

Chapter 18

Tomboys, Sissies, and “That’s So Gay”

Exploring Gender and Sexuality Diversity in Early Childhood and Elementary Education

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Elementary school boy: ‘Usually, a tomboy is a girl that is tougher than a usual girl, or acts more like a boy, but a tomgirl doesn’t really exist, because if you’re a tomgirl, then it is just considered gay’. (Pillsbury, Westheimer, & Brodsky, 2011)

Parents and teachers can also take a more direct approach, by actively challenging the gender rules in American society that promote the idea that how we enact our gender—and the degree to which we approximate someone else’s idea of the “right kind” of boy or girl—somehow determines our worth as human beings. (Roffman, 2012, p. 87)

Introduction

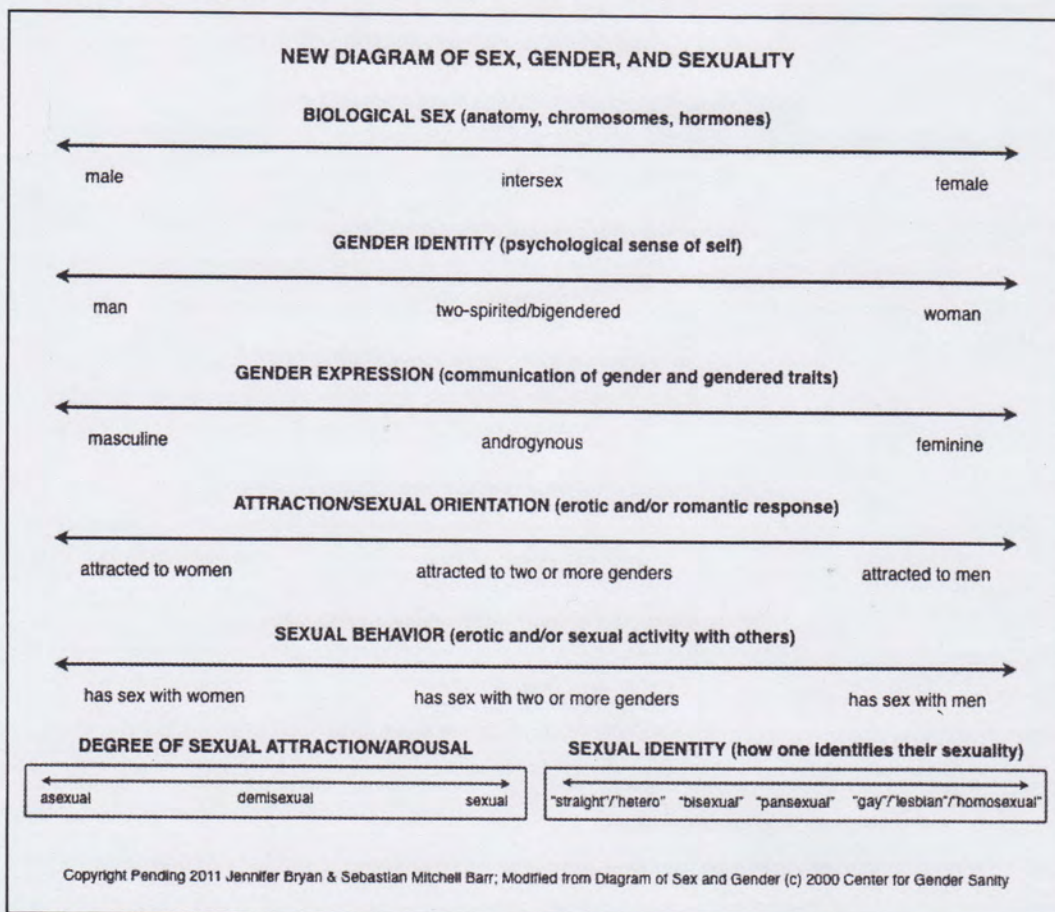
Academic scholars, ethnographic researchers, social advocacy organizations, and legislators continue to debate the role of gender and sexuality in schools. The practical and pedagogical needs of PreK–6 educators, however, are often lost in these debates. This chapter will present a contemporary construct for understanding sex, gender, and sexuality—Gender and Sexuality Diversity (GSD)—to clarify the ways these essential aspects of human identity are manifest in schools every day. By addressing GSD within this proposed educational framework, elementary educators can challenge heteronormative bias, and promote developmentally appropriate practices and policies.

