

Running head: CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT SENSITIVE TO GENDER DIVERSITY

Utilizing Self-Reflective Practices to Create a Classroom Environment Sensitive to
Gender Diversity

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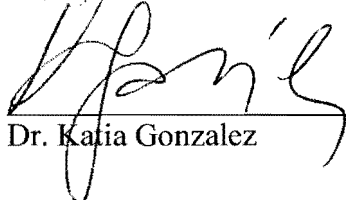
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Abstract

Gender development begins in the early stages of life, and because of this it is the role of early childhood educators to carefully take into consideration the gender identity of their students. This study explored gender stereotypes within the preschool classroom in an effort to develop a classroom environment that is sensitive to gender diversity. The study consisted of eight questionnaires and a final group reflection to assist teachers in discovering if their classroom is accessible to a variety of students regardless of their gender. Research from this study suggests that gender roles are constructed within the preschool years. The reflections from the participants also revealed that being mindful of language and varying the materials within the classroom allows students of all genders to equally partake in the learning process.

Conceptual Framework

Past educational research involving gender has predominantly focused on the differences in learning amongst female and male students, while other areas of educational research directed its attention towards bridging the gender achievement gap. There has not been a considerable amount of focus on children who do not fit into typical social constructs of gender until recent years. To better understand these concepts of nonconforming children it is of great importance to examine gender development. The maturity of understanding the concept of gender undergoes a series of stages similar to any other forms of cognitive, social, emotional and physical development that every child undergoes. There are however, several different views on how the road to gender identity is established. The American Psychological Association describes Gender Identity as one's sense of oneself as male, female, or transgender. Lawrence Kohlberg, a well-renowned American psychologist and theorist constructed the idea that there are three stages of gender development. Kohlberg was highly influenced by the concept of maturation when developing his theories, particularly meaning that the stage a child is currently in determines how the child processes information about gender. Kohlberg believed that children do not actively start processing gender information until they reach the third and final stage of gender development (Sammons, 2007). He claimed that the first stage which is reached around the age of two years old is known as "Gender Identity." This stage is obtained when children are able to label their own sex (Sammons, 2007). According to Kohlberg, the second stage is usually attained by the age of four and is described as "Gender Stability." This is when children come to the realization that gender remains the same across time (Sammons, 2007). At the age of seven children are at the "Gender Constancy" stage. Here they realize gender is independent of external features (Sammons, 2007).

Another approach to the idea of gender development is Gender Schema Theory.

Followers of this approach do not follow the idea of maturation the concept that Kohlberg based his stages of gender development on. Instead, it is believed that schemas impact a person's development of gender (Sammons, 2007). These schemas are comprised of observations and experiences of the world around us – for example gender can be constructed and manipulated by media, ideals of close loved ones, religious and cultural expectations and so on (Sammons, 2007).

Putnam, J., Meyers, J. A., & Love, D (2006) correlates children's ages and specific experiences regarding gender that directly relate to both Kohlberg's stages and Gender Schema Theory. For instance, the authors share that even at seven months children can begin to distinguish between male and female voices. Putnam et al (2006) continues to state that at the age of twelve months they will begin to tell the difference between male and female faces based on physical features. As children mature they take the initiative of applying what they comprehend about gender to their individual encounters. This comprehension of gender is visible in their own form of amusement, for example starting at two years of age, children start to exhibit gender stereotypes in their play by taking on different roles. Through examination of the different views of gender development it is clear that gender is far from a simple concept to fully understand.

When it comes time for children to reach the Gender Identity Stage, they might experience difficulty with the idea of their gender identity being solely based on their biological makeup at birth. Participants in a study by Rankin and Beemyn were asked when they began to feel "different" from others because of how they perceived their gender. The results showed that the mean was 5.4 years old. Almost a fifth of the respondents said that they "always" or from

their “earliest memories” felt a sense of gender difference (Rankin & Beemyn, 2012). Meanwhile it is also claimed that children from three or four years old have already completed a gender transition or made it evident that their gender identity is not that which they were assigned at birth (Boenke, 1999). Students who attend Preschool across the United States typically range from three to five years of age. The data from the research also aligns the ages with the stages of gender development. Some children may simply explore different gender roles that do not necessarily conform to their own biological gender. This can be viewed as nonconforming in terms of their gender expression. Others may choose to identify as the sex opposite to that they were assigned at birth. The American Psychological Association recognizes the latter as Gender Dysphoria. Gender Dysphoria is described as the persistent discomfort with his or her sex or sense of inappropriateness in the gender role of that sex (APA, 2000, p. 581). The sensitivity towards labeling has changed dramatically since the fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Health Disorders where the original label – Gender Identity Disorder was changed to its most recent name. This change removes the connotation that the patient is “disordered.”

Laws Regarding Gender Equity

Gender issues have been addressed throughout history, and have been taking dramatic steps towards including all genders. In 1972, due to a response for a push towards achieving gender equity between males and females, Title IX became a policy that was created to address issues regarding gender, and was introduced as part of the Education Amendments. Under Title IX it is mandated that:

“No person in the United States shall, *on the basis of sex*, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity

that is receiving federal financial assistance...”

Due to the implications of Title IX administrative personnel and educators are abided by law to create equal opportunities for children of various genders within all areas of their educational experience. As part of this reform under Title IX the department of education was mandated to reconsider and reconstruct school policies, classrooms and teacher instruction as well as after school programs in order to create equal opportunities regardless of gender. However, Title IX only referred to *sex* insinuating the biological makeup of a person – female versus male. Where does this leave those who identify as something else? Participants in a study that identified as transgender especially those who grew up prior to the 1980s, shared that initially they did not understand their experiences or have the appropriate language to describe them, leading many to remain confused or to mischaracterize their identities (Rankin & Beemyn, 2012). This goes to show that diversity of gender was not a popular topic in the past. Regardless of federal laws such as Title IX there were still problems that arose regarding equality of gender, especially in the State of New York. In 2007 the Department of Education released the *Respect for All Initiative*. The program was implemented so that:

Every secondary school in the district had at least one staff member who could support lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning LGBTQ students and combat all forms of bias-based bullying and harassment, particularly bias based on sexual orientation, *gender identity*, and *gender expression* (Greytak, E. A. and Kosciw 2010).

Unlike Title IX, this initiative realized that there are other options besides being male or female at birth. The program allowed for staff members in secondary education schools the opportunity to share experiences of dealing with LGBTQ issues in the classroom all while obtaining the proper training to handle problems that arise. A review of the program the data revealed that the

training educators received aided in the improvements of knowledge of appropriate terms, awareness of where and how to access LGBTQ-related resources, increased empathetic feelings for LGBTQ students, amplified communication with students and staff about LGBTQ issues; and engagement in activities to create safer schools for LGBTQ students. The question remains however as to why training programs such as the *Respect for All* focus primarily on the secondary level when gender constructs are developed at an earlier time period? As was explored earlier, feelings of “difference” can begin at the Preschool Age when children are coming to a conclusion about what gender they wish to identify with. Children in this age bracket are also developing ideas of what it means to be “male” or “female” in the terms of society as a whole. However, despite the positive review of the program these areas of improvement slightly declined over a period of time.

The GLSEN released the National School Climate Survey in 2011, and New York was one of the many states to be identified as being unsafe for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender secondary school students. Nine out of ten students claimed to have heard other students in their school make negative remarks about how someone expressed their gender on a regular basis. Also, 27% of students regularly reported hearing staff make negative remarks about someone’s gender expression. This statistic is a reason why the professional tactic of self-reflective teaching practices should be explored to see the advantages of creating a classroom sensitive to gender diversity. Teachers should analyze their own beliefs and actions, before assisting their students on finding the path towards acceptance. New York State recently took a step towards achieving gender equity specifically to “nonconforming” or transgender students by passing the *Dignity for All Students Act* on September 13, 2010. The sole purpose of this act is to create an awareness and sensitivity in the relations of people, including but not limited to, different races, weights,

national origins, ethnic groups, religions, religious practices, mental or physical abilities, *sexual orientations, gender, and gender identity*. On July 1, 2012 the *Dignity for All Students Act* took full effect in the State of New York. As a result of this law, administrators and teachers are called to make a more conscious effort to create and maintain a safe and supportive environment free from discrimination, intimidation, taunting, harassment, and bullying not only on all areas of school property, but also on school buses, and at school functions. Under this law educators are also required to serve as mandated reporters - this role includes sharing any accounts of bullying that they have witnessed. In addition the Act requests teachers to embed and implement these features of “acceptance” into their everyday curriculum.

The purpose of this action research paper is not to make a call of appeal for educators to completely relinquish gender stereotypes; rather it is a request for teachers to focus on constructing an accepting environment that allows any students who wish to explore other means of gender expression to feel comfortable in doing so. Not only is it our duty as educators by law, but it is also morally as well. Is it right for these students to be out cast just because they are deemed “different” by society? There is a larger question at hand however. As an educational system we continue to establish laws, and implement school wide programs to support to students who may not conform to gender stereotypical behaviors then why do issues still persist? Gender expression and identity are commonly examined in the later years, however it may be vital to focus on these issues at a young age range particularly in the early childhood setting where students learn concepts that are necessary for life alongside the introduction to content areas. Additionally, Preschoolers begin to explore social and emotional skills including ideas such as “acceptance.”

The following research questions were examined:

1. Are genders stereotypes present in a preschool setting?
2. What issues do students face when they do not conform to gender stereotypes?
3. As educators how can we create a safe and accepting environment for students who may not conform to gender stereotypes and/or for those who may identify as transgender?

Literature Review

For children one of the first formal experiences with social contexts and where gender appropriate behavior is defined and constructed can be encountered in school (Myhill & Jones, 2006). Schools have the influence and power to either reproduce the dominant gender ideology of the wider society or be a potential site for allowing non-traditional gender identities (Myhill & Jones, 2006). The preschool setting in particular tends to choose a model of learning that emphasizes social and emotional learning in addition to traditional academic learning. For instance, in learning through play model there is a focus on socialization as well as academics through developmentally appropriate practices. A preschool classroom that has adopted this type learning through play philosophy is filled with various “centers” that integrate literature, technology, science, art, and math. Within these centers are also the various toys and materials that enhance learning of these content areas through self-exploration. In order for students to participate it is deemed of great importance for preschool educators to follow developmentally appropriate practices, which in this case calls for teachers to seek out and make use of toys that are suitable for the children’s age bracket. However do teachers also consider gender diversity when selecting materials for the classroom and are all these materials in a preschool classroom equally appealing to all genders? Hanline (1999) explained how it is fundamental to have an inclusive model if a teacher wants to successfully implement a play based curriculum. There are two main features of the early childhood environment that influence young children’s perceptions of both gender and gender stereotypes: classroom materials and the instruction of teachers (Gee & Gee, 2005).

