom environment as it was experienced by my students. I was also troubled with the stability and veracity of my subjective interpretations and the ways I controlled data, including how my role as researcher was shaped by the fact that I was also the classroom teacher. From a positivist perspective, it would have been possible for me to situate myself (the
researcher) as someone who was able to enter from my students’ perspective in order to understand and make sense of their experiences and the way they provided meaning to their actions. From that same point of view, objectivity would imply that it was possible to distance myself from the subjects and interact with them in a neutral way, free of a theory to prove or predetermined results to support (Patton, 2002). However, contradictory to this belief, Scheurich (1995) argued that what really emerges from the researcher is only a mirror of the researcher’s mindset, rather than a mirror of reality itself. As the teacher/researcher, I was solely responsible for crafting the questions my students were asked to respond to and for transcribing their words into written text, thus making my field and journal notes mere interpretations of my own story (Varga-Dobai, 2012).

At the same time, I experienced a concern for the ways the data began to shift and change to show steady regularity in my students’ responses to my questions and discussions relating to gender and sexuality. For example, when we read books or I asked questions concerning gender stereotypes, my students gradually began to respond with statements such as “boys can do whatever girls can do and girls can do whatever boys can do” or “boys and girls are equal” or “there is no such thing as girl colors and boy colors”, etc. One likely explanation for the consistency in the data is that my students learned what they were supposed to say to make me happy. In essence, they know how to play the school game of presenting the right answers to leading questions, thus making the teacher happy (Boldt, 1996, p. 124). Another possible explanation is that even when young children think they believe the words, they often feel pressure by their peers and family members to conform to cultural norms. While
the classroom may have become a safe place for some students, allowing them to experiment with non-normative ideas and behaviors associated with gender and sexuality, their value systems and sense of morality were still connected to the expectations established in their network of family, friends, teachers, community, and the media, which existed outside the four walls of our classroom (Janmohamed, 2010). This was demonstrated when I asked them questions about how they knew what they had shared or where they had learned what they were talking about. They oftentimes fell back onto these establishments as their sources.

Throughout the study, I experienced a paradoxical power relationship between my students and myself. While I acknowledged that my role as researcher was historically, socially, and politically constructed, I was aware of my power over my students, while at the same time I also came to recognize that my students legitimated power over me in the ways they constructed and performed their genders, thus influencing the ways in which I interacted with them, what I took notice of, and how I analyzed the data. For example, my attention was drawn to conversations and behaviors concerning sex, gender, and relationships. I oftentimes stopped what I was doing to involve myself in these types of conversations. During group time, I frequently smiled and laughed as I shared stories about my boyfriend and things we had done together. It is possible that students began to initiate discussions about gender and sexuality and to ask me questions about my boyfriend to gain extra attention from me or because they felt it placed them in my favor and, in some ways, it probably did.

Through critical reflection and narrative reframing of the data, I realized that in my efforts to disrupt gender stereotypes and open up new spaces for gender
possibilities, I re-inscribed the original assumptions about identity, gender, and sexuality that I was trying to move my students away from. Field and journal notes illustrated the various ways my students performed gender norms in terms of their behaviors, desires, talents, interests, and style. They dressed, wore hairstyles, played games, spoke out, moved, took part in classroom activities, and expressed emotions in ways that clearly identified them as masculine and feminine by normalized gender standards. For example, they 1) associated bows with being a girl causing many of the girls to point out when they wore a bow to school; 2) referred to boys with longer hair and bangs as girls; 3) refused to use certain colors based on whether they were a boy or a girl; 4) labeled toys and picture books as either for girls or for boys; and 5) restricted each other from participating in playground games such as superheroes based on their gender.

Influenced by the works of Butler (1993), I began to wonder if rather than choosing their gendered performances, they were chosen for them, forced and enforced on them long before the moment of birth when, as a fetus, they were actively constructed as gendered beings. When a female announces she is having a baby we immediately want to know if it is a boy or a girl and the way we respond to this information is founded on a fixed set of social and cultural assumptions about the child’s gendered future. With the construction of sex difference being extended to life in the womb, parents, family, and friends can actively construct the fetus as a gendered being. The gendered infant is constructed when parents choose gender appropriate names, purchase gender appropriate clothing, and when they assign specific characteristics to the fetus according to sex (Grieshaber, 1998). Therefore, knowledge of the sex of a fetus
expands or limits the possibilities for ways that mothers and fathers construct gendered realities about their children.

In whole group and throughout the school day, I questioned students about their gendered stereotypical talk, thoughts, and actions. Despite the fact that the construction of gender produces diverse models of femininity and masculinity, many young children have learned about gender as a result of being immersed into cultural ideologies that are saturated with hegemonic forms of femininity and masculinity. So, while I used classroom discussions to try and open up new possibilities for thinking about gender, this was, at times, a difficult task because I was working against understandings of gender founded primarily on visible biological attributes (Grieshaber, 1998).

Nonlinear Data (Re) Presentation

During recent decades, qualitative researchers have been intrigued by the methodological possibilities of poststructural thought. Some have fractured the notion of data (Lather & Smithies, 1997; St. Pierre, 1997a), the field (St. Pierre, 1997b) and conventional forms of data representation (Richardson, 1995; Wolf, 1992). They have also problematized the privileged function of theories and the existence of single representations of a fixed reality. A number of qualitative researchers have challenged traditional forms of writing by experimenting with multilayered texts and collective stories (Lather & Smithies, 1997; McCormack, 2000; Torres, 2001). Rather than exploring the data through traditional methods which use analytical steps or detailed techniques, I utilized and experimented with multilayered texts. By blending the multiple, fractured, and sometimes contradictory voices of the teacher/research, I avoided building uniform
identities and orderly representations of reality. The understandings presented in this section follow multiple story lines, situated descriptions and experiences, and disrupt the order of a linear and sectional presentation of research (Koro-Ljungberg, 2008).

Originating from thinking and writing within my own spaces, these reflections were written within an autoethnographic format that illustrates the concepts of the subject’s location and movement. It illustrates a journey of bends and diversions of subjectivity, ruptures in my self-reflection, and transformation into other spaces as I interpreted the stories of my classroom life. Thus, this research is intended to exemplify subjectivity and should not be taken as “mirrors to reality” (Jones, 2005, p. 765), but as interpretations of the cryptic spaces of unrest that shift and influence us intellectually, spiritually, emotionally, and physically (Phillips, Harris, Larson, & Higgins, 2009).

This section presents three multivocal autoethnographic narratives illustrating my journey between trying on, being in, and becoming a feminist poststructural educator who uncovers and troubles gendered teaching practices in her own early childhood classroom. These texts were generated from field notes and journal recordings written during a study of my struggle to move beyond my comfort zone as the good DAP teacher, to recognize the ways gender and sexuality influence my teaching practices in the classroom, to challenge gender identity and sexuality in my teaching practices, and to trouble teaching and learning in the early childhood classroom. While sections and the linear movement of the text can be deceptive, some type of order and structure was needed to help the reader make sense of the text.

In trying on poststructural feminisms, I wrestled with what Foucault (1983) termed hypomnemata, the “means to establish as adequate and as perfect a relationship to
oneself as possible” (p. 247). While my understandings and questions concerning feminist poststructuralism grew and I experimented with new pedagogy, I struggled with essentialism and a desire for the answers. I still needed to be the good DAP early childhood teacher.

Multivocal Autoethnographic Text - Trying On

Early on in the study, I read the picture book, *Arthur's Valentine*, by Marc Brown (1988), to my class of students in order to engage them in a discussion about gender and sexuality. This particular book was chosen for two reasons. First, it was my experience that boys and girls alike enjoyed reading about Arthur and his adventures with his family and friends. Second, the story is about Valentine messages, secret admirers, kissing, and girlfriend/boyfriend teasing. Similar to the way other researchers (Blaise, 2010) have used picture books with young children to detail their understandings of gender, I used picture books as a way to interact with my students about sex, gender, and sexuality.

I sat in my rocking chair, with my class of students, reading the book *Arthur's Valentine*. I focused on the pages where Arthur received valentine messages from his secret admirer, was teased by his classmates for having a girlfriend, and talked about his movie date with Francine on Valentine’s Day. “Who do you think Arthur’s secret admirer will be?” I asked. “It will be a girl who likes him.” one girl said. “It will be his teacher or his sister D.W.,” said a boy.

*DAP Good Teacher Voice:* Am I asking the right questions? Is this how I am supposed to open up spaces for new thinking on gender and sexuality? I wish there was a book that taught me how to do this. These questions are taking time away from the concepts I am supposed to be teaching.
As I paused to question my students about the characters in the book, I was suddenly aware that my classroom door was open. My struggle with feminist poststructural ideas, sex, gender, and sexuality, and a great amount of risk anxiety propelled me to walk over and close the door so that no one outside our classroom could hear what we were talking about. When I sat back down, I felt more at ease knowing the door was closed.

As I relaxed, I shifted into other lines of thought.

_Sexualized Teacher Voice:_ I am curious to find out how my students understand relationships and why they take such pleasure in performing particular forms of femininities, masculinities, and sexuality for and with each other. Why wouldn’t they take pleasure in these things though? I enjoy talking about my own dating relationship, love, and what we do together. Isn’t it possible for children to also find delight in this?

“Could a boy be his secret admirer?” I asked.

_DAP Good Teacher Voice:_ Should I even ask this next question? Is it even appropriate to ask? Isn’t it my job to protect my students from hearing or seeing play, talk, or behavior that might be thought of as too sexual and therefore inappropriate? These questions are taking time away from the concepts I am supposed to be teaching.

Students started to talk over one another and privately with each other. They were excited about our discussion. I heard outbursts of laughter, lots of “Oooohhhssss!” and comments such as “No!” “Boys do not like boys.” “Boys cannot like boys.” It was unanimous.

_Bad Teacher Voice:_ I want to open up opportunities with my students for discussion and for reconceptualizing what it means to be a boy or girl. I want it to be okay to talk about non-normative forms of gender and sexuality. I want to see my students outside of the dominant discourse of childhood innocence.

_Mother Voice:_ As a mother, how do I feel about this line of questioning? Is this a moral concern? My sisters have already expressed that they would not feel comfortable with their child being in my classroom because of my study. As a mother, do I think like they do? Am I that closed off? I do not think so. I do not think I would be bothered by these types of questions. I am very close to both of my daughters. I have talked openly with them about this study. My youngest
daughter and I have talked candidly about what it means to be gay and about same sex families. On the contrary though, I think that because I am the researcher, my thoughts on this matter might be skewed. My answer to this question right now is probably different to an answer I may have given in the past. My research for this study seems to have opened up my thinking on these issues, even in relation to generating new possibilities for my own daughters’ thinking about sex, gender, and sexuality.

