Exploring kindergartners' understandings of gender: responding to picture book read alouds with a focus on fairy tales

Karen Marie Maher
University at Albany, State University of New York, kmaher@albany.edu

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Exploring Kindergartners’ Understandings of Gender:
Responding to Picture Book Read Alouds
With a Focus on Fairy Tales

by

Karen M. Maher

A Dissertation
Submitted to the University at Albany, State University of New York
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the Requirements for the Degree of
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ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores four of my kindergartners’ understandings of gender across one academic year with an in-depth study of responses to a series of picture book read alouds including Cinderella variants. Critical literacy offered opportunities for these young students to critique inequities within social practices (Au & Raphael, 2000; Vasquez, 2014, 2017); whereas, poststructuralist feminism framed the inquiries into the locations of deeply ingrained gender identities (Blackburn, 2005, 2006; Blaise, 2005a, 2005b, 2014; Villaverde, 2008). This critical analysis of literature provided a means for the kindergartners to uncover underlying messages of power and inequity by interrogating whose voices were heard and whose voices were silenced (Freire & Macedo, 1987; Harste & Vasquez, 2011).

Through the methodologies of case study (Creswell, 2007; Yin, 2009) and discourse analysis (Bloome, et al., 2008; Fairclough, 2003; Gee, 1999), three case studies emerged, drawing on the constant comparison of data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), analysis of intertextualities (Fairclough, 2003) and (re)positioning of participants (Davies & Harre, 1990; Harre & van Langenhove, 1991) from both structured and unstructured discursive classroom events. Structured events included transcriptions of picture book read alouds, discussions, and smaller focus groups; while unstructured events encompassed multimodalities such as dramatizations and play centers. Furthermore, the methodology of practitioner research (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Perry, Henderson, & Meiers, 2012) required transparency of my own gendered understandings as a teacher through the analysis of classroom discourse, practices, and curricula. Data sources included reflections, weekly lesson plans, video and audio transcriptions.
The findings of this study support gender as complex, dynamic and fluid, and contextualized varyingly through people, places, and events. The kindergartners’ explorations and expressions of gender revealed multiple perspectives and definitions of gender. The results also suggest subconscious reinforcement as well as intentional disruptions of heteronormative instructional practices across the school year. The findings of this study could benefit the wider educational field to inform and extend poststructuralist feminist conversations in the early childhood setting (Blaise, 2005a, 2005b; Thornton & Goldstein, 2005; Wohlwend, 2009, 2011, 2012). This study also has the potential to enhance local knowledge at the school and district level by promoting conversations regarding gender within spaces such as Professional Learning Communities (Perry, Henderson, & Meier, 2012). Additionally, this research seeks to promote acceptance for girls or boys who identify with areas of study and professions not typically aligned with their gender. Finally, this research responds to the increasing call for schools to be more responsive to the needs of children who experience harassment and discrimination due to gender.
DEDICATION

Morris swish, swish, swished.
The tangerine dress crinkle, crinkle, crinkled.
His shoes click, click, clicked.
Morris felt wonderful.
-Baldacchino, *Morris Micklewhite and the Tangerine Dress*

To Miguel - Thank you for entering into my life. May you always feel wonderful, no matter what color dress you wear.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I have always been a reader. Real and imagined worlds, new possibilities, and the quest for knowledge drew me into books early on. I have vivid memories of reading vicariously as a child, bringing home stacks of books from school and the library, following authors and characters across books, and at times, becoming one with a character. I, too, became enaptured with Cinderella and other princesses within the pages of a book, and I remember dreaming of my own Prince Charming. The books I read transported me to other places, events, and times, yet I believe they also transformed me into the person I was becoming.

As an adult, I continue to read. I still follow my favorite authors or characters. I still wonder about my own experiences; and, I find I still turn to texts to learn more about the people, places, and events that spark my curiosity. I realized this was particularly true for my work as a classroom teacher of young children, as I eagerly poured through the works of teacher practitioners who wrote of their classroom experiences. Yet, I quickly discovered I typically started my reading of professional books by flipping to the back of the books, to the reference section, where I checked off the citations of countless other books, articles, and research studies for future reading, as well. Very soon, I began to appreciate a trove of educational researchers who expanded my understandings as well as motivated my own professional inquiries. As I read and learned more, I realized the less I actually knew. Yet, the less I knew, the more intrigued I became to learn even more. Thus, my journey into research began.

This dissertation would not be what it is today if it were not for the heart and soul of my dissertation chair, Dr. Kelly Wissman. Dr. Wissman teaches by powerful example, as I first witnessed as a doctoral student in her literacy theory and research course. At that time, her coursework, readings, and insightful classroom discussions aligned with my kindergarten world
with uncanny precision. Kelly, thank you for inspiring me to see the beauty and importance of honoring multiple perspectives then, as well as throughout my dissertation; you helped my vision become a reality. Warm and heartfelt appreciation also extends to committee members Dr. Virginia Goatley, Dr. Cheryl Dozier, and Dr. Erica Barnes, as each of you touched my life in many ways. Dr. Goatley was the first person I met on campus as an incoming doctoral student. Ginny, your comments and questions as my advisor, professor, and committee member nudged me forward in my own thinking and wondering; thank you for your encouragement and wisdom. To this day, Dr. Dozier lifts my practice beyond my dreams. Cheryl, your words and actions will reverberate within my heart and mind for years to come; thank you for being my cornerstone in teaching both elementary and graduate students. Dr. Barnes stretched my understanding of early childhood learners and language. Erica, your sharing of articles and experiences enriched me as a researcher as well as a practitioner; thank you for being a part of my journey.

I owe a huge debt of gratitude to a school district that values learning and growth for all of its stakeholders. With deepest appreciation, I thank my superintendent, deputy superintendent, and building administrator for embracing a gender-focused research study within an early childhood classroom. Your willingness to support a study of classroom practices helps to open future doors for all students. Thank you for the opportunity. Likewise, I am indebted to my critical friends, three dear colleagues from near and afar, who took the time to read my findings, share their own interpretations, and offer further considerations. Your voices are an integral piece of this research.

At the beginning of each school year, I tell the parents at Curriculum Night that I will learn much from their children as the school year progresses, and I truly believe this. Young children know and understand more than credit is given; we owe it to them to listen respectfully
and openly, as they have an abundance to share with the world. To the kindergartners throughout my years of teaching – thank you for being a part of my kindergarten world, I appreciate all that you have taught me. To the kindergarten participants in this particular research study, I am in awe of your honesty, strength, wisdom, courage, and curiosity. Thank you for pushing me in my thinking. I know I have grown immensely with your guidance. To my future students – my eyes, ears, mind, and heart are open to you.

As I consider learning to be a social process, I wish to acknowledge a core group of doctoral colleagues - Wendy, Brian, Sean, Thea, Julie, Tracy, Diane, Linda, and Kemm. Across the years, we have car pooled, studied, laughed, cried, collaborated, read, written, shared, presented, lifted up, and celebrated. Through it all, support systems remained intact and friendships bloomed; our bonds are unbreakable. Thank you for walking beside me.

We belong to a number of communities across a lifetime, each holding formative experiences that shape and inform who we are and what we believe. My family holds a special place in my heart, for I carry with me their examples of unity, love, hard work, and perseverance. My parents, Matthew and Dawn Witczak, were my foundation. I am eternally grateful for their love and guidance through the years. Dad, thank you for instilling in me the importance of education; you believed in me even when my faith in myself dwindled. I have been surrounded by strong female role models my entire life. Thank you, Mom, for showing me it is possible to go back to college with a houseful of kids. You continue to be a beacon of strength for me from up above. My grandmothers, Mary Witczak and Helen Spotilla, were feminists at heart. Growing up, I took note of their tender, loving, caring sides; yet, I was also fully aware of their strength, fierce determination, and independence. To all three matriarchs, thank you for showing me there is more than one way to be a woman.
To Melissa, Katelyn, and Jimmy, you mean the world to me. Your patience, support, and understanding were forever present, as I carried my laptop, research studies, and highlighter to swim meets, art shows, band concerts, football games, wrestling matches, college tours, and family weekend visits on campuses across the northeast. May the doors of opportunity always remain open as you follow your dreams in life; continued prayers for strength, compassion, and peace in your hearts as you advocate for a more just and equal world. I have no doubt you will each make indelible marks on the people and places within your lives. And finally, to my husband, Jim. You are my Prince Charming; yet, there was no rescuing involved. Across the years, we have each been brave, tender, strong, and caring; you also accept me for who I am, even knowing that means you do the cooking…dreams really do come true. Thank you for being my partner.
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CHAPTER 1

An Introduction to the Research: 
Who Gets to Live “Happily Ever After”?

For centuries, numerous versions of fairy tales have entertained children of all ages. The Grimms fairy tales, first published in the 19th century, primarily provided delight and pleasure for children, yet the storylines also disciplined the youngsters through the frightful accounts in the tales (Trousdale & McMillan, 2003). Fairy tales told in the 20th century also included sociopolitical and psychological messages that served to reinforce underlying patterns of behaviors and expectations. Added to the collection in the late 20th century was the adaptation of classic fairy tales through the eyes of Walt Disney with the vivid descriptions of beautiful, mostly helpless women, depicting the stereotypical image of a princess in need of rescue by a brave and daring prince. By the end of the 20th century, children were not only inundated with storybook pictorials of princesses, they were also deluged with videos as well as toys and other items that offered countless opportunities to spread the underlying message of the fairy tales (Wohlwend, 2009).

Through innumerable text and media exposures of enchanting fairy tales, a great number of young children immediately visualize a distinct image of a princess as a young woman who is “physically beautiful, silent, docile, and dependent on the male” (Trousdale & McMillan, 2003, p. 3) while the true hero of the story is a strong, brave, and handsome man. More often than not, he rescues the damsel in distress, marries her, and then takes care of her so that she can live happily ever after. While some of the more contemporary tales attempt to shift away from such storylines, the more traditional versions of the fairy tales continue to have a great hold on society (Coyne, Linder, Rasmussen, Nelson, & Birbeck, 2016). Although movies, television, music, and advertisements also contribute to societal influences on children, fairy tales persistently circulate
as a viable source of information regarding customs and beliefs of certain cultures (Coyne, Linder, Rasmussen, Nelson & Birbeck, 2016).

**Statement of the Problem**

As fairy tales continue to play an influential role in the potential shaping of children, ideologies regarding gender are routinely perpetuated and reinforced. Popular fairy tales are not only associated with “Western girlhood” (Marshall, 2004, p. 262) but also provide “sites of power/knowledge through which to investigate often contradictory discourses about sexuality, gender, and childhood” (p. 262). Within this frame, language and story lines that inherently support dominant patriarchal practices reveal issues of gender. Because the Westernized fairytale canon often surfaces in the elementary school curriculum, the possibility of “reproducing gendered identities” (Marshall, 2004, p. 262) in the classroom setting remains very much present.

In turn, societal understandings and expectations related to gender hold the potential to become barriers to equitable literacy opportunities for all students. Early in their educational careers, preconceived ideas of the passive and active learning stances between girls and boys can permeate classroom environments, and thus set the stage for distinct gendered literacy behaviors and opportunities (Masuchika Boldt, 2002). Belief systems constructed through such binaries may steer some girls away from classes or subsequent careers traditionally viewed as male in fear that it will make them look unattractive, too strong, or too smart (Tan, Barton, Kang, & O’Neill, 2013). Furthermore, dichotomous viewpoints of gender serve to limit the possibilities of those who do not fit into the mainstream definitions of “girl” and “boy” (Blackburn, 2005).

A great number of students in our educational system find themselves routinely discriminated against, harassed, bullied, and abused while in school due to their gendered
identities and sexual orientations (Watson & Miller, 2012). It is through the silence of others that acceptance of this treatment is registered (Blackburn, 2005, 2006). In the case of schooling, teachers and peers often do not acknowledge or attempt to stop the abusive behaviors (GLSEN, 2016). It is also through the school system that “students are subject to a variety of routines, procedures, curricula, and pedagogy that enforce heteronormativity” (Watson & Miller, 2012, p. 3). When a person considers something as normal, such as heterosexuality, anything that falls outside of that description is realized as abnormal by default (Blackburn, 2005; Blaise, 2005b). New York’s Dignity for All Students Act (2012), or DASA, supports an education that includes the awareness of and sensitivity to, amongst others, sexual orientations and gender identity. While this reform is a positive move, more needs to occur to counteract destructive societal norms regarding gender and sexual orientation (Blackburn, 2005, 2006; Blaise, 2005a, 2005b; Watson & Miller, 2012).

Our society continues to build on the foundation of equal rights for people of race, color, religion, and ability. Communities across the nation advocate for a more just and equal world through actions supporting civil rights such as gender equity and gender identity. For example, grass root movements increasingly endorse schools to honor gender identity work through classwork, curricula, and social justice teaching (Burns & Miller, 2017; Miller, 2018). Literature read through a critical lens in classrooms extends the opportunities for deeper dialogue of equality, diversity, and acceptance connected to students in-school experiences; the read alouds potentially offer a link to personal experiences within our students’ out of school lives, as well.

**Research Questions**

My experiences as a veteran kindergarten teacher helped shape this dissertation. My research questions emerged from the gender and equity issues that arise in the larger society and
in the educational setting in particular. I mapped out the following research questions in an attempt to add insight to how instructional practices and classroom environments may play a role in the perpetuation of gender inequalities; therefore, I framed this study as an inquiry into how gender was opened up for exploration in the kindergarten setting. With this in mind, my research questions were:

1. How do the kindergarten students and I explore our understandings of gender across one academic year?
2. In the daily life of classroom practice, how do the kindergartners express their understandings of gender?
3. What do the oral, written, and performative responses to gender specific fairy tale read alouds reveal about this one group of kindergartners’ understandings of gender?

Within this qualitative dissertation research study, I first identify the kindergartners’ perceptions of gender; then, with the catalyst of a variety of renditions of Cinderella fairy tales, I determine the spaces where the kindergartners bumped up against their existing gender perceptions and either maintained or shifted those conceptions. I also note instances in which students attempted to re-position or re-envision their own or others’ interpretations of gender. Using picture books as a springboard across the school year, I closely examined the conversations between kindergarten students, their drawn and written artifacts produced during Writer’s Workshop, their verbal responses to stories within Reader’s Workshop, and their performative acts resulting from the engagement with fairytale variant read alouds of Cinderella. Initially, I focused on the discursive practices amongst the young students to determine how they defined gender and secondly, I looked for shifts in the kindergartners’ understandings of gender
that transpired through participation in a series of oral and written literacy events involving Cinderella variants.

In addition to a child-centered focus, I also analyzed my own talk, actions, and decisions as a teacher. This analysis opened up instances of the positioning and repositioning of research participants in relation to the classroom discourse, practices, and curricula. Furthermore, I located occasions in my practice that maintained gender binaries through classroom discourse, practices, and curricula as well as those practices that opened up opportunities for the shifting of traditional gender binaries.

**Theoretical Frameworks**

The theoretical framework of this research study is multi-layered and complex (Ravitch & Riggan, 2012). As I believe that no single theory can adequately explain the phenomena of gender and identities, I considered numerous viewpoints to encompass a thorough investigation of my research questions. Furthermore, I realize the more lenses I use as a researcher, the more adept I will be at explaining my findings through differing perspectives (Tracey & Morrow, 2012).

As the teacher in this research study, I automatically brought my understandings of educational theories to the forefront as I planned and implemented instructional practices within my classroom. I made conscious and possibly unconscious decisions as to which curriculum materials I used, when, and for what purposes (Vasquez, 2014). My interpretations of data and unfolding events were also seeped in my theoretical understandings. Thus, it benefitted me to reflect upon these theories in real life context so that I could better align research to practice as well as make future sound instructional decisions for the benefit of my students (Tracey & Morrow, 2012).
In considering the interrelationships among gender, identities, and (in)equities of classroom discourse, practice, and curricula, I was drawn to the lenses of poststructuralist feminist theory and critical literacy theories. This theoretical framework shaped the questions I asked; framed the methods I selected to gather data and then how I analyzed and interpreted the information; and situated my interpretation of the issues at hand as well as the past literature and research that I reviewed (Ravitch & Riggan, 2012). This study’s theoretical framework is uniquely “me” due to my experiences and knowledge; it enabled me to follow, interpret, and produce research in a contextual manner as I sought to make sense of my role as a researcher and educator.

**Poststructuralist Feminist Theory**

Power is omnipresent in our society; who has the power and what one does with it is a major consideration within today’s society. Because of this structure, dichotomies form, and inequities and injustices are evident (Villaverde, 2008). Poststructuralist theory deconstructs the understanding of hierarchies and the binaries they establish such as male/female or black/white. Poststructuralist theorists believe that meaning and culture are connected. There is no single meaning attached to events; each reader’s identities determine the meaning alongside of the author’s intent. Poststructuralist feminist theory allows for the examination of power through the scrutiny of traditional binaries coupled with existing practices of gender. This theory typically makes us aware of the varying ways that power functions in “personal, cultural, historical, social, and educational systems” (Villaverde, 2008, p. 129).

Recognition of gender occurs through a variety of lenses. One way to view gender is that there are two sexes, male and female, and we act the way we do because we are the sex that we are. In other words, a male is born with certain physical characteristics and a female is born with
certain physical characteristics (Davies, 2003). Another way to look at the binaries of male and female is that children “learn to take up their maleness or femaleness” through “learning the discursive practices in which all people are positioned as either male or female” (Davies, 2003, p. x). In this regard, one understanding is that society teaches them through language what it means to be a boy or a girl, a perspective often referred to as sex-role socialization theory.

By learning the discursive practices of society, children notice the directive that they must be socially identifiable as either one or the other (Davies, 2003). Interactions with others serve to position themselves in society within this binary even when they are not directly taught the societal definitions of gender. Through language use in discursive, societal and narrative practices, a child begins to identify as being a male or a female. Rather than looking at gender unitarily, however, children learn to “take up a range of both masculine and feminine positionings if they have access to discourse that renders that non-problematic” (Davies, 2003, p. 12).

Not all children fit into the predetermined gender binary or the mold of heteronormativity (Blaise, 2005a, 2005b). These heteronormative discourses define traditional norms and expectations for males and females in society that serve to institutionalize male dominance. This hegemonic mindset holds the gendered social order firmly in place (Villaverde, 2008). Poststructuralist feminist theory works at disrupting the thought that gender is static; this theory supports the understanding that ones’ social, historical, and political enculturation construct gender. In this regard, contextualization plays a role in gender. People define gender according to the ways in which they uniquely organize and understand gender in relation to their personal contexts within each situation. Therefore, gender is not located within each individual, and each person defines gender differently. Consequently, poststructuralist feminist theory “challenges us
to ask new questions about how children become gendered, the part they play in their gendering process, and the role of teachers and the early childhood curriculum” (Blaise, 2005a, p. 105).

Although not a typical conversation in the early childhood education setting in the past, a focus on feminist theory has become more predominant in recent years (Thornton & Goldstein, 2005). Taking a closer look at how young children know and do gender in the classroom environment is an important realization, as we must become more aware of the “pervasiveness of the heterosexual matrix and gendered discourses in early childhood classrooms” (Blaise, 2005a, p. 106). In reality, young children take part in the gendering process through the active construction of words and actions, at times maintaining the status quo, at other times resisting it. It is important to note which words, actions, and relationships have the propensity to set up a person for the critical negotiations between self and world (Villaverde, 2008) within and outside the classroom.

With this in mind, I lean on poststructuralist feminist theory as one of the theoretical frameworks in my research study. By dually focusing on the institution of school as well as the institutionalized norms of societal gender roles and expectations, I seek to understand how these two converge or collide. I use poststructuralist feminist theory to locate places where (in)justice and (in)equality are defined as well as to interrogate the structures that hold heteronormative ideals in place (Villaverde, 2008). I investigate the role that education plays in the gender discourse of young children and couple that with the role that I play as a feminist educator (Blaise, 2005a, 2005b). I bring to the forefront the worldviews and lives of the girls in my classroom in the hopes that male dominated ideologies will not be their gatekeepers in future coursework and career paths. I support the boys in my classroom who choose to engage in activities that traditionally align with females. I also examine the actualization of gender at the
school level so that possibilities can exist for marginalized populations such as the many girls and boys in schools across the nation who identify as LGBTQ and do not fit into the prescribed definition of gender (Blackburn, 2005, 2006; Blaise, 2005a, 2005b).

**Critical Literacy Theory**

Critical theory, or the critical reviewing and (re)shaping of a culture, informed the development of critical literacy approaches and scholarship. Critical literacy is a way of being. It is not an add-on program nor meant to be a negative stance; rather, it is a frame or perspective through which schooling and the outside world are tied together (Au & Raphael, 2000). It is an intentional disruption of problematic and inequitable practices considered the norm. Critical literacy engages in ongoing discourse to uncover the power factors over who gets to learn, what, how, and when, and then looks at those factors, analyzes them, and suggests alternative possibilities for change (Vasquez, 2014). The lens of critical literacy provides sites for the analyses of real life social justice issues. Using texts as a springboard, differences become more visible, which offers spaces to problematize and interrogate narratives, language and positions (Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002). The acknowledgement of silenced voices occurs through the discovery of multiple and often contradictory perspectives. Furthermore, critical literacy challenges the belief that education is politically neutral as the critical analyses of texts recognizes the ways in which the “sociopolitical systems, power of relationships, and language are intertwined and inseparable” (Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002, p. 383) from teaching.

According to Freire and Macedo (1987), “schools must be seen in their historical and relational contexts” (p. 14) as typically working to hold power over what is considered to be literacy and who is thought to be literate. School as an institution affects who we are and can be and how “justice and equality are defined, whose suffering counts, how we question dominant
structures, and what role education plays in creating change” (Villaverde, 2008, p. 129). A deeper look at the attitudes that position people can occur through the questioning of purposes, structures, and motivations normalized by the dominant culture, (Rowe, 2010). This examination brings to the forefront that not all members of society have equal access to the same experiences (Au & Raphael, 2000).

Teachers and peers are not the only influence on an individuals’ learning; cultural beliefs and attitudes also influence the ways instruction and learning takes place (Lave & Wenger, 1991). It is through socially situated practices such as school, home, and community that mediation between differing perspectives instigates learning; this can be evidenced through the “historical production, transformation, and change of persons” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 51). Since mental functioning in the individual begins in social activity (Vygotsky, 1978), learning inherently “reflects and constitutes its historical, institutional, and cultural settings” (p. 115). Through the internal production of sign systems such as language, behavioral transformations form a bridge between early and later forms of individual development largely due to the interactions between the individual and society.

This is why critical literacy is so vital. Rather than being shut out due to lack of membership in the dominate prospective, marginalized groups - in the case of this particular research study, girls and boys who don’t fit into preconceived ideas of what females and males can do and become – can utilize their ownership of literacy to advocate for change (Rowe, Fitch, & Smith Bass, 2003). This cycle generates positive attitudes towards literate events, which in turn supports the desire to engage in subsequent habits of everyday literacy for one’s own purpose. This can lead to higher motivation to gain literacy proficiency; higher levels of proficiency offer more opportunities for communication (Au & Raphael, 2000), and so forth.
Critical literacy focuses on transforming the perceptions of those in power and with privilege, as well (Foss, 2002). Thus, reading the word to rewrite the world (Freire & Macedo, 1987) contributes to empowerment so that all students “can become productive and contributing members to an even more complex society” (Au & Raphael, 2000, p. 170).

When one applies a critical lens in a reflective manner, critical literacy takes an intensive look at the power, inequities, and injustices within texts (Harste & Vasquez, 2011). Critical literacy can help students review, re-envision, and re-conceptualize normalized school practices. In turn, critical literacy holds great potential to help these same students transform societal practices.

As texts are never neutral (Freebody, Luke, & Gilbert, 1991), the learning environment becomes one of a participatory curriculum in which the students are both the consumers and constructors of the curriculum (Vasquez, 2014). For example, through critical literacy my students and I read aloud texts and discussed the characters and the roles taken up by them. When I asked questions such as “Who are the powerful characters?” and “What roles do the females (or males) hold?”, the social issues of gender, fairness, and equity authentically rose to the top. When I inquired “Who do you know in your life that is like the character in the book?”, I began to connect literature, and possibilities, to their own lived experiences. As I posed the inquiry “What can you do to change the situation?”, I positioned the kindergartners into agentive acts that could lead to their future empowerment (Johnston, 2012).

A better match between students’ in school and out of school experiences needs to occur as many times marginalized groups do not succinctly fit into the norm. With consideration to students’ world experiences, students enter schools with experiences and their own forms of language; yet, these may rub against society’s norms (Harste & Vasquez, 2011). As the
kindergartners participated in the read alouds, their words, actions, and drawn and written documents provided evidence of their in school and out of school worlds as well as their in school and out of school identities (Rowe, Fitch, & Smith Bass, 2001). These artifacts were genuine works of literacy in which I could think about what my students have learned to read and write; yet, this critical perspective from a teacher’s viewpoint also offered me ways to think about what my students can do with their literacy as well as what their literacy can do for them and their world (Vasquez, 2014).

As dominant ideologies continue with little or no push back, the distribution of power remains uncontested (Blackburn, 2005, 2006; Blaise, 2005a, 2005b). Through the lens of critical literacy in this particular research, I investigated the histories of the kindergarten students as well as my own history so that I could better understand which stories “may enable or undermine the values and practices that provide the foundation for social justice, equality, and democratic community” (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 15). In addition, I pursued ways to “broaden our conceptions of how teachers actively produce, sustain, and legitimate meaning and experience in the classroom” (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 14) while also actively seeking and honoring the students’ narratives and acts of agency. This opened up a viewpoint from multiple perspectives rather than just acknowledging the perceptions of those considered traditional knowledge bearers in education, namely the teachers, curriculum specialists, and school administrators.

Significance of the Study

A research study such as this is important as society has certain expectations and norms for gender. Ongoing interactions introduce and reinforce social practices and help to form social identities (Bartlett, 2007; Rowe, 2010). Early on, children learn what it means in society to be a girl or a boy and often accept the inequities in gender norms without question (Davies, 2003). In
education specifically, this research study is a nudge for the field to reconsider how and in what instances young children learn about gender (Blaise, 2005a, 2005b; Davies, 2003; Vasquez, 2014; Wohlwend, 2009, 2011, 2012). This conversation is necessary because there is still much to discuss regarding gender norms and society (Thornton & Goldstein, 2005).

Until recently, many gender studies in educational environments centered on older students (Blaise, 2005a; Thornton & Goldstein, 2005). The reality is that young students also come to the early childhood educational settings with existing thoughts and ideas of what girls and boys can do (Vasquez, 2014; Wohlwend, 2009, 2011, 2012). In addition, everyday routines within the classroom setting validate ways of being, doing, and achieving at school (Rowe, 2010; Vander Zanden & Wohlwend, 2011). Coupled together, these ideals can either set up or limit the educational possibilities of both girls and boys as they move up through the grades (Au & Raphael, 2000). Therefore, this particular research study intentionally takes a closer look at young children in their educational setting and serves to strengthen our understanding of what young children know and do with respect to gender roles (Blaise, 2005a, 2005b; Rowe, 2010; Vasquez, 2014; Wohlwend, 2009, 2011, 2012). The results of this specific research study provide new insights and extend upon the existing gender conversations with regards to early childhood education specifically, as well as across the grade levels.

**Organization of the Dissertation**

This introduction serves as the first chapter of the dissertation. Its purpose is to provide background knowledge on fairy tales, my perception of the problem in the field, the questions that drove my research, and the foundations of the theoretical framework. Chapter two reviews the empirical studies that inspired me to think deeper about gender and identity in childhood education, gender and fairy tales, gender and teacher practice, and gender and responses to
literature. Chapter three explains the methodologies of the research study including practitioner research, case study, and discourse analysis. An overview provides a description of the kindergarten participants, classroom setting, and literacy event protocols; whereas, the final section of the chapter details the methods of data collection and analysis of the young students’ oral, written, and drawn responses to an exploration of gender across picture book read alouds including Cinderella variants. Chapters four, five, and six explore the understandings of gender of particular students in the kindergarten classroom. Chapter four looks at two girls who mostly expressed gender in normative ways, yet who also attempted to try on different ways for being a girl. Chapter five follows the relationship between two girls, one of whom consistently bumped against the gendered norms of society. Chapter six explores the words and actions of a young boy as he enacts his understandings of gender dependent on the context, participants, and discursive classroom events such as read alouds and playtime. Chapter seven reveals the instructional decisions I made as the kindergarten teacher, at times purposeful and planned out, at other times spontaneous or in response to others in the class. Language carries more than the meaning of words; therefore, my language choices play a major role in the discussion within this chapter, as historical, cultural, and political implications surface at times, as well. Lastly, chapter eight places the findings of this research study in context with past research as well as invites future exploration of gender understandings and interactions at the early childhood level.
CHAPTER 2

Review of the Literature

As I link arms with the researchers before me, I seek deeper understanding of their questions and findings. The thought-provoking inquiries of the past encouraged me to consider the ways in which gender portrayal in literature either challenged or supported the heteronormative discourses of society. The research also caused me to reflect on the instructional decisions I made as an early childhood educator, including the picture books I chose to share, the questions I asked of my kindergartners, the ways in which the students explored gender in relation to picture book read alouds, and the purposes behind our choices (Ravitch & Riggan, 2012). In this regard, the studies provided the impetus as well as the foundation for my own study. In this chapter, I discuss empirical studies pertaining to: 1) gender and identity in childhood education; 2) gender and fairy tales; 3) gender and teacher practice; and 4) gender and responses to literature.

Gender and Identity in Childhood Education

Sociocultural theorists consider gender to be a learned behavior (Blackburn, 2005, 2006; Blaise, 2005a; Davies, 2003). Society conditions people to act according to their biological genders, and this starts at a very early age (Dutro, 2001/2002). For instance, a recent baby shower trend has guests simultaneously biting into cupcakes to reveal the gender of the unborn child – pink icing in the middle of the cupcake for a girl or blue icing for a boy. Headbands and bows distinguish the gender of female infants with little hair on their heads. In the school setting, children segregate into two lines as they walk down the hallway – a line for girls and a line for boys. Starting from birth, children learn how to “do” gender (Blaise 2005a). These discursive practices support the hegemonic discourse so that young females and males know their roles and

**Enculturation of Heterosexual Norms**

Blaise (2005a) speaks to the heterosexual norms that bind children as young as five years old such as society’s specific gendered expectations of appropriate male and female appearances, actions and activities. Through enculturation, young girls and boys begin to take these on as their identities form. As a researcher observing within the classroom setting, Blaise followed a group of 27 kindergartners over a six-month period and discovered many examples of heterosexual discourse in the everyday school experiences. For instance, the kindergartners bumped against the gendered social order of the classroom as they actively constructed their gendered identities through clothing, body movements, and friendships. On several occasions, she realized the students worked hard at getting gender “right” so as not to cause conflict. For example, one girl chose to comply rather than confront an uncomfortable tug of power involving the need to clean up a mess. In another case, a young male student asserted his power by talking over other female students, while these same girls chose to let this act of disrespect go unchallenged. Blaise concluded that young children use heteronormative discourses such as silent compliance to the dominate discourse as they actively and discursively position themselves and others in gendered ways.

Wohlwend (2009, 2011, 2012) conducted a yearlong study of kindergartners and looked at gender through communities of practice as the way young children “do” gender. As a researcher looking in, Wohlwend noted spaces in which girls rewrote storylines to give strength to females and intentionally excluded boys from the doll play (Wohlwend, 2009). Wohlwend also observed examples of hegemonic discourses evidenced during play and through language.
For example, one set of boys insisted upon taking up “feminine” practices of gender through the imaginary actions of princess dolls (Wohlwend, 2011) while another group of boys projected their own perceptions of gender onto a fairy tale doll (Wohlwend, 2012). According to Wohlwend, each of these enactments emphasized femininity in response to the specific situations in which they occurred. Some of the kindergartners honored the boys’ interpretations of gender on occasion; yet, there were also instances when a few peers sought to protect the boys from the negative reactions of other peers (Wohlwend, 2009, 2011, 2012). In addition, Wohlwend described occurrences in which the kindergartners verbally and nonverbally corrected each other back into gender roles as well as discursive moves that served to give authority to the boys or restrict the girls (Wohlwend, 2009, 2011, 2012). Wohlwend’s (2009, 2011, 2012) observations of gender performances that fell outside of normalized expectations and gender binaries had almost an immediate consequence in school and with peers, and thus perpetuated the underlying hegemonic discourse.

As a researcher within the classroom setting, Dutro (2001/2002) observed fifth grade students whose tensions were palpable during book choosing events. She noted instances in which the boys became noticeably anxious when forced to choose books implicitly implied as “feminine” in theme, characters, or design; whereas, the girls eagerly transcended the gender boundaries through a “masculine” book choice. The boys with higher social status attempted to use their masculinity to control the situation. When that did not work, they used humor as a shield as well as publicly disclaimed interest in a “girl’s” book. Privately, however, the boys occasionally admitted to their enjoyment of the literature. The girls readily asserted their right to choose a book of choice, regardless of gender, although they still tended to place the books in
highly gendered categories. This “boundary policing and crossing” (Dutro, 2001/2002, p. 379) unveiled the students’ assumptions regarding gender roles and expectations.

**Filling in the Gender and Identity in Childhood Education Research Gap**

Research studies such as these informed the thinking on my study as their findings illustrate children who are “already learning significant lessons about who (they are) and who others assume (them) to be” (Compton-Lilly, 2014, p. 18). Furthermore, each of these gender studies brought me to a deeper understanding of society’s ability to shape a person’s gender identities as evidenced through the explorations and enactments of discourse and discursive practices within the classroom environment.

In my review, I discovered many of the past gender studies focus on children in intermediate grades and beyond (Berman & White, 2013; Compton-Lilly, 2014; Dutro, 2001/2002; Moeller, 2011); while more recently, research has begun to look closer at the younger learners (Blaise, 2005a; Wohlwend, 2009, 2011, 2012). In this regard, I believe my study will help to fill in the research gap at the early childhood level as I studied five and six years olds, their understandings of gender, and the positions they placed themselves and others in the social setting of a kindergarten classroom. I looked deeper into the choices the kindergartners made, with the understanding that even the youngest children’s participation embeds ideological assumptions about what counts as literacy and what literacy events are open to persons of different genders (Rowe, 2010).

In addition, my research looks at the emic role I, as the classroom teacher, played in the gendered discursive practices evidenced and reinforced within my own classroom. This is significantly different when compared to the gender exploration and identity research studies
reviewed; mainly, these findings evolved from the etic perspective of researchers who observed the happenings in a classroom environment.

**Gender and Fairy Tales**

Research over the past several decades determined that power relationships are frequently present in children’s literature, typically representing normative ideologies and binaries such as male strength, agency, and bravery coupled with female weakness and reliance on others (Baker-Sperry & Grauerholz, 2003; Bettelheim, 1975; Davies, 2003; Kelley, 2008; Marshall, 2004; Mendelson, 1997; Parsons, 2004; Trousdale & McMillan, 2003). Power disequilibrium such as this reflects societal and cultural norms. Double standards for males and females are quite noticeable (Mendelson, 1997) as patterns of male characters being portrayed as active and independent emerge in stark contrast to the passive, dependent traits of the female characters (Davies, 2003; Marshall, 2004; Parsons, 2004). Educators must be attentive to the biased representations as they choose, read, and discuss texts with students across all ages and grades (Davies, 2003; Kelley, 2008; Marshall, 2004; Trousdale & McMillan, 2003). Recommendations from much of the reviewed research suggested setting up students to take a critical stance as a means to interrogate and disrupt the patriarchal norms on a routine basis (Baker-Sperry & Grauerholz, 2003; Kelley, 2008; Parsons, 2004; Trousdale & McMillan, 2003).

**The Shaping of Identities**

In Bettelheim’s 1975 book, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*, he spoke to the obvious and not so obvious meanings embedded within a wide range of fairy tale examples. Tales often have symbolic significance; yet, they evoke interpersonal responses as well. He stated that stories are children’s primary means of culture assimilation, and often these texts inspire a person to find meaning in life. As children listen to fairy tale read
alouds, they often place the unconscious content into consciousness, which then helps to shape their identities. Bettelheim considers meaning making as varying per person as well as within different times throughout one’s life. This suggests that educators must be cognizant of the texts consciously chosen to share with children as well as the purposes of sharing the stories.

Trousdale and McMillan (2003) interviewed one girl at two different ages in their research study. Over the course of the research study, the girl read four different feminist folk tales including “Briar Rose” (Grimm & Grimm, 1812/1987) and “The Three Strong Women” from Tatterhood and Other Tales (Phelps, 1978). The authors’ findings suggested that developmental shifts and disjuncture occurred for the research participant as she aged. During one of the later interviews, when the girl was older, she went “underground” with her thoughts because her sense of identity and independence conflicted with the societal norms and boundaries. In order to identify with an active and good character, she needed to connect with the male figure. Yet, this action put her at odds within the narrow male/female binary. Rather than show her true feelings, the girl chose to remain silent. Trousdale and McMillan emphasized the use of literature as a means of resistance to the normative patterns and layerings found within and across society.

**Power and Privilege**

Baker-Sperry and Grauerholz (2003) underscored the central theme of power and beauty that often transpires between males and females. In this textual analysis, the authors compared Brothers Grimm’s fairy tales (Grimm & Grimm, 1812/1992) against current fairy tales; they looked for the fairy tales most frequently reproduced into books and movies across a series of twenty-year periods between 1900 and 2000. Baker-Sperry and Grauerholz determined the following five original tales from Grimms were still prevalent in today’s society: Cinderella (the
most frequently reproduced tale); Snow White; Sleeping Beauty (also known as Briar Rose); Little Red Riding Hood (also known as Little Red Cap); and Hansel and Gretel. They noted how often beauty described the characters, as well as the frequency of references to a characters’ physical appearance. Baker-Sperry and Grauerholz determined these texts upheld the dominant gender system as the female characters wanted to look beautiful in order to please their male counterparts. Additionally, there was a clear connection between beauty, goodness, whiteness, and economic privilege as compared with ugliness and evil in many of the fairy tales. Although not an empirical study of children responding to fairy tales, the authors brought important points to the gender-focused literature discussion. Baker-Sperry and Grauerholz urged readers to ask themselves who benefits from these ideologies and suggested teachers challenge their students to rewrite the gendered scripts to make them more equitable.

Power was also the central theme in Kelley’s (2008) textual analysis between the fairy tale of Rumplestiltskin (Grimm & Grimm, 1812/1987) and the fractured fairy tale version of Rumplestiltskin’s Daughter (Stanley, 1997). Kelley discovered the two texts were value laden with gender inequities as she compared the power of dominance, collusion, resistance, and agency. As with the previous textual analysis, Kelley’s review added depth to the findings of gender-focused empirical studies using children and literature. She suggested a critical multicultural analysis of gendered texts so that readers can consider how books maintain, counteract, or suggest alternative power systems. By asking whose interests best serve a specific representation, power relationships can be unpacked and thus lead to the reimagining of social practices.
Curricula: Reading Within and Against Traditional Canons

Marshall (2004) used feminist, poststructuralist, and literary theories to explain the culturally bound and fixed definitions of femininity, perpetually reinforced through Anglo American canon in elementary curricula. She maintains gender differences live in the discourse and thus produce certain ways of being, doing, and knowing; these cultural practices support gender and sexuality through storylines as well. Marshall stated multiple interpretations of texts were possible which is why “everyday practices, such as children’s literature, arise as sites of power and knowledge through which to investigate often contradictory discourses about sexuality, gender, and childhood” (Marshall, 2004, p. 262).

Mendelson (1997) remarked on the obvious double standards between male and female characters found within a great many Grimms fairy tales. He noted 25% of the Grimms tales show men as working collaboratively with each other for personal support as well as for the collective accomplishments; conversely, women tended to work alone or their collaborations with other women were evil and caused problems rather than solve them. This dichotomy placed the male spirit of camaraderie and collective actions in powerful and esteemed positions while the female’s predicaments carried a punitive stance. As these subconscious and conscious messages serve to reify the inequalities between genders, Mendelson warns educators against remaining silent to gender characterizations such as these while sharing Grimms fairy tales with students. Silence equates to the acceptance and reiteration of the dominant mind frame; therefore, educators should mindfully extend text discussions to include multiple interpretations, including those that push back against the cultural norms of society.

Parsons’s (2004) textual analyses of four versions of Cinderella acknowledged fairy tales as enculturated locations for appropriated gendered behaviors and expectations. Children learn
how to do gender according to the traditional patriarchal canons often shared in schools; additionally, the desires, behaviors, and values of the texts draw the reader into the messages and subject the reader to wishes of similar desires, behaviors, and values. In this review, Parsons studied *Cendrillon* (Perrault, 1697), *Aschenputtel* (Grimms, 1812), *Ella Enchanted* (Levine, 1997), and *Just Ella* (Peterson Hendrix, 1999). Each version held a slightly different perspective; Parsons recommended access to alternatives discourses as a means for children to challenge the dominant mindset. Researchers and teachers alike need to “help children read within and against hegemonic discourses” (Parsons, 2004, p. 152) in order to open up possibilities of re-envisionment for both girls and boys.

**Generating New Discursive Practices**

Davies’s (2003) study of eight four-year-old students considered the dress, hairstyles, speech patterns, and actions as evidence of their conceptualizations of gender. Using fairy tales such as *The Paper Bag Princess* (Munsch, 1980) and *The Princess and the Dragon* (Wood, 1981) as well as feminist stories including *Oliver Button is a Sissy* (dePaola, 1979), Davies observed the discursive practices of society that illustrated how and why the participants took up their gender roles and behaviors. Society provided the structure, language, and possible ways of being and doing in a binary fashion, and the children positioned themselves due to their particular understandings. Rather than not fit in, many of the children chose to think and act within the constraining linguistic boundaries. She stated that as “language is both a resource and a constraint”, it “provides the tools and the materials with which the social structure is created and maintained” (Davies, 2003, p. 1). By passing along language, participants also pass along the order of society including the binaries meshed within it. Davies suggested a move beyond the
male/female boundaries to generate new discursive practices, those that have multiple subjectivi- 

ties, so that social change can occur.

**Filling in the Gender and Fairy Tale Research Gap**

The previous gender and fairy tales research served to inform the thinking of my particular study in multiple ways. Throughout the literature review of gender and fairy tales, a resounding call to agency and activism is evident. Each study advocates the need to be proactive in the interrogating and re-envisioning of heteronormative societal practices through the reading of fairy tales. With the exception of the Davies study of preschool students, the studies in this literature review include work with elementary school students and report on students’ actions without proactive nudges to encourage shifting thoughts and behaviors.

My research study serves to fill in the gaps in the research in two instances. First, my research studies early childhood students, and to date there are more gender research studies at the higher age levels as opposed to the early childhood level. Next, I intentionally opened up conversations with the kindergartners that involved questions of fairness, justice, and gender while reading aloud the fairy tales and noted their responses. This act moves beyond the actual reading event and into the thought processes and potential agentive acts of young children.

Leaning on the words of Davies (2003), my research aims to “search for orders that are locally and specifically being established in the spaces” (p. 158) to note the generation of new discursive practices.

**Gender and Teacher Practice**

A teacher has many roles within the classroom environment. Teaching content through curriculum is one major goal with this purpose achieved through communication (Cazden, 2001); yet, the literary resources chosen to access the curriculum are paramount, as well.
Students benefit from the concerted efforts of the teacher who actively embeds read alouds and discussions focused on gender as a consistent part of the curriculum (Mattix & Sobolak, 2014; Ryan, Patraw, & Bednar, 2013; Tempel, 2011). Multiple possibilities for girls and boys become visible as students experience new ways of thinking about gender and discover connections to their own lives (Ryan, Patraw, & Bednar, 2013).