The goal of this chapter is to first, define the concept of heteronormativity, and second, offer readers examples of the ways gender and sexuality permeate everyday life in Early Childhood and Elementary Education (ECEE). Third, the GSD framework is defined, providing readers with a way to think more broadly about gender identity and sexual identity in children. Fourth, applying the GSD framework to working examples highlights the impact of heteronormative bias on all students, teachers, and families. The chapter concludes with strategies for contending with obstacles to adopting the GSD approach.

Heteronormativity

In order to consider heteronormativity, we must first understand the structure of gender and sexuality. The New Diagram of Sex, Gender, and Sexuality (Box 18.1) provides a visual representation of these parts of who we are (Barr & Bryan, 2012). The diagram—which continues to evolve—depicts the continua of (a) biological sex, (b) gender identity, (c) gender expression, (d) attraction/sexual orientation, (e) sexual behavior, (f) degree of sexual attraction/arousal, and (g) sexual identity.¹ The human species is inherently diverse, and the continua model represents an infinite number of “locations” on each dimension of sex, gender and sexuality.

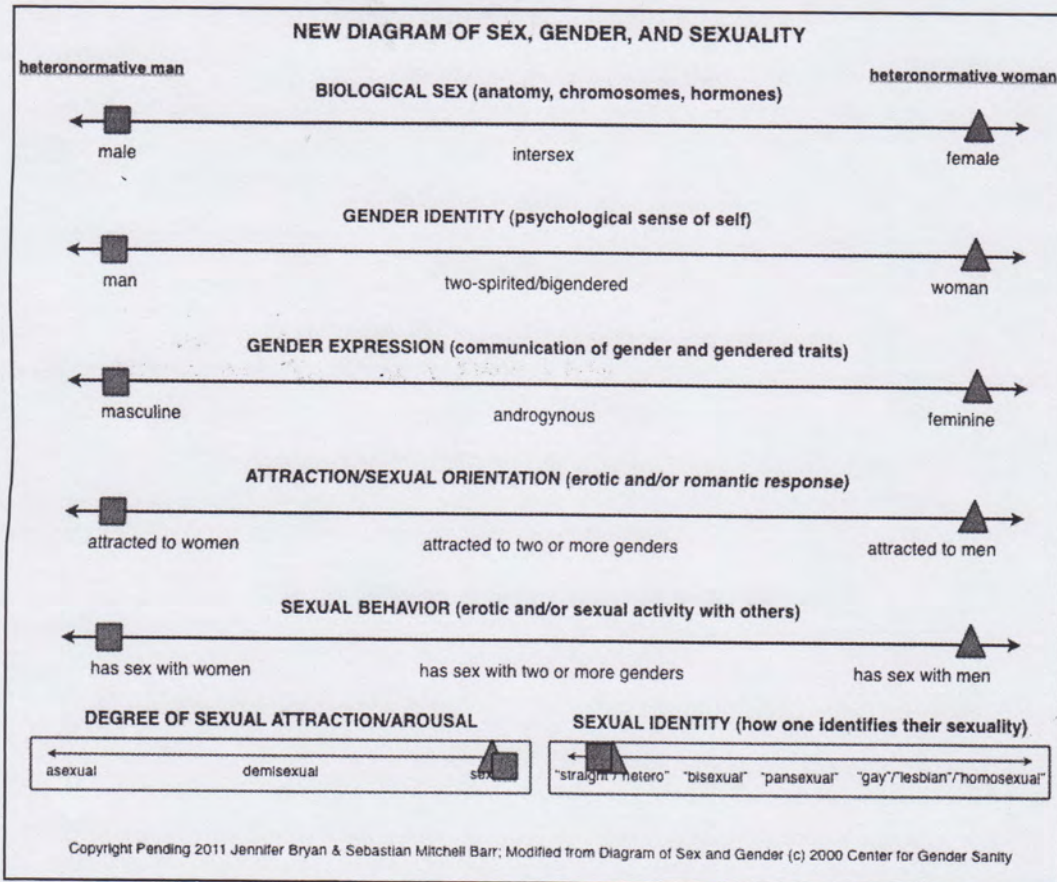
Box 18.1. New Diagram of Sex, Gender, and Sexuality



Heteronormativity depicts our cultural, social, and, in many cases, legal management of gender and sexuality. It represents the privileging of biologically male, masculine men pairing with biologically female, feminine women. Heteronormativity represents the “ideal” configuration of sex, gender, and sexuality (see Box 18.2). In spite of the variation that the

inherent biodiversity of our species promises, these exclusive locations on each continuum (as indicated by the squares and triangles) are considered "normal."

