

“They’re trying to trick us!”: Making sense of anti-oppressive children’s literature in the elementary school classroom

Kate Paterson, B.A.

Social Justice and Equity Studies

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St. Catharines Ontario

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Abstract

This study examines how children make sense of “anti-oppressive” children’s literature in the classroom, specifically, books that integrate and promote positive portrayals of gender non-conformity and sexual diversity. Through a feminist poststructural lens, I conducted ethnographic observations and reading groups with twenty students in a grade one/two classroom to explore how children engage with these storybooks. I further explored how the use of these books in the classroom might help to mediate and negotiate existing gendered and heteronormative beliefs and practices within educational settings. The books used in this study challenge oppressive gender and sexuality regimes within mainstream children’s literature that have traditionally served to marginalize and silence gender non-conforming and LGBTQ individuals. Responses from participants in this study aid in questioning how dominant discourses of gender and sexuality are produced and reinforced, as well as where we may find opportunities for change and reform within the elementary school classroom.

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Introduction

Background and context

According to Egale Canada Human Rights Trust, three quarters of LGBTQ¹ and ninety-five per cent of trans* students reported feeling unsafe at school (Taylor, Peter, Schachter, Paquin, Beldom, Gross, & McMinn, 2009). An additional seventy-five per cent of students reported hearing daily derogatory remarks directed at LGBTQ youth. Under the 'It Gets Better' campaign, many LGBTQ students are told to 'stick it out' until they can complete high school and enter the proverbial 'real world' where they may finally find solace and acceptance (Stelter, 2010). Unfortunately, not all will make it there. Not surprisingly, LGBTQ youth are at higher risk for depression and suicidal behaviours (Hatzenbuehler, 2011; Higa, Hoppe, Lindhorst, Mincer, Beadnell, Morrison, Wells, Todd, & Mountz, 2012; Russell, 2003; Taylor et al., 2009). One need only recall the story of Jamie Hubley from Ottawa, Ontario, a gay teen who committed suicide after experiencing homophobic bullying throughout elementary and high school (CBC News, 2011) to recognize the impact of such a toxic school culture. The 'It Gets Better' campaign, while perhaps admirable in its initiatives, is clearly not enough. As eloquently stated by Tina Majkowski (2011), "without saying as much, the message [of the campaign] is: Dear Queers, just wait it out and try not to die before we get around to making things better" (p. 164).

Elementary schools have been acknowledged as sites of gender policing in which heterosexist and homophobic practices and beliefs are defined and reproduced (Blaise, 2005a; Blaise, 2005b; Duke & McCarthy, 2009; Ryan, Patraw, & Bednar, 2013). Caitlin

¹ Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans* (denotes transsexual, transgender, and other identities within the gender spectrum), Queer & Questioning.

Ryan, Jasmine Patraw, and Maree Bednar (2013) draw further attention to the fact that elementary schools are not always inclusive in their education, misrepresenting or all together excluding those who fall outside the gender binary – the classification of gender into two distinct, separate, and opposite categories. The use of this rigid binary effectively silences and marginalizes gender non-conforming individuals, while also perpetuating stereotypically gendered beliefs and attitudes. The education system and curriculum also consistently portray heterosexuality as the only natural and implied sexual orientation, leaving children who do not identify with heterosexuality, or perhaps those who come from families with same-sex parents or LGBTQ friends or relatives, to feel excluded, marginalized, or invisible (Cloughessy & Waniganayake, 2014; Duke & McCarthy, 2009; Lindsay, Perlesz, Brown, McNair, de Vaus, & Pitts, 2006). Exploring possible avenues for acknowledging diversity and fostering acceptance within schools is of paramount importance for those individuals and families who are gender non-conforming or LGBTQ identifying.

Previous research suggests that gender-specific content found within many children's storybooks reinforces and validates a particular form of masculinity and femininity over others, prescribing certain gender roles by which young children often feel they must abide (Diekman & Murnen, 2004; Hamilton, Anderson, Broaddus, & Young, 2006). Such literature provides children with gendered scripts of what is considered to be socially acceptable ways of being a boy or a girl, which serves to legitimize and support the existing gender order in which men are systematically privileged over women (Baker-Sperry & Grauerholz, 2003; Oskamp, Kaufman & Wolterbeek, 1996; Taylor, 2003). Through the omission and silencing of LGBTQ

characters, children's books additionally portray heterosexuality as the only acceptable sexual orientation. These representations consequently render gender non-conforming or LGBTQ individuals as invisible, yet these books are still widely used within the classroom (Chick, 2008; Flores, 2012). Children's books in the classroom that fail to reflect diverse ways of being and acceptance of those who do not fit the norm may be a contributing factor to the perpetuation and reinforcement of narrow and limiting understandings of gender and sexuality.

Gabriel Flores (2012) echoes these sentiments by suggesting, "with a more inclusive multicultural education that includes LGBT themes, children may base their knowledge and beliefs on accurate information and, ideally, without fear and bias change negative attitudes" (p. 188). The desire to challenge existing gendered and heterosexist beliefs within the classroom has been noted by many researchers (Duke & McCarthy, 2009; Lindsay et al., 2006; Renold, 2002; Wilkinson & Pearson, 2009). However, there is only a small body of research pertaining to the use of gay-themed or gender variant literature within educational settings (Flores, 2012; Kelly, 2012; Rowell, 2007; Ryan et al., 2013). Jeff Sapp (2010) argues that it is important to address diversity, inclusion, and homophobic beliefs and practices in schools in the hope that such "early learning around difference can begin and spaces can open up in the classroom that acknowledge multiple sexualities and diverse family structures" (p. 33). As stated by Kay Chick (2008), "although research suggests only positive outcomes from the inclusion of children's literature with gay and lesbian themes in homes, schools and libraries (Chapman 1999; Cooper 2000; Garden 1994; Sennett 2001), we know that it is rarely present" (p. 16). Additional research on the diverse ways in which children engage with, and apply these

texts to their own lived experiences is still limited, reducing our knowledge on the topic. It is important to appreciate the value of considering children's ability to negotiate messages within children's literature from a place of thoughtful interpretation, underscoring the notion that children are active, rather than passive, participants in their learning process (Baker-Sperry, 2007). More in-depth empirical studies on the use of anti-oppressive children's literature in the elementary school classroom will help to enrich the body of knowledge pertaining to how children's books with themes of gender and sexual diversity are understood by young social actors, as well as how these understandings may help foster more inclusive learning environments.

Purpose

Given the presence of gender-specific ideology, heterosexism, as well as transphobic and homophobic bullying in schools, as noted earlier, there is a strong imperative to explore possible avenues for creating more socially just learning environments, particularly at the elementary level where perhaps these ideas can take root and grow from an early age. Children's literature is useful in providing representations of the social world that help children make sense of themselves and those around them, as well as holding the potential to introduce young readers to new possibilities and ways of thinking (Chick, 2008; Esposito, 2009). This thesis therefore examines the use of 'anti-oppressive' children's literature in the elementary school classroom. I define anti-oppressive children's literature as a subset of children's books that integrate and promote positive portrayals of gender non-conformity and sexual diversity, which remains separate and distinct from 'mainstream' children's literature (this will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 2). I have elected to explore anti-oppressive children's literature

because the representations of gender and sexuality within these books drastically contrast with that of the content within mainstream children's literature. It is important to note that the term 'anti-oppressive' might also encompass a broader range of social justice issues to be explored in children's literature, such as race, class, and ability. While acknowledging the importance of intersectionality, for the purpose of this thesis, I have chosen to narrow my focus to explore issues of gender and sexuality.

This study uses feminist poststructuralism to recognize how traditional children's books – particularly those that do not hold diverse representations of gender variant/LGBTQ characters – have served to define and reinforce dominant discourses and understandings of gender and sexuality. This perspective is useful in exploring what conditions of im/possibility have been constructed within children's books, and how anti-oppressive children's literature may disrupt these prevailing understandings by introducing new narratives, plotlines, and subject positions that were previously unavailable. Presenting children with literature that offers alternative depictions of gender and sexuality – such as gender non-conformity, transgender characters, and same-sex parents – may help to challenge traditional and arguably harmful representations, as well as provide a space in which dialogue and discussion around these issues can be explored, thus paving the way for greater inclusivity in the classroom (Ryan et al., 2013).

My study will therefore explore the following questions:

- 1) How do children make sense of gender and sexuality through anti-oppressive children's literature?
- 2) How might anti-oppressive children's literature be useful in disrupting dominant discourses of normative gender and heterosexuality?

Personal significance

This thesis is a continuation of my previous undergraduate honours research in which I explored children's understandings of gender in fairytales (Paterson, 2012). Findings from my former study suggested that gender-specific roles and values within fairytales reinforce stereotypes for young children in the form of dominant masculinity and emphasized femininity (Connell, 1987), while also ignoring representations of non-heterosexual families. Given what is known about the impact of children's literature on gender socialization (Baker-Sperry, 2007; Hamilton, Broaddus, & Young, 2006; Taylor, 2003), my study emphasized the importance of critically analyzing the representations of gender and sexuality in these texts, as well as exploring children's understandings of these messages. My previous research thus provides the background and context to ask how anti-oppressive children's literature might offer alternative discourses of gender and sexuality to young children.

As Andrea Doucet (2008) states, "perhaps the most important consideration, when we consider the relationship between our projects and our selves, is to reflect on and dissect the personal or political motivations that matter in how we come to our research topics" (p. 75, emphasis in original). My pursuit of this topic and my connection to it came about organically, both in relation to my previous research and personal life. It is no coincidence that I chose this topic around the same time I began to consider myself a member of the LGBTQ community and came out to my friends and family. My reasonings for pursuing this research and my connection to it, as stated by Doucet (2008), "matter in the motives that we bring to our research and in the claims that we make from our work" (p. 83). I feel a strong personal and political imperative to create space within

the elementary school classroom where discussions of LGBTQ issues, same-sex families, and gender variance can take place so as to proliferate what is considered 'normal.' I seek these spaces in the hope that queer and gender non-conforming lives may no longer live in the margins of society (hooks, 2000) and that we may no longer be bound by male-female dualism and be limited by a sanctioned, reproductive sexual orientation.

Chapter 1

Theoretical Framework

Feminist poststructuralism

Feminist poststructuralism, which underscores “the relation between language, subjectivity, social organization and power” (Weedon, 1987, p. 12), provides a framework to examine how knowledge, practices, ideas, beliefs, and values – particularly ones that often serve to subordinate or marginalize certain groups of people – are discursively produced and constructed as taken-for-granted ‘truth’ and ‘common sense’ (Weedon, 1987). A feminist poststructural lens through which to analyze how gender and heterosexual discourses are constructed within mainstream children’s literature highlights the power of these representations in shaping dominant understandings of gender and sexuality. Poststructuralism looks at the range of discourses that are available for subjects to take up, and how they have been constructed as ‘natural’ and perhaps inevitable. For example, the ‘correct’ positioning of one’s self as male or female, which requires strict adherence to numerous codes of speech, dress, and body language, have become profoundly naturalized to the point where gender is seen, by many, as an indisputable and inescapable component of life. This is evidenced by the ways in which people “take up their maleness or femaleness as if it were an incorrigible element of their personal and social selves” (Davies, 1989, p. x). Bronwyn Davies (1989) argues, however, “an assumption of poststructuralist theory is that maleness and femaleness do not have to be discursively structured in the way that they currently are” (p. 12), thus revealing the social construction of gender. By making visible the ways in which dominant discourses of gender are enacted in every day use of language and action, new possibilities, multiple

positionings, and understandings of ourselves outside of normative gender discourse may be revealed. Further, by using poststructural theories of language, discourse, subjectivity, and agency to explore how children make sense of anti-oppressive children's literature, we can begin to see how children participate in prevailing discourses of gender and sexuality through their talk and actions in the classroom, as well as open up the opportunity to take up new discourses and subject positions.

Language

From a humanist standpoint, language simply names and reflects our world in a fixed, linear fashion. This understanding, however, does not account for the varying and numerous meanings and definitions one can associate with any given term. Elizabeth St. Pierre (2000) argues,

One problem with this [humanist] theory is that it is difficult to produce enough names to match all the different things there are in the world, so often we are forced to group things/ideas/people that are similar but significantly different into the same category. (p. 480)

Poststructuralist theory addresses this problematic by asserting that there are multiple, shifting, and often contradictory meanings for any given term, further arguing that language *constructs*, rather than *reflects*, reality. As stated by St. Pierre (2000), "we word the world" (p. 483). By this, St. Pierre is suggesting that our very utterances, and the meanings and associations we attribute to the things in our world, are arbitrarily connected. Chris Weedon (1987) offers an explanation of the poststructural conception of language by alluding to Saussure's theory in which the meanings we have abstractly attributed (the signified) to sounds or written images (the signifier) to indicate objects,

people, and ideas are highly constructed and arbitrary, therefore having “no natural connection between the sound image and the concept it identifies” (p. 23). A feminist poststructuralist stance, therefore, illuminates how our conceptualizations of the world are thus reliant upon the language we use and, consequently, the implicit or apparent ‘truths’ we have delineated from these constructions. This denotes the sheer power of language to shape our world and our lives. In other words, since language serves to construct our social worlds, it becomes apparent that the repetition of language coheres over time to become rooted in discourse, resulting in our social realities being seen as ‘natural’ or ‘just the way things are’ (Butler, 1990). For example, as St. Pierre (2000) notes, “we see the power of gendered pronouns...to reconstitute the male/female binary every time we speak” (p. 275). Language is therefore instrumental in both constructing our worlds, as well as dictating what is possible. Trevor Purvis and Alan Hunt (1993) suggest that this shared consciousness, how people jointly make sense of the world that arises from such language, “has consequences for the direction and character of [our] action and inaction” (p. 474). Hence, an examination of how gender and sexuality are constructed within cultural texts and products that position these messages as stable and ‘true,’ sheds light on the shared, or common, interpretations of what are considered to be ‘normal’ expressions of gender and sexual orientation.

Within the context of children’s literature, we can see how language is constructed in these stories to define and reinforce normative understandings of gender and sexuality, functioning as a producer of discourse itself. Davies (1989) argues,

The division of the world into female and male is a consistent ordering device in children’s stories. Through hearing traditional narrative children learn to

recognise themselves and others as located within their own lived gendered narratives. Stories provide the metaphors, the characters and the plots through which their own positionings in the social world can be interpreted. (p. 43-44)

If we indeed “word the world,” it becomes possible to see how, from a poststructural perspective, children’s literature serves to construct particular realities. For example, by presenting children with storybooks that represent men and women as adhering to strictly traditional gender roles, certain conditions of im/possibility are constructed for them. While acknowledging that children are by no means passive social actors who simply absorb this information (Baker-Sperry, 2007), it is important to recognize the discourses produced and reified through the language used within children’s literature, as these representations and portrayals are, in part, a reflection of what is accepted and valued within contemporary society.

Discourse

According to M. J. Barrett (2005), “discourse is conceived as a set of beliefs and understandings, reinforced through daily practices, which frame a particular understanding of the ways we are in the world” (p. 82). As Dawn Currie, Deirdre Kelly, and Shauna Pomerantz (2009) note, “a discursive formation is produced when enough talk, text, and representation on a particular subject creates a distinctly new body of knowledge, one that appears natural and inevitable – as if it has always been there” (p. 47-48). Poststructuralism is itself a discourse that we can operate within and use in order to examine how other discourses function in society. Discourses provide shared cultural narratives for us to reinforce and reproduce within a given situation or context, offering organizational modalities through which we think, act, and function in the world. As

Barrett (2005) suggests, we are constantly performing within discourse, strengthening, reifying, reproducing, and negotiating understandings of ourselves and of those around us. These modes of being – for example, what it means to be a ‘boy’ or a ‘girl’, or to desire certain bodies – are produced and reinforced over time, becoming naturalized and part of what we consider to be ‘true.’ St. Pierre (2000) states,

Once a discourse becomes ‘normal’ and ‘natural,’ it is difficult to think and act outside it. Within the rules of a discourse, it makes sense to say only certain things. Other statements and others [sic] ways of thinking remain unintelligible, outside the realm of possibility. (p. 485)

Language is closely related to discourse, as “discourse is not specifically a language or text, but is the effect of language practices” (Barrett, 2005, p. 82). For this reason, “discourse is embedded in ... the meanings we attach to the words (signifiers) we use, and the rules we use to determine what ‘makes sense’ or is possible” (p. 82).

While our social realities and understandings of the world are deeply entrenched within discourse, it is possible to negotiate discourses, and take up new ones. Michel Foucault (1978) reminds us of the malleability of discourses through his examination of the history of sexuality, emphasizing how there was once a time in which sexuality was not reprimanded, but celebrated. Foucault (1978) illustrates how language serves to construct social rules and discourse, for example, he states, “calling sex by its name thereafter became more difficult and more costly. As if in order to gain mastery over it in reality, it had first been necessary to subjugate it at the level of language” (p. 17). Foucault (1978) emphasizes how speech utterances both shape and fit within what is allowable and possible within a given historical context or discourse. He further cites

ensorship regarding the repression of sexuality, “where and when it was not possible to talk about such things became much more strictly defined” (p. 18). This highlights the power of language in terms of shaping and constructing our realities.

Feminist poststructuralists use conceptions of discourse – particularly how shared sets of meaning and social practices produce, reproduce, and challenge power – to examine what has been constructed as taken-for-granted truth and how these structures, beliefs, and understandings serve to limit opportunities and further marginalize certain individuals or groups of people. One can see how discourses operate throughout mainstream children's literature, particularly in those books that sharply define and reinforce gendered and heterosexual categories. As stated by Elizabeth Marshall (2004), “literature for children has a particular history invested in disciplining young readers into normative heterosexual femininity and masculinity” (p. 261). Davies (1989) further states, “in passing language on to children we also pass on a relative entrapment in the social order” (p. 1). It is in this way that we can see the language and messages within mainstream children's literature as cohering to create accepted knowledge about who and what girls and boys can and cannot be, as well as which bodies men and women should be desiring.

Subjectivity

Poststructuralists argue for a subjectivity that is “precarious, contradictory and in process, constantly being reconstituted in discourse each time we think or speak” (Weedon, 1987, p. 33). Following this perspective, our conceptions of who we are, what we can do, and what we are *supposed* to do as individuals are constructed through our constituting discourses, and the subject positions we assume, rather than stemming from

an internal sense of self (Barrett, 2005). Subjectivity is produced, in large part, by language, as well as the ways in which the subject speaks into existence a range of discourses. Weedon (1987) states, “this range of discourses and their material supports in social institutions and practices is integral to the maintenance and contestation of forms of social power, since social reality has no meaning except in language” (p. 34). It is noteworthy, then, to examine the available conditions of possibility and the subject positions that are afforded by children’s literature that so frequently reinforce gender dualism. Davies (1989) acknowledges the imperative for children to position themselves within the gender binary, “in learning the discursive practices of their society children learn that they must be socially identifiable as one or the other [male or female]” (p. 2). Barrett (2005) further elaborates, “with each speaking and acting, the poststructural self takes up discourses available, and in doing so, is constantly (re)inscribed as a subject within a category” (p. 83). The representations of these categories and subject positions – for example, clearly defined understandings of what it means to be a boy or a girl – are outlined within children’s texts, encouraging readers to take up those positions and accurately perform one’s gender within its constructed boundaries. Such a subject position holds implications for how we view ourselves in the world around us, as well as functioning to naturalize these particular identity categories.

It is important to note the contention between humanist conceptions of the inward, stable self that has been challenged by poststructuralism. According to Alison Jones (1997), the act of ‘taking up’ subject positions, a common expression within poststructuralist theory, contradicts the poststructuralist belief that we cannot speak of an essential self. Jones (1997) cautions, the use of ‘take up’ may lead one to believe that

there is a “‘doer’ behind the deed”, (Butler, 1990, p. 34), a pre-discursive self who is endowed with agency to *choose* to take up particular subject positions. Davies (1997) adds to the discussion, recognizing that while we cannot escape humanism altogether, perhaps “the subject as it is understood in post-structuralism... can only engage in *apparent* acts of choosing, or positioning, or of experiencing the self as an agent” (p. 271, emphasis in original). While the debate is far from over, Davies (1997) offers a possible explanation through which to conceptualize how young children can ‘take up’ various subject positions. She cautions, however, in doing so, we must acknowledge that such a choice is constitutive, constrained, and embedded in discourse.