Frequently, the classroom setting shows the great majority of the time invested in teacher talk versus students’ responses (Allen, 2008; Cazden, 2001; Cohen, 2008; Gallimore & Tharp, 1990; Rowe, 1998; Wisneski & Goldstein, 2004; Wortham, 2003). However, a classroom environment supportive of student generated questions and observations deepens the level of student understanding; when the focus of the conversations is on social justice topics such as gender roles and expectations, classroom participants also become more aware of diversity and acceptance (Ryan, Patraw, & Bednar, 2013).

Likewise, consideration needs to be made as to whose knowledge counts and how often students hold the floor in discussions, as teachers often fall back on the traditional model of teaching in which directing and assessing rather than assisting in the building of knowledge occurs (Cazden, 2001; Gallimore & Tharp, 1990). Implicit messages of privilege can disseminate through teacher action and talk which then serves to limit student responses and interactions (Cohen, 2008; Rowe, 1998; Wisneski & Goldstein, 2004). Stereotypical messages regarding gender roles and expectations disempower students who do not fit neatly into the heteronormative descriptions (Tempel, 2011); thus, it is imperative educators are mindful of the language they use and the expectations that are valued (Allen, 2008; Cazden, 2001; Gallimore & Tharp, 1990; Rowe, 1998; Tempel, 2011; Wisneski & Goldstein, 2004).
As well as the human and dialogic aspects of learning, educators must also pay mind to the physical settings of a classroom environment, and the available resources, tools, and materials (Roskos & Neuman, 2011; Strong-Wilson & Ellis, 2007) that support academic, social, and cultural growth. An intentional seeking out of more inclusive and diverse books and materials provides children with multiple perspectives for gender, and thus becomes a model for greater opportunities of equality (Mattix & Sobolak, 2014).

**Classroom Discourse: Honoring All Learners**

Cazden (2001) looked closely at the classroom discourse that typically occurred between teachers and students. She analyzed the language of curriculum, the language of control, and the language of identity, all of which transpire in the daily interactions of school. She reminded us that teachers most often have a scripted, in-the-head agenda that does not always honor the learner as a significant contributor to the classroom dynamics. Cazden considers the cultural differences of language and storytelling as paramount because “spoken language is an important part of the identities of all the participants” (p. 2). Curriculum represented in contexts, within activities, and during whole and small group discussions benefit from scaffolds so that all learners have access to the expected academic language and learning environment. Rather than focus on the traditional Initiate-Respond-Evaluate (IRE) format of questioning, Cazden recommended a more inquiry-based, child centered approach that encouraged reflection and explanations of thought processes. She asked educators to bring new perspectives into the classroom so that students could re-conceptualize and re-contextualize their understandings of the world. Consequently, Cazden suggested teachers utilize a repertoire of lesson structures and teaching styles and frequently ask themselves who participates, how they participate, who does not participate, and why not.
Nevins-Stanulis and Manning (2002) used children’s literature as a means to understand the teacher/student and student/student relationships. In studying the teacher and student characters within two picture books, the researchers determined teachers modeled the language and expectations of the classroom accepted as the cultural norms of the classroom. Through words and actions, the teacher characters’ verbal as well as nonverbal cues affected the student characters sense of self-worth; additionally, the nonverbal messages essentially usurped the power of verbal messages in the end. Their findings on book character words and actions prompted a reminder from Nevins-Stanulis and Manning for teachers to be cognizant of messages of power and privilege sent through eye contact, body language, tone of voice, and facial expressions. According to the researchers, words as well as a silence have the propensity to send messages of worth.

**Positioning Learners Through Discursive Events**

Wortham (2003) followed one student throughout a school year and determined that classroom atmospheres developed distinct activities and norms. These norms influenced classroom relationships and student identities. In this study, Wortham observed a girl who entered the classroom at the beginning of the school year in a place of esteem with peers, yet through curricular themes and discussions became repositioned (Harre & van Langenhove, 1991) as one who no longer contributed substantially to conversations. Through curriculum use, therefore, this student lost Bourdieu’s symbolic capital in the eyes of the teacher and students. Eventually her place in the social dynamics of the classroom lowered, and she became a combative classroom participant. Wortham called for ethical and moral questioning on the part of educators due to the interdependence between identity and curriculum. He wondered aloud if
educators have the moral responsibility to examine the types of people their students are becoming through particular curriculum use.

Glazier (2005) took a yearlong approach to the interrogation of discursive teaching practices involving text. She asked high school English teachers to first pay close attention to their personal positionings concerning text assignments; then, she requested the teachers to notice if, how, or when these personal positions also played out through the positionings of students in their classes while they read the texts. Through these interactions, the teachers distinguished who and what they privileged in their instructional practices. This supports Glazier’s contention that as teachers view the world through a particular lens, they may subconsciously privilege some students over others, especially those whose discourses and actions more strongly resonate with their own styles and preferences. Glazier reminds educators to reflect, rethink, and re-enact so classroom practices can shift and the possibility of normative positioning due to societal or cultural differences at the classroom level will decrease.

**Intentional Pedagogical Decisions**

As a first grade teacher, Tempel (2011) was aware of gender stereotypes in society; yet, she became even more conscious of gender biases in the school setting when a student who did not conform to traditional gender roles joined her classroom. To ensure her classroom was inviting and accepting for each of her students, as well as breakdown gender stereotypes, Tempel determined the need to address gender openly with her first graders. Through whole class conversations, read alouds with a gender focus, an inquiry on toys, and changes in teacher language, the first graders in Tempel’s class began to broaden their understandings of gender. The findings support explicit gender discussions in the primary grades, as she advocates for
“preparing students to be a part of our society, ready to work and play with all kinds of people” (Tempel, 2011, p. 3).

Ryan, Patraw, and Bednar (2013) followed the teaching decisions of a third grade teacher named Maree, who intentionally chose to disrupt the gender norms of society with her students through curriculum choices. Maree’s motivation was the increasing likelihood of bullying and suicides of gender nonconforming youth. Through four episodes of teaching, Maree progressively stepped up the levels of complexity in her gender-based focus. Together, teacher and students chartered the course for appropriate words to identify and express gender, connect personally to gender diverse people in their own lives as well as through book characters and popular culture, and take a stand as allies for bullied classmates or community members. Ryan’s study is a reminder that empathy, understanding, and action are important hallmarks of an inclusive curriculum, which then also supports a more inclusive society.

**Space, Place, and Materials: Planning for Diversity and Inclusivity**

At the early childhood level, there are numerous articles referencing the Reggio Emilia method (Roskos & Neuman, 2011; Strong-Wilson & Ellis, 2007). According to Strong-Wilson and Ellis (2007), Reggio Emelia considers three teachers in their educational design – the teacher, the child and the environment. As young children use their surrounding spaces to create meaning, every part of the room including the walls, doors, materials and resources, and lay out opens up instances for interactions and learning. Likewise, the physical space and accessibility of materials and resources encourages a “negotiated curriculum” (Strong-Wilson & Ellis, 2007, p. 42) in that the children use their senses, knowledge bases, and curiosity to extend the learning opportunities that best resonate with their interests. For instance, a student repurposes an unlikely object such as using an empty box to represent a telephone as a means to fit into his pretend play.
(Wohlwend, 2008). Strong-Wilson and Ellis suggest that educators pay close mind to the artifacts produced by students, as each piece tells a unique story of the appropriated objects, places, and materials within their settings. In addition, the authors believe social development and identity build as children experience a sense of ownership, fitting in, and have roles of decision-making (Roskos & Neuman, 2011).

As students participate in classroom literacy events such as read alouds, they experience the ideals and perspectives represented within the pages of the books. In this regard, Mattix and Sobolak (2014) believe that gender-focused book choices provide ideal opportunities for students to explore positive role models as well as offer a more equitable depiction of gender possibilities. Their study reviewed the best-selling books over the forty-year period of 1972-2012; their objective was to determine whether a positive shift in gender representations and equality in literature had occurred. Mattix and Sobolak looked for changes in representations of girl and boy characters across the years; examined the strong characters within the best-sellers and noted the gender; and, looked for the pervasiveness of common stereotypical behaviors of the female book characters. Their analysis revealed an upward swing of positive gender-focused books through the end of the century; their investigation shows the surge has since faded. The authors advocate for a thoughtful perusal of book characters to ensure representation of both girls and boys in positive, non-traditional ways, as storybooks “have a profound impact on how (children) develop their perspectives and ideas on gender and gender roles” (Mattix & Sobolak, 2014, p. 231).

**Filling in the Gender and Teacher Practice Research Gap**

My research study serves to fill in the gaps in the teacher practice research in numerous ways. As the classroom teacher in this research study, I examined the instructional decisions made in purposeful, thoughtful, and reflective ways (Cazden, 2001; Glazier, 2005; Roskos &
Neuman, 2011; Wortham, 2003). I used the research before me as I considered the classroom discursive events, physical layout of the classroom environment, and accessibility of materials and resources, including an explicit focus on gender-focused read alouds and discussions (Mattix & Sobolak, 2014; Ryan & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2018; Tempel, 2011). For instance, I offered spaces for the kindergartners to choose and use materials and resources according to their interests and likes rather than gender; gender did not define colors such as pink and blue and play spaces such as cars and trucks or the house area. I intentionally left open places for exploration of gender understandings such as the re-enactments that occurred within the student designed and created classroom castle used during dramatizations. I made available a free range of materials for costume designing according to the student sign-up sheet that detailed roles, costume requirements, and desired materials; requests included shiny material, feathers, cardboard, and jewels. Lastly, I reflected on the responsive positions I personally took up as teacher as well as the ways in which I positioned the learners in my classroom (Glazier, 2005; Wortham, 2003) while becoming mindful of spaces in which gender was a placeholder (Tempel, 2011). I noticed the words and actions I used (Cazden, 2001; Vander Zanden & Wohlwend, 2011) to determine if and when gender (in)equities occurred (Tempel, 2011).

Furthermore, my research extends the current research base because I consciously involved my kindergartners in experiences, readings, and discussions about the characters’ gender roles and expectations within picture books (Mattix & Sobolak, 2014; Ryan, Patraw, & Bednar, 2013; Tempel, 2011) and then considered our interactions across the discursive events. As gender-focused literature provided a purposeful opening to conversations regarding the characters as well as the characters’ actions, feelings, and words, this focus led to a greater
consciousness of social injustices regarding gender roles and expectations (Mattix & Sobolak, 2014; Ryan, Patraw, & Bednar, 2013; Tempel, 2011) for my kindergartners.

**Gender and Responses to Literature**

Texts can be viewed as both informative and transformative (Rosenblatt, 1994; Sipe, 2008). This occurs as readers actively construct knowledge as well as engage in the social processes involved with reading. When literature is read with a critical lens regarding gender roles and behaviors, spaces open up for students to redefine gender in their own lives (Rice, 2002), thus informing as well as transforming the students. As the transaction of the reading influences both the reader and the text, there is a deep connection between the knower and what is known; and, generally, each reader interprets texts differently according to what each brings to and receives from the transaction (Rosenblatt, 1994). Aesthetic and efferent stances, two basic ways to look at the world, reflect the purpose of the reading and affect the public and private meanings engaged by each reader and “should be part of the student’s repertory from the earliest years” (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 1390). The reader creates language through textual interpretations and then understandings shift or transform when she participates in transactions with others (Whitmore, Martens, Goodman, & Owocki, 2005).

As the children listen to stories read aloud, they interact with the text and respond in numerous ways in order to gain deeper meaning (Sipe, 2008; Whitmore, Martens, Goodman, & Owocki, 2005). Pictures and words hold equal status as all parts of a text including the end pages, visual media, and peritextual features are valuable as well as hold central meaning (Sipe, 1998, 1999, 2008). Responses include analytical, intertextual, personal, transparent, and performative (Sipe, 2008). When students express their understandings of texts across a variety of sign systems including oral, written, creative, and dramatic representations, they move beyond
their initial responses and begin to see more than one perspective (Rice, 2002). Additionally, performatory responses in the form of dramatization provide evidence of an “internal construction of literal meaning” (Ortleib, Cramer, & Cheek, 2007, p. 169); drama also employs “meaningful communication” (Catney-McMaster, 1998, p. 574) and fosters a “community of learners” (p. 575).

**Instructional Practices: Actively Reading More than the Words on the Page**

In her study of 18 kindergarten and first grade students, Lysaker (2006) viewed “self” as fluid and dynamic whereas language became a powerful means of the construction of knowledge. Lysaker acknowledged print knowledge as one possibility for readers to gain entry into a text. Yet, she also observed as early readers located ways of “being in relation with the text” (Lysaker, 2006, p. 34), which then enabled them to make sense of wordless picture books. Scaffolds provided opportunities for students to position themselves into active roles so that both reader and text transformed during the reading process. The findings led Lysaker to posit that teachers who modeled a dialogic system of self essentially set up their students to being open to language events and transactional reading.

Pantaleo’s (2013) study revisited the way classrooms elicit aesthetic responses. She stated a misinterpretation and oversimplification of transactional responses routinely occurs at the elementary school level with this focus in today’s classrooms seeming to be a mere nod to the students’ feelings about the text. In her case study, Pantaleo followed a nine year old, fourth grader in her co-authoring role as she reconstructed the text to gain deeper meaning. Pantaleo noticed that the student’s thinking developed through collaborative construction and the exploration of multiple viewpoints. Additionally, by participating in instructional practices with discourse, tools, and texts and by looking critically at the whole text – the craft, purpose, and
visual elements of art and design – the fourth grader lifted her textual interpretations beyond the emotive stance. In order for students to gain deeper meaning from texts, Pantaleo recommended teachers provide explicit literacy instruction inclusive of the visual elements as well as extended amounts of time to become more aesthetically attuned to the messages within.

Social Negotiations: Collaborative Literacy Events

In a shift away from reading, Rowe (2008) observed two-year-old preschoolers for nine months in an attempt to study their social negotiations of literacy events in the form of writing. She watched as the adults and students navigated literacy opportunities as a way to understand the cultural models of how to “do” writing at the preschool level. Rowe observed the ways of acting and interacting between teachers and students in addition to their use of tools, materials, and space and determined that social contracts contain multiple layers. Although the teachers had more experience and knowledge concerning the cultural models of literacy and learning, adult and child participants worked collectively to shape the local understandings of literacy knowledge, roles, and expectations at the early childhood level. The author’s findings suggest adult and young students participate in literacy events through the negotiation of social contracts, or activities, and in response to each other’s actions.

Dramatization as a Performative Act

Performative acts and dramatizations as responses to literature warrant additional study in order to bring greater depth to the existing research base. In one relevant study, Edmiston (2010) drew on Bakhtin to describe the identity formation that occurred between himself and his young son as they negotiated within dramatic play opportunities. Through analysis of transcripts, Edmiston concluded that he and his son self-authored as well as co-authored their ethical and moral identities as they spontaneously extended dramatic play experiences. The internal and
external voices provided conversations that seemed to nudge each participant both socio-historically as well as socio-culturally. Additionally, each participant subconsciously projected his own beliefs, as he became the make-believe characters, which in turn reshaped the other participant who also represented pretend characters. In this way, Edmiston (2010) concludes, an actor’s words or actions can conceivably shift the way another actor views the “actions as right or wrong in relation to social and cultural groups” (p. 207).

Adomat (2009; 2012a) studied the dramatization of read alouds in a first grade setting. She discovered students benefitted from the dramatic retellings of the stories as they supported each other to deeper levels of comprehension. Through the exploration of ideas within the story, the first graders essentially became the characters and thus were able to understand the characters’ issues from multiple viewpoints. This immersion into characters enabled the students “to see themselves in the story world and develop literary understanding” (Adomat, 2012a, p. 45) beyond what might be expected of this age group as well as encouraged the generation of “new meanings and possibilities for stories” (Adomat, 2009, p. 629). Additionally, personalized interpretations of the texts provided opportunities for the young children to insert themselves into the storyline and manipulate the outcome to their specific needs and wants. This was especially poignant in that the enactments became the conduit for the students to understand the motivations as well as the moral and ethical decisions made by the characters.

In a book chapter recounting literacy related dramatic play events, Rowe (2000) examined two connected early childhood dramatic play studies. One study occurred at a preschool; the other was a case study involving one of the preschooler’s connections to literacy in his home. Rowe expanded upon the early learners’ exploration of literacy purposes and processes through the multiple sign systems of book related dramatic events. Her analysis of the
studies revealed that play may enhance the children’s literacy processes including comprehension of the content as well as author’s intent. In addition, spontaneous dramatic play involving recently read books often incurred personal interpretation as well as negotiations of social issues. In this regard, the dramatic play events become the young child’s response to the readings. Rowe concluded with the need for additional studies of dramatized events to look closer at the relationships between efferent and aesthetic literacy responses in young children.

**Moving Across Sign Systems: Transmediation**

Simply reading picture books with characters in nontraditional gender roles may not be enough of a catalyst to shift the dominate discourse and heteronormative positioning according to gender (Rice, 2002). In order to take a closer look at ways to extend traditional reading responses, Rice temporarily took on the role of language arts instructor in a third grade class while the classroom teacher became her assistant. During that time, Rice intentionally created spaces for the students to redefine masculinity and femininity through the reading and responding to the characters in picture books. Her study investigated transmediation, or the movement from one sign system to other modes of communication, as a means of reflection, elaboration, and connection for the third graders. After reading books such as *The Paper Bag Princess* (Munsch, 1980) and *Oliver Button is a Sissy* (dePaola, 1979), students responded across a series of communications, moving from reading to writing to oral to creative art to drama. The author’s findings reported transmediation as being an effective way to open up spaces for students’ redefinitions of gender, as participants start with their own definitions, become a book character to experience a different perspective, and engage in discussions with peers for additional perspectives. She recommends teachers expand their repertoires of reading responses
to include a wider availability of open-ended expressions, while also focusing on critical issues such as gender norms.

**Filling in the Gender and Responses to Literature Research Gap**

Research shows many students negotiate themselves through the existing mainstream dominate culture of society in order to become successful in school (Whitmore, Martens, Goodman, & Owocki, 2005). This narrowed vision of literacy and schooling means, “children are socialized into versions of the world that are limited and expanded according to issues of power and access” (Whitmore, Martens, Goodman, & Owocki, 2005, p. 305). Instead, purposeful communities of practice can work to establish cultural models of how to “do” literacy events, through the negotiation and co-construction of texts, and while valuing more than one viewpoint (Rowe, 2008). In this regard, these specific research studies informed the thinking of my study. Using diverse gender-focused literature as a springboard (Rice, 2002), I considered my kindergartners’ responses and viewpoints regarding gender roles and expectations through their reading, writing, creative representations, and dramatizations (Adomat, 2009, 2012a, 2012b; Edmiston, 2010; Pantaleo, 2013; Rosenblatt, 1994; Rowe, 2000, 2008; Sipe, 2008; Whitmore, Martens, Goodman, & Owocki, 2005).

My study of communities of practice and literary responses at the kindergarten level stands on the shoulders of this past research (Ravitch and Riggan, 2012) as each of the reviewed studies are intentional acts of literacy that require participants to position themselves within cultural and social fields (Bartlett, 2007). With this particular research study, I strive to close the research gap in a number of ways. First, with a clear focus on the discursive classroom practices and the cultural artifacts, I interrogate the social positions occupied by the kindergartners and the participation afforded through these positions (Gee, 1999; Lave & Wenger, 1991). Next, the
stories told by children provide vital insight into their understandings of the world (Wright, Bacigalupa, Black, & Burton, 2008); for example, the analysis of dramatizations in response to the fairy tale read alouds leaves open the possibilities of the reimagining of texts and social practices that are more socially just as far as gender is concerned. The findings of this research study serve to extend the existing base of research on drama, most particularly at the early childhood level.

As fairy tales remain a popular reading material in elementary schools, the underlying messages of gendered expectations and behaviors supported within these texts often mirror the world as the children of today experience it. In bringing gender inequity conversations up-front and center through read alouds, discussions and responses, and dramatic re-enactments, the kindergartners in my classroom not only had the chance to rewrite the stories for the book characters, they began to lay the foundation for their own futures as well. As I explore in the chapters to come, this kind of roleplay has the potential to help shift the prevalent discriminatory societal discursive practices.
CHAPTER 3
Methodology

To pursue this research study, I drew on three methodological approaches: practitioner research, case study, and discourse analysis. Practitioner research uncovered the intentional and unintentional decisions I made as a classroom teacher as well as provided evidence of the gender roles and expectations I placed onto the kindergartners during everyday school events. Case study revealed specific kindergartners’ perceptions of gender, expressed through their discursive events across one academic school year and within this one particular classroom. In addition, the analysis of the discourse explored the ways in which the kindergartners and I both positioned and repositioned others and ourselves through language in relation to our unique and dynamic understandings of gender. This chapter describes in detail the three methodological approaches taken throughout this research study; it also recounts the data methods, collection, and analyses processes of the rich data sets in which I explored our understandings of gender across the school year.

Practitioner Research

As a practitioner researcher, I documented my teaching practice and knowledge. For consideration of this specific study, knowledge for practice tied into the theories behind the practices; knowledge in practice reflected on the experiences; while, knowledge of practice connected the understandings to the larger social, cultural, and political issues in the field (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). Knowledge viewed within this framework enabled me to study my own practice in the context of the classroom setting, which ultimately led to systematic shifts in my instructional practices (Perry, Henderson, & Meiers, 2012; Shagoury & Power, 2012).
I intentionally chose this methodology for numerous reasons. First, many researchers consider practitioner research to be a robust qualitative research model (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Perry, Henderson, & Meiers, 2012). It was important for me to stretch my knowledge and experience in research and the field of literacy while utilizing a research model that held both credence and strength in qualitative research. Using concrete, detailed examples of my classroom practice as well as the voices of my students helped to contribute to the rigor, validity and trustworthiness of this particular research study (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009).

Next, I acknowledge that my practitioner research was a deliberate act in which I attempted to “theorize practice as part of practice” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 2). This was a major consideration for me, as I not only wonder about existing theories of practice, I also question the role I play in implementing these accepted theories (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). By taking a critical stance in my practice, I aspired to make the process transparent for myself, as well as others, as I worked through the multiple layers of teaching and learning while being cognizant of the students’ histories and genders, existing society and institutional viewpoints, and available curriculum and materials (Perry, Henderson, & Meiers, 2012). Chapter seven goes into greater depth regarding my role as a kindergarten teacher and the instructional decisions I made based on existing theories of practice.

By utilizing practitioner inquiry, I applied a range of tools through the systematic inquiry. In this manner, I also elicited the kindergartners’ distinctive ways of knowing, being, and doing that brought transparency to their own perceptions of gender. This provided an opportunity for the examination of our language and actions, which then garnered evidence of how we positioned each other and ourselves within the context of our classroom environment. Most importantly, though, was my desire to improve the life chances of my students. As a proactive
early childhood educator, I actively seek future justice and equality for my kindergartners; therefore, it was imperative for me to engage in “public discourse of teaching as a professional practice with the capacity for and the commitment to improving itself [emphasis in original]” (Perry, Henderson, & Meier, 2012, p. 196).

Through the lens of practitioner research, my kindergarten students and I co-constructed not only the curriculum, but also who we are in society as gendered beings. As a kindergarten teacher, I work with students at the beginnings of their school careers. Each year, my students enter the classroom with identities already formed through cultural and societal practices. As I bring my own knowledge, prior experiences, and theories of practice to the research as well as the classroom, I “understand more deeply the contributions of (the) children’s own frameworks and cultural and linguistic resources to the life of the classroom” (Perry, Henderson, & Meiers, 2012, p. 199). Thus, it remains vital for me to engage in language, activities, routines, expectations, and roles at the primary level that provide a foundation for academic learning as well as instill a desire to be proactive agents in a democratic society (Johnston, 2012).

In this capacity, practitioner research served to open up gender role discussions and expectations as part of the more local contextualization of this specific classroom (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Perry, Henderson, & Meiers, 2012). In turn, my understandings of these particular students shaped the conversations I had, and continue to have, with colleagues at the grade, building, and district levels, in meetings such as Professional Learning Committees, and demonstration lessons as a district literacy leader. Each of these distinct areas holds the potential to extend the possibilities for schooling in a democratic society at the local level.

Within this specific study, then, practitioner research holds the possibility to present teaching through the lens of a counterhegemonic stance. For, “out of the dialectic and synergy of
inquiry, knowledge, and practice and from the intentional blurring of theory and practice, knowing and doing, conceptualizing and studying, analyzing and acting, researchers and practitioners, and public and local knowledge” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 3) comes the shaping of ideas regarding diversity, evidence, and educational reform. With this as the core of my understanding, I first used practitioner research to situate the findings of this research study within my own classroom. Then, I searched for the ways in which this research could extend and enhance the more global understandings of schooling in our society, through the wider intellectual and social traditions, assumptions of knowledge and learning, and acts of teaching (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, 2009; Perry, Henderson, & Meiers, 2012).

Case Study

With the realization that “all people have stories to tell” (Creswell, 2007, p. 119), case study was an additional methodological approach used in this research study. Case study methodology entails the in-depth investigation of a phenomenon within context. As this study’s placement was in the “real life context” (Yin, 2009, p.3) of my kindergarten classroom, I used case study as a research methodology to understand more about the “complex social phenomena” (p. 4) of my kindergartners socially constructed learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Simultaneously, I interrogated the competing discourses involving social justice and gender inequities in the educational system (Duke & Mallette, 2012). The multiple forms of data (Creswell, 2007; Yin, 2009) such as observations, drawn and written documents, whole and small group discussion transcriptions, and student created dramatizations uncovered particular students whose thoughts, ideas, and experiences either resonated with or disengaged from the research study’s overarching subject of gender roles and expectations.
In addition, the research questions within this research study aligned with the theoretical framework (Ravitch & Riggan, 2012) of case study. The “how” research questions I posed in this study, specifically “how” the kindergartners explore and express their understandings of gender as well as “how” they respond to fairy tale variants, lent themselves to the use of the case study method (Yin, 2009). The deliberate wording of my research questions provided a glimpse into the actions and words of five and six year olds with the intent to involve the epistemological understandings of gender currently represented in gender-focused research studies.

This case study methodology strengthened my investigation of the societal considerations of gender as the study was contextual and with real life examples; furthermore, the theoretical concepts served to guide the data collection and analysis concerning specific case studies (Yin, 2009). The data collection section within this methodology chapter holds details on case study participants while chapters four, five, and six discuss the ways in which particular kindergartners explored, expressed, and revealed their gendered perceptions within our kindergarten classroom.

**Discourse Analysis**

As texts can make assumptions, careful scrutiny of what is said as well as left unsaid can indicate the prevalence of certain identities or conditions such as hegemonic mindsets (Fairclough, 2003). An important reason I utilized discourse analysis as a methodology was that the oral and written language of the kindergartners and myself as teacher rests on the understanding that human beings rely on language to communicate and to accomplish certain goals (Bloome et al., 2008; Fairclough, 2003; Gee, 1999). Through the analysis of the words used by the students as well as me, I searched for intertextualities that questioned which “relevant ‘external’ texts and voices are included in the text, and which are (significantly) excluded” (Fairclough, 2003, p. 61). For the purpose of this study, I viewed intertextualities as
the interrelationships between texts and contexts, or the places where the kindergartners used one text within another. Essentially, I was looking to see whether the social constructs, contained within the pages of the literature and pertaining to gender roles and expectations, surfaced within the kindergartners’ oral, written, drawn, or performative acts. I also searched for evidence of intertextualities that supported the shifting of gendered concepts within their discursive events.

By getting as close to the kindergartners’ perspectives as possible through the analyses of oral and written languages, I attempted to build “compelling, explanatory theories about classroom practices (and) social processes” (Bloome et al., 2008, p. 2). Furthermore, I recognized the discourses, seen as language in use, as well as the Discourses, noted as the thoughts, objects, events, actions and interactions that shaped the identities (Gee, 1999) of my students. This possibility occurred through the analysis of the kindergartners’ language as they explained their responses to personal experiences, as well as their actual words captured within audiotaped and videotaped read aloud sessions, small group discussions, play centers, and dramatic re-enactments of the fairy tale read alouds. Likewise, the analysis of my voice helped me to examine my choices of questions, inclusion or exclusion of participants, next instructional moves, text choices, and reactions to inquiries, responses or requests.

With this in mind, our daily school practices and interactions with each other became important points to investigate (Gee, 1999) through the lens of gender understandings, roles, and expectations. In this manner, discourse analysis became the conduit in which I better understood how our language uses and actions both created and defined us within the micro level of our classroom setting, and then later as applied to the broader societal viewpoints at the macro level (Bloome et al., 2008). As language is central to the social construction of the everyday lived experiences of school, a deeper scrutiny of some of these events uncovered a gatekeeping
process of sorts (Fairclough, 1992). Through the analysis of the kindergartners’ language and interactions, a space became provided for me as teacher to deconstruct “how social relationships and power relationships have been constructed – often unjustly – through language and how those relationships might be reconstructed on a more equitable and democratic basis” (Bloome et al., 2008, p. 20).

An important point of consideration for the use of discourse analysis in this particular study could be the age of the kindergartners, however. There are some who argue that young children may simply mimic the adults around them without really understanding the concepts or contexts of those words; or, young children might simply restate what they think the adult wants to hear in order to please that person (Edwards, 1993). To ensure this “otherness” did not occur, I took care that my researcher or adult status did not confound the relationships, and thus the conversations, between my students and me (Alldred, 1993). To help with this, I made certain the kindergartners knew that I valued their thoughts and perspectives. It was also feasible the give and take dialogue amongst my students and me might become more of a verbal cross-examination. Therefore, I made concerted efforts to keep the control of the conversation in the hands of the student, rather than provide for a more teacher directed pattern of discourse.

Discourse analysis is not a straightforward path. The analysis of talk is strongest within context and even more informative when spontaneously produced outside of the researcher’s controlled environment (Edwards, 1993). Therefore, it was imperative for me to be reflexive as both researcher and teacher so that I honored the students’ words through their own voices rather than through my adult representations or interpretations. For instance, I often asked the students to “tell me more”; I kept their exact words in context rather than revoice their thoughts according to my interpretations of their words, as well. As I worked to analyze the kindergartners’ voices, I
acknowledge that I was actually re-presenting their words within research situations actively set up by me, as well as through my own perspective.

**Methods of Data Collection**

The goal of qualitative research is to tell a descriptive story of a specific place, time, and set of occurrences that happen to particular people, the purpose of which is to help to understand that certain piece of the world (Patton, 2002). In the following sections, I set the scene of the people, places, and happenings that led to the eventual narrative of gender understandings, roles, and expectations of one young group of children and one kindergarten teacher.

**Classroom Context**

This research study took place within my kindergarten classroom situated within a suburban primary school in the northeast region. The most current data from the 2013-2014 school year showed that approximately 27% of the student population in this school qualified for free and reduced lunch. The school had a diverse population with approximately 59% Caucasian, 22% Hispanic, 8% African American, 7% Asian, and 4% of mixed race. The full day kindergarten program met from 8:40am-3:10pm. The district cap for kindergarten classes was 29 children. Over the three years prior to the start of research study, the size of my kindergarten classes had ranged between 20 and 24 students.

For the 2015-2016 school year, there were 21 students enrolled in my classroom. There were 12 girls and 9 boys. At the beginning of the school year, the youngest child started kindergarten at 4 years, 9 months old, with four students turning 5 years old in September. The remainder of the children in the class ranged in age between 5 years, and 1 month old to 5 years, and 9 months old at the start of the school year.
Pedagogy: Learning and Growing as a Community

My classroom environment is centered on the building of classroom community and respect for ourselves and others. I believe learning is a socially situated practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) in that we all share our experiences and knowledge within the classroom. This classroom environment supports our abilities to learn and grow from one another through frequent interactions and discussions. As a community of learners, we strive to extend ourselves socially and emotionally as well as academically (Kriete & Davis, 2014). Typically, this occurs as we come to consensus on classroom rules and consequences and support each other in learning within partnerships, small groups, or whole class experiences. Student independence is encouraged, and knowledge and self-esteem are strengthened through hard work and perseverance within a growth mindset (Dweck, 2006).

While forming a kindergarten community of learners is vital, I also believe that my classroom should engage in social and moral conversations as this is foundational to future civil engagement and democratic actions (Johnston, 2012). I believe in agency, no matter one’s age, as we each have a voice that can contribute to the better good. Through the intentional and purposeful use of critical literacy, a greater awareness of social inequities develops and thus opens up opportunities for the students to take action within their in school experiences as well as their out of school lives. For instance, as the kindergartners discover injustices in books, they roleplay their own responses to the situations, reenact or rewrite a different ending, or talk back to a character in the book. Likewise, when a situation does arise in the classroom, class meetings are called to search for solutions. The children’s thoughts and ideas are not only paramount to the problem at hand, they are equally powerful to the solution. I believe this in school practice provides a rehearsal space for subsequent acts of agency in their own lives.
**Literacy curriculum.** The required district English Language Arts (ELA) curriculum maps provide kindergartners with a reading and writing workshop model, embedding time for voluminous reading and writing opportunities. Fiction and nonfiction reading and writing units are integrated across the school year, with each unit building upon the skills and strategies taught in previous units. Additionally, the district curriculum supports the building of agency through habits and routines. One such work habit focuses on the continued ability to “make changes in the world as critical consumers of literacy” (Atlas - ACSD ELA Kindergarten Launching the Workshops, Unit 1). Kindergartners familiarize themselves with this process as they “stop and think about social issues in text; (and) begin to ask questions … such as ‘What do I think about this?’ ‘Is this fair (equal)?’, and ‘Would I do the same thing or something different?’” (Atlas – ACSD ELA Kindergarten Launching the Workshops, Unit 1). Another work habit that supports critical literacy at the kindergarten level reminds the young students to “draw and/or write in response to societal issues discovered in texts or current events; (and) begin to ask questions … such as ‘What can I do to help change or shift this issue?’ and ‘With whom should I share this thought?’” (Atlas - ACSD ELA Kindergarten Launching the Workshops, Unit 1).

**Read Aloud Process.** Typically, exploration of literature according to the district ELA curriculum maps includes a variety of genres including fiction, nonfiction, and poetry. The kindergartners and I involve ourselves in class discussions, which at times include the characters found in a wide variety of books. Usually, I plan to read aloud texts and engage in conversations several times a day on a daily basis. Through my modeling of words and actions, I demonstrate for the kindergartners how to ask and answer questions about key details and happenings within the readings. As students revisit the texts numerous times, they practice retelling and re-enacting in response to the literature. Together, we reflect on the readings to instill a natural process for
the strengthening of the kindergartners’ comprehension; additionally, I encourage students to use these same texts to help them think about the spaces they occupy in the world (Vasquez, 2014).

Literary conversations include looking at ideas through multiple perspectives. Planned and spontaneous read alouds often involve a closer inspection of the characters, their actions, and why they act in the ways they do throughout the storyline. The kindergartners and I pay close attention to whether or not a character changes within a story or across a series. I believe discussions such as these are of primary importance literally as well as figuratively; taking on another’s perspective, or “mentally walking in another’s mind” (Johnston, 2012, p. 85) strengthens the ability to “see more of ourselves in the other and the other in ourselves” (p. 86). Additionally, illustrations and peritextual explorations are prominent as we spend just as much time thinking about the pictures, endpapers, and other visual images as we do the words on the page to gain deeper meaning from texts (Evans, 2009; Sipe, 1998, 1999, 2008).

Through these interactions and discussions, the kindergartners begin to form opinions about personal tastes in stories and characters. This often occurs through the comparing and contrasting of similar adventures and characters in familiar stories. Early in the school year, we begin to share our thoughts on books. I encourage and support the students as they talk about what they liked or did not like about a story and why, discuss what they would change in the story, describe the relationship between illustrations and text, and make cultural connections to text, self, and world by questioning whether or not the characters were all treated alike. A question such as “How are the stories (or characters) alike or different?” (Atlas – ACSD ELA Kindergarten Unit 4) move a child toward deeper understanding while queries such as “Is there a character in the story that is left out or not included in something important? Is that fair?” and
“What would you do to include the character?” (Atlas – ACSD ELA Kindergarten Unit 4) work to position the readers as agents of change (Johnston, 2004, 2012; Vasquez, 2014).

**Read aloud book selections.** As a reflective practitioner, I actively search for books that speak to the ways of the world through differing perspectives. Socio-economic status, race, and culture are frequent classroom discussions as the kindergartners and I interrogate friendship and acceptance through character responses and actions within context. For instance, we think deeply about making judgements regarding a person’s appearance or skin color while reading books such as *A Dance Like Starlight* (Dempsey, 2014), *Martin’s Big Words: The Life of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Rappaport, 2007), *Each Kindness* (Woodson, 2012), and *The Other Side* (Woodson, 2001). We also open up queries about hobby or activity choices such as dance, theater, and playing with dolls as we read *Oliver Button is a Sissy* (dePaola, 1979), *Amazing Grace* (Hoffman, 1991), and *William’s Doll* (Zolotow, 1985). Likewise, we talk about the differences of people and family structures when we read *It’s Okay to be Different* (Parr, 2009) and *The Family Book* (Parr, 2010). Books such as these frequently open up connections and disconnections to the kindergartners’ real world experiences, which in turn lead to the extension of discussions and interrogations in more authentic and meaningful ways.

**Future pedagogical considerations.** Throughout my 23 years of teaching, I have been fortunate to teach a great number of children, each of whom has enriched me with her or his unique perspective on life and learning. I have grown immensely in my understanding and acceptance of people through the eyes, experiences, and excitement of my young learners. Their curiosity, willingness, and inquisitiveness are testaments to the acceptance of diversity on many different levels. As a reflective person, I consider myself to be in a perpetual state of growth both as a teacher and as a woman. Therefore, my experiences in working with a vast array of diverse
students, including five-year-old students who question their biological genders, continue to shape and inform my practices and perspectives.

I do acknowledge that gender identity and gender conformity are difficult conversations for some to have, especially when it addresses something other than the societal gender norms. In the not too distant past, race and culture were not open conversations, either. In my teaching experience, however, I do see young children as being familiar with and open to gender diversity. For instance, in years past, my students have discovered peers whose families have two parents of the same gender. Likewise, former students wondered aloud about a male peer who consistently chose play-based activities such as the dollhouse and housekeeping or shared his love of reading Barbie chapter books. Our ensuing conversations were necessary yet also very natural.

As literature plays a major role my classroom environment, I prefer to remain responsive to the students’ comments or questions; and, one of my instructional choices would be to reflect their requests or queries through my book selections. To me, situations such as those mentioned above seem to be authentic starting points for educators such as myself to locate texts for young people to see themselves represented as a means of validation. Wonderful book options are now readily available for young children such as *Heather Has Two Mommies* (Newman, 2015), *My Princess Boy* (Kilodavis, 2010), *and Morris Micklewhite and the Tangerine Dress* (Baldacchino, 2014). It is of the utmost importance that we can each open up a book, for instance, and find ourselves not only represented within the pages of the book but also find ourselves as to who we are, what we can do, and where we can go in life (Levithan, 2004).

Yet, I have found that being a teacher of young children in a public school setting can sometimes put constraints on what I can freely read or talk about with my students, as others may
feel topics such as these are too controversial. Gender nonconformity, or enacting gender against the hegemonic societal norms, seems to fall under this umbrella in the case of this dissertation. As permission for this study required approval from district administration, school principal, and parents, some of the read alouds chosen for this particular study were acceptable for the kindergarten classroom setting, while other books were not. Therefore, for this specific gender study and at this particular time, gender nonconformity is not the focus in terms of the book selections. In future studies, I would like to extend this conversation to include the use of gender nonconformity and transgender children’s literature.

**Participant Selection**

As the kindergarten teacher and researcher, I initially contacted the parents via an introductory letter mailed through the postal system at the end of October 2015. The introductory letter included an invitation to attend one of two parent information meetings in early November of 2015. Seven families participated in the first meeting; four families attended the second meeting. In addition, seven families who could not attend either parent information meeting received the research study information through an introductory phone call at a time of their convenience.

The two identical parent information meetings were a forum to explain the research study to the parents, provided an opportunity for them to browse through the Cinderella texts, and gave parents a chance to ask questions. To become familiar with the contents of the forms their children would eventually sign, parents viewed the child assent forms. In addition, parents reviewed the parent consent forms at this time. Parents had the option to sign the forms that evening and leave the forms with me, or to take home the forms and send back the signed forms in a stamped, addressed envelope to my home address by mid-November. I was responsible for
collecting the signed consent forms. All 18 parents who participated in the information sessions signed and returned the forms. Appendix A represents an example of the parent consent form.

In mid-November, I met face to face with the 18 kindergarten students whose parents signed the consent forms. Each child with parental consent was given the opportunity to participate in the research study. The student/teacher meeting took place during school hours in the familiar setting of their classroom. I explained, in child friendly language, the purpose of my research study. I also had on hand all books as well as audio and video equipment so that the students became acquainted with the items. I affirmed that the students had a choice to participate at any given time and could always opt out of any suggested activities that were directly connected to the research study. Additionally, I let the students know that there would always be numerous other activities being offered simultaneously so that there will be no undue pressure for the children to participate in the research study. Finally, I read and explained the child assent form which was also written in a child friendly manner. All 18 kindergartners signed the assent forms. Appendix B represents an example of the student assent form.

As with the parent consent forms, I collected the signed child assent forms. Once parental and child permission were secured, I generated a list of kindergarten students who were eligible to participate in the research study. Initially, there were 18 kindergarten participants with signed consent forms; however, in January 2016, one of the kindergartners moved with his family out of district. Therefore, this research study includes a final total of 17 kindergarten participants. I stapled together all of the corresponding parent consent and child assent forms and stored the papers in a locked file cabinet until the conclusion of the research study, after which time I shredded the forms. Table 1 provides an overall description of the kindergarten participants (all names throughout this study are pseudonyms).
### Table 1 Kindergarten Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><em>Name</em></th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Age (year.month)</th>
<th>Birth Order</th>
<th>Siblings</th>
<th>Occupation Mother</th>
<th>Occupation Father</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aaliyah</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Bi-racial</td>
<td>4.11-5.7</td>
<td>Only child</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>College Student</td>
<td>No Information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dakota</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>5.1-5.9</td>
<td>Older</td>
<td>Sister</td>
<td>Admin. Assistant</td>
<td>Trade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dawn</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>5.1-5.9</td>
<td>Oldest</td>
<td>Sister; Brother</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Education/ Coach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eliza</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>5.11-6.7</td>
<td>Older</td>
<td>Sister</td>
<td>Stay at home mother</td>
<td>Health Field</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gabriel</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>5.3-5.11</td>
<td>Older</td>
<td>Brother</td>
<td>Stay at home mother</td>
<td>Homeland Security</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Garrett</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>5.1-5.9</td>
<td>Only child</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Admin. Assistant</td>
<td>Health Field</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hannah</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>5.2-5.10</td>
<td>Oldest</td>
<td>Brothers</td>
<td>Stay at home mother</td>
<td>Business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jesse</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>5.11-6.4</td>
<td>Only child</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Stay at home grandmother</td>
<td>Trade grandfather</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mia</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>5.5-6.1</td>
<td>Oldest</td>
<td>Brothers</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nadim</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>5.3-5.11</td>
<td>Younger</td>
<td>Sister</td>
<td>Stay at home mother</td>
<td>Health Field</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nahla</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>5.8-6.4</td>
<td>Older</td>
<td>Brother</td>
<td>Stay at home mother</td>
<td>Business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophia</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>5.2-5.10</td>
<td>Younger</td>
<td>Brother</td>
<td>Business</td>
<td>Restaurant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sydney</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>5.3-5.11</td>
<td>Younger</td>
<td>Sister</td>
<td>Health Field</td>
<td>Business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taylor</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>5.10-6.6</td>
<td>Only child</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Trade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tommy</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>5.8-6.4</td>
<td>Youngest</td>
<td>3 Sisters 2 Brothers</td>
<td>Stay at home mother</td>
<td>Trade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vinnie</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>5.3-5.11</td>
<td>Younger</td>
<td>Brother</td>
<td>Admin. Assistant</td>
<td>Restaurant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Willie</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>5.11-6.7</td>
<td>Twin</td>
<td>Sister</td>
<td>Health Field</td>
<td>State worker grandfather</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* All names used throughout this research study are pseudonyms.
Since grades were not attached to the research study, a child's grades were not affected by whether or not he or she chose to participate in the research. The children who did not wish to participate in this research study suffered no consequences. Parents could revoke permission for participation at any time the parent desired, as well. At all times, the child's participation was strictly voluntary; the kindergartner could leave the study at any time and continue to participate in the regularly scheduled classroom activities. The student could say no at any time to any activity focused on gender without penalty.

