

Queer Decisions in Early Childhood Teacher Education: Teachers as Advocates for Gender Non-conforming and Sexual Minority Young Children and Families

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In this paper, we highlight the social challenges faced by sexual minority populations, and we include a short internationally-framed literature review to illuminate the complexity of experience for children and families who might be lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, gender non-conforming or gender expansive (LGBT+). Using both personal and professional stories from practice, the anecdotes illustrate key moments in teaching that help to frame the complexity of advocacy for LGBT+ young children and families. The larger social challenges faced by this group help the field make informed decisions about educating both LGBT+ young children and those who teach them. Our purpose is to continue to inspire other teachers and teacher educators to be courageous in noticing and supporting the gender development of children as a starting place. We suggest ways (as others have) to become comfortable when adding sexuality and gender difference advocacy in their work with and for young children (Blaise, 2005; Cahill & Theilheimer, 1999a; Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010; Kissen, 2002; Newman, 2016; Silin, 1995; Thorne, 1993).¹

The first author (Kroeger) is a professor in Curriculum and Instruction and Early Childhood, and a former teacher of young children, and the second author (Regula) is a university professor and biologist. As professionals who are adult educators, we are interested in highlighting recommendations led by current biological knowledge to frame work with young children. Using biology and anti-bias notions together can frame a logical argument for nervous teachers. We use our surnames (Kroeger or Regula) throughout the paper to delineate the interdisciplinary insights that each author contributed.

Because our professions (teacher education and healthcare education) have not yet normalized sex and gender as fully separate concepts (as well as non-binary constructs) and our students are not regularly taught about the complexity of human sexuality and gender development and their differences, our work in university classrooms is more complex than it should be. Both of us have constructed, and sometimes reconstructed, our own gender identities throughout our lives, allying with the LGBT+ populations in our professions, and we are increasingly allying with children who are emerging as transgender, gender non-conforming, or gender expansive.

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Regula, for example, recognizes that the history of biology and development is sometimes used as an oppressive force against marginalized youths; she uses biology and development in a restorative justice capacity. Kroeger, who recognizes the ways in which child development often frames mainstream teaching but is absent of biological gender knowledge utilizes Regula's expert thinking. Together we argue that teachers' full understanding of biology's impact upon development can leverage support for gender non-conforming and/or gender-expansive children and their families. Kroeger integrates anti-bias (Derman-Sparks & the A.B.C. Taskforce, 1989) practices from her experiences teaching herein and we elevate biology's importance as an argument for supporting all children more equitably.

We work toward full inclusion of LGBT+ children and families in our practice(s) consistent with a history of literature in early childhood. Scholars have argued to increase the seriousness of topics when we teach young children and to include, rather than ignore, gender and sexuality or family differences (Cahill & Theilheimer, 1999a & b; Casper & Schultz, 1999; Kissen, 2002; Silin, 1995; Robinson, 2003). Researchers have found that early childhood educators are likely to deny their responsibilities to young children or deny their impact upon children's sexuality or gender development by acts of omission (Robinson, 2003). Additionally, heteronormative silencing via surveillance, or perceived irrelevance and exclusion of lesbian and gay equity is a concern in early childhood classrooms (Robinson, 2003; Surtees, 2005).

Drawing on a host of complex points, it is our hope that the article inspires readers to raise levels of individual responsibility leading to social change, further policy development, and anti-bias early childhood practice. If society is to make progress with this group, educators must move toward larger-scale inclusion of children and families who are LGBT+, and have reasoned arguments for doing so (Ehrensaft, 2011; Newman, 2016; Nutt, 2015; Mosso-Taylor, 2016; Surtees, 2005). We know early childhood teachers can resist heteronormativity, with specific skill sets (Gunn & Surtees, 2011), but having a strong rationale for doing so matters.

In this paper, we utilize real-life stories from the early childhood classroom to make anti-bias practice (versus anti-bully approaches) come to life in the early childhood classroom. Positioning ourselves in a multidisciplinary way, we hope to align with the childhood policy field as advocates to re-conceptualize teaching and to serve as activist-scholars.