Gender Stereotypes in the Preschool Classroom

Children as early as Preschool age demonstrate knowledge of gender stereotypes (Martin,

Ruble, & Szkrybalo, 2002). One type of play in particular that seems to express the most visible evidence of gender stereotypes or nonconforming gender stereotypes in children's amusement is Symbolic Play. Symbolic Play is described as imaginative role-playing that involves the transformation of persons, objects, or events into make-believe or pretend persons, objects, or events (Hanline, 1999). There are two types of ways children participate in Symbolic Play. Children may engage in macrosymbolic play, where they assume pretend roles or they may engage in microsymbolic play, where they use miniature toys that are replicas of actual objects (Hanline, 1999). There has been extensive research on the impact of gender stereotypes on children's play. For instance, the findings of Martin & Eisenbund (1995) suggest that children's choice of play is indeed gender based. The data in this particular study revealed that children preferred toys labeled as being for their own sex more than toys labeled for the opposite sex or unlabeled toys (Martin & Eisenbund, 1995). Children also generalized their predictions about others' choice of toys to their gender based perceptions of their own preference of the toy (Martin & Eisenbund, 1995). Therefore, the concluded thought process was— I am a girl this is a “girls” toy so only girls must enjoy this toy, and the same assumption follows suit for the opposite gender as well (Martin & Eisenbund, 1995). This data confirms the thought that children are aware of gender stereotypes at this young age. Researchers predicted that the overall attractiveness of each toy might persuade the child to engage in play. However, regardless of the alluring features of each individual toy, children in the study still had a tendency to select fewer toys that were labeled as being for the opposite sex (Martin & Eisenbund, 1995). In another study conducted by Freeman, children ranging from three to five years of age were asked to identify what they considered to be “girl toys” and “boy toys.” In addition, children were also asked to predict their parents' reactions to their choices of gender-specific toys. The research

indicated that the parents of the children rejected common gender stereotypes in relationship to toys and physical activities (Freeman, 2007). However, the alarming part of the data showed that the children who participated in the study predicted that their parents would consistently apply these stereotypes as reflected by their acts of approval or disapproval of their children's choices to play with either gender stereotyped or cross-gender toys (Freeman, 2007). Toy companies are aware of gendered consumer preferences, and develop and market their toys according to these trends, therefore narrowing the broader options which in turn enhance the gendered toy market (Williams, 2006). Both girls and boys in this study preferred gender typical activities to gender-atypical activities when partaking in solitary play (Goble et al; 2012). Play with male peers increased children's play with masculine activities, play with mixed-gender peer groups increased play with neutral activities, and interactions with teachers increased play with feminine activities (Goble et al; 2012).

At the assessment for Gender Identity Disorder during childhood, 60% of girls already met the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* criteria for GID, while the remaining 40% were on the verge for being diagnosed as well. The age of testing occurred from three years of age ranging up to twelve years meaning that one of these students may have been in a Preschool setting. Research suggests that transgender adults participate in play that is regarded for the opposite gender. Participants classified as Gender Dysphonic at the follow-up during adolescent and adult year recalled significantly more cross-gender identity and role behavior in childhood than participants classified as having no Gender Dysphonia (Drummond, Bradley, Peterson-Badali, & Zucker, 2008). The percentage of feminine play that boys engaged in was found to be significantly aligned with gender disturbance (Rekers & Morey, 1990).

Most of the research gives the impression that students tend to pick toys based on their gender, however how do educators know what type of toys are best for the classroom? In a study created by Cherney et al (2003) results revealed that when both boys and girls were observed playing with female stereotyped toys their play complexity was at its highest level. Cherney et al (2003) explains that perhaps the over identification for boys in early intervention services may result in the underestimation of the boys cognitive functioning since they may not want to partake in female stereotyped play.

Usually teachers in the early childhood setting frequently conduct Read Alouds during circle time, and during center time children are often given the opportunity to explore books. Literature is another important component of learning in a Preschool Classroom and can also aid in children's understanding of gender. In the world of children's literature, analyses of the distribution and representation of gender, biological sex, and gendered behavior in picture books often focused on Caldecott Award-winning literature (Crisp & Hiller, 2011). Children need to read stories depicting gentle men and strong women (Sapp, 2010). Sapp (2010) observed that the books that did explore gender variance involved authors that would retell a traditional tale where a male is in the protagonist role by switching it so that a female is in the main character role. In her opinion this has the potential to demonstrate the character's intelligence, wisdom, courage and ingenuity which is not often displayed in other types of children's books (Sapp, 2010). Out of the fifty-three books explored most had white males as the character (Sapp, 2010). These representations may have the power to lower self-esteem and increase feelings of "invisibility" for readers of all genders who don't fit the binary, culturally sanctioned ideals of "male masculinity" and "female femininity" privileged in these texts(Crisp & Hiller, 2011). Teachers, caregivers, librarians, and all interested adults have a responsibility to continue the often difficult

work of recognizing their own assumptions about gender, especially when guiding young people who are engaging in their own critical explorations of how literature and media work to establish what it means and looks like to self-identify in gendered ways (Crisp & Hiller, 2011).

Being Ostracized & Bullied

Parents tend to criticize boys for cross-gender-typed play meanwhile girls receive less of a reaction when it comes to their participation in cross-gender-typed play (Fagot, 1977).

Freeman's (2007) data also revealed that although parents deemed their child's interaction with various toys acceptable, parents' verbally expressed discomfort about boys' behaviors that are considered to be "feminine." Nevertheless, these parents did not convey much concern with the idea of girls who were considered to express "tomboy" behaviors. If some family members struggle with the idea of acceptance how are those who are unrelated to these children to deal with their nonconforming behaviors?

A National School Climate survey that was examined in 2011 shared LGBT students negative experiences with their peers. On a frequent basis 61.4% of students who participated in the survey heard negative remarks about gender expression. 43.9% of these students felt unsafe because of their gender expression. 63.9% of students were verbally harassed because of their gender expression. 27.1% were physically harassed because of their gender expression. 12.4% of students were physically assaulted because of their gender expression. Almost all individuals who had experienced physical violence (97.7%) reported that in at least one of these instances, gender identity or expression was the primary reason for the violence. 89.2% of those who experienced sexual violence reported that their gender identity or expression was the primary reason for the violence (Testa et al., 2012). Statistics on the number of cases of bullying in response to gender identity and gender expression throughout all the studies seem to be within

the same range and within a high percentage range. Testa et al., 2012 continues to build off this data by sorting the experiences according to their relationship status to those who are bullying. Physical violence was most often perpetrated by a complete stranger (47.4%), acquaintance (27.1%), family member (23.3%), or primary partner (14.3%), while sexual violence was most often perpetrated by an acquaintance (48.4%), family member (33.3%), complete stranger (25.8%), or primary partner (24.7%). Boys experience victimization in school due to actual or perceived LGBT status and gender nonconformity at higher rates than girls (Toomey, Ryan, Diaz, Card, & Russell, 2013). The National School Climate Survey backs up this by stating that female students reported lower frequencies of victimization based on sexual orientation and gender expression and were less likely to feel unsafe at school.

Children who adhere to gender stereotypes see the struggle that these other children face when participating in nonconforming behaviors. It was inferred that young children are aware of the pressures that boys need to behave in sex-typed ways because the participants used such a high percentage of sex-role reasoning when discussing boys' dislikes (Eisenberg, Murray, & Hite, 1982). Children's gender typicality was related to same- and other-gender-typed interests, but not to other-gender friends, indicating that children do appear to base their judgments of their own gender typicality (at least in part) on their gender-typed attributes. (Eisenberg, Murray, & Hite, 1982).

Since identity development is embedded in the interaction structures that organize the child's social relationships, different interaction structures will impact the kind of gendered self the child constructs. When placed in structures that expect stereotypical role performances, children are coached into definitions of the self that incorporate traditional limits and inequities.

By contrast, children who are provided with roles that balance opportunities and power relationships can construct the full potential of gender (Gosselin, 2007).

Poor Academic Performance

Gender nonconforming students and transgender students experience heightened negative experiences at school compared to students whose gender expression adhered to traditional gender norms. Transgender students were most likely to feel unsafe at school, with 80.0% of transgender students reporting that they felt unsafe at school because of their gender expression. Students who were more frequently harassed because of their sexual orientation or gender expression had lower grade point averages than students who were less often harassed. Students who experienced higher levels of victimization because of their gender identity were more than twice more likely to have missed school in the past month than those who experienced lower levels. This shows that a safe school environment is one of the first few steps that are necessary for a student to flourish academically. Students who experienced higher levels of victimization in school because of their gender expression were more than twice as likely to report that they did not plan to pursue any post-secondary education compared to their peers who experienced lower levels. On the other hand it was reported that students that came into contact with supportive staff reported higher grade point averages compared to other students. This supports evidence that a greater sense of belonging to one's school has an everlasting impact on academic achievement.

Depression

Students who experienced higher levels of victimization based on their sexual orientation or gender expression had higher levels of depression than those who reported lower levels. There has been a wide variety of data that have indicated high correlation between transgendered

people and the experience at some sort of psychological effects in the past couple of years. As seen in the data regarding bullying – acts of teasing and violence are typically observed in the adolescent years, however gender nonconformity before age 11 years is linked to elevated risk for depressive symptoms across adolescence and early adulthood, and that elevated prevalence of child abuse and bullying victimization in children who were nonconforming versus conforming accounted for most of this risk (“Gender nonconformity, bullying and depression,” 2013). Forty-seven percent of transgender men and forty percent of transgender women report significant symptoms of anxiety (Budge, Adelson, & Howard, 2013). Fifty-one percent of transgender women and forty-eight percent of transgender men report significant symptoms of depression (Budge et al., 2013). Rates of depression for transgender individuals range from 48% to 62% (Budge et al., 2013). It appears that individuals who are in the beginning stages of their transition process use more avoidant coping, and thus experience more distress (Budge et al., 2013). Avoidant coping occurs when individuals try to prevent an emotional response to the stressor, for example, using avoiding behaviors or cognitions, minimizing the problem, trying to detach oneself from the outcomes of a problem, or overeating or drinking (Budge et al., 2013). Detachment and depression can lead to more serious issues for transgendered people. For instance a study including 350 self-identified transgender persons ranging from 18 – 69 years old found that trans- women who had experienced physical violence were also significantly more likely to report a history of a suicide attempt in comparison to those who had not experienced physical violence (Testa et al., 2012). According to the 2011 National School Climate Survey those students who had endured physical and/or sexual violence were significantly more likely than those who had not had such experiences to report a history of suicide attempt and multiple suicide attempts.

Teacher's Experience with Nonconforming Gender Stereotypes

Teachers bring their beliefs and assumptions into the classroom with them, and these perceptions, consciously or unconsciously, manifest themselves in their own teaching practice (Myhill & Jones, 2006). Children who were gender nonconforming before age 11 years were more likely to be bullied and verbally and physically abused by *adults outside the family* (“Gender nonconformity, bullying and depression,” 2013). Specifically the National Climate School Survey revealed another alarming statistic regarding this adult-child relationship stating that 56.9% of students involved reported hearing negative remarks about gender expression specifically from their *teachers* or other professionals that make up the *school staff*.

One study uncovered that there are other variables besides an educator's personal beliefs and experiences when it comes to a teacher's own bias. The data presented a connection between a teachers' own gender identity and how that influenced their outlooks on their students' play. The study implied that male preschool teachers contribute with more playfulness at the same time sharing that this finding was not viewed as alarming to the participants because male and female teachers both agreed to witnessing this (Sandberg & Pramling-Samuelsson, 2005). The data also presented the idea that female preschool teachers tend to value calm play and emphasize the importance of social development, whereas male preschool teachers accentuate the significance of physical development (Sandberg & Pramling-Samuelsson, 2005). This is interesting because it seems that teachers can accentuate an ongoing cycle of gender stereotyped expectations in regards to their own gender. It would also be interesting to explore if there is some type of fluctuation in ideal types of play in educators who may identify as transgender, however research appeared to be limited in this area.