As the whole group read aloud was an activity that occurred as a part of the regular school day to support curriculum work, all students participated in this activity, regardless of the book title or subject matter. Immediately following a Cinderella variant read aloud, I introduced a small group discussion regarding the reading. A student who had permission to participate in the study was given the option to accept or decline this invitation at any given time with no repercussions. This meant the research study participants could have chosen to join in the small group discussion or they might have chosen to join other students at the other non-research study based center activities stationed throughout the classroom. If a parent did not wish for his or her child to participate in the gender-focused discussion immediately following the Cinderella read aloud, or a child who had permission to participate in research study activities opted out of the discussion at that particular time, then the child continued to participate in the regularly scheduled center activities. I made every effort to respectfully exclude the child from data collection with the following measures: not collect any art work, drawings, or written work from the particular child; not transcribe any portion of the audio tape in which this particular student can be heard talking; face the video camera away from the child who did wish to participate; and not transcribe the words of the particular student as heard on the videotape.
Data Collection Process

This qualitative research study examined yearlong conversations regarding gender between the kindergarten students and me, their teacher. The study naturally occurred within the confines of our everyday classroom experiences. Therefore, this research study was an extension of daily practice with a more mindful eye towards the kindergarten students’ perceptions of gender.

From September 10, 2015 until June 23, 2016, the required district ELA curricula for kindergarten followed the anticipated timeline of the routines and expectations of literacy events established during the Launch Unit, and stories being read and discussed regarding the characters, settings, problems, and solutions during Units 2 and 4. All students in the class participated in the read alouds and subsequent center activities as this was a regular expectation in the kindergarten classroom and matched with the ELA curriculum maps. Throughout the year and as per our typical classroom practice, students responded to read alouds through drawing, writing, dramatization, and whole group or small group discussions. When a particular read aloud had a focus on gender, I collected qualitative data using the students’ responses to gender through drawing, writing, dramatizations, and whole group or small group discussions.

Data collection areas. As the classroom environment was typically a vibrant and active space, I used various places throughout the room to gather data. Typically, I planned activities that optimally utilized the furniture, supplies, technology, and the traffic flow of the room. There were five major areas in the classroom in which the majority of learning events took place: the rug area, the horseshoe table, the round table, the six square tables in the middle of the room, and the dramatic play area. Occasionally, the kindergartners’ work spilled into the cubby area and hallway when additional elbow room was needed for projects that required more space.
The classroom had a large rug area in the far left corner of the room. The rug area was the hub of activity in this kindergarten classroom, so this zone held the most documentable activities, both planned and spontaneous. This was the place where read alouds occurred, whole group discussions happened, Reader’s Workshop and Writer’s Workshop mini lessons took place, and some center activities transpired. The rug area also housed the interactive whiteboard and document camera. Dependent upon the placement of other scheduled center activities, small group discussions occurred at the rug area as well. Because of the high amount of data collection in this space, I kept a video recorder in this corner of the room to capture the language, movements, and reactions of the kindergartners and myself. Additionally, I had access to a clipboard with notepaper and sticky notes, placed on the stool under the easel. These supplies provided a spontaneous place for me to jot down anecdotal notes as events unfolded in this area of the classroom.

The horseshoe table and the round table were at different ends of the classroom. The middle of the room held six square tables with seating for four students at each table. Each of these table areas became a base for center activities at times. Writing and drawing utensils were located there, and tables held baskets of books. Reader’s Workshop folders, Writer’s Workshop folders, and Independent Reading bags were available on the nearby counters. These tables were where most writing took place; these tables opened up spaces for informal, spontaneous dialogue that occurred with peers because these centers were less structured. An audio recorder was also available in this section of the classroom to capture peer dialogue as it authentically transpired.

In the lower left corner of the classroom was the dramatic play area. This section changed frequently according to themes and student requests. Typical rotations of dramatic free play opportunities included a kitchen setting, bakery, restaurant, veterinarian’s office, post office,
farm, and castle. Students extended their play by making additional props or costumes using a free range of materials such as fabric and various sized boxes. This was a popular area in that students tried on different roles (Sipe, 2008; Wright, Bacigalupa, Black, & Burton, 2008) which, in turn, helped them to begin to understand the logic and motivation of people (Ortleib, Cramer, & Cheek, 2007). Due to the dialogic nature of this center, I ensured that either an audio or a video tape recorder was present so that I could document and analyze the words and actions of the actors.

**Timeline.** In keeping with the formal approval of research from the Institutional Review Board, this doctoral dissertation research study took place within the eight-month period starting from November 2015 through June 2016. Throughout this research study, I collected qualitative data through multiple means from the kindergarten students in my classroom whose parents gave permission to participate. I collected data through: initial and final pictures sorted according to gender; student drawings, writings, and verbal explanations of drawn and written pieces; verbal, drawn, and written responses to readings; teacher notes from regularly scheduled student-teacher reading and writing conferences; spontaneous teacher generated anecdotal notes; planned and spontaneous acts of performance; video and audio taped interactions; and reflective field notes at the conclusion of each event.

Across the timeline of the research study, I collected and stored the qualitative data in chronological order. I saved documentation such as picture sort results, written or drawn pieces, audio and video tapes along with their transcripts, narrative field notes, and anecdotal notes from each kindergarten participant in a color coded file folder according to each data set. These file folders were stored in a locked file cabinet, and student artwork and writing examples were returned upon conclusion of the research. I also scanned each piece of information, made them
into pdf files, and then uploaded the digital files into specific electronic file folders onto a password protected laptop computer. These pertinent recorded pieces supported me as the researcher as I worked to make sense of the movement and pattern structures through context or process (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

**Data set 1.** Within the first week of school, the district required kindergartners to draw, write, and verbally describe real life stories involving personal experiences. The district’s purpose for this task was to obtain an entry-level point on each student concerning oral planning, drawing with details, sequencing and retelling of an event in order, letter and sound correspondence, sight word knowledge, and the mechanics of writing. As this writing event occurred before I received IRB approval, I collected this initial writing sample from classroom archives as my first set of data. I used this required district writing piece to analyze the activities, clothing, traits, dialogue, and whatever else was depicted and described in terms of the students’ gender conceptions.

During the Launch Unit of the curriculum maps, students practiced sorting pictures by distinct attributes such as circle, triangle, square, or living and non-living. This was in preparation of the district-wide word study program in which the students eventually sorted according to specific word patterns. Students also justified their reasoning for placing objects into specific categories. To extend this practice as well as to gain information regarding their understandings of gender, the kindergartners also sorted pictures of objects according to the gender categories of “girl”, “boy”, and “girls and boys”. The picture sorts contained items such as clothing, colors, activities, traits, and occupations. Kindergartners placed pictures such as a football, long hair, a dress, and scientist under the heading of “girls”, “boys”, or “girls and boys”, and then verbalized their logic to me.
Data Set 1, therefore, included the gender-focused picture sorts as well as the initial personal narrative writing sample. Qualitative data collected from the picture sort experiences constituted a hard copy of the sort, a digital file of the completed sort, and digital transcriptions of the students’ reasons for sorting in that manner. Collection of the hard and digital copies of the writing samples became data, as well. The picture sorts and written personal narratives helped to determine the kindergartners' beliefs at the beginning of the school year as to what they thought boys and girls can and cannot do.

Data set 2. From there, I leaned into the yearlong, overarching social justice focus in which I intentionally planned read alouds and discussions involving race, socio-economic status, abilities, and gender. Starting in the late fall of 2015 and continuing into the spring of 2016, I thoughtfully designated specific read alouds that invited the kindergartners to interrogate the texts as to whose voices were heard or whose were silenced (Vasquez, 2014, 2017). During this timeframe, I read books that inspired gender-focused dialogue such as A Fire Engine for Ruthie (Newman, 2004), Little Kunoichi, The Ninja Girl (Ishida, 2015), and Rosie Revere, Engineer (Beatty, 2013).

These texts and numerous others encouraged a community of inquiry among the kindergartners. As we critically read and discussed the books, I asked each of us to consider “Who am I in this world?” and “How can I make a difference?” Read alouds and follow up discussions were either video or audiotaped, after which I transcribed each event. The uploaded transcripts and recorded events became digital files, the artifacts saved as Data Set 2. Appendix C displays a reference list of picture book read alouds used to explore gender; Appendix D shows an annotated bibliography of read alouds across the course of the research study, including those read during the collection of the second data set.
In addition to their verbal thoughts to the read alouds, the kindergartners responded in writing to the particular readings within community response journals during this same timeframe. After we read and discussed each book, I placed the book and a corresponding response journal in a communal basket on one of the bookshelves. Thereafter, the students independently accessed the books for a personal re-read. After the re-read, the kindergartners had the option to write their own thoughts and observations into the journal; at times, they also expanded upon a peer comment. I uploaded each community response journal as a digital artifact as well as maintained the hard copy in a separate file folder.

Likewise, when I located evidence of gender understandings within a student’s individual *All About Me* response booklet, I also saved the hard and digital copies of the artifacts within files. Additional written documentation included the notes that I made while conferring with students during routine reading and writing conferences, anecdotal notes jotted during student/student and student/teacher interactions and field notes written in reflection following an event. I kept all of these documents, saved as hard and digital copies, for subsequent analyses of the students’ understandings about gender specifically.

Due to the structured setting of the read alouds and discussions, I also wished to locate instances of gender understandings in a more unstructured manner; therefore, I audiotaped the students during Choice Time (play centers) and transcribed their words to look for examples of gender perceptions. Play centers included housekeeping, dollhouse, western town, blocks, car and trucks, trains, Super Heroes, Legos, vet, and school. Uploaded taped and transcribed sessions became digital files for subsequent analysis of gender related concepts in a more spontaneous, unstructured setting. In chapters four, five, six, and seven, I provide specific examples from the discursive events collected within Data Set 2 that highlight this specific group of kindergartners.
adherence to the normalized, biased differences between the gender binaries of girl/boy as well as examples that pushed against it.

**Data set 3.** Throughout the spring of 2016, I read twelve variations of the Cinderella fairy tale, and these interactions became data for Data Set 3. Our previous deep thinking about texts supported this gender-based focus as we critically read and discussed these particular Cinderella variant books (Vasquez, 2014, 2017). I read many renditions of Cinderella such as *Smokey Mountain Rose: An Appalachian Cinderella* (Schroeder, 1997) and *The Irish Cinderlad* (Climo, 1996). However, three fairy tales in particular, *Cinderella* (Disney & Dias, 2005), *Prince Cinders* (Cole, 1997), and *Cinder Edna* (Jackson, 1998) were chosen specifically as a read aloud set. This read aloud triad examined the main characters through the lenses of parody and poesis (Altmann, 1994). The parody of *Prince Cinders* (Cole, 1997) simply flipped the leading role to a masculine character, yet, did little to disrupt the notion of gender inequity; rather, it seemingly mocked heteronormative roles and expectations. The poesis, *Cinder Edna* (Jackson, 1998), moved the reader forward by offering “a new and wider world of meaning through reconfigured events and characters” (Altmann, 1994, p. 23) and generated awareness as well as a deeper questioning of justice and fairness amongst some of the kindergartners. The fairy tales played a central role in opening up class discussions through both planned and impromptu talk about gender roles and expectations; furthermore, the fairy tales provided us with conversations involving love, marriage, and being rescued (Trousdale & McMillan, 2003). At the completion of each fairy tale read aloud and discussion, I transcribed the audio and videotapes of the discursive events. Hard copies and digital files of the artifacts documented the children’s thoughts involving gender.
Narrative data collected during whole and small group discussions centered on questions that encouraged the participants to explore and respond to gender through the picture book read alouds or to previous students’ drawings, writings, or dramatizations. Responses during the small group discussions were verbal, drawn, written, or acted out. This provided me with realistic opportunities to look closer at the way students made meaning from texts as well as made connections to themselves, other books, and the world around them. As the kindergartners entered into a familiar setting with a known adult, their own teacher, they reacted and built off of each other’s responses in authentic ways (Cameron, 2005). As an observer of the collaborations, I had multiple opportunities to collect both the children’s words and actions. This approach provided consideration of “not only the children’s own accounts of reality but the ways they negotiate these accounts with others, therefore showing divergence or convergence between their views” (EU Kids Online, FAQ3, Research Best Practices, para. 7).

In late spring of 2016, the kindergartners formed book clubs of choice involving favorite story characters, one of whom was Cinderella. The students in the Cinderella book club responded to the fairy tales through written responses to their favorite characters, the writing of their own Cinderella books, comparing themselves to fairy tale characters, and scripting two-sided stories with a fairy tale character of choice. Each of these experiences provided hard and digital documentation of the kindergartners perceptions of gender. In addition to these specific artifacts, I transcribed audiotapes of book club discussions as well as student dialogue generated during the play center activities of Choice Time. All of these experiences also became part of Data Set 3, providing detailed information of this group’s words, actions, and feelings about gender. Some of the documentation reinforced gender biases while others bumped against the
gendered norms of society. In chapters four, five, six, and seven, I present my findings of particular kindergartners’ understandings of gender through the fairy tale focus.

**Data set 4.** I desired to apprentice the young learners into finding authentic causes that mattered to them and encouraged them to become active agents of change in their own future worlds (Vasquez, 2014, 2017). Therefore, at the end of May and beginning of June of 2016, I purposefully structured opportunities for the kindergartners to step into the shoes of a favorite character from one of the Cinderella variants and to become one with the character. I intended for this experience to be a practice session, for them to try on stronger words or to take on an injustice. Data Set 4 holds the records from this group of activities, including transcribed videotaped interviews of the students enacting the characters, and hard and digital copies of their artistic representations of the characters. In addition, I discuss discoveries from the transcriptions of the kindergartners’ fairy tale based dramatizations, which centered on their student-generated plays performed in the student-constructed castle.

**Data set 5.** This was the final collection of data. This documentation included a revisit to the gender picture sort from the beginning of the school year. At the end of the school year, I collected the district required final write regarding the kindergartners’ real life stories in the form of personal narratives. As with Data Set 1, I analyzed this collection of data to look for the students’ gender conceptions as represented within activities, clothing, and trait choices, as well as their written and verbal dialogue. Table 2 depicts the data collection timeline regarding the entire kindergarten data sets.
### Table 2 Data Collection Sources and Timeline – Kindergartners

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data Set 1 November 2015</th>
<th>Data Set 2 November 2015 –March 2016</th>
<th>Data Set 3 March-May 2016</th>
<th>Data Set 4 May-June 2016</th>
<th>Data Set 5 June 2016</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender picture sorts</td>
<td>“I am special” class book</td>
<td>Cinderella read aloud transcriptions (12)</td>
<td>Who am I in the world? read aloud transcriptions (7)</td>
<td>Gender picture sorts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drawn and written personal narratives</td>
<td>All About Me journals</td>
<td>Focus group transcriptions (7)</td>
<td>Making a difference read aloud transcriptions (5)</td>
<td>Drawn and written personal narratives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fashion books (5)</td>
<td>Comparison of illustrations interviews (5)</td>
<td>Dramatization video transcriptions (12)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Social justice read aloud transcriptions (12)</td>
<td>Cinderella book club transcriptions (8)</td>
<td>Notes from workshops</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Community social justice response journals (12)</td>
<td>Puppet show transcriptions (5)</td>
<td>Anecdotal Notes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choice Time audio transcriptions (10)</td>
<td>Choice Time audio transcriptions (10)</td>
<td>Notes from workshops</td>
<td>Notes from workshops</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notes from workshops</td>
<td>Notes from workshops</td>
<td>Anecdotal Notes</td>
<td>Anecdotal Notes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Simultaneously, I documented my instructional moves through weekly lesson plans in a digital file. After each research event, I also jotted field notes in a research journal; these notes recapped the experiences, as well as held a place for me to nudge my thinking further or ask
myself more questions. I kept the research journal with the field notes in a file folder within a locked file cabinet. Likewise, after I transcribed audio and videotaped events I reflected back on the occurrences and took note digitally of sections that stood out to me, lingering questions on my part, additional questions to ask the students, and possible future directions to take regarding read alouds or activities. Table 3 represents the data collection timeline for teacher practice.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data Set 1</th>
<th>Data Set 2</th>
<th>Data Set 3</th>
<th>Data Set 4</th>
<th>Data Set 5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Field notes</td>
<td>Instructional plans</td>
<td>Instructional plans</td>
<td>Instructional plans</td>
<td>Field notes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflections</td>
<td>Reflections</td>
<td>Reflections</td>
<td>Field notes</td>
<td>Field notes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Data Analysis**

Discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2003; Gee, 1999) as well as the constant comparative method (Corbin & Stauss, 2008) framed the data analysis process. I analyzed data from all kindergartners in my classroom whose parents provided permission to participate in this study. I analyzed data collected across an eight-month period, starting November 2015 and ending in June 2016; all data was marked in chronological order. The need for me to be extremely thorough and organized with data from the onset was important for two reasons: for my own good, as I read data and look for threads or recurring themes; and, so other interested investigators could review the database along with the written study with relative ease, should they so desire (Yin, 2009).
The analysis of data was a long, thoughtful process. It began with my first data set collected in the fall of 2015 and continued well after the data collection process ended in June of 2016. It was imperative for me to cull through the data in a recursive manner during the school year; therefore, I analyzed data soon after I collected it and continued in a cyclical fashion (Charmaz, 2006). This sequential process enabled me to stay on top of the data as it occurred so that I did not become overwhelmed; this also helped me to identify key concepts, follow through on pertinent questions or revise upcoming inquiries, and become a more focused listener and observer as I collected data in each subsequent month (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Once the school year ended and data collection ceased, it took another six months, until December 2016, for me to complete the transcriptions of the play centers, castle dramatizations, and puppet shows. I continued to go back through the data sets recursively to look for patterns and themes within the individual data collections as well as across data sets. Since the amount of data collected was immense, it took approximately another eight months for me to analyze across all data sets.

Through the close examination of data, I continually broke it apart to look for the properties and dimensions that were grounded within (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Creswell, 2007). As data analysis is dynamic, I expected shifts to occur as I thought about the varying information brought into the study conceptually through the data. This caused me to discard some ideas or further expand on others before I came to a more concrete interpretation of the stories told by the participants (Charmaz, 2006).

**Coding for Themes**

The data analysis went through numerous stages at varying levels so that the gaining of deeper meaning took place (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Initially, I coded the data through microanalysis. As I broke open the data in a more detailed manner, I considered potential
concepts and generated new ideas. Interactions can include conditions both locally and distant; therefore, I eventually moved into macro analysis, which was situated more globally in social, historical, or political contexts, to look at a broader perspective. Throughout the data analysis process, I probed deeper into the data through questioning. I also compared data across time (Charmaz, 2006).

The core elements of my qualitative data analysis initially consisted of two central steps to coding: reducing the data into meaningful segments and assigning names to the segments. After I digitally transcribed each read aloud or discussion, I read each transcription initially to get a general understanding of the event. On the second reading, I added notes to the documents. Next, I began to highlight key words and phrases within each of my comments. A priori codes from previous early childhood gender studies (Blaise, 2014) formed the beginning of the coding process; whereas, additional codes developed authentically as data sets grew. From there, I reorganized and sorted the data as concepts and themes emerged. Over the course of the data analysis period, I found I revisited the data sets numerous times to come to a deeper understanding of the narratives held within.

The concepts and themes became clearer to me as I constructed data graphs, tables, and charts to compare data across all of the data sets, then across case studies, and finally within each case study participant (Creswell, 2007). For instance, I made research question maps for each case study to match data in support of all three research questions; Appendix E, F, G, and H exemplify the research question maps for chapters four, five, six, and seven respectively. I charted each Cinderella variant read aloud, their corresponding projects, and the focus groups invited to deeper text discussions; Appendix I shows this organization of data across data sets. I also documented each focus group and the participants so that I could look for trends in
participation; Appendix J shows the way in which I organized this information to aid in data analysis.

As I worked through the analysis of each set of qualitative data, I first coded and then categorized the themes and threads using memos and notes throughout the drawn, written, and transcribed documents (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The first layer of notes within the digital transcriptions became “comments” in my word document file. I placed sticky notes with notes on the hard copies of artifacts such as drawings and art projects. This microanalysis enabled me to locate key concepts within the data sets, which I highlighted within the applicable comment sections. From there, I coded according to concepts such as “love”, “fashion”, “dependence on others”, and “boys and girls as athletes”. Appendix K depicts a coding example.

From the larger set of concepts, I narrowed down the focus to a smaller set of themes supported through the data. I looked for themes that naturally surfaced in the database rather than attempting to fit the database into a preconceived set of ideas or themes (Creswell, 2007) so that I did not limit myself to a set or presubscribed ideas or theories (Charmaz, 2006). For instance, “multiple perspectives” emerged as I moved from the open coding of notes to memos. After I recognized the themes, I categorized, identified structures and processes, looked for patterns over time, and elaborated more fully on my interpretations of the findings (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Rather than use a linear approach, I took a spiral approach. As I entered information into the database on one side, I exited from the other side with notes and memos constructed from the data, and then circled back around again with this information (Charmaz, 2006). Throughout the process, I read, described, classified, and interpreted the data through the development of concepts and categories within notes; whereas, the use of memo writing helped me to organize
my thoughts and “reflect the mental dialogue occurring between the data and me” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 169).

As I analyzed the wide range of data sets across the study, I wondered: how did the kindergartners and I enact upon our understandings in the classroom setting with specific regards to gender? Did we ignore, overlook, or dismiss blatant acts of gender bias? Was hegemonic masculinity or emphasized femininity valued or honored in this particular kindergarten classroom? Alternatively, I asked myself - did anyone in the class push against and challenge the heteronormativity imparted upon us by society?

Once I determined the essence of the data through microanalysis, I returned to the data to engage with broader macro analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). I identified links or connections between the gendered words, actions, and interactions at the individual level and the more global, social, and political discourses involving gender. In this regard, I noted connections between themes that “reinforced”, “challenged”, and “re-envisioned” the gendered norms of society. To support this, I looked for gender role situations or events that influenced at the micro level and were influenced by the macro level; and, then I analyzed how “these consequences feed back into the conditions that become a part of the situation and subsequent inter/action” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 91).

Questioning the data helped me to open up lines of inquiry, and I used this as an analytic tool throughout each stage of my analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). In order to get involved in the data at the very beginning, I asked myself what I noticed (Charmaz, 2006). For instance, as I analyzed the first data set of archived drawn and written real life events, I wondered about the types of activities the students had chosen to represent in their narratives and the connections of this information to gender expectations. In other instances, I probed deeper into a topic to better
support a concept (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). For example, the recurrent theme noted in my data collection of “friendship” led me to question the gender make-up of small groups in which students had the opportunity to self-select group membership. Yet, in other instances, I nudged myself to think outside of the box concerning the discoveries made as I read and interpreted the data. I realized I did not need to ask questions at every point, but I did understand that asking questions was one way to take me deeper into the data.

Comparing Across Data Sets

As the amount of data increased, I had the ability to compare one data set with another to look for similarities and differences (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). This constant comparison enabled me to assemble data together according to concepts, and it provided a way for me to discriminate between varying themes and categories. Through the continual comparisons of data, I pinpointed the properties and dimensions specific to each category or theme (Charmaz, 2006). The chart represented in Appendix L illustrates evidence across all data sets. From this organization of data, case studies began to emerge, as shown in the chart within Appendix M. In addition, the comparison of data illuminated gaps in the information or my own understanding of the data that inspired me to ask further questions or observe additional situations. Finally, constant comparison required me to be more aware of my own biases and assumptions as I exposed myself to a multitude of perspectives (Charmaz, 2006).

I acknowledge that analyzing data was a fluid process. During the data analysis process, I also realized that more than one story could be found within the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Therefore, it was important for me to go back into the data repeatedly and rework the process until “the analytic story all falls into place and ‘feels right’” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 274). This mindset determined the students eventually represented as case studies.
**Triangulation of data.** I intentionally used multiple sources of data so that I was better able to address a broader range of issues (Yin, 2009). Through a variety of data sources, I developed “converging lines of inquiry” (Yin, 2009, p. 115) that corroborated similar facts or phenomena. For instance, observations combined with drawn or written documents followed by interviews verified interpretations as well as substantiated data sources. As an example, Appendix N illustrates the triangulation of data across multiple data sources. In this regard, I supported evidence with more than one source such as from observation, artifacts, and narrative accounts (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Through this process, triangulation of data more firmly established rigor because multiple sources of evidence offer a variety of measures for the same phenomena (Yin, 2009).

**Case study 1: Hannah and Dawn.** While working through the data, I began to note a small group of girls who were similar in their responses during read alouds, especially the Cinderella texts; their words and actions in the classroom as well as their lively recounts of home activities seemed to reflect the gendered binaries of society. Subsequent looks at my anecdotal notes and their reading and writing examples substantiated this understanding; likewise, my field notes and reflections also supported my analyses of their close adherence to the girl/boy binaries of societal norms. Digging deeper into the multiple data sets, I noted two specific individuals from this group of girls, Hannah and Dawn, who mostly reinforced the gender binaries of society with their words and actions throughout the majority of this research study. Yet, the two girls also began to expand their understandings of what being a girl looked like to each of them as the year progressed. Chapter four describes the interactions of Hannah and Dawn; Table 4 describes characteristics of Hannah and Dawn as the focal students in Case Study 1, as well as the peers with whom they had particular interactions related to gender across the school year.
Table 4 Kindergarten Participants, Chapter 4, Case Study 1

### Focal Students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Age (year.month)</th>
<th>Birth Order</th>
<th>Siblings</th>
<th>Occupation Mother</th>
<th>Occupation Father</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hannah</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>5.2-5.10</td>
<td>Oldest</td>
<td>Brothers</td>
<td>Stay at home mother</td>
<td>Business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dawn</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>5.1-5.9</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>Sister; Brother</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Education/ Coach</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Supporting Students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Age (year.month)</th>
<th>Birth Order</th>
<th>Siblings</th>
<th>Occupation Mother</th>
<th>Occupation Father</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dakota</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>5.1-5.9</td>
<td>Older</td>
<td>Sister</td>
<td>Admin. Assistant</td>
<td>Trade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eliza</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>5.11-6.7</td>
<td>Older</td>
<td>Sister</td>
<td>Stay at home mother</td>
<td>Health Field</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gabriel</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>5.3-5.11</td>
<td>Older</td>
<td>Brother</td>
<td>Stay at home mother</td>
<td>Homeland Security</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Garrett</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>5.1-5.9</td>
<td>Only Child</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Admin. Assistant</td>
<td>Health Field</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mia</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>5.5-6.1</td>
<td>Oldest</td>
<td>Brothers</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nahla</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>5.8-6.4</td>
<td>Older</td>
<td>Brother</td>
<td>Stay at home mother</td>
<td>Business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophia</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>5.2-5.10</td>
<td>Younger</td>
<td>Brother</td>
<td>Business</td>
<td>Restaurant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sydney</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>5.3-5.11</td>
<td>Younger</td>
<td>Sister</td>
<td>Health Field</td>
<td>Business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taylor</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>5.10-6.6</td>
<td>Only Child</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Trade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tommy</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>5.8-6.4</td>
<td>Youngest of 6</td>
<td>3 sisters; 2 brothers</td>
<td>Stay at home mother</td>
<td>Trade</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. All names used throughout this research study are pseudonyms.

Case study 2: Sydney and Dawn. The second case study emerged as I realized the ways in which a girl named Sydney expressed her understandings of gender within the kindergarten classroom. Transcriptions from read alouds, play centers, reading and writing artifacts,
anecdotal, reflective and field notes illuminated a girl who consistently bumped against the roles and expectations of gender. As I looked and listened closer to the various information contained within multiple data sets, I also noted Sydney’s relationship with Dawn, who frequently questioned Sydney’s choices. Therefore, this work becomes the discussion in chapter five. In this chapter, the focus illustrates one girl who bumped against societal gender binaries and the ways in which she opened up new definitions of gender for her kindergarten peers, most specifically for Dawn. Table 5 gives background on Sydney and Dawn as the focus in Case Study 2, as well as the other kindergarten peers who joined in Sydney and Dawn’s conversations.
### Table 5 Kindergarten Participants, Chapter 5, Case Study 2

#### Focal Students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>*Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Age (years.month)</th>
<th>Birth Order</th>
<th>Siblings</th>
<th>Occupation Mother</th>
<th>Occupation Father</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sydney</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>5.3-5.11</td>
<td>Younger</td>
<td>Sister</td>
<td>Health Field</td>
<td>Business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dawn</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>5.1-5.9</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>Sister; Brother</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Education/Coach</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Supporting Students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>*Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Age (years.month)</th>
<th>Birth Order</th>
<th>Siblings</th>
<th>Occupation Mother</th>
<th>Occupation Father</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dakota</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>5.1-5.9</td>
<td>Older</td>
<td>Sister</td>
<td>Admin. Assistant</td>
<td>Trade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eliza</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>5.11-6.7</td>
<td>Older</td>
<td>Sister</td>
<td>Stay at home mother</td>
<td>Health Field</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Garrett</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>5.1-5.9</td>
<td>Only child</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Admin. Assistant</td>
<td>Health Field</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hannah</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>5.2-5.10</td>
<td>Oldest</td>
<td>Brothers</td>
<td>Stay at home mother</td>
<td>Business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jesse</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>5.11-6.7</td>
<td>Only child</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Stay at home grandmother</td>
<td>Trade grandfather</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nadim</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>5.3-5.11</td>
<td>Younger</td>
<td>Sister</td>
<td>Stay at home mother</td>
<td>Health Field</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taylor</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>5.10-6.6</td>
<td>Only Child</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Trade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tommy</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>5.8-6.4</td>
<td>Youngest</td>
<td>3 Sisters; 2 Brothers</td>
<td>Stay at home mother</td>
<td>Trade</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* All names used throughout this research study are pseudonyms.

**Case study 3: Nadim.** As the months of data collection and analyses progressed, I began to notice a recurrent theme of gender possibilities through real life experiences; and, this becomes the focus of chapter six. As I traced through the data sets of read alouds and discussions, I discovered much of the initial conversations started with a kindergartner named Nadim. For Nadim, once he saw something, he believed it would happen again in the future. To
gain a clearer understanding of this theme, I went back into the data sets of play centers,
dramatizations, drawn and written artifacts, and responses to readings to look for the connections
and disconnections. This focus on Nadim’s understanding of gender formulated Case Study 3.
Table 6 details the characteristics of Nadim, in addition to the details of the classmates who
participated alongside Nadim in his discursive events.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>*Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Age (year.month)</th>
<th>Birth Order</th>
<th>Siblings</th>
<th>Occupation Mother</th>
<th>Occupation Father</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nadim</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>5.3-5.11</td>
<td>Younger</td>
<td>Sister</td>
<td>Stay at home</td>
<td>Health Field</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dawn</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>5.1-5.9</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>Sister; Brother</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Education/Coach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gabriel</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>5.3-5.11</td>
<td>Older</td>
<td>Brother</td>
<td>Stay at home</td>
<td>Homeland Security</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Garrett</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>5.1-5.9</td>
<td>Only child</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Admin. Assistant</td>
<td>Health Field</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hannah</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>5.2-5.10</td>
<td>Oldest</td>
<td>Brothers</td>
<td>Stay at home</td>
<td>Business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sydney</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>5.3-5.11</td>
<td>Younger</td>
<td>Sister</td>
<td>Health Field</td>
<td>Business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taylor</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>5.10-6.6</td>
<td>Only child</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Trade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tommy</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>5.8-6.4</td>
<td>Youngest</td>
<td>3 Sisters; 2 Brothers</td>
<td>Stay at home</td>
<td>Trade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vinnie</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>5.3-5.11</td>
<td>Younger</td>
<td>Brother</td>
<td>Admin. Assistant</td>
<td>Restaurant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Willie</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>5.11-6.7</td>
<td>Twin</td>
<td>Sister</td>
<td>Health Field</td>
<td>State worker grandfather</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* All names used throughout this research study are pseudonyms.
**Researcher’s Role: Complexities of Being Both Researcher and Teacher**

I took on dual roles in the research study, as I am both the teacher and the researcher. Being practitioner and researcher in one study had both affordances and constraints. Each of these sides carries weight, as research plays a vital role in the growing knowledge and understanding of education across society. This becomes especially pertinent to today’s political climate in which federal and state agencies seek to prescribe educational mandates with regard to curriculum, teaching, and testing (Perry, Henderson, & Meier, 2012). Table 7 illustrates the complexity of the teacher-researcher role.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Table 7 Dual Roles of Researcher and Practitioner Researcher</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Affordances</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Emic/etic perspective</td>
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<tr>
<td>Link theory with practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extend knowledge base</td>
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<tr>
<td>Create new knowledge base</td>
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<tr>
<td>Professional relationships</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ethical and moral obligation to myself to teach from a social justice stance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

On the affordances side, this teacher research study linked theory with practice while also attempting to extend upon an existing knowledge base, and it held the potential to create new knowledge (Perry, Henderson, & Meier, 2012). My goals for this particular teacher research included gaining an awareness of my teaching and this particular group of students’ learning, reflecting on my own practice, expanding the mindset of this specific group of students, and potentially effecting educational changes at the local and global levels (Cochran-Smith & Lytle,
This research study also provided a backdrop for systematic inquiry within context. Another vital component of practitioner research was the awareness that my emic perspective offered an authentic framework of my educational practice; as well, it held the logistics of how, where, when, and why my students were gaining knowledge (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009).

While the emic perspective of my classroom was an extremely vital position to present in this practitioner research study, it also complicated my ability to gather research (Kuriloff, Andrus, & Ravitch, 2011). As the classroom teacher, I had a professional relationship with the young students in my class, their families, my principal, and colleagues. In addition, I also had an ongoing professional connection with teachers and personnel throughout the district as a literacy leader. I had ethical and moral obligations to teach and model the district-required curriculum to the best of my abilities. A major role for me as a teacher and literacy leader was to further the breadth and depth of understanding of my students as well as my colleagues. Within each role, confidentiality regarding my students was paramount as I shared my working knowledge of classroom literacy practices.

In each of these teacher positions, I can certainly test out theories as well as research based practices within my daily instruction, yet the history and purposes of “school”, as society knows it in this environment, have boundaries to this extent. One such boundary I discovered was the covering of controversial topics such as gender nonconformity in a kindergarten classroom situated within a conservative public school district. While many of my suggested gender-focused picture book read alouds were acceptable at the building and district level, several of the texts were deemed unacceptable to be read with five and six year olds in a classroom setting. For example, the story of *Morris Micklewhite and the Tangerine Dress*
(Baldacchino, 2014) is about a young boy who feels best when he wears an orange colored dress in the dress-up center at his school. As I noted previously, I received an administrative request to take this specific book off my read aloud list, as the sensitive nature of a boy wearing a dress might have been unsettling to some of the parents. Yet, as a responsive kindergarten teacher, I would have preferred to include the book in our exploration of gender through picture book read alouds. Chapters seven and eight further expand my thoughts regarding this topic.

The teacher context was similar yet also slightly different to the professional relationship I had within my doctoral studies, professors, and university (Kuriloff, Andrus, & Ravitch, 2011). Here, I also needed to be cognizant of respecting boundaries and confidentiality; nonetheless, the nature of this institution was to delve deeper, question, test out, and further stretch the existing educational knowledge base. As researcher, I entered into another’s setting, in this case an elementary school that was part of a larger school district, with varying expectations. In addition, I was taking a stance in the name of social justice; to some, that was an unsettling proposition. This meant I needed to be aware of situations that may unintentionally invoke power differentials. As this particular research study “offers great opportunities for both groups to learn from and about each other” (Kuriloff, Andrus, & Ravitch, 2011, p. 49), it became even more crucial that I worked continuously to promote collaboration between university and school in ethical and moral ways. I was very careful not to express judgments and I remained open to the multiple perspectives of all key players – students, families, teachers, building and district administrators, university officials, and my dissertation committee members.

**Reflexivity: Locating identities.** One point I continued to be mindful of was that “(a)ll researchers are positioned” (Chiseri-Strater, 1996), and I was no exception. I especially needed to be reflexive while I collected and analyzed my data sets (Mauthner & Doucet, 2003) as data
analysis methods hold the potential to develop biases. My chosen methods contained my personal, institutional, and emotional assumptions, which influenced how and what I collected and analyzed as data. As I engaged in research, I carried the epistemological, theoretical, and ontological expectations of researchers before me, and I inherently transferred those understandings over to my own research process. Yet, while I gained meaning from past researchers, I concurrently worked to understand the participants with whom I researched; and, I brought my own personal knowledge, theories, and ways of being to the forefront. As I paid careful attention to all of my data, I became more aware of the assumptions and interpretations I brought to the data (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Therefore, it is important to note the analyses of the data as viewed from my unique perspective.

For instance, I am a female kindergarten teacher and doctoral student who has an interest in researching gender inequalities in the early childhood educational setting. Personally, I hold the experience of hearing as an adolescent student that I would not be able to understand higher-level math and sciences classes because I was a girl. As a teacher, I watch as former female students of mine, most often highly engaged and interested in math and science as kindergartners, repeatedly turn away from these studies as they move into middle and high school. Additionally, I have witnessed students as young as four and five years old publicly exclaim that boys cannot go into the housekeeping area, use the color pink, play with dollhouses, or read Barbie chapter books. Furthermore, I continue to engage in higher-level coursework that encourages me to take a stand for social justice, and I participated in doctoral coursework in which I explored gender.

Experiences such as these shape how and why I entered into this particular research and the methods I chose to explore this phenomenon. With this in mind, I see how my doctoral
research study is “the product of my academic and personal biographies” (Mauthner & Doucet, 2003, p. 420). As I involved myself in this specific research and report out on it, especially within a feminist perspective, I need to locate my identity within my writing because I essentially co-produce these writings alongside my kindergartners (Fine & Weis, 1996). Therefore, it is vital that I remained reflexive of my understandings by being transparent in the identification, articulation, and interrogation of the research data through the lenses of an early childhood teacher/literacy doctoral student with a feminist stance.

**Subjectivity through critical feedback.** My participation in discursive events has shaped my thoughts and understandings of the world, both consciously and subconsciously (Blaise, 2005). As both teacher and researcher, I assumed a variety of roles in the activities, therefore it was imperative I continued to be mindful of potential subjective biases that I may have unknowingly produced (Yin, 2009), misconstrued, or misrepresented (Kuriloff, Andrus, & Ravitch, 2011).

A major consideration that helped with subjectivity was the reliance on critical friends (McKeown & Diboll, 2011; Shagoury & Power, 2012). I consistently called on the support of three colleagues throughout the data collection and analysis processes. I sent each peer subsets of data from the larger data sets and asked for objective feedback and suggestions. Their professional interpretations and perspectives expanded my own perceptions with thought provoking questions and observations. Additionally, I met face to face with one critical friend in particular to continue the conversations at a deeper level. The written and verbal conversations provided me with numerous opportunities to reflect on my instructional practices within context (McKeown & Diboll, 2011).
Furthermore, at the end of each school day in which a research activity occurred, I wrote field notes so the information was fresh and directly connected to the documentation. After transcribing a read aloud, I added reflective notes that wove together my own understandings as a kindergarten teacher, literacy specialist, and researcher. Furthermore, I made every attempt to write anecdotal notes when a spontaneous conversation or act involving a gender-focused theme occurred at times different from the pre-scheduled observation times.

**Validity**

In order to strengthen the validity of my study, I needed to collect multiple documentations so that corroboration across evidence could occur (Yin, 2009). Additionally, the collection and analyses of data across the entire school year built a chronological chain of evidence. This time series analysis facilitated a closer look at the relationship of events across time, which helped to validate the data. I utilized video or audio tapes during the planned events, which provided back up in case I was unable to take immediate notes as well as helped in instances when activities happened concurrently; transcription of all taped events was my sole responsibility. The transcriptions also provided a form of documented evidence that I could go back into when I had questions or needed exact facts (Kuriloff, Andrus, & Ravitch, 2011).

As I paid attention to the quality of the collected data and materials analyzed with an open mind, I also raised the level of rigor in my research study (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). For example, observations, although time consuming and intrusive, had much to offer to me as the researcher. As I observed the kindergartners, I paid mind to their actions as compared to their personal explanations of phenomena. As an observer, I put myself right into the action to see what actually occurs and then “verify interpretations with the participants” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 30) as a confirmation of nonverbal behaviors.
Concerning practitioner research, some may view the research as being not rigorous enough. However, I believe my teaching background and experience supported my ability as a novice qualitative educational researcher in that I was already a veteran kidwatcher within a classroom setting (Adams, 2009). As a teacher practitioner, I observe, take notes, and interpret information on a consistent basis. This familiarity of watching students, notetaking, and interpretation of data was foundational to my role as researcher; I followed a similar protocol as I undertook valid and rigorous research.

There is also the question of direct and indirect teacher coercion during practitioner research studies. Ethical issues such as coercion tend to complicate practitioner research, much like other fields of study experience (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). Therefore, during my research study I remained open to possibilities as well as interpretations. I remained committed to leaving the students open to choice as to when they participated in research study activities. In addition, I refused to include grades to any of the research activities. Safeguards such as these reduced the potential for teacher/student coercion.

Trustworthiness of Student Interviews

As my kindergartners did participate in interviews across the school year, an additional consideration was the trustworthiness of the interview. My desire was to say as little as possible and rely more on the lead of the student during the interview process. While I needed to maintain the validity of the interview process, I also wanted to honor the reciprocity of our existing connection without situating the student, the one being researched, as the “other” and me, as the researcher, as “self” (Harrison, MacGibbon, & Morton, 2001).

In order for trustworthiness to occur, I considered the reciprocal relationships between the researcher and the researched. To help with this, I asked myself to consider whose voice was
heard, why, when, and where. I also chose to be transparent about our existing teacher/student relationship and who benefitted from the collaboration in each particular instance; for example, I started each interview session with a reminder that we were talking about my research work. I also ended each session with gratitude to the students for taking time to talk with me so I could learn more about my teaching. Additionally, I sought out my students’ thoughts and considerations as I unpacked my interpretations of their work and conversations. I did this by periodically meeting with a kindergartner and talking with her about what I noticed in her drawing, writing, or art project. This member check built trustworthiness as well as empowered the students whom I researched.

As I eventually chose to interview specific students either individually or within a small group, I needed to be mindful that I did not force my meaning of context or understanding of explanations on the student who I interviewed as well as later on during the analysis of the session (Seidman, 2006). Throughout the course of the study, I did numerous one-on-one interviews such as after Focus Group 3 met, and we had discussed the similarities between illustrations of Cinderella and Prince Cinders, each by a fireplace. The one-to-one interviews enabled me to gain more individualized perspectives on the unfolding events or a student’s personal thoughts. As the interviewer, I played a very prominent role in the process; and due to the interactions of the situation, it became even more important for me to adhere to my purpose of the interview in order for the data to validate my kindergartners’ lived experiences, thoughts, and ideals (Charmaz, 2006). I was also cognizant of a possible conflict of interest in that the students I interviewed for the research study were also the children with whom I had a teacher/student relationship. I did not want to put undue pressure on a kindergartner who felt she must respond a certain way (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) because I was her teacher.
CHAPTER 4
The Princess Girls: Living the Dream

In this chapter, I explore gender through the lens of language and discursive events, being aware of the possible presence of gender binaries in my kindergarten classroom. As poststructuralist feminism considers the comparison of one side of the dichotomy against another (Blaise, 2005a, 2005b, 2014; Villaverde, 2008), I intentionally became mindful of the instances when the girl/boy binary surfaced throughout the school day. In this regard, I actively searched for the ways in which the kindergarten girls re-enacted or reinforced the normative expectations of girlhood such as not standing up for oneself, being overly concerned with looks, or seeking the approval of others. Likewise, I became aware of the traditional characteristics associated with boys such as being assertive, highly active, or brave. Heteronormative roles and behaviors presented in various individuals throughout the research study; yet, I also discovered gender understandings seemed to progress across a continuum for several of the kindergartners.

