
http://researchrepository.murdoch.edu.a/23500/

Copyright: © 2014 by SAGE Publications
It is posted here for your personal use. No further distribution is permitted.
Teaching about “Princess Boys” or Not: The Case of One Male Elementary School Teacher and the Polemics of Gender Expression and Embodiment

Wayne J. Martino¹ and Wendy Cumming-Potvin²

Abstract
In this article, we deal with the politics of gender embodiment and the significance of queer sociological and transgender theoretical perspectives for reflecting on the pedagogical implications of employing texts such as “My princess boy” to address questions pertaining to the livability and recognizability of differently gendered identities in the elementary school context. We draw specifically on the theoretical work of Judith Butler and Deborah Britzman to examine important questions related to the pedagogical implications for one male teacher in terms of what counts as a viable, recognizable, and legitimate gendered identity. Through adopting a case study approach, our purpose is to unravel and unpack the politics of gender embodiment, especially in terms of addressing the thinkability and admissibility of gender variant and transgender personhood in the elementary school classroom and what this might entail with regard to deploying reading practices as sites of identificatory possibilities or not.

Keywords
gender expression, gender nonconformity, transgender, queer sociology, male teachers, masculinity, reading practices, elementary school classroom

¹ University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario, Canada
² School of Education, Murdoch University, Murdoch, Australia

Corresponding Author:
Wayne J. Martino, University of Western Ontario, 1137 Western Rd, London, Ontario, Canada N6G 1G7. Email: wmartino@uwo.ca
Introduction

This article is concerned to investigate the pedagogical implications for addressing the politics of gender expression and embodiment in the elementary classroom. It provides a specific case study of one male school teacher’s reflections on teaching about “princess boys” as a basis for providing insights into the micro-political dimensions of the elementary classroom as a site of pedagogical intervention into what Rooke (2010, 656) identifies as “the cultural logics of gender normativity.” More specifically, we document the specific rationalities and justifications offered by this teacher for choosing not to employ My Princess Boy, a picture storybook about a boy who likes the color pink and enjoys wearing dresses, as a pedagogical text (Kilodavis and DeSimone 2010). Our purpose is not to generalize across a population of male teachers and their pedagogical commitment to addressing questions of gender variance and transgender identities in their classrooms or not, but rather to provide critical insights into some of the broader political and pedagogical ramifications for creating transgendered spaces and social imaginaries in schools that are committed to an ethics of recognition and livability in terms of what is to count as viable gendered personhood. It is in this sense that we draw significantly on Butler’s (2004) work regarding the presuppositions and social norms that come into play, particularly given the pedagogical circumstances arising from the introduction of texts in the elementary school classroom that make available to young children “avowedly unthinkable representations of sexual and gender identity” (Rasmussen 2006, 474). We also engage with the theoretical insights of queer theorists such as Britzman (1998), for example, who argues for employing texts and reading practices in the classroom as a site for addressing the “problem of the production of normalcy” and for “re-thinking the self” in terms of entertaining identificatory possibilities (p. 81).

In addition, we draw on trans-informed theoretical perspectives as articulated by scholars (Connell 2009; Doan 2010; Hines 2006; Rooke 2010; Stryker 2006) who provide epistemological insights into the politics of gender expression, embodiment, and nonnormativity and raise serious concerns about “the tyranny of gendered spaces” and questions of gender democratization. Such insights are important, given both the scant research on the pedagogical implications of addressing transgender identities and gender-variant expression in schools and the literature, which points to schools as regulatory sites of surveillance for the policing of gendered and sexual normativities (Martino and Cumming-Potvin 2003, 2014; Martino 2000; Blackburn 2007; Blaise 2005; Davison 2007; DePalma and Atkinson 2009; Frank et al. 2003; Kimmel and Mahler 2003; Ingrey 2013; Pascoe 2007; Renold 2005; Wyss 2004). As Robinson (2002, 2008) argues, within the elementary and early childhood school context, such regulatory surveillance is further exacerbated by dominant discourses that position children not only as sexually innocent and vulnerable to dangerous knowledge about gender and sexual minorities but also as lacking cognitive and psychological readiness or maturity to deal with such adult matters (see also DePalma...
and Atkinson 2006). A recent study, however, which focuses specifically on teaching about gender diversity as part of the elementary school curriculum in the United States, has highlighted the possibilities of employing picture storybooks through developing a carefully scaffolded series of lessons over time with the explicit purpose of engaging children productively in critical questions about the politics of gender embodiment, expression, and trans identities (Ryan, Patraw, and Bednar 2013). Our focus in this article is to build on this important work, but with a focus on the pedagogical constraints that are imposed by a certain homonormative logics of masculinity with its incitement for discomfort with regard to disavowing the thinkability and recognition of the princess boy as both a viable expression of gendered personhood and for introducing a scaffolded platform for addressing important ontological questions about transgendered subjectivities and imaginaries (Martino and Cumming-Potvin 2014; Davidson 2009; Slesaransky-Poe and Garcia 2009). As Butler (2004, 219) stipulates, such questions which relate to an ethic and politics of recognition are ones that need to be addressed, so that we can “create a world in which those who understand their gender and their desire to be nonnormative can live and thrive not only without the threat of violence from the outside but without the pervasive sense of their own unreality, which can lead to suicide or a suicidal life.”