Agency

Poststructuralism recognizes that people are not wholly determined by discourse, but rather are embedded in a process of constant negotiation. According to Judith Butler (1990) “when the subject is said to be constituted, that means simply that the subject is a consequence of certain rule-governed discourses that govern the intelligible invocation of identity” (p. 198). She makes an important distinction, stating that the subject is not passively determined by these rules, instead, is found as “regulated [through] a process of repetition that both conceals itself and enforces its rules” (p. 198). This repetition, what Butler refers to as ‘performativity,’ constructs a supposed naturalness of these subject positions and presents them as ‘truth’. She argues, “gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time” (Butler, 1990, p. 45) to create the illusion of a natural gender identity. Gender is therefore relational and reliant upon the anticipation of performativity, “an expectation that ends up producing the very phenomenon that it anticipates” (Butler, 1999 preface, p.

xv). She explains that this repetition results in the anticipation of acts and gestures, creating a “hallucinatory effect” of a naturalized gender identity (p. xv-xvi). She additionally states, “there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (Butler, 1990, p. 34).

Butler acknowledges the trepidation many feminists have with the claim that “gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed” (p. 34), for this statement conjures some concern over the concept of agency and how we are to enact change without an active, *choosing* agent. Poststructural theory offers some insight into this conundrum, suggesting that since we are born into discourse, rather than speaking of an essential self from which agency is often thought to derive, “people are ‘subjects of’ cultural narratives, or storylines” (Barrett, 2005, p. 83). Following this, Butler’s (1993) assertion that the “‘I’ neither precedes nor follows the process of this gendering, but emerges only within and as the matrix of gender relations themselves” (p. xvi) perhaps does not dispute the existence of the ‘I’ but rather recognizes that it is engrained within discourse and must take the contexts in which it emerges into consideration. This sentiment is captured well by Bronwyn Davies, Jenny Browne, Susanne Gannon, Leckie Hopkins, Helen McCann, and Monne Wihlborg (2006) who state:

The subject does not have an existence that lies outside of or prior to these acts of formation.... In becoming that possible subject, however, it reiterates and confirms those conditions that make it, and go on making it, possible. Those

conditions of possibility are embedded not in discourse alone, but in mutually constitutive social acts. (p. 426)

Davies' explanation echoes Butler's (1990) argument that gender is relational, as well as "a set of *repeated* acts" (p. 45, emphasis added), those that create the illusion of an intelligible gender identity. She states, "'agency,' then, is to be located within the possibility of a variation on that repetition" (p. 198). While agency cannot be understood as being removed from discourse, there is, however, the opportunity to "take up discourses that disrupt hegemonic cultural narratives" (Barrett, 2005, p. 87), thereby igniting the possibility for change.

The gender order

The exaggeration of difference between men and women in children's literature results in a myriad of gender specific roles and attributes and a corresponding gender hierarchy where men are privileged over women. The prevailing discourses responsible for these representations can be seen as maintaining the existing gender order and institution of heterosexuality that have long served to organize and control our lives. Additionally, which children's books sell and generate revenue is largely indicative and reflective of the themes and representations within the stories. Those that stray from normative portrayals of gender and sexuality quickly go out of print (Chick, 2008), again, effectively maintaining the gender order. According to Steven Seidman (2010), "gender is perhaps the basic dimension through which individuals perceive the social world and their place in it" (p. 308). Raewyn Connell (2009) further suggests,

Gender is a key dimension of personal life, social relations and culture. It is an arena in which we face difficult practical issues about justice, identity and even

survival....most gender orders, around the world, privilege men and disadvantage women. (p. ix-x)

Connell (2009) makes an important point that the current existing gender order serves to privilege men and subordinate women. Connell (1987) further argues, "it is the global subordination of women to men that provides an essential basis for differentiation. One form is defined around compliance with this subordination and is oriented to accommodating the interests and desires of men" (p. 183). This arrangement is, as alluded to earlier, perceived as being inevitable and 'natural' due to the discursive ways in which these distinctions are constructed. Consequently, such a gender order will be reproduced and strengthened over time so as to maintain these 'natural' power relations. As Gail Boldt (1996) argues, "if we believe that there are gender roles that are natural, normal, or true, then we are justified in seeking or creating laws, policies, scientific and medical explanations and practices that protect those spheres from violation" (p. 118). While discourses that offer alternatives to these traditional understandings of gender do exist, they are less frequently available due to the fact that they "risk challenging the power relations that reinscribe masculinity and femininity" (Barrett, 2005, p. 85).

It is also necessary to consider the socially inscribed effect of gender, recognizing the "desire to correctly constitute ourselves within the discourses available" (Barrett, 2005, p. 85). Since gender so intimately shapes our lives, it becomes nearly impossible to discard normative gender binaries when so many of our social institutions and structures revolve around this existing order. As Butler (1990) states, "the very injunction to be a given gender takes place through discursive routes: to be a good mother, to be a heterosexually desirable object, to be a fit worker, in sum, to signify a

multiplicity of guarantees in response to a variety of demands all at once” (p. 199). To do away with gender as we have always known it, or perceived it to be, would be to also challenge the discourses that have governed our lives and social relations. Butler (1990) further contests, “the loss of gender norms would have the effect of proliferating gender configurations, destabilizing substantive identity, and depriving the naturalizing narratives of compulsory heterosexuality of their central protagonists: ‘man’ and ‘woman’” (p. 200). Thus, the repetition of gender, the reinforcement of a binary through consistent performative acts that take place by the individual, as well as through the language and discourse constructed through children’s literature, further creates the illusion of a stable, natural gender identity, and, to reiterate Boldt (1996), serves to “protect those spheres from violation” (p. 118).

It is possible, as well, to view children’s literature as functioning to maintain the gender order by way of ‘gender policing,’ akin to Foucault’s (1977) theory of the surveillance society, wherein internalized discipline and self surveillance serve as a means of maintaining societal power and control. This theory is based on Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon (Foucault, 1977), a circular prison in which the guard remains in a central watchtower and can therefore observe every action within the surrounding cells, while prisoners themselves are believed to be under the constant, watchful eye of their superior. This functions as an effective tool and metaphor for explaining self-regulation. Foucault (1977) states, “this enclosed, segmented space, observed at every point, in which the individuals are inserted in a fixed place, in which the slightest movements are supervised, in which all events are recorded...all this constitutes a compact model of the disciplinary mechanism” (p. 197). The idea is that the prisoners will feel as though they

are being constantly monitored even when there is no longer a guard present in the watchtower, thereby exercising discipline over each individual and instilling a sense of self-surveillance. The same theory can be applied, according to Foucault (1977), to schoolchildren in which under the perceived watchful eye of their teacher and fellow classmates, "there is no copying, no noise, no chatter, no waste of time" (p. 201). He further states, "hence the major effect of the Panopticon: to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (p. 201). A similar connection can be made to children's literature that distributes cautionary tales pertaining to the importance of adhering to one's given gender. According to Marshall (2004),

Foucault's theories provide leverage for thinking about how everyday childrearing practices and materials, such as children's literature, arise as sites of power/knowledge.... The arsenal of children's literature continues to be guided by adult preoccupations about appropriate material for young minds.... These anxieties surface in discourses of femininity and masculinity circulating within the texts. (p. 262)

The pervasiveness of gendered representations within children's literature serves as this regulatory force, providing children with the idea that gender conformity is everywhere, indicating the need for constant self-surveillance. The Panopticon metaphor can also be extended to 'gender policing,' particularly when "children discursively position themselves as boys or girls in their play, thus reifying the dichotomous nature of the construction of gender through peer interaction" (Baker-Sperry, 2007, p. 718). Such interactions have been known to indicate the duality of gender, as children typically

reinforce the traditional gender roles presented to them. As stated by Kelly, Pomerantz, and Currie (2006), "there is a felt moral imperative to get gender 'right' or risk being seen as abnormal within one's social networks" (p. 7). This perhaps indicates the force and salient power of gender policing in terms of maintaining strict gender codes and boundaries for children to abide by, therefore further reinforcing the existing gender order.

Compulsory heterosexuality

The maintenance and perpetuation of the gender order is intricately connected to the preservation of the institution of heterosexuality, in which clearly identifiable male and female bodies are presumed to desire each other. Butler's (1990) theory of the heterosexual matrix illuminates this interwoven connection between intelligible genders and desire:

A hegemonic discursive/epistemic model of gender intelligibility that assumes that for bodies to cohere and make sense there must be a stable sex expressed through a stable gender (masculine expresses male, feminine expresses female) that is oppositionally and hierarchically defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality. (p. 208, note 6)

Butler expresses the function of maintaining the illusion of a stable gender identity, in that "the disciplinary production of gender effects a false stabilization of gender in the interests of the heterosexual construction and regulation of sexuality within the reproductive domain" (p. 184-185). Again, Foucault (1978) traces the regulation of sexuality, wherein "the conjugal family took custody of [sexuality] and absorbed it into the serious function of reproduction.... The legitimate and procreative couple laid down

the law” (p. 3), thereby igniting the creation of ‘illegitimate’ sexualities and relations. We can therefore see how the preservation of the gender order – the strong imperative to perform one’s gender in an intelligible manner – falls within the institution of compulsory heterosexuality. Furthermore, by exaggerating difference between the sexes, Butler (1993) argues that such difference is “in the service of the consolidation of the heterosexual imperative” (p. xii).

Butler’s theories illuminate how interactions between boys and girls indicate strong understandings of traditional gender roles, as well as heterosexual normalcy in the classroom. According to Boldt (1996), “to be ‘normal,’ to have the well-being, privilege, and sanction that go with normalcy, one’s physical sex, gender, and sexuality must be enacted in particular ways” (p. 114). By portraying heterosexuality as a normal, morally correct identity within children’s literature, it becomes easier to view the differences between men and women as something natural and essential to our social order. Asserting a heterosexual identity through the performance of gender has become a means by which one can clearly and accurately present one’s status as a man or a woman. As heterosexuality has transformed into an institution that organizes social life, as well as a way to demonstrate a normal, healthy, *correct* view of sexual and gender identity, homosexuality has been contrastingly depicted as ‘unnatural,’ sinful, and worthy of punishment (Foucault, 1978). This further reinforces a sexual hierarchy that “produces and consolidates gender” (Butler, 1999, p. xii).

Finally, as Connell (1987) suggests, “if the difference [between men and women] is natural why does it need to be marked so heavily?” (p. 80). Failure to perform gender to cultural or societal expectations may shatter the illusion and expose gender as a

construct, rather than something inherent, “that regulatory ideal is then exposed as a norm and a fiction that disguises itself as a developmental law regulating the sexual field that it purports to describe” (Butler, 1990, p. 185). Recalling again Foucault’s (1977) metaphor of the Panopticon, gender policing, and surveillance, Butler (1999) asserts, “under conditions of normative heterosexuality, policing gender is sometimes used as a way of securing heterosexuality...it is not heterosexual normalcy that produces and consolidates gender, but the gender hierarchy that is said to underwrite heterosexual relations” (p. xii-xiii).

Disrupting dominant discourse through poststructuralism

Through an exploration of how representations of gender and heterosexuality manifest in mainstream children’s literature, we can see the reiterative power of discourses at play in serving to construct certain normative understandings of how the existing gender order operates and how this preserves and reinforces the institution of heterosexuality. Accordingly, these discourses are enacted in a way that Butler (1993) references as being the “reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names ... [and] the reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains” (p. xii). It is in this way that discourses of gender and sexuality regulate and constrain our understandings of what it means to be men and women. To not take up such subject positions is to perhaps be perceived by others as abnormal or inadequate (Davies, 1989; Kelly et al., 2006). It therefore becomes crucial to ask how might children be introduced to new subject positions whereby they may imagine themselves as individuals not limited by a strict gender binary and heteronormative discourses. Poststructuralism suggests that by examining how discourses

operate to maintain privilege and power and further, "making visible the dominant and constructive forces of language practices and the ways in which they inscribe and position us" (p. 84), we can use this knowledge to disrupt these understandings and offer up alternatives. Davies (1989) notes,

The polarized social structure, created through a multitude of different discursive practices, is something individuals can attempt to change through a refusal of certain discursive practices or elements of those practices, and by practising new and different forms of discourse. (p. 13)

While agency and 'choice' in this context are by no means removed from discourse, referring to Butler's (1993) earlier assertion that discourses are "reiterative and citational" (p. xii), she further contests "'agency,' then, is to be located within the possibility of a variation on that repetition" (p. 198). A means through which to offer that "possibility of a variation" may be found through the use and integration of anti-oppressive children's literature in the classroom that disrupt and challenge prevailing understandings of gender and sexuality.

As previously mentioned, is important to note that as opposed to viewing subjects as passive and solely shaped by discourses alone with little possibility for variation or active agency, we must understand subjects as being part of a constant process of resistance and negotiation. According to Weedon (1987):

Although the subject in poststructuralism is socially constructed in discursive practices, she none the less exists as a thinking, feeling subject and social agent, capable of resistance and innovations produced out of the clash between contradictory subject positions and practices. She is also a subject able to reflect

upon the discursive relations which constitute her and the society in which she lives, and able to choose from the options available. (p. 125)

Davies et al. (2006) further references Butler to argue that subjects indeed have a “radically conditioned agency, in which they can reflexively and critically examine their conditions of possibility” (p. 426).

In a particularly powerful statement, St. Pierre (2000) argues, “we are ethically bound to pay attention to how we word the world” (p. 484). She contends that we must examine how our language operates under humanist and positivist desires for truth and stability that translate to very real-world structures of domination, “categories, binaries, hierarchies, grids of intelligibility based on essences – that reward identity and punish difference” (p. 484). I therefore suggest that the worlds created through the language and discourses at play within mainstream children's literature are creating structures of oppression and dominance by reinforcing the gender binary and positing heterosexuality as the *only* acceptable, ‘natural’ sexual orientation. In doing so, children are presented with very rigid representations of what it means to be male and female – let alone the idea that one *must* fall within the identity category or risk stigmatization – as well as the notion that romantic relationships are limited to that of courtship or marriage between men and women. The possibilities for variance and negotiation within the texts themselves are practically non-existent.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Children's literature is by far one of the most salient sources through which young children are introduced to socially sanctioned beliefs, values, and attitudes (Baker-Sperry, 2007; Taylor, 2003). Commonly viewed as a valid form of entertainment and a legitimate source of knowledge, children's literature populates the bookshelves of school classrooms and libraries, offering the opportunity for young readers to explore and engage with a variety of plotlines and adventures. It is important to consider, however, the messages within these books, particularly what is being constructed and presented to children as taken-for-granted knowledge or implicit 'truth.' Much like the majority of popular culture texts, it is critical to recognize children's literature as being a powerful producer of discourse. As Davies (1989) states, "as children learn the discursive practices of their society, they learn to position themselves correctly as male or female, since that is what is required of them to have a recognizable identity within the existing social order" (p. 13). It is through mastery of dominant discourses of masculinity and femininity that children are able to adopt and maintain a particular gender identity in order to accurately reflect their status as males or females.

While a variety of agents and institutions teach children socially accepted definitions of what it means to be a 'boy' and a 'girl', children's literature is perhaps one of the most powerful sources through which such ideologies are defined and reinforced. As Jennifer Esposito (2009) argues, "people use popular culture texts to make sense of their worlds and to become familiar with those who they may not have personal experience with. This is especially true of children" (p. 65). Nancy Taber and Vera

Woloshyn (2011a) further suggest, “children’s literature is no more benign than any other form of cultural pedagogy” (p. 226). Scholars have noted the impact of children’s literature in helping to shape children’s views of the world, themselves, and those around them (Diekman & Murnen, 2004; Uttley & Roberts, 2011), underscoring the need to examine the messages within stories that reify narrow and traditional understandings of gender and sexuality. While analyses of gender in children’s literature is not a new endeavour, the ways in which children make sense of these messages and apply them to their own lives deserves more attention. Additionally, though there is still resistance to non-normative gender expression and sexualities, there is increasing recognition and acknowledgment of the existence of multiple gender and sexual identities. As a result, we might expect children’s literature to reflect these changes, since storybooks often serve to reflect and inform readers of the society in which they live (Chick, 2008; Davies, 1989; Gooden & Gooden, 2001). However, mainstream children’s literature is still limited to representations of traditional gender roles and behaviours as well as heterosexuality. It is therefore imperative to examine the use of anti-oppressive children’s literature that integrates and promotes positive portrayals of gender non-conformity and same-sex families, and how their use in the elementary school classroom may contribute to more socially just, inclusive learning environments.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to ascertain the exact intentions of each children’s book author and whether or not the pervasive representations of gendered and heterosexual characters are part of a larger religious, political, or moral agenda. Therefore, when examining children’s literature, it is helpful to obtain a brief history of the *institution* of children’s literature. Jack Zipes (2001) suggests that while many

children's book authors may have particular doctrines that they wish to disseminate through their writing, the work they produce is always part of the larger institution of children's literature, an institution that is constantly shifting and changing. At its inception, children's literature was seen as a tool to educate the masses as well as instill religious and educational sensibilities. Zipes (2001) argues that a variety of factors such as age, gender, and social class went into the production, distribution, and reception of these books. He states, "it was and still is the need of the socioeconomic order that dictates how children will be formed and what forms are or are not acceptable" (p. 46). Successful production, distribution, and reception of children's books are thus reliant upon the publishing industry in which only particular books will appeal and sell to the broader public. It follows, then, that the content within the majority of mass-marketed, mainstream children's literature will be formulated to follow a carefully regulated and standardized script that is part of the larger culture industry. This formulaic component to children's books, according to Zipes (2001), transforms the "young, curious reader... into a homogenized reader, dependent on certain expectations and codes that make it appear the world is manageable and comforting" (p. 8). Thus, children's books that do not follow dominant understandings of, for example, gender and sexuality, will perhaps remain within the margins of the publishing industry and will not be widely used or accepted by the public. Of course, recognizing that authors of anti-oppressive children's literature undoubtedly have their own rules, regulations, and pressures as to what is deemed 'publishable material,' these books still hold depictions that may be considered drastically different from that of mainstream children's literature.

Zipes (2001) reminds us that 'children's literature' is an ambiguous category with multiple and contradictory definitions. He states, "there is nothing definitive about a text or a book that automatically demands that it be classified as a children's book" (p. 65). Throughout this thesis I will be referring to 'mainstream' or 'traditional' children's literature as the books that reflect dominant and hegemonic discourses of gender and sexuality. Furthermore, in my use and evaluation of children's literature, I will be focusing solely on children's picture books, particularly those that are written for young readers in grades one and two (typically children ages 6-7).

Gender in mainstream children's literature

The ongoing trend in the portrayal of gender within children's literature has been overwhelmingly one of male superiority and female subordination, specifically emphasizing the perpetuation of traditional gender roles and the gender binary. This inequality continues to reinforce the notion that men and women have essentialized traits, values, and expectations. Arguably, as the roles of men and women shift², one might expect gender representations within children's literature to reflect these changes. However, in a content analysis of character representation in 83 children's picture books between the years 1995-1999, Angela Gooden and Mark Gooden (2001) found that stereotyped images of male and female characters were still ubiquitous. For instance, male characters "were seldom seen caring for the children or grocery shopping and never seen doing household chores" (p. 96), reinforcing the notion that men and women have a socially defined set of roles and are unlikely to step outside of those boundaries. In a similar study conducted by Mykol Hamilton, David Anderson, Michelle Broaddus and

² The gains of second wave feminism have been well documented, yet many of these changes have not been reflected in children's literature.

Kate Young (2006), female characters were found to be “three times more likely than male characters to perform nurturing or caring behaviors” (p. 761), again supporting traditional gender roles and expectations, including the belief that women should devote their time and energies to caring for others. The authors suggest that female characters are under-represented and heavily stereotyped within children's books, contending that “modern children's picture books continue to provide nightly reinforcement of the idea that boys and men are more interesting and important than are girls and women” (p. 764). In keeping with this argument, the authors found that 33 out of 37 male characters were portrayed as having stereotypically masculine occupations, while female characters were rarely seen holding occupations outside the home. Despite the growing trend of more fathers staying home while women enter the workforce (Doucet & Merla, 2007), children's books have failed to reflect these changes. The omission of changing gender roles within children's stories may highlight the power of children's literature “to reproduce societal norms, teaching children (and reminding adults) of what is considered normal and acceptable” (Taber & Woloshyn, 2011a, p. 227).