This first case explores a group of five-year-old girls who, from the outside looking in, succinctly seemed to fit into the normative description of being female. Within this tight-knit circle of friends, clothing choices, accessories, beauty, and looks were frequently at the forefront of their conversations. An awareness of taking care of others and aiming to please was also evident. Additionally, a fascination with princesses frequently spilled into their activities. Due to this captivation with princesses, I have named this group The Princess Girls.

Within this particular group’s classroom interactions and exchanges, heteronormative constructions of gender were apparent most frequently; yet, there were also occasional times, toward the end of the study, when a few of the girls within The Princess Girls group actively worked at reimagining and reconstructing the predominant ideals of what a girl should look like,
say, or do. To explore how this particular group of girls understood and enacted gender, I first examined their comments, questions, and interactions within the group of Princess Girls; I also studied their contacts with their peers in the kindergarten classroom.

In the pages that follow, I identify a group of girls who seemed to live within this heteronormative binary, and from there I reveal the spaces in which the gender binaries reinforce the differences between the two categories or suggest that one side of the binary holds more value than the other side (Blaise, 2014). In addition to the binaries of gender, I also analyze experiences in which two of the kindergartners from the small group of girls, who mostly demonstrate gender identities aligned with the normative expectations for girls, briefly tried on other ways to be a girl. In many cases, this pair of kindergartners’ school conversations and discursive events reminded them of their out of school experiences and understandings as well; therefore, their home/school connections surfaced in their classroom words, actions, and choices.

To help me gain a broader picture of this specific group of young children as gendered beings, I examine structured and unstructured classroom occurrences for instances of both static and dynamic gender definitions. The findings reveal the kindergartners’ words and actions as to what they thought they could do or who they could be. The young students’ responses to picture book based read alouds and discussions provide evidence of their explorations of gender, and thus bring insight to research question one. Their written documents and peer associations during play centers offer examples of how they expressed their understandings of gender, and therefore help to answer research question two. Lastly, Hannah and Dawn’s participation in Cinderella read alouds and discussions, their princess book club, as well as the roles they played in the classroom castle dramatic enactments shed light on research question three.
It is my intent in this chapter to present how a small group of girls, and even more specifically two of the girls in the group, mostly reinforce the gender binaries of society with their words and actions throughout the majority of this research study, with an occasional foray toward an expanded definition for being a girl.

**Introducing the Princess Girls**

From the beginning of the school year, a group of seven girls with similar interests began to find ways to associate with each other. Sophia, Taylor, Eliza, Mia, Nahla, Hannah, and Dawn (all student names throughout this research study are pseudonyms) seemed to have much in common including their clothing choices, decisions they made with regard to play centers, topics of interest they wrote about, and books they read during independent reading. Through the course of the school year, their conversations often revolved around princesses, clothing and fashion. At times, their fashion talk prompted reactions from others in the classroom as well. Additionally, four of the girls, Hannah, Dawn, Taylor, and Nahla, chose to extend their princess conversations through a Cinderella Book Club which met during the character analysis portion of our reading unit of study in the spring of 2016. The collective, enduring focus on all things princess was the cohesive thread that bound this group of girls together and likely deepened their friendships.

As the girls grew to know each other within this self-initiated grouping, each participant began to take on a variety of roles. At first, Sophia seemed to hold a leadership position in that she often offered suggestions for dramatic play as well as attempted to orchestrate the next moves by instructing the girls as to whom they should be within the scenes. Taylor was an initial outspoken group member as well, with ideas and the occasional reminder to stay on task. Eliza and Mia were each soft spoken and easy going; they tended to follow along with the others.
Nahla was quiet yet matter of fact when she did voice her thoughts. By mid-year, Hannah and Dawn had become more vocal and outspoken, and their roles within the group appeared to shift as they gained more confidence. The experiences and examples that follow explored the interactions, literacy practices, and embodied actions of the Princess Girls, with a particular focus on Hannah and Dawn.

**Hannah.** At five, Hannah was the oldest of three children. Her younger siblings were both brothers. She often spoke about them and was excited to introduce her newborn brother to our class in the fall. Hannah’s mother was a stay at home mom; her dad worked in sales. Hannah’s real life stories in writer’s workshop often told of family outings to McDonald’s (*Pre-Writing Assessment, 9/17/15*) and long car trips together to visit far away cousins (*Post Writing Assessment, 6/1/16*). Her passions included playing with dolls (*All About Me Response Booklet, Play, 1/21/16*) and dressing up. She often talked about Disney princesses and delightfully relived her family trip to Disney World in which she was able to meet several of the princesses in real life (*Writer’s Workshop, Personal Narrative, 4/11/16*). Hannah was also a fan of eating ice cream, and she frequently spoke of her love of animals.

When Hannah first started kindergarten, she seemed highly sensitive and unsure of herself; she cried easily and often looked to an adult for assistance. At first, she quietly participated in classroom events such as read alouds and was hesitant to make her own choices. However, as the weeks progressed, Hannah became more of a willing participant, first as a follower, later as a leader. Looking back on the school year, I attributed her involvement with the Princess Girls as being pivotal to her gaining of self-confidence (*Field Notes, 6/20/16*).

**Dawn.** As the months moved along, Dawn became another major voice within this specific group of girls. Unlike Hannah, however, Dawn started the school year with a burst of
confidence. Her older sister had been in my kindergarten class two years prior; therefore, Dawn was familiar with me and comfortable with the school surroundings. Having been a visitor to her sister’s classroom in the past, Dawn was well aware of the layout, routines, and expectations. She could also independently locate areas throughout the school such as the library, cafeteria, and gymnasium. Dawn was highly vocal and engaged in classroom activities from the first day of class and often readily volunteered to be a classroom helper in many capacities.

Like Hannah, Dawn was close to her family. Dawn was the middle child of three with an older sister and a younger brother. Dawn’s dad was a teacher as well as an athletic coach, and her mom was a stay at home mom who had recently returned to her teaching career through substitute teaching in a local school district. Many of Dawn’s real life stories in writer’s workshop also revolved around her family adventures such as taking a family trip to Maine (Pre-Writing Assessment, 9/17/15), playing Wii with her siblings (All About Me Response Booklet, Play, 1/21/16), and going to Chuck E. Cheese (Post-Writing Assessment, 6/1/16). She regularly spoke and wrote about playing in her own soccer games or going to watch her older sister play sports. Dawn also talked animatedly and frequently about her love of dressing up, and she dreamed of being a princess (Dance Like Starlight Read Aloud, 3/1/16).

Throughout this research study, both Hannah and Dawn valued looks and beauty. Each girl was enthralled with princesses and considered themselves knowledgeable with regard to the Disney character princesses, especially Cinderella. Hannah and Dawn had viewed movies that included Cinderella, and both girls were familiar with numerous versions and tales of Cinderella. Each had imagined themselves into the roles of this character through dress-up and dramatic play events many times, at home as well as in school.

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**Reinforcing the Norm: Societal Expectations of Gender**

Spontaneous comments from the kindergartners often opened windows into their minds of what they understood or how they were processing through concepts of gender, beauty, and clothing. For instance, as we prepared to leave school at the end of an autumn day, the kindergartners put on their coats and backpacks, and then got into their bus order as they lined up to go home. The school secretary came over the loud speaker and announced, “Please dismiss all pick-ups and the lovely kindergartners.” To that, Hannah wondered aloud, “But what about the boy kindergartners?” *(Field Notes, 11/24/15).*

Hannah’s response seemed to indicate the word “lovely” only considered girls, and therefore, the boy kindergartners could not leave at the same time as the girls. According to Hannah’s reaction, boys and girls looked, acted, and dressed in certain ways, and the use of specific descriptive words represented each gender. As gender differences live in the language rather than the person (Marshall, 2004), the descriptive term of being lovely produced certain ways of thinking and acting for Hannah, heavily dependent on her experiences. Often times, language conjures certain images and meanings that are not always viewed in a transparent manner (Davies, 2003); therefore, culturally bound definitions of masculinity and femininity such as this rigidly bind a person into a fixed perception of gender representation. In this particular instance, Hannah’s gendered expectations of what boys looked and acted like did not match the way in which the school secretary dismissed the kindergarten students, and she questioned it.

**Fashionistas: Making fashion statements.** In addition to language choices that summon gender-based images, clothing also forms an impression of gender; the chosen colors, styles, or graphics often provide a means to express one’s perceptions of self. Specific fashion choices
afford opportunities for the performance of gender identities (Blaise, 2005a), and young children often work at getting their gender “right” (Davies, 2003) through their fashion decisions. Dawn’s vision of fashion stemmed from free play activities at home. Numerous times throughout the school year, Dawn remarked on her love of dressing up at home, using her various costumes and props. Through dress-up, Dawn was able to try on a variety of roles and practice how she might look, feel, and act in multiple situations. In her All About Me booklet, Dawn expressed her satisfaction at being able to dress up with the following written response, “I love to Play with MY gres up toys. I love to play with my dress up toys.” (All About Me Response Booklet, All About Me, 1/21/16). This practice space made her feel more self-assured in certain instances as well as gave her a place to perform her gender identities.

Later, when asked why she liked to play with dress-up clothes, Dawn responded, “because I like to put on a fashion show because I have a lot of makeup. I like to pretend I’m a fashion girl” (All About Me Response Booklet, All About Me 1:1 Interview, 1/21/16). Dawn’s perception of fashion included not only clothing, yet also referenced makeup as a beautifier. Society had secured its portrayal of female beauty in Dawn’s mind; and, in this particular instance, Dawn sought to replicate it in ways that validated her own understandings of a female’s role in society (Baker-Sperry & Grauerholz, 2003).

By subscribing to the ideal of feminine beauty and intentionally engaging in society’s revered beauty customs, Dawn, at the early age of five, had already begun to notice that physical appearance is highly important in a patriarchal world (Baker-Sperry & Grauerholz, 2003). A woman may feel powerful and in control through her looks and beauty; inherently, though, she may become more dependent on the male. This occurs because a preconceived image of beauty forces a female into certain behaviors, actions, and looks. Social and psychological rewards
benefit those who fit into this image of beauty, whereas those who do not match the description receive negativity. As girls continue to adhere to the social significance of beauty, society may maintain its hold on gender inequities through the restriction of possibilities.

Detailed clothing discussions were not exclusive to female fashion lines, however; the girls also discussed appropriate clothing for their male counterparts. The girls in the Cinderella book club had a specific picture in mind as to the formal dress attire for a man. In the following conversation held during a Cinderella book club discussion of *Prince Cinders* (Cole, 1987), Dawn, Hannah, Nahla, and I talked about the dress expectations for a man. In this book scene, the stepbrothers of the main character, Prince Cinders, had left him at home to go to the Palace Disco; Prince Cinder’s perplexing fairy had come to his rescue to help him magically dress for the dance.

Dawn: Look at him!

Karen: He is a huge gorilla, isn’t he!

Dawn: In a bathing suit!

Karen: What is that about? (laughter from students)

Hannah: It’s not even close to a real suit with nice shoes!

Nahla: This is a real suit! (pointing to the suitcoat, pants, and bowtie in the picture)

Dawn: You don’t wear that (referring to the old fashioned bathing suit) when you want to look nice!

(*Cinderella Book Club Meeting 1, 4/25/16*)

Hannah’s exclamation that the prince’s attire did not match her definition of dress clothes for a man revealed her gendered understandings and expectations for males. Both Nahla and Dawn concurred with Hannah’s definition of formal male clothing choices through their
comments and laughter. For example, Dawn’s reference to looking “nice” suggested the importance to her of appealing looks. Their discourse offered the ways in which this group of girls thought heteronormative identities should be enacted (Wohlwend, 2011). At five years of age, this specific group of children had already anticipated certain appropriate gender behaviors and actions for the male population; thus, they felt compelled to question the competing circumstance as it arose.

Male fashion transcended into other points of discussion and with other class members, too. At one point, members of the Princess Girls spontaneously sparked a fashion frenzy when Eliza initially shared her “Fashion Girls” book, designed at home the previous evening, with the whole class. The models in her handmade book were stencils of princesses such as Ariel and Anna; vivid pink and purple colored pencils filled in the details on their long flowing dresses and high heels. Eliza’ eagerness to share her understandings of female beauty channeled energy into the kindergarten classroom and subsequently inspired her fellow classmates to join the discussion with their own renditions of fashion books made at home.

For almost a week, Gabriel listened intently as first Eliza, then Sophia, Nahla, and another girl in the classroom read aloud to the whole class their homemade booklets describing the various pieces of clothing worn by fashionable girls. Then, in response to the girls’ vision of fashion, Gabriel drafted his own version of “Fashion Boys” at home and brought it into school to share with his classmates, as well. Gabriel’s fashionable characters included Prince Hans, Luke Skywalker, R2D2, Chewie (Chewbacca), and Kristoff who not only looked handsome, he smelled divine, as was noted through Gabriel’s label of “colom/cologne”. Gabriel’s illustrations depicted all of the males as smiling; each was wearing a colorful necktie, even the robotic character of R2D2. Figure 1 depicts a page from Gabriel’s book of “Fashion Boys”.

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In Gabriel’s ending to his book, his “Detetcashun to clasrim 2 so thay can lrn wut fashen doys look like/Dedication to Classroom 2 so they can learn what fashions boys look like” (Fashion Books, 3/31/16) offered another perspective to this group of kindergartners understandings of gender roles and expectations. Through his gentlemanly descriptions of males and their clothing choices, Gabriel’s discourse actively and discursively positioned himself as a gendered being in the classroom (Blaise, 2005a, 2005b). In Gabriel’s vision, each male character was clean cut and accessorized with items such as neckties and cologne, and he described them as such.

One possibility for Gabriel’s visual representation of fashionable boys might be his shared understanding of gendered discourse with society’s ideas and beliefs regarding what it meant to be a male in society. If this were Gabriel’s perspective in this example, then his words
and actions reflected societal hegemonic masculinity (Blaise, 2005a, 2005b; Davis, 2003), in that fashionable men looked a specific way. Hence, this discursive event may suggest an attempt to normalize his classmates’ understandings of gender behavior (Blaise & Taylor, 2012). Yet another perspective for Gabriel’s “Fashion Boys” book may be his attempt at purposefully positioning himself into society’s gendered categories, in relation to how others perceive he should be. If this were the case, then perhaps Gabriel was learning how to fit into the gendered terms and categories made available within this particular discursive event (Davies, 2003). When looking across the weeklong spontaneous book sharing experience, Eliza, Sophia, Nahla, and Gabriel each shared their personal interpretations of fashion girls and boys in today’s society; and, their collective words and actions seemed to work at regulating the gendered norms of their classmates (Wohlwend, 2011).

Lessons in love: Finding Mr. Right. Fairy tales, most especially the Disney versions, bring with them visions of grandeur and romance; they hold images of the princess being swept off her feet by love or rescued from harm by a handsome prince. Promises of living happily ever after provide motivation for girls and women to keep searching for Mr. Right. This romanticized myth insinuates that marriage is the primary means of a girl’s happiness and is the solution to her problems (Parsons, 2004; Trousdale & McMillan, 2003). Even the young are aware of this message, as Dawn suggested during a Cinderella read aloud discussion.


Dawn: Um, it tells you about love.

Karen: Okay, what do you mean by that? It tells you about love?

Dawn: Um, if you meet and you love each other … Cinderella or other princesses can tell you about love.
In Dawn’s case, “the characters in books are an important resource in learning to get it right” (Davies, 2003, p. 52). In addition to books spreading this type of message, media in the form of videos or movies served to reinforce these societal gender norms for Dawn, as well. When heard and seen repeatedly, a belief such as this becomes deeply engrained. This unilateral perception of life potentially sets the prototype for a girl’s model of acceptable reality as she continually and actively searches for her “happily ever after” (Coyne, Linder, Rasmussen, Nelson & Birkbeck, 2016, p. 1923).

As Dawn took on perspectives such as this as her own, the discursive practices she engaged in provided opportunities for her to be placed in or to place herself in a variety of positions (Davies & Harre, 1990). Through the conversational turns within Dawn’s social interactions, Dawn continued to gain meaning from the language choices of the participants. In the following example, Dawn recalled a previous discussion she had with her father in which he had named her as a princess.

Taylor: Are you a princess?

Dawn: My dad calls me princess! He says “My little princess”!

(Cinderella Book Club Meeting 4, 5/1/16)

When young children have the background knowledge and exposure to fairy tales and princesses, they have their own understandings of what a princess looks and acts like. In Dawn’s case, she was familiar with a number of Disney princesses, and she often roleplayed a princess in dramatizations. By identifying Dawn as a princess, her dad’s words hold the potential to connect Dawn with her vision of fairy tale princesses; this connection may then serve to reinforce for Dawn the normative expectations of female beauty and helplessness portrayed through many of
the princess role models seen by her in print and media. Because Dawn is highly familiar with the ways in which princesses’ dress and act, this mental image may become a guide for Dawn’s own behaviors, choices, and actions.

**Unveiling perceptions of gender, princess style.** Fashion, beauty, and dress-up were prominent and frequent topics of conversation between the Princess Girls. Often, they referenced their knowledge of beauty and the importance of looks as learned through varying media such as movies or books (Marshall, 2004; Wohlwend, 2009). Their sense of fashion seemed to evolve from the repeated exposure to books and videos involving fairy tales. The girls frequently wore shirts, dresses, and hair accessories adorned with Cinderella and other notable Disney princesses; additionally, frilly dresses, strappy shoes, nail polish, and jewels such as sparkly earrings and a necklace with a silver Cinderella coach charm were regularly worn by the girls (*Field Notes, 2/9/16*).

Hannah and Dawn took in this visual information from the media as ironclad facts, especially since they had each met a “real” Cinderella at Disney World. Seeing Cinderella in person made her character in the movies and books all the more lifelike and believable to the young girls. At times, their comments suggested Cinderella was as real as they were, as was situated in the following read aloud discussion:

Karen: You have a Cinderella shirt on. Why do you have a Cinderella shirt on?

Sophia: Cuz I like Cinderella!

Karen: You like Cinderella! What makes Cinderella so special to you?

Sophia: Cuz (pause) cuz I watch a lot of movies of her.

Karen: You watch a lot of movies of her? Give me a thumbs-up if you already have seen a Cinderella movie (15 thumbs raised) or if you’ve read a Cinderella story or
Eliza: I went to see her in real life!
Karen: or you went to see her in real life at Disney World?
Hannah: I did! I did! I did! I did!

*(Disney Cinderella Read Aloud, 4/13/16)*

Hannah’s exuberant response encapsulated the great joy she felt upon meeting one of her favorite princesses. Once a character such as Cinderella became real and believable, Hannah’s understandings of what a princess looked and acted like became even more concrete, tangible, and for Hannah, more desirable.

Repeated exposure to Cinderella through books, videos, and face-to-face meetings gave Dawn and Hannah vivid perceptions of how princesses acted, what they looked like, and what they wore (Coyne, Linder, Rasmussen, Nelson & Birkbeck, 2016; Wohlwend, 2009). The girls’ conversations and written thoughts frequently touched upon topics such as the mannerisms required of royalty, carried descriptive bits of beauty advice, and recommended the necessary royal accessories. As the school year progressed, the two girls gained more confidence as knowledgeable princess girls; therefore, each girl began to express their understandings more vocally. For instance, Dawn shared her knowledge of proper princess etiquette through the following written statement:

*I love Prises Be Kuz thay are so fanse ths ow ez say Plez and the Pres awez do thr manrs./I love princesses because they are so fancy and they always say please and the princesses always do their manners.*

*(All About Me Response Booklet, Favorite Book Character, 1/21/16)*

Within this same response activity, Hannah wrote that her favorite character was “Sidrlu bekuz I LoVe hr jas./Cinderella because I love her dress.” *(All About Me Response Booklet, 1/21/16)*
Favorite Book Character, 1/21/16). In the subsequent conversation noted below, Hannah felt obliged to remind her book club members that Cinderella needed a crown to complete her ensemble (Cinderella Book Club Meeting 2, 4/26/16). In Hannah’s mind, it was also important for a girl to look nice for a man, especially when the end goal was marriage.

Taylor: So, what does Cinderella look like?

Hannah: Really beautiful!

Nahla: We love Cinderella!

Hannah: We love Cinderella! She’s beautiful!

Taylor: So, I’m going to write (pause) Cinderella’s dress is so, so beautiful. Thank you fairy godmother!

In the days that followed, the girls continued to work on their individual books, and Hannah interjected with the following statement:

Hannah: She will marry the prince in a dress.

Girls: (laughter)

Hannah: She is the best princess ever! I love Cinderella!

(Cinderella Book Club Meeting 7, 5/5/16).

In each of these examples, Dawn and Hannah’s statements involved the clothing, beauty, and mannerisms of females. More specifically, Hannah’s princess recommendations for her peers focused on female beauty for the benefit of the male (Baker-Sperry & Grauerholz, 2003). At five years of age, Dawn and Hannah’s close attention to actions, looks, and clothing could be their way of trying to impress each other as well as the other classmates, intentionally positioning themselves (Davies & Harre, 1990) as stylish girls who know what to wear and how to act. Their actions also appear to support the heteronormative mindset of women, needing to look and act a
certain way in order to be appealing to men. As both girls admired Cinderella, and each had expressed numerous desires to emulate Cinderella in dress and actions, their emphasized femininity in these instances continued to reinforce rather than challenge or reimagine the status quo (Blaise, 2005a, 2005b; Coyne, Linder, Rasmussen, Nelson & Birkbeck, 2016; Wohlwend, 2009). At the same time, the discursive events also provided a forum for Dawn and Hannah to gain social capital and add their voices to the classroom conversations involving gender roles and expectations (Gee, 1999).

Hannah’s conceptions of gender presented itself in other ways, as well. For instance, Hannah’s deep seeded knowledge and admiration of Cinderella inspired her to construct a detailed book on fashion statements through the eyes of the princess. Having taken two book club meetings to complete, the eighteen-page book was crafted by folding nine sheets of paper in half and then stapling the left side as if it were a bound book. The pages on the left side contained Hannah’s written thoughts while the right side showed colorful illustrations that matched the text. Each picture depicted Cinderella with a beaming smile. At a subsequent book club meeting, Hannah read aloud from this rendition of her Cinderella book; then, in a reflective manner, Hannah discussed how she decided upon this specific topic.

Hannah (reading her book aloud to the book club members): Cinderella’s Style. She’s wearing a bracelet. Cinderella, she’s wearing a sparkly crown. She’s wearing a slipper. Now she is wearing a hairdo. Then she’s wearing a princess dress. Then she was wearing a necklace. Then she was wearing some jewels. Then she was wearing a skirt. Then she was wearing a smile and a shirt.

Karen: Excellent! So, how did you decide what you were going to put in that book?

Hannah: Um, I know things that people wear, and I wanted to do a crown book but then I
thought about clothes, what I like, so I picked Cinderella Style.

(Cinderella Book Club Meeting 8, 5/8/16)

Hannah’s reflection illustrated the connection between her understandings of fashion coupled alongside her personal interest in Cinderella. Hannah felt confident in knowing what people wore as well as what she personally liked about clothing. Cinderella was also highly important to Hannah. As children assimilate culture through stories such as fairy tales (Bettleheim, 1975), Hannah melded her societal and cultural understandings of female clothing along with her literary knowledge of fairy tale princesses together to highlight styles worn by a princess. In essence, Hannah expressed her sense of fashion through the “symbolic, gendered nature of clothing” (Trousdale & McMillan, 2003, p. 20) as revealed through the eyes of Cinderella.

Who am I? Blurring the lines between fantasy and reality. Dreams of one day becoming a princess often surfaced through Hannah and Dawn’s spontaneous comments and reactions during read alouds. As they immersed themselves into the world of princesses through read aloud events, each girl planned what they would wear and what their lives would be like as princesses. Dawn dreamed of being a princess “because I like princesses” (Dance Like Starlight Read Aloud, 3/1/16) whereas, Hannah imagined herself “wearing a crown, because I have a dress-up and it comes with a crown” (Not All Princesses Dress in Pink Read Aloud, 6/8/16). Dress-up events in both home and school became viable places for Hannah and Dawn to live out these dreams vicariously, and reading was the connection (Adomat, 2009, 2012a, 2012b; Rowe, 2000; Wohlwend, 2009).

Read alouds frequently provided a forum for Hannah and Dawn to express their joy in dress-up opportunities. Both girls were quick to connect to the book characters that played dress-
up within the story lines. In the exchange below, Hannah enthusiastically responded to a dress-up scene between the book characters of Ruthie and her grandmother because it reminded Hannah of the times she personally had dressed-up. In this book scene, a girl named Ruthie imagined herself dressing up as a train conductor, whereas the grandmother was suggesting they dress-up in hats, dresses, and boas for a fashion show.

Hannah: (rubbing hands together and whispering) Dress-up clothes!
Karen: What are you thinking?
Hannah: I love dress-up clothes!
Karen: How come you love dress-up clothes?
Hannah: Cuz I really love to dress-up and dress-up and dress-up and dress-up!

(Fire Engine for Ruthie Read Aloud, 1/22/16)

As the girls heard read alouds that included princesses, they often associated their own opportunities for dressing up in these costumes, too. The stories reminded them of the times they had dressed up as princesses at home or imagined themselves as Cinderella (Coyne, Linder, Rasmussen, Nelson & Birkbeck, 2016; Wohlwend, 2009). After one of the Cinderella read alouds, Dawn expressed appreciation for her favorite character in the book when she revealed “I loved cinderela becas I Hav a castoom of Her./I loved Cinderella because I have a costume of her” (Favorite Character Readers Response, 4/14/16). In a smaller group, Dawn explained her rationale:

Karen: What were you thinking when I was reading the book?
Dawn: Um, I like Cinderella because, uh, I have a Cinderella dress.
Karen: You have a Cinderella dress at home? Tell me about it.
Dawn: I dress up in it and pretend I’m Cinderella.
Likewise, in another exchange, Hannah emphatically exclaimed, “I love to be a princess! I always want to be a princess when I grow up! I want to have a fancy dress!” (Field Notes, I am Special Project, 11/23/15). When asked to explain the importance of Cinderella, Hannah responded with the following:

Karen: What is so important to you about this character?

Hannah: Because I’m just thinking about her, and I just really love princesses, all of the princesses really. And, I, all I really like about Cinderella is she has one of my favorite colors and it’s yellow.

As the months progressed and we moved into our character analysis unit, we began to look closely at the book characters (Adomat, 2009, 2012a; Pantaleo, 2013; Rosenblatt, 1994; Rowe, 2000). We related the book characters to other book characters and looked for similarities, differences, and changes across time and events (Rosenblatt, 1994; Sipe, 1998, 2008). Likewise, the kindergartners also compared the book characters to themselves to see which character traits they shared (Lysaker, 2006; Rosenblatt, 1994). This was a natural extension for Dawn and Hannah, as they frequently did this when they dressed up in their favorite princess costumes and imagined themselves as one with the characters (Adomat, 2009, 2012a, 2012b; Rowe, 2000). As revealed in the conversation below with Hannah, at times the lines blurred between being a five year old and being a princess.

Karen: Think about all the characters who you’ve read about so far. Who are you the most similar with?

Hannah: Cinderella, because I’m saying me too, me too every time! That’s true
inside my house when I do that same thing like Cinderella. Like, whatever she does on this page, it’s just like me too! It just makes me think I do.

*(Focus Group 5, 2 Sided Stories Discussion, 5/13/16)*

To scaffold the kindergartners’ understandings of characters and traits, I read aloud a multitude of books across a series or particular characters to the class. After each read aloud, the books were placed in a basket for the book club members. Over several weeks, the book club members spent additional time looking closer at the illustrations, re-reading, and then discussing the books together.

One such club was the Cinderella book club. The participants who chose this particular group were Hannah, Dawn, Nahla, and Taylor. The girls took turns being leader; the leader’s job was to take attendance, pass out the papers, supplies, and books, and keep the conversation moving. Each meeting had a specific focus such as retelling the story, thinking about the setting, or comparing oneself to a character in the story using a T chart.

Dawn chose to compare herself to Cinderella in one of these book club instances *(Adomat, 2012a)*. As shown in the following T chart, Dawn felt she and Cinderella were similar in numerous aspects. Many of the outstanding qualities chosen by Dawn focused on the taking care of others through working, washing, and being helpful. She also considered Cinderella and herself to be good people, although Dawn had a harder time justifying herself as nice. As fairy tales can shape one’s identity *(Bettleheim, 1975)*, Dawn worked through her place in society using her favorite character as a model.
In another T chart character comparison, Dawn opted to compare herself to the hairy stepbrothers from *Prince Cinders* (Cole, 1987). The illustrations in the book depicted the stepbrothers as mean, sloppy, arrogant, and uncaring. As Dawn shared her chart with her book club members, she identified the stepbrothers as being mad. She then named herself as being happy, yet she had difficulty with giving herself the more congenial compliment. In fairy tale literature, women are most often portrayed as being demure, weak, and passive (Trousdale & McMillan, 2003); in real life, Dawn’s difficulty in naming herself in a strong, positive light seemed to position her as a weak, passive girl rather than a strong, assertive one. In order to validate Dawn’s belief, the small group worked at supporting Dawn’s description of herself as being happy.

Karen: and I am (pause)

Dawn: happy

Karen: because

Dawn: because (long pause)

Karen: Why would you describe yourself as happy, Dawn?
Dawn: I don’t know.

Karen: Does anybody have any thoughts? Why would you describe Dawn as happy? (pause) I think she’s happy because whenever she comes into the classroom, she is smiling!

Hannah: Yeah! And I always hear her laugh!

*(Cinderella Book Club Meeting 5, Share Out, 5/2/16)*

Like Dawn, Hannah saw similarities between herself and Cinderella. Hannah revealed notable characteristics that centered on obedience, submissiveness, and looks, as well – all aligned with the cultural norms and expectations for a female in a male dominated society. For example, Hannah believed she and Cinderella were sweet, nice, and good; she also valued each of them as being helpful when they cleaned up. Hannah acknowledged her role as being “good because every time I play with playdoh and I’m done with it, I clean it up” *(Cinderella Book Club Meeting 5, Share Out, 5/2/16)*.

Cinderella       Hannah
nus/nice         nus/nice

dans/dance       no dans/no dance
god/good         god/good
fin/fine         fin/fine
swet/sweet       swet/sweet
slipr/slipper    slipr/slipper
clen up/clean up clen up/clean up
dall/ball        No dall/no ball

*(Cinderella Book Club, Character Trait Comparison, 5/2/16)*
While fairy tales and children’s literature are not solely responsible for the shaping of a child’s identity, the story lines and characters are influential to the child’s interpretation of societal and cultural norms (Trousdale & McMillan, 2003). The multiple layering of gendered expectations through books and their characters create influential examples of what it looks like to be a man or a woman, and these “stories potentially have a powerful effect on children’s self-understanding and behavior” (Trousdale & McMillan, 2003, p. 1). Thus, for Dawn and Hannah, Cinderella tales became scripts for their own gendered understandings and behaviors of what it meant to be a girl in today’s society (Parsons, 2004), and their words and actions expressed this.

Multiple Ways of Performing Gender

Although Hannah and Dawn mostly supported the dominant gender status quo through their discursive practices, the following examples revealed the choices they made that either reinforced gendered binaries or highlighted their interpretations of the multiple ways of doing and being female (Blaise, 2014). While Dawn and Hannah worked at creating their gendered identities through their language and agentive actions, their active roles in the interpretation and construction of gender provided performative places for them to try on a variety of ways to be a girl (Butler, 1988). Their innovations on gender provided rehearsals that may be “interpreted as expressive of a gender core or identity” (Butler, 2008, p. 527). These dramatic, embodied performances gave Hannah and Dawn opportunities to expand their own gender understandings and expectations; as well, their enactments of multiple ways to be a girl serve as a thoughtful nudge to expand the narrowed societal visions of gender possibilities. The following findings support the social and dynamic construction of gender (Blaise, 2014).

Stepping into the glass slipper. Often, the focus of our read aloud discussions intentionally called upon us to step into the shoes of book characters. In these instances, the
kindergartners imagined themselves into the roles of the character. It was during times such as these Hannah and Dawn’s understandings of gender roles and expectations often surfaced. Sometimes, their perspectives as the fairy tale characters were almost identical to those portrayed within the digital and textual versions (Coyne, Linder, Rasmussen, Nelson & Birkbeck, 2016; Wohlwend, 2009). In these specific cases, Hannah and Dawn’s re-enactments served to reinforce societal norms and gender expectations (Blaise, 2005a, 2005b, 2014, 2015; Davies, 2003).

For instance, Dawn formed many connections with the princesses in our read alouds. She literally became one with a princess character and closely identified with her. In the following example, the participants of the Cinderella Book Club wrote their own books. The topic of the books was their individual choosing; the one requirement was that Cinderella was to be included as a character. Written from Cinderella’s perspective, as demonstrated by using the word “I” throughout, Dawn became helpless to the demands of her stepfamily and repeatedly begged for opportunities to go to the ball. As the exchange below illustrated, Dawn/Cinderella’s justifications and suggestions were ignored, and her dreams of going to the ball eventually were not realized. Figure 2 represents one page from Dawn’s actual book.

“Cinedrlla Chors”/ “Cinderella Chores”

I tel My StePmatr Ples can I go/I tell my stepmother, please can I go?

I do my wrk evre day I do not no wot to do/I do my work every day. I do not know what to do.

I mop My flr/I mop my floor.

I wosh The Flor and Klen My sitrs mesis/I wash the floor and clean my sisters’ messes.

Tehl My wot I hav to do/Tell me what I have to do.
I wrk all day and all nit/I work all day and all night.

I relly wont to go to the Ball/I really want to go to the ball.

I wish My stepmother wos nise/I wish my stepmother was nice.

I relly wont to go to the Ball/I really want to go to the ball.

So can I go/So, can I go?

So can we all go/So, can we all go?

Plesa/Please?

You hav to do all your chos/You have to do all your chores.

You nevr let me go./You never let me go.

I hav to do evrething/I have to do everything.

Win will I go./When will I go?

Im bon/I’m done.

You can not go to the Ball like that/You cannot go to the ball like that.

(Cinderella Book Club, Make Your Own Book, Dawn, 5/8/16)
In this make-believe world as Cinderella, Dawn was powerless in her situation and her voice went unheard. She worked tirelessly at taking care of her stepfamily with little acknowledgement from them. As Cinderella, Dawn begged her stepmother to allow her the chance to go to the ball, and eventually suggested they all go together. However, as did happen in numerous Cinderella versions, the stepmother and stepsisters went to the ball without her. Thus, in her role as Cinderella, Dawn replicated the inability of the princess to take agentive action (Parsons, 2004; Trousdale & McMillan, 2003). Rather than rewrite the story of Cinderella, and thus herself, as being powerful by standing up for oneself, Dawn’s lack of action appeared to reflect society’s expectations and norms for females (Blaise, 2014).

In Dawn’s every day kindergarten-world interactions, there were times in which she attempted to voice her thoughts, yet her peers did not acknowledge her. In the next example, Dawn picked the dollhouse play center during Choice Time, which also happened to be the choice of one more girl and two boys. Dawn opted to be the mother doll, and the boys were the

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*Figure 2. One page from Dawn’s “Cinderella Chores” book. Translation: I do my work every day. I do not know what to do.*
father and son dolls. In this specific scene, the two boys controlled the next moves in the play situation, while Dawn pleaded for the boys to listen to her idea.

Dakota: Dinner time!

Garrett: It’s sleeping time.

Dakota: Dinner time!

Garrett: I am so hungry!

Dawn: Wait!

Dakota: Dinner time!

Dawn: Wait!

Garrett: The mother’s doing the, the little baby things.

(Dollhouse Play Center, 3/1/16)

At another point in time, Dawn chose block building as her Choice Time activity. Dawn was one of four students in the block building area, and one of the two girls in the group. In this example, Dawn once again attempted to gain the attention of the rest of her playmates; however, her repeated calls remained unacknowledged by peers.

Dawn: Hey, look what I made, you guys! Look what I made, you guys!

Sydney: Guys! We have enough blocks!

Dawn: Guys! Look what I made!

Tommy: Look what Gabriel made!

(Blocks Play Center, 3/18/16)

Toward the end of the school year, Dawn stepped into the shoes of a princess during the castle dramatizations, and in this instance, she portrayed the princess as a damsel in distress. Her
high-pitched and anxious remarks displayed the dismal nature of the situation; likewise, her words did not sound assertive, strong, nor did she make a move for agentive action.

Cinderella (Hannah): Get the dragon, please!

Knight (Garrett): Okay, I’ll try.

Princess (Dawn): Oh, it’s so bad!

Queen 1 (Eliza): I think the dragon is upstairs.

Queen 2 (Nahla): No going upstairs!

Princess (Dawn): No going upstairs!

(Classroom Castle, Group 5 Dramatization, 6/22/16)

Later in the enactment, Dawn paced back and forth and wrung her hands in despair. Her desperation at being trapped in the castle with dragons looming nearby was evident in the speed, high pitch, and prosodic tone of her language choices.

Princess (Dawn): I need to go out of the castle (walks toward castle door). Oh no, I’ll never get out of here!

King 1 (Gabriel): So, we cannot let him get in the castle. I’m not going to let him in. Stay out!

(Classroom Castle, Group 5 Dramatization, 6/22/16)

Then, as the dragons surrounded the castle and the king fought to the save the kingdom, Princess Dawn and the queen suddenly became preoccupied with their clothing and the preparation of dinner.

Queen 1 (Eliza): Dinner’s ready! (pretends to give food to Hannah and Garrett)

Princess (Dawn): (adjusting her sash and swirling around)

Queen 1 (Eliza): (straightening her own beaded necklace and Dawn’s beaded necklace)
As the commotion of the kings, fairy godmother, and dragons swirled around them, Dawn stayed focused on serving her guests their food.

Princess (Dawn): It’s a roasted feather (serving Garrett and Hannah at the table).
Cinderella (Hannah): (pretending to eat the feather) This is pretty good! (laughter)

In this particular drama event, Dawn’s interpretation of a princess mimicked that of other princesses she had seen and read, including Cinderella. Dawn’s spontaneous dialogue and actions reinforced the fairy tale’s image of a helpless, beautiful princess as well as society’s perception of women being in need of rescue. Additionally, Dawn spent her energy catering to the needs of others through the preparation and serving of a delicious meal rather than taking a more proactive, agentive role of slaying the dragon or saving the kingdom.

Stepping into another’s shoes became a powerful way for the students to “try on” a variety of voices and actions in other ways, as well. Practice space such as this opened up multiple opportunities for the students to become more aware of societal inequities (Kelley, 2008; Marshall, 2004). For Hannah, it provided a safe place for her to practice alternative perspectives in which she could reimagine the characters’ roles, actions, and reactions. Additionally, becoming another character worked at building up Hannah’s confidence level and encouraged her to become a proactive agent of change in her own surrounding world.

Hannah used dramatizations as one such place to try on a variety of actions as a princess. Knowing the story of Cinderella so well, she replicated the role of a damsel in need of rescue during an unscripted play in our classroom castle. In this scene, Hannah politely requested the
knight in shining armor to dispose of the menacing dragon rather than taking action against the
dragon herself.

Cinderella (Hannah): Get the dragon, please!

Knight (Garrett): Okay, I’ll try.

Princess (Dawn): Oh, it’s so bad!

Queen 1 (Eliza): I think the dragon is upstairs.

Queen 2 (Nahla): No going upstairs!

Princess (Dawn): No going upstairs!

(Classroom Castle, Group 5 Dramatization, 6/22/16)

Yet, at other times, Hannah seemed to work through questions of fairness and inequity
through her roleplays. In the following puppet show scenario, Hannah took on all of the roles of
Cinderella, the prince, the stepmother, and the two stepsisters; she performed a brief skit, made
up on the spot, behind the tabletop stage for two of her peers. Figure 3 provides a photograph of
the puppet show in action. Most of Hannah’s re-enactment followed closely to the scripted
versions of the tale she heard so many times before – the prince waiting on the princess; the kiss;
getting married. As Cinderella in this particular puppet show, Hannah wanted to portray the
character true to form; she knew that Cinderella should be helpful and kind. Yet,
Hannah/Cinderella also seemed to navigate the relationships between standing up for herself by
not having to clean up after the stepsisters and stepmother versus the justification that the
stepmother had learned better and was now really just a nice person seeking assistance.

Hannah: (puppets in hand, sitting behind the tabletop puppet stage)

Prince (Hannah): Hey, hey, hey! Cinderella, where are you? I’m waiting!

Cinderella (Hannah): Here I come! This is the prince. He knows me, and we get married.
(Prince puppet and Cinderella puppet kiss). Here is my stepsister, both of them, and this is my stepmother. She used to be mean but this is a nice version, so (pause) she’s very, very nice. Okay, okay, okay, I really don’t want to do the chores, but now she’s really, really nice.

Stepmother (Hannah): I do polite words and I learned to do good.

(Puppet Making Center, Cinderella Re-enactment, 5/24/16)

Figure 3. Hannah’s Cinderella puppet show.

In the previous examples, Hannah moved in and out of a variety of gendered perspectives. Dependent on the context, she consciously shifted known, gendered actions and discovered new reactions or different possibilities. At times, for example when Hannah politely requested her male peer to capture the dragon, she appeared to reinforce the status quo of female passivity and weakness. In this regard, unequal power structures remained between the two genders. Yet other times, for instance when Hannah reimagined the role of the stepmother, caused her to question her own reaction to the stepmother’s request. Her response might have been a (re)negotiation of the gender conditions culturally passed along to her; therefore, it may
have been her way of suggesting an alternative practice for a more fair and just solution (Kelley, 2008). Or, perhaps it was Hannah’s approach to playfully try on a variety of ways of re-enacting a well-known character. Important to note in this example, however, is Hannah did move between a variety of responses and did try out different ways of being and doing gender. The puppet show seemed to be a comfortable place for her to imagine herself into different reactions and responses.

**Contested Spaces: The Co-Construction of Gender**

Frequently throughout the school year, Dawn and Hannah’s gender related roles, expectations, and dress reflected society’s normative expectations. Their clothing choices, books read, favorite characters, actions and reactions mostly represented emphasized femininity. Yet, within a poststructuralist feminist lens, gender binaries are not an acceptable reality (Blaise, 2005a, 2005b). There are multiple possibilities for being and doing gender, and both girls revealed instances in which this occurred.

As the school year progressed, our school conversations consistently focused on commonly occurring social injustices (Vasquez, 2014, 2017). This meant at times, the kindergartners bumped against contested spaces that worked at disrupting gender inequities. In the next examples, Hannah and Dawn revealed spaces that caused each of them to question the established roles and expectations as a girl in the classroom as well as within society. By participating in the co-construction of gender, they attempted to shift the boundaries of societal norms; essentially, they began to reimagine themselves as powerful, agentive girls.

By the beginning of June, Dawn had reconsidered her costume plans for the castle dramatizations. Throughout the weeklong class discussions of what the castle would look like and the potential roles of each kindergartner, Dawn emphatically expressed her desire to be a
princess (*Field Notes, 6/3/16*). When it came time to sign up for requested materials however, Dawn decided she wanted to be a knight and wrote the following notation on the sign-up sheet: shield nitcostoom/shield, knight costume (*Costume Supplies Sign Up, 6/13/16*).