*DAP Good Teacher Voice*: Whose role is it to provide young children with sexual knowledge anyway? Shouldn’t this area of education be considered the parent’s responsibility? I don’t think I could really teach my students about these types of issues. I am already anxiety ridden just thinking about the possible risks involved.

*Sexualized Teacher Voice*: How might I be different if I had a kindergarten teacher who opened up discussion about sex, gender, and sexuality? Would sex have seemed less taboo growing up? Do we create adults who are closed off to sex and their own sexual identities and the identities of others because early on we shut down and ignore talk, play, and behaviors related to gender, sex, and sexuality?

I have to count down from five to quiet my students down. They are very excited. They are having a hard time sitting still on the spot and not talking while I am talking. I notice several of them can’t help but continue to share thoughts with one another. I continue reading. “What do the x’s and o’s mean on Arthur’s valentine message?” I ask.

*DAP Good Teacher Voice*: This seems like a safe question to ask. I wonder if they will know what x’s and o’s mean?

One girl calls out that it stands for hugs and kisses. While most of them were unaware of what the x’s and o’s meant before the girl shouted out, they are very excited over her answer. More laughter, smiles, squeals, and oooohhhs are heard. With each pause to ask more questions, they seem to get more excited, making it harder and harder to quiet them back down. I continue reading.

*DAP Good Teacher Voice*: It is taking so long for me to read this book. This is not the best use of my instructional time. I am still not sure I am doing this right. I feel so lost. I need some direction.
**Bad Teacher Voice:** It is interesting that we position children as innocent as in need of protection of sexual knowledge, yet so many children’s books are overflowing with kissing, boyfriend and girlfriend relationships, and love. It is interesting that the characters are typically animals rather than people. What does that say?

I stop reading and ask “Why do you think Arthur likes Sue Ellen?” Once again, there is lots of shouting out and talking with each other.

**DAP Good Teacher Voice:** It is early in the year. If I continue to read books and generate and allow discussions and talk about sex and gender, will students settle in? Is this excitement all from the pleasure they take in it or because it’s so new to them? I am constituted in child development and DAP. Reassembling what I already know feels awkward and unnecessary.

Everyone is talking at once. I try to call on individual students, but it is difficult. I hear “She is pretty” and “She is Adorable” from a couple of girls.

**Sexualized Teacher Voice:** Why do I like my boyfriend? What attracted me to him? I like to write sweet notes to him like the ones in this book. This book and study bring personal pleasure to me. For the first time, I feel like I am becoming more at ease with my own sexual identity and the pleasure I take in it.

“What makes her adorable?” I ask. Students name off a number of physical traits, such as her bow, her hair, and her dress. “Can a boy be adorable? I ask. I hear lots of “no’s” and several “yeses”. The “yeses” seemed to come only from girls. The boys did not seem to think that adorable was a good word for describing a boy.

**DAP Good Teacher:** It is so hard to read, listen to what my students are saying, and to think about what I want to ask or how I want to respond to what my students are saying. Negotiating with all of these different identities makes me feel lost in transition. Will I be able to let the need for truths go? Will I be able to recognize the shifts in my own identity?

**Bad Teacher Voice:** I wish a professor in my undergraduate or masters’ course work had educated me on feminist poststructuralism and alternative images of the early childhood teacher. In order to provide my students with the tools they need to understand their experiences with gender and sexuality, I needed to have been provided with the same tools. The field of early childhood needs more support in challenging early childhood norms. I recognize the pleasure my students are taking from this experience.
I read on to the part where Arthur’s friends made fun of him and sang the kissing song. The classroom erupts in laughter and shouting. I hear some of them say they know that song. I ask them why they think Arthur’s friends are teasing him. Someone calls out that it is because he has a girlfriend. I stop and ask “Why does it mean to have a girlfriend?” Only girls respond. “It means you like someone.” “It means you fall in love and get married.” “It means you get picked up and you go on dates.” I interject “I have a boyfriend.” This brings on lots of questions. “What is his name?” “Are you married?” “Can we meet him?” “Do you love him?”

**DAP Good Teacher:** Maybe I shouldn't have said I had a boyfriend. Should I answer these questions? Oh no. They are really excited now. What if an administrator walks in? How will I respond? Trying on feminist poststructuralism does not feel quite right to me.

**Sexualized Teacher Voice:** I like sharing that I have a boyfriend. We have only been dating since last year. It is all still very new and exciting. I like answering questions about him. I am anxious to talk about him. I can still remember my fourth-grade teacher introducing the class to her boyfriend. He used to visit her at school. As a child, I enjoyed those visits and thinking about having a boyfriend.

We reach the end of the book. With all of my questions and all of their discussion, it seems like we had been reading it forever. Arthur has Francine close her eyes so he can give her a kiss. I pause and ask students about the look on Francine’s face. “What does it mean? How is she feeling?” I ask.

**Bad Teacher Voice:** Here again, I am interested in the sexual knowledge my students are bringing with them to the classroom. What do they know about kissing? We may think they should not know anything about what it means or how it feels, but it is all over the television, in magazines, and in so many of the books I read to them.

**Sexualized Teacher Voice:** I had my first kiss at five. It was a boy from down the street. He was one year older than me and he typically spent the summers with his grandma who lived on my street. He kissed me in my back yard. There
wasn’t much to it, but at the time I was excited about it. I look back now and think about how young I was. It puts a different perspective on how I react to students when they tattle that someone kissed them on the playground. I don’t see it as wrong or taboo.

Good DAP Teacher Voice: Kissing at school is bad. It is wrong. That will definitely get you a phone call or note from a parent.

Bad Teacher Voice: How will I deal with kissing at school differently than I have in the past?

It turned out to be a chocolate kiss. This ending brought about more talk, squeals, and laughter than any of the other parts of the book. One boy accidentally used the word boyfriend instead of girlfriend. That brought on extra laughter and squeals. I heard one child say “You mean girlfriend.” Several students shouted out that boys do not kiss boys. Several boys said kissing girls was yucky. I asked them why it was yucky to kiss girls. They said it was yucky to taste their lips.

Sexualized Teacher Voice: This made me laugh. One day, in the not so distant future, I expect they will change their minds about this. I like to kiss my boyfriend. I actually love to kiss him. Should I say that?

I continue on with more questions. “Have you ever kissed a girl?” “Do you kiss your mom?” “Is that yucky?” After much discussion about kisses from moms and dads, grandmas and grandpas, and aunts and uncles, they decide that kissing is not so bad after all.

DAP Good Teacher: I am happy to be through this book. I couldn’t bring myself to bring up my own thoughts about kissing. This paradigm shift is difficult and a bit unsettling. I am unsure about the space of transition in which I am located.

Bad Teacher Voice: That went well. By the end of the book, I felt more at ease. The more I experiment with new pedagogical practices, relax and release the desire for order, structure, and a right way, and make sense of these theories, the better I will be at asking questions, generating discussion, and allowing the opening up of new spaces.
Multivocal Autoethnographic Text – *Being In*

As I gained a better understanding of feminist poststructural ideas and found new ways to open up classroom space for sex, gender, and sexuality, I transitioned from merely trying on these ideas to being in them. I yearned to push deeper into the study with the ways I interacted with my students. While still present, the voice of the good DAP teacher seemed to speak less often. In *being in*, I felt it was time to move feminist poststructuralism out of my “academic desk drawer” (Phillips, Harris, Larson, & Higgins, 2009, p. 1462) and truly out and into the open of my early childhood classroom.

While I oftentimes utilized specific picture books to bring out questions and discussion about gender and sexuality, there were other times when students initiated classroom discussion around books I had never thought to be gendered or sexual in nature. *Pete the Cat I Love My White Shoes* (Litwin, 2010) was a favorite book of my students. Most of my class, myself included, assumed Pete was a boy. As I began to read *Pete the Cat Rocking in My School Shoes* (Litwin, 2011), a boy in my class raised his hand and asked me if Pete was a boy.

*Good DAP Teacher Voice:* I have never thought about Pete as anything but a boy before. Of course Pete is a boy. Pete is blue and named Pete. Blue is a boy color and Pete is a boy name.

*Bad Teacher Voice:* I love how kids can think outside of the box. As adults we can be so grounded in our thinking that we never consider alternative ideas. I don’t know. Is Pete a boy? What decides if he is a boy? Can he be a girl or a boy? What do my students think?

Instead of answering the student, I questioned him back. “What do you think Pete is?” I asked. The boy answered “a boy,” while the class, in unison, also responded with “a boy.” This was not surprising to me, but I wondered why they thought Pete was a boy and, if we had some discussion about Pete, if any of them might change their minds. I
posed a couple of questions to the class. “Why do you think Pete is a boy?” and “Can Pete be a girl?”

*Bad Teacher Voice:* I was beginning to like conversations like this. I always tried to ask questions and respond to comments without leading students in any direction. It was important they not feel there was a right answer or a response that I was looking for. Their insights in conversations like this were always interesting to me and consistently framed within a heterosexualized framework.

Several students shared their thoughts. Most of them said because he was blue and blue was a boy color. One boy said Pete was a boy because he was playing a guitar and boys like to play guitars. Several girls disagreed, saying that girls could play guitars too. Surprising to me was that no one brought up Pete’s name as a reason for thinking he was a boy, so I asked them if his name could help us decide if he was a boy or a girl. They all seemed to agree that Pete was a boy name. They continued to trouble whether Pete was a boy or girl though because they agreed that girls could like the color blue and play guitars and that maybe the name was not that important.

*Good DAP Teacher Voice:* I feel more at ease with discussions about characters, what they wear, and what gender they are. These discussions are going faster, are calmer than they once were, and this is a safe topic. Maybe I can make these different teacher identities all co-exist together.

*Bad Teacher Voice:* I feel really good about this discussion. It was led mostly by my students and they shared some interesting ideas. Of course, all of their ideas are based on gender norms and stereotypes. This makes me laugh to myself. Just when I think I reach a space of rest, I realize it is problematic. Even still, I relish here in what I feel is a victory in opening up alternative thinking about gender.

We had so much fun reading *Pete the Cat Rocking in His School Shoes* (Litwin, 2011) that my students asked me to read another Pete the Cat book. I pulled out *Pete the Cat and His Four Groovy Buttons* (Litwin, 2012) since we had not read it yet. We read along, enjoying the rhyming sing-song text of the book, not thinking much more about
whether Pete was a boy or girl when Pete lost all four of his buttons and was only left
with his belly button. My students thought this was wildly funny. There were lots of
shrieks, laughter, and several “ooohhhssss.”