**About the Study**

This particular case of teaching about princess boys and the ethics of recognition in avowing gender-variant expression in the elementary classroom needs to be understood as part of a broader study concerned to address the marginalization and silencing of sexual and gender minority issues in schools. Initially, the study began with a focus on developing a unit of work on family diversity as part of a compulsory course on literacy education for preservice elementary school teacher candidates in the Western Australian context through employing literacy and media texts as pedagogical resources. Texts that included representations of same-sex families and relationships were explicitly sought and introduced to the teacher candidates as a basis for developing specific lesson plans. The teacher candidates were also invited to participate in an interview which involved them sharing their reflections on the use of such texts with regard to their pedagogical potential and limits. The study grew to include a small purposeful sample of three experienced teachers in the school system in Western Australia, who were provided with a range of resources and asked to reflect specifically on whether and how they would deploy them in their classrooms (Patton 2002). These texts included:

- *Sticks and Stones* (Johnson 2001), a documentary that focuses on children from same-sex families and how it feels to be teased as a consequence of belonging to such families;
- *Mini Mia and her darling uncle* (Lindenbaum 2007), a picture storybook about a young girl’s relationship with her gay uncle;
• *Asha’s Mums* (Elwin and Paulse 1990), a picture storybook about an African Canadian girl who has two lesbian mums; and

• *And Tango Makes Three* (Richardson and Parnell 2005), a picture book based on the true story of two male penguins who hatched and raised a healthy chick.

Our research expanded to include elementary school teachers in Ontario and also involved a specific emphasis on gender nonconformity, given our specific reading of some of the trans literature mentioned previously and which we outline in greater detail in the following section. *My princess boy* and *And Tango Makes Three* were sent to all teachers in advance and two weeks later, a semistructured interview was arranged, so that they could discuss the texts and their potential pedagogical deployment. The Ontario teachers were recruited through personal contacts and through information about the study disseminated by a contact at one of the teacher union offices, which led to a snowballing effect. Eight elementary teachers contacted the first author and provided the source for generating a series of information-rich cases for more in-depth study into deployment of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT)-themed texts as sites of pedagogical possibilities for fostering both queer and transgender social imaginaries in schools (see Martino and Cumming-Potvin 2014). Noy (2008, 327), in fact, argues that snowball sampling has the potential to “generate a unique type of social knowledge—a knowledge which is emergent, political and interactional.” Each case study enabled attention to be devoted to *thick description* and detail about specific teachers and their reflections on the pedagogical deployment of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (LGBTQ)-themed picture storybooks. For example, Patton (2002, 46) argues that a focus on individual cases “selected purposefully . . . permit inquiry into and understanding of a phenomenon in depth.” He further adds that:

> The logic and power of purposeful sampling derive from the emphasis on in-depth understanding. This leads to selecting information-rich cases for study in depth. (p. 46)