Taber and Woloshyn (2011a) emphasize that the content within children's literature functions to reinforce dominant understandings of “proper femininities and masculinities” (p. 227). In their analysis of gender within three popular children's books, the authors found “clear boundaries in the ways in which the female and male protagonists act and think” (p. 239). In a similar study that explored the representation of gender in Governor-General award-winning Canadian children's literature (Taber & Woloshyn 2011b, p. 889), the authors found that female characters were “more likely to be engaged in traditional activities and roles. Female characters who responded to the call

for adventure and/or who took up male-dominated actions usually did so only after male characters were no longer available, able, or willing to do so” (p. 899). Amanda Diekman and Sarah Murnen (2004) had similar findings in their examination of gender roles within children's books categorized as 'sexist' and 'nonsexist.' They found that books deemed as 'nonsexist' still “portrayed at best a narrow vision of gender equality, in which women adopt male-stereotypic attributes and roles” (p. 381). It is important to note that these female characters still maintained traditionally feminine qualities. In contrast, male characters were not found to take on female roles or qualities but rather maintained their masculinity. The expectations, values, and qualities associated with prevailing understandings of what it means to be male and female are perpetuated throughout these stories in which there are few alternatives to the norm.

Taber and Woloshyn's (2011a, 2011b) and Diekman and Murnen's (2004) studies demonstrate that even when there is an attempt to represent female empowerment or a new conceptualization of gender roles, this progression is limited to women subscribing to traditionally masculine qualities, resulting in the perpetuation of a gender hierarchy in which masculine traits and roles are continuously valued over the feminine. Further, as Marshall (2004) states, “in terms of children's literature, the focus centers on how girls' attributes are similar to or different from those of boys” (p. 259). Diekman and Murnen (2004) indicate that even when female characters are represented in a more 'progressive' manner, they are still confined by feminine qualities that limit their ability to take action. For example, the portrayal of female characters in children's literature, and the media at large, tends to place high importance on women's physical appearance and attractiveness (Baker-Sperry & Grauerholz, 2003; Harriger, Calogero, Witherington, & Smith, 2010;

Kwan & Trautner, 2009; Murnen, Smolak, Mills, & Good, 2003). Lori Baker-Sperry and Liz Grauerholz (2003) examined this portrayal of female characters within traditional fairytales and sought to investigate how the feminine beauty ideal – “the socially constructed notion that physical attractiveness is one of women’s most important assets, and something all women should strive to achieve and maintain” (p. 711) – was sustained through the stories, noting the changes (or lack thereof) of feminine beauty portrayed in fairytales as women gained greater social status and equality. They argue that the pursuit and maintenance of a particular physical appearance that is in line with dominant discourses of femininity and social requirements plays a central, organizing role in women’s lives, acting as a “beauty ritual” (Dellinger & Williams, 1997 as cited in Baker-Sperry & Grauerholz, 2003, p. 711). The actual physical portrayals of female characters within children’s literature, particularly fairytales, follow a normative script that reinforces traditional gender stereotypes and idealized physical traits (Paterson, 2012). According to Kate Paterson (2012), the most common physical traits for female characters in fairytales include: blonde hair, large eyes with long eyelashes, pink lips and cheeks, pale skin, and an over exaggerated hourglass figure. Baker-Sperry and Grauerholz (2003) further asserted that this emphasis on external, aesthetic sources of power function as a means of social control and regulation over women’s lives, whereby the internalization of the norms and values associated with feminine beauty – such as passivity and subservience – serve to restrict women’s goals and aspirations. As stated by Baker-Sperry and Grauerholz (2003), “value constructs such as ‘nice girl’ or ‘feminine beauty’ operate as normative restrictions by limiting women’s personal freedom and

laying the 'groundwork for a circumscription of women's potential for power and control in the world' (Fox 1977, 816)" (p. 712).

Several researchers have examined the portrayal and representation of gender within mainstream children's literature, noting in particular the ways in which male and female characters subscribe to traditional gender roles and expectations. Overall, male characters were found to be traditionally masculine: adventurous, independent, aggressive, and violent; female characters exhibited traditional femininity: domesticity, passivity, and nurturing and caring qualities. It is argued that "children's books provide their audience with cues about life – in particular, about what goals and social norms are available and appropriate for members of their sex" (Oskamp, Kaufman, & Wolterbeek, 1996, p. 27). Ultimately, narrow depictions of characters adhering to traditional gender roles and expectations may negatively impact children's understandings of themselves and others as being part of a strict gender binary.

Heteronormativity in mainstream children's literature

Heteronormativity is closely linked to how children's books represent narrow, dominant, essentialist understandings of gender through the stereotypical portrayal of male and female characters. As Karin Martin and Emily Kazyak (2009) observe, "by elementary school, children have a heteronormative understanding of the world" (p. 316). One avenue through which children become aware of normative sexuality, and consequently implied heterosexuality, is through the portrayal of heterosexual romance and the nuclear family in children's literature. Three children's books examined by Taber and Woloshyn (2011a) were shown to "demonstrate a heteronormative reinforcement of traditional femininities and hegemonic masculinities" (p. 239), while Marshall (2004)

adds, children's literature "has a particular history invested in disciplining young readers into normative heterosexual femininity and masculinity" (p. 261). Neal Lester (2007) further argues, "such early indoctrination, even unconsciously, impacts young minds quickly learning the parameters of what is deemed socially and morally right and wrong" (p. 57), suggesting that "children's texts perpetuate a limiting heteronormality that negatively impacts identity development for those who do not fit in this model of behavior and desire" (p. 58).

While empirical studies on heterosexuality in children's literature are lacking, one need only turn to what are considered to be classic fairytales – *Snow White*, *Cinderella*, and *Sleeping Beauty*, all of which are predicated on heterosexual romance as the main plot – to appreciate the pervasiveness of heteronormativity in children's literature. Even in storybooks or fairytales where marriage and romance are not the primary narrative, secondary references to heterosexuality are still perceptible, perhaps providing the underlying idea that heterosexuality is ubiquitous and unanimously accepted by society. These plots suggest to the young reader that in order "to live the proverbial 'happily ever after,' boys and girls must perform the omnipresent and omnipotent heterosexual script" (Lester, 2007, p. 69). What is particularly noteworthy about the portrayal of heterosexuality in children's texts is that not only are these relationships depicted as inevitable, they are also presented as "transformative, powerful, and (literally) magical" (Martin & Kazyak, 2009, p. 324). When dialogue or narrative are lacking during 'romantic' scenes between male and female characters, authors and illustrators of these tales appear to rely on illusions, both through text and imagery, and perhaps the reader's own assumptions of heterosexuality, in order for the reader to imagine how the characters

are feeling. This is particularly evident within the animal kingdom which “tell[s] a moral-driven narrative that essentializes messages about sexuality and the body by animating a story told ‘in nature’” (Griffin, 2000, p. 30). Heterosexual romances that are told from the point of view of an animal, a plot that frequents many fairytales, such as *The Frog Prince*, further normalizes and displays heterosexuality as innate.

The consistent representation of heterosexuality within children's literature teaches young readers “heteronormative messages about which kinds of people are worthy of love, respect, and protection and which are not” (Ryan & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2013, p. 143). The pervasive portrayal of heterosexual characters and nuclear families in children's books undoubtedly contributes to heteronormative discourse in the classroom, in which alternative sexual identities and family structures are silenced. Lester (2007) notes the value of using more inclusive – or anti-oppressive – children's literature in the classroom that might help to lessen homophobia and conventional heterosexual narratives.

Children's engagement with children's literature

As a result of its frequent use in the classroom setting, children's literature provide a medium to investigate how children interpret these messages and apply them to their lives and views of the world around them (Baker-Sperry, 2007; Trousdale & McMillan, 2003). According to Frank Serafini and Lindsey Moses (2014), “children's literature provides a window through which young readers can explore the world” (p. 467) and often “provides a platform for children to experience people, places, and circumstances that they may not be able to experience in real life” (p. 466). As previously mentioned, children's literature presents socially sanctioned ways of being for men and

women, girls and boys, moms and dads, providing a conceptual framework through which to view gender and sexuality. It is important to note, however, that children's books are by no means comprised of static or fixed messages. Instead, as Stuart Hall (1993) suggests, children's literature holds cultural codes that have become "profoundly *naturalized*" (p. 132, emphasis in original) in which "the operation of naturalized codes reveals...the depth, the habituation and near-universality of the codes in use" (p. 132). Thus, the messages, beliefs, and values regarding gender and sexuality within children's literature can be seen as *dominant*, rather than *determined*. Hall (1993) refers to these particular readings of texts as "preferred readings" (p. 134) in which the dominant, explicit messages within a given story are easily noticed by the reader due to the fact that these "preferred meanings" have the whole social order embedded in them as a set of meanings, practices and beliefs: the everyday knowledge of social structures" (p. 134). Consequently, children's interpretation of messages within literature should not be construed as linear or static, rather, dominant or 'preferred readings' of the text may be revealed, while leaving open the possibility for a multiplicity of understandings.

We must also garner an appreciation for the diverse and complex ways in which children engage with, and interpret children's literature. For example, while many believe that the use of LGBTQ-themed or anti-oppressive children's literature may help build tolerance and acceptance, broaden children's minds and reduce stigmatization (Flores, 2012), it is important to consider the diverse ways children interact with text and that they may not willingly take up the messages within anti-oppressive literature. Davies (1989) suggests:

Feminist stories are about providing narrative structures in which new ways of resolving existing conflicts are presented ... the feminist story is constrained by something of a double bind: if the primary focus is just on new images and the story fails to confront the issues and conflicts surrounding gender as it is experienced and understood, then it cannot adequately generate new possibilities. (p. 47-48)

Davies (1989) explored *The Paper Bag Princess* by Robert Munsch (1980), a story in which the main character, Elizabeth, “experiences the multiple and contradictory subject positionings we each experience in our everyday lives” (p. 59). The text demonstrates a dramatic departure from that of a traditional fairytale plot. Davies (1989) underscores the ways in which children take up this text, revealing the children’s multiple and differing comprehensions. In her study, Davies (1989) found that many children were unable to view Elizabeth, the main character who defeats a dragon and does not end up with the prince at the end of the story, as a heroine. According to Davies (1989), “most children believed Elizabeth should have cleaned herself up and then married the prince” (p. 60). She further states, “it is possible to see that the story that is heard is subtly different for each child, this difference relating in part to the subject position she/he takes up in the story ... and in part on her/his understanding of gender relations” (p. 60). Baker-Sperry (2007) builds upon this assertion, explaining that children’s expectations of gender are “essential to the process of interpretation and the construction of meaning” (p. 717). In her study of children’s responses to the popular tale, *Cinderella*, she found that students’ prior perceptions and understandings of gender resulted in the children refusing to

question “basic gendered assumptions embodied in many images and characterizations in the text, nor did they explore alternatives” (p. 721). The children in Baker-Sperry’s study willingly accepted and related to the gender discourses within the story, emphasizing, for example, the importance of feminine beauty, as indicated by the girls’ desire to be perceived as feminine to their peer group, “[reinforcing] their positions as girls and as knowledgeable of the feminine world” (p. 722). This could be due to the children’s desire to be accepted and seen as ‘normal’ within their peer group. These studies underscore that it should not be assumed that all children who read anti-oppressive stories would appreciate, relate to, or comprehend their divergence from traditional gender roles and heteronormativity. Likewise, some children may be more willing than others to take up the messages and discourses offered through particular stories. According to Ryan et al. (2013), many students in their study engaged with LGBTQ children’s books in ways that indicated an awareness and understanding of issues of gender and sexuality. It is important to recognize the complexity of children’s responses to text, and appreciate that “children are *inventive* and *resourceful* social participants in the preservation (reproduction), interpretation, and formation of their social world as they actively interpret the social world by constructing the meaning of social messages” (Baker-Sperry, 2007, p. 717, emphasis in original).

Anti-oppressive children’s literature: Content and uses in the classroom

Children’s literature that incorporates themes of diversity and inclusion, such as those that focus on same-sex families, LGBTQ issues, transgender or gender-nonconforming characters, have begun to emerge, yet have also been met with contention. For example, *And Tango Makes Three* by Justin Richardson and Peter Parnell

is a children's book that tells the true story of two male penguins at the Central Park Zoo who wish to have a family. This book, which includes a discussion of same-sex coupling, was number one on the American Library Association's Top Ten List of the Most Frequently Challenged Books of 2010 and has remained one of the most widely challenged and controversial children's books for its 'inappropriate homosexual content' (American Library Association, 2011). While children's books with LGBTQ or gender-non-conforming themes are not necessarily censored at the government level in Canada, they remain restricted and prohibited within many local schools and libraries (Howard, 2005; Spence, 2000). Additionally, as I have found in my efforts to select these books for use in this study, many titles have gone out of print and are difficult to access.

In a review of LGBTQ children's literature, Sapp (2010) found that the books fell within six themes: "visibility for same-sex parents, celebrations of family diversity, love and marriage, adoption, biography, and gender variance" (p. 33). The books selected were compared with previously evaluated children's literature, dating back to 1989, in order to note how "their storylines, images and depictions of gays and lesbians have changed, and to critique the evolving quality of these works" (p. 33). Sapp's (2010) findings suggest that while older works "lacked the elements of quality literature that children would want to read over and over again" (p. 38), the books seemed to focus more on increasing visibility of LGBTQ issues and people, perhaps a reflection of the political and social climate in which those books were published. In comparison, more recently published children's books had more nuanced and complex storylines, in particular, portraying "how boys and girls genders [sic] can grow up with character qualities that traditionally have been attributed to one gender and not the other" (p. 37).

Still, issues of gender conformity and stereotypes surfaced throughout the literature. For example, Sapp (2010) notes that fathers portrayed in LGBTQ children's books often have a difficult time accepting gender diversity, while female characters – including mothers and grandmothers – love and accept their children for who they are. This reinforces the essentialized belief that women are more naturally loving and caring, while men have difficulties with emotion. As stated by Sapp (2010), “stories that position all men as homophobic and all women as accepting actually reinforce heteronormative gender roles, the exact opposite of the intent of many of these books” (p. 38).

Chick (2008) further highlights limitations within gay-themed children's literature, suggesting that some stories represent stereotypes, thereby perhaps reinforcing homophobic beliefs and attitudes. She states, “the lack of developmentally appropriate content and believable characters in *Heather Has Two Mommies* makes it difficult for children to identify with the story's plot or protagonist” (p. 17); whereas Esposito (2009) contests that the same children's book “inscribes heteronormativity on the lesbian family” (p. 62). Esposito's (2009) argument underscores the power of popular culture to construct meaning. She suggests, “texts, including children's picture books, with lesbian characters help construct what lesbianism is. Thus, popular culture's role in the construction and understanding of identities is especially true for those populations who fall outside of the dominant culture” (p. 65). By limiting gay-themed literature to fit within traditional heteronormative scripts, these stories are falling under the “lesbian [or gay] families are ‘just like’ heterosexual families [and should therefore be accepted]” (p. 74) rhetoric, resulting in a limited approach that preserves heterosexual privilege. Esposito (2009) states that if such texts “are not continually critiqued, it will become

more difficult to recognize how texts that presume themselves to be 'progressive' are inscribed with hegemonic values" (p. 77). Jasmine Lester's (2014) examination of queer-themed picture books echo Esposito's findings, in which LGBTQ children's books may promote the acceptance of queer individuals and same-sex families, provided they follow sanctioned understandings of the nuclear (heterosexual) family – including monogamy, and the privileged ability and desire to reproduce. Still, as posited by Ryan, Patraw, and Bednar (2013), anti-oppressive children's literature, while acknowledging its limits and critiques, can be used as a starting point to disrupt dominant discourses and understandings of gender and sexuality in the classroom. Specifically, these books offer the opportunity for children to "question restrictive social systems, think more inclusively about gender expression and identity, and apply this knowledge to other experiences" (p. 83).

A number of researchers have theorized about, and advocated for the use of anti-oppressive or gay-themed literature in the classroom, suggesting in particular how these books may challenge the current restrictive and exclusionary curriculum within elementary education (Chick, 2008; Cumming-Potvin & Martino, 2014; Flores, 2012; Kelly, 2012; Rowell, 2007; Sanders & Mathis, 2012). While it is important to consider the limitations of anti-oppressive children's literature, as outlined in the section above, it is perhaps equally important to take note of its positive implications. As Chick (2008) states, "gay-themed literature also affords children of gay parents the opportunity to validate their experiences and see themselves and their families in the books they read" (p. 15-16). By including these books in the classroom and encouraging a discussion around their themes and messages, perhaps "families comprised of same-sex parents or

those who have gay and lesbian family members or friends will feel that the people they know and love are evident in materials used in their child's school" (Rowell, 2007, p. 29).

A small body of literature has examined the use of gender variant and LGBTQ children's books in the elementary school classroom and how children engage with these books. For example, Ryan et al. (2013) used a case study approach to explore how an elementary teacher utilized children's literature to address LGBTQ issues in her grade three classroom. The teacher, admittedly passionate about social justice issues, developed classroom lessons to explore issues of gender nonconformity in relation to transgender and LGBTQ characters in children's literature. Results of this study indicate the usefulness of children's literature in opening up discussions of gender and sexuality in the classroom, and underscores that by connecting the stories, as well as the teacher's and students' personal reflections to curriculum, "the curriculum *becomes* the antibullying policy" (p. 102, emphasis in original). Ryan et al. (2013) emphasize that students in their study were able to make meaningful and lasting connections to the lessons communicated by their teacher, and suggest the value of using inclusive materials – such as LGBTQ children's literature – in the classroom. Conversations with students about the messages within these books "moved from discussions of traditional gender roles and expressions, to an expansion of those ideas, to explorations of gender nonconformity, to the recognition of people whose gender identities might not match their biologically assigned gender" (p. 92), suggesting that the integration of such literature and discussions in elementary classrooms can "[provide] a space for students' vast knowledge about gender rules—gained from their own experiences, from the experiences of people around them, and from popular culture—to be voiced and sometimes even challenged and expanded"

(p. 92). The authors argue that children are capable of – and ready for – discussions of gender diversity within the classroom, and that the use of children's literature that explores themes of gender variance may be an effective way of doing so.

Kelly's (2012) study supports these findings through her examination of a kindergarten teacher's interpretations of student responses to children's literature that included same-sex families. Kelly (2012) suggests that introducing alternative discourses in the classroom through children's literature does not have to be difficult. Instead, she argues that her research "demonstrates that children can understand families/possible families from multiple and diverse perspectives" (p. 298) and further advocates for the usefulness of these texts.

Chapter 3

Methodology

I have selected qualitative, feminist poststructural ethnographic research as the methodology for my study. Qualitative research seeks to examine social processes and practices with the goal of exploring the creation of meaning and interpretation (Neuman & Robson, 2012). Feminist research, more specifically, places “the social construction of gender at the centre of one’s inquiry” (Lather, 1988, p. 571), recognizing gender as a fundamental organizing principle that gives shape to our lives. An overt goal of feminist poststructural research is to appreciate how knowledge, language, and power are intertwined and enacted within discourse. In speaking with participants and offering a space where they can engage with, and negotiate dominant discourses, I aimed to highlight the power of language to give meaning to experience, since, as Weedon (1987) states, “experience has no inherent essential meaning. It may be given meaning in language through a range of discursive systems of meaning, which are often contradictory and constitute conflicting versions of social reality” (p. 34) This use of language provides us with a discursive framework through which to interpret our lives and the world around us, and informs us of what is socially desirable and appropriate. Certain individuals and groups of people can therefore be seen as having been constrained and defined by particular discourses and narratives that have been reinforced over time and, consequently, perceived as ‘truth’. Recognizing that experience cannot be viewed as unmediated, as it is always rooted within discourse, a poststructuralist approach to research opens up discussion on how “different statements and different material and political conditions might be possible” (St. Pierre & Pillow, 2000, p. 4). By

providing a forum through which participants may negotiate alternative discourses, the socially constructed and regulated production of knowledge becomes visible, and thereby susceptible to possibilities of change and reform (Barrett, 2005).