Sexualized Teacher Voice: I had noticed that my students seemed to associate
bare skin with sex and sexuality. I knew this was why they all thought seeing
Pete’s belly button was so funny. It was like showing your belly button was
taboo. Interestingly enough, I love belly buttons. I always have. Should I show
my belly button? What would my kids think? What if they went home and told
their parents?

Mother Voice: This reminded me of when my oldest daughter was three. Her
preschool teacher read the book *Froggy Gets Dressed* (London, 1994) to her
class. In the book, Froggy forgets to put on his underwear, so my daughter lifted
up her skirt, showed her panties, and told everyone she had not forgotten to put
on her underwear. I appreciated the fact that my daughter’s teacher did not shun
her or punish her for her reaction to the story. It makes me think of pulling up my
shirt and showing my belly button to my students.

Good DAP Teacher Voice: You can’t show your belly button to your class. That
is so inappropriate.

Sexualized Teacher Voice: Just do it. Your kids will enjoy it. Maybe it will break
the notion that bare skin equals sex.

I reread the last page of the book again. We chanted about Pete’s belly button and then
I said “I have a belly button” and I pulled up my shirt and showed my students my bare
belly and my belly button. Then several of them quickly followed suit. They pulled up
their shirts and showed off their belly buttons. Some were slower to display their
tummies and belly button, while others were reluctant to take part at all. Everyone was
accepted at the level they wanted to participate. We talked about innies and outies,
what we thought about belly buttons, and if we liked them. We even discussed how we
got our belly buttons.

Sexualized Teacher Voice: I took great pleasure in this conversation. It was fun
to me and my students were all so eager to participate in it. Even those who did
not want to show their belly button were excited to talk about it. I am not ashamed of my body and I do not want my students to be either.

**Good DAP Teacher Voice:** Did I just do that? What would other teachers say?

**Bad Teacher Voice:** I can see my students talking more about kissing, love, and girlfriends and boyfriends. By not shutting down their conversations and play, they seem to be moving away from the taboo cloud that seems to follow gender and sexuality for them. I hear them talk about crayons without wrappers being naked and sharing with classmates when they find kissing pages in stories. These conversations occur free of me. They are ones I overhear when I am near them in the classroom, so I do not feel they are statements made for my benefit. That makes me happy.

**Multivocal Autoethnographic Text - Becoming**

A pivotal moment in this study was a conversation I had with a female student while we were on the playground at recess. Aaliyah and several other kindergarten girls came running up to me on the playground. “Ms. Larremore,” Aaliyah called as she ran toward me, “Max kissed my sister on the lips.”

**DAP Good Teacher Voice:** Being in the presence of another kindergarten teacher, I was sharply reminded that most early childhood teachers would expect me to put an immediate end to students kissing on the playground, either because young children are too innocent to take part in such play or because a good early childhood teacher would have prevented this type of play or talk from occurring in the first place. There was a certain amount of anxiety in my struggle to be the DAP good teacher I had been taught to be as I facilitated the discussion with Aaliyah. I felt a bit uncomfortable as I considered opening up a discussion about kissing, which is considered taboo for young children.

**Bad Teacher Voice:** At the same time, I rejected the notion that developmentalism and developmentally appropriate practice could provide me with all I needed to know to interact with Aaliyah over her concern for Max kissing her sister. Believing that gender is a critical factor in what I do, I turned to queer theory and feminist poststructuralism to inform the way I interacted with Aaliyah. While I still had doubts about moving beyond child development and positioning myself as bad, it was becoming easier to confront my fears of going beyond the DAP image of the good early childhood teacher.

**Sexualized Teacher Voice:** It would have been easy to dismiss my students’ sexuality and sexual knowledge as unnatural or bad, but rather than view children’s gender role development as asexual, simple, and unproblematic, I
perceived Aaliyah and the other students involved as sexual in nature and capable of finding pleasure through their own gendered selves. While being a good early childhood teacher typically calls for separating sexuality from gender and therefore ignoring sexuality almost entirely, queer and feminist poststructuralism allowed me to trouble gender and childhood innocence in the way I responded to Aaliyah’s concern.

As I looked at the group of young girls standing in front of me, I paused before responding to Aaliyah’s news.

**DAP Good Teacher Voice/Bad Teacher Voice:** The constant feeling of unsettlement in going beyond the romantic notion of the good early childhood teacher sometimes makes it difficult to respond quickly.

“Did your sister like it when Max kissed her on the lips?” I asked. Aaliyah smiled at me while the girls around her giggled. “No,” she said. “She didn’t like it.” I continued, “Did your sister tell Max that she did not like being kissed by him and that she wanted him to stop?” As Aaliyah looked up at me and said “yes,” I noticed Max standing in the background with a troubled look on his face. I called out, “Max, did Aaliyah ask you to stop kissing her?” Without speaking, Max shook his head up and down to say yes. “Did you stop when she asked you to stop?” I asked. Once again, Max shook his head up and down to say yes.

**Sexualized Teacher Voice:** I could see by the look on Max’s face that he expected me to regulate his behavior and possibly even punish him for kissing Arianna. The look on Max’s face reiterated that there is some knowledge which should not be shared with adults, that young children displaying sexual behavior is bad, and that adults tend to restrict, shut down, and limit any of these types of behaviors. This reminded me of my own feelings growing up.

“Max,” I said, “If Aaliyah doesn’t want to be kissed and asks you to stop then you need to stop.” At that point, Max spoke out “Ok. I won’t kiss her again if she does not want me to.” I motioned for him to go back to his playing. Then I turned back to Aaliyah. “It looks like Max understands that your sister does not want to be kissed and he said that
he will stop if she wants him to.” Aaliyah smiled at me, said “Ok,” and ran back to her playing.

*DAP Good Teacher Voice:* I wondered how I would respond if the girl’s mom complained about her daughter being kissed by a boy at school. What would I say if I was questioned about how I addressed the situation? I realized I had just situated myself in a political and risky position. My thoughts also circulated around where to proceed with my co-worker over this situation since she had just asked me, “Did you just ask Aaliyah if her sister liked it when Max kissed her?”

*Mother Voice:* As a mother, how would I feel if my child was the one who had been kissed on the playground? Would I have viewed it as innocent and cute? Or would I see it as some form of sexual harassment? Would I feel like what I said to Max was enough to address the concern? As a father, what would my boyfriend think of this? Once again, I feel as though I handled the situation the way I needed to and that there is no need for moral panic... but, once again, is my thinking skewed because of my place in the research?

*Bad Teacher Voice:* Rather than constructing Max as a bad boy for kissing on the playground, I just pushed myself into the bad position, engaging in risky behavior, and moving beyond the acceptable limits of conventional early childhood practice and knowledge. Instead of shutting down taboo play such as kissing on the playground, I created an environment that allowed such behavior to surface and be talked about. I felt encouraged in the way I was moving toward providing my students with opportunities to understand and discuss their experiences with gender and sexuality.

*Sexualized Teacher Voice:* It felt good to liberate the bad teacher within me. With each new experience, I am better prepared to feel uncomfortable and to shift my thinking to a range of issues considered unmentionable with young children, including sexuality and sexual behaviors, racism, substance abuse, and death.

**Summary**

There were several similarities and understandings that were revealed during the exploration of the data. These included: 1) young children actively and knowingly talk about gender and sexuality and do have a considerable amount of sexual knowledge; 2) new spaces were created for students’ thinking on gender and sexuality through the ways I opened up opportunities for discussion, allowed my students to challenge gender
norms, and supported their efforts in reconceptualizing what it means to be a boy or girl; 3) heterosexuality and heterosexual desire are an integral part of children’s everyday experiences, including their early education; and 4) while students increasingly demonstrated non-normative expressions and thoughts on sex, gender, and sexuality, who is to say if these expressions were not just words spoken for my sake rather than lived realities. In Chapter 4, some of these issues are further discussed, along with how the field of early childhood education, universities, and preservice teacher education programs can make use of these understandings in order to support those teachers who are willing to take chances, challenge early childhood norms, and enact new images of what it means to be an early childhood teacher.
CHAPTER 4

RETHINKING GENDERED PRACTICES

This study examined the ways young children construct gender and heterosexual discourses in the early childhood classroom, as well as the tensions associated with my attempts to rethink gendered narratives and childhood sexuality in my own kindergarten classroom. In this study, I addressed the ways dominant gender discourses affect gender possibilities and power relationships between kindergarten students, their classmates, and their teacher, within a public school classroom. Specific questions were developed to examine the ways I functioned to perpetuate or resist dominant meanings and understandings of femininities and masculinities in the classroom and to explore how those views of what it means to be a girl or a boy affected the gender possibilities for my students. Critical reflection was used to deconstruct the teaching narrative and reframe it in order to both open up new spaces for thinking about gender as well as to develop counter narratives for resisting dominant ways of teaching young children about gender, sex, and sexuality.

This chapter (1) provides a summary of the major understandings and discourses that were identified in relation to the research; (2) discusses the future implications of the study related to greater concerns with moving beyond child development discourses and disrupting the image of the DAP early childhood teacher; (3) explains subsequent issues related to creating proactive strategies for responding to sex, gender, and sexuality in early childhood settings; and (3) offers suggestions based on the study’s implications for the field of early childhood education, early childhood preservice education programs, early childhood teachers, and researchers in the field.
Review of the Study

A feminist poststructural theoretical framework was used to explore the ways in which dominant gender discourses affect gender possibilities and power relationships between early childhood students, their classmates, and their teacher within a public school kindergarten classroom. Additionally, queer theory (Blaise & Taylor, 2012), an ideology which links gender stereotypes to the norms of heterosexuality, was used to open up new ways of understanding and challenging persistent gender stereotypes.