Gosselin points out issues that can arise when educators rely predominately on free choice. She shares that by allowing children to make decisions, a teacher's desire to empower children by giving them the opportunity to control their own working conditions, instead may undermine the larger social aim for the democratic value of gender equity and may also reinforce the cultural codes of femininity and masculinity. Gosselin observed a classroom that exemplified this and she noted that students typically stuck to working with their same-gendered peers. This can appear to be a problem because it may not allow students to interact with other genders in order to break stereotyped beliefs. What also comes to mind is where nonconforming or transgender students might feel comfortable gravitating towards in this type of environment?

Ideas for Classroom Implications

"The development of gender sensitivity in pedagogy...means a higher-order and flexible perspective which challenges one to pay attention to gender in order to prevent sexual bias and promote equality and equity in supporting human growth as an everyday pedagogical and context-bound praxis..." (Sunnari, V. 1997).

If educators wait until children are in the middle and upper grades, to address gender issues the task becomes one of unlearning prejudice instead of preventing it (Sapp, 2010). Most of the research regarding nonconforming and transgender students seems to be focused on the adolescent years but based on gender development theories concepts of gender begin in the earlier years. It is not enough for classrooms, teachers, and schools to be "open" or "non-judgmental", instead there needs to be a focus on being actively trans-positive (Dykstra, 2005). Dykstra (2005) author of a *Trans-Friendly Preschool* makes some suggestions for creating an actively transgender positive classroom. Cheryl Kilodavis (2012) shares this belief with Dykstra on the need of an "active" classroom. In her speech titled *Acceptance of the Male Image*

Kilodavis (2012) reflects briefly on the existence of anti-bullying programs in school systems, and suggests the establishment of an “acceptance” curriculum instead. Blaise & Taylor (2012) suggest using concepts of queer theory to rethink gender stereotypes in the early childhood classroom. The “queer” in Queer Theory represents the assumption that there is any existence of “normal” expression of gender (Blaise & Taylor, 2012). The theory links gender stereotypes to the norms of heterosexuality (Blaise & Taylor, 2012). Dykstra (2005) offers some thoughts on how teachers and students can be actively trans-positive through this notion of acceptance. Verbal and non-verbal communication have a strong influence on the social construction of gender (Gosselin, 2007). Dykstra (2005) emphasizes these two areas of importance when she makes the suggestion that educators utilize “some” and “most” when having a discussion about gender. This simple shift in speech can create the opportunity for acceptance of gender diversity within the classroom by not establishing universal characteristics that are strictly bound to “male” or “female.” Dykstra (2005) also advises teachers to affirm kids’ experiences but at the same time to not make a big deal of it. This can allow children to recognize and appreciate differences without viewing these differences as something that they should be alarmed about. Dykstra (2005) also supports the idea of encouraging children to question their own assumptions by advocating for a classroom where questions are allowed. Another recommendation she points out is for teachers to draw attention to gender benders reconfirming that each gender is not set by boundaries by identifying concrete examples. Blaise and Taylor (2012) have similar suggestions by using Queer Theory. For example, Blaise and Taylor (2012) suggest asking children to sort clothes and accessories from the dramatic play area into a pile for girls and a pile for boys and asking thought provoking questions.

Importance of Self-Reflection

A substantial amount of time in a teacher candidate's higher education in order to become a professional requires the candidate to write reflectively. Gosselin (2007) presents an excellent explanation on the importance of keeping up with self-reflective practices after educators finish their formal schooling by asking how programs can promote reflective practices and what this actually means for the teacher candidate who eventually becomes a classroom teacher and is no longer required to write reflectively. How do we, as philosophers of education, aid teachers to re-conceptualize the meaning of philosophy of education, evaluate the bearing philosophy has on the kinds of questions they ask, and how they can use philosophy as a tool to understand the juncture of theory and practice in the classroom (Gosselin, 2007). As professionals do we continue reflecting on our teaching practices.

There has been some research and some proponents for reflections when addressing gender diversity within the classroom. For instance, Blaise and Taylor (2012) who are promoters of using Queer Theory to reconstruct gender in the classroom highlight the importance of self-reflective educators. Blaise and Taylor (2012) state that with self-reflection, some teachers are inventing new developmentally appropriate practices that help them, as well as the children they work with, to challenge gender stereotypes by questioning gender and sexuality norms. Self-reflection seems to be an approach by parents as well as educators. For example, during a discussion titled *Acceptance of the Male Image* on TEDxTalks, Cheryl Kilodavis (2012) author of *My Princess Boy*, talks about her experiences as a parent of a five year old boy who enjoys wearing dresses. To understand the distress over the changing male image Kilodavis asks her audience to reflect on two thought provoking questions that were purposefully created to reflect on the fear of gender nonconforming people; questions that can certainly be a useful application

to other aspects of life as well. The first question is “why am I uncomfortable?” and the follow up question is, “Is what I am uncomfortable with (physically) harming anyone?”

The bigger question is can self-reflection give educators the opportunity to recognize their prior knowledge on gender issues, and identify and address any gender bias that they may have within their classroom? A study by Dewar & et al., 2013 explored this thought. Interviews were conducted with early childhood teachers regarding the impact of self-reflective teaching practices and their impact on gender. Three themes emerged after participants completed the self-reflective process which include professional development, critical self-awareness, and critical thinking (Dewar, Servos, Bosacki, & Coplan, 2013). By being aware of gender roles in the classroom as well as their own language, actions and practices, participants were better able to be cautious and willing to make the classroom more inclusive and accepting (Dewar et al., 2013). Critical thinking was a very important part of the self-reflection process for these Early Childhood Educators as it opened up their eyes and minds to how children learn in an early childhood education setting and what needs to be done in order to identify stereotypes surrounding gender (Dewar et al., 2013). The teacher participants themselves even regarded the self-reflective process as beneficial. In a search for the importance of self-reflection to ensure schools implement gender sensitive teaching practices Carter (1998) reports some of the thought provoking statements that teachers and other staff members created after reflections. One director from an educational program had a turning point when she recognized that she had not responded to a number of stereotypic and derogatory comments about gay people from parents and staff. At the same time she knew that if these were comments about someone’s race or disability, she would have immediately challenged them (Carter 1998).

Based on the research, it seems as though gender stereotypes are already established in the Preschool years, and the materials in the classroom and teachers' biases have the power to strengthen these stereotypes. Research focuses on the negative experiences of transgender students at a secondary level classroom, however gender is constructed in an earlier setting. This emphasizes the need to educate students on gender diversity at the early childhood level. This action research project will explore the benefits of utilizing self-reflections to recognize the Early Childhood teachers' prior knowledge of LGBTQ issues, exploring their classroom makeup and pedagogies to explore if their classrooms are truly "inclusive" and "accepting" of gender diversity. Collaboration on coming up with ways to push the focus towards being an "accepting gender" classroom rather than just incorporating an anti-bullying program, will also be attempted.

Methods

Materials

Numerous scholarly peer-reviewed research articles in the field of education were reviewed for the Conceptual Framework, and Literature Review sections of the thesis and findings from these articles were also shared with the participants. The materials utilized for this study to occur included an Informed Consent Form for Participants to sign, and a series of eight independently created Questionnaires made by the researcher. The Informed Consent Form states the purpose of this study which is researching gender diversity and the classroom environment in order to learn how to create an accepting classroom that creates equal opportunities for students of all genders. The consent form also states that if at any point a participant may feel uncomfortable, that he/she could leave study at any time and any information that had already been provided by them would be destroyed. Please refer to the Appendix to view the Informed Consent Form. The Eight questionnaires were divided by a particular topic for each week. For example, the First Questionnaire the “Background Information Questionnaire” was constructed with the purpose of discovering the participants’ prior knowledge of the subject matter, personal experiences with the subject matter, as well as their personal beliefs. The complete set of questions that participants answered can be found in the Appendix. The second questionnaire allowed for teachers questionnaire to reflect on their everyday use of language within their classroom. For a complete list of questions please refer to 2nd Questionnaire: Language in the appendix of this paper. The remaining questionnaires focused on a different center that is located in each of the classrooms every week. The questionnaires focus on centers because the setting where the study focused on follows a play based curriculum. The third Questionnaire focused on the Reading Center, the fourth Questionnaire focuses on the Art Center, the fifth Questionnaire focuses on

Dramatic Play, the sixth Questionnaire focuses on Science, the seventh Questionnaire focuses on Technology, and the eighth focuses on Questionnaire Blocks and Puzzles. To see each individual questionnaires in their entirety please refer to the Appendix.

Participants

Prior to implementing this study, teachers and graduate assistants from Wagner College's Early Childhood Center were given a consent confirm their interest in participating in this research based on a matter of convenience. The Informed Consent Form is located in the Appendix. The consent form also states that if at any point a participant may feel uncomfortable, that he/she could leave study at any time and any information that had already been provided by them would be destroyed. However, all participants followed through until the end of this study. Six employees in total agreed to become participants in this study. Three of the participants are teachers, and the remaining three participants are graduate assistants. All the participants were female and reported to identify this based on their genetic makeup. The years of experience in teaching ranged from Private Schools to Public Schools to Museum Educators for the Head Teacher Participants. All the head teachers have had at least fourteen years of experience as a lead classroom teacher. Meanwhile the graduate assistant participants explained that their experiences in the educational world ranged from student teaching, substitute teaching, work at various educational programs and tutoring with their years of experiences ranging from 1-4 years.

Setting

All participants are currently working or were working at the Early Childhood Center at Wagner College at the time that this study took place. The Wagner College Early Childhood Center is located in Staten Island, New York and is a school composed of four classrooms. The

school is licensed by the Department of Health of the City of New York and caters to children ranging from two to six years of age. Each classroom is under the daily guidance of a New York State certified Teacher, accompanied by 1-2 graduate assistants on a daily basis. The graduate assistant teachers are candidates for the Master's Degree in Education at Wagner College. The student population consists of primarily middle class to upper class Caucasian students. The school offers both half day programs and full day programs. Parents of the students also have a choice whether to send their children two, three, four or five days a week. The philosophy at the Wagner College's Early Childhood Center follows a "learning through play" philosophy – where students develop emotionally, socially, physically, and academically by exploring various teacher-made learning centers. It is in this setting that the group meeting with the participants of this study was held for the purpose of collecting data. The last Friday, in one of the classrooms at the Early Childhood Center at times when the students were not present. If participants were unable to make a group meeting we met for a virtual conference to discuss as a group our individual reflections.

Procedure

The participant candidates were given an "Informed Consent Form for Participation in Research" to seek out those who are willing to participate, outline the rights of the participants, and to highlight the importance of their safety.

Prior to the implementation of the study, the researcher independently created Questionnaires composed of questions that would promote self-reflection and the participants were given these questionnaires on a weekly basis. Every Monday, they were handed out and asked to be completed independently and submitted back to the researcher the Thursday of the same week. The researcher read the responses and took notes of any outstanding ideas or

thoughts or any reoccurring themes. The last Friday of the questionnaires the group reflection was held.