Traditional ethnographic research is grounded in positivist assumptions and understandings of experience, language, and what is considered 'knowable' information. This type of ethnography is concerned with accurately describing and characterizing the culture of a particular group of people, detailing the shared beliefs, values, language, and behaviours of that group in ways that are neutral and accessible to outside readers (Creswell, 2013; LeCompte & Schensul, 1999; Pomerantz, 2008). According to Deborah Britzman (2000), "there is a belief and expectation that the ethnographer is capable of producing truth from the experience of being there and that the reader is receptive to the truth of the text" (p. 27-28). These basic tenets of ethnographic research would render it an impractical methodological approach for poststructuralists who recognize the social construction of and contradictions within language, knowledge, and experience. A *poststructural* ethnography, however, provides the ideal methodology for my study. In poststructural terms, the 'truth-seeking' component to ethnographic research is mitigated, and in its place is the goal of showing how both the researcher and participants engage with, participate in, and negotiate a range of discourses and practices. According to Pomerantz (2008), "to do poststructural research is to foreground the impossibility of unmediated representation by reflexively analyzing the discursive forces in which researcher, researched, and research process are intertwined" (p. 25). My desired approach to conducting research in a school setting – in which I sought to immerse myself in the classroom and become an accepted part of the class' culture – renders a

poststructural ethnography as the ideal framework to explore how students engaged with discourses of gender and sexuality both in and out of the reading groups, and how I, as a poststructural researcher, make sense of these observations.

Methods

Recruitment

Participants were recruited from a grade one/two classroom in an urban public elementary school (which I will refer to as Mayfair Elementary) in a large Western Canadian city. This particular school and grade were chosen due to my previous volunteer and research experience at Mayfair during which I have volunteered as a teacher's assistant in various classrooms over the past six years and conducted my undergraduate research in one of their grade one/two classrooms. My prior experience in the school has helped me develop strong working relationships with staff and administration that has undoubtedly aided my research. Upon approaching the school principal and Ms. Wright³, the grade one/two teacher, their support of my study was evident. For example, the principal felt it was important that she write a cover letter for my recruitment/letter of consent to be sent out to the parents of students in the classroom. This letter explained my previous experience volunteering at Mayfair, my undergraduate research, a brief explanation of my current study, and stated that my research had been granted ethical approval from the school board. This letter, along with a combined recruitment/consent letter, was sent out to all parents of the students in the class. The recruitment/consent letter described the details my study and clearly stated that participation was voluntary and parents may choose to withdraw consent at any time.

³ Name has been changed.

These letters were sent home with each student in their school agenda (Ms. Wright's routine method for sending and receiving school letters and forms) and were returned to myself within the week.

Participants

I recruited twenty participants, eight girls and twelve boys between the ages of six and seven years old from the grade one/two classroom. This grade and age were selected due to my previous volunteer experience at Mayfair Elementary, which granted me access to this particular classroom and grade level. Additionally, the anti-oppressive children's literature selected for this study was at a similar reading level to books typically used in the grade one/two classroom, rendering it an ideal grade for my study to take place. It is important to note the demographics of the area as to how they may have impacted responses from students and influenced the results of my study. The majority of participants were white, with four students who were non-white. There was also wide variance amongst participants from very low socio-economic status (SES) to very high SES backgrounds. These factors were reflective of the overall demographics of the neighbourhood and the school from which my sample was drawn. The community in which the school resides is politically conservative and comprised of mostly affluent, well educated, working professional families. Mayfair also welcomes students from other neighboring communities, some of which are largely comprised of lower SES, working-class families. Since many students in this study were from higher SES households, it is possible that they may have had greater access and exposure to knowledge of social justice issues, thereby potentially impacting their responses to the anti-oppressive children's books. Students from racialized, lower SES, or working-class households may

have held different understandings of these issues⁴. However, it is also important that I did not place certain expectations on participants simply by virtue of their non-racialized/racialized or SES status. While acknowledging the importance of intersectionality and how social categories such as race and class intersect with understandings of gender and sexuality, to suggest that students from racialized or low SES households would not have knowledge or appreciation of social justice issues would be to place unfair assumptions upon them. Likewise, to assume the converse about students from more affluent, higher educated households would place certain expectations upon those participants. As Davies (1989) states, “class and race are not unitary, nor determining features of persons, but labels that we use to group people with” (p. 23). I therefore recognize the potential limitations in my study in having participants from predominately white, middle-class backgrounds, while also acknowledging that these social categories are not solely indicative of how they may or may not engage with anti-oppressive children's literature.

Ethics and consent

This study received ethical approval from Brock University Research Ethics Board (REB) and the school district's research ethics board. An additional letter of consent was required from the teacher in order to conduct ethnographic observations in her classroom (see Appendix B). Letters of consent (see Appendix C) were distributed to

⁴ There is a body of literature that suggests level of education, occupation, and SES may be contributing factors to more socially liberal beliefs or political mindsets. For instance, according to Schoon, Cheng, Gale, Batty, & Deary (2010), higher levels of education and occupational status may contribute to individuals holding more socially liberal perspectives. They state, “social background, cognitive ability, education, and own social status influence perceptions of society” (p. 144). Additionally, Perry, Irizarry, & Fair (2013) note the effect of SES in terms of support for same-sex marriage. They suggest that those with a higher SES may be more likely to support marriage equality than those from lower SES backgrounds.

the parents of all students in the classroom, requesting their permission for their child to participate in the reading groups. The one student who did not receive consent to participate stayed in the classroom with the remaining students while I conducted my reading groups. After permission was granted from parents, I explained my role to the students, stating that I was both volunteering in their classroom and asking for their help with a project for my own school. Students in the reading groups were required to provide verbal consent and were offered the opportunity to opt out at any time should they wish not to participate. Students were continually reminded that they did not have to participate or respond to my questions or prompts. Ongoing verbal and non-verbal consent were required from the students to participate in this study. For example, if students appeared apprehensive (i.e. silent, appearing nervous, fidgeting, etc.) about responding to questions, they were not forced or encouraged to respond and were not penalized for a lack of participation. For the most part, students were only called upon to respond to questions in the reading groups if their hands were raised. Pseudonyms were provided to all participants after the data was transcribed.

Anti-oppressive children's books

Six anti-oppressive children's books were selected to use in this study. The following section explains the challenges in terms of content and availability of anti-oppressive children's literature, the process I experienced when searching for and selecting books, the content of each book as it relates to gender, sexuality, and anti-oppression, and how they were used in the reading groups.

Selecting the books

It is important to note that children's literature that contains transgender, gay, and lesbian content is still fairly recent (Sapp, 2010), making my selection of books fairly narrow in comparison to that of more broadly available mainstream children's literature. B. J. Epstein (2012) additionally notes that gay-themed children's books can be problematic in their representation of same-sex families, in that they are "aimed at making GLBTQ parents seem acceptable and like any other parents. They emphasize that these families are as good and normal and loving as heterosexual ones" (p. 289), perhaps suggesting that non-heterosexual couples can and should only be accepted provided they still abide by heteronormative ideals. As well, while there are books that include discussions of gender variance (Sapp, 2010), children's books that explicitly contain transgender characters are fairly limited, again, narrowing my selection to that of a few books.

Chick (2008) and Sapp (2010) also state that gay-themed literature can lack interesting plot lines and narratives that are easily understood, believable, or compelling to children. I was therefore also conscious of selecting books that I thought would be appealing to young readers in terms of plot line, character development, and artistic representation. As such, when selecting the books for this study, I took these challenges into consideration and sought to provide a range of anti-oppressive children's books that included representations of non-traditional gender roles and activities, a transgender character, and same-sex families that did so in such a way that did not seem to overtly limit or narrow character representation.

I began my search for books by reading articles and websites that boasted lists such as, “best LGBTQ children’s books”, “feminist children’s books”, and “children’s books that challenge traditional gender roles.” I visited self-proclaimed feminist bookstores in Toronto, Ontario, asked friends, colleagues, and professors for recommendations, and sifted through book reviews on goodreads.com. What I found, however, was that many of these books seemed to either fall flat on character or plot development, rendering the book dull and unappealing, or did not encompass the anti-oppressive themes I wished to focus on. For example, many books about challenging traditional gender roles simply had a female character take on a decidedly ‘masculine’ role, yet the narrator would be sure to remind readers that the character was ‘still a girl,’ suggesting a very limited understanding of gender fluidity. Other books had female characters – again, performing a more traditionally masculine behaviour or activity – participate in heterosexual marriage at the conclusion of the book, perhaps implying that even girls who stray from the norm can still ‘get the guy.’ In many ways, the books I ended up selecting for this study still adhere to a binary understanding of gender in which male and female characters are seen as adopting a few feminine and masculine traits or activities while still maintaining their position as gendered characters. However, as explained in greater detail in the data analysis section, these books also opened up the opportunity to discuss gender variance with participants in such a way that underscored both their traditional, and negotiated understandings of gender.

I came across similar difficulties when searching for children’s books with transgender characters, which are also limited both in terms of availability and content. Two books I had initially ordered positioned transgendered people as strange, unusual,

and placed heavy emphasis on traditional gender roles and traits. For example, in one book, a young boy wished he could be a girl, so the 'wish fairy' replaced his hockey skates with 'pretty figure skates' and filled her closet with floral clothing and headbands for longer hair. These representations hinder the concept of gender fluidity by emphasizing a very rigid gender binary, effectively providing the message that people are either male or female, with no room for variation. As corroborated by Lester (2014), "Children's books that feature transgender children as main characters... maintain normative, binarist ideas about gender. These stories present the idea of two opposite genders and no other options" (p. 251). The transgender book I selected to use in this study is visually appealing, focuses on the thoughts and feelings of the main character, and approaches transgender issues in a respectful, thought-provoking manner that does not seem to place such heavy emphasis on a rigid gender dualism.

While there are more books with same-sex families to choose from, it was difficult to find ones that were interesting in terms of plot, character development, and artistic representation. As previously stated, many of these books seem to focus on increasing LGBTQ visibility, instead of writing a compelling, enjoyable story for young readers. The three same-sex family books I selected have interesting visuals, plots and characters, and each encourages a discussion of same-sex families in thoughtful and constructive ways.

While no text is without its challenges in terms of representing LGBTQ and gender non-conforming individuals in non-offensive, non-stereotypical, and non-normative ways, the following books were selected with the intention that the plot and character representations would generate thoughtful discussion with students and offer

alternatives to traditional portrayals of gender and sexuality within mainstream children's literature:

1. *The Paper Bag Princess* by Robert Munsch
2. *Ballerino Nate* by Kimberly Brubaker Bradley
3. *10,000 Dresses* by Marcus Ewert
4. *And Tango Makes Three* by Justin Richardson and Peter Parnell
5. *King & King* by Linda de Haan and Stern Nijland
6. *Molly's Family* by Nancy Garden

Content and use of the anti-oppressive books

When selecting the books to use in this study, I purposefully chose ones that could be read in a particular order in the reading groups. The first book we read, *The Paper Bag Princess*, was selected to introduce students to a discussion of gender. *The Paper Bag Princess*, written in 1980, is a popular and well-known children's book by Robert Munsch. Many of the children in my study confirmed this by telling me that they had read it before and knew exactly what would happen. Munsch's story presents a departure from that of the traditional fairytale plot and has long thought to be an example of a feminist children's book. In the story, Princess Elizabeth, armed with knowledge and brainpower, saves Prince Ronald from a dragon, only to reject him and dance off into the sunset by herself. However, what initially appears to be a tale of female-empowerment ends up revealing complex understandings of male and female gender roles. I used this story in my undergraduate study as well because it provided an opportunity to approach a discussion of gender – focusing in particular on how Princess Elizabeth did or did not conform to traditional femininity – with students through a story that was familiar to most

of them, which perhaps offered a smooth and welcoming start to my reading groups. This book was therefore selected for the present study for the same reasons.

Ballerino Nate, written in 2006, is a story about a young boy who develops a love of ballet dancing but is conflicted when his brother consistently states that ballet is for girls. The plot follows Nate's journey as he grapples with his brother's criticisms, yet follows his passion regardless. The story strikes me as somewhat problematic in that it reassures readers that boys do not have to wear pink dresses or shoes in order to be a ballet dancer, and the book concludes by stating that boy dancers are not called "ballerinas," but "*ballerinos*." Even with these limitations, the book provided an opportunity to discuss gender roles and activities with the students, this time with regards to a male character participating in a traditionally feminine activity.

The third book we read in the reading groups was *10,000 Dresses*. Written in 2008, the story follows a transgender child, Bailey, who does not "feel like a boy" and dreams of beautiful dresses every night. When Bailey tells her family about the dresses, her parents and brother disapprove and tell her that she's a boy and should not be talking about such things. Bailey eventually finds companionship when she meets an older girl who accepts her for who she is. As previously mentioned, this book was selected due to its thoughtful and respectful portrayal of a transgender character. Discussions with the first two books segued nicely to *10,000 Dresses*, which deepened the conversation with students and further illuminated their understandings of gender and gender variance. For example, in *10,000 Dresses*, the author uses female pronouns throughout the book and tells the story from the main character's perspective, providing the ideal opportunity to discuss gender identity with participants.

According to Sapp (2010), the book, *And Tango Makes Three*, written in 2005, is one of the most widely banned and controversial gay-themed children's books available. The true story, which tells the tale of two male penguins that wish to be parents like the other penguins at the Central Park Zoo, was primarily selected for this study due to its compelling plot, the fact that it is a true story, and has interesting visuals. The book, while unfortunately still positing heterosexuality as the social norm, introduces the concept of same-sex families to young children, opens up discussion as to what is considered a family, and how two same-sex parents might have children. It was by coincidence that Ms. Wright happened to teach a lesson to the students on penguin families the week before I read *And Tango Makes Three*. This provided a great opportunity to introduce students to discussions of same-sex parenting and connected what they had learnt in the classroom with the anti-oppressive storybook.

King & King, a non-traditional fairytale written in 2000, tells the story of a young prince whose mother insists he choose a princess to marry, even though the prince states that he "never much cared for princesses." A twist in the plot, in which a princess arrives with her brother, Prince Lee, reveals that the prince would prefer to marry another prince instead. The story is filled with brightly coloured illustrations and disrupts the traditional heteronormative narrative within many fairytales, making it an interesting book to discuss with students and compare with traditional fairytales they may have heard in the past.

Finally, *Molly's Family*, written in 2004 by Nancy Garden, was chosen due to its more 'real life,' applicable representation of same-sex families. This book tells the story of Molly, a kindergartener who draws a picture of her family, which consists of her two moms, Mom and Mama Lu. One of Molly's classmates, Tommy, notices the picture and

tells her that she cannot have two moms. Molly struggles with Tommy's comments and is unsure of whether or not to bring her picture back to school for their classroom's open house night. This story was selected because it portrays a situation that takes place within a school classroom and may therefore be understood as more 'real' to students, whereas the two previous books on same-sex families take place within the animal world and fictional kingdom. *Molly's Family* opens up a discussion of same-sex families, discrimination, and the importance of acceptance.

Ethnographic observations

For six weeks, I spent three hours every morning in the grade one/two classroom concurrently volunteering and collecting data. In an effort to make my presence in the classroom as comfortable and unobtrusive as possible, I assisted with regularly scheduled lessons, activities, and supervision, including library time, art projects, spelling, and writing exercises. This immersion in the classroom enabled me to become a welcomed and accepted member of the class. Students came to expect my presence and treated me as if I were another teacher in their classroom. For example, students would frequently ask me for help with their work and referred to me as "Ms. Paterson." My involvement in the classroom provided me the opportunity to conduct informal ethnographic observations of the classroom. In order to adhere to ethical requirements, these observations remained general and were not specific to any individual student or interaction. The goal of these observations was to report on the dominant discourses that I witnessed taking place within the classroom so as to contextualize and frame the responses from students during the reading groups. Observations were recorded in my field notes at the conclusion of my involvement in the classroom each morning.

Reading groups

Focus groups – for the purpose my study, I will refer to them as ‘reading groups’ – have traditionally been viewed as a complementary research tool rather than a primary means of data collection (Jowett & O’Toole, 2006). However, the focus group is beginning to emerge as a legitimate method in its own right, offering a forum through which “detailed revelations about people’s thoughts and ideas – particularly about the social world, as made and experienced through human dialogue” (p. 454) can be revealed. Additionally, focus groups with children are considered to be a more child-centric approach to data collection, affording the opportunity for their voices to be heard and power imbalances between researcher and participants to be lessened (Gibson, 2007; Morgan, Gibbs, Maxwell, & Britten, 2002). Reading groups were selected for this study as the ideal method to collect data with participants, as their use provided a relatively unobtrusive, flexible means to discuss the anti-oppressive storybooks. Also, students were already familiar with the routine of being read a story and responding to questions, which may have decreased the potential discomfort with being part of my reading groups. Moreover, discussing the selected anti-oppressive literature with smaller groups of students allowed for greater and more in-depth conversations to take place, particularly for quieter students to have the opportunity to voice their thoughts and opinions. Finally, this method of routinely reading stories and posing questions to children in a classroom setting illuminates how teachers may use anti-oppressive children’s literature in their classrooms in the future.

While acknowledging the benefits of reading groups, it is also important to consider the potential challenges that come with using focus groups with children. For

example, Morgan et al. (2002) argue that focus groups that take place within school settings may evoke concerns regarding receiving peer and teacher approval. Students may see the focus group facilitator as an “‘honorary’ [teacher]” (p. 9) perhaps causing students to be apprehensive to respond to questions that contradict their peers’ opinions or feel the imperative to provide the ‘correct’ answers. Boateng (2012) additionally explains the concept of “groupthink” in which participants may agree with each other in order to reduce conflict, resulting in the potential loss of individuality, creativity, and independent thinking. Morgan et al. (2002) offer some suggestions as to how to alleviate these concerns, including setting out guidelines from the onset of the focus groups to clarify expectations. These include explaining if and when to raise one’s hand to speak, allowing everyone the opportunity to voice their opinion, and being respectful of each other’s viewpoints. As such, during data collection, I was cognizant of these potential challenges and took these concerns into consideration when conducting my reading groups. For example, I told students that we must be respectful of everyone’s thoughts and opinions, and offered the opportunity for students to clarify their responses by repeating their statements back to them or prompting with additional questions. As well, while analyzing and reflecting upon my data, I recognized that certain participant responses might be framed by the desire to ‘fit in’ or share the ‘right’ answers.

Twenty participants were randomly split into two reading groups of ten students each, which I referred to as Group A and Group B. Each group met for a total of eight sessions, which took place in the adjoining resource room. This was a relatively quiet room lined with bookshelves, had four round tables and chairs in the middle, and was selected for the location of my reading groups due to its proximity to the classroom and

availability. When it was most convenient for the teacher (i.e. with minimal disruption to the students' regular routine where they would not miss previously scheduled lessons or activities), Ms. Wright would give me the go-ahead to remove each group of students from the classroom to conduct my session for that day. For example, if I held a session with Group A on Monday, Group B would take place on Tuesday, and so on. The reading groups generally took place while other students in the classroom (consisting of the group I did not call that day, as well as the one student who did not have consent to participate) were read a story by their teacher, played games, caught up on other schoolwork, or had their snack time. Due to time constraints within the class' schedule, reading groups lasted approximately 10-15 minutes each. The reading groups were audio recorded for later transcription, and field notes were taken at the conclusion of each reading group once students had returned to their classroom.

During the first reading group, I explained my research to the students, asked for their verbal consent to participate, and posed introductory questions pertaining to reading. These questions included:

- What are your favourite kinds of books to read?
- Do your parents or other family members read you stories at home?
- What kind of stories do you read with your family?
- Do you talk about the stories with your family after you read them?

The purpose of the first session was to introduce students to the reading groups and collect preliminary data that helped inform later responses to the anti-oppressive storybooks. During subsequent reading groups (sessions two through seven), I read students the anti-oppressive storybooks (one book per session). As previously mentioned,

books were read in a pre-set order so as to broadly introduce the topics of gender and same-sex families, and follow with examples that more directly challenged traditional understandings and representations. The eighth session functioned as the conclusion to the reading groups in which I asked students summative questions about the six books we had read:

- Think about all the books we've read together. Which ones are your favourites? Why?
- Which books didn't you like? Why?
- Would you like to read any of those books again?
- Would you ask your parents or family members to read them with you?
- If your teacher or librarian had these books in your classroom or library, would you read them again?
- Did you learn anything from all the books we've read? Can we think of some themes or lessons we learned?