Field and journal notes were taken to address the specific research questions that were identified for the study. There were several discourses identified within the data. These included: the discourses of 1) childhood innocence, 2) adult/child dichotomy, 3) developmentalism, 4) developmentally appropriate practice, 5) gender identity construction, and 6) heteronormativity. In addition, four critical understandings emerged while rereading and exploring the data. These included: 1) young children actively and knowingly talk about gender and sexuality and do have a considerable amount of sexual knowledge; 2) new spaces were opened up for students’ thinking on gender; 3) heterosexuality and heterosexual desire are an integral part of children’s everyday experiences, including their early education; 4) a lack of diversity, equity, or inclusion associated with family diversity or queer identities exists; and 5) while students sometimes indicated that they understood what I wanted them to believe, oftentimes, these expressions turned out to be words spoken for the teacher’s sake rather than their lived realities.
The Research

The relationship between young children, sex, gender, and sexuality is one shrouded in controversy, steeped in social taboos, and filled with contradictions. The interrelationship between childhood and sexuality is primarily comprised within dominant western discourses of child development, childhood innocence, and sexuality. These modernist dominant discourses of childhood and sexuality generally constitute children as asexual, immature, and underdeveloped beings, with little or no control over their own bodies. They are treated as too young physically, cognitively and emotionally to appreciate and understand sexuality. Sexuality is thought to be an adults-only concern and a facet of adult life in which children are especially vulnerable and in need of protection. Accordingly, dealing with sexuality with young children is typically looked upon as developmentally inappropriate (Blaise, 2009; Blaise & Andrew, 2005; Janmohamed, 2010; O'Loughlin, 1992; Robinson, 2002). Research has suggested (Robinson & Jones Diaz, 2000) that children’s understandings of sexuality are not usually perceived by early childhood teachers as being important or relevant to their early education. Within these understandings, it is important to note that sexuality seems to be almost always narrowly defined and understood in terms of physical and sexual acts, rather than a necessary part of children’s subjectivity and identity formation. For the sake of this study, I examined gender and sexuality from a different perspective and in broader terms, associating them with relationships, life choices and practices, temperaments, personal comforts, gratification, wants, and fascinations, all of which were visible features of everyday life in which the young children in my classroom actively participated (Robinson, 2005).
Understandings Related to Specific Research Questions

The following similarities and understandings were visible when considering the first research question developed for the study:

\textit{How do I function to perpetuate or resist dominant meanings and understandings of femininities and masculinities in my kindergarten classroom?}

In \textit{trying on} feminist poststructuralism to uncover gendered teaching practices,

- What I noticed in the classroom and how I responded to children’s talk and play were based on my developmental understandings of childhood, teaching, and learning.
- The image of the good DAP teacher influenced and limited my teaching practices and thoughts concerning young children and sex, gender, and sexuality.
- I ignored talk, behaviors, and play related to gender, sex, and sexuality.
- I allowed curriculum and pedagogical practices to construct and normalize children’s gender identities.
- I established, instituted, and circulated heteronormativity through the picture books I chose to read, the ways I spoke about boyfriends, girlfriends, and couples, and in classroom lessons and activities.

The following similarities and understandings were visible when considering the second research question developed for the study:

\textit{How do the ways I perpetuate or resist particular views of what it means to be a girl or boy affect the gender possibilities for my students?}

In \textit{being in} feminist poststructuralism while uncovering gendered teaching practices,
• By allowing students to talk freely and openly about sex, gender, and sexuality, I found that young children find pleasure through their gendered identities.

• By allowing students to perform gender in non-normative ways, the study showed that young children take an active part in constructing and reconstructing knowledge about gender and sexuality.

• By thoughtfully listening to classroom discussions and student conversations, I observed that young children access sexual knowledge through a variety of means, including technology and media sources, magazines and books, and conversations with other children.

• Repetitive understandings in the data uncovered that young children are heteronormalized in their everyday lives, including their educational experiences.

The following similarities and understandings were visible when considering the third research question developed for the study:

*Through self-reflection, how does an awareness of my actions help me to deconstruct my teaching narrative and reframe it in such a way as to empower both myself and my students?*

In *becoming* a feminist poststructuralist while uncovering gendered teaching practices,

• While DAP remained a necessary practice in my classroom, I became less constrained and limited by it, thus altering the ways in which I responded to students’ talk, behavior, and actions related to sex, gender, and sexuality.

• I moved from the position of passive observer of my students’ talk and play to someone who questioned and challenged their current gender understandings.
I shared with teammates how we do things differently in my classroom. I opened up about conversations in our classroom and the ways I interacted with my students concerning sex, gender, and sexuality.

I began to critically reflect on the ways in which heterosexuality has been normalized to the point that it has become the one true sexuality. While not yet willing to risk troubling this concern, I opened myself up to allowing it, if it was student initiated.

Systems of Discourse and Power

According to Foucault (1975, 1980a), language should be read within discourses as influencing and being influenced by power. Moreover, he argued that discourses are infused with power in order to create and evaluate new truth claims, which may subsequently be discursively embodied or eliminated. Foucault's theory of discourse demonstrated how language organizes itself within socially constructed rules and regularities that authorize certain statements to be made and not others (St. Pierre, 2000a). Regarding discourse, O'Loughlin (1992) wrote,

> While discourses and category systems can be empowering in that they give us new vocabulary for naming our world, to use Freire's (1970) term, and in doing so they enable us to think about our world in new ways, they can be disabling too, in that they can restrict our vision to only the possibilities that a particular discourse names. (p. 3)

Field and journal notes were used to identify key discourses within the data. These discourses included: 1) childhood innocence, 2) adult/child dichotomy, 3) child development, 4) developmentally appropriate practice, 5) gender identity construction, and 6) heterosexualization. The next six sections discuss the six discourses found within the study in relation to the similarities and understandings revealed in the data.
Just as discussed in the literature review, these discourses operated to regulate, 
normalize, and govern the uncovering and troubling of sexuality, gender identity 
construction, and gendered teaching practices.

Discourse of Childhood Innocence

There is a common assumption that young children either do not or should not 
know about sexuality and that any effort to communicate with them about such issues is 
problematic (Blaise, 2010; Epstein, 1999; Renold, 2005; Robinson, 2005; Sears, 2009; 
Tobin, 1997). These dominant and traditional discourses of assumed childhood 
innocence construct children as naive, possessing little or no understanding of sex, 
gender, and sexuality (Blaise, 2010). This perspective is typically based on the concern 
that young children either grow up too soon or are not yet ready for sexual knowledge 
(Epstein, O’Flynn, & Telford, 2003). Taylor (2010) and Egan and Hawkes (2008a, 
2008b) found that concerns regarding childhood innocence and protection have all been 
raised by adults, indicating that it is adults, not young children, who are troubled, and 
perhaps even threatened, by the loss of childhood innocence. This study indicated that 
many parents, educators, and child-care providers experience feelings of doubt and 
shame concerning these types of conversations, due to the belief that it is not 
acceptable to give this kind of information to the innocent child. For example, I 
observed that teammates, the school nurse, counselors, and administrators frequently 
view young children who possess a certain degree of sexual knowledge as deviant for 
their young age. In team discussions, parent conferences, and meetings with the 
counselor, many indicated a great concern over the sexualization (Levin, 1998) of 
childhood and the loss of childhood innocence (James et al., 1998). Children were
oftentimes reprimanded or punished for their talk and behavior related to sex and sexuality.

Discourse of the Adult/Child Dichotomy

Oftentimes, young children are characterized as innocent, weak, needy, lacking in skill, and savage, while adults are typically characterized, in opposition, as intelligent, strong, competent, mature, and civilized. This Western dualistic thinking of adult/child has constructed the child as immature and uncivilized, which has led to the belief that childhood is a period in life that requires protection, reform, and control by adults (Block, 1995). This dichotomous line of thought has produced structures of power, which allow those who are younger to be disciplined, silenced, and controlled. The construction of children as a group who need protection and/or to be saved has sustained forms of oppressive power that deny young children voice and personal expression, resulting in less agency to establish themselves within dominant cultural domains and discourses (Cannella, 1997). This creation of the adult/child dichotomy was made apparent through this study as early childhood teachers, administrators, and counselors responded reactively to young children’s talk, actions, and play relating to gender identity construction and sexuality. I observed co-workers as they quickly shut down talk, behavior, and play associated with sex, gender, and sexuality. In many cases, young children were sent to the office, their parents were called, or counseling services were requested to address the deviant behaviors. While Blaise’s (2009) work suggested that some adults are not alarmed by young children’s sexualized talk and play because they view them as too young to really know what they are doing, this study demonstrated that adults were more apt to close down such play as a means of
protecting young children from hearing or seeing play that was thought of as too sexual, and therefore inappropriate, for young children to take part in or watch.

Discourse of Child Development

Our construction of the child has been influenced by the belief in child development and the notion that all children progressively develop toward specific adult capabilities, skills, and understandings. This discourse of child development has dominated research agendas, professional publications, early childhood programs, and the way we educate and guide teachers and parents regarding their children. Child development knowledge has been used to decide if children are ready to be exposed to specific content and experiences and whether they are mature enough to function socially in the surrounding world (Walkerdine, 1988). Many educators, practitioners, and researchers in the field of early childhood have assumed that this discourse on child development represents a truth that benefits all children, regardless of their culture, socioeconomic background, or historical period.

These workings of developmentalism are located throughout the discourses which shape early childhood and are considered problematic in examining the complexities of the discourse of childhood sexualization. Typically, the debates on childhood sexualization make assumptions about sexuality and childhood, based on Western and child development understandings of knowledge. There is no simple explanation regarding the sexualization of young children; rather, there is research (Egan & Hawkes, 2008a, 2008b; Grieshaber, 2010) which indicates that a range of factors (i.e. media discourses, consumer culture, and theories about the production and mode of consumption) must be taken into account, thus revealing the limitations of
relying solely on a developmental framework to attend to the complexities involved in the sexualization of childhood. For the sake of this study, the sexualization of childhood refers to the way advertising images and popular media have represented young children as sexual beings, thus underpinning the public’s concern for the disappearance of childhood innocence (Blaise, 2013).

Taylor (2010) argued that developmentalism has constituted the foundation of childhood innocence and in doing so has normalized sexuality, constructing it as a limited, simple, and natural phenomenon that emerges later in a child’s life. Faulkner (2010) built on Taylor’s work, showing the way child development locates the discourse of childhood sexualization within a discussion framed around either protecting children from this sexualization or empowering them with the necessary tools so they can question sexualization. Additionally, Taylor maintained that the repeated cross-referencing between child development, childhood innocence, and child protection is problematic as it closes down, rather than opens up, the possibility of considering children as sexual beings.

My teammates indicated a great deal of apprehension and moral panic surrounding young children’s knowledge of sex, childbirth, sexual relationships, and referencing of body parts. One morning, during group time, a student shared that the baby growing in her mother’s tummy had died and that when your mother bleeds from where you go to the bathroom, it means her baby is dying. Rather than shut this conversation down, I allowed my students to dialogue with each other by sharing their own understandings of gender and sexuality. When I shared this story with my team, they expressed concern over the child’s sexual knowledge related to being pregnant
and the choice of the parent to share that information with their child. While young children were once more freely exposed to these realities, a moral panic discourse has created adults who are troubled, and maybe even threatened, by the wearing a way of childhood innocence. This notion that there should be considerable distance placed between the knowing adult and the unknowing child is perpetuated daily and reinforces the adult/child binary (Blaise, 2013).