On Monday, February 3 the study commenced with the initial questionnaire. This initial questionnaire sought background information about the participants including their name, their role at the Early Childhood Classroom (head teacher versus graduate assistant), and years of experience in the educational field. Their name was kept confidential and the researcher used an alphabet code for the classroom teacher participants and a numerical code for the graduate assistant participants, to ensure their confidentiality.

Once the researcher read the responses and took notes of any outstanding ideas and thoughts or any reoccurring themes, the participants joined together on the last Friday of the completed Questionnaires. Before the meeting commenced, the researcher gave back the participants their responses to refresh their memory, and to ensure their statements were clear and understandable, and were not tampered with. Once reviewing their own responses, participants were given the opportunity to share any self-realizations, identify aspects that are already implemented that are creating a classroom environment sensitive to gender diversity, and potentially come up with changes for the program in the future. The researcher also constructed final self-reflective questions that were answered as a whole group in addition to the group discussion. To read this Questionnaire, please refer to "Group Reflection" in the Appendix. Notes were taken by the researcher on any reoccurring themes or ideas. Before the meeting ended the researcher recited back some of the discussions points to ensure the participant's comments had not been misconstrued, and to clarify any details that may appear to be unclear.

Results

The following results are based on the participant's own observations, experiences, and beliefs and therefore reflect qualitative data. The names on the questionnaires have been removed and have been coded with the following letters or numbers to ensure the participants' privacy:

- Head Teacher Participants: A, B, C
- Graduate Assistant Participants: 1, 2, 3

First Questionnaire: Background Information

The participating teachers and graduate assistants compiled a variety of explanations of what gender means to them. Participant A explained gender simply as either male or female. While the other participants took a different approach for instance, Participant B described gender as a biological determination that can be validated or changed through self-identification. Participant C described gender as a state of being – meaning the social role influences what the person is comfortable with. The graduate assistants shared their personal definitions of gender as well. Participant 1 explained that gender is the sex one identifies, while Participant 2 explained that gender is reflected by one's actions and interests, and Participant 3 states that it can be biological but what matters is if they agree with that or not. Although all participants described differently what gender means, five out of the six participants touched upon some other form of identification other than just a biological definition.

As stated in the literature review of this thesis several studies reveal that concept of gender and gender identity are typically constructed at the Early Childhood levels and most of the participants' responses parallel the results from these studies. The youngest age specifically identified was from Participant 3 who stated that based on her experience and observations, she

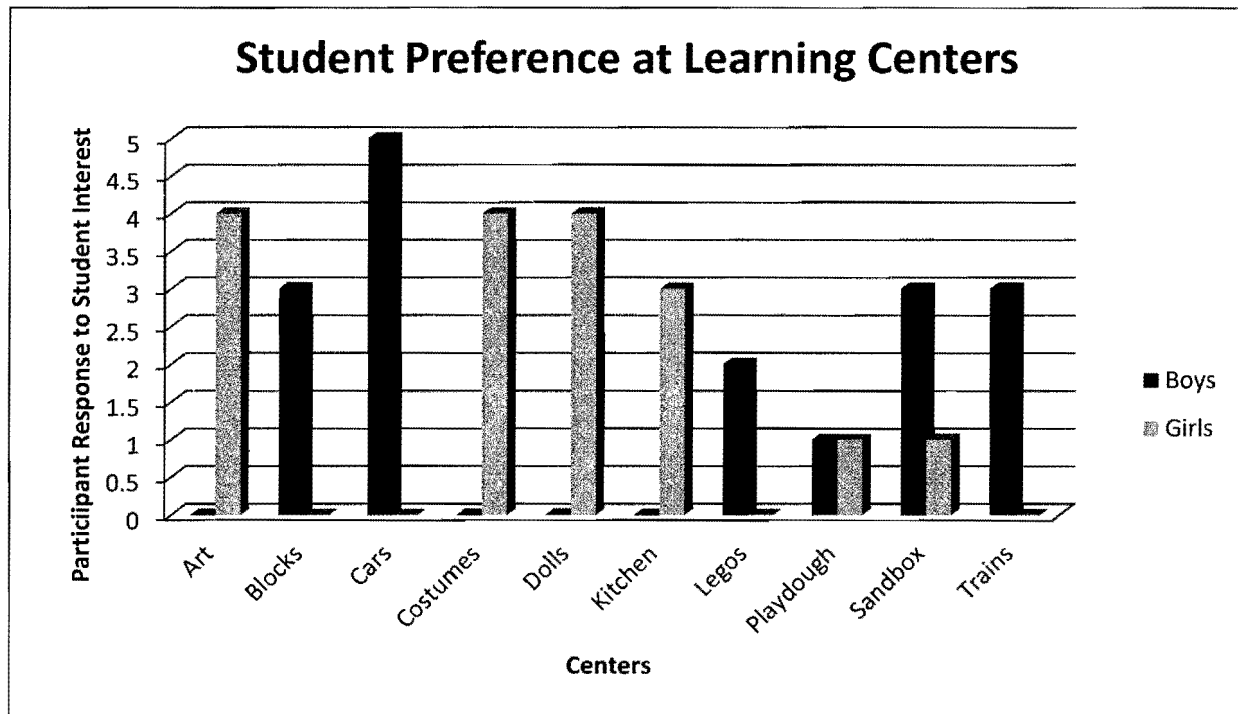
has noticed children as early as two having the ability to distinguish between gender and are expressing gender rules established by their parents. The oldest age discussed was by Participant 2 who shared that she believes gender is not fully understood until high school level because that is when gender identity is such a philosophical concept. All participants with the exception of Participant 2, came to an agreement that the early childhood years is the time period that they have noticed students gaining a grasp of concepts of gender.

When asked what a gender diverse classroom looks like and if this aspect is important for them in their own classrooms participants shared mixed reviews. Participant A expressed that this type of classroom was important to have. This type of classroom according to Participant A means that girls and boys are taught and treated the same. The levels of expectations are the same for everyone and opportunities to experience both “boy” and “girl” activities are open to all students. Participant C shared this view with A stating it is important because at the early childhood level teachers need to address social and emotional needs and milestones as well as cognitive ones. On the other hand Participant B shared that gender is an important aspect in our students’ lives, however, she deems this type of classroom that specifically emphasizes gender as unnecessary. Instead she believes teachers can provide a setting in which all students can be comfortable in other ways as well.

When asked if they take into consideration the gender of their students when constructing their classroom, all participants except C agreed that they are consciously aware of gender when they design their classroom. Together Participants A and B explain that they ensure that their activities are open-ended and are not deemed gender specific. On the other hand Participant C explained that her classroom is based on students’ interests and the biological makeup of the

classroom. Participant 2 expanded on this notion saying that gender diverse classrooms is where teachers do not assume interests based on the child's gender.

Participants were asked to reflect on what centers they believe the students are interested in based on their gender. Below is a graph of the results.



The majority of the participants noticed same interests in centers based on their students' gender. Participants A, B, and C were in agreement that their female students seem to enjoy the dramatic play center which includes the kitchen and dolls, in addition to the arts and crafts center. Participant B was the only participant to disagree with girls favoring the costumes over boys, because there are some costumes in particular that appeal to male students as well. Simultaneously all participants agreed that the boys' favorite centers were blocks, cars, trains, and Legos. The participants believe that all children tend to enjoy the playground, computer, sensory tables (which includes centers such as playdough, and water table).

When it comes to non-stereotyped gender play none of the participants noticed any

significant accounts of bullying. Two of the Participants, 1 and 2 had not seen or heard of any accounts of bullying. Participant 1 explained this is because they are too young to have a strong stance on stereotypes. Participant C also stated in her response that the children in her classroom are too young to partake in something like that. However, three participants (A,C,3) have observed situations where students made comments to one another regarding their choice of play. For instance, they observed comments like, “That’s for girls” or “He has on high heels.”

Participants were also asked if they ever had a parent express concern regarding their child’s choice of play. All the head teacher participants (A-C) have had situations where that has happened, or is currently going on where a parent mentioned uneasiness about their child’s play. Participant A for instance shared that she had some parents that were concerned over their boys using the girl’s dress up clothes. Participant C had a similar experience in which two moms expressed concerns about their sons enjoying wearing their high heels. Participant B shared that a mother suggested that her son wear a princess hat for crazy hat day, however her husband vetoed the thought. Participant C expanded on her answer by stating that she never had a parent worry about girls playing with something that may be deemed as “boy toy or boy activity.” The graduate assistant participants had no experience like this related to the Early Childhood Center, although the Head Teachers they worked with had. For instance, Participant 2 explained that they refer to the head teachers for matters like that. Participant 3 expanded her reflection by sharing a story outside the Early Childhood Center, saying that a boy she babysits for isn’t allowed to watch Disney movies or play in the Kitchen because his dad believes these toys are too “girly.”

The last question required participants to express their own opinions on non-gendered stereotype play. Five out of the six participants used the words– “explore” and “experiment” to describe their opinion on students who may express gender roles not typical of their biological

sex.

To read the questionnaire in its entirety please refer to the Appendix.

Second Questionnaire: Language

This second questionnaire involved questions that asked participants to reflect on how they speak to each particular gender, and their classes as a whole.

Common sayings that Participants A,C, and 3 used when addressing girls in the classroom include: Miss (Name), sweetie, sweetheart, big girl, nice girl, strong girl, and good friend. Common sayings that Participants A,C, and 3 used when addressing boys in the classroom include: buddy, strong boy, good friend, dude Mr. (Name), and handsome.

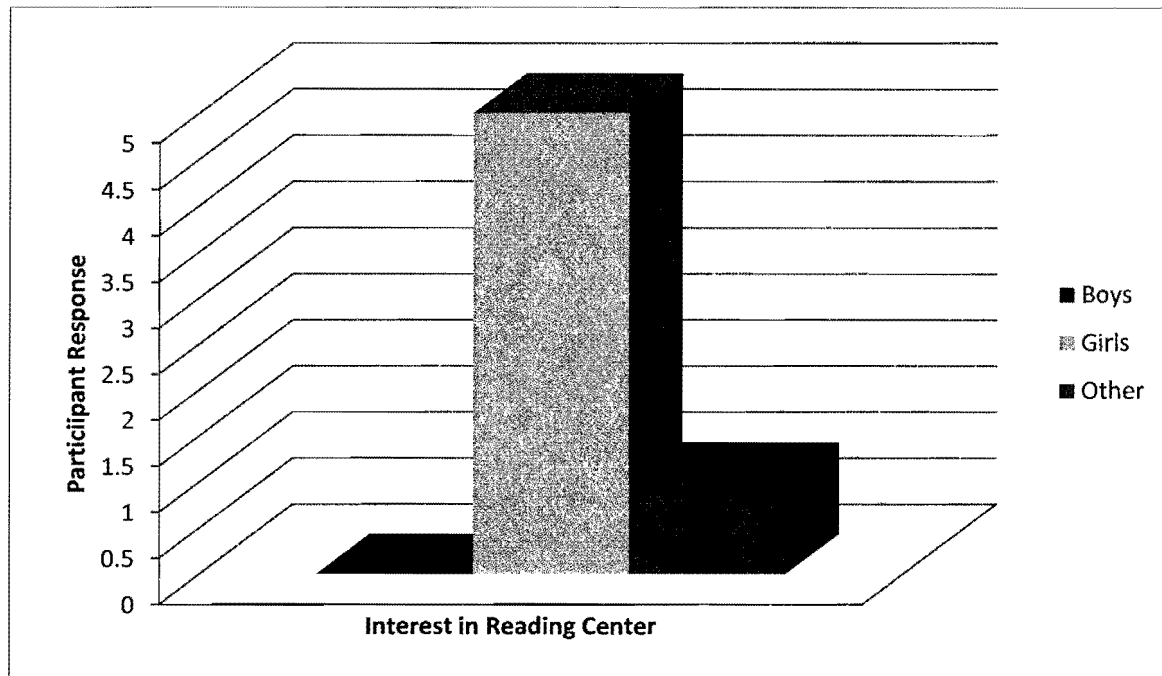
Participant 1 shared that they tend to address students by their biological gender, for instance saying sweetie to girls and buddy to boys. Participant B on the other hand, stated that she utilizes the same words or phrases when addressing boys and girls. Upon answering the question about addressing issues with each particular gender, Participant C went into specifics sharing that she realized that she typically explains the problem more to a girl when correcting an issue, whereas with a boy she utilizes fewer and more direct words without explanation of why the issue is being corrected. When addressing a mixed group some words that were commonly used included friends, children, students, everyone, my friends, and boys and girls.