With all of Dawn’s princess talk throughout the school year, her desire to reimagine herself became stronger, and thus she attempted see herself in a different role. She considered stepping outside of her norm by portraying a strong female knight. She requested shiny material and cardboard to make her knight costume, and she spent an afternoon cutting and designing a long drape that tied around her neck as a cape. She cut the cardboard to resemble a shield and taped a piece of cardboard on the back of it for a handle. She excitedly prepared for her role as knight with the exclamation, “I want to be a knight, too!” (*Field Notes, 6/15/16*) Yet, ultimately Dawn decided to roleplay a princess every opportunity she had in the castle. Each time Dawn entered the classroom castle, her knight in shining armor was quickly repurposed into a princess costume. She tossed the shield aside, quickly tied the cape around her waist as a long, flowing skirt, and immersed herself in her world of make-believe as a princess.

Hannah’s dramatic interactions in the castle were more fluid. She used these drama opportunities as spaces to try on different gender roles and expectations as a girl. As the stepmother in one particular dramatization, Hannah started out by reinforcing the negative, evil stepmother storyline represented in many fairy tales. Speaking directly to the fairy godmother and two stepsisters, Hannah laughed wickedly and then exclaimed, “I’m the stepmother, so I say bad words. I say bad words! I’m the stepmother! Ha ha ha!” (*Classroom Castle, Group 1 Dramatization, 6/16/16*). Then, midway through the scene, Hannah attempted to break away from the stereotypical evil stepmother persona by expressing empathy as she spontaneously turned to Cinderella and said in a nurturing manner, “You have the whole day to just relax.”
Yet, later on in this same scene, Hannah resorted to the more passive role as she politely whispered to the fairy godmother, “Okay, give her a dress! Please?” (Classroom Castle, Group 1 Dramatization, 6/16/16). Therefore, Hannah dynamically shifted between reinforcing, reimagining, and then back to the reinforcing of societal gender norms within this one drama event. It seemed as if Hannah was testing the waters and intentionally pushing back on the gender norms held within society; the more she tried it out, the more comfortable she became in taking on a stronger, more assertive role.

**Taking a stand and talking back.** Fairy tale books and movies are a mainstay in many home environments. Likewise, fairy tales are a part of the traditional canon in many elementary literacy curriculums. This means that countless children are familiar with the storylines, characters, and their actions (Leland, Harste, & Clouse, 2013; Parsons, 2004). Yet rather than dismiss the fairy tales as biased and stereotyped, I made a conscious decision as an early childhood educator to continue to share books such as these with my young students; my goal was to teach them how to read the words critically so they could also critically read the world (Freire & Macedo, 1987).

One of the ways in which we accomplished this as a community of learners was to take on the roles of characters. After we read aloud the books, we went back into each story and closely studied the illustrations in the book to determine the character’s feelings. We matched the feelings with the words in the text. We acted out the stories. We became the characters so that we could better understand the decisions they made and the actions they took. We talked through our own multiple perspectives of the problems and solutions, and we examined alternate possibilities (Adomat, 2009). The kindergartners had numerous opportunities to step into the shoes of a
variety of characters, and then, as the characters, they stood up for themselves by talking back to another character in the book whom they felt had treated them unfairly.

Hannah had chosen to enact two different characters, the Rough Face Girl and Prince Cinders. *The Rough Face Girl* (Martin, 1992) is an Algonquin tale similar to Cinderella; the main character is a sweet, caring girl who has scars on her face and arms due to the embers from the fireplace. In the following excerpt, Hannah as the Rough Face Girl felt it was important to stand up to the village people because they laughed at her as she walked through the village.

Karen: Okay, so who are you going to talk back to?

Hannah: Um, the village people.

Karen: The village people (pause) And, what will you say to become a more powerful character? Read your words to me.

Hannah: “No fair! Still I not scared of you. I like to stand up for myself.”

Karen: And what made you say that, Rough Face Girl?

Hannah: Because, what made me say that is because when I see other people be mean, and they’re not standing up for theirselves, and I want them to stand up for theirselves.

So, I try to stand up for theirselves, even if they don’t.

Karen: How do you feel?

Hannah: Happy.

Karen: How come? Tell me more.

Hannah: Because when I stand up for myself and they don’t, I’m happy that I’m good and they’re, like, bad, but I still want them to be good.

Karen: All right, so when you’re standing up for yourself, it makes you feel good. What else does it do for other people?
Hannah: Uh, I think it makes them still mean. Some start to be good when I’m good and they’re seeing me doing that, and they start to be good.

(*Focus Group 7, Talking Back, Transcription 1, 5/20/16*)

As the Rough Face Girl, Hannah had a sense of purpose and justice. She believed she was treated unfairly, and it was her right to stand up for herself. Not only did it bring her pleasure to do so, she also felt her assertiveness and strength served as a role model for others who may be in a similar predicament. By standing inside the shoes of a literary character, Hannah constructed the necessary words in order to stand up for herself as the character. I believe this roleplay also provided a rehearsal space for the future times when Hannah will need to stand up to injustices in her own life. In other words, this practice provided Hannah with the words she might possibly use when confronted with an injustice. She gained strength from the experience by seeing new possibilities as a strong girl; additionally, she experienced positive feelings as a proactive member of society.

**Extending the Possibilities: Gender Along a Continuum**

In this chapter, I explored the possibility of gender binaries being present in my kindergarten classroom. My understanding in a poststructuralist feminist sense is that gender binaries within a patriarchal society maintain dominance over women through the social ordering of gender. Through analyses of a wide range of data sets across the majority of the kindergarten school year, I discovered The Princess Girls, whose words and actions most frequently maintained the status quo regarding the expected gendered norms of society yet, at times, also revealed gender understandings along a continuum.

At times, gender binaries were evident in the kindergarten classroom. For instance, I described the example of Eliza who shared with her kindergarten colleagues her “Fashion Girls”
book, complete with princess models bedecked in pinks and purples. In turn, this discourse inspired other Princess Girl members as well as a male classmate, Gabriel, to write their own fashion books, offering their unique perspectives and understandings of gender and fashion. Each kindergartner’s illustrations depicted the characters through heteronormative lenses of gender. I considered this impromptu fashion discussion from multiple perspectives: a mutual understanding and thus support of the gendered norms of society; and, an intentional positioning within the gendered categories of society in relation to how others perceived it should be. Collectively, their literary pieces appeared to work at stabilizing societal gender norms within our classroom setting as well as maintained the expected gendered norms of society.

From The Princess Girls group, Hannah and Dawn emerged as vocal and active participants. Throughout the chapter, I named numerous ways in which the two girls expressed their understandings of gender as aligned to the heteronormative mindset. Mostly, their everyday actions and words in the kindergarten classroom supported the traditional binary gender discourse that girls looked, talked, and acted in subordinate, passive ways. For instance, I described how the two girls valued clothing, accessories, and beauty. In addition, each of the girls was enamored with princesses; considerable amounts of their time and energy involved either reading or writing books about princesses, or roleplaying princesses in puppet shows or plays in the classroom castle. I asserted that much of their roleplays as princesses left them in passive or submissive roles, waiting for rescue.

I explored Dawn’s conscious re-enactment in the role of damsel in distress during dramatizations, in which her emphasized femininity was apparent (Blaise, 2005a, 2005b). In this specific example, Dawn relied on others and tended to take care of others first. I examined how this persona also emerged for her during block building and dollhouse play centers, as Dawns’
interactions revealed her in the more helpless and often ignored role as a girl. In these specific situations, I also described the boy playmates who maintained the dominant social gender order by intentionally ignoring Dawn’s requests and by taking control over the play scenes.

Additionally, I revealed Hannah’s reinforcement of the differences between genders through her discursive interactions. For instance, I reflected on Hannah’s interpretation of gender possibilities when she questioned the boys’ inability to board the school bus with the invitation of “lovely kindergartners.” Likewise, Hannah invested herself in princesses, beauty, and marriage. From there, I explored instances of societal gender norms and expectations such as when Hannah commented during a book club discussion that Cinderella was so beautiful that the prince would marry her; as well, during her impromptu puppet show, Hannah announced in a matter of fact manner that the prince and princess were to be married. In this regard, I believe the presence of gender binaries for Hannah seemed to regulate the acceptable gender patterns in society as for her, beauty and marriage were goals. Its premise suggested that the male side of the dichotomy held more value over the female side in that a woman needed to look and act a certain way in order for a man to want to marry her, or that a woman needed to marry a man to be complete.

Yet I also realized as the school year progressed, the more opportunities Hannah and Dawn had to share their understandings of princesses, they stronger their voices became. As the months advanced, they appeared to develop new confidence; they seemed to hold more social capital in the eyes of their peers, being seen more readily as knowledgeable and experts (Davies & Harre, 1990). Their membership in the Princess Girls increasingly gave them powerful opportunities to express their understandings of gender through classroom discursive events. For instance, Hannah’s reminder to her peers to include a crown on the princess illustration
(Cinderella Book Club Meeting 2, 4/26/16) as well as her eighteen page book describing Cinderella’s fashion choices (Cinderella Book Club Meeting 8, 5/8/16) positioned Hannah as a knowledgeable other regarding Cinderella as well as fashion. She gained strength and prestige amongst her classmates through her active engagement.

Lastly, I described purposeful instructional practices and read aloud choices that supported the district curriculum, yet also served to open up conversations with the kindergartners regarding social issues. Within this context, I also noticed the ways in which some of the kindergartners represented their gendered understandings along a continuum. As the year progressed, and as classroom discussions continued to focus on gender and social justice through picture book read alouds, Hannah in particular began to try on a variety of ways to become more agentive in her interactions. When stepping into other’s shoes, she gave strength and power to the character. As the Rough Face Girl, Hannah realized her words and actions provided an example as to how one should act toward others; additionally, she felt good about herself for taking a stand against an injustice. Although not as frequent or as strong, Dawn also attempted to take on a new stance as a girl when she consciously decided to play a role primarily enacted by males. I consider Dawn’s brief venture into designing a knight costume as practice space for new possibilities for her as a girl. Through participation in this research study, it is my belief that continued gender-focused discussions, read alouds, and re-enactments would serve to build up Hannah and Dawn’s knowledge, experiences, and comfort level regarding social (in)justices and (in)equities as well as inspire their future acts of agency for authentic purposes. I envision experiences such as this would also work at extending the gender identities and possibilities for both girls and boys in the primary classroom.
In this chapter, purposeful instructional practices with a focus on social inequities mentored Hannah and Dawn into multiple possibilities for gender. In the next chapter, I explore the challenging relationship between Dawn and another girl in the kindergarten class named Sydney, whose ideas of being a girl were broader than Dawn’s. I will consider the multiple ways to interpret gender, rather than the reliance on a static, unilateral definition.
CHAPTER 5

Are You a Girl?

This chapter primarily explores a girl named Sydney who expressed her understandings of being a girl in her own unique ways, contrary to heteronormative expectations, as well as her classmate Dawn’s reactions to Sydney’s gender expressions within the kindergarten classroom. Everyday experiences provided opportunities for Sydney and Dawn to construct their understandings of gender; in turn, the occasions served to shape the foundations of what it meant for them personally to be girls in today’s society. As Sydney and Dawn became active participants in the kindergarten class, the discursive classroom events revealed their unique perceptions of gender, manifested within their own words and actions (Blaise, 2005a, 2005b; Wohlwend, 2009, 2011, 2012), as well as shaped their growing perceptions. For Sydney, gender seemed to live within multiple contexts and through a variety of possibilities, whereas Dawn continued to seek reassurance that gender was primarily located within the individual and more closely aligned to a narrowed set of gender roles and expectations (Blackburn, 2005; Blaise, 2014). As Sydney continued to reveal a range of possibilities for being a girl, Dawn began to police the boundaries of acceptable gender behaviors and expectations (Dutro, 2001/2002).

In order to gain a deeper understanding of Sydney and her personal interpretations of being a girl, I initially examined Sydney across a wide range of experiences and artifacts. Both structured and unstructured classroom events coupled with my field notes and anecdotal records revealed a happy, expressive, energetic girl with strong opinions and a competitive nature. As I reviewed the data, I began to notice occasional conversations of interest that occurred between Sydney and Dawn. Within the social contexts of their discourse and actions, Sydney and Dawn expressed their own gendered subjectivities, and it seemed as if each kindergartner attempted to
maintain her relationship with the other through structures of power (Blaise, 2005a, 2005b). In Sydney’s case, her clothing, language, and actions consistently ran counter to the normative expectations of what it means to be a female in today’s society. When Sydney’s choices bumped against Dawn’s understandings and desires as a girl, Dawn’s reactions and questions were often attempts to regulate the gendered social order within the classroom. Therefore, I also explore the interactions when Dawn either questioned Sydney or voiced her concern in this regard, as I seek to understand when and how their discursive events informed or shaped each other’s perspectives.

In this chapter, I first examine Sydney’s gendered perceptions, which mostly challenged the dominant gendered discourse. Then, I explore the interactions between Sydney and Dawn, as the two girls in particular had definite yet different conceptualizations, understandings, and enactments of being a girl. Individually as well as collectively, Sydney and Dawn’s responses to picture book read alouds and discussions add depth to research question one, as the girls explore their understandings of gender throughout the school year. Written documents from both reading and writing workshops as well as Sydney and Dawn’s associations with classmates during play centers help to answer research question two, where each girl expresses her particular understandings of gender within our daily classroom experiences. Finally, Sydney and Dawn’s voices during the classroom castle preparation as well as in the castle dramatizations bring greater insight to research question three, in which the gender specific fairy tale read alouds help to shape their oral and performative responses.

**Meet Sydney and Dawn**

As the months progressed in our kindergarten classroom, I began to notice a relationship between two of the kindergartners specifically. Most often, the two girls, Sydney and Dawn,
appeared to get along with one another. Frequently, they seemed friendly and accepting of one another; yet, at other times, an underlying tension emerged between the two of them. Their pull-and-tug relationship occurred during both structured and unstructured classroom events. Once an exchange occurred between the two girls, they typically went right back to being friends. Their exchanges were not disagreements, accusatory, or anger-driven; rather, the instances involved Dawn’s questionings and wonderings about choices made by Sydney. The experiences and examples that follow reveal the ways in which these two girls expressed their particular perceptions of gender.

**Sydney.** At five, Sydney was the younger of two daughters in her family. Sydney’s mother was a night nurse; her dad worked in finance. Sydney had a close relationship with her family, as was documented in her real life personal narratives. Within her stories, Sydney described family activities such as an outing to a local water park (*Pre-Writing Assessment, 9/17/15*), winning prizes with her sister at a local pizza place (*Things I Do First Write, 3/14/16*), and playing catch with her family members (*Post Writing Assessment, 6/1/16*). Her personal interests included playing sports such as basketball and soccer. Sydney talked about *Star Wars* enthusiastically and frequently recounted the characters including her favorite, Darth Vader (*All About Me Response Booklet, Favorite Character, 1/16*); she was also known to recap the movies from the beginning of the series she had viewed with her dad. Sydney returned to the classroom supply of *Star Wars* books regularly throughout the school year (*All About Me Response Booklet, Learn More About, 1/16*). Free time at home commonly involved playing with her *Star Wars* light saber, *Star Wars* figures, and *Star Wars* basketball hoop in her bedroom that made noises when the ball went through the hoop (*All About Me Response Booklet, Play, 1/16*). In addition, Sydney loved to eat pizza, brownies and cookies (*Things I Do Final Write, 5/24/16*).
My first impressions of Sydney alluded to her high level of social confidence. She readily entered the classroom each day, and she often initiated conversations with both peers and adults alike. She was eager to share daily happenings from bus rides, the lunchroom, ball practice, or home with whomever would lend an ear to her conversations, and her animated expressions and gestures frequently left people with smiles on their faces and deep belly laughs. Additionally, Sydney was not one to hang back and wait for others to offer suggestions or invitations to join in a group; typically, she was the one who initiated an event and then sought out friends to join in her plans (Blocks Play Center Transcription, 3/18/16; Super Heroes Play Center 2 Transcription, 5/5/16).

Socially, Sydney’s peers considered her a leader; yet academically, Sydney was more of a follower. Although she was not fearful of taking risks in a physical, active sense, she was hesitant to take risks as a learner. Throughout the school year, Sydney often commented on her perceived inability to read and write. She leaned heavily on her personal experiences during read alouds in order to gain meaning or form connections with text. As the year progressed, Sydney’s confidence level grew enough for her to tackle learning she considered more challenging, mostly with a support system intact (Field Notes, 6/20/16).

Typically, Sydney chose to wear t-shirts, pants or shorts to school. One of her favorite shirts was a long sleeved t-shirt that looked like a tuxedo. The first time she wore it to school, Sydney exuberantly showed off the shirt with a comment of “Look how cool this is! It looks like a suit!” (Anecdotal Notes, 1/18/16). Sydney did not wear a dress the entire school year; when asked why not by a classmate, she vehemently expressed her disdain with the exclamation “No way!” (Anecdotal Notes, 1/18/16). On the rare occasion her nails were painted, blue was her
color of choice. At times, she chose to keep her shoulder length hair away from her face with a low-lying ponytail pulled to the back of her neck with a single strand, monotone band.

Dawn. Previously introduced in the Princess Girls chapter, Dawn was also extremely comfortable in a social sense. She was talkative, active, and a happy kindergartner. Dawn, too, felt at ease in a group of peers and often invited her friends to join in her play. Yet, as noted in the previous chapter, Dawn tended to follow rather than lead during numerous academic and play-based scenarios. Also discussed earlier was Dawn's frequent talk of her love for princesses and dressing up (All About Me Response Booklet, All About Me, 1/21/16). On regular occurrences, Dawn wore dresses, skirts, sandals or low-heeled dress shoes, loved to have her nails painted in vivid colors, and usually accessorized her outfits with brightly colored, plastic bangles and sparkly necklaces (Field Notes, 2/9/16). She also liked to wear barrettes, headbands, and colorfully adorned ponytail holders in her hair.

For the most part, Sydney and Dawn got along well with one another throughout the school year. At times, they played together; at other times, they played with different friends in the class. Their interests were similar on occasion, yet varied at others. Their friendship seemed genuine. Mostly, they spoke with kindness to each other. Sometimes, though, their opinions would clash, and more intense discussions between them would ensue. It was during times such as these questions of gender would arise from Dawn, as she seemed to find it harder to fit Sydney into her understandings of what girls can do, say, wear, and look like. On the other hand, Sydney was content to be who she was, rather than who someone else, or society, thought she should be.
Challenging the Norms of Society

As the year unfolded, Sydney routinely expressed her particular understandings of gender through the lens of her own experiences. Sydney believed she was capable of most anything in a physical sense, and she looked for opportunities to run, jump, climb, build, and get messy (Field Notes, 6/20/16). In the fall, her first attempt at writing a real life story valued playing on a sports team with both boys and girls – “STOAXSaR/Me and Robert playing soccer” (Pre-Writing Assessment, 9/17/15). Months later, Sydney wrote about her favorite toy to play with, as she scried “Ilove to youul F str wrtys/I love to play with Star Wars toys.” (All About Me Response Booklet, 1/21/16). Figure 4 displays Sydney’s response. Typically, Sydney maintained a tough emotional façade such as when she admonished herself with “I’m really okay, but just don’t cry” (Blocks Play Center Transcription, 3/18/16). In this particular episode, a block hit Sydney in the head accidentally as other play center participants passed the blocks amongst the group members; once hit, Sydney willed herself not to cry in front of her peers. She considered herself rough and tough; and her language, actions, and activity choices mirrored that sentiment.
From the first days of kindergarten, Sydney was a vocal participant in most aspects and settings of the classroom, whether it was a more structured activity, lower-key event, or free choice experience. She would often strike up a conversation with the peers sitting around her; she spoke freely of her dreams, goals, likes, and dislikes. In situations such as this, Sydney’s gender discourses unveiled the ways in which gender existed within context for her personally (Blaise, 2014; Gallas, 1998).

For instance, the following example occurred as Sydney, Dawn, and a small group of students worked together during literacy centers. Sydney spontaneously started a discussion pertaining to one of her favorite pastime activities at home, playing basketball. Through her statement, Sydney seemed to push up against society’s gendered expectations for a girl. Dawn extended upon Sydney’s remark, while the rest of the kindergartners at the table continued to work, seemingly unaffected by Sydney’s pronouncement. Dawn’s response to Sydney might
seem as if Dawn was seeking stabilization of the gender order by calling attention to the fact that her own interests included an activity that aligned more closely to the gender expectations of a female (Blaise, 2014; Gallas, 1998; Wohlwend, 2011).

(5 students, 3 girls and 2 boys, sitting at the horseshoe table, quietly working on booklets)
Sydney: I have a basketball hoop in my bedroom!
Karen: Why do you like to play basketball?
Sydney: It’s awesome! It’s a Star Wars one! It makes noises when you get it in!
Dawn: (sitting on the opposite side of the table) You know what’s cool about me? I’m a cheerleader!
Karen: What’s so special about being a cheerleader?
Dawn: I’ve always wanted to be a cheerleader! It’s so fun!

(students resume working on booklets quietly)

(Field Notes, Literacy Centers, 11/23/15)

History, culture, and politics design gender as a construct within society (Blaise, 2005a, 2005b); society then molds girls and boys, starting at an early age, as to what it expects of them. In our dichotomous society, a heteronormative order of gender exists in which hegemonic masculinity is valued, and most frequently, masculinity dominates over femininity (Blackburn, 2005; Blaise, 2014). In this specific example, Sydney expressed her excitement at practicing to be an athlete in a sport typically dominated by males. She also appreciated the loud, combative, action packed scenes and characters of Star Wars. Dawn, however, most frequently honored looks, compliance and beautiful, docile princesses. One possible interpretation of Dawn’s reply appears as if she drew on her assumptions of acceptable gender behaviors. If this were the case, then her response could be a reaction to Sydney’s public exclamation of objects and activities
typically admired by boys. This would suggest Dawn, at age five, seemed to be aware of the heterosexual matrix, in which gender performances occur in relation to the norms of society (Butler, 1998).

When viewed in this frame, Sydney did not fit the binary mold for female expectations; therefore, Dawn might have been attempting to stabilize the gender order by drawing the attention back to acceptable practices for girls within today’s society. Dawn’s response seemed to imply females could be active, as cheerleading is a physical activity; yet, to her, female roles more closely align to a supportive capacity of cheering on the players on a team. Perhaps Sydney and Dawn’s choices in how they participated in this particular exchange signaled ways in which they saw themselves within their world (Villaverde, 2008); Sydney’s statement challenged the existing social order for females, whereas Dawn’s comment upheld the current belief system (Blaise, 2005a, 2005b).

Yet, another equally plausible explanation for Dawn’s response might be her desire to extend upon the comment made by a peer, purely to share her own thoughts about herself. Dawn’s desire might be an outward, verbal reflection of what she, personally, likes to do, not necessarily with conflict or control in mind (Gallas, 1998). Her comment might also be a replication of the social dynamics within our classroom setting, in which students are encouraged to be active participants and to share thoughts, wonderings, and experiences readily with one another. As I am re-interpreting the words and actions of five year olds, I realize the importance of considering multiple possibilities, rather than making one, clear-cut, definitive statement regarding the choices of others.

Early in the school year, it became readily apparent to me Sydney was one of the kindergartners in this group of students who did not hesitate to bring up her thoughts in
conversations (Gallas, 1998). Frequently, she was one who noted gender differences as well as nonconformity in others and consistently found ways to discuss gender roles and expectations. For instance, Sydney commented on the rigid boundaries set upon the main characters as she formed a connection between two gender-focused read alouds. During the read aloud session of *A Fire Truck for Ruthie* (Newman, 2004), Sydney listened intently as the grandmother character cajoled the girl character into playing with dolls and dress-up clothes instead of the fire trucks the little girl desired. In the following transcript excerpt, Sydney immediately saw the similarities of the gender biased expectations between this specific main character and another main character from the previous read aloud of *William’s Doll* (Zolotow, 1972) who wanted his own doll:

Sydney: It’s almost the same as the book where he wants a doll!

Karen: Oh!

Sydney: That, where the dad doesn’t get him the same thing.

Karen: Wait a minute, do you have a connection between *William’s Doll* and *Ruthie’s Firetruck*?

Sydney: (nodding head ‘yes’)

Karen: What’s the same about them, honey?

Sydney: Um, because the grandma doesn’t get her the other firefighter, just like he doesn’t get him a doll. (*A Fire Engine for Ruthie* Read Aloud, 1/22/16)

During the whole class discussion that followed the read aloud, Sydney also felt compelled to challenge the gender stereotypes held by the grandmother and showed her support of the girl by sharing a text-to-self connection. Sydney loudly interjected “And I like to play with fire engines and cars AND trains and motorcycles!” (*A Fire Engine for Ruthie* Discussion,
1/22/16). In this regard, Sydney’s comment worked at “disrupting the commonplace” of the
gendered norms of society and opened up multiple perspectives for both the fictionalized
character of Ruthie as well as herself (Labadie, Wetzel, & Rogers, 2012; Lewison, Flint, & Van
Sluys, 2002). Sydney’s proclamation helped “to lead them [her classmates] to new ways of
understanding the world” (Labadie, Wetzel, & Rogers, 2012, p. 119). As Sydney intentionally
stood up for Ruthie, she also gave voice to others who do not fit succinctly into the dichotomous
gendered norms of society (Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002). Another important point to
consider in this interaction is all children benefit from seeing themselves in the books read to or
by them (Sims Bishop, 1990). Therefore, as Sydney viewed books with characters such as Ruthie
that resonated with her own thoughts, likes, and dreams, Sydney’s identity, sense of belonging,
and self-worth strengthened. In essence, the main characters within these two gender-focused
read alouds were the mirrors that reflected possibilities as well as opened up windows of
opportunities for Sydney and her kindergarten peers (Sims Bishop, 1990).

**Young children as gendered beings: Conversations around picture books.** In addition
to expressing herself through a lens that differed from society’s expectations for a girl, Sydney
was also cognizant of other’s decisions concerning group membership with respect to gender.
Following a gender-focused read aloud of *Oliver Button is a Sissy* (dePaola, 1979), Sydney and
her classmates used this discursive space as a place to talk about society’s gender roles and
In this book as well as the previously read *William’s Doll* (Zolotow, 1972), the supporting
characters teased the main characters because of their non-traditional choices of wanting to
dance or play with dolls. This next discourse offered insight into this particular group of
kindergartners’ thoughts as they puzzled through the intent of multiple characters:
Dawn: That, that reminds me of *William’s Doll*.

Karen: How come it reminds you of *William’s Doll*?

Dawn: Cuz it’s called sissy.

Karen: Remember? In that book, the boys were calling William a sissy, right? Why were they calling him a sissy? Do you remember?

Dawn: Cuz he had a doll.

Sydney: Because they think he is a girl. Because he thinks, they think because he’s playing with a doll, they think, they call him a girl then.

Karen: Um hm. What are you thinking?

Eliza: Because (pause) because he wanted a doll, and the boys think he will play with boy stuff. (*Oliver Button is a Sissy* Read Aloud, 2/11/16)

With this conversation, the kindergartners practiced positioning themselves as knowledgeable and powerful (Davies & Harre, 1990), capable of talking about the author’s message that conflicted with a message received from society – only girls should play with dolls. Sydney and Eliza’s comments helped the group to think about the gender issue at hand, whereas Dawn’s statement formed a connection across texts. Each of their observations served to open up a space, either then or in the future, for these young students to form real-life connections to themselves and their own experiences (Deprez, 2010). Essentially, this discursive opportunity confirmed for some of the discussants that gender resided in multiple contexts and through multiple perspectives; additionally, it held the potential for other discussion members to begin thinking along a new way, if multiple possibilities were something that had never occurred to them (Blackburn, 2005).
“But how will I know?” As Sydney and Dawn continued to interact with each other in classroom events, Dawn learned more about Sydney’s strengths, likes, and dislikes. She listened and observed Sydney closely within each occurrence; by doing so, Dawn became further unsettled with Sydney’s words, actions, and choices. Therefore, it seemed to me she felt the need to confront Sydney one winter afternoon, as the kindergartners packed up to go home. After the students got into their bus lines, the following conversation took place between Sydney and Dawn:

Dawn: (leaning close to Sydney) Are you a girl?

Sydney: (stares at Dawn for a few seconds and then turns her back on Dawn)

Dawn: Sydney? Are you a girl?

Sydney: (remains silent, not looking in Dawn’s direction)

Dawn: But how will I know?

Sydney: (keeps her back to Dawn until they get onto their respective buses)

(Field Notes, 1/13/16)

The episode passed, and the next school day Dawn and Sydney entered the classroom as if nothing different had occurred between the two of them. Yet, Dawn seemed to notice the times when Sydney looked, said, and enacted in ways different from her own expectations. Therefore, she felt compelled to question Sydney. In Dawn’s case, her language and actions within the classroom setting mostly emphasized femininity (Blaise, 2005a, 2005b) such as she valued beauty and fashion. She was also compliant concerning school and classroom rules or routines. In addition, Dawn often took a subordinate stance and accommodated to other kindergartners’ interests and desires (Blocks Play Center, 3/18/16; Classroom Castle, Group 5 Dramatization, 6/22/16; Dollhouse Play Center, 3/1/16). In this specific interaction, especially with her direct
reference to “but how will I know?”, it seemed as if Dawn attempted to place Sydney within her own concise definition of being female, a similar definition upheld by society’s normative female discourses and actions. Dawn’s question to Sydney appeared to imply if Sydney did not follow along with the gender expectations and norms, then Dawn would be unable to identify Sydney as a girl.

Another possible explanation for Dawn’s response to Sydney might include Dawn’s desire to protect her peer from harm or judgement; thus, it could have been her way of correcting Sydney back into the female gender role (Wohlwend, 2011). Since Sydney frequently resisted the societal norms, behaviors, and expectations for being a girl, Dawn may have taken it upon herself to apprentice Sydney into being a girl. If this were the objective, Dawn’s attempt at remediation suggested a practice that was “regulatory, maintaining a set of expectations by sanctioning practices regarded as unexpected or inappropriate” (Wohlwend, 2011, p. 18).

Also to consider, perhaps Dawn was sincerely trying to inquire for her own benefit. Children do not understand and build their gender identities in the same ways (Davies, 2003). Maybe it was not about control, conflict, or uncomfortableness on Dawn’s part (Gallas, 1998); rather, it was simply a carefree, spontaneous comment to find out more about her friend.

Sydney, on the other hand, chose to remain silent through this entire episode. Up until this point in time, her words and actions took a stance against a singular vision of being a girl. Numerous times throughout the months, Sydney had been vocal when her needs or wants differed from expectations. A closer look at Sydney’s decision to remain silent brought to light several potential interpretations: substantiation of current gendered norms, silence as power, or preservation of self.
In one regard, Sydney’s lack of voice at this specific moment might have been a substantiation of the current gendered, binary social structure (Blackburn, 2005). It could have been Sydney’s way of acknowledging her awareness of and resistance to the multiple differences between herself and wider, global expectations of gender enactment. If this were the case, then Sydney’s silence left Dawn’s vision of females unchallenged, and thus gave Dawn no need to look outside of her unilateral description of “girl” or to see more possibilities for being a girl. Consequently, heteronormative power potentially would remain strong, as both Sydney and Dawn’s words and actions regulated the traditional social standing of gender, within both the classroom and society as well (Blaise, 2014).

Another possibility for Sydney’s silence may have been an attempt on Sydney’s part to gain control over the power of the discourse. If this were the intent, then Sydney’s non-verbal communication of first locking eyes with Dawn and then deliberately turning her back on Dawn immediately put an end to the dialogue (Gallas, 1998). As silence is interpersonal, Sydney’s refusal to communicate gave her control over the conversation as well as suggested a move for dominance within their relationship. Through Sydney’s determined resolution to remain quiet, she “controlled the flow of spoken ideas by recognizing the mediating role of talk in the classroom, by not participating in it” (Gallas, 1998, p. 52).

Yet, another possibility for Sydney’s reaction could have been her conscious desire to disengage in a conversation in which she might not have felt comfortable enough to participate in, at that specific moment, or with this particular person. It was possible that, at five years old, Sydney was not able to pull the words together to communicate her thoughts. Maybe she did not want to have to justify herself, or did not see the need to justify. Perhaps, due to Sydney’s
comfort level and self-confidence, Sydney did not feel as if it was as big of a concern as it was to Dawn, and therefore, Sydney did not want to make an issue.

As gender is not necessarily fixed or stable within a poststructuralist sense, Sydney’s gender performances could be her answer to the feminine limitations placed on her; and, Sydney’s choice of more boy-like behaviors gave her more power (Blaise & Taylor, 2012). Through Sydney’s words and actions, she formed her own, particular gender identity; this helped Sydney to determine her unique definition of being a “girl”, even as her performances did “not comply with gender stereotypes and actively contradict(ed) gender and heterosexual norms” (Blaise & Taylor, 2012, p. 92). Her tomboyish performances, therefore, do not “necessarily locate (her) outside of heterosexualized gender discourse” (Blaise & Taylor, 2012, p. 94).

More Than One Way: Through the Lens of Multiple Perspectives

As a society, as well as within a classroom of students, how we connect to defining gender-specific qualities often mirrors how closely we align ourselves to these perceptions of gender (Villaverde, 2008). Social and cultural conditioning concerning masculine and feminine norms and expectations serve to position, most often sorting dichotomously into acceptable gendered actions, attire, emotions, or occupations. For some people, the alignment makes sense or feels right personally; yet, the connection to society’s gender expectations may feel foreign, unnatural, or forced to others (Blackburn, 2005).

Sydney felt strongly about her likes and dislikes, and she was willing to share her thoughts if something did not feel right to her. She rarely seemed pushy or arrogant about it; rather, she was matter of fact in her tone and demeanor. This happened to be the case one winter morning, when Jesse’s grandmother sent in small tokens to celebrate Jesse’s birthday. The note attached to the basket of tokens indicated the intent was for the boys to receive the rubber lizards,
and the charms were for the girls. As Jesse passed out the items, Sydney exclaimed to him “But, I don’t like charms! Can I get a squiggly rubber thing instead?” (Field Notes, 12/17/15).

This interchange between Sydney and Jesse is significant for a number of reasons. With this deliberate stance, Sydney positioned herself as a powerful girl, capable of standing up for herself and asking for what she needs or wants (Blaise, 2014). Jesse’s grandmother assumed each student would fit succinctly into society’s binary categories of boy and girl; according to Jesse’s grandma, then, each child would appreciate a gender specific trinket. However, Sydney’s request for the squiggly rubber thing rather than the piece of jewelry exemplified the multiple possibilities for this particular girl. In Sydney’s mind and heart, she did not have to like or want jewelry; rather, she could like slimy, wiggly creatures instead; and, she could stand up for herself to get what she desired. For Sydney, there were multiple ways of being a girl (Blackburn, 2005).

Likewise, Sydney believed there were multiple ways to be a boy, as the following impromptu conversation illustrated. On a cold, snowy winter day, Sydney and three of her friends chose to color during inside recess. Their topics of conversation gradually moved from playing in the snow to hair length, with each child expressing her or his thoughts on who could wear their hair long or short.

Garrett: I was going really, really fast! Sledding down the hill! (moving his arms and body up and down, as if he was bumping down the hill)

Dakota: Ha! That’s funny!

(silence, as the group of kindergartners color intently)

Taylor: (head down, looking at her picture as she colored) Girls can have short hair and boys can have long hair.

Sydney: When my dad was a rock star, he had long hair.
Conversations involving multiple possibilities for gender such as toys, trinkets, and length of hair have a purpose and a place in schools, including within the early childhood classroom (Blackburn, 2005; Blaise, 2005a, 2005b, 2014; Gallas, 1998; Wohlwend, 2009, 2011, 2012). Children such as Sydney and Dawn enter school with a sense of gender identity and gendered expectations, apprenticed through historical, cultural, and societal norms. Children as young as five years old are aware of these norms; and, some children seek to get gender “right” (Blaise, 2005a, 2005b; Wohlwend, 2009, 2011, 2012). As demonstrated in the example above with Sydney and her kindergarten friends, they often worked through their understandings within self-initiated peer discussions. In Sydney and her friends’ opinions, there was more than one-way to look like a girl or a boy as far as hair length is concerned (Blaise, 2014).

**Reimagining Possibilities: Defining and Redefining Gender**

When viewed within a poststructuralist lens, gender as a construct is defined and redefined continually (Villaverde, 2008). In the case of two particular kindergartners, Dawn mostly worked at sustaining the traditional definition of female; whereas, Sydney often worked at redefining the heteronormative meaning of being a girl. Their language, actions, and choices drew on varied images of a female's capabilities and opportunities within the classroom setting across the school year. As Sydney and Dawn participated in daily interactions, singularly as well as together, they actively developed information about what was desirable and normal for each of them as girls in the kindergarten classroom as well as females in society. As well, their
interactions served to both inform and shape each other’s points of views regarding gender possibilities for others.

In turn, Sydney and Dawns’ discursive practices also encouraged their classmates to think and act in broader terms of feminine and masculine norms. In the following exchange that occurred during a whole group read aloud of *The Playground Problem* (McNamara, 2004), Sydney and her friend reacted to the discrimination against a group of first grade girl characters forbidden to play on a soccer team with boys.

Karen (reading from the text): “And girls do not play soccer!”

Students: (gasps)

Hannah: I play soccer!

Sydney: I play soccer! Nobody tells me I can’t play soccer!

Karen: What do you suppose those girls are going to do about that?

Sydney: I think that they’re going to play soccer even though. (*The Playground Problem Read Aloud, 6/14/16*)

The discourse in this particular experience served to nudge the kindergartners thinking beyond the expected and caused them to imagine other possibilities for the first grade girls who wanted to play ball with the boys. By using their personal experiences and interpretations of their own social worlds, Sydney and her peer attempted to make sense of the contradictory storyline within the book (Vasquez, 2014, 2017). This teasing apart of conflicting personal and societal understandings is paramount, no matter what the age of student participants. The more possibilities of gender that are seen and understood, the more inclusive and accepting classrooms will be, as far as who students are and wish to be in the world (Blackburn, 2005).
A closer look at gender through Sydney’s eyes frequently opened up opportunities to see gender construction as relational and experiential, and not residing within static categories. As the kindergartners’ interactions played out within the social environments of this specific classroom, Sydney’s viewpoint constructed descriptions of gender that supported the contextualization of gender rather than being a fixed entity held within her. Sydney’s vantage shared her many varied ways and interests for being female, as opposed to the singular traditional way of being feminine (Blackburn, 2005).

It was important for Sydney, as well as her peers, to begin the interrogation of gendered categories at the young age of five because circumstances such as these enabled the kindergartners to gain confidence in themselves and to envision their own places in the world. Their discursive practices provided opportunities for them to observe and explore power balances through a gender-based lens. Through their experiences and gender-focused discussions, they were able to “develop new connections and perspectives on the world we inhabit, and to chart fresh paths for intervening in social injustices” (Villaverde, 2008, p. 101).

In one such instance, the kindergartners gathered on the rug to discuss the building of a classroom castle. Throughout the reading of the fairy tale variants, the students were enthralled with the idea of kings, queens, princes, princesses, knights, and dragons. It was not too far into the unit before the students requested the opportunity and the materials to create a large cardboard structure as a kingdom for their imaginary roleplays. As the children volunteered to play specific roles, a spontaneous conversation on gender possibilities unveiled itself as the kindergartners determined who would play each role.

Hannah: I want to be a princess. Some boys can be the princes.

Nadim: But I want to be a king!
Garrett: I know! We need knights to protect the castle! I’ll be a knight. We need more boys.

Sydney: I want to be a knight, too!

Taylor: Wait! How about if we do it like real life? You can choose to do whatever you want to. It doesn’t matter if you’re a boy or a girl. (Field Notes, Whole Group, Rug Area, Castle Discussion, 6/3/16)

Sydney’s suggestion to be a knight was pivotal in this episode. Her determination to step outside of the box of gender expectations, to be who she wanted to be and not what others wished for her to be, was purposeful. Her comments and requests since the beginning of the year had been consistently so. Initially, the call from her classmate requested that more boys sign up as knights; Sydney, however, believed there was more than one possibility for those who wanted to be knights. Therefore, she resisted the dominant power of others who attempted to marginalize her opportunities based on gender alone. Her suggestion for a girl to join the ranks of knighthood in addition to her male counterparts expressed her understanding of gender roles in a more fluid and flexible manner (Blackburn, 2005).

Just as poignant, however, was Taylor’s response. Her reply was dynamic, and voiced directly in reaction to Sydney’s request (Gallas, 1998). Taylor’s reflection demonstrated the deeper level of consideration and ready acceptance of multiple perspectives for some of the kindergartners in this particular classroom; while doing so, Taylor also intentionally connected the possibilities back into their everyday world experiences with her proactive reminder to make choices based on personal desires (Blackburn, 2005). Within this kindergarten community, this specific discursive practice between Sydney, Taylor, and her peers raised the level of gender
consciousness such that it gave cause for the classmates to see the multiplicity of available gender positions for females and males both in and out of the classroom (Blaise, 2014).

Another such conversation expressed the kindergartners desire to develop new perspectives on their world as they spontaneously advocated for gender equality. While the kindergartners were at specials one afternoon, I placed a child-sized model of a knight next to the castle we had constructed inside of the classroom. The guard was a three dimensional stand-alone replica of a knight in shining armor designed from recycled material such as boxes, cylinder shaped cans, wrapping paper tubes, and aluminum foil. As the students returned to class, it did not take long for someone to discover the addition to the castle, and a discussion immediately arose. As the following conversation illustrated, Sydney once again rallied for the multiple possibilities of a girl with her classmates.

  Tommy: Look at the knight!
  Dawn: Is it a boy or a girl?
  Sydney: I think it’s a girl. Look at the long eyelashes.
  Taylor: Yeah, it’s a girl, definitely.
  Sydney: Girls can be knights, too. I’m going to be a knight.

(*Field Notes*, 6/10/16)

After overhearing the conversation between the children, I was curious to hear Sydney’s thoughts. Therefore, I went over to the group and asked Sydney why she wanted to be a knight. Sydney responded with “because knights protect castles” (*Field Notes*, 6/10/16). Rather than maintaining and reinforcing societal gender norms, Sydney’s desire to be a proactive, protective female bumped up against the power of hegemonic masculinity (Blaise, 2005a, 2005b). In this case, it seemed Sydney specifically repositioned herself away from the emphasized femininity
mindset of being helpless, needing care, and weak; it appeared she consciously moved herself away from the limitations of being a female as imposed by society.

In order to see beyond a scripted, singular vision of feminine and masculine behaviors, roles, or looks, all students would benefit greatly from school discourse that values gender conversations from the beginning of their school careers (Blackburn, 2005). As this group of kindergartners expressed within this specific example, these young children were aware; they noticed their surroundings and questioned that which felt different from their own understandings. In this particular kindergarten classroom, discussions evolved authentically from spontaneous experiences or comments from the students; likewise, planned, purposeful gender-focused conversations opened up spaces for multiple possibilities to co-exist.

**Complexities of Gender: Considering a Range**

In this chapter, I considered the many ways in which Sydney expressed her understandings of gender. For Sydney, gender was complex and fluid; her gender identity contextualized through her discursive events within the kindergarten classroom. I explored the ways in which Sydney challenged the gendered norms of society, from her tough, assertive demeanor to her clothing and activity choices. Additionally, I shared how Sydney advocated for multiple definitions for being a girl such as when she supported book characters, as well as her own self, with being able to make decisions according to likes and interests rather than gender.