Box 18.2. Heteronormativity via the New Diagram of Sex, Gender and Sexuality



Heteronormativity at School

Preschool teacher: How do we fight the stereotypes that are already dictating the play of our students? The kids are constantly talking about 'girl' colors and 'boy' clothes. It feels like we are the only ones challenging those ideas.

While heteronormativity is an academic term, it should become part of standard ECEE terminology. Children enter school with their gender-identity development and sexual-identity development well under way, and the classroom, cafeteria, and playground become new venues for negotiating Self, Other, and Community. Preservice and veteran teachers alike need accurate and shared language to describe and understand the vital gender and sexuality phenomena that occur daily at school.

Our youngest students spend a lot of energy consciously and unconsciously trying to learn the rules, trying to understand the way this big, new world of school works. Sitting quietly on the rug at circle time is one kind of rule; choosing the "right" color crayon is another. Gender-role stereotypes and gendered expectations permeate ECEE, and all members of the school community contribute to this oversimplified culture by wittingly or unwittingly supporting and perpetuating such stereotypes. In addition to gendered suppositions, all children (and families) are treated as, and assumed to be, heterosexual when they begin school, and this assumption persists until "disproven."

The pervasiveness of heteronormativity in school makes the authentic and varied expression of biological sex, gender, and sexuality extremely difficult. These narrow and rigid expectations of gender and sexuality are deeply imbedded in the ECEE milieu. If you assess the school environment through a critical lens, you will find heteronormative bias in just about every aspect of school life, and this bias can be overt, subtle, situational, structural, personal, institutional, collegial, curricular, or programmatic.

Heteronormative Case Examples

The following examples are drawn from my Gender and Sexuality Diversity work over the past 15 years with PreK–12 educators and schools, and also from an online survey conducted in March 2011. Though not a representative sample of all PreK–6 teachers in the United States, the opinions, concerns, and experiences expressed here reflect typical challenges found in ECEE.

Overt *A few years ago our librarian put a storybook about the gay penguins at the zoo in the library. Our administrator was very upset. Although the book remains in the collection, I think she requested that it be put behind the librarian's desk and only available upon request. I found this very discouraging.*

Subtle *My first graders don't exactly understand the concept, but they are very open minded to friends who have two mommies or two daddies.*

Situational *Every year we take the 5th graders overnight for four days to Nature's Classroom, and there is one particularly effeminate boy that is perceived as gay. The kids don't want to room with him and even some parents have expressed concern about the 'sleeping arrangements.'*

Structural *Right now we have a 4th grade girl who has transitioned to living as a boy, but people at school remain uncomfortable with her using the boy's room. She/he² has to use the bathroom in the nurse's office.*

Personal *One of my colleagues is a gay man who teaches 4th grade, and my own son happens to be in his class. He is getting married next month to his partner of many years, and he has shared this news selectively with the adults in the building but not with the students in his class. The students just love this man. He is an incredible teacher, and I know that they would be absolutely thrilled to know he is getting married. They would want to honor this*

big event; they respect him very much. And I think they will be hurt if they hear this news after the fact. I'm not really sure what to do as a colleague or as a parent.

Institutional *Every year the kids have their pictures taken by this company that offers only the girls a flower to hold during the photo. Two years in a row now I have had boys who wanted to hold the flower and they were told no by the same photographer. I complained and asked if we could change companies but the administration sees this as a very small issue. They think I'm making a big deal out of nothing, plus they have bigger problems to manage.*

Collegial *There's a general lack of awareness or understanding by my coworkers. I went to a very progressive, liberal arts school and feel like I have a pretty good understanding of the issues surrounding gender and sexuality (I'm also gay myself), but my coworkers are not as informed. It's hard to be the lone voice that raises questions or concerns.*

Curricular *I just want to know how to teach about GSD in a time where we need to bring awareness up to a more even level with the rest of the curriculum. How can you teach it and not have it be your only focus given that so much emphasis is on testing and "outcomes"?*

Programmatic *The "Sex" program that happens in 5th grade is very outdated. It would be a perfect opportunity to address different genders and sexualities but it is completely based on heterosexual reproduction.*

In order to work effectively with these common scenarios, teachers must have a conceptual framework that accounts for the range of identities, expressions, and behaviors of all community members. GSD—which is fully defined in the next section—is such a framework. Later in the chapter we will return and apply GSD to the case scenarios above.