The Problems Encountered by LGBT+ Young Children, Youth, and Families

Connecting our arguments for the provision of early childhood anti-bias education practices to some of the larger problems faced by LGBT+ youth and families in North America and other parts of the world is an important conceptual step for argumentation. If teachers of young children understand the larger social problems faced by LGBT+ youth or families, we hope they will take responsibility for positive actions, rather than avoidance, in the classroom.

We have found no larger studies which demonstrate that LGBT+ bias starts especially early in a child's life, unlike race bias and gender bias which have been well documented in early childhood scholarship (Campbell, Smith, & Alexander, 2016; Derman-Sparks & the A.B.C. Taskforce, 1989; Derman-Sparks &

Edwards, 2010). We do know, however, that young children imitate the homophobic language they hear from siblings and social media, describe themselves in sexual terms, exhibit gender power and sexual awareness, pose questions about sexuality and gender, and often exhibit qualities of gender non-conformity (Blaise, 2005; Cahill & Theilheimer, 1999 a & b; Kroeger, 2006a; Robinson, 2003). Such overt expressions are often regarded uncomfortably by young children's teachers, who are at a loss for how to handle these situations, even while declaring that they as teachers demonstrate inclusivity along racial, ethnic, or religious lines (Robinson, 2003; Surtees, 2005). Teachers of older-age students are similarly uncomfortable (Toomey, McGuire, & Russell, 2012); however, it is known that having one supportive staff member is often regarded as one protective strategy to support youth (Flannery, 2016; Toomey et al., 2012). Moreover, the early childhood literature routinely shows ally behavior and anti-bias approach as effective with young children or families when used by teachers and principals (Cahill & Theilheimer, 1999a; Gunn & Surtees, 2011; Kroeger, 2001 & 2006b; Mosso-Taylor, 2016; Newman, 2016; Stout & Sapon-Shevin, 2002).

At early ages, young children “can be creatively playful about their gender presentation” within their gender affinity (Ehrensaft, 2011, p. 152), but as they age, challenges to their gender expressions, such as name calling and bullying mark increased difficulties in school (Ehrensaft, 2011; Thorne, 1993). Older LGBT+ students experience school bullying at higher rates than random student populations (Kosciw, Greytak, Bartkiewicz, Boesen, & Palmer, 2012). Those who grow up in a LGBT+ family, or one that is perceived to be LGBT+, experience similar challenges, often from school staff. Mistreatment from other students and from teachers because of their LGBT+ family is not uncommon (Kosciw & Diaz, 2008). Unfortunately, many students are discouraged by a teacher from speaking about their family status at school, principal, or another staff person (Kosciw & Diaz, 2008).

School climate problems are sometimes compounded by mental health and social problems. LGBT+ youth report dramatically more sexual abuse than do their heterosexual peers, and the pervasive, daily discrimination many transgender people experience leads to an increased risk of suicide for many. LGBT+ individuals are overrepresented among homeless youths (Choi, Wilson, Shelton, & Gates, 2015).

In the United States, violent assaults of LGBT+ persons as well as the unprecedented high rates of hate crimes based on gender have become a federal issue. The Obama administration since 2011 had promoted and attempted to protect the human rights of LGBT+ persons with the passage of the *Matthew Shepard and James Byrd, Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act of 2009* (The White House, 2015). This law, and others considered a significant victory in the fight for equality for LGBT+ people in the United States is now under scrutiny and erosion by conservative forces and a new presidency.

By providing a problem section here, we are not making causal connections between the practices in the early childhood classroom and the reduction of bullying, harassment, suicidality, homelessness, or the sexual vulnerability of young people. However, describing for readers how LGBT+ individuals are vulnerable in schools in particular ways can provide a pivotal rationalization for teachers of young children, as they justify a more explicit, reasoned advocacy for LGBT+ groups.

In the rest of this article, storied examples create solid links to strategies and needs of young children and families in early childhood classrooms. We argue that techniques in bullying prevention are insufficient. We posit that a more complex understanding of the biological development of children, combined with the de-construction of the male-female binary while teaching college students about inclusive strategies, can work. We challenge our university students to understand their obligations to individuals who are gender non-conforming using leading ethics documents from such organizations as the National Association of School Psychologists (*NASP*) (2014) and review national laws like *Title IX* and *Title IV* to build inclusive environments for gender-expansive and gender non-conforming children. We ask pre-service teachers to examine the gender politics of schools (Blaise, 2005; Campbell, Smith, & Alexander, 2016; Thorne, 1993) as we share instances of working with LGBT+ children and families.