Discourse of Developmentally Appropriate Practice

Developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) is founded on a collection of theoretical assumptions and research findings from child development theory and the work of stage theorists such as Piaget. O’Loughlin (1992) argued that education is not neutral; rather “it is a cultural relay for the production or reproduction of culture” and that young children enter school possessing varying amounts of cultural capital or “advantage” (p. 3). In this study, cultural capital refers to the extent to which one has gained mastery over white middle-class language, intellectual values, and norms of social conduct, which constitute the dominant discourses of schooling. While recent efforts have been made to make DAP (2009) a more culturally responsive pedagogy, its latest revisions continue to remain silent on lesbian, gay, and queer identity or difference in family structure. Although the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) Code of Ethical Conduct (2005) clearly states the importance of respecting children within the contexts of their families, there is not one single word on same-sex families, let alone queer families, in the index or the glossary (Janmohamed, 2010). More recently, NAEYC outlined a set of goals focused on anti-biased education (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010). While the four goals addressed
positive social identities, human diversity, fairness, and prejudice, they failed to specifically mention non-normative expressions of gender and sexuality, such as queer identifications, explorations, and performances. This limited definition of diversity and difference acts to limit constructions of gender identity and sexuality, thus making anything remotely different that may inherently be linked to sex to be regarded as non-normative (Scattebol & Ferfolja, 2007). In relation to this study, I struggled with how to deal with same-sex families or children who may not fit normative expectations of what we expect as acceptable behavior. Gay and lesbian families and queer identities were not addressed in my teacher training program or current job setting. A lack of comfort with my own knowledge regarding the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) community, as well as personal discord regarding my own personal religious upbringing, created an inevitable silence surrounding such issues. In addition, a fear of retribution from administrators, peers, and parents perpetuated the silence and uncertainty.

Burman (2008) and other reconceptualists (Grieshaber & Cannella, 2001; Kessler & Swadener, 1992; Mallory & New, 1994) continue to view DAP as white, middle-class, and partial, arguing that, as an individualistic model of child development, it universalizes the child and childhood. The notion of a universal child reinforces the concept of the naturally developing child (James et al., 1998), thus the global image of the child which is situated within DAP fails to identify the importance of sex, gender, and sexuality as having an impact on children’s life experiences, learning, or development (Blaise, 2005, 2009; Browne, 2004; MacNaughton, 2000). Consequently, young children who enter school with a greater amount of sexual knowledge or early childhood teachers who wish to disrupt the current developmental patterns of thinking about
childhood sexuality are considered bad for knowing and talking about troublesome subjects like sex and sexuality (Blaise & Andrew, 2005).

In relation to this study, questions were raised concerning teaching and learning. By actively interrupting stereotypical early childhood teaching and drawing on feminist poststructuralism and queer theory, I was able to trouble sex, gender, and sexuality in my classroom. I moved away from grouping and classroom management strategies which gendered students by stereotypes and norms. I began to examine children’s talk and play outside of the confines of development and age-appropriateness. Feminist poststructuralism and queer theory influenced the questions I was interested in asking and the discussion I generated when meeting at group time or while reading picture books. It also directed what I noticed and considered important as I explored and researched gender identity construction and sexuality within my classroom. In challenging the presence of developmentally appropriate practice in my classroom, I caused developmentalism to stutter in my practices, teaching, and research (Pacini-Ketchabaw, Kummen, & Thompson, 2013). Instead of viewing my students as asexual or incapable of finding pleasure through their gendered selves, I allowed them to pursue conversations related to kissing, boyfriends and girlfriends, marriage, and what it means to be a boy or girl. I engaged in risky conversations concerning sex, gender, and sexuality and, in doing so, troubled the image of the DAP early childhood teacher. I engaged in conversations about childbirth, kissing, and relationships. I used group time to open up the possibilities for a girl child to also be a boy child and vice versa. For example, I allowed boys to play girl roles and girls to play boy roles when acting out stories. While I was willing to take chances and challenge early childhood norms, open
dialogue about same sex families, gay and lesbian relationships, and physical sex acts (sexual intercourse) remained off limits for me. In practice, very few districts in the state include language about homosexual conduct in their sex education materials. As a Texas public school early childhood teacher, who was theoretically positioned in feminist poststructuralism, I was conflicted in my subject positions as a public school teacher and the ways my subjectivities were constituted in response to power relations inherent in my teaching environment.

Discourses of Gender Identity Construction

How we speak of gender and young children and the ways we form pedagogical practices are factors in creating gendered subjects (Lenz-Taguchi, 2004). In recent years, research has increasingly detailed the process of gender construction in the early years. This research has illustrated the ways in which young children themselves actively and knowingly utilize their understandings of gender norms and heterosexuality to regulate and construct what it means to be a boy and girl (Bhana, 2007; Blaise, 2005, 2009; Blaise & Andrew, 2005; Davies, 2003; Francis, 1997; Grieshaber, 2004; Reay, 2001; Renold, 2005; Skattebol, 2006; Taylor & Richardson, 2005; Tobin, 1997). Within this process, they willingly participate in the policing of gender performances of other children, as well as their own, within fixed boundaries of what has been defined as appropriate masculine and feminine roles (Alloway, 1995; Davies, 1989, 1993; Grieshaber, 1998; MacNaughton, 2000). Furthermore, research has indicated the meaningful role that the curriculum and pedagogical practices play in constructing and normalizing young children’s gendered identities (Robinson & Jones Diaz, 2000).
The children in this study consistently regulated their own and others’ behaviors in relation to what games it was acceptable for them to play, what color markers or paper it was ok for them to use, how they dressed, the words they spoke, and the way they emotionally responded to activities and happenings. Throughout the study, color was a central theme. While girls were not bothered by any specific colors, they oftentimes chose pink and purple when given the option. Boys, on the other hand, were very upset when given pink paper or asked to use a pink marker. The response was always the same “pink is a girl color.” I questioned my boys about their use of the word girl as an insult. They said they were boys and that boys don’t like girl things because that would be gross. For the girls in my class, to be a called a boy oftentimes seemed to offer the promise of increased opportunities, such as being able to dress as a superhero for Halloween, being chosen by peers for organized games on the playground, or being able to wear a particular pair of tennis shoes; but, for the boys, being identified with girls’ interests and desires signified a loss of power and possibility (Boldt, 1996). The boys in my class regularly made fun of those boys who showed interest in girl toys, in girl colors, or in wanting to sit or play with girls at lunch or recess.

Although we engaged in repeated conversations about there not being girl colors and boy colors, the boys did not seem to completely buy into this notion. Since the color pink seemed to be an integral part of our daily classroom conversations and activities, I decided to incorporate it more often in the books I read, the paper we used, and the activities my students engaged in. Purely out of personal interest, I read the book *Pinkalicious and the Pink Pumpkin* (Kann, 2011). Then I pulled out pink paint and orange paint and pink glitter. I gave all of my students the option of painting pumpkins
using pink paint with pink glitter or orange paint. I was curious to see how the boys would respond. In the end, every boy except for one chose to paint a pink glittery pumpkin. After reading various *Pinkalicious* books and several others in the series such as *Emeraldalicious* (Kann, 2013), and *Purplelalicious* (Kann, 2007), my boys shifted their comments from *Pinkalicious* books being for girls to *Pinkalicious* books being for everyone. While students gradually began to make statements such as “girls can do anything boys can do,” “boys can like pink and purple” and “there are no such things as ‘girl’ books and ‘boy’ books because all books are for everyone,” I am not sure if these declarations were anything more than right answers for my sake. Ultimately, I was concerned that my attempts to disrupt their gendered stereotypical thinking merely re-inscribed their original clichéd assumptions. In other words, my efforts to displace the normalized boundaries of gender identity, through the use of particular picture books, whole-group discussions, and lesson activities, did not cleanly untangle the problems created by identity as it is dominantly constructed. While it may feel desirable to suggest strategies that early childhood teachers might use in their classrooms to address the problems implied through this study, it is important to note that teachers and students have multiple subjectivities at every moment in time, situated not only within normalized discourses of gender and sexuality, but also within those of race, class, age, physical size, and “countless other identificatory possibilities” (Boldt, 1996. p. 115).

Discourse of Heteronormatization

Heteronormativity is a term used to describe how heterosexuality is constructed as the norm in sexuality. It locates itself as the unquestionable sexuality, the natural
order of being, primarily through the way it is connected to the male-female biological dualism and reproduction. The normalization of heterosexuality becomes the definer for legitimate and prescribed sociosexual relationships and one which defines all other sexualities as different, illegitimate, and abnormal. Within this power hierarchy, heterosexuality becomes compulsory (Rich, 1980). Consequently, the normalization of heterosexuality is embedded in the language, schooling practices, and interactions of young children’s everyday lives. This normalization process and the power structures associated with it were inherent within the students’ discourses (Robinson, 2005), specifically in relation to how 1) they referred to all parents as mommies and daddies; 2) they talked about and played out boyfriend/girlfriend relationships; 3) they spoke about needing to get married and have babies in order to “live happily ever after;” 4) they grouped themselves by boys and girls when sitting at tables, on the carpet, and working in small groups; 5) they spoke about television and movie characters needing a mate such as Batman needing Batgirl; and 6) in the ways they spoke out against the possibility of boys liking or kissing other boys or girls liking and kissing other girls.

Heterosexualization was evident not only in the students’ talk and actions, but also in my own. For example, I rarely questioned their boyfriend/girlfriend talk and play and oftentimes reinforced their thinking by talking about my own boyfriend/girlfriend relationship. I spoke of families and chose picture books about families which reiterated the notion that all families have a mom and a dad. The process of heterosexualization was even evident in school-wide events such as daddy/daughter dances and enrollment forms which assume that all families are made up of one mother and one father.
Over time, I gradually reframed a few of my teaching practices in order to try and disrupt the power structures created by heterosexuality. I removed the mock wedding ceremony I usually have for joining the letters “Q” and “U” as a couple. I no longer separated students into groups based on sex identity, color of clothes, or any other characteristic that may have perpetuated grouping themselves by gender stereotypes. Rather than reinforcing or ignoring students' talk, I began to question them about comments such as “that’s a boy color” or “boys can’t kiss boys” or “girls can’t be Batman, they have to be Batgirl.”

Discussion of the Study

For many early childhood teachers, conversations with young children concerning gender, relationships, and sexual knowledge are complex and contradictory and are perceived to pose risks of various kinds. Oftentimes, this results in early childhood teachers avoiding addressing issues of gender and sexuality with young children all together. Similar to other research (Blaise & Andrew, 2005) conducted in this area with early childhood teachers, this research showed that gender is a critical factor in early childhood teaching practices, that engaging in risky teaching can feel uncomfortable, and that early childhood teachers are oftentimes resistant to moving beyond simplistic notions of biological and socialization models of gender and sexuality.