Gender and Sexuality Diversity: An Inclusive Identity Framework

We know that sex, gender, and sexuality vary, existing on multiple continua (Box 1). GSD is a broad construct that encompasses the variability, fluidity, and complexity that are inherent in these aspects of human identity. GSD is based on the belief that sex; gender; and sexual identity, expression, and behaviors:

1. Exist on distinct, interrelated continua,
2. Are essential aspects of human identity for all people, and
3. Are inherently diverse (as in, *biodiverse*).

The GSD framework allows us to consider (a) a single aspect of sex, gender, or sexuality, (b) relationships among different aspects of sex, gender, and sexuality, and (c) the totality of sex, gender, and sexuality. Let us examine each aspect individually.

Biological sex in ECEE

On a fundamental level, schools are organized by biological sex. Standardized forms ask for information about the "gender" of each student, but in truth, schools want to know about sex. They want to know whether the student is biologically male or female. Is the teacher who asks her students to line up "boys on one side and girls on the other" organizing her class by sex (i. e., physiology and anatomy), or by gender (i. e., identity)? Children in school are categorized by their biological sex, and as a result, they are directed to bathrooms, locker rooms, and sports teams accordingly. For those whose gender identity *differs* from their biological sex, the conflation of gender and sex represents a profound obstacle to literally and figuratively finding their place in school.

Gender in ECEE

Preschool teacher: Children constantly role-play family and so many teachable moments happen throughout the day. "You can't be a mommy, we already have one." "You can't marry him, you're a boy and he's a boy." "He can't wear dresses, he's a boy." "Doctors are boys and nurses are girls." "He can't like pink, that's a girl color." "This is a boy table. You can't be here. You're a girl. No I'm not, I'm a boy too."

There are many perspectives on the etiology of gender identity (for example, Brill & Pepper, 2008; Fausto-Sterling, 2012; Fine, 2010; Stoller, 1968; Zucker, Wood, Singh, & Bradley, 2012), and yet, we do not know exactly how gender identity develops in anyone. At present, however, ECEE educators would do well to take a dynamic view of gender-identity development and think of this process as being (a) linear for some, nonlinear for others; (b) fixed by a specific age for some and fluid for others; (c) consistent across the lifespan for some and changeable for others. Though some educators may be more familiar with uniform and predictable stage models (e. g., Kohlberg, 1966), the various possibilities represented in our working examples all represent "normal" gender-identity development.

In addition to taking a dynamic view of development, educators should also apply these fundamental premises to considerations of gender in the school setting:

1. Gender is not binary (Meyer, 2010).
2. Gender is influenced by interactions among nature, nurture, and culture (Ehrensaft, 2012).
3. Gender involves body, mind, and environment (Fausto-Sterling, 2012).
4. Cultural constructions and prescriptions dictate the expressions of masculinity and femininity that are considered "normative" (Fausto-Sterling, 2000).

Adrienne Harris (2005) described gender—with its many components and determinants—as "softly assembled" rather than "hard-wired." With all these tenets in hand, ECEE teachers can more effectively comprehend and engage with the evolving gender of all their students.

Developmentally Appropriate and Effective Practice

Elementary teacher: Many teachers understand that they need to have diversity in their curriculum, but they are afraid of GSD.

Even with this more comprehensive understanding of biological sex, gender identity, and sexuality as a guide, some educators may still be concerned about the developmental appropriateness of addressing GSD in ECEE. I frequently hear questions and concerns such as these from teachers.

- *While talking about these issues is important, we must be sensitive at all times to developmental appropriateness.*
- *It seems a bit ridiculous to address sexuality in kindergarten.*
- *Kids are thinking about sexuality at a much younger age than we want to accept.*
- *It is important to talk about gender/sex at a young age, before opinions are fully formed.*
- *I worry that elementary students are not mature enough to accept and consider this topic.*
- *The discussions need to be age appropriate and we need to have the language to do this well. Many of the concepts are new...and changing regularly.*

Teachers themselves express frustration about these contrasting views of "readiness," as this lack of consensus about developmental appropriateness can become an obstacle to doing anything at all. It can also become a source of tension among colleagues.

There are many factors that influence educators' beliefs about what is truly developmentally appropriate: academic background, age, professional training, selective interpretations of theories and research, personal experience, and cultural values, to name a few. However, when it comes to assessing the appropriateness of engaging GSD in the ECEE setting, teachers are also influenced by *fear*. They are afraid of being perceived as "sexualizing innocent children." They are concerned about saying or doing the wrong thing. They worry about backlash from angry parents; they question whether they will have adequate administrative support. Some fear for their jobs (Bryan, 2012).

