

Exploring Children’s Experiences of Gender and Heteronormative Disruptive Texts in Early Years Classrooms

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CONTEXT

- Classrooms are sites where children (re)create normative gender and heteronormative discourses
- The traditional gender constructs and heteronormativity are ever-present in the discourses of schooling, including in curriculum, pedagogy, and practices (Aronson & Laughter, 2020)
- The Western discursive ideals of family continue to be reified through children’s literature (Lo, 2019)
- Teachers’ book selection, the ways in which teachers share these books, and the ways in which children interact with and make sense of the literature are crucially important in disrupting discursive identity ideals (Sciurba, 2016)
- Research demonstrates that teachers can disrupt children’s understanding of normative discourses through read-aloud sessions with particular kinds of children’s literature

RESEARCH PURPOSE

- To explore the ways in which early years children experience and understand dominant discourses of gender and/or heterosexuality, and to consider how these might be challenged using disruptive literature

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- In what ways do disruptive texts engage children in challenging dominant gender norms and heterosexuality, and support a more fluid understanding of gender and sexuality?
- In what ways might students’ experiences and understandings of disruptive texts inform teachers’ practices to better challenge the dominant gender and heterosexuality discourses and support more fluid understandings of gender and sexuality?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

- Poststructural feminism and queer theory

METHODOLOGY

- As a teacher-researcher, I conducted a four-week case study in my grade two classroom
- I read 13 texts grouped into weekly themes which challenged gender and/or heterosexual dominant discourses

Week One



Teaching objectives

- Introduce the concept of self-expression
- Begin disrupting normative gender expressions

Week Two



Teaching objectives

- Present protagonists who defied normative gender expectations
- Discuss how Raye Montague defied gender expectations and racism as a Black woman
- Challenge the Western hegemonic masculine construct of *hero*
- Introduce a heteronormative disruption

Week Three



Teaching objective

- Present characters that challenged normative gender expectations

Week Four



Teaching objectives

- Further disrupt the heteronormative construct of family
- Continue scaffolding children’s experiences of nonnormative gender expressions

DATA COLLECTION

- Audio-recordings of the read-aloud sessions
- Field journal notes
- Discussion charts that held the students’ thinking and reflections during the discussion periods
- Reader response products
- Observation guide to document the incidental and spontaneous conversations which upheld or challenged gender norms and/or heteronormativity that occurred among the children throughout the day

DATA ANALYSIS

- During the data collection period I reflected on the children’s experiences of the texts and called upon my professional judgement and pedagogical purpose to plan for the next read aloud
- Once I gained access to the consent and assent forms, I anonymized the data and began to make sense and meaning of the data
- I sought the “cracks and fissures in the discourses” (Gannon & Davies, 2012, p. 15), looking for divergence from normative gender and sexuality discourses in the children’s understandings
- The rich meaning came from seeing the patterns in the data and looking at the language the children used throughout the study

FINDINGS

The children demonstrated the ways in which their existing schematic knowledge juxtaposed with the gender and heteronormative disruptions presented in the texts.

I found instances when the disruptive messaging was:

- Too unfamiliar to the children’s schema for them to understand the disruption
- Too dissimilar to the children’s schema and the disruption was rejected
- Aligned with the children’s schema and was adapted and assimilated.

I also found that the role of the classroom teacher was crucial in supporting children’s understanding of the texts’ gender and/or heteronormative messaging.

DISCUSSION: Entries into the Normative Discourses

- The term *unexpected*
- The children’s schema of *family*
- The children’s schema of *kindness*
- Disruptions to the hegemonic definition of *hero*
- Disruption to the heteronormative construct of same-sex friendships

DISCUSSION: Indicators for Critical Text Analysis

- Who is the protagonist and who are the main supporting characters? Specifically, what is their gender; race; ethnicity; sexual orientation; socioeconomic status; age; abilities; and religion?
- What is the relationship amongst the characters?
- Who is the narrator?
- What masculinities are being valued?
- What femininities are being valued?
- How does the protagonist have agency?
- What is the text’s setting?
- What story is being told in the illustrations?
- How do the characters uphold or challenge the dichotomous gender binary?
- How do the characters challenge or uphold heteronormativity?
- What other text(s) can this text be paired with?
- What parts of this text are engaging for children?

Citations

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