Students were asked to – when possible – raise their hands when responding to questions. This allowed me to call upon them by name, indicating on the audio recording which student was speaking, and also ensured everyone in the group had the opportunity to speak and share their thoughts if they wished.

Questions during the reading groups took place before, during, and after the reading of each story. This provided the opportunity to explore whether or not the students had previously read the selected book, their predictions of the story, thematic or clarification questions based on the plot or characters as we read the story, as well as discussion questions afterwards. Questions followed an open-ended, semi-structured

guide (see Appendix A). While I generally asked the same routine questions for each book so as to encourage discussion, additional questions were more specific to the selected storybook and depended upon a variety of factors such as the story chosen, spontaneity of discussions, and willingness and engagement of students to participate.

For example, when reading *10,000 Dresses*, the following questions were selected to ask during the reading of the story:

- Why does Bailey's mom say, "Boys can't wear dresses"?
- How do you think this makes Bailey feel?
- What should Bailey do?
- What do you think Bailey means when she says she doesn't "*feel* like a boy"?
- Why would Bailey's brother threaten to kick her? What do you think about this?

The additional use of open-ended, unscripted questions during the reading groups encouraged open and spontaneous dialogue between the participants and myself.

Questions lead to conversations surrounding gender roles, behaviours, and activities in ways that underscored the complexity of the social construction of gender. Questions also opened up discussions of same-sex families both in animal and human contexts. Text-specific questions, in particular, encouraged students to consider details and certain aspects of characters or plotlines within the books. Asking questions to students before, during, and after reading the story additionally served to enrich my data, as these prompts offered insight as to how children's engagement with discourses of gender and sexuality may have shifted throughout the reading of each story.

Data analysis

Data was analyzed through a feminist poststructural lens, which examines how language, power relations, and prevailing hegemonic discourses have sustained unequal “(hierarchically) gendered social arrangements” (Lazar, 2007, p. 141). This approach explores how taken-for-granted assumptions about the social world are discursively constructed and produced, resulting in real world consequences for women and men. For example, dominant gender discourses within mainstream children’s literature can be seen as perpetuating and reinforcing a patriarchal social order wherein men are systematically privileged and women are disadvantaged – an arrangement that, to many, seems profoundly natural. According to Lazar (2005), “the taken-for-grantedness and normalcy of such knowledge is what mystifies or obscures the power differential and inequality at work” (p. 7).

Analyzing the different forms of data (student responses in the reading groups, field notes, and informal ethnographic classroom observations) during my six-week ethnography required me to make sense of multiple, conflicting, and interwoven stories. While the expectation of ethnographic research is for the ethnographer to produce knowable ‘truth’ from the experience of being immersed within a particular cultural group and bridge the gap between researcher and reader by providing insight into events that took place within private, unknowable (to outsiders) spaces (Britzman, 2000), these expectations are complicated by poststructural thought. As stated by Britzman (2000),

The ethnographic promise of a holistic account is betrayed by the slippage born from the partiality of language of what cannot be said precisely because of what is

said, and the impossible difference within what is said, what is intended, what is signified, what is repressed, what is taken, and what remains (p. 28).

The process of coding and analyzing my data led to new understandings of how to 'make meaning' and how participant responses can often be interspersed with contradictions and positioned within numerous coded categories. I began with a series of thematic codes that encompassed the overarching themes present in the data (such as the maintenance of gender boundaries, negotiation of gender, negotiation of sexuality, etc.). I used latent coding to look for the underlying meaning within the data that relied upon "knowledge of language and social meaning" (Neuman & Robson, 2012, p. 210). Statements from participants and ethnographic observations were coded and subsequently categorized across a number of different themes, many of which overlapped. Once all components of the data were organized into visual codes, I was able to recognize the dominant ideas and patterns and subsequently conducted a poststructural reading of the data. As a poststructural researcher, I recognized the limitations of trying to categorize participant's responses into concrete and knowable themes. When we attempt to neatly categorize things, people, or ideas, we immediately lose a range of meanings and definitions within those responses. According to Britzman (as cited in St. Pierre, 2000), "all categories are unstable, all experiences are constructed, all reality is imagined, all identities are produced, and all knowledge provokes uncertainties, misrecognitions, ignorances, and silences" (p. 503). Since poststructuralism seeks no verifiable 'truth' or 'reality' due to the subjective and transitory effect of language and meaning, it is impossible to present my data as being the 'lived experience' or 'true account' of my participants.

While responses from my participants cannot be understood as “transparent *evidence* of that which is real” (Davies, 2004, p. 4, emphasis in original), their statements “reveal *the ways in which sense is being made*” (p. 4, emphasis in original). Participant responses are inevitably framed by various discourses of power, gender and sexuality. As such, in order to analyze my data, I took into consideration the inherent contradictions that exist within spoken language and was careful not to apply fixed or universal meanings to the participants’ responses or consider them to be ‘true.’ As stated by Weedon (1987), “the ways in which discourse constitutes the minds and bodies of individuals is always part of a wider network of power relations, often with institutional bases” (p. 108). The language we use aids in constructing one’s subjectivity that is contextually specific and contingent upon the discourses available to us. A feminist poststructural reading of the data questioned what discourses of gender and sexuality have been considered ‘normal,’ underscoring the dynamics of power, hegemonic discourses, and taken-for-granted truth in the construction of meaning and how children made sense of the anti-oppressive stories in the reading groups. As Blaise (2005b) states, “identifying these discourses is vital in understanding how the power-knowledge regimes of heterosexuality providing children with subject positions to work produce, reproduce, or challenge straight discourses in their talk and actions with each other” (p. 53).

Finally, as a poststructural researcher, I recognize the importance of taking my own perspective into account when analyzing and reflecting upon the data. According to Lather (1991), “our own frameworks of understanding need to be critically examined as we look for the tensions and contradictions they might entail” (p. 80). My data analysis is inevitably framed through my own lens, causing the data to take on more meaning.

Lather (1991) consequently argues for continual reflexivity that takes into account our own narratives and viewpoints that we bring to the research process.

Positioning myself as volunteer and researcher in the classroom

“That was boring.”

- Patrick

Being immersed in the classroom for six weeks, three hours every morning, meant that I would inevitably become a part of the class' regular routine. It did not take long for the students to become comfortable with my presence – in part, due to my efforts in getting to know each student individually, assisting with projects, activities, correcting their work, and Ms. Wright's reassurance to the class that they could approach me with questions or concerns. I soon became known as “Ms. Paterson” and was responding to myriad issues throughout each morning, including requests to go to the washroom, cut fingers, and stolen pencils. When it came to my role as volunteer in the classroom, I was wholeheartedly welcomed and accepted by both Ms. Wright and the students.

I volunteered in the classroom for one week prior to beginning my reading groups so as to allow time for the students to become familiar and comfortable with my presence. Even though I was also conducting my ethnographic observations at the time, the students perceived my role in their classroom to be solely that of a volunteer. I believe this was largely due to the fact that I never took notes during class time and made myself available to assist the students with whatever they needed. Therefore when it came time to call my reading groups into the adjoining resource room, from the students' perspective, I shifted into the role of researcher. While students were used to volunteers, educational assistants, and resource teachers taking them out of class for testing, reading,

and help with schoolwork, these events never took place in large groups and was always done so for *their* benefit (i.e. to improve reading comprehension, literacy, etc.). In the case of my reading groups, I was explicit when explaining to the students that I was asking for *their* help with a project for my own school and that they were under no obligation to do so. While the first reading group was met with curiosity and excitement (mostly centering on the introduction of my audio recorder), at the conclusion of the first session a few students indicated that it was “boring.” When I called the same group of students two days later for the second session, a few students complained, stated that I had “already called them” and asked, “why do I have to help you again?” With these responses, I faced a dilemma. My desire to be liked by the students and have as many participants as possible collided with my ethical obligation to acknowledge their unwillingness to participate. While of course I made it known to students that they did not have to participate and were welcome to return to the classroom and join the rest of their class, no one took me up on this offer. Fortunately, as our reading groups continued on a regular basis and I introduced books to the students that increased their excitement, their initial hesitancy and resistance was no longer an issue. These experiences did, however, indicate the difficulties of being a researcher in the classroom and how, at times, the students’ spontaneous reactions and responses served to frame, shape, and even alter my study.

There were periods during my reading groups in which I noticed a lack of interest from students and notable frustration with my questions. Some students would put their heads down on the table, kick their chairs, or disturb others, disrupting the flow of conversation. While I cannot attribute these reactions to any one thing in particular –

perhaps annoyance that they were missing something that was happening in the classroom (for example, snack time frequently took place while I held my groups, a noted source of irritation for some students), dissatisfaction with the selected book for that day, general angst at having to sit still, or the difficulty of responding to questions that they were not used to – I was conscious of these hesitations and they undoubtedly shaped how I conducted my reading groups.

KP: Any other reasons why Elizabeth wouldn't just kill the dragon? Why did she have to tire him out?

Jesse: So she can rescue prince... I'm *tired* [puts head on table].

...

KP: – [kicking noises coming from under the table] – whoever is touching the table, please do not. You're making very disruptive noises.

[Unclear comments about who is kicking the table]

KP: Whoever is kicking the table, please do not make that noise.

Students: It's Shawn!

...

Patrick: I saw you do it, Shawn [kick the table].

KP: Shawn... no more noises or you're going to have to go back [to class], ok?

When asking questions and choosing which questions to ask or not, I feel out the dynamic and energy of the group. Often I feel like I need to end the group sooner than I might have because kids are fidgeting, putting their heads on the table, glancing around and getting distracted or bored. I feel uncomfortable keeping them for longer and engaging them in questions that they aren't interested in...the energy of the group also makes me forget the questions I have to ask and move through them quickly – this is the benefit of having 2 separate reading groups.

- (Field Notes, 10/07/14)

In these situations I felt caught between managing the students' behaviour as a classroom volunteer and wanting to get the most out of my data collection as a researcher, recognizing that taking time to address these disturbances would disrupt the flow of my research and coherence of the conversation that had taken place prior to the disruption. Feeling sensitive to the students' disinterest and restlessness meant that I sometimes cut my questions short or altered them so as to speed up the reading group and let them go back to class. As I collected data I noted the benefit of having two separate reading groups – in this sense, if I felt rushed with the first group, I was able to remember which questions I forgot to ask previously, and use them with the second group.

Another aspect of being a researcher in the classroom that I had not expected, and further impacted how I conducted the reading groups, was my own emotionality and reactions to the students' responses.

I am constantly unsure of how much to respond to comments in a social justice manner – i.e. the trans marriage comment or how this was a “funny” book because it’s about a boy wearing a dress. While in some ways I think it’s good to be impartial and let the kids say what they want without intervening, I find that very hard to do and to not challenge or question some of their comments... Likewise, when kids give ‘progressive’ answers, I sometimes respond with a positive comment or sound of approval, when I probably shouldn’t... I am conscious to never tell a kid that their response is incorrect or wrong, but to try and help them think about what they said and why they said it.

- (Field Notes, 10/07/14)

I began this thesis with the intent of simply exploring how children make sense of anti-oppressive children's literature. I did not plan on reacting to their responses either favourably or disapprovingly, for my goal in obtaining their understandings of the story was to be explorative and I additionally did not want students to think there were ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ answers to my questions. For the most part, I responded to students by

eliciting an “mmhm” or “yeah” in a tone that I hoped would convey acknowledgment of their response without judgment. However, when students answered my questions using a particularly socially just, feminist perspective, some of my typical responses were: “that’s a great point!” or “yeah, exactly!”, which indicated my enthusiasm. Additionally, when responses from students struck me as transphobic, homophobic, or particularly hurtful, my immediate reaction was to address their comment. While I had no original intention of doing so, as a Social Justice student, feminist, and member of the queer community, I felt morally compelled to utilize the emerging discussion as a ‘teaching moment’ because I saw the potential for learning and transformation. As such, my responses throughout the following sections may have guided conversations between students and myself in particular ways. Though this was not my original intent, I feel as though these conversations hold profound impact and significance for how anti-oppressive children’s literature may be useful in challenging existing gendered and heterosexist beliefs and attitudes.

Finally, I believe it is important to address my emotional reactions to the students’ responses. The “ghosts” that Doucet (2008) references in her discussion of reflexivity and relational knowing, “deeply buried across time and space, that may come back to haunt us when we are physically and emotionally invested in our research” (p. 73), served to shape how I conducted my research, reflected upon it, and analyzed the findings. While I anticipated that the books I selected for this study and the questions I would ask might provoke transphobic, homophobic, gendered, and heterosexist beliefs, opinions, and attitudes from students, I had not anticipated how their responses would affect me. When reading to students, I was keenly aware of the fact that I may be introducing brand new

concepts and ideas to them, and I felt the weight of this realization on my shoulders. My voice shook when reading about transgender, gay, and lesbian characters; I stumbled over my words, and braced myself for their reactions.

I felt very shaky and nervous, anxious to ask the questions in the correct manner and get as much out of the book as I could.

- (Field Notes, 10/09/14)

My emotional reactions changed the course of the reading group, as I would sometimes alter the questions or how I asked them. Perhaps the most difficult part of data collection was listening to homophobic responses from the students. When reading *King & King*, some students indicated that they thought it was “gross” for two men to marry and that it wasn’t “normal.” Another student additionally stated that if he could change the story, he would have the main character marry a girl because if the two men were to adopt a baby, “the baby might not want to have *them* [two men] for their [parents].”

I felt very sad and uncomfortable listening to the comments [about *King & King*] and asking further questions – as if I were being personally attacked (which I know isn’t the case), and this impacted how many questions I felt comfortable asking.

- (Field Notes, 10/16/14)

Though it would not be the students’ intent (as well, I’m guessing they all assumed I was heterosexual, as I never stated otherwise and additionally present myself as a cis-gender⁵, feminine woman), I felt as though they were attacking my queer identity. These comments stirred up my own insecurities about my marginalized sexual identity and

⁵ Cis-gender refers to those who identify with their assigned gender at birth.

caused me to reflect upon my position in the classroom. After that particular reading group for *King & King* had ended and I debriefed the day's events with a close friend and colleague, she asked me if I had considered coming out to the students. She suggested that in doing so, the abstract concept of homosexuality (assuming at that point the students had not met someone from the LGBTQ community), might be bridged – i.e. if the nice volunteer who had spent weeks in their classroom was gay, maybe that could mean being gay wasn't such a bad thing? In remaining closeted by omission and by not directly responding to the students' homophobia, I was afraid I might be perpetuating these beliefs and attitudes. According to Amanda Coffey (as cited in Doucet, 2008), “[t]he boundaries between self indulgence and reflexivity are fragile and blurred’ so that there ‘will always be the question of how much of ourselves to reveal’” (p. 75). However, revealing my sexual identity to students – and subsequently their parents and teacher – held more risks than I was willing to take.

Strengths and limitations

Limitations of this study result from the conflict I experienced between balancing the demands of the classroom with my own research initiatives. As is the case with elementary classrooms, there were impromptu lessons, activities that took longer than expected, and blips in the morning that meant my study, at times, was placed on the back burner. While Ms. Wright made every effort to ensure that I would be able to hold my reading groups, I often had to be ready to quickly gather my group, head to the adjoining room, conduct the session, and do so in time for the students to return to their planned activities. This meant my sessions sometimes lasted as little as ten minutes and there were times when I felt as though I did not get as much out of the story or asked as many

questions as I had hoped to. Not wanting to be a disturbance to the teacher's routine conflicted with the pressures of my research, in which I only had a certain number of days in the classroom to collect my data with no wiggle room should we happen to skip a session. This is where the benefit of having two reading groups came in handy – what I lacked (or missed) with one group, I made up with the second. While not necessarily ideal and acknowledging this as a limitation of my study, it was very important to me, as well as to the integrity of my project, that my research be incorporated into the classroom as smoothly as possible so as to not disrupt students from their routine.

Strengths of this study result from participant responses, which provide insight as to how children make sense of, and engage with the discourses proffered by anti-oppressive children's literature. These books challenge oppressive gender and sexuality regimes within mainstream children's literature that have traditionally served to marginalize and silence gender non-conforming and LGBTQ individuals. The use of anti-oppressive storybooks and subsequent responses from participants in this study aid in questioning how dominant discourses of gender and sexuality are produced and reinforced, as well as where opportunities for change and reform may lie.

Chapter 4

Data Analysis

During data analysis I recognized responses from participants as being constrained within, and indicative of, discourse. A feminist poststructural ethnography, as stated by Pomerantz (2008), “resists closure [of binary thinking] by reflexively analyzing and maintaining the unevenness of the data” (p. 24). Here I explore how young students spoke into existence a range of discourses and subject positions and, most importantly, how these positions shifted as new or contradictory information was presented to them. Responses from students frequently reminded me of Butler’s (1990) theory of performativity, in which it is the “process of repetition that both conceals itself and enforces its rules” (p. 198). In this sense, agency and social change are often found in the variation of that repetition. As such, performative acts and utterances by students revealed the disruption of dominant discourses, as well as engagement with new ones.

In taking particular stances regarding understandings of gender and sexuality, participants frequently asserted their gendered and heteronormative beliefs and subject positions – that is, until those positions were destabilized by comments or questions by either myself, passages from the books, or responses from fellow peers. According to Pomerantz (2008),

While discourse speaks us into subjecthood – naming and classifying us as particular kinds of people who lead particular kinds of (sanctioned, disparaged, privileged, oppressed) lives – it simultaneously offers us attachment to the social world through the subject positions or social roles that we occupy as a result of our discursive constitution (p. 13).

The responses from students, which, in part, indicated their understandings of gender and sexuality, also lend to their larger understandings of social order – how they recognize themselves and others in the world. As stated by Davies (1989), “Positioning oneself as person within the terms made available within a particular social order also creates and sustains that social order” (p. 14). Many students indicated (through tone and adamancy) that certain things were ‘just the way things are.’ Discourse holds the power and authority to solidify our commonsense understandings of the world and to position them as being ‘truthful’, ‘accurate,’ and ‘stable.’ Part of what is so fascinating about speaking with children about these supposed ‘truths’ is exploring how beliefs are constructed and, in turn, how they can be deconstructed. While responses from participants offer a mere glimpse into their undoubtedly complex, interconnected understandings of themselves and those around them as gendered and (hetero)sexualized beings, the following analysis provides nuanced examples of how young children engage with, and make sense of anti-oppressive children’s literature, and how the conversations that took place during each reading group helped to expose the discursive production of particular knowledge regarding gender and sexuality. While recognizing that my different forms of data – each complex and layered with meaning – cannot be easily compartmentalized into neatly defined themes, this chapter will explore four main sections: 1) Ethnographic observations: Gender and heteronormativity in the classroom, 2) Conflicting discourses: Negotiating understandings of gender and sexuality, 3) “How would Molly feel?”: Making sense of new discourses, and 4) Disrupting discourse: The potential for change.

Ethnographic observations: Gender and heteronormativity in the classroom

Though my ethnographic observations in the classroom are secondary to the data collected through my reading groups, the culture of the classroom is of crucial importance when considering the conversations that took place with the anti-oppressive storybooks. As is the case with many elementary school classrooms (Blaise, 2005b; Renold; 2002; Ryan et al., 2013), I immediately noticed the gendered and heteronormative discourses at play amongst the students and their teacher, particularly through their use of language. As previously mentioned, according to poststructuralists, language is instrumental in constructing our social worlds, thus holding the potential for the gender binary to be reconstituted each time we speak (St. Pierre, 2000). For example, Ms. Wright referred to the class as “boys and girls” and would sometimes separate the students by gender, which, as stated by Davies (1989), “draws [the children’s] attention to their maleness and femaleness as central features of their identity, making it seem wrong for one who is continually called male to take up ‘feminine’ positionings” (p. 112). In one particular instance, when the students were lining up according to gender (girls in front, boys in back), one male student was standing with the girls, so Ms. Wright stated his gender and moved him into the ‘correct’ place in line. Students would additionally police each other’s gender and ensure that they were conforming to what they considered to be ‘appropriate’ gendered behaviour, consistent with traditional understandings of masculinity and femininity. Another example of this gender categorization took place when a volunteer visited the class and requested a “big strong guy” to demonstrate an activity for the rest of the students. This comment overtly synchronized “big and strong” (masculinity) with maleness. Observing this, I wondered

why the volunteer could not have asked for a “big and strong” *person* or *student* to demonstrate the gender-neutral activity. As these moments of gender policing in the classroom are repeated over time, they become naturalized (Butler, 1990), which further reinforces certain dominant gender discourses within the classroom, perhaps making it more and more difficult to disrupt these understandings. For example, when I first started volunteering in the grade one/two classroom, I had planned on using the phrases, “everyone” or “grade ones and twos” when addressing the students. This cognizant use of gender neutral language when referring to a group of children is a result of my previous experience volunteering and researching in classrooms, as well as my knowledge of poststructural conceptions of language and its role in constructing and reifying identity categories. It was important to me that I not use language that I considered problematic. However, listening to Ms. Wright - as well as many other teachers in neighbouring classrooms and the library – repeatedly use the phrase “boys and girls” when referring to students, naturalized and embedded this expression in the school and classroom culture. Consequently, I often inadvertently found myself participating in, and reinforcing dominant gender discourse by uttering those very words. I believe this was a result of being part of the school and classroom culture, again, emphasizing how the repetition of language can profoundly naturalize particular ways of being, making these conceptions difficult to avoid or dispute.