Establishing an educational framework; dispelling fear

First-grade teacher: I need help knowing what is appropriate for 6- to 7-year-olds. If things don't "come up" how should I raise them in a natural and comfortable way? I need a curriculum approved by Administration.

An essential first step in reducing fear and providing support to teachers who engage with GSD is to frame this work in terms of fundamental **educational values**. For example, many schools today point to (a) *working with the whole child*, (b) *creating a safe learning environment*, (c) *promoting the intellectual, social, and emotional well-being of every student*, and (d) *preparing students for an increasingly diverse world* as being central to their educational purpose. Here, the emphasis on issues of diversity and safety reflects contemporary challenges in creating equity for all 21st-century students and families in PreK–12 schools.

Conflicts related to equity are not limited to the educational domain alone. Currently, there are intense, ongoing, cultural, political, religious, and legal arguments about issues of

students can safely explore and express themselves. And then educators must trust what students "tell" them.

When Charlie wants to hold a flower for his school picture, he is expressing something essential about who he is at the time. The teacher listens to Charlie and protests the photographer's enforcement of rigid gender norms, knowing that there is nothing wrong with a boy wanting to hold a flower. In this case, it is the photographer who disrupts the nurturing environment and prevents Charlie—and probably others as well—from expressing his true self. The photographer refuses to "see" Charlie. Instead, the photographer imposes his own heteronormative perception of who a boy is supposed to be (i.e., not interested in holding the "girls' flower"), and redirects Charlie. Certainly, in the world of ECEE, students are redirected all the time: *Use an indoor voice. Don't push. Share the markers. Raise your hand.* These are important behavioral instructions that help students negotiate the social milieu. The photographer's redirection, however, is different: *Boys can't hold a flower for the photo; that's only okay for girls.* The students learn that while raising hands and sharing markers are rules for everyone, there are different "rules" for boys and girls. What do Charlie and his peers learn about themselves and the world from these gender-specific rules?

Educators should *expect* children in ECEE to express their gender in a variety of ways. This variation is part of the normal range of development. Teachers must support and give latitude to this aspect of the identity development process, irrespective of cultural prescriptions of appropriate "masculine" and "feminine" behavior. Unfortunately, this type of naturally variable gender expression in some children is not only redirected by teachers (and parents), but often labeled or diagnosed as a developmental, social, or emotional problem. The problem for the majority of children is *not* confusion about their gender identity; the conflict lies in the "culturally defined expressions assigned to that gender" (Ehrensaft, 2012, p. 339).

Working with gender variance

A central concept of GSD is that human beings vary on the different aspects of sex, gender, and sexuality. Therefore, for some people, biological sex and gender identity do not correlate according to heteronormative expectations. Thus, the presence of a fourth-grade student who has made a social transition to live in his affirmed gender identity at school should not be a surprise. Yet, the school is structured to accommodate heteronormative individuals only, so, as a result, this student becomes a problem.

A gender-variant student (teacher, staff member, parent) exposes the bias against those who represent this type of biodiversity in the human species. And *within* this group of children identified as gender variant or gender nonconforming (GNC), there is tremendous variability. While a small percentage of gender-variant children grow up to be transgender adults, the majority of GNC children desist in their variance by or during adolescence (Drescher & Byne, 2012). Such fluidity is a natural part of the developmental process for some, yet it directly collides with the binary organization of sex, gender, and sexuality that is characteristic of schools.

In their review of the literature on gender variance in children and adolescence, Drescher and Byne (2012) concluded that there is no way to predict which GNC children will

first national study that looks at homophobia and gender nonconformity in elementary schools (GLSEN & Harris Interactive, 2012). Some key findings:

- Most teachers say they attempt to address biased remarks of all kinds, yet biased remarks regarding students who do not conform to traditional gender norms are the least likely of any type of biased comment to be addressed by elementary school teachers.
- Though a majority of teachers believe it is their obligation to provide a supportive learning environment for students with LGBT families, only 1 in 5 indicates that LGBT families are included in class lessons. Most say that they have not been included because the "topic has not come up."
- While some teachers feel responsible for and comfortable intervening around bullying related to gender and sexuality to establish safety, these same teachers do not necessarily feel responsible for or comfortable actually affirming diverse gender and sexual identities.
- Teachers with five years of experience or less were more likely to perceive their schools as potentially uncomfortable environments for gender-nonconforming students than teachers with 21 or more years of experience.
- Teachers with five years of experience or less were more likely to try to educate the perpetrator of bullying related to a student having gay parents, than teachers with more than 21 years of experience. The experienced teachers were also more likely to refer the perpetrator to the principal or other administrator.