A critical concern in this research was what knowledge was appropriate for young children in regards to sex, gender, and sexuality, followed by what role I play in providing them with the tools to understand their experiences with gender and sexuality. As the classroom teacher, I had to negotiate my own teaching experiences concerning gender and sexuality, largely because of the hegemonic discourse of child development.
Piaget, 1973) which has underpinned perceptions of irrelevancy and inappropriateness of sexuality to children’s lives and has organized itself to safeguard and regulate teaching and learning practices, in terms of children’s access to knowledge and sexuality (Jackson, 1982; James & Prout, 1990; Robinson, 2012). While I was eager to make room for feminist poststructural and queer perspectives in my early childhood classroom, and to provide a more open experience in understanding gendered identities and challenging gender stereotypes, I felt I lacked the knowledge and certainty to challenge the principles of child development and developmentally appropriate practice. Consequently, I oftentimes reverted to my pre-service teacher education learning, perpetuating the dominant assumptions of universality in early childhood training, in turn limiting and controlling what my students were allowed to say, question, and do in the classroom. In the beginning, I waited for my students to ask questions or make comments about gender, sexuality, and relationships, rather than approaching these issues with my students first. With gender and sexuality being framed primarily through developmentalism and developmentally appropriate practice, my anxiety about transgressing the notion of childhood innocence heightened my level of discomfort as I worked to both open up my students’ curiosity concerning gender identification and to rupture gender norms (Jackson & Scott, 1999; Janmohamed, 2010). The concern over transgressing the boundaries of developmentalism and developmentally appropriate practice was also related to the fear of being a bad teacher, engaging in risky teaching, and being judged by others in doing so (Robinson, 2012). I had always taken great pride in being not only the good early childhood teacher, but the best early childhood teacher. For several years, I served as the district’s K-1 early childhood strategist,
working with teachers, modeling lessons, and presenting staff development to teach other teachers how to be a good DAP early childhood teacher. For me, being bad and questioning early childhood norms meant challenging that image, not having a script to follow or guidelines to adhere to, and risking my district reputation as the model teacher. Additionally, I held concerns for whose role it was to provide young children with sexual knowledge, at what age it is appropriate to communicate certain information, and whether socializing children to be sexual has the potential to be harmful to them. In troubling these matters, I considered how risk anxiety linked to childhood and sexuality is culturally, politically, and historically situated. While moral panic has oftentimes resulted from young children’s access to sexual knowledge, specifically when it transgresses heteronormative principles and practices (Bruhm & Hurley, 2004; Kincaid, 1992; Taylor, 2007), for the sake of this study, I negotiated my own experiences with sex education, shifting between fears of bad teaching, or being judged by fellow co-workers or parents, to discussing issues of gender and sexuality in an open and honest manner in order to deconstruct and reconstruct my students’, as well as my own, understandings of sexuality and relationships (Davies & Robinson, 2010; Goldman & Goldman, 1988; Schwartz & Cappello, 2000).

The discourse of the good teacher positions early childhood educators as facilitating beings who are nurturing and supportive and who patiently redirect and guide children in their development and learning (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). While this limited construction of the good early childhood teacher dominated my thinking, the postmodern notion that our identities are multiple and constantly shifting worked to ease the struggle and tensions by suggesting that what it means to be a good teacher shifts
and changes, depending on the discourse in which one is situated (Covry, 1999; O'Brien, Novinger, Leach-Bizari, 2007; Phillips & Hatch, 2000).

I began this research with the expectation that I would wait for my students to prompt conversations about issues concerning sex, gender, sexuality, and relationships, rather than addressing these issues first. I was under the assumption that young children typically did not ask about these types of controversial issues because such topics were not part of their everyday lives and that issues such as these were perceived as irrelevant to them (Surtees, 2008). However, I quickly realized that young children are excited to talk about gender and sexuality and do have a substantial amount of sexual knowledge. Through girlfriends and boyfriends, chase games on the playground, the picture books read to them, and boy/girl grouping, gender and sexuality are embedded in their everyday activities. When the study began, I viewed young children as naïve, with little knowledge about gender and sexuality; thus, this research fostered questions and concerns in relation to my role and responsibility in opening up spaces within my classroom for children’s gender and sexual knowledge to be heard, respected, and considered (Blaise, 2010).

I allowed students to make comments and have discussions about issues of sexuality that I would have shut down in the past, yet I remained silent in response to these classroom exchanges. Students called classroom items that were missing labels “naked”, they talked about the “kissing” pages in picture books we had read, and they shared stories about their boyfriends and girlfriends. While I was no longer shutting these types of behaviors and conversations down, I had to critically reflect on my own silence, acknowledging that I was continuing to regulate their knowledge by silently
teaching that certain types of knowledge were unmentionable. Realizing that my silence was due to my own feelings of discomfort concerning my educational background and family upbringing, I continued to struggle with rupturing the romantic notion of the idealized image of the early childhood teacher.

This study made visible the ways young children situated themselves as active and knowing agents in their own gender identity construction and how they engaged in and policed gender performances of other children within fixed boundaries of what is understood as appropriate masculine and feminine behaviors (Robinson, 2005). As I began to pay closer attention to my students’ conversations, their actions and behaviors, and the way they interacted with one another, I began to feel more at ease with engaging in these important conversations with them, finding ways to challenge gender norms, and opening up the possibilities for what it means to be a boy or a girl. When students brought up kissing, I asked them if they liked to kiss people, who they liked to kiss, and by whom they liked to be kissed. When they labeled colors, books, movies, and toys as girl or boy, I asked them why it was only for girls or only for boys and then generated conversations to push them beyond their limited constructions of gender identity and sexuality. Rather than line students up, group them, and separate them at tables and on the carpet by boy and girl, I found new and different ways to approach classroom organization and management. When responding to literature, participating in classroom writing, and taking part in group activities, students were given choices and opportunities, allowing them the freedom to challenge normative expressions of gender. When they engaged in conversations about falling in love,
boyfriends and girlfriends, and marriage, I joined in and talked about my relationship with my boyfriend.

While I began to offer an alternative script of gender identity and recognized that identity is not fixed, including my own as an early childhood teacher, I continued to wrestle with the reality of classroom management, the regulation and disciplining behaviors, and the structure of the public school environment. Although I permitted non-normative gender-role identification and exploration in my classroom, encouraged open and honest conversations about all subjects, and critically reflected on all that I said and did to influence children's learning about sex, gender, and sexuality, I did so in secrecy. I opened up conversations related to gender, sexuality, and relationships only within the walls of our classroom. I closed the classroom door when students engaged in conversations about love, boyfriends and girlfriends, and marriage, and I spoke privately with students when other teachers shut down their play or tried to discipline them for it. Although I believed in this work, tradition continued to play a strong role in my teaching practices.

While my studies, professional learning, and practice were extensively entangled in child development and developmentally appropriate practice, my research and doctoral background pulled at me to acknowledge the growing diversity of families, employ multiple perspectives, and create spaces to challenge, shift, and disturb gender stereotypes and childhood innocence (Butler (1993), as cited in Janmohamed, 2010). As the study neared its end, there were noticeable differences in my students. These included: 1) boys began to check out books that were once considered for girls only and vice versa; 2) girls came to school in super hero t-shirts and clothes that belonged to
their brothers; 3) words such as sexy and naked that were once considered taboo were spoken more often; 4) boys and girls, alike, openly and frequently talked about liking someone of the opposite sex or being in a girlfriend/boyfriend relationship; 5) when asked to further explain a comment they made or to give a reason for something they said regarding sex, gender, or sexuality, they no longer shut down or exhibited a look of fear, but rather answered quickly and confidently; and 6) their conversations and questions concerning my relationship with my boyfriend increased, becoming a daily routine and ongoing interest. My interpretation of this difference is that my students’ thinking had shifted and that they no longer assumed that I (their kindergarten teacher and an adult) would shut down or restrict opportunities for them to talk about and play out their understandings of sex, gender, and sexuality. While they once seemed to think there was some knowledge that should not be shared with adults, this belief appeared to have shifted. This variance suggested that the students in my class had learned to accept many of their own and others’ deviations in behavior and contradictory thoughts regarding gender norms (Boldt, 1996). Although I continued to feel a certain amount of anxiety as I listened in on and/or facilitated these types of discussions with my students, I also felt absolved because their spontaneous and outspoken responses appeared to imply that they had been waiting for the opportunity to talk about these subjects or perform these behaviors.

Throughout the semester, I continued to transition in my role as a feminist poststructural early childhood teacher. I regularly questioned, discussed, and mapped out classroom stories as a way of making sense of theories of subjectivity (Foucault, 1983; Lather, 1991; McLaren, 2002; St. Pierre, 2001) and to explore the notion of what
Ellsworth (2005) termed transitional space. There was a multitude of powerful discourses which produced my subjectivities. While I started out to “establish as adequate and as perfect a relationship of” myself as possible (Foucault, 1983, p. 247), I eventually came to understand the leaving behind of transitional space, the experience of the learning self through the assemblage of the mind/brain/body, and that direction is not linear but elliptical and indeterminable (Ellsworth, 2005). I continued to do what was necessary to avoid risk anxiety and negative job repercussions, while at the same time starting to open up to my teammates about the conservations that were occurring in my classroom and how I was troubling my own teaching practices to uncover gendered stereotypes. I moved away from the pressure of others to discipline or reprimand my students for talk and behaviors considered sexual in nature.

This study has shown examples of how to open up new spaces for young children’s thinking on gender and sexuality and how to trouble gendered teaching practices in the early childhood classroom. However, this research does not represent the only or best way to do this, nor does it represent the lived experiences of other young children in other classrooms and places. What it can illustrate is how much is lacking in the “reductionist logic of developmental paradigms” that assumes that adults are the knower and are always fully in control of children, who are considered the known (Blaise, 2013).

Implications for Practice as a Researcher and Teacher

Young children’s access to knowledge about gender, relationships, and sexuality has critical implications for their health and well-being, not only in their early years but also throughout their lives. This knowledge can build children’s competencies and
resilience, contributing to new cultural norms of non-violence in gendered and sexual
relationships. Failing to positively intervene in young children’s discriminatory behaviors
in regard to gay and lesbian issues reinforces the taboo that already silences
discussions in this area, as well as it “blames the victim” (Robinson, 2002, p. 427).
Additionally, it may send the message that teachers disregard the prejudiced behavior
of other children, which can result in the child or children assuming that they are
somehow responsible for the teasing or marginalization that they are going through.
With a growing diversity in the make-up of families, it is now more critical than ever that
early childhood training programs move away from a “single way of knowing, in this
case developmentalism, and make room for multiple perspectives, which in turn
influence innovative kinds of teaching decisions and practices” (Blaise, 2005, p. 184).