Teaching in Queer Times, Confounding Moments

As transgender identities have come to the fore in the collective awareness, schools are becoming more complicated places, and trans awareness in particular has been shepherded along by the acknowledgment of the social construction of gender and family and hormone therapies (Bornstein, 2000; Casper & Schultz, 1999). Consider the following situation taking place at the home of a good friend, whose story I have gained permission to share with pre-service teachers and in this paper. The dialogue is between a 10-year-old child and his mother, who is trans-male, speaking about a school peer who cannot understand why the child's mother appears masculine.

Benny is angry today after school as he talks with his mother, who is undergoing hormone treatment and is trans-male. Benny's biological parents are together, and his mother has begun to masculinize his appearance to match his gender identity.

Benny's mother and father are in a stable relationship, married, and Benny has been informed explicitly as their family has changed. Benny describes to his mother how many times he's tried to explain to a child at school that "yes, it is his mother" who picks him up.

Benny's peer cannot understand why Benny calls the adult who picks him up "mom" because Benny's mom looks like a man. Benny's friend keeps asking, "Is your mom a man?" When Benny replies, "yes" his friend still doesn't get it. While Benny understands his mother's trans identity, his friend (who recognizes only male and female gender) does not.

As I work with university students and share this real *confounding moment* (Silin, 2013), I ask them to consider what types of support Benny and his peer might need from a teacher? Why should support be given? What might support entail? Pre-service teachers notice how children respond to or question aspects of the physical appearance of a trans-parent (trans-male or trans-female). We discuss that an LGBT+ parent might or might not be comfortable disclosing their identity, or disclosing that the surrounding context may or may not be perceived as safe. Additionally, a teacher might or might not have the parent's advice about their preferred response to their child's peers. Indeed, some parents may not talk

to their children about such matters.

Invariably, these and other factors underlie aspects of building rapport, communicating with parents, knowing gender, affirming positive relationships in families, *and* reducing or eliminating bias (Casper & Schultz, 1999; Human Rights Campaign Foundation [HRC], n.d; Kroeger, 2017; Newman, 2016). Most pre-service teachers fail to consider that anti-bias support can deescalate the potential for future teasing and for feeling discomfort and shame; however, the anti-bias approach is much less common than a discipline- or bullying-reduction approach. The instance shared here is with children in middle grades, but for our purposes, the example is a good one when considering bullying versus anti-bias responses (Derman-Sparks & the ABC Task Force, 1989; HRC, n. d.).

In this situation, the teacher did support Benny’s well-being. The children with their two sets of parents, and the teacher’s help, provided resolution. Because Benny’s peer continued to question Benny (to the point of harassment), the classroom teacher requested both families to meet at the same time to support Benny and his peer. After discussing the incidents, Benny’s anger, and his repeatedly ignored requests that his peer stop questioning him, the peer was asked to write an apology letter to Benny and cease the behavior. School staff continued to monitor Benny and his peer to ensure the behavior did not continue or return. This approach was a disciplinary one.

Stopping bullying versus anti-bias responses. Benny’s situation might have ended differently had the teacher been present during the interaction and been able to support Benny and his peer, as well as Benny’s changing family via an anti-bias approach. The teacher would have recognized and acknowledged the underlying transphobia and gender bias in the situation rather than just eliminated the harassment (HRC, n. d.). Some educators could agree that Benny should not be left alone to explain or defend his family to others in the school. Because we know that the children of LGBT+ families are more likely to be harassed, teased, bullied, or mistreated (see Kosciw & Diaz, 2008), providing an anti-bias response would not only stop the harassment, but it would also address the gender bias or trans bias in this situation. An anti-bias response would have: 1) acknowledged the complexity of gender, 2) reduced misunderstandings or continued bias, and 3) also provided a response to the escalating harassment (Derman-Sparks & the ABC Task Force, 1989). An anti-bias response, unlike an anti-bullying one, could have helped Benny’s peer gain clarity about the appearance of Benny’s mom in relation to Benny’s label of his mom.²