These data reveal troubling inconsistencies and shortcomings among elementary educators. Teachers differ in their interpretations of what professional responsibility for safety and affirmation of all students and families—regardless of their gender and sexuality—actually looks like in practice. These data also support anecdotal evidence that younger teachers may have different perceptions of, more open attitudes toward, and greater comfort in addressing GSD than older teachers.

Ready resources

Consider our case scenario where an administrator removed the book *And Tango Makes Three* from circulation in the library. Her actions may well have been fueled by her own heteronormative bias and/or the complaints of certain parents who do not want the school to support respect for same-sex or gay families. Teachers are expected to run inclusive and respectful classrooms across all kinds of differences, yet achieving and maintaining inclusivity cannot be accomplished through behavior management alone. Intervening in the event of overt bullying ensures one kind of safety for students, yet the lack of affirmation of one's identity, or the absence of validation of one's family leaves students feeling profoundly excluded on a deep, fundamental level.

As one teacher states, "I'm certain the lack of an active and open discussion of gender and sexuality has had an impact on students. We can be caring teachers and still not be creating a safe space." Books like *And Tango Makes Three* are critical teaching tools for validating students, enhancing their conceptual capacities, and building community. In the past

10 years, the number of high-quality books that challenge gender-role stereotypes, affirm all kinds of families, and offer broad representations of GSD has grown significantly. These resources⁴ make open, contextualized conversations much more accessible than in the past.

Recall the first-grade teacher in our case scenario; she describes her students as not understanding the concept of same-sex marriage, but being “open-minded to friends who have two mommies and two daddies.” First-grade students are quite capable of understanding the concept of marriage itself. Perhaps it is heteronormative bias that interferes with this teacher broadening the marriage concept to explicitly include two mommies or two daddies. Once aware of the bias, she can use books like *ABC, A Family Alphabet Book*; *Donovan's Big Day*; *A Tale of Two Daddies*; and *The Different Dragon* as vehicles for conversation. Her students are open and ready to learn about all the family structures that exist in their community and beyond.

Without having open discussions about GSD—such as this one about marriage—schools are unlikely to ensure physical, social, emotional, and sexual safety for all students, families, and faculty. If reading a book about two male Central Park penguins who create a family is unacceptable, it cannot be a surprise that the gay, fourth-grade teacher who is getting married does not feel safe sharing this joyous milestone with his class. If the fifth-grade Human Sexuality class only addresses anatomy and reproduction, the opportunity to broaden students' understanding of sex, gender, and sexuality is lost.

Conclusion

Preschool teacher: After 20 years of teaching I am comfortable initiating and navigating conversations with my preschoolers about dressing up in whatever clothes they wish, exploring what it's like to play someone of a different gender, gender roles, acceptance of difference, etc. They are some of the richest and most validating conversations I have as a teacher.

Engaging in conversations and learning about gender and sexuality is a vital aspect of affirming educational values and achieving educational goals in ECEE. Using the GSD framework as a means of challenging heteronormativity promotes healthy identity development for children, ensures a safe learning environment for all, and builds community. The GSD framework validates and normalizes the presence of a gender-variant fourth-grader looking for a safe restroom, a gay teacher who is getting married, and a boy who wants to hold a flower for his school photograph.

There are obstacles to recognizing and disrupting heteronormative bias, yet, as this teacher notes, engaging students in conversations about GSD creates rich, validating, learning experiences for all involved. With school mission and educational purpose as primary reference points, educators can apply the conceptual tools offered in this chapter to affirm the diversity, dignity, and worth of every student, teacher, and family in the community, regardless of gender and sexuality.

Notes

- 1 As noted elsewhere, this diagram does not fully represent all gender and sexual identities (e.g., genderqueer), nor does it capture the concept of “movement” or fluidity along any given continuum (Bryan, 2012). In

addition, it does not portray the infinite number of interrelationships between and among the various continua. Yet, despite these limitations, the diagram offers a comprehensive, nonbinary, multifaceted model of sex, gender, and sexuality that is extremely effective when teaching educators, parents, and students alike about GSD.