Despite my best efforts I find myself inadvertently picking up the teacher's language – calling kids “boys and girls” – and saying “thank you, boys” when they were putting the paints away for me. I also catch myself saying “guys” a lot to the group.... Am I getting engrained in the gender discourse?

- (Field Notes, 10/08/14)

Similarly, heteronormativity was intertwined in the culture of the classroom and gave further meaning to the consistent consolidation of gendered categories. As corroborated by Blaise (2005a), “the concept of genderedness becomes meaningless in the absence of heterosexuality as an institution” (p. 86). While discussions of heterosexuality in the classroom were not as dominant or as overt as gender, they still took place, and were part of the heterosexual matrix, which relies upon the consistent enforcement of appropriate gender behaviours and ways of being “boys and girls.” For example, during a lesson on animal families (more on this later in the chapter), Ms. Wright explained that the mothers and fathers took care of their offspring. She later asked for a boy and a girl to come up to the front of the class and pretend as if they were a couple. The reinforcement that all families have mothers and fathers, and that coupling takes place between boys and girls (or men and women), again, positions heterosexuality as a natural, inevitable orientation with no room for variation. This additionally supports Butler’s (1990) heterosexual matrix through heteronormativity and defined conceptions of what it means to be a ‘boy’ and a ‘girl’. What I found particularly interesting about discussions of sexuality with students is that when reading anti-oppressive storybooks about same-sex couples, a few students indicated early on that they already had knowledge of homosexuality. Though all but one student did not have the apparent language to express this using the label, “gay”, they were aware of its existence. Again, however, this knowledge never made its way into discussions within the classroom.

These observations of gender and heterosexual discourses in the classroom are pertinent and provide context when analyzing the conversations that took place during the reading groups, both in terms of the students’ normative, traditional understandings of

gender and sexuality, as well as those that went against dominant discourse. For example, as will be explored further in the following sections, some students indicated acceptance of gender diversity and same-sex marriage, although these attitudes did not seem to translate into the classroom. This led me to wonder if the conversations during the reading groups were taking place as an 'isolated event' in which students would either tell me what they thought I wanted to hear, or perhaps only felt able to share those viewpoints during our group discussions but would not be able to share these concepts and ideas outside of our circle. This may partly be due to the gendered and heteronormative culture of the classroom where it is perhaps difficult to disrupt traditional narratives and dominant discourses that are continually reproduced and reinforced.

Conflicting discourses: Negotiating understandings of gender and sexuality

“Sometimes boys can wear dresses too!”

- Alexis

Not surprisingly, many students held normative, traditional views and understandings of both gender and sexuality, which came through in their responses during the reading groups, indicating how they make sense of the social world. As found by Baker-Sperry (2007), children “rely heavily on traditional normative structures to make sense of the world, and they often accept gendered expectations as truth” (p. 718). This process of interpretation is also dependent upon prior experiences and understandings, as well as acceptance and confirmation of these beliefs through discussion and interaction with others, particularly the peer group (Baker-Sperry, 2007). The following section explores how students made sense of gender and sexuality through

the anti-oppressive storybooks, how they worked to establish and maintain strong gender boundaries and understandings of heterosexuality, and how these frameworks were challenged by peers, my questions and prompts, as well as the storybooks themselves.

Negotiating gender

Reading the anti-oppressive storybooks to the students offered the opportunity to explore how they made meaning out of the messages within each story, as well as how they conceptualize and negotiate understandings of gender. It is interesting to note that while the children in Baker-Sperry's (2007) study "did not question the basic gendered assumptions embodied in many images and characterizations in the text, nor did they explore alternatives" (p. 721), students in my study both accepted *and* challenged gendered messages. The discrepancies between students' understandings of gender highlights the social construction of gender, as well as providing the opportunity to examine how normative ideas may be challenged and deconstructed.

In the following example, I asked the students why Princess Elizabeth in *The Paper Bag Princess* had not used a sword to defeat the dragon and whether or not she is a hero for rescuing Prince Ronald.

KP: ...Why didn't Elizabeth use a sword? Why didn't she just kill the dragon?

Rob: Cause she's nice and she's a girl.

KP: Mhm...Alexis?

Alexis: Because she didn't have one and if you put really hot, melting hot fire [from the dragon's fiery breath] with metal, it will melt.

***⁶

Mary: Because Princesses don't really use swords and they're nice...

KP: Why wouldn't they use a sword?

Henry: Well, cause, they don't know how to use a sword.

...⁷

KP: Mmhm. Do you think she's a hero?

[Overlapping "no" and "kind of"]

KP: Why isn't she a hero, Kayla?

Kayla: Cause she's a princess...

Julia: Princesses can be heroes. Just because they're princesses doesn't mean they can't be heroes and they can't use swords and stuff.

KP: Julia, do you think she's a hero? Why is she a hero?

Julia: Well, because just because princesses are always like – wear, um dresses and stuff and they don't normally—they don't use swords, doesn't mean they can't fight and stuff...

As was the case with Davies' (1989) discussions of *The Paper Bag Princess* with young children, most students were unable to view Elizabeth as a hero. Rob, Mary, Henry, and Kayla's responses indicated a traditional understanding of femininity, in that Princess Elizabeth was too "nice" and "didn't know how" to use a sword because she's female. Davies (1989) notes, however, that the same story is often heard and taken up differently for each child due to his or her own understandings of gender. Alexis' explanation for why Princess Elizabeth did not use a sword, for example, is not dependent upon Princess

⁶ Indicates a different reading group.

⁷ Indicates a break or shift in conversation within the same reading group.

Elizabeth's gender. Rather, Alexis believed Elizabeth simply did not have a sword on hand and furthermore, the metal would have melted on the dragon's hot, fiery breath. Julia's beliefs about princesses demonstrate an interesting and complex understanding of gender, one that was not shared by any of the other students. It is unclear whether Julia perceived Princess Elizabeth as a hero, as she commented that princesses, in general, have the ability to use swords and fight.

KP: What about fairytales? Do we like fairytales?

Student⁸: Yeahhhh!

Student: Nooo.

Patrick: I don't like fairytales.

KP: Why don't you like fairytales, Patrick?

Patrick: I don't know. Because some of them are bad –

Jesse: – cause boys –

Patrick: – and some of them are good...

Jesse: – Boys don't even like fairytales cause they're actually for girls.

KP: Why are fairytales for girls, Jesse?

Jesse: Well cause they're girlish and boys don't like girls and girls –

Alexis: – Hey!!

...

KP: Sarah, do you like books with pictures?

Sarah: Um, my cousin, um, who's a boy, um, reads, um fairytales...

Student: [Scoff]

⁸ I use 'student' when I am unable to discern who is speaking.

KP: Mmhm, everyone can read fairytales if they want to.

[Overlapping comments, unclear]

Alexis: Yeah! And some fairytales might, some fairytales might be like about a dragon or something... my mom once told me, it doesn't matter if you're a girl or a boy, you could *both* like fairytales.

KP: That's a really good point. It doesn't matter if you're a girl or a boy, you can like whatever book you want.

Sarah: I know somebody who, a boy, who sings *Let it Go* [from the popular Disney movie, *Frozen*] every day at school.

[Patrick slams table in exasperation]

KP: Patrick, what's up?

Patrick: Frozen is a *girl* movie! ... The boys cover their ears lots of the time.

Alexis: Do you even remember what I *just* said?

KP: What did Alexis just say? Andrew?

Andrew: It doesn't matter if you're a girl of a boy.

KP: Very true. Ok so I have another question... Patrick, do you have something to say?

Patrick: You don't have to like everything in the world, actually.

In the above example, which took place as one continuous conversation (ellipsis between dialogue indicate a break or temporary switch in conversation), we can see how Jesse and Patrick established strong convictions of what boys and girls do and do not like, and how these understandings of gender conflicted with those held by Sarah and Alexis. It is

interesting to note that my attempts to get the conversation back on track were interrupted by the students who felt the need to share their own experiences and perspectives of gender, despite the shift in topic. This perhaps indicates their desire to get their understandings of gender 'right' and make it known to the rest of the group. As stated by Baker-Sperry (2007), "interaction in the peer group also solidifies gendered perspectives" (p. 718), though as we can see above, the peer group can also serve to destabilize and question these perspectives. In Ryan et al.'s (2013) study, the female participants interrupted gendered assumptions that did not reflect their own experiences. Similarly, Sarah hesitantly brought up the boy who sings a song from *Frozen*, a "girl movie", and Alexis more assertively stated what her mother had told her. Both of these girls drew upon their own life experiences to challenge the boys' assertions. This resulted in frustration from Patrick, who slammed the table to express his annoyance and said, "you don't have to like everything in the world, actually." Patrick may have reacted this way in an attempt to reestablish his gendered position and defend himself against comments that suggested he perhaps should have liked the "girl movie".

The students' desire to reconstitute the gender order, particularly when their peers, characters in the books, or questions from me destabilized these positionings, indicates just how strongly entrenched these beliefs are and how pivotal they are to their understandings of the social world (Davies, 1989).

KP: [Reading *10,000 Dresses*] Bailey woke up to find her brother. He was playing soccer with some kids. 'I dreamt about a dress,' she told him. 'A dress made of windows, which showed the Great Wall of China and the Pyramids!' 'You dream about DRESSES, Bailey? That's gross. You're a

boy!' 'But...' Bailey said. 'But nothing. Get out of here before I kick you!'

KP: [To group] Why would her brother call her 'gross'?

Shawn: *Him* gross.

...

KP: [Reading *10,000 Dresses*] Together the girls made two new dresses –

Shawn: – the *boys* –

KP: – which were covered with mirrors of all shapes and sizes...

KP: [To group] Why is it the 'boys', Shawn?

[Silence]

Nathan: No, one is a girl, one is a boy...

In this example, I am reading *10,000 Dresses*, which features Bailey, a transgender child who identifies as female. The author tells the story from Bailey's perspective and therefore uses female pronouns when referring to her. At this point in the story, students were aware that Bailey was born a boy, even though the character stated that she did not "feel like a boy". While some students took up the use of female pronouns to refer to Bailey (or used both) –

Sarah: ...she...he, um, she *and* he really likes dresses...

– others, like Shawn and Nathan, as shown above, were quick to assert that Bailey is, in fact, male. This gender policing took place at other points during the reading groups as well.

KP: Is it very nice that [Bailey's] brother wanted to kick her cause she just wanted to wear a dress?

Jesse: Well... that would be gross [if a boy were to wear a dress].

Alexis: He's sort of a bully.

KP: Yup, he is.

Jesse: But... he's not a bully actually. He's just a big brother.

...

KP: Why would [Bailey's] brother say "that's gross"?

Jesse: I know, I know!

Sarah: Because he's a boy.

KP: Why is it "gross" to wear dresses if you're a boy?

Jesse: Well cause—

[Unclear comment from Rob about it being "gross"]

Alexis: — It *isn't*, Rob!

Jessie: Because it's gross...probably...probably cause boys don't really wear dresses. If you're wearing a dress, everyone would [laughing] laugh at you... you'd be... I wouldn't [wear a dress].

In the above example, Jesse both downplays the severity of Bailey's brother's threats by asserting that he's "just a big brother" – he stated earlier, "[siblings] can actually fight but if they play violent, that's just another [type of] playing... so they always do that" – and additionally agreed with Bailey's brother that it's "gross" for boys to wear dresses and states that he would not wear one himself. This effectively serves to establish and maintain Jesse's position as a boy, particularly one who adheres to traditional understandings of masculinity.

What I found particularly interesting throughout the reading groups was observing how, at times, students negotiated their *own* understandings of gender. For example, as demonstrated, Jesse was keen to assert strong gender boundaries for both him and others. However, when reading *Ballerino Nate* to the group, in which Ben, the main character's brother, is disapproving of boys dancing in the ballet, the following interaction took place:

KP: Why is Ben saying "yuck" to the ballet?

Patrick: Because he doesn't like the ballet.

Alexis: Because he thinks it's girly stuff.

Jesse: This is actually really weird.

KP: Why is it really weird?

Jesse: Some boys can actually join in ballet.

...

KP: So why isn't it ok for boys in this book to be ballerinas? Why isn't it ok?

Jesse: Mm cause... well, cause he's [Ben] sort of wrong cause most boys can actually join if they [want to].

The contrast in Jesse's responses to *10,000 Dresses* and *Ballerino Nate* perhaps illuminate his negotiated understanding of gender and which behaviours and activities are deemed as acceptable to him. It is also possible that according to Jesse, dancing in the ballet is seen as less of a disruption and threat to gender norms than wearing a dress. This suggests that children have nuanced understandings of gender boundaries in terms of

what is acceptable and unacceptable gendered behaviour, implying that there are fine lines that one simply cannot cross.

Introducing new ideas to students that most had not encountered before provided the opportunity to witness how they made sense of these concepts and how dominant discourse and understandings were disrupted. The plot and characters in *The Paper Bag Princess* and *Ballerino Nate* did not seem to overly surprise or perturb students, as many of the themes within these books – for example, female empowerment and transcending gender boundaries for the sake of sport or play – can frequently be seen as part of common gender discourse (i.e. ‘girls/boys can do whatever boys/girls can do’). *10,000 Dresses*, however, presented new territory, as it is fair to suggest that most young children have not had exposure to discussions of transgender issues. Subsequent conversations with students indicated surprise, curiosity, and confusion.

KP: Is Bailey a boy or a girl?

Rob: Girl!

Students: Girl.

KP: Why is she a girl?

Andrew: Cause she—she’s called a she.

KP: [Reading *10,000 Dresses*] ... ‘Bailey, what are you talking about? You’re a boy. Boys don’t wear dresses!’—

[Gasps from students]

KP: —‘But...I don’t feel like a boy,’ said Bailey. ‘Well you are one, Bailey, and that’s that! Now go away...and don’t mention dresses again!’

KP: [To the group] So Bailey’s actually a boy?

Chorus: [in shocked tone] Whaaaat?

Alexis: Well they were tricking us!

KP: Were they tricking us?

Student: Yeah.

Alexis: Probably they were *trying* to.

Patrick: Cause they [the author] said *she*...not... never *he*.

KP: Mhm, yeah, why do you think the author would say “she” if

Bailey’s a boy?

Rob: They’re trying to trick you...

Julia: I think it’s cause he [Bailey] is *really* feeling like a girl and he is acting like a girl... So they’re calling him a girl because I think it makes him feel good if he’s getting called a girl cause he likes being a girl.

Prior to this exchange, the majority of students believed Bailey was a girl, as the front cover of the book shows Bailey in a dress and the book begins by using female pronouns. The disruption to the students’ belief about Bailey’s gender offered the space for more in-depth discussions about gender to take place.

KP: So Bailey says he doesn’t “feel like a boy”...what does it mean to feel like a boy?

[Confused looks, shared glances, and hesitant smiles from the boys in the group]

Rob: I don’t know...

KP: You don’t know? You just do?

[Nods]

Sarah: Only a *boy* would know.

Alexis: So *you* boys tell us! And *you* boys! [Pointing to the boys across the table]

KP: Do you know what it means to feel like a boy?

Students: Uhhh

Alexis: Tell us!

Patrick: Like you're – like you're feeling like...

Alexis: [Assertively listing things off on her fingers] How long, how – when will you *know* what that feeling is? What time, how old will you be?

Cause you're a boy and you should know!

Jesse: I have no idea...probably... probably when you're...when you're two or three—

Boy: [overlapping, slightly unclear] – five or six.

Sarah: — Why? Why?

Jesse: —Cause you're a baby, you don't even know any better.

Patrick: Well, your mom and dad pick out [if] you're a boy or a girl...

that's the only reason.

KP: Your mom and dad pick out that you're a boy or a girl?

Patrick: [nodding] Yeah.

Student: [overlapping] Probably it's one or two or three. Probably...just...

Alexis: Your future does!

Patrick: You kinda know you're a girl or a boy by the *name*.

The above conversation, primarily taking place between the students, holds profound implications for understanding the social construction of gender. Though student responses to other questions throughout the reading groups may imply that their understandings of gender are indicative of an essentialist viewpoint, in which gender is seen as naturally occurring and inevitable, when asked questions that disrupt dominant discourse, these notions are challenged and exposed. While it is difficult to ascertain whether or not these students understand the biological basis of gender (i.e. genitalia), their comments regarding “knowing” you’re a boy or a girl by age two, three, five or six, as well as Patrick’s statement that parents are the ones who “pick out” your gender, shatters the naturalness of gender, and reveals it as a social construction. It is particularly interesting to observe this conversation taking place between six and seven year old children, as they have likely not had exposure to conversations regarding feminist theories of sex and gender. As stated by Barrett (2005), “by naming gender as a social construction and troubling normalized notions of gender, we can open ourselves up to new ways of being a man or a woman” (p. 88), or, as I would argue, new ways of taking up subject positions that are not wholly dependent upon gendered categories.

Negotiating sexuality

One day in the classroom Ms. Wright taught a lesson to the students on penguins that included a discussion of how penguin mothers and fathers both look after their offspring and take turns sitting on the egg to keep it warm before it hatches. I saw this lesson as an ideal opportunity to relate what the students learnt in class to one of the books I had selected for our reading group, *And Tango Makes Three*, since the book covers very similar points to what Ms. Wright taught, and introduces readers to same-sex

couples. Students were enthusiastic when I asked them to recall what they had learnt about penguins in class earlier that week and expressed excitement when I told them that the book we were about to read was a true story. The introduction that Roy and Silo – two male penguins – were in love elicited little surprise from the students, and encouraged a discussion of same-sex coupling.

KP: [Reading *And Tango Makes Three*] They didn't spend much time with the girl penguins, and the girl penguins didn't spend much time with them. Instead, Roy and Silo wound their necks around each other. Their keeper Mr. Gramzay noticed the two penguins and thought to himself, "They must be in love."

KP: [To the group] So are Roy and Silo a couple?

Rob: Mmhm

Jesse: Cause they're boys—

Shawn: [interrupting] – are they girls or boys?

KP: They're boys.

Rob: Even if you're a girl and girl you can still get married and if you're a boy and boy you can still get married.

While Shawn wanted to make sure he knew the gender of the penguins, there was no active resistance from students to the two male penguins being a couple. The students were also adamant that even though the baby chick in the story, Tango, had two dads instead of a mom, they were still considered a family because, according to Rob, "they already have a baby." Additionally, Sarah relied upon her own personal experiences when she stated:

Sarah: ...sometimes if you have a mom and a mom they can both...they can have a baby too!

KP: Yeah, they can too!

Sarah: Cause I went to church and two girls were married.

Other students grappled with their understanding of how the penguins could make a family without a mother, which elicited very strong understandings of non-normative sexuality from Julia.

KP: The book says that [Roy and Silo] are a "little bit different"...why would it say that?

Marshall: It's because girls and the boys, they, the mom makes the babies and the boys, they don't, but in this one the boys do.

Nathan: They cannot make a baby if they're [Roy and Silo] together!

Julia: It doesn't mean...sometimes it means, it means you're *gay* if you want to be with a – if it's a boy who wants to be with a boy or it's a girl who wants to be with a girl.

KP: Mmhm. And is that ok, Julia?

Julia: Mmhmm!