Specific verbal strategies for helping children gain clarity and acceptance. Anti-bias work often involves questioning, affirmation, and clarity as well as understanding gender power in schools (Campbell, Smith, & Alexander, 2016). A teacher, overhearing the conversation (or having become aware of it through Benny or his parent) could have provided a question to the peer, like, “What makes you curious about Benny’s parent?” or “What question do you want to ask me, or Benny’s parent, or Benny about his parent in order to stop pestering him?” followed by, “Benny, what else would you like to tell your friend about your family which will help him stop bothering you?” Likewise, affirming statements such as, “Sometimes people’s bodies and what they look like might not match

²At the time of the incident, Benny and his dad had not settled on what to call his mom. As a family that had humorously contemplated this issue of naming, they had discussed “Bom” (Bro Mom) and “Mad” (Mom Dad) as possibilities.

what they would like to call themselves.” Or, “Benny’s mom gave birth to him, just like your mom did to you, but now Benny’s mom wants to look like a man and live as a man.” These examples, while driven by an equity minded set of values, might have gotten this conversation started between Benny and his peer. The questions, though imagined here, are given in known resources supporting Anti-bias and LGBT+ issues in schools (Derman-Sparks & the ABC Task Force, 1989; HRC, n. d.; Scarlet & Fargher, 2016).

As we have experienced ourselves, other teachers will encounter such instances and will need skills to help children make sense of the world using anti-bias approaches (Derman-Sparks & the ABC Task Force, 1989; HRC, n. d.; Welcoming Schools Guide). We believe as others do, that talking positively, while openly accepting and recognizing LGBT+ community members is an action for full inclusion of children and families (Derman-Sparks & the ABC Task Force, 1989; Kroeger, 2001; Scarlet & Fargher, 2016).

Changing Histories, Changing Terms, Understanding Gender

A review of LGBT+ issues with pre-service students starts with how teachers’ roles supporting children’s gender, sexuality, and anti-oppressive actions commonly entail understanding complex ideas and terminologies (i.e., lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, cis-gender) (Hughes, 2001; Newman, 2016). In these discussions, pre-service teachers are uncomfortable, but also relieved, noting this is new information. We call attention to the ways in which the available terms we use today (i.e., homosexuality versus gay, hermaphrodite versus intersex, or transsexual versus transgender) have changed based upon the human rights actions and activism of social groups over time, sharing historical changes, political movements, or instances in which laws (or rights) as well as biological and technological means have shifted (Society & Culture, n. d.). Moreover, utilizing the current knowledge about the differences in body sex, gender, and sexual identity to reframe conversations about our responsibilities to young children and families is critical to creating an anti-bias school climate (Flannery, 2016; Hughes, 2001; Newman, 2016). In the following section, additional basic skills for inclusive classrooms are addressed.

Biology’s Relation to Gender

The following story helps Kroeger to reframe pre-service teachers’ thinking about gender and the body. The following instance provided insights about gender ambiguity and how it mattered in early childhood. The story, with scientific elaboration from my co-author Regula, also provides a starting point for my pre-service teachers as I expose them to more than the simplest developmental stage of gender permanence commonly taught in child development courses.

Concurrent to my earliest salaried preschool position in a public school setting with many types of children, including typical and atypically developing children, medically fragile children, etc., a mother describes her child as *unique* at birth. During our first conversation about the child’s early history, she explained that at birth she and her husband had genetic testing done in order to determine the child’s biological sex. The child was four years old, and his appearance and behavior gave no clue that his sex had been in question. One would not guess there had been any confusion at his birth, just by knowing him or seeing him.

The mother further explained that making a decision about the child's name happened only upon learning a chromosomal make-up of X Y denoted a genetic male. His parents had been confounded at his birth, due to undescended testicles and ambiguous genitalia, so determining or assigning gender was impossible for this family until they obtained genetic information.

This story about “gender-ambiguity”³ is a good example to help pre-service teachers see the relevance of inclusion. The example helps me as a teacher-educator do two things: 1) provide an opportunity to discuss the idea that gender is more complicated than simple appearance and/or genetic (phenotypic sex) agreement of male or female with external genitalia (gonadal sex); 2) establish a clear rationale with pre-service students about how crucial it might be for them to build enough rapport with parents in their classroom so as to allow families to share information that is both sensitive, private, and uncommon.