- 2 The teacher's use of "she/he" reflects her discomfort with validating the student's affirmed gender identity. The student is living as a boy, attending school as a boy, and should be recognized as a boy. Use of the male pronoun, he, is appropriate.
- 3 Quotation marks indicate the lay definition of "sex," which refers to sexual behavior, particularly heterosexual intercourse.
- 4 A list of selected titles is offered at the end of this chapter.

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Selected Resources for the ECEE Classroom

All Kinds of Families

- Bedtime for Baby Teddy* (0–3) Tamara Arc-Dekker
A gentle bedtime storybook for young children of lesbian parents.
- Everywhere Babies* (2 and up) Susan Meyers
Babies of every hue, body type, and hairstyle, the illustrations show traditional, single parent, gay/lesbian, and multiethnic families.
- Mommy, Mamma and Me* (2–4) Leslea Newman
A board book about a toddler's day with two moms.
- Daddy, Papa and Me* (2–4) Leslea Newman
A board book about a toddler's day with two dads.
- One Hundred Is a Family* (2–5) Pam Munoz Ryan
Readers count from 1 to 100, seeing many types of families doing things together: working, playing.
- And Baby Makes 4* (2–5) Judith Benjamin
A playful photo essay of a family getting ready for a new baby. Two moms explain to their daughter what to expect from a baby. Helpful read for any child waiting for the arrival of a sibling!
- ABC, A Family Alphabet Book* (2–6) Bobbie Combs
Learning the alphabet with pictures of LGBT families.
- All Families Are Special* (3–6) Norma Simon
Single, adopted, same-sex, long-distance parents, grandparents, divorced families.
- The Family Book* (3–6) Todd Parr
Typically silly and reassuring, Parr celebrates all kinds of families.
- We Belong Together: A Book About Adoption and Families* (3–6) Todd Parr
A sensitive, colorful description of how adoptive families come together.
- Best Best Colors/Los Mejores Colores* (3–6) Eric Hoffman
A story about having "more than one" favorite color, best friend, mom. English/Spanish.
- The Many Colored Love/El Amor de Todos Los Colores* (3–6) Lucia Morena Velo
Maite was born from the many colored love; now her moms are expecting again. English/Spanish.
- A Tale of Two Daddies* (3–6) Vanita Oelschlager
A girl answers the questions of a curious friend about her Poppa and Daddy.
- White Swan Express* (3–6) Jean Okimoto
In China four baby girls wait in an orphanage while four families (including a lesbian couple) in North America prepare for the exciting trip to bring them home.
- Who's in a Family?* (3–6) Robert Skutch
A picture book depicting all kinds of families, human and animals—step, divorced, extended, gay, lesbian, multiethnic—all happy.
- And Tango Makes Three* (3–7) Justin Richardson and Peter Parnell
A fantastic picture book that tells the true story of two famous gay dads—penguins Roy and Silo—from New York's Central Park Zoo.
- The Different Dragon* (3–8) Jennifer Bryan
This bedtime story about bedtime stories depicts everyday family life for a boy who has two moms, a rich imagination and a dragon that challenges stereotypes.
- Uncle Bobby's Wedding* (4–7) Sarah Brannen
A gentle tale about a young guinea pig preparing for her Uncle's wedding.
- Donovan's Big Day* (3–8) Leslea Newman
Donovan gets ready for a very important celebration—his moms are getting married!
- The Not-So-Only-Child* (4–8) Heather Jopling
A wonderful addition to the all-kinds-of-families genre. Larissa, an only child, describes her diverse extended family: married couples, singles, grandparents, aunts, uncles, pets.
- Antonio's Card/La Tarjeta de Antonio* (4–8) Rigoberto Gonzalez
A Mother's Day story featuring Antonio, his Mami and Mami's partner Leslie. English/Spanish.
- Molly's Family* (4–8) Nancy Garden

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Getting ready for Parent's Night in Molly's kindergarten class prompts everyone to consider what different families look like.

In Our Mother's House (5-8) Patricia Polacco

Well-known children's book author captures the concentric circles of a multiracial, multigenerational lesbian family.

The Duke Who Outlawed Jelly Beans and Others (5-10) Johnny Valentine

Delightful fairy tales, various family constellations and non-preachy message that being different is okay.

Gender Roles, Gender Stereotypes

Hoops With Swoops (4-8) Susan Kuklin with Sheryl Swoops

Photographs of one of the best female basketball players ever. Swoops demonstrates basic skills like jumping, catching, passing. For young basketball fans of every age and gender.