I also noted interactions between Sydney and Dawn within smaller groups such as during literacy centers and play centers. With an explicit focus on the two girls, I realized Sydney and Dawn explored a range of possibilities for being girls as they contextualized their gender identities (Blackburn, 2005) within the kindergarten setting. It seemed as if Sydney performed her personal views on gender capabilities mostly situated away from society’s gender biased
expectations (Butler, 1988), while Dawn attempted to maintain gendered categories with Sydney through her discourse and support of society’s established gender norms (Blaise, 2014). Ultimately, their yearlong interactions with each other served to both inform and shape each girl’s understandings of gender. I believe experiences such as these served two purposes: first, to confirm for Sydney that there were multiple perspectives available for her own gender expectations and behaviors; second, to plant new seeds of understanding for others in the kindergarten group who may have thought or felt differently.

Sydney’s presence within my kindergarten classroom reaffirmed for me the complex nature of gender and identity construction. Sydney’s numerous and varied expressions of being a girl taught me to honor the differences of people and value their individual lived experiences, rather than focus on similarities or make assumptions. In addition to my own enlightenment, Sydney revealed multiple possibilities of being and doing gender for her kindergarten peers. Her interference in traditional gendered norms within the kindergarten classroom opened up a forum that challenged the social, curricula, and pedagogical issues recurrent in the today’s educational system; I believe disruptions such as this are “necessary if we want to support all childhoods, rather than just those children that fit into the ‘norm’” (Blaise, 2014, p. 319).

In the next chapter, I intend to explore the interactions of Nadim. His discursive practices suggested his belief in a multitude of gender possibilities, in which he drew heavily on his personal experiences and observations.
CHAPTER 6
If I See It, Then It Must Be True

In this chapter, I explore the ways in which Nadim expressed his understandings of gender in a range of ways. His words and actions extended from being sensitive and empathetic to being more assertive and bold. Poststructuralist feminism considers gender as being non-linear; and, Nadim’s realizations of gender seemed to support this dynamic, fluid mindset (Villaverde, 2008). For Nadim, a complexity existed between a more diverse understanding of gender possibilities and the more traditional, normative gendered viewpoints. His gender understandings often contextualized or shifted through discursive events in the kindergarten classroom (Blaise, 2005a, 2014; Davies, 2003). Furthermore, his classroom comments often drew directly from his observations of the world around him; thus, when he saw or experienced something in real life, he was more apt to believe in its recurrence.

Texts and playtime were often entry points for Nadim to negotiate and try out new ways of understanding gender (Vasquez, 2014, 2017). Due to his active participation in read alouds and follow-up discussions, many of Nadim’s examples within this chapter involve his responses to gender related readings, conversations, and personal observations. Each instance suggests the possible locations of Nadim’s gendered identities, revealed across a variety of discursive practices, as well as dependent on context, additional participants, and the specific activities (Davies, 2003).

Through structured critical literacy read alouds and discussions, Nadim frequently expressed gender expectations as individualized according to what each person desired; yet, during unstructured play opportunities, Nadim seemed to reveal more narrowed views of possibilities for girls and boys. I discovered this as the year progressed, as I began to transcribe
audio and video sessions of play centers and dramatizations. It was at this point I saw an occasional difference in how Nadim acted and reacted amongst his peers within the unstructured play environment (Adomat, 2009, 2012a; Edmiston, 2010). Rather than being more tolerant and empathetic of others, I took notice of times in which Nadim sought to control the play situations. Therefore, in order to gain a deeper understanding of the ways in which this specific kindergartner revealed his personal perceptions of gender, I examine the varying ways in which Nadim pushed against the male dominate hegemonic framework of society as well as maintained it in his every day kindergarten interactions (Blaise, 2005a, 2005b, 2014; Villaverde, 2008).

**Presenting Nadim**

Five-year-old Nadim was the younger of two children in his family; his sister was three years older than he was and attended the neighboring intermediate school. Nadim’s mother was a stay-at-home mom; his dad was a pharmacist at a local drug store. Nadim had a close relationship with his immediate family as well as with his extended family across the United States. His real life stories during writer’s workshop often reflected the pleasurable family car trips made to Indiana and Georgia to visit aunts, uncles, and cousins (Pre-Writing Assessment, 9/17/15; Post Writing Assessment, 6/1/16). His personal interests included the studying of dinosaurs (All About Me Response Booklet, Learn More About Page, 1/16) as he aspired to one day “be a dinosaur man” (All About Me Response Booklet, When I Grow Up Page, 1/16) who teaches others about dinosaurs. Nadim also held a strong interest in trains and often compared his real life train knowledge to his favorite make believe train characters from Thomas the Train books (All About Me Response Booklet, Favorite Character Page, 1/16). Free time included day trips to the park, playground, local pool, and pizza parlor with family and friends (Things I Do
First Write, 3/14/16). Nadim was also an avid bike rider and soccer player; in addition, his favorite foods included cupcakes, pancakes, and cookies (Things I Do Final Write, 5/24/16).

Nadim was an active and involved kindergartner, and many of the students within the kindergarten classroom considered him a friend. Nadim received speech services four times a week to strengthen his articulation and pragmatic use of language. At times, he struggled extensively with how to articulate what he wanted to say; therefore, Nadim frequently took considerable amounts of time to formulate his thoughts (Field Notes, 4/20/16). Nevertheless, his quiet thoughtfulness often produced comments that were open-minded and accepting of others’ views, remarks, and actions. For instance, Nadim conveyed his understanding that some girls did not necessarily like to play with objects traditionally considered a girl’s item (I am Amelia Earhart Read Aloud, 1/29/16). Nadim also expressed the idea that one had a choice concerning marriage and who might be a good match (Focus Group 2, Favorite Character Discussion, 4/15/16).

Furthermore, Nadim was a curious, inquisitive child who noticed much in his environment (Field Notes, 6/20/16). His comments seemed to show an awareness of the decisions made by the people surrounding him. Nadim’s investment in his relationships with family members and friends as well as his observations of the world around him ignited a desire for deeper knowledge and understanding, which at times left him openly wondering about society’s hegemonic standards. If Nadim had personally seen or experienced something, even when it was against the standard, it was believable to him. For instance, Nadim was comfortable with pink as a boys color choice for clothing because he had seen the color worn by an adult male in his own life (Oliver Button is a Sissy Discussion, 2/11/16). He also believed boys could be nurses. Yet, Nadim acknowledged he did not see as many male nurses, and he wondered why
Moreover, Nadim voiced his observation that boys and girls had separate sections within the toy department as well as a different options for play, and he questioned why that was so (The Playground Problem Read Aloud, 6/14/16).

Read alouds and book talks seemed to be the spaces in which Nadim opened up most often; he had much to share with his classmates. During the read alouds, Nadim typically leaned forward in engagement, eyes on the book, body still as he became enraptured in the storylines (Field Notes, 1/28/16). He frequently talked back to the text, and showed a variety of reactions such as laughter, anger, surprise, and disbelief. He made comments throughout the readings for the benefit of his peers; at times, he also whispered his thoughts just loud enough for himself to hear. Nadim also regularly formed connections between himself and book characters (Field Notes, 4/20/16, 6/20/16). His thoughts during book discussions often built off others’ responses (Field Notes, 4/20/16). Throughout the school year, I was struck by Nadim’s sensitivity to diversity within his classmates as well as within the characters in the books we read (Field Notes, 4/20/16, 6/20/16); likewise, his problem solving and solutions were highly proactive and inclusive of others (Field Notes, 6/20/16).

As compassionate as many of his comments were, Nadim occasionally disconnected from this more accepting stance. At times such as during Choice Time or play centers, Nadims’ spontaneous actions sustained the more traditional male dominant discourse rather than countered it. For instance, while participating in one of the castle dramatizations, Nadim became exasperated at the girls who had restructured the performance into a more nurturing, caretaking scene rather than the action packed, battle scene he had initially set up (Group 5 Dramatization, 6/22/16). Dependent on the situation, then, Nadim’s actions within the classroom setting
vacillated between being a sensitive, caring, accepting community member and being a take-charge kind of guy during dramatic planning sessions and re-enactments.

**Seeing is Believing**

Cultural beliefs and attitudes hold influence over an individual’s learning. Yet, it is through the socially situated practices of home, school, and community that negotiation between divergent viewpoints can affect knowledge and understanding, as well (Lave & Wenger, 1991). For Nadim, there were substantial amounts of times in which he pushed against the standardized norms of society, partly supported by his participation in discursive events across the different learning environments of his home, school, and community. As far as Nadim was concerned, once he saw something, he believed it could and would occur again in the future. Therefore, planned and impromptu conversations amongst classroom peers as well as thought provoking read alouds became opportunities for Nadim to voice the gender perspectives he had witnessed in his life. Yet, occasions such as these often complicated Nadim’s place in the world, and as the school year progressed, worked at shifting the levels of understanding for him as well as his classmates.

**Forming connections to the world.** A common theme from the kindergartners throughout the school year was the refrain of “I saw (something specific)” such as both boys and girls playing with trucks, cars, and trains (*Fire Engine for Ruthie* Read Aloud, 1/22/16), only boys as police officers, daddy using tools at his job, or just mommy vacuuming (*Initial Picture Sorts*, 11/23/15). Visuals such as these gave the children an understanding of their world. These images also enabled the young students to form connections and disconnections to their surroundings, as these pictures provided either real world possibilities or restraints for themselves and others (Lazar, Edwards, & Thompson McMillon, 2012).
Nadim frequently formed connections with the people, places, and activities he saw in real world experiences as well as within the pages of a book. For instance, he knew that boys used tools because “I saw boys build my deck” (Initial Picture Sort, 11/23/15). Likewise, Nadim formed an immediate connection to the girl book character in Rosie Revere Engineer (Beatty, 2013). In this book, the young girl stretched hours, days, and weeks into opportunities to design, build, and test her intricate contraptions. Nadim associated the girl builder with himself, as he related his own pastimes spent designing, building, and testing at his workbench at home (I am Special Project, 2/4/16). In his reading response journal, Nadim noted a connection with her as he wrote “I bil like jus hrs./I build just like her” (Rosie Revere Engineer Re-Read and Response, 3/30/16). According to his remarks, Nadim visualized both boys and girls as capable of building; gender did not appear to be a factor in each person’s ability to build. Rather, the desire and ability to build seemed to be a decision left up to the individual.

Within another read aloud, Not All Princesses Dress in Pink (Yolen & Stemple, 2010), the illustrations showed girls wearing princess crowns while pursuing a wide variation of non-traditional girl activities such as getting greasy and building with power tools. The conversation extended to other possibilities of what girls could do or be, as Nadim contributed his thoughts to the following exchange:

Karen: Sometimes people tell girls or boys that they can’t do something. For instance, people may say, you can’t be a doctor because you’re a girl, or you can’t be an engineer because you’re a girl. What do you think about that?
Nadim: What? Girls can be doctors because I have doctor, and she a girl.
Karen: Why do you suppose people say girls can’t do something or boys can’t do something?
Nadim: Because maybe back in time, girls didn’t do all those things.

Karen: And now, you said back in time, so now?

Nadim: Now, girls can do it and boys can do it.

*(Not All Princesses Dress in Pink Read Aloud, 6/8/16).*

Using the reference of his personal female physician as the frame for gender role possibilities, Nadim expressed his understanding that it was possible for girls to become doctors. He saw it occur in real life; therefore, to him it seemed possible for girls to be whatever they wanted to be. Similarly, Nadim understood girls to be athletes, as the next example suggests. In *The Playground Problem* (McNamara, 2004), the boy characters would not let the girl characters play on their soccer team, and Nadim and his peers discussed their individual experiences regarding girl athletes. Each discussion participant had seen girls play on soccer teams; therefore, they believed girls as well as boys could be athletic in real life.

Karen: Can boys and girls work together, and play together, and have a great team?

Vinnie: Yeah!

Karen: How do you know that?

Vinnie: Because I know. I had a soccer team. Boys and girls goed on it.

Dakota: Girls and boys are on my soccer team, too. And they’re on different teams everywhere.

Nadim: When I go to my soccer, there’s a lot of girls and like nine boys.

*(The Playground Problem Read Aloud, 6/14/16)*

In this last example, taken from the *Oliver Button is a Sissy* (dePaola, 1979) read aloud discussion, the main character in the book liked to dance, and he was teased because of his interest and desire. As the conversation continued, the dialogue turned to the possibility of boy
ballerinas; from there, the color pink came up. While not all of the participants in the discussion agreed with the possibility of boys wearing pink, Nadim contributed his understanding that boys could wear a color traditionally believed to be just for girls.

Karen: Would it be okay if a boy was a ballerina?

Students: Yeah!

Karen: Would it be okay for a boy to wear a pink outfit?

Students: (a combination of yes and no answers called out)

Karen: I hear yeses and noes. Who wants to say why? Why is it okay for boys to wear pink? Taylor, tell us…

Taylor: Cuz, cuz it doesn’t even matter, like, what kind of clothes you wear, it just matters if no one is being mean to you if you wear that.

Karen: Okay. Vinnie, you said no, boys could not wear pink. How come?

Vinnie: Because it’s for girls.

Karen: Who says it’s for girls?

Vinnie: (long pause)

Karen: I’m not saying you’re wrong, honey. I’m just asking you what you’re thinking. So, you’re okay.

Vinnie: Um, because it’s only for girls.

Karen: Did someone tell you it was only for girls?

Vinnie: No.

Karen: You just know that pink is only for girls?

Vinnie: (nods head yes)

Karen: Okay. Tommy, what are you thinking?
Tommy: Um, maybe boys and girls can love the color pink and purple because I love pink; my favorite color is pink.

Karen: What are you thinking?

Nadim: Boys can wear pink cuz my dad wears a pink shirt when he goes to work.

Hannah: My, my dad wears pink shorts.

Karen: So, it’s okay if you see boys wear pink? You’ve seen boys wear pink before?

Sophia: I’m thinking that it’s okay for boys to wear pink because it’s just a piece of clothing.

*(Oliver Button is a Sissy Discussion, 2/11/16)*.

In each of the three examples, Nadim and his peers’ statements seemed to imply girls and boys could do, be, or wear what they wanted, without the boundaries of gender roles and expectations (Davies, 2003); additionally, Nadim believed in these possibilities because in each case he had witnessed the occurrences first hand. Being able to see girl characters as well as friends who were girls or women in positions more typically represented by males provided Nadim with a multitude of potentials for females. Likewise, male role models who willingly stepped outside of the standardized norms just as readily provided Nadim with an expanded definition of acceptable gender standards for boys. Nadim used the socially situated, real life experiences from his surrounding world to construct his unique perceptions of gender possibilities (Freire & Macedo, 1987; Lave & Wenger, 1991). In addition, Nadim’s willingness to share these understandings in a public forum such as group discussions within the classroom setting (Vasquez, 2014, 2017) presented his kindergarten classmates, such as Vinnie who was not sure a boy could wear pink, with multiple possibilities for gender, as well.
In many of these cases, the read aloud opportunities not only supported what Nadim did as a strong reader, it also highlighted what the reading did for him (Allyn & Morrell, 2016). For Nadim, the texts became windows to look out into the world “in which people act with moral justice” (Allyn & Morrell, 2016, p. 113); at the same time, the books also give him a renewed gauge to monitor for gender injustices within his own world experiences. The more Nadim saw gender based, multiple perspectives within context, whether within the pages of a book or in real world experiences, the more likely he was able to imagine and work towards a multitude of possibilities of gender.

**Windows and mirrors: Looking in and reflecting out.** As children experience numerous ways of being and doing, this vision of multiple pathways extends the possibilities and expectations for themselves as well as for the people they see in their everyday lives. Yet, not only do children benefit from seeing opportunities in real life, they also need to see themselves in the books they read (Allyn & Morrell, 2016; Lazar, Edwards, & Thompson McMillon, 2012; Sims Bishop, 1990). While the books become the windows in which they look out into their world, books should also be the mirrors that reflect their lives and experiences (Sims Bishop, 1990). Through critical literacy read alouds and book discussions, students grow from the questioning of the text, world, and each other, and therefore expand their understandings of acceptable reality (Allyn & Morrell, 2016). Conversely, when classrooms exist within a vacuum of representing most or all literary characters in normative, gender-biased ways, the replication and reinforcement of the historical and cultural social constructs of gender becomes more deeply engrained (Butler, 1988).

In this particular kindergarten classroom, I aimed to create an environment that supported and encouraged students to think and question critically (Vasquez, 2014, 2017); thus, Nadim was
quite comfortable in sharing his thoughts with his peers. Nadim held personal beliefs about what boys and girls could do, say, wear, or play, and his comments throughout discursive events such as read alouds and book discussions often revealed his thoughts regarding the possibilities.

**Negotiated meanings, co-participation, and socially situated practices.** Gender identities form in relation to each individual’s unique experiences, yet also build upon their collective experiences with others. As Nadim began to position himself as a student with a particular gendered identity within the school community, he also began to question what was accepted and valued across other communities. While thinking and acting in terms of his categorized gender membership, he inevitably came across gender possibilities that contradicted his own understandings (Davies, 2003).

In addition to having his own belief system, Nadim seemed to understand the constraints placed on others by society. When Nadim noticed something that stood out to him as being important, unusual, or contradictory, he would comment on it. For instance, during a read aloud about a little boy who liked to play with dolls, the supporting book characters as well as his own kindergarten peers laughed at the possibility. Rather than joining the laughter, Nadim thought about the situation through his own lens of gender understanding:

Karen: Look here (pause) look at the kids back behind him (pause). What are they saying? Or what are they doing? Can you see, Eliza? What are those kids in the back doing?

Eliza: (pause) Ummmm, they have, they have like a little tennis thing?

Karen: That is a tennis racket. Look at their faces, what are they doing? (pause) it’s kind of hard to see. Dawn, what are they doing?

Dawn: (long pause)
Karen: Can you see, Dakota? (pause) those guys? What are they doing?

Dakota: Ummmm, they’re laughing.

Karen: Right, they’re laughing. Why do you think they’re laughing? (pause) Why do you think they’re laughing, um, Nadim?

Nadim: Because he, he, plays with a doll, and those kids are laughing cuz they, they think he is a girl.

*(William's Doll Read Aloud, 1/17/16)*

A few days later, we read and discussed the book *I am Amelia Earhart* (Meltzer, 2014). This child friendly biography was part of a series that depicted famous people as they were growing up. The following dialogue occurred in response to an illustration of a young Amelia Earhart who did not appreciate dolls or frilly dresses. Comparable to his thoughts regarding William and his doll, Nadim revealed his belief that not all girls think and act alike, as well.

Hannah: She’s screaming cuz she doesn’t like girl stuff!

Karen: Why do you, I wonder, why doesn’t she like girl stuff?

Nadim: Because some girls doesn’t like girls stuff and some girls like boys stuff.

Karen: So, what do you think? Do you think Amelia Earhart likes girl stuff?

Students: No!

*(I am Amelia Earhart Read Aloud, 1/29/16)*

In the examples above, Nadim expressed diverse possibilities for both girls and boys; the choice of what to wear or play with resided within the individual (Davies, 2003). He did not seem to be thinking in terms of the gendered binary expectations; rather, his comments suggest a move toward the more complex terms of multiple positions made available to individuals.
His openness to possibilities also applied to other life choices, as revealed during a small focus group that met after a Cinderella read aloud. In this particular response to the reading, the kindergartners drew and wrote about their favorite characters in the story. Nadim and two of his classmates responded specifically about the prince; subsequently, the two boys and one girl met together in a smaller group after the reading response exercise to discuss their thoughts about the prince. At first, the three kindergartners’ discussion revolved around their appreciation for how nicely the prince treated Cinderella. When the talk moved to marriage, Nadim agreed that the prince wanted to marry Cinderella because “her was pretty and nice”. Nadim’s two classmates felt the prince would be sad if the prince and Cinderella did not marry; to that, Nadim stated, “Well, it’s your own feeling. If you want to marry somebody, go ahead. If you don’t want to marry that girl, don’t” (Focus Group 2, Favorite Character Discussion, 4/15/16).

In this regard, Nadim extended upon his two peers’ comments to include the concept of marrying due to internal or personal desire rather than external factors or to please someone else. His thoughts also mentioned the possibility of not marrying someone if the desire was not present. At times such as this, Nadim seemed to take on somewhat of an expert role; as for Nadim, gender was more flexible and fluid, not rigid and static. He saw possibilities where others might not have (Blaise, 2005b). Within the social context of the focus group, Nadim’s participation seemed to be a bid to negotiate the meaning (Lave & Wenger, 1991) of marriage with his co-participants.

At times, the peer discussions served to shift Nadim’s understandings about gender as well, such as happened during the read aloud and discussion of The Playground Problem (McNamara, 2004). Prior to the read aloud, Nadim expressed his understanding that boys played with video games; he also agreed with his male classmates that girls played with dolls and doll
accessories. In the following excerpt, Nadim disclosed his belief that girls played with dolls because both girls and dolls had long hair.

Karen: What toys and games are girl toys?

Tommy: Like, princesses stuff

Gabriel: A doll

Nadim: A dollhouse

Willie: Doll clothes

Gabriel: Barbies

Garrett: Ariel

Karen: What makes these girl toys?

Nadim: They have long hair like girls.

(The Playground Problem Read Aloud, 6/14/16)

As the interactive read aloud continued, Nadim and his peers studied the pictures on the pages. According to their interpretation of the illustration, there appeared to be a problem because a few of the characters in the picture looked angry. As Nadim and his peers worked at discerning the possible issue at hand, they also spontaneously opened up a discussion about gender norms for hair length. It seemed as if Nadim was bringing in his personal understandings of gender as he worked at interpreting the author’s message.

Nadim: They have long hair like girls.

Hannah: (whispers) I saw a boy with long hair before.

Garrett: They have dresses.

Karen: What did you say, Hannah?

Hannah: I saw a boy with long hair.
Sydney: Me, too.
Karen: Sydney, what are you thinking?
Sydney: I’m thinking a long, long time ago my dad had long hair because he was a rock star. (*The Playground Problem* Read Aloud, 6/14/16)

In this exchange, Nadim first noticed the length of hair on the book characters and named them as girls. From there, two of the girls in the group opened up the prospect of boys also having long hair. As this group of young children listened to the read aloud and continued to discuss its meaning, they seemed to also authentically and critically worked through other ways of being and doing gender. Through this particular discourse, then, the kindergartners mentored Nadim into a new way of understanding regarding gender and looks. Their co-participation in this particular discursive event revealed the negotiation and renegotiation (Lave & Wenger, 1991) of gender-based standards.

**Reinforcement of Societal Gender Norms**

Within a poststructuralist framework, one considers gender as learned through societal mentorship (Blackburn, 2005, 2006; Blaise, 2005b; Davies, 2003). Society, understood as being highly influential, conditions people to act according to their biological genders, and this conditioning begins at a very young age (Dutro, 2001/2002). Discursive events work to support the hegemonic discourse, which in turn guides young girls and boys into their roles and expectations within the social order (Blaise, 2005b; Compton-Lilly, 2014; Dutro, 2001/2002; Wohlwend, 2009, 2011, 2012).

As Nadim continued to interact with his classroom peers, he occasionally revealed a closer alignment toward the male dominated society; this seemed to occur most often in an unstructured setting such as during playtime (Wohlwend, 2011, 2012). In these instances, Nadim
appeared to take charge of classroom situations and made decisions for him as well as for groups of his peers, and his actions and words seemingly aligned to the standardized norms of society (Harre & van Langenhove, 1990). For example, in the following exchange, Nadim adamantly challenged a girl classmate during the scene setting for a forthcoming dramatization, as he held a different interpretation for the assigning of the roles.

Hannah: I want to be a princess. Some boys can be the princes.

Nadim: But I want to be a king!

Garrett: I know! We need knights to protect the castle! I’ll be a knight. We need more boys.

Sydney: I want to be a knight, too!

Taylor: Wait! How about if we do it like real life? You can choose to do whatever you want to. It doesn’t matter if you’re a boy or a girl.

(Field Notes, Whole Group, Rug Area, Castle Discussion, 6/3/16)

Nadim’s persistence in maintaining control continued as the dramatization unfolded, as well. Later, when the kindergartners acted out their scene in classroom castle, Nadim once again took charge of the situation. Figure 5 captures a scene from Nadim’s castle dramatization.
Figure 5. A scene from King Nadim’s castle dramatization.

As King Nadim, he gathered just the boys in the castle and instructed them with “Okay guys, we need a plan to get this dragon out!” (Classroom Castle, Group 5 Dramatization, 6/22/16). However, a group of girls, gradually gathering more energy in the background, began to improvise the scene to include tiny baby dragons that had hatched out of eggs and followed everyone around. This turn of events highly exasperated Nadim as he had already set up the performance for a battle scene with a fiery dragon, not a nurturing, motherly dragon and her fledglings. Then, when one of the knights responded to the princesses and the fairy godmother rather than him, Nadim used his power as a male as well as the ruler of the kingdom to bring the scenario back to his own script.

Fairy Godmother (Taylor): (speaking to Queen Nahla) And they think Gabriel is the dad right now! The baby dragons think Gabriel is the dad!

King 2 (Nadim): (throws his hands in the air, in exasperation) Oh my God!

Knight (Garrett): (to Queen Eliza and Queen Nahla) The dragons are coming downstairs, so -

King 2 (Nadim): (to Knight Garrett) Wait! Wait! I order you to fight that dragon!
There can be several interpretations to this particular discursive event. In one respect, Nadim’s words and actions seemed to support the male dominated culture in which he had membership. If this were the case, Nadim’s actions appeared to be purposeful in that he positioned himself in the more powerful role; then, he repositioned himself as the authority within the group of both boys and girls (Harre & van Langenhove, 1990). Nadim may have realized a king had more power than a prince, knight, queen, or princess did, so he negated the lesser role of prince and rallied for the more powerful role of king. Subsequently, he could then use this power to his advantage during the actual dramatization in order to maintain control of the unfolding enactment (Davies & Harre, 1990). Furthermore, as Nadim initially challenged the girl classmate’s roleplaying suggestion, he essentially repositioned the girl classmate into a subordinate role and thus dismissed her attempt of control over him. Likewise, he held a dominant stance during the play scene when he took back the floor from both the knight and the group of girls (Harre & van Langenhove, 1991). If this were the scenario, then Nadim’s use of language and actions within this play-based scenario revealed another layer of his personal gender perspectives; at the same time, politically charged gender biases surfaced (Gee, 1999). Alternatively, this castle in his classroom may be a place in which this particular kindergartner could practice power and control, in a world where five year olds typically do not have much power and control (Gallas, 1998).

**Multimodalities: Extending personal and social engagements.** Another possibility for Nadim’s language and action choices throughout this event might have been his desire to be a part of his small group of dramatic actors. Perhaps, he was working hard at trying to understand his world and acting upon it in a social manner, and he was using language to accomplish this
goal. In this regard, he may have been performing a variety of roles through his play and his
dramatic interpretations (Adomat, 2012b).

As an active learner, Nadim shared his understandings of the fairy tale books as well as
his perceptions of gender in concrete ways. His bodily engagements within the castle
dramatizations were both personal and social (Adomat, 2009). Using drama woven from the
literacy experiences of the fairy tale read alouds, Nadim revealed his own rich and creative
understandings of the picture books. Likewise, through the multimodal approach of
dramatization, Nadim extended his language and imagination (Adomat, 2009). Furthermore, the
multimodality connected him socially to his peers. This play space gave Nadim an entrance into
the textual worlds of fairy tale re-enactments, where “in both play and drama, the context is
fictional, but the responses are real” (Adomat, 2012a, p. 45). Through the multimodality of
dramatizations, Nadim played one character in particular – the king – yet, he tried on multiple
perspectives while doing so. For instance, he often personalized his own understandings of the
scenes through physical movements such as pumping his fist in the air for emphasis (Adomat,
2009).

The castle dramatizations were a shared experience for Nadim; each participant within
every storyline created personal images of his or her individual character’s traits, feelings, and
motivations (Adomat, 2012a). As their collective interpretations emerged, they recreated the
story together, exploring new meanings, new possibilities, and new perspectives. Nadim’s
actions built upon his peers interactions and worked toward clarifying the meaning of the
storyline for him as well as his peers (Adomat, 2009). As Nadim enacted his role in concert with
a variety of other actors, Nadim considered each character’s traits, feelings, and motivations,
including his own (Adomat, 2012a).

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It was important for Nadim to enact his own intentions and ideas through drama. Dramatization encouraged active agency, often in quick response to the previous action. The act of doing so not only moved Nadim beyond comprehension of the storyline, it also opened up spaces for him to explore consequences and significances, as well as come up with solutions to the spontaneous problems developing within the dynamic narratives (Adomat, 2012a). As King Nadim, he interpreted other’s interactions, drew inferences, and applied his knowledge and personal experiences as the scenes unfolded (Adomat, 2012b). This helped Nadim inform and transform what he already knew and understood both personally and socially (Adomat, 2012a).

Through dramatization, I believe Nadim was able to connect to our classroom read alouds at a deeper level. The gender-focused read alouds followed by the Cinderella variant read alouds provided a space for Nadim to gain multiple viewpoints involving who, where, when, and why. He could then enact as well as personalize his understandings through and with his dramatic interpretations (Adomat, 2012b). Through the castle plays, Nadim, as well as his fellow participants, not only gained greater meaning of the storyline; they also went deeper into their “critical readings” on the biased gendered norms of society (Pantaleo, 2013).

As all discourses contain counter discourses, it was important for me to remember that Nadim’s identity as a young boy within this particular kindergarten classroom opened up possibilities of differing ways for him to perform gender, positioned by his unique understandings and experiences located within his personal gender discourses (Blackburn, 2006; Blaise, 2005a, 2005b). In this specific incident, Nadim’s understandings of culture and gender contextualized socially, in response to the other classmates’ discursive practices with the multimodality of dramatization. Differing outcomes were likely to have occurred within varying contexts and with different participants. There were additional occasions across the school year
in which Nadim worked at the construction and reconstruction of his gendered identities, as revealed in the next section.

**Reading the World: Negotiations and Renegotiations for Gender**

As Nadim engaged with others in his world, he began to notice disconnections between the treatment of boys and girls, and he wondered aloud about the inconsistencies of accessible options for both boys and girls (Blackburn, 2006). For instance, Nadim was well aware that girls could be doctors because he personally visited his female pediatrician on a regular basis, yet as far as male nurses were concerned, Nadim replied “I think he can do that, too, but I don’t see them around” (*Final Picture Sort*, 6/21/16). With this statement, it appeared as if Nadim read his world within his own personal stance (Freire & Macedo, 1987) and noticed the disjuncture between opportunities for people based on gender (Blackburn, 2006). By bringing his stance to the public forum of a classroom discussion, he also worked at re-envisioning gender-based potentials for those in participation, most notably the kindergartners who had never experienced the possibility of a female doctor or male nurse.

Nadim frequently encouraged the negotiation and renegotiation of the social meaning of the world through the classroom’s communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) during read aloud sessions. Through the social contexts of the classroom and the read aloud events, Nadim became an active participant in the discursive events through his words and actions as well as his interactions with his co-participants in the discussion. The kindergartners learned from and grew through their interactions together. In this next example, the kindergartners attempted to determine if there were differences between boy and girl playthings, where it happened, and if it was even necessary to have a differentiation between the two.
Dawn: A doll isn’t a girl thing! Because in William’s Doll there was a doll.

Gabriel: I watch ninja turtles all the time, and there’s even a girl in it.

Nadim: Um, the dolls are in the girls section, and the girls only shop in the girls section.

Karen: Oh wait, so you are saying that when you go to the store, dolls are in the girls section and not in the boys?

Nadim: And, I see some girls go in the boys section.

(The Playground Problem Read Aloud, 6/14/16)

When asked if they would buy dolls if the dolls were in the boys section, the boys realized some of them do have dolls and choose to play with them.

Gabriel: Because I have one doll for Christmas.

Nadim: Because I have Woody, and Woody’s a doll.

Vinnie: Um, because I have one at my house, and I buyed it.

Garrett: I was going to say the same thing as Gabriel. I got one from Christmas, too.

(The Playground Problem Read Aloud, 6/14/16)

Through this verbal exchange, Nadim first voiced his realization that society has contradictory roles and expectations according to gender; he brought up the real issue of boys and girls not only having separate toy departments, but also different toy options. His public vocalization of differing treatment might be his way to call attention initially to oppressive binary gender standards located within society (Blackburn, 2006). Then, within their classroom community, Nadim and his peers continued to discuss dolls, who had access to them, and who played with them. Essentially, the kindergartners embarked on the beginnings of social and
cultural production (Lave & Wenger, 1991). A different way to envision gender standards for boys and girls occurred through this specific group of kindergartners “producing, mediating, and confirming the mutual ideological elements that emerge(d) from and reaffirm(ed) their daily lived experiences” (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p.142). In this regard, I believe Nadim’s interpretation of his social world seemed to be an act of agency, one in which attempted to re-envision his world rather than reproduce the inequities of society, as he and his young colleagues took notice of availabilities to them as boys and girls.

**Transformations of texts and self.** From the beginning of kindergarten, Nadim was an advocate for worthy causes and typically stood up for those in need. He believed it was important for us to understand differences so we could have “love for ourself and love for our sisters” (*It’s Okay to be Different* Read Aloud, 6/1/16). Likewise, he believed in individual and personal choice because “it’s our own feelings and our own brains” (*The Playground Problem* Read Aloud, 6/14/16).

As Nadim participated in the read alouds, he also co-created the text (Rosenblatt, 1994). The actual act of reading, or in his case listening to a read aloud, essentially transformed him; yet, it not only changed who he was, it also led the others who were involved in the read aloud and discussions to new conceptualizations. The act of reading for Nadim was not used exclusively for the inclusion of new knowledge or experiences; rather, it also embraced the re-interpretation of his past experiences and expanded the present as well as his future understandings (Sumara, 1996). Furthermore, our focus on reading texts critically set the stage for future social action to occur in the larger world (Clarke & Whitney, 2009; Vasquez, 2014, 2017).
Within this specific kindergarten classroom, Nadim and his peers regularly participated in distinct activities and norms that supported their development as a community of learners, built positive classroom relationships, sought multiple perspectives, and strengthened their literate and social identities. Awareness of social justices and inequities were frequent conversations of topic, and acts of agency were encouraged as there was an emphasis on the social as well as academic (Au & Raphael, 2000). Throughout the school year, our overarching theme focused on “Who am I?” and “How can I make a difference in the world?” Nadim had a strong sense of self and others, and was a proactive problem solver, as can be noted in this final example.

Karen: What could have Prince Cinders done instead to solve his own problem?

(pause) What do you think, Nadim?

Nadim: He should have said to his brothers, I don’t care if you’re better than me. I am myself. (Prince Cinders Discussion, 4/20/16)

Nadim’s daily lived-experiences supported, constructed, and extended his learning (Vygotsky, 1978); likewise, the socially situated learning within our classroom community encouraged the co-production of his growing knowledge through his practice as well as encouraged agentive actions (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Supporting and building off Nadims’ experiences in home, school, and community provided him with a multitude of opportunities to engage in highly interactive and productive roles in which differing perspectives were mediated and negotiated amongst himself and his peers. It is within these spaces that Nadim and his co-participants acquired new knowledge and skills, and transformation of social meaning occurred through their enactments (Au & Raphael, 2000).
One of the major points that stood out for me as I went deeper into the writing of this chapter is that young children believe what they see. Nadim helped me to understand this as “I saw…” was a recurrent statement for him. When Nadim saw something exist in a real world way, for instance women doctors and boys playing with dolls, he accepted it as truth, regardless of the dominate viewpoint. I believe this to be an important take-away of this particular chapter. Children need to see more than the dominate discourse in their worlds. They need to see real life examples of women and girls with a wider scope of roles, actions, feelings, and clothing that differ from the expected norms; they need to see men and boys who stretch past the predictable masculine standards in society. It is also essential that children see people who do not always fit neatly into gendered categories. There is more than one way to be and do gender, and I believe our society would benefit from a more inclusive mindset.

Through this research, I learned Nadim was a young child who frequently brought his personal readings of the world (Freire & Macedo, 1987) into the classroom. His “perspectives, background, beliefs, and language shape the way the world is read, and in turn, the way the world is read shapes the meaning” (Au & Raphael, 2000, p. 178); Nadim brought this to the text each and every time. This meant, as Nadim noted instances of gender discrepancies and inequities in real life, he carried his thoughts back to the classroom, filtered through his own unique experiences and viewpoints; then, he and his peers negotiated new meanings of their worldviews through their discourse (Lave & Wenger, 1991). As these specific kindergartners continue to negotiate and renegotiate their understandings, their discourse and actions hold the propensity to produce change in society rather than reproduce the dominant discourse.
(Fairclough, 1992). Given the opportunity, their acts of urgency and agency can and will make a difference in their world.

Yet, not only do children need to see real life examples of gender diversity and inclusivity, they also need to see this in the books they read. Nadim’s love of read alouds and active participation in book discussions revealed an empathetic and tolerant five year-old who seemed to accept diversity. His language, actions, and interactions are reminders of the importance of sharing a wide variety of books, filled with examples of strong people who break the molds of the heteronormativity. For Nadim, texts became the windows and mirrors of his world (Sims Bishop, 1990), as he used the contexts to look out into his world to find his potential and then reflect back on the multiple possibilities for himself and others. Therefore, I understand this research to support work that puts books into the hands of all students, including kindergartners, which will provide the windows and mirrors to their outside worlds. The more gender diversity and inclusivity they see in books, the more likely they will believe in and connect with a wider definition of gender roles, behaviors, and expectations for their in-school as well as out-of-school lives.

My work with Nadim reminded me to continue to build my curriculum, especially the texts that we read and discuss critically, from cultural understandings and knowledge of my students (Vasquez, 2014, 2017). From a critical literacy perspective, I realize that I am building the social identities as well as the literate identities of my kindergartners. As co-participants and co-producers of knowledge (Lave & Wenger, 1991) in this particular kindergarten classroom, we seek to ask ourselves – Who am I as a reader? Who am I as a writer? What am I passionate about, and what purposeful acts of literacy can I use to make a difference in the world? Nadim’s
insightful comments during critical literacy read alouds and discussions often prompted us to rethink the ways of the society, setting the stage for future acts of agency (Vasquez, 2014, 2017).

Through multimodalities such as dramatization, I believe Nadim moved from surface level understanding of the characters within his picture books to deeper layers of meaning regarding feelings, motivations, and traits (Adomat, 2012a). Just as gender is complex, the storylines of books and characters are complex and multi-layered as well. Drama provided Nadim with many possibilities to interact with and through multiple perspectives according to the participants and contexts; this essentially served as practice for his real life experiences (Adomat, 2009, 2012a, 2012b).

Nadim also affirmed for me how important talk and language are to our learning. As an active participant in classroom discussions, Nadim brought richness to our discussions; he often viewed the experiences with a critical lens. While “we all carry worlds in our heads, and those worlds are decidedly different” (Delpit, 2006, p.xxiv), Nadim openly questioned and worked at disrupting the worldviews of the hegemonic culture such as when he wondered why there were separate toy sections and options for girls and boys. His words helped all of us in the kindergarten classroom to view our experiences in more diverse and accepting ways; his wonderings inspired us to question more of our surroundings.

Finally, these findings showed Nadim’s understandings of gender as being complex (Blaise, 2005b, 2014). Therefore, it remains critical for me, as a classroom teacher, to stay open to the fluidity of gender. There is never one-way to be and do. Discursive events within the kindergarten classroom contextualized the ways Nadim enacted his gender understanding (Wohlwend, 2009, 2011, 2012). For Nadim, his gender perception shifted according to the discursive event, with a more narrowed viewpoint revealed during unstructured playtime and
dramatization (Wohlwend, 2008). Gender identities become shaped and enacted according to each person’s social, cultural, and historical experiences (Blackburn, 2006; Blaise, 2005b, 2014), and Nadim’s interactions across people, places, and events reinforced this for me.

The next chapter explores my instructional decisions and language use as the kindergarten teacher in this practitioner research study. Through transparency of practice, I explore teaching spaces in which subliminal reinforcement and purposeful disruption of gender biases occur.
CHAPTER 7

A Reflection on Practice:
Creating Spaces of Possibilities

In this chapter, I shift focus to my teaching practice to answer my first research question, determining the ways in which I explore my understandings of gender across the school year. This chapter is an attempt to locate intentional and unintentional places in my instructional decision-making and practices that may disrupt or support gender biases within the classroom setting. As an early childhood educator, I listen to and watch my young students carefully and closely, and then I make instructional moves according to their interests, strengths, and areas which would benefit from additional support. By making my teaching practices transparent, I believe I will strengthen the areas which enhance my students’ literate and gendered identities, and therefore improve their life chances (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). Furthermore, I seek to add to the existing research in the field of literacy regarding young children, gender, and educational practices.

Enculturated Social and Cultural Gender Practices

As I reflect upon myself, there is no denying that I am a bi-product of society’s conditioning, apprenticed through years of acceptable gender roles and expectations in both home and school. In looking back through the years, I also realize that at the beginning of my teaching journey, I taught my students in the same traditional ways in which instruction occurred for me. Through repeated exposure to societal discourse and discursive events in my schooling across the years, I was enculturated into the norms of schooling and instructional practices. Yet, as I grew as a woman and a teacher, I became more aware of the social inequities in both culture and the school system. As I continue to think deeper on the role I may play in sustaining this power (dis)equilibrium, I find this study prompted several shifts in my thinking.
Gendered Concepts: Society to School

One specific instance that caused me to reflect deeper on my instructional decisions occurred in the fall of 2015, after the kindergarten students learned how to sort pictures according to specific attributes such as color, size, shape, and living or non-living. This daily sorting practice supported the district-wide word study program in which the students eventually organized a variety of words according to specific word patterns. I simultaneously used this attribute sorting practice to gain information regarding their understandings of gender for this research study, as the kindergartners also sorted pictures of objects according to the gender categories of “girl,” “boy,” and “girls and boys.” The picture sorts contained items such as clothing, colors, activities, traits, and occupations.

To begin the gender sort, the kindergartners chose a piece of colored construction paper on which to sort and glue their pictures. Together, we folded the paper into thirds; next, we used a black crayon to make the folded lines darker on our papers, thus delineating three distinct sections in which to sort our pictures. We carefully labeled the three columns with “girls,” “boys,” and “both girls and boys.” The kindergartners cut out the various pictures, and then glued the pictures into one of the three categories they felt was an appropriate place according to gender. After the completion of the gender sort, I asked each student individually to explain why she or he sorted the pictures as such. My intent of this activity was to begin to identify the kindergartners’ beliefs as to what they thought boys and girls can and cannot wear, do, or become.

It was not until I sat with my dissertation committee members a month later that I realized I had given the kindergartners the gendered categories for sorting, preconceived according to the gender norms enforced by society. I did not even think of opening up the
opportunity for the young children to formulate their own categories in alignment with their own thoughts and gender perceptions. Through this subconscious action on my part, then, I essentially reinforced the enculturated gender norms of society within school.

In reflection of this initial gender sort experience, I now realize I had situated myself within the institution of school yet also linked the activity to the established gendered binaries of society. In our culture, heteronormativity is the norm. The order and the structure of gender relations (Blaise, 2014; Villaverde, 2008) regulate acceptable gender patterns through the power of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1996). Hegemonic masculinity, considered one practice of many masculinities within a culture, is generally the more honored form. It often conjures up a picture in the mind of “the male role” (Connell, 1996, p. 209), which, in retrospect, is exactly what I asked my kindergartners to do. Thus, my naming of the gender categories was problematic because I potentially recalled narrow, static visions of society’s acceptable roles and expectations of males and females within the kindergartners’ minds. In the future, I intend to use this sorting exercise in a more open manner so my young students can express, explore, and (re)envision multiple possibilities of gender from within their own frames of understanding and drawn from their unique personal experiences.

**Silence as nuanced.** Silence around controversial subjects in schools is a frequent occurrence, and this became more apparent to me as this research study progressed. As inequities are ignored, the status quo remains present, strong, and protected (Blackburn, 2005a, 2005b). In the past, there were times as a teacher in which I remained quiet in the wake of controversial topics, including gender. In retrospect, I understand my silence on several levels: power, ignorance, and fear are but a few. However, no matter what the reason, my silence may be
interpreted as acceptance. Through my lack of words or actions, I may also enculturate my young students into the act of remaining silent and unquestioning, though.