As I am teaching today, I remind students that the important parts of this story are not parents' choices for electing for genetic testing, or the idea that one's genitals might not be formed “correctly,” but how little biology we are commonly taught. Yet biology is a main factor that underpins critical and essential physical and sometimes social aspects of gender development as well as identity. There is a complex interplay between hormones, the body, one's gender, and sexual identity.

In teacher education, this story provides a segue to talk about human development and how unlikely teachers are to learn about or commonly discuss anything beyond the male/female binary while undergoing their own teacher education. I have learned from this parent and many others to become more comfortable discussing what makes us male or female and to deconstruct the male/female gender binary that we commonly subscribe to and in turn teach to the young (Blaise, 2005; Thorne, 1993). Deconstructing the gender binary is especially central when children are gender non-conforming in their social habits and play.

Regula reminds us here that when most people refer to an individual's sex, they are referring to phenotypic sex, or the endpoint of a physical developmental process that results in the formation of external genitalia. Breaking apart the categorical binary of boy and girl allows us to discuss how pre-natal hormonal influences (that of the growing child and the mother) combine with post-natal social experiences and available gender behaviors to form human sex and gender [see Hughes, 2001 for a review of established embryology of the reproductive system (Hines, 2010; Quigley, 2002)].

Furthermore, gender is made up of at least three parts: 1) gender biology (our bodies or our biological sex and the interpretation of the external genitalia at birth so as to assign the legal sex); 2) gender expression (how we dress, act) and; 3) gender identity (how we feel inside) (Blaise, 2005; Hughes, 2010; Newman, 2016). Moreover, the gender binary is related to sexuality or sexual orientation, but it *is an altogether a separate construct* (consisting of who we are sexually or

³ I wish to sincerely thank the “anonymous” mother (who I called after 27 years) who helped me gain clarity to write this section.

romantically attracted to) which may or may not lead to our abilities to procreate in common ways (Newman, 2016).

Kroeger reminds pre-service teachers that what we know about human development, as well as the complex physiological and hormonal changes taking place *after conception but before birth*, is biologically based, quickly changing (but knowable), and based upon science of the body *and* the brain. Kroeger also describes moments in which children who are typically biologically male or female engage in play behaviors in the classroom which would suggest they identify heavily with the opposite gender than their body sex entails. Parents commonly look to their child's preschool teacher for both knowledge and support related to gender in such instances, and there are a host of materials to help with questions (Hughes, 2010; HRC, n.d.; Newman, 2016).

Kroeger and Regula argue here (this edition) that because the appearance of our bodies (body sex) has played such a role in determining our gender in our society, it might *seem* as if the appearance of our bodies is the most important part of our gender (along with reproductive structures). But today, because of what we know about hormonal influences upon the body *and* the brain, it is probably the gender identity and gender expression that are far less understood from a biological or social perspective, and yet it *is specifically this understanding that might matter most in our ability to teach about and address gender issues*. Understanding gender roles, gender expressions, and gender physiology all matters when including children by using anti-bias curriculum (Derman-Sparks & the ABC Task Force, 1989).

Regula reminds us that while hormonal processes are occurring in the body (during pre-natal stages), the brain is also undergoing development directed by the influences of testosterone, estrogen, and progesterone forms (MacLusky & Naftolin, 1981). Major biological decision points directing the development of sex *at the 6 to 8 week point after conception, but prior to birth*, and the potential for individual differences that arise due to external factors are possible. For example, there are environmental endocrine disruptors, and maternal use of hormones or endocrine disrupting chemicals, some of which might be unknown to the mother (Colborn, vom Saal, & Soto, 1993; Timms et al., 2005). In the infant, genes control the production of any given hormone across all tissue, but not all tissues produce hormones at the same rates. As genes control the rate of hormone production in various areas of the body (e.g. see Jaenisch & Bird, 2003), these controls, coupled with the blood-brain barrier, protect the central nervous system (of the infant) by significantly limiting the materials (including hormones) that can reach the brain. Additionally, the reproductive structures (of the body) and the brain of the infant may be subjected to rather different hormonal micro-climates (Ballabh, Braun, & Nedergaard, 2004; Genezzani et al., 2000; McEwan & Alves, 1999;). As Regula demonstrates here, there are many biological influences on development which influence the child's body and brain. In some cases, this may make sex determination difficult due to ambiguous external genitalia. Individuals with this condition may be termed "intersex," (depending upon reproductive structures) and at times, this condition has precipitated surgical correction of the infant's genitals to make them more "normal" looking, and closer to the legal sex assigned to the child at birth (Dreger, 1998; Kessler, 1990).