Julia's responses indicate clear access to previous knowledge and experiences, perhaps from her parents or other family members that enable her to construct these opinions and viewpoints. Julia consistently shared these beliefs, perhaps indicative of the culture of her family and upbringing. It is interesting to note, as previously mentioned, that her understandings of sexuality did not (at least during my time in the classroom) make their way into classroom discussions.

King & King, as previously discussed in Chapter 3, was partially selected for this study due to its variation on a traditional fairytale. According to Baker-Sperry (2007), “the static, gendered messages and the highly structured form of the fairy tale provide a vehicle for children to interpret gendered norms and expectations more clearly” (p. 718). The plot twist in *King & King* in which two men fall in love sharply contrasts with that of a traditional fairytale and consequently disrupts preconceived understandings of what will happen in the book. As I expected, when I asked the students to predict what might happen in the story, despite the title, they all believed the prince would fall in love with a princess and marry her, since this is what happens in most fairytales. When the prince's sexual orientation was revealed, and dominant discourse was consequently disrupted, students struggled to make sense of what was happening, as indicated in the following responses from Jesse and Rob:

KP: So what's happening on this page? [The image in the book is of the two princes with their wedding cake]

Jesse: Ahh!

KP: Yeah, Jesse?

Jesse: That... that... um, they'rehe's gonna marry...that girl, the queen and the other boy's gonna marry... the queen that's standing next to her... and the other prince will be marrying the, *his*... brother...

...

KP: So who can tell me what happened in this story that was not what we were expecting?

Rob: That the two boys fell in love?

KP: Yeah, and what do we think about that decision?

Rob: [quietly] it's disgusting...

Rob's comment that it was "disgusting" for the two men to marry contradicts his earlier statement (see page 91), which indicated knowledge and acceptance of same-sex marriage. In an effort to explore this inconsistency, I tried to relate *King & King* to our previous conversations when we read *And Tango Makes Three*.

KP: But what did we learn yesterday about the penguins?

Jesse: That, that two boys...can make a penguin family.

KP: Yeah, so how is that different from today?

Rob: Cause they're animals.

KP: So is [it] not ok for two *human* boys to get married?

Alexis: It's ok!

KP: It's ok, Alexis? You think it's ok?

[Alexis nods]

Sarah: Or two girls.

KP: Or two girls, that's right.

It is possible that Rob's belief that it is ok for two male *animals* to be married but not for two male *humans*, is in part due to the disruption of the normative fairytale structure that he was anticipating. Additionally, while animals do not directly relate to Rob's life, humans certainly do. The preconceived expectation that the prince would marry a princess was not fulfilled, which perhaps resulted in incongruence and dissatisfaction with the story. This is best exemplified when I asked the students what they would change about the story if they were the ones writing it.

Rob: I would just...make him [the prince] choose no one.

KP: No one? Why would you make him choose no one?

Rob: Cause it's gross...

...

KP: Alexis, what would you [change]?

Alexis: I would put more...adventure in it? And...[now speaking very quickly, almost under her breath] have him choose a princess too...

[speech returns to normal] like how to climb a castle, go 600 miles...

KP: Mhm... would you still have him marry a prince?

Alexis: [pause]...No...[looking down]

KP: Why not?

Alexis: No idea!

Though Alexis previously stated that "it's ok!" for two boys to get married (see page 94), in the above example, she very quickly and hesitantly stated that she would change the story to have the prince marry a princess instead. Alexis' body language and intonation during our exchange suggested her desire to 'fit in' and be accepted by her peer group, since the majority of students were adamant that it was "gross" for two men to marry.

KP: Laura, what would you choose [to change about the story]?

Laura: Um, I would choose the prince would marry a *girl*.

KP: Why would you want the prince to marry a girl?

Laura: Cause I don't like them kissing a boy and a boy... [note: the last picture in the book was of the two princes kissing, with a heart covering

their lips. This picture elicited a chorus of “gross” and “yuck” from students]

KP: Yeah, why don't you like that?

Laura: ...cause it looks yucky.

KP: Patrick?

Patrick: It's awkward, and it's...um, just not normally happening...

KP: Yeah?

Rob: It doesn't really happen...

Mary: [very quietly] – the girl is supposed to get the boy...

KP: The girl is supposed to get the boy?

Julia: *No!*

Mary: *Well?*

[Pause]

Julia: *No*, boys can marry boys! You already *know* that!

Mary: Mmm...

In the above scenarios we can see evidence of the students moving the story to a place that makes sense to them, in keeping with their own expectations of what *should have* taken place in the story. Julia's resistance to Mary's comment is also an interesting case in which the girls' different understandings of sexuality resulted in conflict. This exchange may indicate the potential for disrupting discourse and allowing space for alternative ways of comprehending sexuality.

It is also worth noting how students' understandings of non-normative sexuality are still often predicated on heterosexual narratives. For example, the students frequently indicated a preoccupation with reproduction during discussions of same-sex couples, as first demonstrated through Rob's, Sarah's, Marshall's and Nathan's responses to *And Tango Makes Three* on pages 91-92. While *And Tango Makes Three* and *Molly's Family* emphasize how parents of the same sex can conceivably have children (through either adoption or artificial insemination, which is alluded to in *Molly's Family*), the students continually noted the same-sex characters' inability to reproduce as a point of contention and concern.

KP: ... So what makes [Roy and Silo] a family?

Julia: ... um, they, um, they got a baby so they're very happy and it made it so they could become a family um, and they had their own child.

Nathan: [Quietly] the zookeeper gave it...

KP: So did we learn anything in this book [*And Tango Makes Three*]?

Marshall: Uh that, boys can uh, make babies too.

...

Henry: Two boys can't make a baby but they can have one.

Julia: Yeah.

KP: Yeah, they can adopt one... That's how they got the egg, right?

Nathan: Yeah, cause the zookeeper gave them one!

KP: The zookeeper gave it...

Julia: [Overlapping] and girls can do the same thing.

Mary: Yeah.

Henry: But-but they [Roy and Silo] need to find an egg to— to have a baby cause two boys won't have one...

KP: ...what did we learn yesterday when we read *And Tango Makes Three*?

Mary: Well...

Julia: [Overlapping] You *can* have a baby, but you can't make a baby!

...

Mary: Also girls can marry girls...

KP: They can, they absolutely can!

Mary: But then, they also can't have a baby...

KP: But they can get one through adopting, right?

Mary: Yeah...

Julia: [Overlapping] Mary, that was not nice!

The students stressed that in order for the characters in *And Tango Makes Three* to be considered a family, they must be able to make – or get – a baby. Mary persistently told me – in a tone that suggested sadness and disappointment – that while she thought it was possible for two men or two women to marry, they would not be able to have a baby.

When asked in general terms what they learnt from *And Tango Makes Three*, again, most students emphasized the subject of reproduction. The students' fixation on this topic, which they repeatedly brought up even when not specifically asked, implies that in order for relationships between same-sex couples to be viewed as legitimate, they must have

children. Lester (2014) remarks, “access to normalcy and acceptance is contingent on how closely queer families resemble the heterosexual model of the nuclear family” (p. 253). From the students’ responses, we can see how their understandings of non-normative sexuality are so closely intertwined with this nuclear ideal. In fact, there was only one exchange during the reading groups that suggested a same-sex couple might happily exist without children.

KP: Yeah, why would you have him marry the girl?

Henry: So they wouldn't have to adopt a baby...

KP: What's wrong with adopting a baby?

Julia: Plus they might not even want one!

KP: Yeah, they might not want a baby.

Henry: [Quietly] The baby might not want to have *them* [two men] for their [parents].

Julia: [Overlapping] A baby doesn't even know!

KP: Yeah? Why not?

Henry: ...they might wanna have just a mother...

Julia: A baby doesn't even know...

At this point, I continued asking my questions to the students and only heard the following exchange between Henry and Julia when I later transcribed the recording.

Julia: [Overlapping] they [the parents] would love them... so it wouldn't—

Henry: [Overlapping] —it would know that it was adopted.

Julia: [Overlapping] No it wouldn't!

[Conversation between Julia and Henry continues, unclear]

Julia: [Overlapping, to Henry] That's not nice...

The representation of same-sex couples in these books, combined with the students' understandings and responses suggest that the dominant narrative is, according to Lester (2014), "'We're parents, just like you and everyone else!' with the ultimate goal being acceptance by dominant heteronormative society" (p. 252). Lester (2014) further argues that "this erasure of difference upholds the heteronormative discourse that defines the functions of an acceptable sexuality as begetting acceptable nuclear families, rather than promoting the acceptance of non-normative sexual and gender identities not centered around reproduction" (p. 252). With this in mind, it is particularly interesting that students expressed concern over the two princes' inability to have children in *King & King*, despite the fact that the story did not once indicate the men's desire or plans to have children.

KP: So what do we think about the prince marrying another prince [in *King & King*]?

Adam: You can marry boys but...

Mary: [Very quietly]— you can't have a baby if you marry a boy...

Adam: [Quietly] Yeah...

Again, this preoccupation with reproduction indicates a very specific understanding of sexuality; one that suggests acceptance of non-normative sexuality is predicated on the erasure of difference. The corresponding understanding is that "queerness and the divergence from the heteronormative narrative of monogamous child rearing are [...] abnormal and undesirable" (Lester, 2014, p. 254). As previously mentioned, children's

books impart to children conventional narratives, standards, and societal values.

Consequently, these understandings of normative and non-normative sexuality have the potential to shift, particularly if children's literature begins to reflect an imaginable and acceptable existence of queers that lies outside of heteronormative discourse (Lester, 2007, 2014). I further argue that anti-oppressive children's books can be used as a medium to encourage conversations with students about conceptions of 'family' and same-sex coupling that exists outside of heterosexual narratives.

“How would Molly feel?” Making sense of new discourses

“It is not enough to introduce students or teachers to counter-hegemonic discourses and assume they will adopt them.”

– Barrett, 2005, p. 87

The reading groups provided a space for the themes and messages in the anti-oppressive storybooks, questions and prompts from myself, and beliefs and opinions from other students to potentially disrupt dominant discourses of gender and sexuality. The groups then offered the opportunity to see how students made sense of these new discourses, and how they were (or were not) taken up. The question remains, however, what possible impact did these reading groups have on students' understandings of gender and sexuality and were the books useful in challenging these dominant discourses, particularly in meaningful and lasting ways? The following section explores students' engagement with the anti-oppressive messages through empathy with the characters and how they applied these messages to other situations and experiences.

The "right thing" to do

One of the routine questions I asked students during the reading groups was "how is [the character] feeling?" This provided the opportunity to see how the students made sense of what was happening in the story and how they connected the plot with the character's thoughts, feelings, and emotions. The goal with this question was to also provide the space for students to perhaps appreciate how the characters in the books, many of whom are marginalized, were impacted by the discrimination and/or conflict they faced.

KP: How do you think it makes Nate feel when Ben says that he shouldn't be one [a ballerina]?

Rob: Sad...

KP: How else does he feel?

Shawn: Scared.

Jesse: Angry.

Mary: He's feeling a little sad...cause his brother says he, boys never dance and he wants to try!

In the following example, I asked students how the title character in *Molly's Family* felt after her classmate, Tommy, told her that "there's no such thing" as having two moms.

KP: How do you think that makes Molly feel?

Chorus: Sad.

Jesse: Really, really, really, really sad.

KP: Why does it make her really sad?

Alexis: Cause someone's saying something mean about her own family

KP: Yeah! Rob?

Rob: He said it's like, not normal to have two moms.

KP: Mmhm, and how does that make Molly feel, Rob?

Rob: Sad.

Jesse: It's... it's... it's almost like the ballerina thing [when] the boy says that "you will be...you'll be called ballerina when you join and you will have pink clothes!"

In the excerpt below, I was conflicted about whether or not to ask my question, as I did not want to shame the students or make them feel badly for their previous comments about *King & King* (see pages 94-96). However, I felt the imperative to utilize the conversation as a moment of learning and an opportunity to have the students connect the impact their words may have on others.

KP: So remember what we were saying about *King & King*? Remember how a lot of you said it was "gross" and "disgusting"?

Patrick: Yeah

Rob: Mmhmm

Student: Yup!

KP: How do you think those comments would make Molly feel?

Rob: [quietly] sad...

KP: Why would they make her feel sad?

...

Rob: Um...

Alexis: It would make her even sadder...[unclear]

Rob: It'd be sad because like, she has two moms and we said it's like, kinda gross to have two dads...it would make her feel sad.

KP: It would make her feel really sad. So maybe next time we shouldn't say those things.

These responses indicate that the students held an appreciation of the implications of what was happening in the book and how this affected the character's feelings. However, due to the power imbalance between teachers and students, in this case, the students may have considered me an 'honourary teacher.' In this vein, I often wondered if the students were simply reiterating the 'right thing' to do or say, and perhaps told me what they thought I wanted to hear, particularly because these answers contrasted with responses to other questions. For example, even though students had previously expressed negative reactions to same-sex marriage, when asked pointedly about how the characters would feel, their responses seemed to change. It is difficult to ascertain whether this was due to my role as 'honourary teacher' in which they felt it necessary to get the answers 'right' or if these responses indicate a shift in thinking. Similar reactions and responses occurred when I asked students what kind of advice they would give the characters or how they would change the story.

KP: What should the parents and brother have said [to Bailey, the transgender character, when she told them she wanted a dress]?

Marshall: "You *can* wear a dress if... if you want to, it's not my decision, it's yours".

KP: ...so what kind of advice would you give Molly if you were her friend?

Alexis: Don't listen to them, they're just being mean because you're different, but you're not.

KP: What do you think Molly should do? What kind of advice would you give [her]? ... What would you say to her?

Henry: I –I would say, “he’s wrong, you *can* have a family with two mommies!”

Mary: – or two daddies!

Nathan: [interrupting] – I would say that too.

Julia: I would stand up to the um, to him [the character who said that Molly couldn't have two moms] and say that she *can* have two mommies and it's none of your business cause it's not your family!

KP: ...if you could change anything in this story [*Molly's Family*], what would you do?

Rob: I would take Tommy [the character who said Molly could not have two moms] out of it.

KP: Yeah. Alexis, what would you change?

Alexis: I would change what Tommy said into *nice* things...

KP: What would you change [in *Molly's Family*]?

Julia: I would change the part where the boy was being mean.

Mary: I would change the boy into a nice boy.

Unlike with *King & King*, the students did not want to change the stories to fit heteronormative expectations and dominant understandings of sexuality. Rather, they empathized with the main character, Molly, and indicated that the 'right thing' to do would be accepting and kind towards Molly's family. I additionally found myself inadvertently suggesting to students the 'right thing' to do, particularly in relation to how the characters were feeling, which may have affected or shifted their responses. For example, at the conclusion of *10,000 Dresses*, I asked the students whether they thought Bailey was a girl or a boy. Prior to reading the book, most students believed Bailey was a girl due to the image of the main character in a dress on the cover. Upon finishing the story, I was curious as to how students interpreted the author's pronoun use (as previously mentioned, the author uses female pronouns throughout the book, since Bailey identifies as female), Bailey's self identification as female (i.e. "But...I don't feel like a boy") and conflicting gender policing by Bailey's family (i.e. "You're a boy!"). Would students be able to comprehend Bailey's thoughts and feelings in relation to gender identity and therefore identify her as being a girl at the conclusion of the story?

KP: ...Is Bailey a boy or a girl?

Rob: Gir—boy! A boy.

[overlapping, unclear comments]

KP: Is she a girl or a boy?

Student: *Boy!*

Student: A girl.

Mary: Half!

KP: What does *she* think she is?

Chorus: A girl

KP: Mhm. And what's most important...what other people think she is?

Or what *she* thinks she is?

Alexis: What *you* think you are!

Patrick: What *she* thinks she is...

Alexis: What you think you are more than other people...

The above conversation indicates both the students' difficulty in interpreting the gendered messages within *10,000 Dresses* as well as my own response, which suggested the 'right thing' to do. My own direct use of female pronouns when referring to Bailey in my question, for example, offered a substantive clue to the students as to what answer I was looking for. As well, I could not help but utilize this as an opportunity to impart empathy with Bailey and though I did not use this language, tried to encourage students to think about the importance of respecting a person's right to self identify, in which I perhaps unwittingly appealed to their greater sensibilities of what is considered 'right' and 'wrong.'

Applying the books

When asked to apply the characters, themes, and messages within the books to other people and situations, I was again privy to how students interpreted the discourses offered through the anti-oppressive storybooks. As explored in the previous section, while most students articulated how the characters in each book were feeling – i.e. sad, angry, scared, depressed – responses to other questions suggest that these new

understandings and discourses were not always taken up and the process of 'making sense' is extremely complex and layered.

In the following example, after reading *10,000 Dresses*, I asked students what they might say if a boy came to their school wearing a dress.

Rob: Nice dress?

KP: Yeah, nice dress. What else would you say to him? Alexis?

Alexis: Don't listen to *anybody* if they say something mean.

KP: Yeah! Mary?

Mary: [I would ask] are you a boy or a girl?

...

KP: So would you still want to play with a boy if he was wearing a dress?

Mary: Mmhm.

Patrick: Yeah, I guess so...

Jesse: No!

Alexis: Yes!

KP: Why wouldn't you play with him, Jesse?

Jesse: I like boys who are...are sorta...like...[unclear] with the same games as me—

Rob: [Interrupting, turning towards Jesse] – that's *mean*! That's mean.

In the above responses, Rob and Alexis stated that they would react positively – or at least respectfully – towards the boy if he were to wear a dress to school. Mary's response suggested that she would still want to ascertain whether or not the boy identified as male or female, indicating again, the importance of getting gender 'correct' – both for one's

self and others. Jesse's response suggested his desire to interact and play with boys who conform to traditional understandings of gender (i.e. "the same games as me"). Jesse was then interrupted by Rob's assertion that his comment was "mean". This conversation is marked with both gender policing, and further indication of how students make sense of the messages within anti-oppressive literature when applied to other situations. Their varied responses suggest that, for some students, they are participating in the discursive practices of society, particularly how we make sense of those around us, especially if they do not have a recognizable identity (i.e. Mary's question as to whether or not the child in question is a boy or a girl).

KP: If we had a friend who came to school who's a boy and [was wearing] a dress, what would you say to him?

Adam: [smiling and almost laughing] take it off!

KP: Why would you say, "take it off"?

Adam: Cause I don't really like dresses.

KP: What if *he* liked the dress?

Shawn: Yeeek!

Marshall: He can keep it on.

KP: Mmhm, and would that be ok?

[Most students say "mmhm" or "yes"]

KP: Would you still play with him?—

Shawn: [interrupting]—what happens if *boys* think he's a girl and then try to marry him?

Though Marshall indicated that he would be accepting if a boy came to school wearing a dress, Adam and Shawn reacted negatively. Shawn further questioned, what might happen if the boy in the dress was mistaken for a girl and other boys tried to marry him? This question is multifaceted, with underlying understandings of gender expression and heteronormativity. Though I could have utilized Shawn's question as an opportunity for further discussion, I felt unprepared and hesitated with my own response:

KP: I don't think we try to marry kids though, right?

Nathan: No, when he grow—

Shawn: —when he grewed up.

KP: When he grows up, well that's ok too...for some people, that doesn't matter...mmhmm...so would we play with this boy if he was wearing a dress?

My discomfort with Shawn's question is evident in my disjointed answer and immediate shift back to my original question. Again, this example highlights my continual inner debate as to what extent my reading groups would function as a space for 'teachable moments,' rather than an exploration of students' thoughts and ideas in relation to the books. The above example also underscores the process students undertake when making sense of discourse, and how their responses are often "reflective of the expectations and pressures of the larger adult world" (Baker-Sperry, 2007, p. 723). In this case, Shawn's question suggested an understanding of both the function of normative gender identity and expression, and how that fits within the heterosexual matrix, wherein in order for "bodies to cohere and make sense there must be a stable sex expressed through a stable

gender...that is oppositionally and hierarchically defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality” (Butler, 1990, p. 208, note 6).

Even when I did not directly ask students to apply the books to other situations, many students did so on their own or offered additional information about what they had seen or heard in their own lives, which further underscored the central importance of prior experience to the process of understanding and interpretation.

KP: So did anyone not like this story [*10,000 Dresses*]?

Kayla: I don't like it.

KP: Why don't you like it, Kayla?

Kayla: [quietly] Cause it's a boy who wears dresses...

KP: Cause it's a boy who wears dresses? What's wrong with that?