In chapter 5, I discussed an interaction between two of my kindergartners, Sydney and Dawn. Sydney consistently bumped against the gendered norms of society for a girl; she consciously worked at rewriting and expanding the definition for girl in our classroom. Dawn, on the other hand, worked very hard at trying to get Sydney to fit into the prescribed societal definition of being a girl. At times, the two girls clashed. In the following example, Dawn confronted Sydney as they packed up to go home. After the students got into their bus lines, the following conversation took place between Sydney and Dawn:

Dawn: (leaning close to Sydney) Are you a girl?
Sydney: (stares at Dawn for a few seconds and then turns her back on Dawn)
Dawn: Sydney? Are you a girl?
Sydney: (remains silent, not looking in Dawn’s direction)
Dawn: But how will I know?
Sydney: (keeps her back to Dawn until they get onto their respective buses)

(Field Notes, 1/13/16)

As I watched this interaction unfold, I had to make a spontaneous decision: at that particular point in time, was my role going to be that of researcher, to listen in and gain more awareness of Sydney and Dawns’ understandings of gender? Or, was my role primarily going to be that of teacher, responsible for creating an accepting, inclusive classroom environment, and thus intervening in the conversation? Could I do both – gain a deeper understanding of Sydney and Dawn as researcher and teacher? I was unsure of how to do this, and I was more fearful of unintentionally leading the research than I was of bringing up a gender-focused conversation
with five year olds. Therefore, I remained quiet. As I look back on the decision, I realize I had wondered about Sydney’s decision to remain silent, and yet I did not acknowledge nor question my own choice of silence (Field Notes, 1/13/16).

This was not the only instance in which I chose silence, however. As mentioned previously, I needed to get permission for the books I wished to read for this research study. I brought a booklist and a stack of books when I met with an administrator. The principal listened to my plans and asked to borrow the books she was unfamiliar with so she could read them. Upon return of the reading material, she provided me with a list of the books and her comments next to each title. For instance, she considered *Little Kunoichi the Ninja Girl* (Ishida, 2015) to focus on perseverance and practice; *Rosie Revere, Engineer* (Beatty, 2013) also focused on perseverance. Both of the main characters in these two books were hard-working girls, each representing a more traditional male role; Little Kunoichi practiced repeatedly until she became a ninja fighter, whereas Rosie Revere persevered at designing and building a contraption until it worked correctly. On the booklist, the book titled *Morris Micklewhite and the Tangerine Dress* (Baldacchino, 2014) had a question mark placed next it with a verbal request to explain more. I clarified I saw a place for the story within our classroom read alouds because I had noted previous students’ comments across the years regarding boys wearing dresses during pretend play. My principal understood this particular book to be “gender related”, as well; her hesitation to use it as a read aloud in my kindergarten class was largely due to the age of my students as well as probable parent pushback due to the gender nonconformity theme (Field Notes, 1/14/16).

Rather than pushing back on my principal’s decision, I consciously opted to remain silent. In this specific instance, I was a researcher studying gender perceptions with five year olds; yet, I was also a teacher of young children representing the school district. I was mindful of
that. It was important I respect my educational partnership as well as my research partnership involving this study. I do know my principal was supportive of my dissertation work. My principal understood and agreed with the need to move toward a more just and equal society; diversity and acceptance were important focal points for her, as well. Her reasoning was, as administrator of a primary school she had to consider all stakeholders’ viewpoints such as parents, higher-level administration, and Board of Education members. They were all key voices within the school district. Historically, gender identity and nonconformity have not been frequent conversations at the elementary level, and the topic is controversial to many.

Looking back on these experiences now, I wish I had chosen to enter into the gender-focused conversations at a deeper level in each instance, both with the two girls as well as with my administrator. Five days after the gender-focused text approval conversation occurred with my principal, I was still mentally pondering the decision to leave out a few of the read alouds such as *Morris Micklewhite and the Tangerine Dress* (Field Notes, 1/19/16). My early childhood teaching experience has made me aware of young children who have experienced times in their lives in which either another person or themselves have tried on a variety of ways of being and doing gender. This research study reminds me that gender is dynamic, fluid, and contextualized with others as well as across experiences. Furthermore, I believe the critical reading of gender-focused books holds a place open for students to become more familiar with the multiple perspectives of being and doing gender. Through books, rich and enriching discussions occur; conversations that emerge through social justice books open the doors for diversity and acceptance. In my opinion, to ignore this conversation at the early childhood level perpetuates the continuation of stereotypes and inequities. To me, this does not mean gender nonconforming books are the only books I would read to my kindergartners; rather, it means I would appreciate
the unfettered opportunity to read books that represent all people so that the barriers of stereotypes can be broken down, and all people are valued and accepted for who they are (Evans, Gilbert, & Doyle, 2017).

Yet, does my immediate silence in these two specific examples necessarily equate to acceptance? In these two personal cases, I can honestly say no, it does not. I understand silence as nuanced. For me, my silence in each of these cases was a slowing down, a (re)evaluation of the situation at hand, and a deeper, more thoughtful response in subsequent interactions. I consider my silence in each of these cases as active listening, learning more and deeper about the contexts and people around me. As a reflective practitioner, I immediately began to focus on my next steps of inclusivity within my future instructional practices, text choices, and questions for my kindergarten students.

**It Does Matter: Resisting and Interfering with Past Practice**

In addition to silently accepting gender inequities without recourse or pushback, the words we choose and how we say them perpetuates the inequalities amongst people, as well (Johnston, 2004). Gender is one of the many socially created explanations used to justify societal differences. Similar to race and culture in one regard, individuals use gender to know and understand how people in society are grouped together (Doucet & Keys Adair, 2013). Adults and children alike freely use the terms girls and boys, women and men, or female and male as identifiers to group sets of people according to gender differences. This occurs in schools, as well. For instance, teachers frequently ask students to line up into separate boys and girls lines; in addition, teachers often address the class as “boys and girls”. Through children’s experiences of the world around them, they reach conclusions about groups of people whether or not we as adults explicitly talk to them about it. Children not only notice the ways in which people are
categorized, they also begin to recognize how certain groups of people are more or less important than other groups (Swindler Boutte, Lopez-Robertson, & Powers-Costello, 2011; Doucet & Keys Adair, 2013).

One such way the marginalization of people became apparent in my classroom occurred in the words written by a kindergartner during a reader’s response activity. During the winter months of 2016, the class had critically analyzed a series of read alouds involving social justice themes such as race, socio-economic status, and gender (Vasquez, 2014, 2017). During the whole group discussions, we talked about the importance of acceptance as well as the similarities and differences of people. After we read and discussed each book, the books along with coordinating reader’s response journals were placed in a big basket on one of the bookshelves. Throughout the next few months, children revisited the books independently and then wrote their interpretations within the journal.

While reading the children’s responses one afternoon in April 2016, I discovered a comment from one of the students. His thoughts were the first comment scribed at the top of page 2 in one of the journals. The writing stood out to me because, at that point, it was the only comment on that particular page; yet, it also stood out to me as a stark reminder of the words I had used repeatedly with the kindergartners. In careful kindergarten script, Garrett wrote - it dosit madr if you are black/It doesn’t matter if you are black (Amazing Grace Thoughts, 4/5/16). Figure 6 represents his written thoughts. Garrett’s words startled me and caused me to reflect back on our recent conversations regarding the particular book itself as well as any past discussions involving race. I could not understand why Garrett would think somebody did not matter because of skin color. That premise went against everything we stood for and worked against as a classroom community.
I began to look back at my transcripts and artifacts for answers. It was then that I realized the problem originated with me. It became apparent to me that I was using a colorblind approach in my classroom practices as we talked about race (Swindler Boutte, Lopez-Robertson, & Powers-Costello, 2011) as well as socio-economic status and gender. In this specific instance, I had steered our conversations with the sentiment that it does not matter what color skin you have, we are all the same inside. In Garrett’s condensed version, I heard my own words reverberated: *it doesn’t matter if you are black* or white, we are all the same inside.

As I re-read transcripts throughout our winter classroom study of social inequities involving race, socio-economic status and gender, I discovered numerous other instances where my choice of the words *it doesn’t matter* were a disservice, and I now understood this to be a
pattern in my instructional practices. For instance, a revisit to a gender based example used earlier in chapter 5 found Taylor exclaiming to her classmates, “Wait! How about if we do it like real life? You can choose to do whatever you want to. *It doesn’t matter if you’re a boy or a girl* [emphasis added]” (*Field Notes, Whole Group, Rug Area, Castle Discussion, 6/3/16*). My words had stuck with my students, and the words had become their own.

In an effort to erase biased language choices from my vocabulary, I turned to a critical friend who graciously had agreed to review my research writing (McKeown & Diboll, 2011). Her feedback as a trusted colleague was invaluable to me, as she used her own personal and professional interpretations and perspectives to nudge my perceptions with thought provoking questions and observations. The conversations that occurred after her review of each data set provided me with numerous opportunities to reflect on my instructional practices within context, by connecting research to practice; thus, a “cycle of inquiry, reflection, and action” (McKeown & Diboll, 2011, p. 19) developed. Through her “hard feedback” (McKeown & Diboll, 2011, p. 17), intentionally meant to challenge and raise concerns in a supportive manner, it was determined at that point in time a more open, respectful, and inviting statement should be *it’s okay to be (different)* rather than *it doesn’t matter* (*Critical Friends Feedback, Data Set 2, 5/16*).

My next step was to apologize to the kindergartners for using hurtful words such as *it doesn’t matter* when talking about people’s identities. By lumping all people into one category or another and emphasizing the similarities, I realized that I no longer honored the differences. This was problematic on numerous levels. Through my words, I continued to reinforce the prejudices of society. Gender identities, albeit all identities, are an integral part of who people are and who they see themselves as in the world; therefore, even though my actions were not intentional or overt, they were damaging all the same. Additionally, as the kindergartners heard biased
messages such as this repeatedly and from an early age, the internalization of their understandings could in fact provide the foundation for beliefs later on in their adult lives (Swindler Boutte, Lopez-Robertson, Powers-Costello, 2011).

By consistently using the wording of “it doesn’t matter if you’re (a girl or boy or black or white or rich or poor)” in front of the young children in my class, I ultimately had sent the message that whatever group I had mentioned did not matter as much as another group. I should not nor “cannot underestimate the incredible endurance of inequitable power dynamics” (Blackburn, 2005, p. 412); therefore, it became imperative for me to change the language. As students continued to discuss gender (or racial, cultural, or socio-economic) differences by using the phrase it doesn’t matter, I began to intentionally re-voice their sentiments with “It does matter – how you look or how you feel. Instead of saying it doesn’t matter, let’s say it’s okay to be different” (It’s Okay to be Different Transcription, 6/7/16).

Time has passed since this experience; yet, collegial discussions between my critical friend and I regarding inclusive stances have continued on, as we have since realized that it’s okay also carries with it a polarizing effect. As professionals, we continue to debate and actively look for terms that are more inclusive for our students and us within our classroom settings.

**Intentionality: Across Time and Curriculum**

In a purposeful instructional move to hold a place in my classroom for critically important social issues, I felt I needed to layer texts across time and the curriculum (Labadie, Wetzel, & Rogers, 2012), not just through the Cinderella read alouds. To support this framework as a classroom community of learners, we also read picture books that were not fairy tale related. I intentionally sought out books that held life-like characters and situations that did not involve magic. I did this because I wanted the kindergartners to identify actual places where they could
make powerful choices, and these acts of agency would make changes in their own worlds (Vasquez, 2014). As we critically read the books and the characters for instances of injustices and inequities, we interrogated a character’s motive and came up with alternative solutions to the situations at hand. This brainstorming and problem solving provided a practice space for eventual real life situations in which the kindergartners would need to be assertive and stand up for themselves. I wanted them to see the possibilities within themselves and not as something magical.

This was the case in the read aloud example below, in which the book characters of the first grade boys told the first grade girls they were not allowed to play soccer with them during recess. As I read the book aloud to the kindergartners, a few of the students began to vocalize their concern when they realized the athletic activity excluded the girls. In the following exchange, Dawn and Garrett each expressed an understanding of the book’s problem in that the boy characters thought the girl characters were incapable of playing sports.

Karen (reading the dialogue from book): “Hey, said Emma, may I play?”

Garrett: They say no!

Sophia: I bet they say no.

Karen: Why do you think they’re going to say no?

Dawn: Because they don’t think girls can play soccer.

Garrett: I’m thinking they’re saying “Girls can’t play soccer, only boys can play soccer!”

As I read further along in the story, Dawn revealed her dismay at the injustice placed on the first grade girls by the soccer-playing boys.

Karen: Why do you suppose she’s furious?

Vinnie: Because they’re not letting her play.
Dawn: And that’s not fair!

Eventually, the first grade boys in the book came up with a solution. However, neither the girl characters in the book nor the kindergartners in the class were happy with the suggestion. As the kindergartners shared their multiple perspectives, I realized that for the students to gain the full understanding of the gender-based issue, I needed to be more explicit in not only what the girl character said, but also how she said it. This purposeful questioning opened up a space for this specific group of kindergartners to come to their own consensus, expressing what they believed to be a more equitable solution to the situation.

Karen: Why doesn’t she want to play on a team with just boys?

Nadim: Because they were mean.

Mia: Because she wants girls to be in her team and not boys.

Sophia: Because those boys are mean to her, and she wants the girls because the girls are nice to her.

Dawn: Because the boys were saying mean things, and they didn’t want the girls on their team, so Emma didn’t want the boys on their team.

Karen: But listen to how she said this. I do not want to be on a team with just boys.

Hannah: She wants to play with boys and girls.

(The Playground Problem Read Aloud, 6/14/16)

Some consider critical literacy difficult to accomplish for a number of reasons. Maybe the topics are thought to be too sensitive or controversial. Perhaps, others may say that young children are not ready or capable of deeper thought or seeing points of view from another’s perspective. However, I believe as an early childhood educator, I am teaching my students to read more than just the words on the page. “Critical reading leads to questioning the everyday
world and challenging the assumptions” (Leland, Harste, & Clouse, 2013, p.6); it sets the stage for identity building as well as offers a vision for the ways in which people wish to be, as Hannah expressed during the following play scene:

   Hannah: No, no, no! We’re not doing this anymore, slamming by the truck! We all have to clean up, and you’re the one who made a big mess. I don’t like this! I just don’t like this!

   (Cars and Trucks Play Center, 3/15/16)

   Critical literacy intentionally disrupts the commonplace with a goal of equalizing and fairness. It gives permission to people, like Hannah, to stand up for themselves or for what they believe to be injustices.

**Disrupting the Commonplace Within Instructional Practices**

   Largely due to my growing disconnect between societal expectations and my personal understandings of gender possibilities, I have made conscious efforts throughout the years to distance myself from the biased, harmful norms of society and to take a stand against social inequities. As a feminist, literacy scholar, and teacher practitioner who purposefully focuses on social injustices, I intentionally chose to examine my instructional practices, language, and decisions through this particular dissertation research. It was, and still is, extremely important for me to recognize my personal biases within the classroom setting, as I inevitably influence the students in my classroom. Not only do I wish to minimize the negative influence that my gender biases hold within my classroom, I also seek to disrupt the ways in which my biases affect the treatment of my students (Woody, 2010).

   At this point in my social awareness journey, any biases I have may feel undeliberate to me; however, this unintentionality does not negate the harm that results from my oppressive
actions (Swindler Boutte, Lopez-Robertson, & Powers-Costello, 2011). In order to disrupt the traditional gendered binaries held tightly by society and reinforced through me, I consciously felt the need to make visible any invisible practices that continue to privilege others (Blackburn, 2005).

Through this research, I have new understandings about me as an early childhood educator. I have realized that I unconsciously act in support of the hegemonic gendered norms at times. As past enculturated practices emerge within my words and actions, I need to consciously and honestly own it; then change it. Although I have come a long way since the beginning of my teaching career, I acknowledge there is more work for me to do. In the instance of the gendered sorts, a more open inquiry into what the students themselves notice about the pictures would have brought them deeper into the conversation of gender inequities.

Likewise, decisions on my part to remain silent during student questions of gender (or racial, cultural, or socio-economic status, as well) need to be thought out carefully. Silence can mean many different things. I believe young children deserve the time and the space to work through their own thoughts, as there are many different perspectives and possibilities. I do not wish for my voice to be the first and possibly only voice heard, nor do I want the kindergartners simply to revoice my thoughts. I wish for discussions that include multiple perspectives, understandings, and questions. My purposeful silence gives time for participants, and me as well, to listen, think, learn, and grow from one another. Yet, I also do not want my silence to model for my young learners an unequivocal acceptance of society’s biases. I continue to work on finding a balance in my modeling of critically reading the word and the world (Freire & Macedo, 1987) to my young learners.
My interactions within this research also reinforced that language carries more than the meanings of the words. It carries with it cultural, historical, and political implications. The words I use daily in the classroom (re)position the kindergartners, others, and me in society in powerful ways, sometimes in a positive light and other times not. Therefore, I need to be cognizant of the ways in which I use my language to position people within and across populations. To support my growth, I continue to engage in reflective practices and actively seek feedback through ongoing dialogue with fellow colleagues.

I have recognized the power of planning intentionally and thoughtfully for young students to become aware of the social inequities present in our society. I believe literature is the key to doing so; texts open minds and offer multiple possibilities, especially when read critically. Not only did I choose to read magical fairy tales critically, I consciously chose to read books with life-like characters and situations. I wanted the kindergartners to see themselves as change-makers in their own lives. Furthermore, I understand the purpose of making critical literacy an integral, yearlong part of my kindergarten curriculum rather than a stand-alone unit. The conversation needs to start early in a student’s schooling; it needs to occur authentically and frequently throughout the entire school year; additionally, it needs to be a consistent part of every curriculum across the grade levels.

Finally, as the research study unfolded, it became important for me to acknowledge that conversations involving gender between young children occurred whether or not I planned for the discussions; therefore, I attempted to locate instances in which this happened spontaneously as well as those I had intended to occur. As an early childhood educator, I would argue that a conscious decision to ignore classroom comments and conversations that pushed against the gendered norms and expectations of society essentially equates with the continued, uncontested
acceptance of inequalities and injustices (Blackburn, 2005; Blaise, 2005a, 2005b, 2014). Rather than close my eyes or ears or turn away from uncomfortable or hard discussions with my young students, I intentionally choose to be responsive and proactive (Vasquez, 2014, 2017).
CHAPTER 8

Discussions and Implications:
The Complexities of Gender

The purpose of this study was to learn more about gender enactment within the early childhood educational setting. I studied the discursive events in my kindergarten classroom across one academic school year, noting the complexities of gender within the kindergartners and me, and looking for the ways in which our expressions of gender understandings became apparent. The premise of my research was to gain a better understanding of the gender perceptions of this specific group of kindergartners; I was interested in finding out what they knew and believed to be true regarding gender possibilities at five and six years old. As a feminist educator who has shifted her practice over time, I was also curious to see when I reverted to previous gender-biased instructional practices, especially during unplanned conversations or turns of events.

I chose case studies as a means to discover this particular group of kindergartners’ understandings of gender. Across the school year, the young students responded to gender-focused picture books as well as a series of variant Cinderella fairy tales. The structured classroom occurrences of read alouds and discussions, small focus groups, response journals, and personal narrative stories as well as the unstructured happenings within dramatizations and play centers opened up opportunities for the kindergartners to voice their thoughts regarding gender. Four students in particular expressed their knowledge of gender in ways that invited further exploration; these students formed the three case studies discussed in-depth within chapters four, five, and six.

In the first case study, Hannah and Dawn actively participated in a group of girls that mostly sustained the gendered norms of society, yet they also tried on a wider variety of roles
and expectations for girls as the year progressed. Their words and actions frequently embodied their understandings of gender, and reflected their connections to their favorite princesses through visits to Disney World, movies, books, and princess themed clothing. However, as gender-focused read alouds and discussions continued across the months, each girl began to enact gender in new ways for themselves.

The second case involved Sydney and Dawn, two girls with differing understandings of what being a girl meant to each of them. Sydney’s words and actions worked at redefining the heteronormative roles and expectations for being a girl; whereas, Dawn mostly supported the traditional definition of female. Their language, actions, and choices expressed a variety of capabilities and possibilities for girls within the classroom setting; furthermore, their interactions both informed and shaped each other’s understandings of what being a girl could look, act, and sound like.

The third case study explored the ways in which Nadim’s understandings of gender contextualized alongside his interactions with people, places, and events both in and out of school. Nadim’s gender perceptions shifted according to the discursive event, at times revealing a more traditional viewpoint such as during unstructured playtime and dramatization (Wohlwend, 2008). As Nadim brought his understandings of his out of school life into the classroom, his thoughts on gender included a range of possibilities for himself as well as his classmates. Nadim formed connections to the world as well as to the characters within books through the communities of practice in the kindergarten classroom.

In addition to case study, I engaged in practitioner research as a way to examine my instructional decisions and practices in relation to gender. I consciously chose to make visible any invisible practices. This examination of my teaching is deliberate on my part, as I desire to
improve the areas in which I shape and inform my students’ literate and gendered identities, with the goal of improving their life chances (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). Furthermore, it is important to me to think deeper about and add to the existing research in the field of literacy regarding young children, gender, and educational practices. I reviewed field notes, reflections on research events, and weekly instructional lesson plans for evidence of my instructional decisions. I also analyzed the video and audio tapes for instances in my instructional practices where gender behaviors, roles, and expectations were evident. My language choices, (re)positioning of classroom participants, and possibilities for texts provided a glimpse into my understandings of gender within my early childhood classroom.

**Gender Along a Continuum**

The case study findings of this dissertation underscore the complexity of gender, as multiple perspectives of being and doing gender emerged for each of the kindergartners. Within this particular kindergarten classroom, gender presented as a continuum rather than a static binary. In some cases, there were examples of emphasized femininity and hegemonic masculinity (Blaise 2005a, 2005b), which helped to sustain the gender binaries of society; in other instances, the kindergartners pushed against the norms. In numerous examples, gender identities presented as more fluid and contextualized through interactions with people, places, and events. In addition, the social, historical, and cultural practices of home, school, and communities were evident in the children’s words and actions (Lave & Wenger, 1991). These occurred as the kindergartners brought observations of their real life experiences into the discursive events with their peers at school. It was important to note that some of the young students leaned heavily on this; for them, when they saw something in their world, it became believable and plausible for them (Freire & Macedo, 1987; Lave & Wenger, 1991). According to
this young group of students, the possibilities for gender ranged from girls wanting to be just like Cinderella to expressing the understanding that men and boys could also wear the non-traditional gender color of pink.

The findings of this dissertation revealed the complexity of teaching practices, as well. Schools and teachers have historical, cultural, and political backgrounds (Freire & Macedo, 1987); with this in mind, I discovered I sometimes still teach as I had been taught. In this regard, occasional instances of heteronormative instructional practices surfaced. In some cases, an immediate recognition and thus shift of instruction occurred; while at other times, the revelation happened later, as I analyzed the data. Confirmation of my responsiveness to unplanned conversations occurred at times, as well. Transparency of my teaching practices was important for my personal and professional growth; therefore, collegial support through feedback was highly beneficial to me (McKeown & Diboll, 2011). It was also worthwhile for me to share my new understandings with my students. We learned and grew together as a community of learners, co-constructing the curriculum and our understandings of gender across the school year (Rowe, 2008).

**Responsive Teaching Through Critical Literacy**

As fairy tale books and movies are a mainstay in many home environments and a continual part of the traditional canon in many elementary literacy curriculums, countless children are familiar with the storylines, characters, and their actions (Leland, Harste, & Clouse, 2013; Parsons, 2004). Rather than dismiss the fairy tales as biased and stereotyped, I made a conscious decision as an early childhood educator to continue to share books such as these with my young students; my goal was to teach them how to read the words critically so they could also critically read the world (Freire & Macedo, 1987).
While I believe more than fairy tale read alouds in classrooms reinforce the hegemonic practices of society, a great number of picture books across genres also carry with them messages of biased gender roles and expectations (Mattix & Sobolak, 2014; Ryan, Patraw, & Bednar, 2013; Tempel, 2013). Therefore, in addition to fairy tale read alouds, I planned for the sharing of picture books with my kindergartners that ran counter to the heteronormative mindset readily available in many elementary classroom read alouds. To accomplish this, my students and I critically read and interrogated traditional picture books, social justice picture books focused on gender, and fairy tales with the intention of disrupting gendered norms.

Purposeful extensions of the picture book read alouds gave opportunity for the kindergartners to become one with the books characters as they worked through instances of injustices and inequities. For instance, as the kindergartners discovered marginalized characters while reading, they stepped into the shoes of the characters (Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002). As the young students interacted with the book characters in this manner, they began to problematize the ways in which they could stand up for injustices; then, the children practiced the words to use as they talked back to other characters. This action gave the kindergartners a chance to understand the character’s traits, feelings, and motivations at a deeper level. It also reinforced empathy for other people. The storybook roleplays of stepping into the shoes of characters and talking back provided the kindergartners with the words, actions, and feelings supportive to future acts of agency (Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002).

In addition to roleplaying while reading, multimodal responses such as drawings, response journals, and dramatization deepened students’ understanding of gender (Adomat, 2009, 2012a, 2012b). Conversations occurred in response to the readings through oral discussions; then, students had opportunities to make their learning more profound as they built
on each other’s thoughts. For instance, by using drama as a representation, each kindergarten participant created personalized images of the characters in his or her own mind, and then brought the characters to life through puppet shows and plays. As they acted in character together, their shared images expanded the meaning making of the literature as well as the possibilities for both the characters and themselves (Adomat, 2009).

Furthermore, my study explores the affordances of carrying out conversations involving gender across the school year rather than sporadically or as one unit of study. I consciously structured the frequency and accessibility of gender-focused read alouds in this way to support students’ understandings and changing perceptions of gender across time. Not only did we read many picture books across the school year, we consciously read books such as the fairy tales against other picture books and considered these as text sets.

In order to accomplish this, I expanded my classroom library to include more picture books with diverse and inclusive characters (Tempel, 2011). This was purposeful on my part because I desired my kindergartners to begin to realize they each held the power to be true to themselves, rather than relying on the magical powers of others. I wanted the young girls and boys in my classroom to see themselves within powerful texts, and have opportunities to imagine themselves as powerful people who make a difference in their own lives as well as the lives of others. As we read each picture book, we compared and contrasted characters’ feelings, actions, roles, and clothing; we noticed; we wondered; we connected to our real life experiences. In this particular kindergarten classroom, reading against gender-biased picture books frequently led to the interrogation of whose voices were heard, whose were silenced, who benefitted from this, and how change could occur (Labadie, Wetzel, & Rogers, 2012; Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys,
2002). Overarching questions throughout the readings were “Who am I?” and “How can I make a difference in this world?”

It was imperative for me to create spaces for both planned and spontaneous conversations regarding gender to emerge authentically. Frequently, the picture book read alouds used in this particular early childhood classroom provided the planned opportunities; whereas, the unplanned dialogue generally happened during unstructured times such as play centers and lining up to go home. Often times, I consciously chose a particular read aloud with the goal of opening up a discussion regarding the roles and expectations of the characters. Likewise, I reached for particular books in response to the young students’ impromptu observations and wonderings, for their spontaneous responses across the months in kindergarten served as a platform that furthered the inquiries into their understandings of gender.

Important to note, there were times in which I would have chosen a different read aloud to support and extend the kindergartners’ responses. For instance, dress-up clothes during play centers are included in many kindergarten classrooms; both girls and boys have the chance to reach for a dress as a clothing option during play centers. *Morris Micklewhite and the Tangerine Dress* (Baldacchino, 2014) tells the story of a young boy who routinely chooses to wear the flowy, orange dress during play centers in his classroom. From my point of view, this specific book appropriately supports and extends the kindergarten ELA curriculum (Atlas – ACSD ELA Kindergarten Launching the Workshops, Unit 1, Unit 4) as well as represents another possibility for gender and clothing expectations for young students. When I first sought permission for my research study, district administration deemed this book as too controversial for the young children in my classroom. Two years have passed; different administrators have joined the
district; and, the district has recently initiated a district-wide Equity Committee. Instructional culture, practices, and change take time.

Finally, one of our major goals as a community of learners was to learn from one another. Therefore, talk played an important role in this early childhood classroom. Many of the conversations were planned through book and topic choices; yet, the kindergartners often opened up these conversations themselves through their observations and wonderings posed during discursive events. For example, spontaneous dialogues that occurred throughout the school year provided genuine opportunities for Hannah, Dawn, Sydney, Nadim as well as their kindergarten classmates to begin to notice gender stereotypes and injustices (Blackburn, 2005; Blaise, 2014). Their comments and questions were initial attempts to uncover who held the power and who had their voices silenced. In essence, their discourse began to build the foundation for this specific group of kindergartners to consider multiple perspectives within a more globalized world (Deprez, 2010).

**Responsive Teaching to Gender Identities**

Society currently holds many dichotomous viewpoints that sort people into discreet categories. Most frequently, the binaries frame one side against the other in a biased manner. Responsive teaching to gender identities works at dismantling societal dichotomies. In schools, for instance, teachers can expand the definitions and representations of normalized gender roles and expectations within classrooms (Blackburn, 2005; Blaise, 2005a, 2005b, 2014; Butler-Wall et al., 2016; Ryan & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2018).

As an early childhood teacher who consciously chooses to be responsive and inclusive to gender identity, I consider my first step as building a caring, respectful, accepting, responsive classroom from the beginning of the school year (Butler-Wall et al., 2016). I desire to make my
I made space for critical literacy through the mindful selection of books, and then I purposefully used the books as a different way to understand the world. I introduced the critical literacy books in thoughtful ways to build deeper meaning, and I used open-ended statements to encourage students’ own thoughts, enriched from their personal experiences (Labadie, Wetzel, & Rogers, 2012). I extended the students’ thinking through prompts such as “What do you notice?”, “How do you know?”, and “Who or what is left out?” My use of intentional teacher
silence provided an opportunity for students to articulate their own thoughts, share their ideas with others, and grow from each other’s perspectives (Labadie, Wetzel, & Rogers, 2012).

Additionally, I gave students choice by way of offering more than one book or more than one way to respond, and I moved away from the single story (Adichie, 2009). In this regard, the multiple layers and perspectives of diversity became more evident; thus, students realized there was more than one possibility for people to be or do. In the case of this study, I considered single stories as those that covered one particular event or group of people in a singular fashion, essentially providing a narrowed, incomplete view of a more complex, multi-layered story (Ryan & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2018).

The results of this dissertation build upon past poststructuralist feminist research and critical literacy research studies. The following sections detail this discussion, as the findings are relevant to the field of literacy and hold implications for theory, research, and practice.

**Implications for Theory**

The use of multiple theories as a framework in this research study was intentional, each theory bringing a systematic organization and structure to help explain how and why the phenomena of gender and identities functioned (Ravitch & Riggan, 2012). My goal was twofold: 1.) to study the interrelationships among gender, identities, and inequities within classroom discourse, practice, and curricula; and 2.) to further the understanding of gender and identities within the field, especially at the early childhood level. Using poststructuralist feminist theory, I sought to examine the power of the more globalized, normative gender binaries of society coupled with existing gender practices localized at the classroom level (Blackburn, 2005, 2006; Blaise, 2005; Villaverde, 2008). The lens of critical literacy theory framed the ways in which school and society tie together; it also interrogated who held the power and privilege within
literate events (Au & Raphael, 2000) and texts (Harste & Vasquez, 2011). In this particular research study, I observed the ways in which the kindergartners defined gender, unique to their own experiences, in addition to the role I played in gender identity construction through my instructional decisions and language choices. Furthermore, I engaged the kindergartners in critical literacy to open up opportunities for them to review, re-envision, and re-conceptualize normalized school practices as well as to transform societal practices (Harste & Vasquez, 2011).

First, this research exemplifies the ways in which the members of this early childhood classroom participated and engaged with each other and texts to grow socially, emotionally, and academically through the lenses of poststructuralist feminist and critical literacy theories. The setting up of communities of practice was paramount to our classroom environment, as this established the expectations for inquiry into our social, emotional, and academic learning. The kindergartners grew from their social relationships with one another, as learning is socially situated and recursive (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Negotiations and re-negotiations of meaning transpired as the students engaged in dynamic experiences across the school year. Therefore, the establishing of a community of practice within this research study provided opportunities to see the possibilities for poststructuralist feminist and critical literacy theories, and thus offers insight to the growing understanding of the two theoretical frameworks within the fields of literacy, gender, and education. Furthermore, as existing research involving communities of practice has mainly studied older students (Berman & White, 2013; Compton-Lilly, 2014; Dutro, 2001/2002; Moeller, 2011), this particular research adds to the current communities of practice research at the early childhood level (Blaise, 2005a; Vasquez, 2014; Wohlwend, 2009, 2011, 2012).

Second, the process of talking back provided practice for the kindergarten students in critically reading the word as well as the world (Freire & Macedo, 1987). By stepping into the
shoes of book characters, and then talking back to other book characters that had treated them unfairly, the students became more empathetic to the feelings and actions of the characters who been treated unjustly. This provided a means to discuss a variety of interpretations to the social (in)justices, and then a space to determine alternate possibilities (Adomat, 2009). The more exposure the kindergartners had with this critical literacy practice throughout the school year, the more natural it became, and the more likely they would be to continue to exercise agency and advocacy for a more just and equal society in their own futures. Young children come to us knowledgeable and ready; they are willing and able to act as agents of change in response to the social issues found within texts and their lived experiences. Therefore, this research suggests the conscious opening up of social injustices through critical literacy in the classroom, including the early childhood level. The findings emphasize the importance of creating spaces for critical conversations such as gender roles and expectations to emerge, as well as across multi-modalities such as interactive read alouds, discussions, response journals, roleplaying, and dramatic play. Within these spaces lie opportunities for students to come away with a more profound understanding of the associations, implications, and advocacy of people through the feelings, traits, motivations, and problem solving of the characters (Adomat, 2012a, 2012b).

Third, responsively teaching with gender identities in mind may mean causing “gender trouble” in schools (Blackburn, 2006, p. 411). This means being open and accepting to varying interpretations of gender, and acknowledging there is no one way to be and do gender (Blackburn, 2005, Blaise, 2005a, 2005b, 2014; Butler-Wall et al., 2016; Ryan & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2018). As educators, the recognition of gender prejudices and reflection on how these prejudices affect instructional practices (Butler-Wall et al., 2016) causes “gender trouble”
(Blackburn, 2005, p. 411); becoming educated on the social issues of gender and identity building does, as well.

This research study has shown me that as a classroom teacher, I can work toward social change in my classroom (Blackburn, 2005; Blaise, 2005a, 2005b, 2014; Butler-Wall et al., 2016; Ryan & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2018). I have learned it is possible to engage in discussions of gender from the beginning of students’ school careers (Blackburn, 2005; Rice, 2002). I have seen firsthand how young students can use their own lived experiences to explore a range of gender understandings. Therefore, this research indicates a need to leave open spaces and possibilities for critical discussions to occur within the classroom setting, beginning at the early childhood level. Likewise, this research supports the reading across genres as a means to explore multiple perspectives, as doing so may serve to empower the identity construction of young students within the classroom as well as their outside worlds (Vasquez, 2014, 2017).

Fourth, this research has shown me it is conceivable for young students to explore complex issues such as gender inequities through literature (Mattix & Sobolak, 2014). Children themselves show their understandings of gender along a continuum; this specific research study is one such supportive example of gender being fluid, dynamic, contextualized alongside others and experiences, and differentiated amongst individuals within an early childhood classroom. The findings of this research study indicate the intentional reading of diverse, inclusive books alongside traditional canon as one way to interrogate existing heteronormative roles and expectations through a critical literacy stance (Parsons, 2004). Through the critical reading of literature, students begin to recognize the inequities within the pages as well as within their own lives, thus providing advocacy opportunities for a more just and equal society for themselves as well as others (Ryan & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2018).
Implications for Research

The findings of this research study could inform future research in early childhood education, gender, and practitioner research. The reflection on the events that took place within this kindergarten classroom holds promise as to the knowledge, experiences, and understandings of all the participants, including the teacher (Gee, 1999). Consideration to the broad range of definitions for gender as well as the recursive manner of re(defining) gender across people, places such as within schools, and occurrences including discursive classroom events encourages further questioning in future research studies.

The findings of this study affirmed actions, reactions, and language as not being linear; rather, each was a sequence of meaningful actions (Bloome et al., 2008). As each of us within this particular research study entered into an event during the school day, we acted and reacted to each other; yet, it was not only the immediate interaction that we responded (Bloome et al., 2008). Our actions and words reflected our past, present, and even future reactions, otherwise known as consequences, within that specific context. With this in mind, the field would benefit from continued research that makes the invisibility of instructional practices more visible through the frame of practitioner research. As teachers plan for and engage with the students, negotiations are made visible and provide evidence to “a working consensus about what is happening, about how significance and meaning are assigned to various actions, and what norms for interpreting, talking, acting, thinking, believing, evaluating, and feeling are shared and expected” (Bloome et al., 2008, p. 10). In this regard, the non-linear nature of knowledge production and the complexities as well as contradictions within teachers and individual students becomes more transparent; and, this holds a space for new understandings, deeper considerations, and future possibilities for the fields of literacy, gender, and education.
Additionally, the results of this study reflect the duality of the roles of researcher and teacher practitioner. This practitioner research intentionally revealed the emic role I played as the classroom teacher. This is significantly different when compared to the numerous gender, identity, and classroom research studies explored and reviewed (Blaise, 2005a, 2005b; Dutro, 2001/2002; Wohlwend, 2009, 2011, 2012); mainly, these findings evolved from the etic perspective of outside researchers who documented learning experiences within another’s classroom environment. Further research studies from the emic lens of practitioner research would add value and informative knowledge to the field. For instance, practitioner research studies that reflect on the responsive positions personally taken up as teacher, the ways in which learners are positioned in classrooms (Glazier, 2005; Wortham, 2003), and the spaces in which gender is a placeholder (Tempel, 2011) would add insight for further growth and understanding. Likewise, analyzing the words and actions used by a teacher within the classroom setting (Cazden, 2001; Vander Zanden & Wohlwend, 2011) would help to determine the ways in which gender (in)equities occur in schools (Tempel, 2011).

The local knowledge acquired about me as a teacher and how I interacted within my school as a practitioner deepened my own understandings of myself as an educator of young children. Yet, the gender conversations that transpired from this research study may also inspire other practitioner researchers to study their own classrooms (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009) with regard to gender as well as gender roles and expectations across society. The field would benefit from new understandings as to the ways in which teachers create safe and inclusive classroom environments for all, including gender non-conforming students (Ryan & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2018); likewise, continued research studying the critical review of gender-focused books,
materials, and instructional practices and decision making would extend gender understandings within the field, as well.

The results of this study also underscore the importance of studying the words and actions of people and communities. In this particular study, the analysis of the discursive classroom events helped to determine the kindergartners’ understandings of gender through the situations in which they (re)positioned themselves or were positioned by other students and me (Harre & van Langenhove, 1991). As the kindergartners and I positioned or repositioned each other and ourselves, we enacted according to our positions and in relation to each particular event. The field would garner strength and new knowledge from continued research on discursive practices that illustrate the framing of people as both speakers and hearers, while expounding on the ways in which new positions become negotiated (Davies & Harre, 1990). As this occurs, language can be “seen” in a more contextualized manner (Bloome et al., 2008).

Research studies such as this would provide opportunities to consider how the language used in the classroom setting enacts social and cultural perspectives, helps to form identities, and is inherently political (Gee, 1999). This research would also indicate the ways social change utilizes language (Fairclough, 1992). Building on past research (Blaise, 2005a, 2005b; Wohlwend, 2009, 2011, 2012), future studies could entail the ways in which classroom participants advocate for (re)positions with the classroom environment according to societal and/or classroom gender biases.

Finally, I believe this research adds to the practitioner research and gender research, as I reflected on the actions, interactions, language, environment, accessible materials, and curriculum choices within my classroom through a critical lens of gender (in)equities. In conjunction, I documented the choices the kindergartners made concerning the activities,
manners of responses, and materials and spaces they used to explore their perceptions of gender (Strong-Wilson & Ellis, 2007). The kindergartners were thoughtful, responsive, and reflective in their discussions and responses to the gender-focused picture books. There remains a need for research on the building of both the literate and gendered identities of elementary students, including at the early childhood level (Vasquez, 2014, 2017). For, without this conscious level of awareness, the dominant discourse remains unchallenged at the school level (Vander Zanden & Wohlwend, 2011). Prospective research might focus on going beyond the deconstructing and re-imagining of texts to include the advocacy to shift real world gender inequities (Vasquez, 2017).

**Implications for Practice**

Fairy tales remain a staple in the elementary curriculum (Coyne, Linder, Rasmussen, Nelson & Birbeck, 2016; Marshall, 2004). The books, while enjoyable to read, contain images and messages of heteronormative roles and expectations for males and females (Davies, 2003; Marshall, 2004; Parsons, 2004). This presents a problem as the tales play an influential role in the potential shaping of children’s gendered identities (Bettleheim, 1975; Davies, 2003). As children read these popular books, the enculturation of the dominant patriarchal practices become further engrained in both society and schools (Parsons, 2004). Coupled with read alouds of picture books that predominantly support the dominant discourse, heteronormative practices remain firmly in place in classrooms, thus leading to the reinforcement of static, biased gender norms rather than the acceptance of more fluid, diverse definitions of gender (Davies, 2003; Ryan & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2018; Tempel, 2011). A result of this framing is the varied educational opportunities made available to girls and boys, as well as those who do not fit neatly into these narrow gendered categories (Masuchika Boldt, 2002; Ryan, Patraw, & Bednar, 2013;
Tempel, 2011). Social inequities barricade students from equal and just literacy opportunities, which in turn limit real world possibilities (Tan, Barton, Kang, & O’Neill, 2013).

First, the results of this study suggest a need for educators to look more closely at the texts read to students and the purposes for choosing texts. Fairy tale read alouds in classrooms can reinforce the hegemonic practices of society; yet, a great number of picture books across genres also continue to reinforce societal messages of biased gender roles and expectations. Therefore, it becomes imperative for teachers to plan for read alouds and book discussions of picture books, in addition to fairy tale read alouds, that run counter to the normative gender mindset. To accomplish this, students and teachers should critically read and interrogate traditional picture books, social justice picture books focused on gender, and fairy tales with the intention of disrupting gendered norms. The mindful interrogation of the gender-focused picture book read alouds will give occasion for students to work through examples of injustices and inequities across genres; whereas, discussion and response spaces can support students into feelings of empathy and greater understandings of gender inequities, as well as encourage authentic acts of agency. The findings of this research advocate for the reading of multiple perspectives and possibilities, which may serve to empower young students’ construction of gender identities both within the localized setting of the classroom as well as the more globalized, wider world (Deprez, 2010).

Second, this study indicates a need to engage in discussions regarding gender across the school year rather than occasionally or as a stand-alone unit of study. A conscious, continual structuring of gender-focused books, discussions, and responses provide the frequency and accessibility of gender-focused read alouds in a way that is supportive to students’ growth of gender understandings across time. Additionally, text sets, or pairs of picture books and fairy
tales with a focus on gender, support a conscious reading of gender against each picture book to see who is treated justly and who is not. For this to occur, classroom libraries as well as school libraries should expand to include more picture books with diverse and inclusive characters. Therefore, this research suggests reading diverse, inclusive books side-by-side with traditional canon as one way to investigate the existence of heteronormative roles and expectations within a critical literacy stance (Parsons, 2004). Through the critical reading of literature, students begin to recognize the inequities for the book characters as well as within their own lives, thus supporting opportunities to advocate for a more just and equal society for themselves as well as others (Ryan & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2018).