When asked if they could think of some ways they can alter their speech to promote a classroom that is sensitive to gender diversity, the participants suggested using gender neutral phrases such as “friends, children, and everyone” would suffice.

To read the questionnaire in its entirety please refer to the Appendix.

Third Questionnaire: Reading Center

This questionnaire commenced with asking participants to discuss which gender of students do they perceive to spend more time at the reading Center. Below is a graph representing the results of that particular question.



Although it was not mentioned in the first Questionnaire regarding interests based on gender, five out of the six participants agreed that the Reading Center is favored by female students. Participant C and Participants 1-3 all share the belief that girls tend to spend more time at this particular center. While Participant B, agrees as well, it was also noted that boys gravitate towards the reading center, however it seems to take them longer to become interested. On the other hand Participant A did not choose either female or male because she believes it depends on the individual child's interests, not necessarily the student's gender. This is reflected in the chart above, as "other." Participant 3 goes on to explain why boys may not favor the Reading Center stating that there is a stigma of what boys are supposed to enjoy. That is to say, if they do like to read they may do so in private rather than in class where a lot of other boys are present.

Participants each described what type of book appeals to their male and female students the most. Participants deemed books that involved animals and transportation were the most popular amongst boy students. Other types of literature include action-oriented books, and books about dinosaurs. When it comes to girls, popular choices include fairytale books generally with a princess in it, or a character that they can connect to, for example Dora was mentioned several times throughout the responses. Participant C and Participant 3 shared that they believe girls gravitate towards books that are aesthetically pleasing that can be described as “colorful” or “pretty.” Participant A explained that girls tend to not like factual books as much as boys.

Four out of the six participants believe that the books within the libraries include characters that do not solely represent a gender stereotypical role. Participant 3 believes that the literature that is exposed to young people often represent gender roles, because that is depicted as the “norm.” There are more books produced for the “norm” because it reaches a larger audience.

In order to get a wider range of students interested in this particular center, majority of the participants said to incorporate a variety of books that peak each individual student’s interest. Participant 3 expanded on this idea by saying that teachers can take the time out and ask students what type of books that they would like to read. Also suggesting for the students who can write can anonymously put their suggestions on paper so they would not feel embarrassed about their selection. Participant 2 said to seek out books that include interchangeable gender roles in order to appeal to all students regardless of their perceived gender. In addition, Participant A suggested hands on activities to peak interest in the reading center. For example, students can write their own stories and those stories can be put in the library for all students to read, and by acting out stories. Participant C suggests having a designated reading center time where all students must sit and pick a book and their teachers can take turns reading to them on a

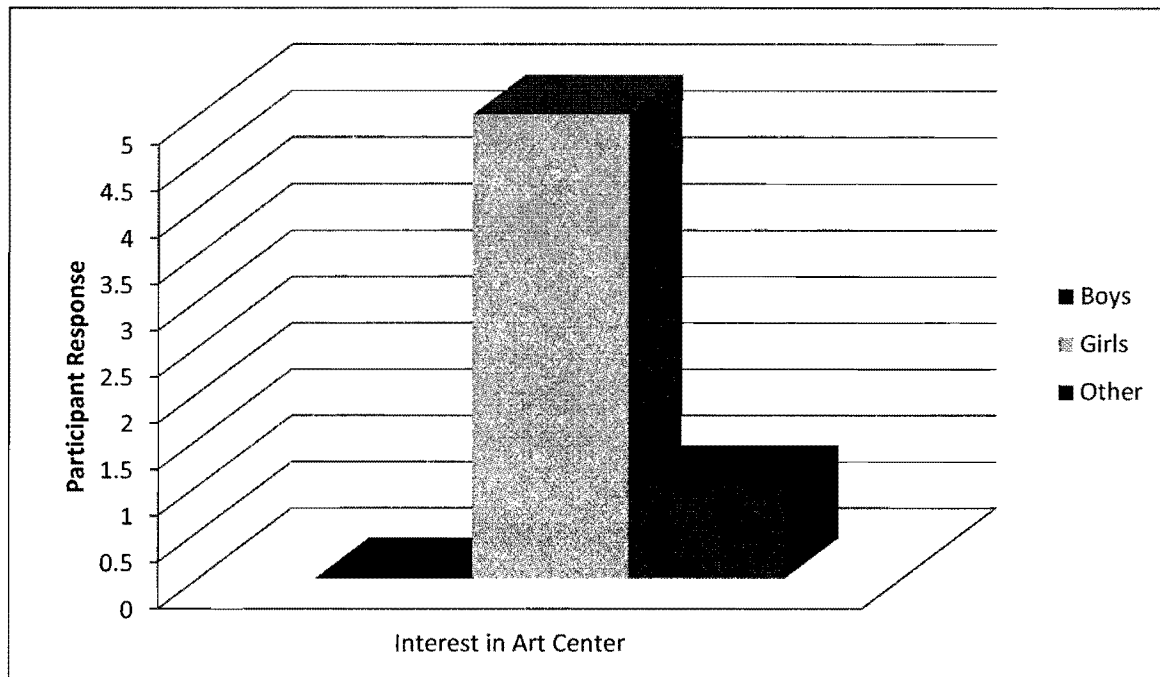
daily basis. Participant B also agreed with having a read aloud with a variety of books and having discussions afterwards which may lead to concepts of gender.

If there was a case of bullying because of atypical gender stereotype play, all the participants agreed that reinforcing the idea that these books are for all students is essential. Participant B would also question why the study considers this a “boy” book or a “girl” book in order to address their underlying bias. Participant 3 thought of an activity to combat bullying at this center by having a “swap week” where the girls could read “boy” genres and novels and the boys could read “girl” genres.

To read the questionnaire in its entirety please refer to the Appendix.

Fourth Questionnaire: Art Center

The first question for this particular questionnaire asked participants which gender of students do they perceive favors this center. Below is a graph representing the results of this question.



Participant C explains the reason that girls may enjoy this center more compared to boys is because they typically enjoy fine motor activities. Participant A mentioned how although it is favored by girls, this center is not avoided by boys. They occasionally participate as well especially since there is a craft every day that all students must complete. Participant 3 who is a graduate assistant for the half day program says that for this particular center it varies on the class. In the first class students of all genders tend to participate, meanwhile in the second class Participant 3 observed more girls flocking towards this center. This participant's answer is reflected as "other" in the chart above.

Although participants agreed that girls seem to favor the Art Center they described the art activities that boys enjoyed doing when there. The most common answer was painting, with the next two popular answers including cutting and pasting, along with decorating with bingo

markers. Participant 3 explains that boys may enjoy using these materials because they like destroying things and being messy.

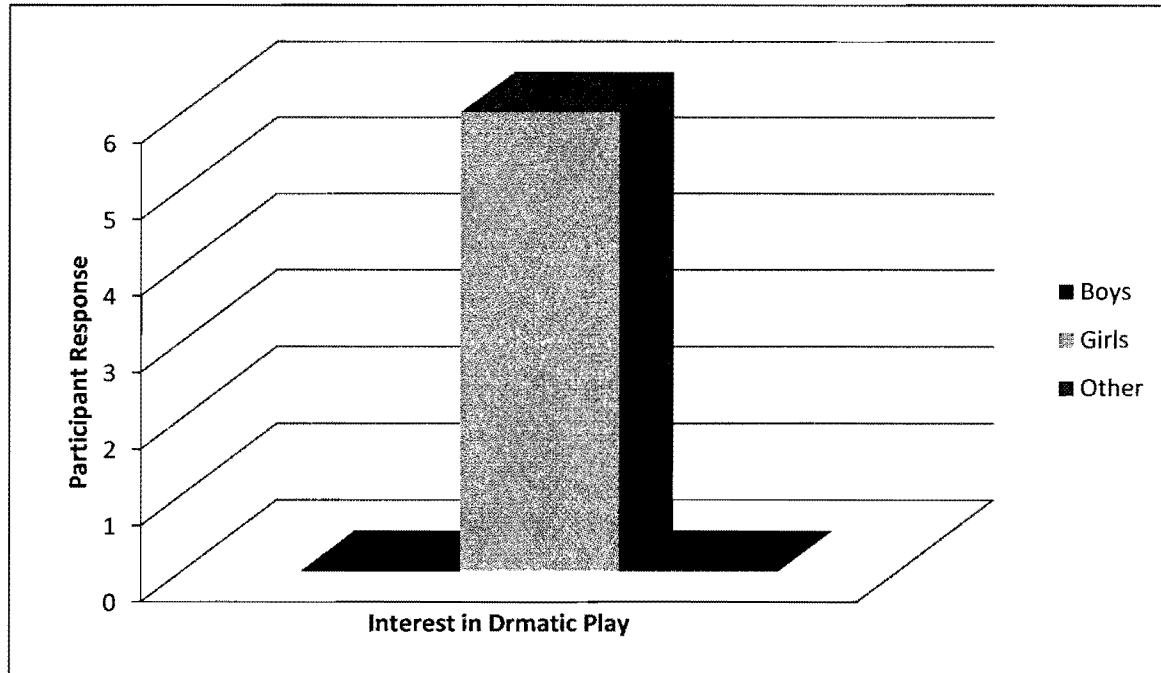
According to the participants when girls play at the art center their favorite activities include painting and coloring. Participant A and Participant C both explained that girls tend to enjoy these activities because girls tend to choose activities that involve fine motor skills, and these materials in these two types of activity allow for them to do so.

When asked if they believe factors such as choice of color at the art center has an effect on whether a male or female student chooses to play or not majority of participants did not think so. For instance, Participants B and 2 shared that a majority of the male students often choose the color “pink” which is commonly viewed as a “girl’s” when making their arts and craft projects. However, Participant C agreed that these factors play a role on each gender, explaining that for example boys have a difficult time holding thin objects. Participant C continues to share that through selection of materials can easily address this issue and accommodate all students to allow for full participation. The rest of the participants agreed materials play a factor in choice of play, however they believe it is not because of the student’s gender, but rather due to their individual interests. For example, Participant 1 explained that a female student in her class will always participate in the center when there is the color blue involved, because it is her favorite color.