Young children’s access and knowledge about gender, relationships, and
sexuality also develops their ability to understand their own sexual subjectivity, which is
critical for fostering their literacy with regard to sexual knowledge, and is essential to
their rights as sexual citizens (Robinson, 2012). This research study is important
because it illustrates that it is possible for early childhood teachers and researchers to
use feminist poststructuralism and queer theory to deepen their understandings and
responses to children’s talk, actions, and play regarding sex, gender, and sexuality and
to use these understandings to inform their professional practice. There are a number
of possibilities for acting out pedagogies intended to challenge and disrupt gender
stereotypes and inequalities in early childhood classrooms, such as the following: 1)
provide new, more complex images of early childhood teaching for preservice education
students; 2) reject the notion that child development and developmentally appropriate
practice provide teachers with all they need to know in order to work with young children; and 3) use alternative theoretical perspectives to trouble the image of the good DAP early childhood teacher and to reconceptualize the relationship among sex, gender, and sexuality.

This study demonstrated that the relationship between childhood and sexuality is rife with difficulties, controversies, and complexities. It is one that is oftentimes publicly and formally established on exclusion, with children constructed as requiring protection from sexuality, which is thought to be an adults-only concern and dangerous to children. Some adults have concerns about the sexualization of childhood through the media and sexy dolls and toys, while other adults may not be troubled at all by such ads, play, and toys because they view young children as too young to really know what they are seeing or doing (Blaise, 2009). Oftentimes, adults mistakenly diminish sexuality to physical sexual contact and sexual orientation, thus contributing to the moral panic discourse that is associated with young children and sexuality. The understanding that sexuality is a danger to children is associated with fears of the ramifications of exposing children to sexual knowledge too early and to children’s exposure to sexual abuse and exploitation. These fears have resulted in an increase in the number of regulations regarding children’s access to knowledge and have been instrumental in constructing anxiety that has permeated all areas of children’s education in this area (Egan & Hawkes, 2008a, 2008b; Grieshaber, 2010, Blaise, 2013). In relation to this study, I draw upon Foucault’s concepts of governmentality and technologies of power to illustrate the ways hegemonic discourses of childhood and childhood innocence have been assembled to strictly police citizenship norms through children’s access, or lack of
access, to non-normative constructions of gender and sexual knowledge. I saw this policing reinforced through 1) unofficial early education practices such as reprimanding and disciplining a child for kissing another child or saying a word that was deemed sexual in nature; 2) parental fears of being judged as bad for providing children with too much sexual knowledge too early; 3) teacher fears of being judged as bad for allowing children to talk about or take part in conversations and activities related to sex, gender, and sexuality; and 4) the ways young children regulate the gender performances of other children within strict boundaries of what is considered appropriate masculine and feminine behaviors.

Implications for Early Childhood Teaching

The field of early childhood education tends to avoid examining complicated and troubling images of gender and its relationship to teaching, learning, and identities, more readily conveying a simple and unproblematic notion of children’s gender role development (Blaise & Andrew, 2005). In most cases, I observed early childhood teachers respond to conversations, interactions, and play based on uncomplicated, predictable, and fixed understandings of gender and children’s gender identity development. These dominant assumptions of universality and gender stereotyping have acted to limit and govern program curriculum, professional learning, and teaching practice. Research (Surtees, 2008) showed how early childhood teachers chose not to interact with sexuality for fear of being seen as bad teachers. Other findings (Blaise, 2013) indicate the ways adult anxieties mirror broader cultural beliefs about childhood innocence, which play a part in the moral panic discourse.
Additionally, heteronormativity was inherent on my campus through the chosen curriculum, the focus on child development, and the lack of critical reflection among the teachers I was involved with. These universal understandings in early childhood education need to be deconstructed and reconstructed to expose how heteronormative values position queer-identified families or children and to provide a system that will support these families and children in early childhood settings (Janmohamed, 2010). As mentioned previously, in relation to this study, “queer-identified” refers to those practices which deviate from heteronormative talk, behavior, and relationships (Robinson, 2002, p. 419). Ochner (2000) argued that the process of identifying diverse beliefs about gender and critically reflecting on what we say and do impacts children’s learning about gender concepts. Early childhood educators need to be aware of how their silence on, and resistance to, alternative ways of being is as unacceptable as their silence about bullying or issues of racism. We perform gender whether we want to or not and in doing so implicate children who may not fit into normative expectations of what we expect as acceptable behavior. Kumashiro (2002) contended that the norms of schooling and its manifestations can be perceived as oppressive, arguing that, “changing oppression then requires constantly working against the norm” (p. 11). The propensity to focus on developmentally appropriate practice seems overbearing and indeed oppressive. Through a critical deconstruction of Western theories of child development and of the normative pedagogical frameworks that dominate early childhood practice, early childhood teachers can construct alternative understandings of young children’s gender identities.
This absence of a critical pedagogy in practice is oftentimes the result of a lack of critical pedagogy in preservice teacher training. With a heavy reliance on child development and developmentally appropriate practice, theory and text become the focus of teacher education rather than the experiences of children and their families. The works of critical thinkers such as Michel Foucault, Jean Francois Lyotard, Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, and Jacques Derrida rarely find their way into early childhood training (MacNaughton, 2005). By using feminist poststructuralism and queer theory, college educators can challenge their preservice students to pose new questions about their teaching practices and students’ learning, consider how they will address gender and sexuality in their own classrooms, and envision diverse possibilities for what an early childhood teacher can be (Blaise & Andrew, 2005).

Troubling sex, gender, and sexuality in the early childhood classroom and in preservice teacher training programs is an integral part of early childhood education. Engaging preservice teachers in alternative theoretical perspectives, such as feminist poststructuralism and queer theory, can help to raise new questions about teaching and learning. Moving beyond the dominant discourses of child development and DAP is risky, but if we are to provide young children with the tools needed to understand their experiences with gender and sexuality, then we cannot continue to remain silent in either the field of early childhood education or preservice teacher programs. Rather, early childhood teachers need to be prepared to be bad by engaging with their students in conversations about difficult subjects like sex and sexuality, by challenging early childhood and gender norms, and by constructing and enacting new images of what it means to be an early childhood teacher (Blaise & Andrew, 2005). Furthermore, despite
parent perceptions and risk anxiety concerning educating children about sexuality, children’s sexual knowledge and early education in this area have critical implications for their present and future health and well-being and for creating a society that is more critically reflective about gendered and sexual ethical relationships

Implications for Young Children

For the most part, dominant discourses of child development have underpinned ideas and understandings of irrelevance and inappropriateness of sexuality to children’s lives (Jackson, 1982; James & Prout, 1990). However, the significant increase in the number of same sex couples having children (Janmohamed, 2010), sexuality as a major component in pop culture media and advertising (Robinson, 2012), and the normalization of heterosexuality in children’s daily classroom experiences indicates that sex, gender, and sexuality are relevant to young children and their lives. Some children grow up to be gay, lesbian, or transgender, or are a part of a gay/lesbian/transgender family and the lack of public support for these children and their families can influence their daily experiences, self-esteem, and perceived future choices (Mayo, 2006). Research (Donaghhy, 1997) has suggested the level of addiction and youth suicide linked to issues of sexual identity are a critical indicator of how sexual citizenship is important to young children. This study implied that the strict policing of young children’s access and inaccessibility to sexual knowledge are crucial factors in the process of heteronormalizing their schooling experiences in order to actively produce heteronormative adult citizens. This governing of knowledge has serious implications for both the immediate and long-term health and welfare of children and throughout their lives. Well-informed honest conversations concerning sex and sexuality support
children’s agency in building resilience and competency in this area (Robinson & Davies, 2008). In a culture where young children are increasingly expected to negotiate and make decisions about a wide range of options in their lives, it is imperative to provide them with the critical skills needed to do this in an efficient and confident manner (Robinson, 2012).

Being allowed to generate and participate in conversations and play related to sex, gender, and sexuality seemed to empower my students and relax them, allowing them to move away from the notion that what they had to say was inappropriate or bad. By providing equal opportunities for students and broadening their potential to make choices in less gender-stereotyped ways in everyday early childhood practices (Karlson & Simonsson, 2011), early childhood teachers can create new spaces for young children to feel less restrained by fixed boundaries of what is considered appropriate gendered behavior, thus developing the skills necessary to stand up against the prejudice and discrimination that flourishes in society, which begins in the early years of life (Blaise & Taylor, 2012; Robinson, 2002).

Possibilities for the Future

There are several possibilities for future research. One example would be research that supports those early childhood teachers who are willing to take risks as they challenge early childhood norms and disrupt the image of the good DAP teacher. It is important for preservice teachers to hear stories of teachers who are taking these risks in their own classrooms and of those who are using feminist poststructural and queer theories to challenge gender and sexuality in their teaching practices. Similarly, there is a need for research that examines the long-term impact and importance of
providing young children with the tools necessary to understand their experiences with
gender and sexuality. Boldt (1996) has shown that young children grow up with less
prejudice and are more tolerant of difference and more open to a wide-range of
possibilities for themselves and others if they are exposed to difference in a positive
way. Finally, Blaise's (2013) work with Deleuze and Guattari's (1983, 1987) concepts of
“assemblage”, “desire”, and “territories” calls attention to a need for research that brings
together these three philosophical concepts as a way of not only re-imaging childhood
sexuality, but also as a means of re-considering the image of the early childhood
teacher (p. 802).

Closing Remarks

As an early childhood teacher and someone who believes that gender and
sexuality are critical factors in the field of early childhood education, this study has
greatly impacted my thinking and teaching practices. The children who participated in
this study were eager to share their ideas and thoughts concerning their gendered
identities and sexuality, many of which were strongly influenced by the discourses of
hegemonic masculinity and femininity. It is my hope that this research will open up
spaces for discussion for early childhood educators, practitioners, and researchers who
are interested in constructing and enacting new images of what it means to be an early
childhood teacher. We can work together in order to liberate the bad teacher within
ourselves, to trouble issues such as sex, religion, racism, poverty, and death, which are
typically considered taboo for young children, and rethink the content and theory that we
teach in our early childhood teacher preparation programs.
APPENDIX A

IRB APPROVAL
March 18, 2014

Supervising Investigator: Dr. Kelley King
Student Investigator: April Larremore
Department of Teacher Education and Administration
University of North Texas

Re: Human Subjects Application No. 14023

Dear Dr. King:

As permitted by federal law and regulations governing the use of human subjects in research projects (45 CFR 46), the UNT Institutional Review Board has reviewed your proposed project titled Uncovering Gendered Teaching Practices in the Early Childhood Classroom. The risks inherent in this research are minimal, and the potential benefits to the subject outweigh those risks. The submitted protocol is hereby approved for the use of human subjects in this study. Federal Policy 45 CFR 46.109(e) stipulates that IRB approval is for one year only, March 18, 2014 to March 17, 2015.