Kayla: Cause...boys in [this city], um, they don't wear dresses.

Julia: ... I know someone who might have a boyfriend and he's a boy, cause I know that he likes boys.

KP: Yeah? Marshall?

Marshall: [Quietly, some hesitancy] Uh, when I was walking by, I saw someone with a boy and a boy getting married.

KP: Cool! And what do we think about that? Is that ok?

Julia: Yeah!!

Marshall: Yeah.

Mary: Also girls can marry girls...

As Davies (1989) points out, “society provides, through its structures, its language and its interactive forms, possible ways of being, of thinking, of seeing” (p. 14). When the students drew upon previous experiences in their responses, we can see how they are using this information to make sense of the anti-oppressive storybooks, as well as my questions. As further corroborated by Davies (1989), “children use their own experiences in the everyday world and their knowledge of other stories in relation both to characters and plot to make sense of the stories they hear” (p. 47). Particularly for those students who have not had prior experience with gender non-conformity or sexual diversity in their own lives, introducing storybooks in the classroom that disrupt traditional narratives of gender and sexuality is of paramount importance if we are to ever hope for understandings of the world that extend beyond the gender binary and presumed heterosexuality.

Disrupting discourse: The potential for change

“Freedom does not lie outside discourse, but in disrupting dominant discourses, and taking up unfamiliar ones. It is about seeing things that heretofore remained invisible in order to make them revisable.”

- Barrett, 2005, p. 87

A number of responses from students indicate the prevalence of dominant discourses and understandings of normative gender and sexuality. Many students reiterated and reinforced the ‘obviousness’ and resoluteness of these understandings through their speech and reactions throughout the reading groups, indicating once again, the significance of language in terms of constructing our world and dictating what is

possible. Through each of these speech acts, students took up subject positions that often reaffirmed the gender order and their position in the social world – as well as expectations of others – as being either ‘male’ or ‘female,’ with underlying assumptions of heterosexuality. Through the repeated naturalization of gender stereotypes, gender inequality, and heterosexism in the classroom, it becomes difficult for students, parents, teachers, and school administrators to recognize these issues as being worthy of our attention. They become engrained in the culture of the school and classroom and part of ‘just the way things are.’ According to Currie, Kelly, and Pomerantz (2009), “over time, many children become inured to inequalities that structure their daily lives; they cease complaining about the unfairness of gendered expectations” (p. 212). Very few children in this study questioned the gendered and heteronormative components in their classroom or the books we read, unless specifically asked or prompted (i.e. recalling many of Julia’s comments and responses to the anti-oppressive books). This leads me to wonder if these students may not have otherwise had the chance to engage with issues of gender variance and sexual diversity had they not been part of my reading groups. I do not dispute that children are indeed active participants in their learning and engage in a process of negotiation and interpretation of information (Baker-Sperry, 2007; Currie, Kelly, & Pomerantz, 2009). However, given the pervasiveness of dominant discourses of gender and heterosexuality in the classroom, I argue that spaces must be created in order to prompt deeper and more critical reflections of gender and sexuality.

As evidenced in my study, dominant discourses were frequently disrupted through the use of anti-oppressive children’s literature in my reading groups. I suggest that it is not necessarily whether or not students actively *took up* these new discourses that is

important. After all, to expect radical and drastic shifts in thinking within six weeks would be unreasonable. Alternatively, what is important to take into consideration is how these reading groups opened up space for discussion of gender variance and sexual diversity to take place, particularly in the elementary school classroom where there is heightened fear and anxiety about discussing such topics with young students. As additionally found by Kelly (2012) and Ryan et al. (2013), my study suggests that young children are capable of discussing issues of gender and sexuality. Discourses of 'innocence' and 'developmental appropriateness' which have been used as shields against including discussions of gender variance and sexual diversity in the classroom (Allan, Atkinson, Brace, DePalma, & Hemingway, 2008; Payne & Smith, 2014), do not stand up against responses from students that indicate they can (and in my opinion, *should*) engage with these topics. Students also indicated their enjoyment of reading and discussing these books and at the conclusion of my time in their classroom, many expressed disappointment that I would soon leave and would no longer be reading to them.

Nathan: Are we – are you gonna keep [reading us] books?

KP: Not for – not for too long... I go back to [school] really soon.

Mary: Wahhh.

Nathan: [overlapping] And then when you come back from [school], are you going to read us more books?

KP: Hmm?

Nathan: Are you going to read us more books after, when you come back?

KP: So this is our last reading group [and] I wanted to thank you all for helping [me] out so much! Now I get to go back to school and write my huge [paper].

Alexis: Will you come here again?

KP: Yeah, I'm going to be back in December [to visit].

Andrew: Are you going to read [another] book to us?...

The students' enjoyment of the books and willing participation in the reading groups not only indicate their acceptance of me as part of their expected routine, but also the positive reception of the anti-oppressive storybooks. For our last reading group, I brought back all the books we had read together over the previous weeks and laid them out on the table. I asked students what they had learnt, if anything, through the books.

Alexis: They all have something in common.

KP: What's in common?

Alexis: It's all...they all like, love something. Like, he loves dresses [pointing to the books on the table], he loves being a ballerina, these two [the penguins in *And Tango Makes Three*] love each other, and...Molly loves her parents...

Patrick: [and] *King & King* love each other.

Julia: ...all these books were kinda teaching us lessons that you—that, it's like, boys can wear dresses and two boys can get married and two girls can get married and boys can be—can dance.

I also asked students which books they liked the best and why, which provided further insight as to the lessons they learnt and what they understood from the books, even weeks after we had finished reading them.

KP: Sarah, why was *10,000 Dresses* your favourite book?

Sarah: Even though I don't like dresses, [it was my favourite] because you can like whatever you want even if you're different!

Julia: I like *Molly's Family* because, um, it's nice because she has two moms and she's different than other families.... And I like the *Ballerino Nate* because they do cute dresses and um, and I...it's good that people can know that boys can be ballerinas and they can be dancers too!

KP: Awesome! Henry, which were your favourites?

Henry: [King & King] cause there's two kings and...and um, there's not normally two kings that they write.

Even Rob, who stated that it was "disgusting" (see page 94) for the two men in *King & King* to get married, chose the book as his favourite out of all the ones we read.

KP: Rob, what was your favourite book?

Rob: [hesitantly] I liked *King & King*...

KP: Why did you like *King & King*?

Rob: Uh... mmm I don't know...

It is not possible to determine whether or not Rob was entrenched within dominant discourse and understandings of normative sexuality when he first indicated that two men marrying was "disgusting" and why he later hesitantly and quietly chose it as his

favourite book. It could be that he was initially taking part in 'group think' or felt as though he had to react in a certain way to please his peers. Or, this could indicate a shift in thinking about sexual diversity. Regardless, the fact that these students seemingly came away from the reading groups with an understanding and an appreciation of what took place in the books, as well as the purpose and lessons behind each story, suggests that these books hold profound potential and possibility for disrupting prevailing discourses of gender and sexuality, particularly when used to facilitate a discussion and exploration of these issues.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

The primary aim of this study was to highlight the potential of using anti-oppressive children's literature in the elementary school classroom in the hope that doing so may help open up opportunities for discussion and reflection of gender non-conforming and LGBTQ issues. Given the prevalence of homophobic and transphobic bullying, as well as the pervasiveness of gender stereotypes and heteronormativity in school settings, there is a well documented and pressing need for such conversations to take place with young children (Flores, 2012; Kelly, 2012; Renold, 2002; Ryan et al., 2013, Sanders & Mathis, 2012). Children's literature is a widely recognized source of knowledge and entertainment in the classroom that also functions as a tool to impart information about the social world to young readers (Baker-Sperry, 2007; Chick, 2008; Davies, 1989; Esposito, 2009; Gooden & Gooden, 2001; Taylor, 2003). Anti-oppressive children's literature, therefore, offers an ideal avenue to promote discussions of gender and sexuality in the classroom, particularly by introducing new discourses that are not typically offered to young children.

The complexity of the students' thinking and process of understanding throughout this thesis cannot, and should not, be understated. Children undergo a tremendous process of negotiation and interpretation. As stated by Ryan et al. (2013),

While many of these conversations were still marked by misperceptions and surface-level understandings, they provided a space for students' vast knowledge about gender rules—gained from their own experiences, from the experiences of

people around them, and from popular culture—to be voiced and sometimes even challenged and expanded. (p. 92)

My intent with this study was not to generalize or make conclusive arguments as to the children's understandings of gender and sexuality, or to concretely determine whether or not they took up alternative discourses. According to Morgan et al. (2002), "given the differing ideas, understandings and social worlds of children and adults" (p. 11), it becomes difficult, if not impossible, for the researcher to make sense of these responses in ways that articulate what the children 'actually' meant. As a poststructural researcher, an important component of my research was to engage students in a discussion of these ideas and concepts rather than definitively stating their 'truthful' responses. By asking open-ended questions, the freedom and flexibility for a variety of responses was made possible. Whether or not they took up the discourses offered through these groups is not necessarily clear and cannot be generalized or verified. However, this research indicates that students were willing and able to engage with issues of gender and sexuality. While students were still hesitant at times, I saw the wheels turn, ideas – some new, some familiar– formulate in their minds, and it is impossible to know the potential lasting impact these stories may have on them.

Jesse: Uh, cause she can't get...those two dresses cause she feels like a girl but she's a boy but, but ... like he's a boy... but like... but it's hard to understand ...

KP: Is it?...

Jesse: – My brain is sort of tricking me right now...

KP: Yeah?

Jesse: Trying to focus.

...

Alexis: I don't really understand...

KP: What don't you understand, Alexis?

Alexis: It's confusing!

KP: What's confusing about it?

Alexis: I can't understand. I don't know what's confusing about it cause it's so confusing and now I'm making myself confused by what I'm saying and now I'm really confused.

The students' confusion, silences, and hesitations throughout the reading groups do not strike me as negative or unproductive. Rather, these reactions (or lack thereof) may suggest deeper and profound negotiation and interpretation of the messages, concepts, and ideas that were proffered through the anti-oppressive storybooks as a result of my questions and prompts. At the beginning of each reading group, I would also ask students if they had thought about the last book we read, or discussed it with other friends or family members. A few students indicated that they had thought about the story afterwards. According to Alexis, she "thought about it [*And Tango Makes Three*] after and what might happen if it was longer." Other students indicated that they had discussed the stories at home with their parents.

Jesse: I actually told my mom and my dad that the real ones [Roy and Silo in *And Tango Makes Three*], that, that the two penguins are boys and they're a little bit [like] a couple, one is big, one is small—

KP: —Yeah? And what did mom and dad say?

Jesse: —And then, there, the zookeeper had a egg to give them cause they needed to, they needed... it needed to um hatch, then he put it in the nest, then one penguin sat on it...

KP: Yeah! So Jesse, what did mom and dad say? Did they like the book? Did they like the idea?

Jesse: They said, they said, “ok, that’s actually... that’s actually true, cause like, cause, like, if two boys can be married, then two girls can be married, and then you”, they [said] like... “that’s actually weird, but it’s not. It’s just like, *life*”.

By asking students if they thought or talked about the anti-oppressive storybooks with other friends or family members, my objective was to get a sense of whether or not these stories were perhaps prompting reflections or discussions of social justice issues.

Regardless of whether or not their parents were supportive of gender variance or LGBTQ issues (in fact, in referencing whether or not he had discussed *10,000 Dresses* at home, Jesse stated that he did not because, “my daddy would...my dad would, would be grossed out...but my mom and... my mom and my sisters would be so amazed”), just the mere fact that these conversations could potentially be taking place between young children and their parents is cause for optimism. In this regard, the use of anti-oppressive storybooks in the classroom may have a ripple effect of sorts in which children who read them in the classroom may start engaging in a process of interpretation and reflection of social justice issues with themselves, friends, and family members.

Equally positive, was the students’ excitement with many of the books I read to them. For every story, at least a handful of children seemed to have thoroughly enjoyed

the book and enthusiastically stated their favourite parts. Marshall and Alexis both asked me where I had purchased the books because they wanted their parents to buy them. Once I told them where I had ordered the books, Alexis excitedly stated, "Oh my gosh! ... Maybe I'll spend my allowance money there!" The school principal took note of my use of these books in the reading groups (and perhaps also the students' enthusiasm for them), and upon completion of my study, requested the list of the anti-oppressive books so she could order them for the school library. I later found out that an order for the books had in fact been placed. After reading *King & King* with the students and sharing some of the homophobic comments with Ms. Wright, she told me that these topics (i.e. gender variance and same-sex marriage) do not come up in classroom conversations. She explained that she chooses books from the library to read to the students but these books (i.e. books with LGBTQ characters, or themes of gender and sexual diversity) are not available so the opportunity to discuss these issues through the use of storybooks is not possible. She concluded by suggesting that perhaps if these books were present in the library, these conversations could take place in her classroom. This conversation with Ms. Wright, in conjunction with the fact that my study had prompted the principal's desire and willingness to order the books for the inclusion – and real possibility of *use* – in the school library and classrooms is deeply encouraging and has touched me both on an academic and personal level.

It is important to recognize that "even if students have access to different cultural narratives, taking up discourses not considered normative requires social risk and careful negotiation" (Barrett, 2005, p. 87-88). Although, as demonstrated, many students had knowledge and an appreciation of gender fluidity and sexual diversity, these

understandings did not make their way into the classroom. This observation leads me to wonder if there is simply no space for these discussions to take place because the elementary school classroom is so entrenched with traditional views of gender and heteronormativity. As well, as stated by Caitlin Ryan and Jill Hermann-Wilmarth (2013), “if books with LGBT characters ever are read in classrooms... they are often included in a single unit or even a single day and can be positioned in didactic ways that emphasize their nonnormative status” (p. 43). However, I believe there are encouraging possibilities for inclusion of these materials in the classroom that could potentially create meaningful change. Ms. Wright’s lesson on penguin families, for example, struck me as an ideal opportunity to incorporate a book such as *And Tango Makes Three* into the existing lesson plan and curriculum so as to teach students that not all families have a mom and a dad, and some can (and do) in fact have two parents of the same sex. By looking at opportunities within the classroom to include these discussions as part of the curriculum, gender and sexual diversity may eventually no longer be seen as something ‘different’ or ‘abnormal.’ Nevertheless, for this to become a reality, significant changes will need to occur both in teacher education and curriculum development. To do so entails an exploration of the existing barriers to incorporating and implementing these lessons in the classroom that also includes the feasibility of asking teachers – many of whom come from a variety of personal backgrounds with varying beliefs and values – to teach lessons of gender and sexual diversity to their students. To not pursue these changes to curricula and pedagogy will limit possibilities for children in terms of who and what they can be. Arguably, dominant discourses of gender and sexuality that continue to be reproduced and reinforced within the classroom will repress any initiatives to foster new conceptions

of how to comfortably occupy a subject position in the social world that is outside of what is considered 'normal.' My hope is for parents, teachers, and students to begin a dialogue surrounding issues of gender variance and sexual diversity in a way that moves "toward a more possible future to expand the very meaning of what counts as a valued and valuable body in the world" (Butler, 1993, p. xxix).

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Appendix A: Semi-structured reading group guide

Before reading:

- Did anybody think about the last book we read? What did you think about?
- Did you talk about that book with anyone after we read it? What did you talk about?
- Have you ever read [selected anti-oppressive storybook]?
- When you look at the title and cover, what do you think will happen in this story?
- How is that different (or similar) to what you've read before?

During reading:

- Why do you think [the character] did/said/reacted this way?
- Why did [character] say this?
- What should [character] do?
- What would you do right now if you were [character]?
- If you were [character's] best friend, what would you say to him/her?

After reading:

- How much the story be different if....?
- Is this story different from other books you've read in school or at home? What makes it different?
- What message do you think this story is trying to tell us?
- What was your favourite part of this story? Why?
- What was your least favourite part of this story? Why?
- If you could change any part of this story, what would it be? Why?

Appendix B: Teacher consent form

Informed Consent Form

Dear Ms. Wright,

I am writing to request your permission to include ethnographic observations of your classroom as part of my data collection and dissemination. These observations are pertinent to my study, as many of the student responses in the focus groups may be informed by the culture of the classroom.

Confidentiality:

All data collected, including the name of the school, city location, and names/descriptors will remain completely confidential and pseudonyms will be used for any identifying information.

Voluntary consent:

Your consent to this request is voluntary. You may decide to decline this request or withdraw consent at any time.

Should you have any questions or request further information, please feel free to contact myself at kp12ts@brocku.ca. You may also contact my thesis supervisor, Dr. Shauna Pomerantz at spomerantz@brocku.ca or 905-688-5550 ext. 5371 with any questions or concerns.

This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through the Research Ethics Board at Brock University, REB file number: 13-303. If you have any comments or concerns about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Research Ethics Office at (905) 688-5550 Ext. 3035, reb@brocku.ca.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,
Kate Paterson

I consent to the request described above. I have made this decision based on the information I have read in the Information-Consent Letter. I have had the opportunity to receive any additional details I wanted about the request and understand that I may ask questions in the future. I understand that I may withdraw this consent at any time.

Name: _____

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Appendix C: Parental consent form

Dear Parent or Guardian:

I am a Graduate Student at Brock University in St. Catharines, Ontario, completing my Masters degree in Social Justice and Equity Studies. I am conducting a research project on children's understandings of "anti-oppressive" storybooks in the classroom. These are storybooks that hold positive portrayals of characters with different gender roles and varying family structures, such as same-sex parent families and LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer & Questioning) identifying individuals. The title of my study is "How Children Make Sense of Anti-Oppressive Children's Literature in the Classroom." I am writing to request your permission for your child to participate in this study. Please carefully review the following:

What's Involved:

I will be volunteering in your child's classroom for four weeks beginning October 1st, 2014 and will conduct my research during that time. I will be exploring how these storybooks may offer new understandings of gender roles and family structures. This study will provide the opportunity to examine how young students interpret such stories and how these understandings may lead to greater acceptance and diversity in the classroom. The study consists of reading to students and discussing the selected storybooks in a focus group setting. There will be six focus groups in total (two per week). They will take approximately 15-20 minutes and will be audio-recorded for later transcription. The total time commitment required for this study is approximately 90-120 minutes. Regular classroom instruction and activities will not be interrupted. Please see attached list of books and sample questions.

Confidentiality:

All data collected, including the name of the school, city location, and names/descriptors of the students, as well as student responses will remain completely confidential and pseudonyms will be used for any identifying information. Only my thesis supervisor and I will have access to information from your child, and the data will be kept in a secure, locked location. At the conclusion of the study (August 2015) a summary of results will be made available to your child's teacher, school principal, school board, and all interested parents and guardians. If you would like to receive a summary, please indicate your interest to myself using the contact information listed below, and the principal will distribute the information when it becomes available.

Voluntary Participation:

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you choose to participate in this study, you are free to withdraw your child at any time. To do so, please use the contact information provided below and I will immediately remove and delete any existing data from your child and they will no longer participate in the focus group. Additionally,

students will be informed of this study, will be required to provide verbal consent to participate, and retain the right to decline participation at any point in time. During the focus group discussions, I will continuously watch for cues or signals indicating students' willingness to participate. Should any student seem unwilling or hesitant, they will not be forced or encouraged to respond to questions. Should you wish not to have your child participate in this study, your child will not be penalized in any way for not participating in this study and will be part of a reading group that is read a storybook from the classroom or school library that will not be audio recorded or used in my study. This reading group will take place so as to not exclude any student from usual classroom activities.

Contact Information & Ethics Clearance:

Should you have any questions or request further information, please feel free to contact myself at kp12ts@brocku.ca. You may also contact my thesis supervisor, Dr. Shauna Pomerantz at spomerantz@brocku.ca or 905-688-5550 ext. 5371 with any questions or concerns.

This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through the Research Ethics Board at Brock University, REB file number: 13-303. If you have any comments or concerns about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Research Ethics Office at (905) 688-5550 Ext. 3035, reb@brocku.ca.

Sincerely,
Kate Paterson

Please indicate whether or not you wish to permit your child to participate in this study by checking one of the statements below, signing and printing your name and returning it to school with your child. Thank you very much for your consideration!

_____ I grant permission for my child _____ to participate in this study.

_____ I do not grant permission for my child _____ to participate in this study.

Print of Name Parent/Guardian

Signature of Parent/Guardian

Date: _____