To read the questionnaire in its entirety please refer to the Appendix.

Fifth Questionnaire: Dramatic Play

The first question for this particular questionnaire asked participants which gender of students do they perceive favors this center. Below is a graph representing the results of this question.



In accordance with the data from Questionnaire 1 participants were consistent with their observations and 100% of the participants agreed that this center which includes the Costumes, Kitchen, and Dolls is a favorite amongst girls rather than boys.

Six out of the Seven participants say that they believe their female students tend to choose dresses and princess costumes. Participant 1 however, says that they favor the animal costumes, and will occasionally try on the dresses. Two participants expressed how boys seem to prefer using the accessories rather than wearing a full costume. For example they will put on the hats, use the doctor's kit, and sometimes try on the heels. Participant A states that the boys will sometimes even take the aprons and tie them around their necks to make a cape so they can pretend that they are superheroes.

According to the participants some of the costumes that they consider gender neutral

include the career costumes and the animal costumes.

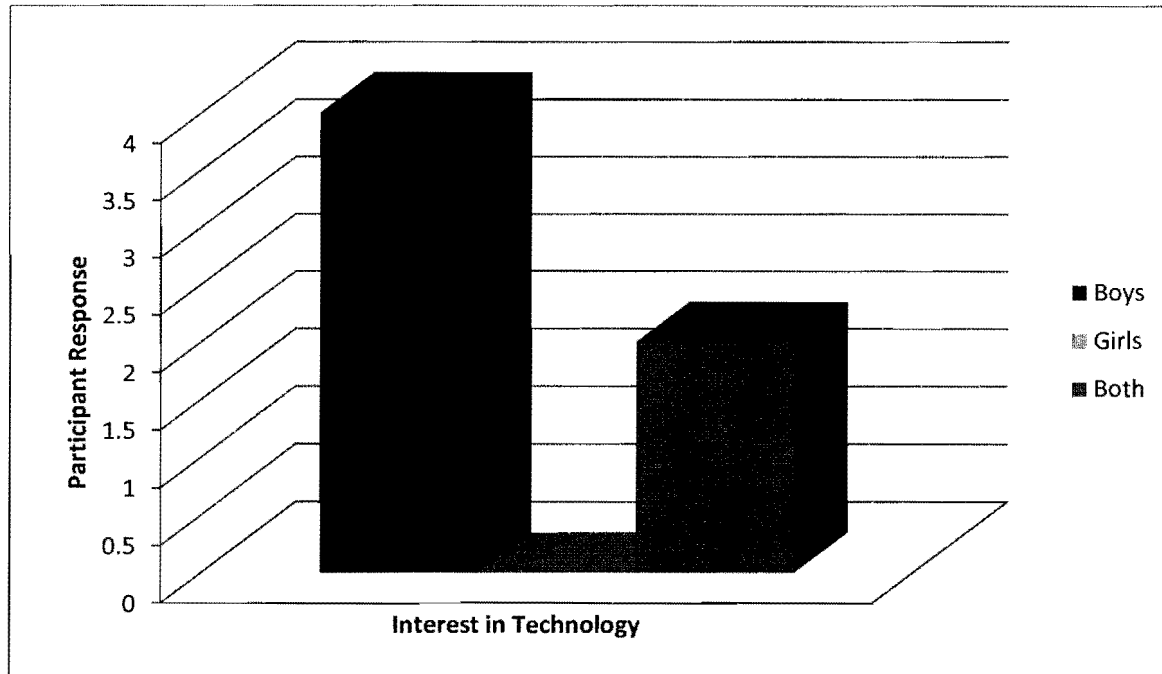
In order to get a more diverse population playing at the dramatic play center Participant B suggests using the items from the dramatic play center to reenact the Read Alouds. Participant B and C both suggest putting the costumes in a closet instead of a dresser. Participant C also suggests providing “male” clothes for the baby dolls.

Four out of the six participants stated that they would address bullying by verbally reinforcing the idea that the toys are meant for all the students. Participant B suggests by incorporating the costumes into daily instruction, for example acting out a read aloud using the costumes, allows children to visibly see that these materials are for everyone. Participant 1 states that reading books that address gender stereotypes may teach children that not everyone looks the same, and that is okay.

To read the questionnaire in its entirety please refer to the Appendix.

Sixth Questionnaire: Technology

The first question for this particular questionnaire asked participants which gender of students do they perceive favors this center. Below is a graph representing the results of this question.



A wide range of participants claimed that both genders equally shown interest in this particular center, which is indicated as “both” on the chart above. Participants A, 1-3 stated that they believe boys favor this center. However, Participants B and C disagreed stating that they believe their students do not typically show much interest in this center, but when they do it’s a mix of both genders.

When it comes to the type of games at this particular center, the head teachers and graduate assistant participants both agree that all the games at this center are gender neutral because there are only educational games allowed. According to the participants these games often include references to educational shows that are geared towards children, such as Blue’s Clues and Franklin. Other games often reflect children’s literature as well, for example Dr. Seuss. Participant A continues off this idea by saying that the boys often ask for non-educational

games that are not on school property, by asking for types of games that they play at home. However, the girls seem to be content on the choices that the teacher has picked, and rarely ask for a different game to be played. Participant 2 shares a similar experience saying that a good majority of these young students have their own iPads and you can often hear them discussing these applications such as Angry Birds.

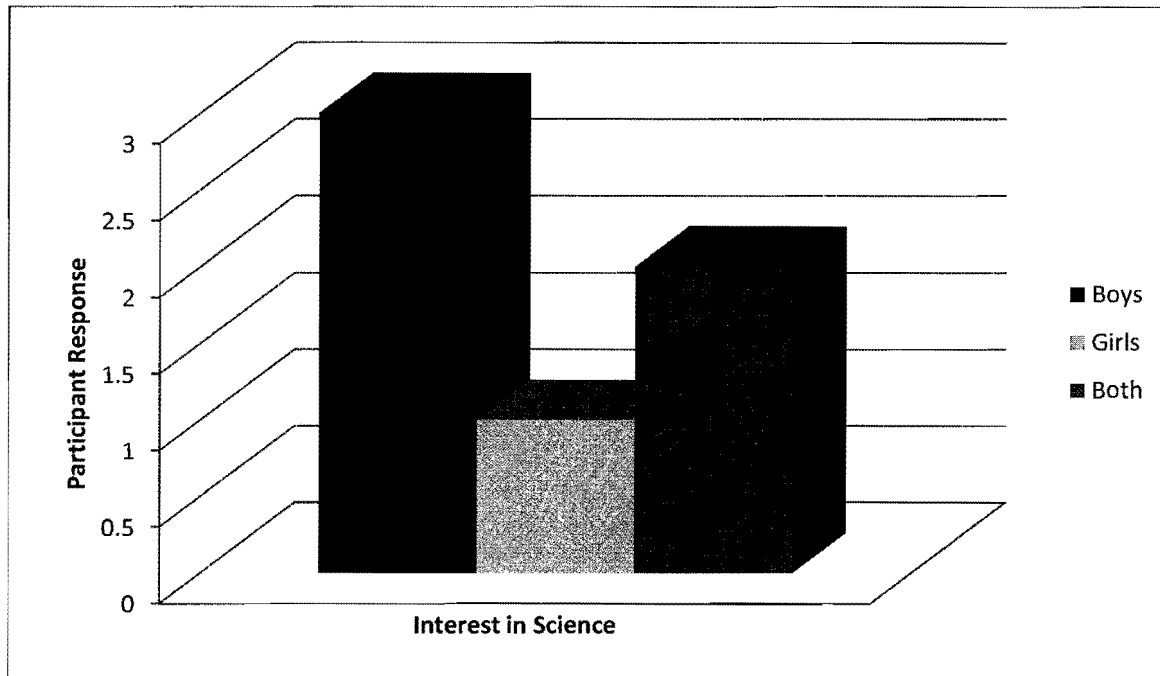
Participants said that although more boys express their enjoyment for this center, a fair amount of girls still participate as well. So regarding increasing the variety of student's several participants did not produce a solution. Participant A however says that she uses a timer which allows students to each have a chance at the center. Participant 1 also took notice of this implementation and agreed the timer aids in allowing each child to partake in the activity. This participant expanded on this by also explaining that each child's name is written so they can visibly see whose turn it is so there is no fighting about who belongs at the center and who doesn't. Participant 1 continues to explain that this also eliminates bullying by reinforcing the rules that everyone is allowed to play these games, and that we must take turns.

Participants said that they could not foresee any bullying to occur at this particular center based on the gender neutral material that is already provided. Participant A, said if there was an instance that besides reiterating that there is zero tolerance and that they must share, that trying to have a girl and boy play together would eliminate any gender stigmas about who is allowed to play computer games.

To read the questionnaire in its entirety please refer to the Appendix.

Seventh Questionnaire: Science

The first question for this particular questionnaire asked participants which gender of students do they perceive favors this center. Below is a graph representing the results of this question.



Participant B and C replied that both boys and girls play at the center equally explaining that children especially at the early childhood level are naturally curious about the world around them. Participant 2 shares that on many occasions she has seen several students watch the classroom's pet fish swim, or even ask if they could help feed the fish. Meanwhile, Participant A who states that boys favor this center, describes how the male students always have a magnify glass in their hand.

Participants expressed that since the material within the science centers varies and is constantly changing this makes the science center gender neutral. However, participants shared the different types of activities that boys and girls in the classroom prefer when they are playing at this center. Boys seem to enjoy the "hands on" experiences particularly when it comes to topics that are interesting to them (for example dinosaurs and outer space). Participant C explains

that the boys like when things get messy. Participant 2 agrees with Participant C and even states an example of when one of the Head Teachers changed the Sand Table into a “Fossil Dig” when students were learning about Dinosaurs. Meanwhile other participants discussed that girls like to observe and make predictions. Participant C states the girl students in her class are analytical and always question “why.”