Enclosed is the consent document with stamped IRB approval. Please copy and use this form only for your study subjects.

It is your responsibility according to U.S. Department of Health and Human Services regulations to submit annual and terminal progress reports to the IRB for this project. The IRB must also review this project prior to any modifications. If continuing review is not granted before March 17, 2015, IRB approval of this research expires on that date.

Please contact Shelia Bourns, Research Compliance Analyst, at extension 2018 if you wish to make changes or need additional information.

Sincerely,

Patricia L. Kaminski, Ph.D.
Associate Professor
Department of Psychology
Chair. Institutional Review Board

PK/sb
University of North Texas Institutional Review Board

Informed Parent/Guardian Consent Form

Before agreeing to your child’s participation in this research study, it is important that you read and understand the following explanation of the purpose, benefits and risks of the study and how it will be conducted.

Title of Study: Uncovering Gendered Teaching Practices in the Early Childhood Classroom

Investigator: April Larremore, University of North Texas (UNT) Department of the College of Education. Supervising Investigator: Dr. Kelley King.

Purpose of the Study: You are being asked to allow your child to participate in a research study which involves a self-study of how the classroom teacher interacts in classroom discussions and activities, asks questions, and opens up further discussion by allowing children to ask questions of their own concerning gender-related issues. For example: Your child may be asked to expand upon comments made when he or she talks about himself or herself as a girl or boy, refers to activities, behaviors, or physical attributes as “for girls” or “for boys”, or initiates classroom discussion concerning love or relationships.

Study Procedures: In some cases, your child will be asked to expand upon or further explain statements he or she made, ideas he or she shared, or behaviors he or she displayed concerning issues related to gender. In other instances, the teacher will simply make notes concerning observations made.

Foreseeable Risks: The activities and lessons used in this study will not go beyond or be different in any way from what we normally do in class each day. The only foreseeable risk involved in this study is the possibility the student may become embarrassed if asked to further explain a statement he or she made, an idea he or she shared, or a behavior he or she displayed. In the event that a child becomes embarrassed or uncertain about answering or responding, the line of questioning and discussion will be stopped and attention will be moved away from the child and onto something else.

Benefits to the Subjects or Others: This study is expected to benefit your child through the teacher’s attention to her own teaching and to her more thoughtful responses to student behavior. This study may benefit the field by illustrating how early childhood teachers and researchers can use a variety of theoretical perspectives to deepen their understandings and responses to children’s gender identity and play and inform their professional practice.

Compensation for Participants: None

Procedures for Maintaining Confidentiality of Research Records: Field notes and reflective journal entries will be made daily concerning statements made,
conversations had, and observations seen concerning issues of gender. In order to maintain subject confidentiality, no names will be recorded as a part of these notes or in any of the writing done as a result of this study. The confidentiality of your child’s individual information will be maintained in any publications or presentations regarding this study.

Questions about the Study: If you have any questions about the study, you may contact April Larremore or Dr. Kelley King at

Review for the Protection of Participants: This research study has been reviewed and approved by the UNT Institutional Review Board (IRB). The UNT IRB can be contacted at (940) 565-3940 with any questions regarding the rights of research subjects.

Research Participants’ Rights: Your signature below indicates that you have read or have had read to you all of the above and that you confirm all of the following:

- April Larremore has explained the study to you and answered all of your questions. You understand the possible benefits and the potential risks and/or discomforts of the study.
- You understand that you do not have to allow your child to take part in this study, and your refusal to allow your child to participate or your decision to withdraw him/her from the study will involve no penalty or loss of rights or benefits. The study personnel may choose to stop your child’s participation at any time.
- You understand why the study is being conducted and how it will be performed.
- You understand your rights as the parent/guardian of a research participant and you voluntarily consent to your child’s participation in this study.
- You understand you will receive a copy of this form.

Printed Name of Parent or Guardian

Signature of Parent or Guardian Date

APPROVED BY THE UNT IRB FROM 3/19/14 TO 3/17/15

Office of Research Services
University of North Texas
Last Updated: July 11, 2011
APPENDIX B

INFORMED PARENT/GUARDIAN INFORMED CONSENT FORM
Before agreeing to your child’s participation in this research study, it is important that you read and understand the following explanation of the purpose, benefits and risks of the study and how it will be conducted.

**Title of Study:** Uncovering Gendered Teaching Practices in the Early Childhood Classroom

**Investigator:** April Larremore, University of North Texas (UNT) Department of the College of Education. **Supervising Investigator:** Dr. Kelley King.

**Purpose of the Study:** You are being asked to allow your child to participate in a research study which involves a self-study of how the classroom teacher interacts in classroom discussions and activities, asks questions, and opens up further discussion by allowing children to ask questions of their own concerning gender-related issues. For example: Your child may be asked to expand upon comments made when he or she talks about himself or herself as a girl or boy, refers to activities, behaviors, or physical attributes as “for girls” or “for boys”, or initiates classroom discussion concerning love or relationships.

**Study Procedures:** In some cases, your child will be asked to expand upon or further explain statements he or she made, ideas he or she shared, or behaviors he or she displayed concerning issues related to gender. In other instances, the teacher will simply make notes concerning observations made.

**Foreseeable Risks:** The activities and lessons used in this study will not go beyond or be different in any way from what we normally do in class each day. The only foreseeable risk involved in this study is the possibility the student may become embarrassed if asked to further explain a statement he or she made, an idea he or she shared, or a behavior he or she displayed. In the event that a child becomes embarrassed or uncertain about answering or responding, the line of questioning and discussion will be stopped and attention will be moved away from the child and onto something else.

**Benefits to the Subjects or Others:** This study is expected to benefit your child through the teacher’s attention to her own teaching and to her more thoughtful responses to student behavior. This study may benefit the field by illustrating how early childhood teachers and researchers can use a variety of theoretical perspectives to deepen their understandings and responses to children’s gender identity and play and inform their professional practice.

**Compensation for Participants:** None

**Procedures for Maintaining Confidentiality of Research Records:** Field notes and reflective journal entries will be made daily concerning statements made, conversations had, and observations seen concerning issues of gender. In order to maintain subject confidentiality, no names will be recorded as a part of these
notes or in any of the writing done as a result of this study. The confidentiality of your child’s individual information will be maintained in any publications or presentations regarding this study.

**Questions about the Study:** If you have any questions about the study, you may contact April Larremore or Dr. Kelley King.

**Review for the Protection of Participants:** This research study has been reviewed and approved by the UNT Institutional Review Board (IRB). The UNT IRB can be contacted at (940) 565-3940 with any questions regarding the rights of research subjects.

**Research Participants’ Rights:** Your signature below indicates that you have read or have had read to you all of the above and that you confirm all of the following:

- April Larremore has explained the study to you and answered all of your questions. You understand the possible benefits and the potential risks and/or discomforts of the study.
- You understand that you do not have to allow your child to take part in this study, and your refusal to allow your child to participate or your decision to withdraw him/her from the study will involve no penalty or loss of rights or benefits. The study personnel may choose to stop your child’s participation at any time.
- You understand why the study is being conducted and how it will be performed.
- You understand your rights as the parent/guardian of a research participant and you voluntarily consent to your child’s participation in this study.
- You understand you will receive a copy of this form.

______________________________
Printed Name of Parent or Guardian  
______________________________  ___________________
Signature of Parent or Guardian                                     Date
Information Letter and Consent Form for Parents or Guardians
Permission for Research with Children

March 20, 2014

Dear Parent(s) or Guardian(s):

I am writing to ask your permission for your child to participate in a University of North Texas research project on uncovering gendered teaching practices in the early childhood classroom. This project will be conducted in Ms. Larremore’s kindergarten class at Sallye Moore Elementary over the next couple of months. You are being asked to allow your child to participate in a research study designed to explore the ways in which the teacher interacts with students in classroom discussions and activities, asks questions, and opens up further discussion concerning gender-related issues. For example: Your child may be asked to expand upon comments made when he or she talks about himself or herself as a girl or boy, refers to activities, behaviors, or physical attributes as for “girls” or for “boys,” or initiates classroom discussion concerning love or relationships. Additionally, the teacher will make an effort to recognize and allow for diversity and to move away from gendered teaching practices such as grouping and working with students based on stereotypical gendered categories such as girls, boys, color, etc.

The project in which your child has been invited to participate is expected to be an enjoyable experience and will not require any time out of class. However, the decision about participation is yours. To help you in this decision, a brief description of the project is provided. The activities and lessons used in this study will not go beyond or be different in any way from what we normally do in class each day. In some cases, your child will be asked to expand upon or further explain statements he or she made, ideas he or she shared, or behaviors he or she displayed concerning issues related to gender. In other instances, the teacher will simply make notes concerning observations made. The only foreseeable risk involved in this study is the possibility the student may become embarrassed if asked to further explain a statement he or she made, an idea he or she shared, or a behavior he or she displayed. In the event that a child becomes embarrassed or uncertain about answering or responding, the line of questioning and discussion will be stopped and attention will be moved away from the child and onto someone or something else.

All children’s comments, actions, and behaviors are considered confidential and information about individual children will not be shared with school staff. Only children in Ms. Larremore’s kindergarten class who have parental permission, and who themselves agree to participate, will be involved in the study. Also, children or parents may withdraw their permission at any time during the study without penalty by indicating this decision to the teacher/researcher.

This study has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of North Texas. In addition, it has the support of the district’s Executive Director of Elementary
Education Principal. However, the final decision about the participation is yours. Should you have any concerns or comments resulting from your child’s participation in this study, please contact the University of North Texas Review Board at (940) 565-3940.

I would appreciate it if you would permit your child to participate in this project, as I believe it will contribute to furthering the field of early childhood education by illustrating how early childhood teachers and researchers can use a variety of theoretical perspectives to deepen their understandings and responses to children’s gender identity and play and inform their professional practice. If you give permission for your child to participate in the study, please complete the attached consent form and return it to the school by (date to be determined).

If you have any questions about the study, or if you would like additional information to assist you in reaching a decision, please feel free to contact me at (email) or my faculty supervisor, Kelley King (email). Thank you in advance for your interest and support of this project.

Sincerely,

April Larremore
UNT Doctoral Candidate
UNT College of Education

Kelley King
Associate Professor
UNT College of Education
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