I Look Like a Girl (4-8) Sheila Hamanaka

Exuberant girls burst both the limits of the page and confines of traditional expectations, imagining life as free and wild as that of a tiger, dolphin, mustang, wolf.

Not All Princesses Dress in Pink (3-6) Jane Yolen

These princesses wear their sparkly crowns while playing soccer, getting muddy, biking.

Ballarino Nate (4-8) Kimberly Brubaker Bradley

Kindergartner Nate sees a ballet performance while on a school field trip and decides to become a dancer. His older brother tries to dissuade him: "boys can't be ballerinas."

Oliver Button Is a Sissy (4-7) Tomi dePaula

Friends and family learn to appreciate Oliver's love for music and dancing.

Do Princesses Wear Hiking Boots? (4-7) Carmela LaVigna Coyle

Lots of questions from a girl who wants to be a princess AND play in the mud, climb trees.

The Sissy Duckling (3-8) Harvey Fierstein

Elmer is not like other boy ducklings and is teased for his love of baking, decorating until he teaches a life lesson to the whole flock about embracing special qualities we all possess.

Max the Stubborn Little Wolf (3-7) Marie-Odile Judes

Papa Wolf is horrified when tiny Max declares his intention to become a florist when he grows up, and tries everything he can to change his son.

Fire Engine for Ruthie (4-8) Leslea Newman

Ruthie and her Nana find they like to play with different things, and Nana discovers that girls can love fire engines and motorcycles as much as girls love dolls and dress-up.

Horace and Morris but Mostly Dolores (4-8) James Howe

Adventurous mice are tested when a "Boys Only" club changes the rules of friendship.

Pugdog (3-8) Andrea U'Ren

Pugdog loves to drool, chase squirrels, and romp in the mud. When the owner discovers that "he" is actually a "she," Pugdog gets an (unsuccessful) makeover.

My Name Is Not Isabella: Just How Big Can a Little Girl Dream? (3-8) Jennifer Fosberry

Isabella delights in pretending to be some of the amazing women who changed history: Sally Ride, Annie Oakley, Marie Curie. A "history lesson" via imagination and play.

Amazing Grace (4-8) Mary Hoffman

Grace loves acting out stories, but when classmates tell her she can't play Peter Pan because she is Black and a girl, important lessons are learned all around.

Elena's Serenade (4-8) Campbell Geeslin

In this story set in Mexico, a young girl longingly watches her papa blow glass and dreams about doing the same. Papa disapproves, because of her size and gender.

Rotten Richie and the Ultimate Dare (5-9) Patricia Polacco

Sibling rivalry takes an interesting turn when Trisha and her brother enter into a double dare that entails trying each other's favorite activity: ice hockey and ballet.

The Princess Knight (5-9) Cornelia Funk

A funny, unapologetic feminist tale of a youngest sister who refuses to give up her own ambitions to be a knight—and her own person.

The Basket Ball (5–9) Esme Raji Codell

Lulu likes dresses, dolls and basketball. When the boys won't let her play, she holds a basket "ball," inviting girls from around the world to come try out. A refreshing multidimensional portrait of girls who are "girly" AND "sporty."

Sarah Gives Thanks (5–9) Mike Allegra

The story of Sarah Josepha Hale, the pioneering woman writer who convinced the president of the United States to establish a national holiday for the giving of thanks.

The Harvey Milk Story (8 and up) Kari Krakow

A picture book biography about the first openly gay elected official in the US.

Gender Identity

My Princess Boy [A Mom's Story About a Young Boy Who Loves to Dress Up] (3–7) Cheryl Kilodavis

A nonfiction picture book by a mother about her 4-year-old son, who happily expresses his authentic self by happily dressing up in dresses.

Rough, Tough Charley (5–9) Verla Kay

Charley Parkhurst was one of the most respected stagecoach drivers in the Old West. He also kept one of the biggest secrets anyone could keep—he was a woman in disguise.

All I Want to Be Is Me (5–10) Phyllis Rothblatt

An affirmation in rhyme about children whose gender identities do not conform to stereotypical assumptions about who boys and girls are.

Be Who You Are! (6–10) Jennifer Carr

A story about a transgender child who receives support from his family and gets their help in navigating life at school.

10,000 Dresses (4–8) Marcus Ewert

Every night, Bailey dreams about magical dresses. Unfortunately, when Bailey's awake, no one wants to hear about these beautiful dreams. "You're a BOY!"

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