Although biology is complicated, we review it here to explain that for most children the hormones, chromosomes, and physical features of gender are congruent, but for others these characteristics are not. When facets of gender biology and gender expression align, these individuals are said to be *cis-gender* (male/man/masculine; or female/woman/ feminine) and labeled by the outside

world as boys or girls (HRC, n.d.; Newman, 2016). In some instances however, children might not develop a gender identity aligned with their physical appearance.

For early educators, it is crucial to know that these children might be exploring a gender identity of the opposite sex, an expression which they may outgrow, *or*, they may come to accept this expression while not identifying as transgender. Additionally, they may eventually determine that they are *trans-gender*, with their gender identity (internal sex) being different than the biological sex with which they are born (Ehrensaft, 2011; Newman, 2016; Nutt, 2015). Such children, for whom their gender appears as one thing, may in fact have an internal experience that does not match their outward expression or appearance. For these children, the three facets of gender align quite differently; and it might be that these humans' brains have had differing levels of particular hormones at crucial in utero moments, leading them to feel as neither male nor female, but beyond, or what Ehrensaft has termed "gender creative" (p. 10). Moreover, children who are born intersex (and for whom early decisions about gender appearance and gender identity are made by physicians and families) may eventually reject the gender chosen for them at birth and transition into a different gender as they grow older (Mosso-Taylor, 2016; Newman, 2016).

For such children, the sense of being *both* male and female, or *neither* male nor female, might best describe their reality (Ehrensaft, 2011; Hughes, 2010, p. 1). School experiences, which primarily emphasize gender-conformity, can become mentally and emotionally challenging unless teachers and others support such children. A report from the Safe Schools for Transgender and Gender Diverse Students (National Association School Psychologist [NASP], 2014, p. 1) states:

Because transgender youth are so hidden, it would be easy to believe that these students are extremely rare. It is extremely difficult to estimate the prevalence of transgender students in school (Meier & Labuski, 2013)...The prevalence of self-identified transgender adults, however, has been estimated as 0.3% of the U.S. general population. (Gates, 2011)

We remind pre-service students and readers here that ignoring the science and assuming that there are only male and female options for children may unfairly strip children of their own interpretations and experience of their complex hormonal and physiological and social make up. Early childhood teachers need to know that gender is more than the appearance of the body. Under conditions of parent/teacher communications with families (especially in primary schools, in which communications tend to be only about achievement), it is even more important to be accepting of non-binary gender positions because such students and their families, no matter how rare, are part of the human condition.

Advocacy for Young Children within a School Climate

Advocacy work with the very young child includes using inclusive classroom strategies to support children, families, and peers (Gay, Lesbian, Straight Educators Network [GLSEN], n.d.). Ultimately, advocacy for the LGBT+ child or family will take different forms. Early Childhood teachers (EC) will evaluate their own knowledge about gender, sexuality, and new terminologies (HRC, n.d.; Hughes, 2011; Newman, 2016) and increase their knowledge of national policies in their own home countries that support building a healthy school climate. EC teachers can explore the ethical dimensions of providing inclusive, safe schools starting early. Knowing how to support gender non-conforming children, their

peers, or LGBT+ families is an important EC teacher know-how.

In this section, we discuss an example of how one EC teacher supported gender non-conformity in the classroom. We describe how she and a specific parent explored and surpassed their fears *together* as they changed a preschool classroom and a home to be more accepting of gender-expansive play. Kroeger explains the steps people took to eliminate bias, drawing upon resources about healthy parenting for gender non-conforming children (Parenting and Family, 2015). In the example, individuals were educating themselves as the EC pre-service teacher learned about and then explored gender identity, inclusivity, and school climate priorities with one parent.