Third, this research advocates for the importance of creating spaces and possibilities for critical discussions to occur within classrooms. Planning for gender based conversations through purposeful read alouds, discussions, questions, and response supports a recurrent reflection of gender possibilities during the literacy block. However, teachers should be poised to observe students within unstructured spaces, listening for spontaneous conversations regarding gender to emerge authentically, as well. As this research study demonstrated, unplanned dialogues involving gender happened in a variety of settings and times within the school day; play centers, dramatization, and more casual settings such as bus lines and snack time are places where children may share their understandings of the world together. As teachers listen in to these conversations, we can grow our own understandings of our students. This awareness can help us shape our literacy pedagogy, the texts we choose, and the questions we ask, in direct response to their thoughts and wonderings.

Fourth, this research advocates for the inclusion of a wider range of diverse and gender non-conformity texts within elementary classrooms, including the early childhood setting.
Above, I explored the times in which I would have preferred to read a different picture book to support and extend my kindergartners’ comments and questions; however, I am aware of books deemed too controversial for early childhood learners by administration. I see gender-focused picture books as a way to appropriately support and extend the kindergarten ELA curriculum (Atlas – ACSD ELA Kindergarten Launching the Workshops, Unit 1, Unit 4). Likewise, I appreciate books as a way to critically read and learn about social (in)justices and (in)equities, especially with regards to gender. I absolutely keep true to the contextual restrictions of my district. Yet, I intend to keep pushing against the restrictions. I realize, at times I will not be able to include all of the texts I would like; however, I can continue to move forward with some of the texts. In time, I do believe more inclusive spaces will open up. Students become empowered when they see themselves and others within diverse and inclusive books (Sims Bishop, 1990); therefore, it is up to us as their teachers to provide them with a wide variety of gender diverse and gender inclusive books.

Finally, one of the many responsibilities of today’s teachers is to teach acceptance and diversity. Literature provides a space to explore diverse cultures as well as to challenge stereotypes including gender biases. Yet, teachers are often unaware of the nontraditional gender literature available for classroom use (Doyle, Evans, & Gilbert, 2015). Furthermore, many teachers are not sure how to use books that focus on gender equity, and gender non-conformity books are an uncomfortable topic for many educators. Therefore, the findings of this study support the mentoring of classroom teachers into anti-bias and culturally responsive teaching (Doyle, Evans, & Gilbert, 2015). Literacy coaches, professional development facilitators, and preservice educators can be the catalyst and support systems to teachers in the field. The collaboration of understandings from critical literacy read aloud experiences amongst colleagues...
would serve to strengthen the creation of classroom environments for critical thinking and exploration of gender possibilities. The sharing of book lists containing titles of gender equity and non-traditional gender roles would greatly benefit teachers’ knowledge and understanding of available resources and their uses. For instance, the choosing of books that reflect equity of gender through examples of strong women and girls as leaders as well as men and boys in more nurturing roles would extend the understandings of gender along a continuum. Likewise, providing access to high quality books with a focus on gender as well as intentional instruction of how to use gender diverse books within the classroom will raise the likelihood of classroom use (Ryan, Patraw, & Bednar, 2013; Tempel, 2011). Collaborative conversations such as these can occur at faculty meetings, professional learning communities, professional development opportunities, and through undergraduate and graduate level coursework (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Perry, Henderson, & Meiers, 2012).

**Limitations**

As with any research study, there are limitations. This research is not generalizable due to sample size and demographics. The case studies within this study explored a total of four kindergarten students and one kindergarten teacher. The study examined a very small portion of one kindergarten classroom in one suburban primary school in the northeast part of the country. Additionally, the findings analyzed the unique perspectives and experiences of each of the research participants. As we all carry our own worlds in our heads, each of us is unlike the others (Delpit, 2006).

I considered this research study as a fact-finding mission, a way to discover what one specific group of young learners knew and understood about gender, and the choices I made in my instructional decisions. The framing of this study was not an intervention to shift biased
gender stereotypes within my classroom setting. In other words, I did not intentionally seek out students or events that upheld gender biases and then attempt to change the outcome. Rather, I tried to remain open to gender possibilities in my teaching practices and curricula decisions, and then teach in response to the kindergartners’ understandings of gender.

**Conclusion**

For Hannah, Dawn, Sydney, and Nadim, these four young students were aware of what girls and boys can and cannot do. They regularly voiced their understandings during both planned and spontaneous events. They actively connected their outside world within their school experiences, and concretized what they saw, heard, and did. For some of the students, once they saw it, they believed it to be true. For instance, Hannah and Dawn connected their literate knowledge of princesses to the literal meeting of the real life princess in Disney World; whereas, Nadim leaned on his real life images of a female doctor and a man wearing pink to question the traditional norms of society regarding separate and different toy options for boys and girls.

Throughout our picture book exploration of gender roles and expectations, I reminded my young students to ask themselves – “Who am I?” and “How can I make a difference in the world?” Thus, their reading of the world inspired them to read the word critically within the picture book read alouds, just as their reading of word informed their critical readings of the world (Freire & Macedo, 1987).

I believe the kindergartners’ comments of “I saw …” were also reminders for me to place books into the hands of my learners that valued and honored multiple perspectives and a variety of possibilities regarding gender. The more the kindergartners saw the characters in non-traditional gender ways, the broader their definitions of gender for themselves and others became. The books became the windows, mirrors, and doors into their own world (Sims Bishop,
providing visions for a multitude of ways to be and do gender for themselves and the people around them. This practice presented the kindergartners with opportunities to be active participants in their own gender identity interpretations, constructions, and reconstructions. Therefore, I believe the girls and boys who participated in this research study may have benefitted from a wider worldview of possibilities for themselves and the agentive roles they may have acquired for a more just and democratic society (Johnston, 2012; Vasquez, 2014).

I must also mention that my work within this study caused a deeper shift and a greater sense of urgency within my own instructional practices regarding teaching through a social justice stance. As the kindergartners and I read, discussed, and responded to texts together, I realized even more so that the questions I repeatedly had asked of them – specifically, “Who am I?” and “How can I make a difference in this world?” – applied to me just as earnestly. Through our discussions and experiences across the school year, I discovered my kindergartners had inspired me to reflect deeper on myself as an early childhood teacher as well as a contributing member of society. I feel it would be a disservice to my young learners to not interrogate our read alouds in relation to societal issues such as gender roles, behaviors, and expectations. This study reaffirmed for me the importance, possibilities, necessity, and joy of working with young advocates who take a critical stance in their books and their surrounding world.

Finally, it is my hope that this research study will encourage the educational field to both question and reconstruct the foundational assumptions and viewpoints at the early childhood level (Thornton & Goldstein, 2005). The kindergartners who participated in this research study offered honesty, integrity, curiosity, and wisdom as they discussed and responded to gender issues within texts and real world occurrences. This study, and the early childhood and gender research studies before it (Blaise, 2005; Vasquez, 2014; Wohlwend, 2009, 2011, 2012), have
been informed as well as continue to shape the comprehensive and complex understandings of gender and young children. Additional research studies involving young children, gender, and classroom practices will continue to inform socio-cultural conversations in the field regarding gender binaries and the barriers upheld to equitable literacy opportunities (Masuchika Boldt, 2002; Villaverde, 2008), starting at the early childhood level. My hope is this study inspires teachers and practitioner researchers alike to transform their instructional practices with gender in mind, as this will extend the existing gender-focused conversations in schools as well as the future possibilities of today’s children.
REFERENCES


EU Kids Online. FAQ 3: When is it best to use focus group, in-depth interviews, or observations?

http://www2.lse.ac.uk/media@lse/research/EUKidsOnline/BestPracticeGuide/FAQ03.asp


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APPENDIX A  

Parent Consent

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**UNIVERSITY AT ALBANY**  
State University of New York  
Institutional Review Board (IRB)  
Parental Permission  
For Child’s Participation in Research

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Protocol (Study) Number</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Study Title</td>
<td>Exploring Kindergartners’ Understandings of Gender</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study Principal Investigator Name</td>
<td>Karen M. Maher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study Principal Investigator Phone #</td>
<td>(845) 464-4930 (cell); (845) 452-2387 (home)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study Principal Investigator Email address</td>
<td><a href="mailto:kmaher@albany.edu">kmaher@albany.edu</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study Co-Principal Investigator Name</td>
<td>Dr. Kelly Wissman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study Co-Principal Investigator Phone #</td>
<td>(518) 442-5100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study Co-Principal Investigator Email address</td>
<td><a href="mailto:kwissman@albany.edu">kwissman@albany.edu</a></td>
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This is a parental permission form for your child’s participation in a doctoral dissertation research study. It contains important information about this study and what to expect if you permit your child to participate.

**Your child’s participation is voluntary.**

Please consider the information carefully. Feel free to discuss the study with your friends and family and to ask questions before making your decision whether or not to permit your child to participate. If you permit your child to participate, you will be asked to sign this form and will receive a copy of the form.

Please know that your child’s participation in this research study is completely voluntary. At any point in the research, your child may decline to participate and/or answer questions.

**Purpose:**

As you know, I am a kindergarten teacher at Overlook Primary School, Arlington Central School District, in Poughkeepsie, NY. I am also a doctoral student in the Literacy Teaching and Learning Department at the State University of New York at Albany. The purpose of this doctoral dissertation...
research study is to better understand the perceptions of gender through the eyes of five and six year olds. The intention is to examine how kindergartners make sense of gender and gender roles through participation in a variety of Cinderella read aloud stories. As far as this specific group of young children is concerned: What do they think girls and boys can do? What do they think are traits of girls and boys? Which subject areas do they think girls and boys can study in school? What jobs do they think that men and women can hold?

Procedures/Tasks:

Throughout the course of the 2015-2016 school year, the kindergartners will be involved in class discussions based off of our district ELA curriculum maps which involve the characters found in a wide variety of books. Through our typical classroom practice, students will be asked to respond or will spontaneously respond to the read alouds through drawing, writing, dramatization, and whole group or small group discussions. Periodically, the books will have a focus on gender roles, at which point data will be collected using the students’ responses to gender through drawing, writing, dramatizations, and whole group or small group discussions. Information will also be taken from classroom notes during regularly scheduled student-teacher reading and writing conferences as well as spur of the moment teacher generated notes. At times, interactions may be audiotaped or videotaped for eventual transcription and analysis.

Duration:

This doctoral dissertation research study will take place within the eight-month period starting from November 14, 2015 and ending on or around June 23, 2016.

Your child will always have a place to participate in regularly scheduled classroom activities such as the listening center, writing center, sight word center, or ABC center on a daily basis. Occasionally during center time, an invitation to participate in a gender based research study activity will be offered to your child. His or her participation is strictly voluntary. Your child may choose to participate in the gender based research study activity rather than the regularly scheduled center activities, or he or she may opt to work in the regular classroom activities. Likewise, your child can start with the research study activity and decide to leave the activity at any point in time to join the regularly scheduled classroom activities. Your child may say no at any time to any gender based activity that has been offered without penalty. If you or your child decides to stop participation in the study, there will be no penalty and neither you nor your child will lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If your child opts out of the research study, I will not collect data from your child.

Risks and Benefits:

There is a very minimal risk of psychosocial harm, economic harm, legal jeopardy, or risk of pain or physical injury to the participants. There is a very minimal risk of breach of confidentiality. In order to minimize the risks of confidentiality breach, all student information and documentation will be de-identified using pseudonyms prior to storage in a password protected computer and a locked file cabinet. No identifying student factors will be included in the final write up. Any presentations or publications that result from this study will never identify your child by name. The benefits to the student include a language-rich classroom environment that encourages the reading and discussing of a wide variety of books through multiple perspectives.
Confidentiality:

Efforts will be made to keep your child’s study-related information confidential. However, there may be circumstances where this information must be released. For example, personal information regarding your child’s participation in this study may be disclosed if required by state law. Also, your child’s records may be reviewed by the following groups (as applicable to the research):

- Office for Human Research Protections or other federal, state, or international regulatory agencies;
- The University at Albany Institutional Review Board or Office of Regulatory Research Compliance;
- The sponsor, if any, or agency supporting the study.

Incentives:

No incentives for participation will be provided.

Participant Rights:

You or your child may refuse to participate in this study without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

If you and your child choose to participate in the study, you may discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits. By signing this form, you do not give up any personal legal rights your child may have as a participant in this study.

Your child’s grades will not be affected for choosing not to participate and no consequences will result.

An Institutional Review Board responsible for human subjects research at the University at Albany reviewed this research project and found it to be acceptable, according to applicable state and federal regulations and University policies designed to protect the rights and welfare of participants in research.

Contacts and Questions:

For questions, concerns, or complaints about the study you may contact Karen Maher at (845) 464-4930 (cell), (845) 452-2397 (home), or Dr. Kelly Wissman at (518) 442-5100.

Research at the University Albany involving human participants is carried out under the oversight of the Institutional Review Board (IRB). This research has been reviewed and approved by the IRB. If you have any questions concerning your (child’s, parent’s, etc.) rights as a research subject or if you wish to report any concerns about the study, you may contact University at Albany Office of Regulatory & Research Compliance at 1-866-857-5459 or hrsconcerns@albany.edu
Signing the parental permission form

I have read (or someone has read to me) this form and I am aware that I am being asked to provide permission for my child to participate in a doctoral dissertation research study. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have had them answered to my satisfaction. I voluntarily agree to permit my child to participate in this study. I voluntarily agree to permit my child’s drawings and writings to be reviewed as a part of this dissertation study. I understand that findings may be shared in future presentations and/or publications. I will be given a copy of this form.

Please sign below if you are willing to have your child audio and videotaped during read alouds, book discussions, and re-enactments of the stories. You may still participate in this study if you are not willing to have these experiences recorded.

Printed name participant (child) ___________________________ Date __________

Printed name of person authorized to provide permission for participant ___________________________ Signature of person authorized to provide permission for participant ___________________________

Signature of person authorized to provide permission for review of participant’s drawing and writing ___________________________ Signature of person authorized to provide permission for audio and video taping of participant ___________________________
APPENDIX B

Child Assent

University at Albany
Assent to Participate in Research

Study Title: Exploring Kindergartners' Understanding of Gender
Researcher: Karen M. Maher
Sponsor:

- You are being asked to be in a research study. Studies are done to find better ways to treat people or to understand things better.
- This form will tell you about the study to help you decide whether or not you want to participate.
- You should ask any questions you have before making up your mind. You can think about it and discuss it with your family or friends before you decide.
- It is okay to say “No” if you don’t want to be in the study. If you say “Yes” you can change your mind and quit being in the study at any time without getting in trouble.
- If you decide you want to be in the study, an adult (usually a parent) will also need to give permission for you to be in the study.

1. What is this study about?
   *This study is about what you understand about being a girl and being a boy.*

2. What will I need to do if I am in this study? *You will listen to Cinderella stories and talk about the books. You also might want to draw a picture, write, or act out one of the stories to help show your understanding of the stories.*

3. How long will I be in the study? *We will talk about books and characters all year long; we will definitely read and talk about the Cinderella books for about six weeks in March and April.*
4. Can I stop being in the study? You may stop being in the study at any time. If you do wish to stop participating in the study, I will not use your words, drawings, writings, and plays for my study. You are always welcome to join into another center activity with another group of classmates at any time during the study.

5. What bad things might happen to me if I am in the study? I don’t think anything bad will happen to you in this study. If you ever feel uncomfortable, please talk to either me or your parents.

6. What good things might happen to me if I am in the study? I think you might learn new ways to look at things through this research study. You will also help other adults learn more about the different ways to understand what it means to be a girl and what it means to be a boy.

7. Will I be given anything for being in this study? Nothing extra will be given to you to participate in this study.

8. Who can I talk to about the study?

For questions about the study you may contact Mrs. Maher at (845) 845-8100 or Dr. Wiseman at (518) 442-5100.

IRB contact about your rights in the study or to report a complaint: Research at the University at Albany involving human participants is carried out under the oversight of the Institutional Review Board (IRB). This research has been reviewed and approved by the IRB. If you have any questions concerning your rights as a research subject or if you wish to report any concerns about the study, you may contact University at Albany Office of Regulatory & Research Compliance at 1-888-857-0459 or hso@albany.edu.
APPENDIX C

List of Gender-Focused Read Alouds


## APPENDIX D

### Annotated Bibliography

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase 1 - Social Justice Read Alouds Jan.-March 2016</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Race</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Set in Harlem in the 1950’s, this story tells of a young African American girl who dreams of becoming a prima ballerina when she grows up. The girl’s mama spends most of her savings to take her to the Metropolitan Opera House to see Miss Janet Collins, the first colored prima ballerina, dance on stage. The little girl’s hopes and dreams become even more possible in her own mind once she sees the dancer on stage.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grace, a young African American girl who loves stories of all kinds, desires to play the role of Peter Pan in her school play. Her Nana encourages Grace to do what she imagines she can do.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This picture book biography follows the life of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr from his childhood until his death. Rappaport recounts Martin’s life at a young age in which signs read “White Only”, and Martin’s parents tell him he is “as good as anyone” and “everyone can be great”. The narrative draws on King’s peaceful message that helped to change America through the Civil Rights Movement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosie has a fascination with designing and building contraptions. Her great aunt comes to visit and inspires her to build a new design. At first, Rosie sees her contraption as a failure because it does not stay airborne; yet, great aunt Rosie reminds her that from failures come successes. The back page of the book has an informative historical note explaining women’s roles during World War II.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oliver would rather paint, read, and play dress-up. He does not let the teasing from his classmates stop him from doing what he wants most to do – dance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Little Kunoichi comes from a family of warriors; however, ninja skills do not seem to come easily to Little Kunoichi. With hard work, perseverance, and a new friend, Little Kunoichi becomes everything she worked hard to become.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This picture book biography is written as a graphic novel for young children. It details the life of Amelia Earhart whose positive, can-do attitude enabled her to become the first female pilot to fly across the Atlantic Ocean.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Young Ruthie visits her Nana. Nana thinks of things to do with Ruthie such as dressing up and playing with dolls. Meanwhile, Ruthie longs to join in the fun with the neighbor child Brian who plays with trucks and cars.


The one thing that William really wants is a doll; however, his family and friends tease him and try to get to him to do other things such as play with trains or balls. Eventually, he does get a doll so that he can practice being a father.

Diversity


A conflict erupts on the beaches because the Sneetches with Stars do not want to include the Plain Belly Sneetches in their activities. It takes some time for all of the Sneetches to recognize they have been tricked by Sylvester McMonkey McBean, and to realize that they should accept each other for who they are and not discriminate against others.

Phase 2 – Cinderella Variants Read Alouds March-May 2016


This version of the Cinderella fairy tale is told from the perspective of an Irish boy named Becan whose mean stepmother and stepsisters treat him poorly. He runs away and is befriended by a magical bull. Becan rescues a princess and loses his boot in the process. The princess tries to find him by calling on all of the eligible men in the kingdom to try on the boot for size.


This version of the Cinderella fairy tale is a male parody of the original Cinderella. Prince Cinders is mistreated by his hairy brothers and is not allowed to go to the palace disco. His fairy godmother is a spoof that constantly messes up her spells. The Prince meets the princess of his dreams at the dance, and he leaves his pants behind in a mad rush to get home before midnight.


This version of Cinderella is the retelling of the classic fairy tale. Many of today’s young children are most familiar with this Cinderella story due to Walt Disney’s mass media and production. In this story, a beautiful girl named Cinderella is treated poorly by her stepmother and stepsisters. A fairy godmother helps Cinderella go the ball; there, she meets the prince of her dreams and eventually marries him.


This book is a multitude of Cinderella stories from across the world. The 17 stories, passed down for centuries as well as across continents, are woven together to form one narrative with the common Cinderella themes of good prevails over evil and love trumps hate.

Cinderella and Cinder Edna are neighbors who each live with their stepmother and stepsisters. Each Cinder character has her own unique way to approach the trials and tribulations of life. Each girl ends up marrying the prince of her dreams, yet only one of them is completely happy.


This version of Cinderella is an ancient folktale adapted from China. When Yeh-Shen is mistreated by her stepmother and stepsister, a magical fish comes to her rescue. Yeh-Shen loses her slipper at a festival, and royalty finds her when she attempts to get her slipper back.


This is the Algonquin Indian version of the Cinderella fairy tale. In this version, the rough-face girl and her two mean sisters vie for the affection and hand in marriage to the Invisible Being.


This version of the Cinderella fairy tale is retold from Charles Perrault (1628-1703) and translated by Anthea Bell. In this classic fairy tale, a beautiful young woman is mistreated by her stepmother and stepsisters. With the help of her fairy godmother, Cinderella attends the ball and meets the prince she eventually marries.


This version of Cinderella is set in the Art Deco period of the 1920’s. Flapper styles and the Charleston are all the rage in this rendition of a girl gone from rags to riches when she meets the prince of her dreams at the ball.


This version of Cinderella is retold by Ruth Sanderson. The retelling is based on Charles Perrault’s French version, and it includes elements from the Brothers Grimm version such as the white bird.


This version of Cinderella is also based on Charles Perrault’s French version of the fairy tale; however, the setting of this retelling is in the Smoky Mountains. In this tale, Rose loses her glass slipper at a hoedown given by a rich feller on the other side of the creek.


This version is retold using African folklore. Mufaro’s two daughters travel to the kingdom to meet the king who wishes to marry a worthy and beautiful woman. Although both daughters are beautiful, only one daughter is worthy of marrying the king.
Phase 3 – Who am I in this world? Read Alouds June 2016


The book character expresses the many reasons why she likes herself, even though she may be messy or silly.


The words and illustrations inspire children to be who they want to be, and to imagine themselves in roles beyond the traditional gender expectations. It offers a chance to challenge the roles and norms of a gendered society. A caregiver’s note at the back of the book encourages adults to give the gift of choice without boundaries to children.


Take a journey around the world in this book to see how children are the same yet different. This book creates discussions around tolerance, diversity, and acceptance.


Red is a crayon labeled ‘red’ yet is clearly something different. The message in this book is to remain true to yourself and follow your own path. It is also a reminder not to make assumptions on looks alone.


Colorful characters confidently express their individuality and promote messages of tolerance, acceptance, and diversity.


A little girl and her dog are positive they can create something special. Try as they might, their creations are messy, incomplete, or do not work. The little girl gets quite mad and so frustrated that she eventually quits the project. However, the little girl returns to the project with renewed hope; and, in the end, her project is just as she imagined it to be.


The girl characters in this book empower readers to affirm their importance and unlimited potential. The characters remind readers that girls can look, do, be, and enact many different possibilities.

Making a Difference Read Alouds June 2016


A big problem occurs on the school playground when the boys will not let the girls play on their soccer team. The girls figure out a way to get boys to change their minds.


A new girl named Maya joins a class; yet, Chloe and her friends do not want to include her in their group because Maya wears old hand-me-down clothing and plays with old toys. Maya tries to join in their group several times, and eventually she stops trying and plays alone. Soon
after, Maya moves away, and Chloe realizes her missed chance at friendship.


Two young girls, Anna and Clover, are anxious to become playmates; however, their chance for friendship is separated by a fence that segregates the African American side of town from the white side of town. Together, the girls devise a way to become friends, regardless of the drawn line of the fence.
## APPENDIX E

### Research Questions Map: Chapter 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Princess Girls: Living the Dream</th>
<th>Research Question:</th>
<th>Possible Data Sources:</th>
<th>Supporting Data:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| RQ1: How do the kindergarten students and I explore our understandings of gender across one academic year? | Throughout the course of the school year, what do we do, say, question, read, etc that causes us to think, question, discuss, shift our understandings of gender roles? | • Pre/post gender sorts  
• Gender based read alouds (Social Justice books)  
• Anecdotal notes from planned and spontaneous comments, conversations  
• Audio/video analysis (Choice Time/play centers) | • Dawn – Dance Like Starlight Read Aloud  
• Hannah – Not All Princesses Dress In Pink Read Aloud  
• Hannah – Fire Engine For Ruthie Read Aloud |
| RQ2: In the daily life of classroom practice, how do the kindergartners express their understandings of gender? | Throughout the course of the school year, what do the kindergartners say or do, through planned or spontaneous thoughts, comments, drawings, explanations, that bring out, support, demonstrate, or contradict their understandings of gender? | • District pre/post writing assessments  
• Anecdotal notes of everyday experiences and spontaneous comments, conversations (Fashion Books)  
• Reader’s Workshop (response journals, All About Me booklets, conferring notes)  
• Writer’s Workshop (district pre and post writing assessments, Writer’s Workshop books, conferring notes)  
• Audio/video analysis (Choice Time/play centers) | • Hannah – pre and post writing assessments  
• Hannah – Writer’s Workshop, Personal Narrative  
• Dawn – pre and post writing assessments  
• Dawn – All About Me Response Booklet, All About Me  
• The Princess Girls and Gabriel - Fashion Books  
• Hannah – All About Me Response Booklet, Favorite Book Character  
• Dawn – All About Me Response Booklet, Favorite Book Character  
• Dawn – Dollhouse Play Center  
• Dawn – Blocks Play Center |
| RQ3: What do the oral, written and performative responses to gender specific fairy tale read alouds reveal about this one group of kindergartners understandings of gender? | In relation to the gender role-specific fairy tale read alouds within the character study unit, how do the kindergartners express their understandings of gender during Readers Workshop, Writer’s Workshop, Choice Time (play centers), etc.? | • Specifically related to Unit 4 work/traditional canon | • Dawn/Hannah–Cinderella Book Club Meeting 1  
• Dawn – Disney Cinderella Discussion  
• Dawn – Cinderella Book Club Meeting 4  
• Hannah – Disney Cinderella Read Aloud  
• Hannah – Cinderella Book ClubMeeting 2 |
- Reader’s Workshop (book club)
- Writer’s Workshop
- Dramatizations (castle, puppet center)
- Audio/video analysis (Cinderella variant read alouds and discussions, focus groups)

- Hannah – Cinderella Book Club Meeting 7
- Hannah – Cinderella Book Club Meeting 8
- Dawn – Focus Group 1 Favorite Character Discussion
- Hannah – Focus Group 5, 2 Sided Stories Discussion
- Dawn – Cinderella Book Club, Character Trait Comparison
- Dawn and Hannah – Cinderella Book Club Meeting 5, Share Out
- Hannah – Cinderella Book Club Meeting 5, Share Out
- Hannah – Cinderella Book Club, Character Trait Comparison
- Dawn – Cinderella Book Club, Make Your Own Book
- Dawn and Hannah – Classroom Castle, Group 5 Dramatization
- Hannah – Puppet Making Center, Cinderella Re-enactment
- Dawn – Costume Supplies Sign Up
- Hannah – Classroom Castle, Group 1 Dramatization
- Hannah – Focus Group 7, Talking Back Transcription 1
## APPENDIX F

### Research Questions Map: Chapter 5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Are you a girl?</th>
<th>Research Question:</th>
<th>Possible Data Sources:</th>
<th>Supporting Data:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>RQ1:</strong> How do the kindergarten students and I explore our understandings of gender across one academic year?</td>
<td>Throughout the course of the school year, what do we do, say, question, read, etc that causes us to move, think, question, discuss gender roles? &lt;br&gt;• Pre/post gender sorts &lt;br&gt;• Gender based read alouds (Social Justice books) &lt;br&gt;• Anecdotal notes from planned and spontaneous comments, conversations &lt;br&gt;• Audio/video analysis (Choice Time/play centers)</td>
<td>• Sydney – A Fire Engine for Ruthie Read Aloud &lt;br&gt;• Sydney – Oliver Button is a Sissy Read Aloud &lt;br&gt;• Sydney – The Playground Problem Read Aloud</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>RQ2:</strong> In the daily life of classroom practice, how do the kindergartners express their understandings of gender?</td>
<td>Throughout the course of the school year, what do the kindergartners say or do, through planned or spontaneous thoughts/comments, drawings, explanations, that bring out, support, demonstrate, contradict their understandings of gender? &lt;br&gt;• District pre/post writing assessments &lt;br&gt;• Anecdotal/field notes of everyday experiences and spontaneous comments, conversations &lt;br&gt;• Reader’s Workshop (response journals, All About Me booklets, conferring notes) &lt;br&gt;• Writer’s Workshop (Writer’s Workshop books, conferring notes) &lt;br&gt;• Audio/video analysis (Choice Time/play centers)</td>
<td>• Sydney Pre/Post writing assessments &lt;br&gt;• Sydney - Field notes &lt;br&gt;• Sydney – <em>All About Me</em> Response Booklet, Play &lt;br&gt;• Sydney – <em>All About Me</em> Response Booklet, Favorite Character, &lt;br&gt;• Sydney – <em>All About Me</em> Response Booklet Learn More About &lt;br&gt;• Dawn – <em>All About Me</em> Response Booklet, All About Me &lt;br&gt;• Sydney – Block Play Center &lt;br&gt;• Sydney - Super Heroes Play Center &lt;br&gt;• Sydney - Inside Recess Coloring Center &lt;br&gt;• Dawn – Blocks Play Center &lt;br&gt;• Dawn - Dollhouse Play Center</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>RQ3:</strong> What do the oral, written, and performative responses to gender specific fairy tale read alouds reveal about this one group of kindergartners understandings of gender?</td>
<td>In relation to the gender role specific fairy tale read alouds within the character study unit, how do the kindergartners express their understandings of gender during Readers Workshop, Writer’s Workshop, Choice Time, etc.? &lt;br&gt;• Specifically related to Unit 4 work/traditional canon</td>
<td>• Dawn – castle dramatization, group 5 &lt;br&gt;• Sydney – field notes, castle discussion</td>
</tr>
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</table>
## APPENDIX G

### Research Questions Map: Chapter 6

### If I See It, Then It Must Be True

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question:</th>
<th>Possible Data Sources:</th>
<th>Supporting Data:</th>
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</thead>
</table>
| **RQ1:** How do the kindergarten students and I explore our understandings of gender across one academic year? | Throughout the course of the school year, what do we do, say, question, read, etc that causes us to move, think, question, discuss gender roles?  
- Pre/post gender sorts  
- Gender based read alouds (Social Justice books)  
- Anecdotal notes from planned and spontaneous comments, conversations  
- Audio/video analysis (Choice Time/play centers) | Initial and Final Gender Picture Sorts  
- I am Amelia Earhart Read Aloud  
- Oliver Button is a Sissy Discussion  
- The Playground Problem Read Aloud  
- Fire Engine for Ruthie Read Aloud  
- Rosie Revere Engineer Independent Response  
- Not All Princesses Dress in Pink Read Aloud  
- William’s Doll Read Aloud  
- It’s Okay to be Different Read Aloud |
| **RQ2:** In the daily life of classroom practice, how do the kindergartners express their understandings of gender? | Throughout the course of the school year, what do the kindergartners say or do, through planned or spontaneous thoughts/comments, drawings, explanations, that bring out, support, demonstrate, contradict their understandings of gender?  
- District pre/post writing assessments  
- Anecdotal notes of everyday experiences and spontaneous comments, conversations  
- Reader’s Workshop (response journals, All About Me booklets, notes)  
- Writer’s Workshop (books, conferring notes)  
- Audio/video analysis (Choice Time/play centers) | Field notes  
- Pre/post writing assessments  
- All About Me Response Booklet – Learn More About  
- All About Me Response Booklet – When I Grow Up  
- All About Me Response Booklet – Favorite Character  
- Things to Do First/Final Write |
| **RQ3:** What do the oral, written, and performative responses to gender specific fairy tale read alouds reveal about this one group of kindergartners understandings of gender? | In relation to the gender role specific fairy tale read alouds within the character study unit, how do the kindergartners express their understandings of gender during Reader’s/Writer’s Workshop, Choice Time, etc.?  
- Specifically related to Unit 4 work/traditional canon | Focus Group 2 – Favorite Character Discussion  
- Group 5 Dramatization  
- Castle Discussion  
- Prince Cinders Discussion |
## APPENDIX H

### Research Questions Map: Chapter 7

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Possible Data Sources:</th>
<th>Supporting Data:</th>
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| **RQ1**: How do (the kindergarten students and) I explore (our) understandings of gender across one academic year? | Throughout the course of the school year, what do we do, say, question, read, etc that causes us to move, think, question, discuss gender roles?  
- Pre/post gender sorts  
- Gender based read alouds (Social Justice books)  
- Anecdotal notes from planned and spontaneous comments, conversations  
- Audio/video analysis (Choice Time/play centers) | • Initial Gender Picture Sort  
• Silence:  
  o Are you a girl? convo  
  o Booklist convo  
• Language Choices:  
  o It doesn’t matter convo  
• Critical friend dialogue  
• Intentionality  
• Critical read alouds connected to real life |
| **RQ2**: In the daily life of classroom practice, how do the kindergartners express their understandings of gender? | Throughout the course of the school year, what do the kindergartners say or do, through planned or spontaneous thoughts/comments, drawings, explanations, that bring out, support, demonstrate, contradict their understandings of gender?  
- District pre/post writing assessments  
- Anecdotal notes of everyday experiences and spontaneous comments, conversations  
- Reader’s Workshop (response journals, All About Me booklets, notes)  
- Writer’s Workshop (books, conferring notes)  
- Audio/video analysis (Choice Time/play centers) |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RQ3: What do the oral, written, and performative responses to gender specific fairy tale read alouds reveal about this one group of kindergartners understandings of gender?</th>
<th>In relation to the gender role specific fairy tale read alouds within the character study unit, how do the kindergartners express their understandings of gender during Reader’s/Writer’s Workshop, Choice Time, etc.?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Specifically related to Unit 4 work/traditional canon</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
## APPENDIX I

**Data Set 3: Triangulation Example**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Project</th>
<th>Focus Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Cinderella</em> (Disney) 4/13/16</td>
<td>Speech Bubble characters</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Cinderella</em> (Sanderson) 4/14/16</td>
<td>Favorite character</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Cinderella</em> (Perrault) 4/15/16</td>
<td></td>
<td>#1 – Cinderella 4/15/16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>#2 Prince 4/16/16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irish Cinderlad 4/19/16</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prince Cinders 4/20/16</td>
<td>Comparison of 2 pix</td>
<td>#3 1:1 interviews (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yeh Shen 4/21/16</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Prince Cinders</em> (second read) 4/27/16</td>
<td>Character traits</td>
<td>#4 Character Analysis Charts (8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Art Deco Cinderella 4/28/16</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smoky Mountain Rose 5/2/16</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mufaro’s daughter 5/4/16</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Glass Slipper 5/11/16</td>
<td>2 sided stories</td>
<td>#5 Two sided Stories (8)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>#6 1:1 interviews (2)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cinder Edna 5/12/16</td>
<td>Standing up for Self 5/11/16</td>
<td>#7 Stepping into the Shoes of a Character Interviews (17)</td>
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</table>
## APPENDIX J

### Data Set 3: Focus Groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus Group 1:</th>
<th>Aaliyah</th>
<th>Dawn</th>
<th>Mia</th>
<th>Nahla</th>
<th>Sophia</th>
<th>Taylor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Favorite Character (Cinderella)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus Group 2:</th>
<th>Nadim</th>
<th>Sydney</th>
<th>Tommy</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Favorite Character (Prince)</strong></td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus Group 3:</th>
<th>Dawn</th>
<th>Mia</th>
<th>Nahla</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Two Picture Comparison</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>(1:1 Interviews)</td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus Group 4:</th>
<th>Aaliyah</th>
<th>Dawn</th>
<th>Eliza</th>
<th>Gabriel</th>
<th>Garrett</th>
<th>Hannah</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Character Traits Charts</strong></td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus Group 5:</th>
<th>Dawn</th>
<th>Eliza</th>
<th>Gabriel</th>
<th>Mia</th>
<th>Nahla</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Two Sided Story</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>(1:1 Interviews)</td>
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<tr>
<th>Focus Group 6:</th>
<th>Nahla</th>
<th>Taylor</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Two Sided Story</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>(1:1 Interviews)</td>
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<tr>
<th>Focus Group 7:</th>
<th>Aaliyah</th>
<th>Dakota</th>
<th>Dawn</th>
<th>Eliza</th>
<th>Gabriel</th>
<th>Garrett</th>
<th>Hannah</th>
<th>Jesse</th>
<th>Mia</th>
<th>Nadim</th>
<th>Nahla</th>
<th>Sophia</th>
<th>Taylor</th>
<th>Vinnie</th>
<th>Willie</th>
<th>Tommy</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>No Fair</strong></td>
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APPENDIX K

Digital Coding Example

Cinderella Read Aloud
4/13/16
17:28 minutes long

hurried home. They had to be back before the others returned from the ball. The next day, the
stepmother told the girls that the grand duke was coming to see them. He’s been hunting all night
for that girl, the one who lost her slipper. That girl shall be the prince’s bride. Cinderella smiled
and hummed a waltz that had been played at the ball, and the stepmother became very
suspicious. She locked Cinderella in her room.

Students: Oh! (Once again, the students are distraught over the way Cinderella is being treated;
yet, no one has suggested that Cinderella could/should stand up for herself).

Karen: Look at the stepmother’s face (pause). Student, how does she feel?

{ Student: comment }

Karen: She doesn’t care about Cinderella, does she? You can tell by her face. Mia, what are you
thinking?

Mia: Um, she’s like mad.

Karen: Why do you suppose she locked Cinderella in the closet, or in her room?

Eliza: Because, because (pause) she doesn’t want the prince to marry her.

Karen: Why doesn’t she want the prince to marry Cinderella?

Eliza: Because, because she wants the other girls to go. (Eliza believes the stepmother is angry
because Cinderella’s presence and beauty takes away from her own two daughters)

(jealousy)

Karen: She wants her daughters to get married instead? (This might have been a stretch
/assumption by me. Now that I re-hear this, did Eliza mean that the stepmother wanted her
daughters to go to the ball OR the daughters to marry the prince? Now, I am not sure.)

Eliza: (shakes head yes)

Karen: Mia, what are you thinking, honey?
Mia: I think that she noticed her and she noticed that she skipped some of her work. (…whereas, Mia sees the stepmother’s anger at Cinderella for leaving her chores and going to the ball, instead)
(multiple perspectives)

Karen: Okay, so let’s see what happens, ready? Gus and Jacques had a plan to help Cinderella. While Anastasia and Drizella tried to squeeze their big feet into the little glass slipper, the two mice sneaked into the stepmother’s pocket. They got ahold of the key, tugged it up the stairs, and unlocked the door. Cinderella rushed downstairs to try on the glass slipper. May I try it on, Cinderella asked? The wicked stepmother fumed. She tripped the footman who was holding the glass slipper and it fell to the floor and broke into a thousand pieces.

Hannah: Whoa! (Hannah has immersed herself into the story and become one with it. She’s living it)

Karen: Now, why do you suppose the stepmother did that?

Nadim: Um, because her, her doesn’t like her. Her doesn’t want her to get married with him so her broke the glass slipper. (Nadim recognizes the intentionality of the stepmother’s actions.

Karen: How do you feel about that?
APPENDIX L

Evidence Across All Data Sets

Reinforcing, Challenging, and Re-envisioning Data Set 1

**RQ 1:** How do the kindergarten students and I explore our understandings of gender across one academic year?

**RQ 2:** In the daily life of classroom practice, how do the kindergartners express their understandings of gender?

**RQ 3:** What do the written and performative responses to gender specific fairy tale read alouds reveal about this one group of kindergartners’ understandings of gender?

Data Set 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reinforcing Societal Norms</th>
<th>Challenging Societal Norms</th>
<th>Re-envisioning Societal Norms</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Field Notes, I am Special Project (11/23/15)** –  
  • Hannah – “I LOVE to be a princess! I always want to be a princess when I grow up! I want to have a fancy dress!” | **Field Notes, Inside Recess, Coloring Center (12/15/15)**  
  • Taylor: “Girls can have short hair and boys can have long hair.”  
  • Sydney: “When my dad was a rock star, he had long hair.”  
  • Student: “Sean’s daddy has long hair.”  
  • Dakota: “Some boys can have a little bit of long hair in the back.” | **Writing Pre-assessment (9/17/15)**  
  • Sydney, “STOAXSaR”, transcription of written text, “Me and Robert playing soccer” (boys and girls as athletes; boys and girls playing on the same athletic teams) |
| **Field Notes (11/24/15)**  
  • Kinders lined up in bus order to go home at the end of the day; School Secretary: “Please dismiss all pick-ups and the lovely kindergartners.”  
  Hannah: “But what about the boy kindergartners?” | | |

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APPENDIX M

Evidence Across All Data Sets: Case Study 2

“Are you a girl?” (Sydney and Dawn)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data Set</th>
<th>Evidence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1        | Field Notes, Literacy Centers (11/23/15)  
  - Sydney: I have a basketball hoop in my bedroom!  
  Karen: Why do you like to play basketball?  
  Sydney: It’s awesome! It’s a Star Wars one! It makes noises when you get it in!  
  Dawn: You know what’s cool about me? I’m a cheerleader!  
  Karen: What’s so special about being a cheerleader?  
  Dawn: I’ve always wanted to be a cheerleader! It’s so fun! |

*Field Notes (12/17/15)* –  
- Jesse’s grandmother sent in small tokens to celebrate Jesse’s birthday. The note attached to the basket of tokens said the rubber lizards were meant for the boys, and the charms were for the girls. As Hunter passed out the items, Sydney exclaimed “But, I don’t like charms! Can I get a squiggly rubber thing instead?”

| 2        | Field Notes (1/13/16)-  
  - Kinders in bus order to go home  
  Dawn: (leaning close to Rhylee) Are you a girl?  
  Rhylee: (stares at Dawn for a few seconds and then turns her back on Dawn)  
  Dawn: Sydney? Are you a girl?  
  Rhylee: (silence, not looking in Dawn’s direction)  
  Dawn: But how will I know?  
  Rhylee: (keeps back to Dawn until they get onto their buses) |

*All About Me* response booklet (1/21/16) –  
- Sydney, Play page, Ilove to youul F str wrtyss/I love to play with Star Wars toys.

| 3        |  |

| 4        | *Not Every Princess* Read Aloud (6/11/16) –  
  - Karen: Excellent! All right, ready? Not all knights fight dragons, some seek friends instead |
APPENDIX N

Evidence Across All Data Sets: Individual

_Sydney_

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data Set</th>
<th>Evidence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1        | Pre-Writing Assessment (9/17/15)  
- Sydney, “STOAXSaR”, transcription of written text, “Me and Robert playing soccer” (boys and girls as athletes; boys and girls playing on the same athletic teams)  
Field Notes, Literacy Centers (11/23/15)  
- Sydney: I have a basketball hoop in my bedroom!  
  Karen: Why do you like to play basketball?  
  Sydney: It’s awesome! It’s a Star Wars one! It makes noises when you get it in!  
Field Notes, Inside Recess, Coloring Center (12/15/15)  
- Taylor: Girls can have short hair and boys can have long hair.  
  Sydney: When my dad was a rock star, he had long hair.  
  Student: Sean’s daddy has long hair.  
  Dakota: Some boys can have a little bit of long hair in the back. |
| 2        | *All About Me* Response Booklet(1/21/16) –  
- Sydney, Play page, I love to play with Star Wars toys.  
- Sydney, Favorite Book Character page, I like Darth Vader.  
- Sydney, learn more about page, Star Wars because it is cool.  
Oliver Button is a Sissy Read Aloud (2/11/16) –  
- Dawn: That, that reminds me of *William's Doll*.  
  Karen: How come it reminds you of *William’s Doll*?  
  Dawn: Cuz it’s called sissy.  
  Karen: Remember? In that book, the boys were calling William a sissy, right? Why were they calling him a sissy, do you remember?  
  Dawn: Cuz he had a doll.  
  Sydney: Because they think he is a girl. Because he thinks, they think, because he’s playing with a doll they think, they call him a girl then.  
  Karen: Um hm. What are you thinking?  
  Eliza: Because (pause) because he wanted a doll and the boys think he will play with boy stuff.  
Blocks Play Center (3/18/16) –  
- Sydney: I’m really okay, but just don’t cry. |