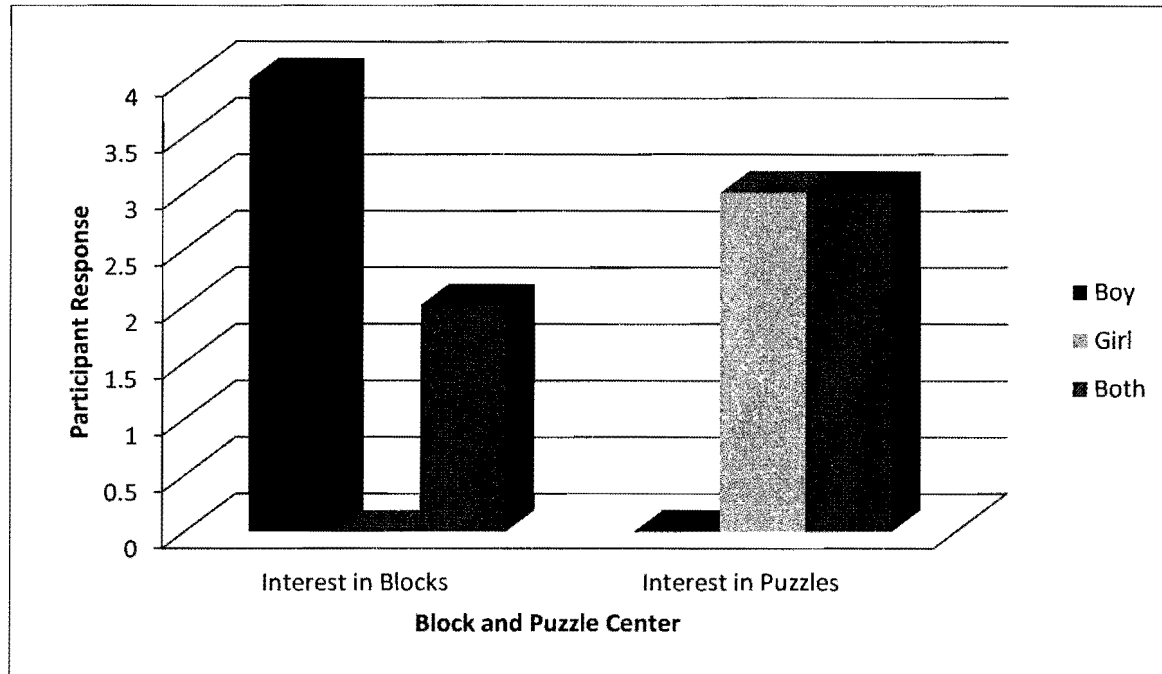
In order to increase interest of this particular center Participant 3 suggests posing a daily question every day for children to really think about to promote exploration. Participant 2 shares that incorporating “mini age appropriate experiments” would help. For instance in October students all were able to examine the inside of a pumpkin.

All the participants mentioned that they have not seen any signs of bullying at this center, nor do they foresee any problems in the near future. Participant B explains that because times are changing it is more acceptable for girls to be in the science fields in their adult years. In addition participant C adds that once again it is due to the children’s naturally inquisitive natures at this age that students work together nicely at this center. If participants saw accounts of bullying they would all discuss how the toys at each center are meant for all students.

To read the questionnaire in its entirety please refer to the Appendix.

Eighth Questionnaire: Blocks/Puzzles

The first question for this particular questionnaire asked participants which gender do they perceive favors this center. Below is a graph representing the results of this question.



When it comes to the blocks four participants believe that boy students predominantly play at this particular center. The remaining participants shared that they think both boys and girls spend equal amounts of time at this center.

Majority of the participants have not seen any bullying in the center in regards to non-gender stereotype play. Participant 2 explains that this is probably the case because all the blocks are either wooden or painted in primary colors and because all children love to create things. Participant 1 recalled a situation where a girl student would not allow another boy student help build the castle because “that’s not for boys.” Participant A on the other hand has observed that typically boys will knock down other student’s buildings that they have constructed. She addresses this by and putting the students in that situation by saying, “How would you feel if your friend did that to you?” and asking that child to help their friend build it again. The rest of

the participants agreed reinforcing the fact that the toys are meant for all students would address this issue.

To get a wider range of students interested in this area Participant B came up with the idea of having an instructional picture booklet for ideas of inspiration when it comes to building for those who might be “stuck.” Participant C also suggests that allowing the children to bring the tools or toy people to enhance their time at this center is a way to entice all students to play with blocks regardless of their gender.

When it comes to the puzzles the participants were evenly split in their opinions on what gender prefers these toys. Three participants (B, C, and 2) stated that they believe boys and girls equally spend time with the puzzles. The remaining participants (A, 1, and 3) shared that they think girls prefer this center over their male peers. All participants mentioned that they have observed their boy students enjoying puzzles that involve movement such as using magnets to move the pieces, and puzzles that require construction for example stacking. Girls on the other hand seem to prefer the more traditional puzzles. In addition, Participant 2 recalls in her response how the girl students love the dress up doll puzzle.

For the puzzles the teachers and graduate assistants both agreed that there are a variety of puzzles to choose from so that all students can feel included. This also means having images that are not exclusive to one gender, for example all princesses or all superheroes. Participant 1 shares that often the images on the puzzles are generic and sometimes will reflect the themes of the month. Participant C discussed an idea about creating their own puzzle as a craft to entice all students to want to assemble their own puzzle and help a friend as well.

Participants did not observe any account of bullying when it came to the puzzles. Participant 2 however did notice comments that were made by the students. A female student

was playing with the dress up doll puzzle and a male student wanted to help and the female student said it was her job because she was a girl. All participants agreed that if they saw a case of bullying they would verbally reinforce the rule that the toys are meant for all students.

To read the questionnaire in its entirety please refer to the Appendix.

Group Reflection

Participants noticed as a whole that girls tend to have a wider range of interests in a multitude of centers compared to the boys. The participants wish to try different tactics that they suggested in some of the questionnaires to ensure that all students can explore their interests without fear of rejection. Some ideas that were discussed included rotating centers at the beginning of the year to introduce students to every center and to introduce students to other children they may not typically choose to play with. Another idea was providing a wider range of materials for each center. For example, the reading center can incorporate books that may purposefully break gender stereotypes or gender roles such as the Paper bag Princess, or the Princess Boy. An idea for the dramatic play center is to and to obtain more costumes that all genders can connect with. Also on occasion, acting out the read aloud using the costumes, can help encourage a wide range of students to feel comfortable choosing certain items when it comes to free time. The participants felt that this would be a great interdisciplinary way to peak both interest in the reading center and dramatic play center.

When reflecting on the second questionnaire about language, as a whole group the participants were intrigued on how they tend to use gender specific speech when addressing each child. The participants did not see this as necessarily harmful, but could see how this may uncomfortable for children who may be questioning their gender identity. The participants are planning to continue using “friends” when addressing each individual child and as a whole

group, explaining that it creates a comforting classroom environment while simultaneously avoiding gender stereotypes. Also the participants want to be more mindful of their adjective use. For instance instead of saying you look “pretty” or you look “handsome” all the time teachers want to work on saying things such as “I really like that hat you are wearing today.” They do not want to avoid complimenting altogether because they believe it is an important part of the students’ social and emotional development, and that it creates a positive relationship between teachers and students. Being more descriptive in nature when complimenting can also help the students intellectually see what it is they are doing that is being complimented, so they can continue on this path.

A common theme that occurred is – As teachers how do we properly support gender development? While they believe that this free choice of centers enables children to comfortably explore based on interests which allows each student to take control of their own gender development, they also see how their own choices within the classes can be influential. Some members expressed interest in a professional development day involving gender development or LGBT. They explain this is because the concept of gender development is not as clear as they expected it to be, and because it is relatable to their classroom experiences.

When asked if they believed self-reflection was a helpful process, the teachers agreed that self-reflective practices allow them to ensure that their practices and philosophies have a purpose behind them, and that they are truly aware of what is going on in their classroom. They shared that it helps them question what is working and where can we improve. They also claimed that it helps as a conversation starter when it comes to collaborating with coworkers.

Discussion

Reviewing the data from the Questionnaires one can see that the Early Childhood Center at Wagner College has had its mix of experiences. Participants have observed their students experimenting with challenging gender stereotypes. They have also seen evidence that gender stereotypes and roles have been firmly established. All but one of the participants described gender as a something that is not defined just from a biological standpoint, so all participants are aware that gender identity is not a simple concept. The answers to the questionnaires, and discussions in the group meeting brought up many situations that aligned with research and that the participants did not realize were areas of improvement in their classroom. When setting up the classroom most teachers revealed that they do not typically take into special consideration the gender of their students, but are aware differentiation for gender diversity can occur in a number of other discreet ways. One of the purposes of using self-reflection was to examine the participants' views on children's free play at centers. From the results of the question, "What is your opinion on students at this age that may express gender roles that are not typical for their biological sex?" it appears that the Head Teachers and Graduate Assistants are comfortable when and if this is the case in their own classrooms. Using words such as "exploring" and "experimenting" also shows that the participants do not assume that because students partake in this type of play that this means that they will necessarily become gay or transgender later in life.

The Questionnaires particularly the ninth and tenth question on the first Questionnaire, revealed that the students of the same gender typically choose the same centers, and play with toys are deemed appropriate for each particular gender. Also, in accordance to prior research, the Early Childhood Center participants have also noticed that when it came to children expressing gender roles that did not align with biological sex, parents of male students expressed more

concerns than parents of female students. When discussing if they believe bullying in regards to gender is already present within their classrooms, the participants all agreed there are no circumstances of bullying. However, when the participants dove into more details the situation that was described always involved other children making comments about their peer's choice of play deeming that these comments were not necessarily acts of bullying in their opinion. While these comments are most likely harmless reactions for this exploratory period of understanding gender, perhaps these comments can turn into something deeper in the future. The ways teachers respond and react to these comments at an early age can impact their students' ways of thinking when it comes to gender roles. Something as simple as correcting the child afterwards by explaining that these toys or materials are available to every student in the classroom is a way to address issues of gender stereotypes gently and discreetly at a young age. Participants seem to be taking this approach of gender sensitivity through this general idea of promoting acceptance. To expand on this, teachers can also utilize materials, in particular children's literature to progress students ideas of gender constructs. Also when the participants specifically explained what was said the comments were often made by female students regarding the male's students interest in "girl's play." However, there were no accounts for same sex students to question their peers when they would want to participate in non-gendered stereotype play.

Examining the data, head teachers and graduate assistants appear to have similar views for a majority of the topics discussed. However one area in the data collection that stood out was in the first questionnaire that asked the question, "Have you heard a parent express concern regarding their child's choice of play in regards to gender?" All the head teacher participants had an experience with this situation, meanwhile all of the graduate assistant participants were unaware of these circumstances. In particular Participant 1 even stated that the parents seem to

be open and understanding when it comes to their childrens' play. This brings up an interesting question – should all faculty members be aware of parents' concerns to ensure that everyone is on the same page? Knowledge of these situations may lead to a conversation where participants can reflect if the head teachers and the graduate assistants agree upon how to properly handle gender diversity within the classroom. Also exposing this information about parental concern to graduate assistants , who have less experience compared to the head teachers, may give them experience they may need in addressing these gender development issues within their future classrooms.

The group reflection showed how utilizing reflections allowed teachers to take a step back and think about their daily lives in the classroom. The participants recognized some things they did not realize were significant, and based on these observations are willing to make some changes within their own classrooms. The participants also shared that they felt that this group meeting allowed them to dig deeper about the questions, and was a great way to collaborate ideas.

Limitations

Although the self-reflective questionnaires exposed several revealing points about gender in the early childhood setting, there were some limitations present in the study, in need of improvement in order to obtain deeper quality of research.

Setting

While this study focused on one setting, it would be interesting to see how other schools that represent different teaching philosophies handle gender diversity in their classrooms. Class makeup (number of students who identify as boys, and number of students who identify as girls) were not noted in this study, which may be a factor in some of the teachers responses.

Participant Pool

There was a total of six participants who agreed to be part of this study, which represents a rather small sample size. Although it worked for the present purposes having a greater quantity of participants could reveal a larger variety of data. In addition, if the participants had their own preconceived personal bias and beliefs towards LGBT this could have resulted in a reluctance to share their thoughts or to even make changes in their teaching styles based on reflections.

According to research families have such an influence on gender constructs. Perhaps including them in this reflective study would help devise a teaching philosophy agreed upon by both the teacher and the parents. The first Questionnaire showed an example of how parents at the Early Childhood Center seem to be more uncomfortable with the notion of boys participating in what is seen as “girly” activities.