Inclusive climates for young children constructing gender. Early childhood anti-bias work (Derman-Sparks & the ABC Task Force, 1989; Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010; Newman, 2016) is in line with other fields such as psychiatry, medicine, social work, and counseling in which there are many ways to reduce discrimination and support LGBT+, gender non-conforming children and families (Hawkins & Yehia, 2016; Jacob, 2013; McClain, Nutt, 2015; Poirier, 2015). We are seeing that in disciplines such as counseling, an emphasis has shifted toward acceptance and adaptation rather than gender or sexual conformity and punishment of LGBT+ children (Ehrensaft, 2011). Anti-bias strategies that emphasize acceptance, along with young children’s wisdom to solve diversity problems with support from the teachers, resonate with, what Dau (2001) describes, the development of teacher confidence.

Consider now an instance in Kroeger’s teacher education classroom when a pre-service teacher learned about and supported a gender non-conforming child in a field experience. This brief description captures some concerns between a pre-service teacher and a mother who is distressed that her biologically male four-year-old is exploring and seems to prefer traditionally feminine-gender princess-play (and has been for quite some time, despite strong discouragement from family members). The mother turns to the pre-service teacher in their first structured conversation with a request to “change him.”⁴

I have learned of a situation in which a child expresses to his EC teacher while coloring and discussing his upcoming birthday party, at which he wants purple balloons. The child said, “I am a pretend boy.”

The pre-service teacher continues that in his behavior and conversations in class, the child seems to long for flowing hair and to wear dresses like in the movie *Frozen*.

This EC teacher is especially nervous because the parent would like her to “fix” the child. The EC teacher is fearful of having conversations about the topic with the family, and the family is of a different nationality and faith than the teacher.

Creating an inclusive school climate in this instance was complicated for the pre-service teacher and family, but not much for the child. The pre-service teacher noticed that the child’s peers in this preschool accepted and played joyfully with him during princess-play. Over many months, the pre-service teacher’s initial fear turned to confidence as she set goals for herself, the child, and supported the

⁴ The episode, used with permission from parties, has been altered slightly to protect anonymity.

family in her teaching.

Using existing policies as a resource. As the EC pre-service teacher and Kroeger collaborated, they confirmed from educational sources that, “efforts to change a person’s gender identity are ineffective, harmful, and discriminatory” (NASP, 2014, p. 1). Yet, because they were also aware of the parent’s deep distress over the child’s gender-expansive play and that “rejecting parenting practices are directly correlated to gender-expansive and transgender youth being more depressed and suicidal” (Parenting and Family, 2015, p. 2)⁵, it was determined that our most crucial priority for this child was for his family to accept him more fully. Knowing further that the parent’s initial request to the pre-service teacher was to *fix* the child, make him play as his brother did with masculine themes and toys which were more traditional for his gender, Kroeger supported the pre-service teacher emotionally, as she rehearsed how she would tell the family she was uncomfortable changing the child.

In this instance, it was helpful for us to draw upon the position statement from *Safe Schools for Transgender and Gender Diverse Students* (NASP, 2014) and gender spectrum articles about healthy parenting for gender non-conforming children (Parenting and Family, 2015). The NASP document discusses how to support the well-being of the gender non-conforming child in peer culture, while genderspectrum.org describes what happens emotionally to children whose families are rejecting of their gender non-conforming children. Because we were concerned about the child’s and the family’s well-being, the pre-service teacher shared the information with the mother about the mental health concerns of such children, such as higher anxiety, suicidality, and depression (Parenting and Family, 2015).

The pre-service teacher supported the child’s emotional well-being by “respecting the right to modify their gender expression” and respecting children’s right to “explore and question” as they grow (NASP, 2014, p. 4). Such actions are direct strategies used to support the internal gender identity and expression of the child in concert with policy documents (NASP, 2014; United States Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights, 2010).

Strategies of support and taking a stand. The pre-service teacher generated open-ended questions to help the family frame their thoughts for themselves and their child in line with an inquiry-based parent-child-teacher project (Kroeger & Lash, 2011). The pre-service teacher successfully described for the family why she would not attempt to change the child’s gender expressions or reduce his gender-expansive play (her values do not subscribe to the idea that gender exploration, gender identity differences, or sexuality differences are abnormal). She would, however, happily support them in their desire for their child to expand play and play partners. While addressing these goals in the classroom, the pre-service teacher continued to share observations with the mother, supported the child’s inclusive play strategies and interest in materials, but most importantly, she earned the parent’s trust.

As we discussed anti-bias strategies in our university classroom, ideas from these documents and from a lecture on terminologies and biological influences were paired with ongoing short conversations between the professor and the pre-service teacher. The pre-service teacher addressed some of the parent’s concerns using concepts from class (e.g., gender terminologies, gay vs. gender non-conforming), but many strategies were created or utilized other sources (anti-bias

⁵ Retrieved September 8th, 2015

approaches), including the use of children's literature about difference. In concert with her assignments which were to adapt curriculum to meet children's needs, the pre-service teacher created experiences for the child across the full range of play and peer culture. Moreover, listening to the parent's concerns, observing the child, and building a genuine relationship while expanding both play materials and play themes seemed to make the parent and the child more at ease and trust the EC teacher.

Inclusive outcomes. As the semester progressed it was the EC teacher's on-going conversations with the mother, paired with a willingness to create a responsive but anti-biased approach, which helped this nervous teacher. Because the pre-service teacher, and increasingly the parent, became more knowledgeable (with the use of various resources), it seemed that acceptance was increasing. In turn, the mother stopped discouraging her child to explore the fuller range of gender through play. Over time, the parent came to terms with her child. As the relationships became more trusting, the mother began less concerned about her son's interest in play which was gender-expansive, even giving him sanctioned time home to do so before re-directing him. Furthermore, the pre-service teacher described for us in our university class how the gender-conformity expectations within the home decreased steadily as the EC pre-service teacher did anti-bias work.

Conclusions & Questions

We have described the challenges of LGBT+ youth and families, while providing our own ways of advocacy in EC teaching. We have argued that to better support young LGBT+ children, the field needs to apply the implications of the complex biological and hormonal changes taking place in utero after the gonadal sex is established, which might affect the child's gendered body and identity. We argue, that the end-point gonadal sex of the individual used to commonly determine gender (and often combined with gender permanence) is not a good enough concept to support the complex identity development of children and families in EC classrooms. Moreover, a biologically-informed understanding of gender expression, identity, and social roles is necessary. EC teachers are continuously providing information to families, therefore expanding parents' and teachers' resources to include ethical documents, policy frameworks, and educational materials with anti-bias can help with advocacy. We urge the EC field to work in concert with other parts of education to reduce homophobia, gender bias, and transphobia as part of the ethical responsibilities to young children (Jacob, 2013; McClain, Hawkins & Yehia, 2016; Nutt, 2015; Poirier, 2015). We want EC educators to understand the differences between bullying-prevention and an anti-bias approach, and recognize that reducing harassment is insufficient.

National leadership in the United States has changed drastically since the Obama administration's forward momentum for LGBT+ students. Today, several of the documents used to create this paper are no longer available on government presidential websites. Instead, the Human Rights Campaign has created a tipsheet to respond to Obama-era policy repeals (HRC, March 31, 2017). Therefore, utilizing anti-bias education is more important than ever in the early years. We take courage as we learn from others in the field, but we have questions as well. Firstly, is it possible to shape EC practice without teaching EC pre-service teachers about the special rights of transgender and gender non-conforming children under national laws and policies? Title IX and Title VI are the national laws influencing school climate that would ultimately protect LGBT+ individuals in the U. S. (National Center for Transgender Equality, 2012; United States Department of Education, 1997; 2010). However, writing about these laws in this

manuscript would have made it too long and irrelevant for readers from other countries. Secondly, when is it too early to teach the parents of children who are gender non-conforming or gender-expansive about their rights to a safe classroom and larger school climate? What happens when gender non-conformity is a dangerous punishable behavior in one nation (even warranting a death) and acceptable in another? If the parent of a gender non-conforming child chooses to move back to that conservative setting, has the EC teacher done a disservice in allowing that child to express gender-expansive play? Finally, what are the laws and rights of gender non-conforming children in other parts of the world?

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