Time constraints

Time seemed to be a prevalent issue throughout this study. Eight questionnaires in addition to a group reflection needed to be completed for the purpose of this study. Giving the participants longer time for the would suffice for deeper level self-reflections and also allow participants to concentrate on adjusting styles and observing and noting students’ behaviors as a result of their adjustments. Utilizing an online questionnaire system could perhaps avoid these issues with time due to schedule conflicts.

Questionnaires

Each questionnaire was long and time consuming which was difficult to complete on time, due to participants’ and researchers’ conflicting schedules. The way the questions were composed may have appeared biased leading participants to perhaps think they had to answer a certain way. In

addition the style of questions could have been varied in order to clarify discussions better – such as check all that apply or circle how often this occurs, along with a section to explain.

Further Research

While this action research project has answered some questions about gender diversity within Wagner College's Early Childhood Center, it also has revealed several more questions that further research can answer.

One to examine further is creating a longitudinal study looking at teachers who have used their reflections to adjust their teaching practices, and examining the effects it has on the students in relation to their gender development experiences. This would be vital to ensure if self-reflective practices indeed aid in creating educators who are aware of their students and their comfort in the classroom. It may also answer the larger question - should we focus on LGBT issues as early as an early elementary school setting and what is the best way to approach this topic. In addition, further research needs to be done on exactly what teaching strategies and approaches best aid in the development of gender.

Another question this study introduces is the differences in the reflections between the head teachers and graduate assistants and thus examining the dynamics of employees in the classroom – what happens if their educational philosophies about gender development clash? One can also examine what type of reflection works better self-reflection or group reflections to ensure that the employees are in agreement about how to handle gender diversity.

Participants in the study did not undergo any professional development for these topics and their reflections were based on their own preconceived notions and observations. If these educators were to go to professional development in areas of Gender Development or LGBT for Early Childhood Educators a researcher could examine the effects it has on their teaching styles,

and from a larger standpoint how that in turn affects their students' gender development.

The data from the questionnaires revealed that the head teacher participants did receive some concerns from parents about their child's exploration in play. To extend this research a questionnaire could be created for the parents to see their stance on gender stereotypes and to see if it agrees with their child's teacher's philosophy on gender development. This research can also benefit teachers and graduate assistants in grasping their individual philosophy so that they are able to explain social and emotional milestones to parents. This situation may also lead to workshops for the parents to attend.

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Appendix

Informed Consent Form

WAGNER COLLEGE

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Informed Consent Form for Participation in Research

As part of my master's degree requirements at Wagner College, I am conducting research on gender diversity and the classroom environment in order to learn how to create an accepting classroom that creates equal opportunities for students of all genders. You are invited to participate in this research project, and this document will provide you with information that will help you decide whether or not you wish to participate. Your participation is solicited, yet strictly voluntary.

For this study, I will be using an "action research" model, where participants are co-learners with me around an issue of practice. During the course of the project, I will start by researching how different genders learn, gender identity, and teaching practices that deal with gender differences. After reading through the studies I will take notes on our own classroom environment. If you were to participate, I would ask you to read some of the research I found and then participate in filling out a questionnaire and discussing as a group what changes can be made to ensure student participation in the classroom. All information you provide during the project will remain confidential and will not be associated with your name. My final thesis will also be cleared of any possible identifying information in order to ensure your confidentiality.

The project does not carry any foreseeable risks though it is possible that some participants might feel uncomfortable discussing some of the topics related to gender role. If for any reason you felt uncomfortable, you could leave study at any time with no penalty, and any information you may have provided would be destroyed.

If you have any questions concerning this study please feel free to contact me at Amanda.chartier@wagner.edu or (718)208-5402. For further information you may also contact Dr. Demoss at Karen.demoss@wagner.edu. Thank you for considering being part of a study related to my research for a master's degree in Education at Wagner College.

Please sign below to indicate your understanding of the project and your consent to participate. I have provided two copies so that you may keep a duplicate for your records.

Please sign below to indicate your understanding of the project and your consent to participate. I have provided two copies so that you may keep a duplicate for your records.

Signature of Participant

Date

Amanda Chartier, Investigator

First Questionnaire

As written in the consent form – Please remember if you feel uncomfortable at any time you may leave this study. You have the right to also skip any of the questions below that you do not feel comfortable answering. Any information you do submit will be presented in the study but your identity will remain anonymous.

(NAME)

(DATE)

Please circle the following:

Graduate Assistant

Classroom Teacher

Please share your experiences in the educational field indicating where you have worked, and the number of years:

1st Questionnaire Prior to classroom investigation/sharing research in literature

1. Describe what gender means to you.

2. At what age do you believe that children have a firm understanding of gender? Why?

3. Describe what an accepting classroom environment towards gender diversity looks like to you.

4. How important is it to you as a teacher, to create an accepting classroom environment in regards to gender diversity?

5. Do you take into consideration the gender of your students when selecting literature, toys, and/or crafts? Why or why not?

6. Which centers in your classroom do you think girls tend to favor?

7. Which centers in your classroom do you think boys tend to favor?

8. Which centers seem to be a favorite amongst children regardless of gender?

9. Have you ever seen bullying between students for their choice of non-stereotyped gender play? If so describe the situation.

10. Have you heard a parent express concern regarding their child's choice of play in regards to gender?

11. What is your opinion on students at this age that may express gender roles that are not typical for their biological sex?

Second Questionnaire

As written in the consent form – Please remember if you feel uncomfortable at any time you may leave this study. You have the right to also skip any of the questions below that you do not feel comfortable answering. Any information you do submit will be presented in the study but your identity will remain anonymous.

(NAME)

(DATE)

2nd Questionnaire (Language)

1. **What are some common words or phrases that you tend to use when addressing girls in the classroom?**

2. **What are some common words or phrases that you may tend to use when addressing boys in the classroom?**

3. **What are some common words or phrases that you may tend to use when addressing a heterogeneous sex group in the classroom?**

4. What are some common words or phrases that you tend to use when correcting an issue with girls in the classroom?

5. What are some common words or phrases that you tend to use when correcting an issue with boys in the classroom?

6. What are some common words or phrases that you tend to use when praising or complimenting girls in the classroom?

7. **What are some common words or phrases that you tend to use when praising or complimenting boys in the classroom?**

8. **Do you think your own gender has an influence on how you may speak to same sex or opposite sex students?**

9. **What are some common sayings that we can avoid that may create gender stereotypes? What are some things that we are already say that are aiding in creating an accepting a gender diverse classroom?**

Third Questionnaire

As written in the consent form – Please remember if you feel uncomfortable at any time you may leave this study. You have the right to also skip any of the questions below that you do not want to answer. Any information you do submit will be presented in the study but your identity will remain anonymous.

(NAME)

(DATE)

3rd Questionnaire Reading Center

1. As a teacher which gender do you believe tends to spend more time at the reading center during free time?

2. What books do boys tend to pick? Why do you think that is?

3. What books do girls tend to pick? Why do you think that is?

4. Does the literature within the reading center have characters that may not represent a gender stereotypical role?

5. As educators what are some ways we can get a wider range of students interested in the reading centers?

6. **As a teacher, how will you address gender roles if there is an occurrence of bullying at this particular center?**

Fourth Questionnaire

As written in the consent form – Please remember if you feel uncomfortable at any time you may leave this study. You have the right to also skip any of the questions below that you do not want to answer. Any information you do submit will be presented in the study but your identity will remain anonymous.

(NAME)

(DATE)

4th Questionnaire Art Center (Easel & Crafts)

1. As a teacher which gender do you believe tends to spend more time at the art center during free time?

2. What art activity do boys tend to pick? Why do you think that is?

3. What art activity do girls tend to pick? Why do you think that is?

4. Do you think variables such as the choice of colors/materials have an effect on who may play at this center?

5. As educators what are some ways we can get a wider range of students interested in the art center?

6. As a teacher, how will you address gender roles if there is an occurrence of bullying at this particular center?

Fifth Questionnaire

As written in the consent form – Please remember if you feel uncomfortable at any time you may leave this study. You have the right to also skip any of the questions below that you do not want to answer. Any information you do submit will be presented in the study but your identity will remain anonymous.

(NAME)

(DATE)

5th Questionnaire Dramatic Play

1. As a teacher which gender do you believe tends to spend more time at the dramatic play center during free time?

2. Why is this center important for social and emotional development?

3. What are some of the costumes that girls generally gravitate towards? Why do you think that is?

4. What are some of the costumes that boys generally gravitate towards? Why do you think that is?

5. What are some gender neutral costumes that are located in the center? Why do you think that is?

6. As educators what are some ways we can get a wider range of students interested in the dramatic play center?

7. As a teacher, how will you address gender roles at this center if there is an occurrence of bullying at this particular center?

Sixth Questionnaire

As written in the consent form – Please remember if you feel uncomfortable at any time you may leave this study. You have the right to also skip any of the questions below that you do not want to answer. Any information you do submit will be presented in the study but your identity will remain anonymous.

(NAME)

(DATE)

6th Technology (Computer, Listening Center)

1. Which gender typically gravitates towards this center? Why do you think that is?

2. What CD do boys tend to pick? Why do you think that is?

3. What CD do girls tend to pick? Why do you think that is?

4. Which aspect of this center seems to be gender neutral? Why do you think that is?

5. As educators what are some ways we can get a wider range of students interested in the reading centers?

6. As a teacher, how will you address gender roles at this center if there is an occurrence of bullying at this particular center?

Seventh Questionnaire

As written in the consent form – Please remember if you feel uncomfortable at any time you may leave this study. You have the right to also skip any of the questions below that you do not want to answer.

Any information you do submit will be presented in the study but your identity will remain anonymous.

(NAME)

(DATE)

7th Questionnaire Science

- 1. Which gender typically gravitates towards this center? Why do you think that is?**

- 2. Which aspect of this center seems to be gender neutral? Why do you think that is?**

- 3. What science activity do boys tend to pick? Why do you think that is?**

4. What science activity do girls tend to pick? Why do you think that is?

5. Which aspect of this center seems to be gender neutral? Why do you think that is?

6. As educators what are some ways we can get a wider range of students interested in the science center?

7. As a teacher, how will you address gender roles at this center if there is an occurrence of bullying at this particular center?

Eighth Questionnaire

As written in the consent form – Please remember if you feel uncomfortable at any time you may leave this study. You have the right to also skip any of the questions below that you do not want to answer. Any information you do submit will be presented in the study but your identity will remain anonymous.

(NAME)

(DATE)

8th Questionnaire Blocks/Puzzles

Blocks

- 1. Which gender typically gravitates towards this center? Why do you think that is?**

- 2. Which aspect of this center seems to be gender neutral? Why do you think that is?**

- 3. As educators what are some ways we can get a wider range of students interested in the blocks?**

-
-
4. As a teacher, how will you address gender roles at this center if there is an occurrence of bullying at this particular center?

Puzzles

1. What picture on the puzzles do you think girls gravitate towards? Why do you think that is?

2. What picture on the puzzles do you think boys gravitate towards? Why do you think that is?

3. Which puzzle seems to be gender neutral? Why do you think that is?

4. As educators what are some ways we can get a wider range of students interested in the puzzles?

5. As a teacher, how will you address gender roles at this center if there is an occurrence of bullying at this particular center?