In addition, Creswell (2007, 40) argues that “we use qualitative research to develop theories when partial or inadequate theories exist for certain populations and samples or existing theories do not adequately capture the complexity of the problem we are explaining.” As Stake (2000, 448) states “Case studies are of value for refining theory and suggesting complexities for further investigation, as well as helping to establish the limits of generalizability.” These methodological considerations relate specifically to our concern about the limits of dominant hetero- and gender-normalizing discourses and their impact on teachers’ pedagogical practices in addressing queer sexuality, gender-variant expression, and transgender identification in the elementary school classroom through the deployment of picture storybooks. In the particular case that we document in this article, our concern was to focus specifically on making sense of the teacher’s own concerns about the
pedagogical limits and foreclosures that he identified with the potential employment of *My princess boy*. We focus on how specific questions related to this teacher’s own narration of his self-understanding of the embodiment of masculinity and sexuality as influenced by what Rooke (2010) identifies as a powerful “matrix of gender normativity” appeared to be playing into his rejection of the text in its capacity to carve out a space of recognition and avowal of embodied gender nonconformity for boys, with all of its possibilities for embracing gender democratization and trans-identificatory possibilities (Slesaransky-Poe and Garcia 2009).

**Queer and Trans-Informed Theoretical Frameworks**

We draw on both queer and trans-informed theoretical literature and the analytic insights they provide in making sense of one male teacher’s reflections on the pedagogical limits of deploying a text such as *My princess boy* as a resource for entertaining identificatory possibilities for his students with regard to acknowledging and avowing the livability of gender-variant expression and transgendered personhood. Britzman (1998, 84), for example, links reading practices “to forms of sociality and to the very structuring of intelligibility, identifications, modes of address, and civic life,” and it is in this sense that we conceive of the pedagogical deployment of texts such as *My princess boy* in the elementary school classroom as offering identificatory possibilities in terms of avowing transgendered and gender-variant expressions and embodiment and moreover, in presenting them as livable and recognizable “forms of gender possibility” (Butler 2004, 219). It is in this sense that reading practices are conceived as offering interpretive possibilities for interrogating “how one comes to think, along with others, the very structures of signification in avowing and disavowing forms of sociality and their grounds of possibility” (Britzman 1998, 85). Thus, Britzman, argues that “reading practices might be educated to attend to the proliferation of one’s own identificatory possibilities and to make allowance for the unruly terms of undecidability and unknowability” and that there are clearly pedagogical possibilities “of working the capacity to imagine oneself differently precisely in one’s encounters with another and in one’s encounters with the self” (p. 85). It is through such a lens that we came to conceive of the deployment of picture storybooks such as *My princess boy* and which provided insights into our understanding of how teachers in our research conceived of pedagogical possibilities and constraints in terms of addressing gender-variant and transgendered realities of embodied and lived experience.

Hines (2006), however, points to the limits of some postfeminist and queer theoretical approaches that have emphasized a project of gender deconstruction of identity categories that leads to a celebration of gender fluidity, while disparaging or ignoring the complexities of lived and material embodied realities of transsexual subjects who are positioned as “gender defenders” instead of “gender outlaws” (Elliot and Roen 1998). It is in this sense, Hines (2006, 50) argues, that “queer theory’s rebuttal of identity” has led to a “negation of difference” with transgender
approaches being characterized “as an ethereal act of gender deconstruction” which fails to positively account for the subjective and material realities of transsexual gendered embodiment (see also Prosser 1998). However, Hines (2006, 52) indicates that such shortcomings can be overcome through embracing a queer sociology of transgender, which “examines how power is discursively and materially produced and resisted at the macro level” alongside an analysis that takes into account the subjective and embodied experiences of the livability of gender at a micro level. This conceptual framing, which attends to the politics of gender as it is materially embodied, experienced, and lived out by transpeople, refuses a tendency to homogenize transgender subjects and to cast transsexual subjects in crude terms as “gender defenders” who simply “desire to assimilate into a gender binary system” (Hines 2006, 63). Rather, such a position that allows for a more nuanced attention to the politics of gender embodiment and gender difference is consistent with what Connell (2009, 146) terms a project of “gender democratization” which does not subscribe to a logic of gender abolition but “seeks to equalize gender orders, rather than shrink them to nothing.” Doan (2010, 637), for example, as a visibly transsexual woman writes about the tyranny and regulatory constraints of gendered spaces and how these impact on her life and those who display their differently gendered identities and who choose to live as “a visibly queer transgendered person” and argues for the need to embrace embodied gender variance. In fact, as Rooke (2010, 656) argues, at the heart of gender democratization is “an ethics of recognition” that is informed by a commitment to interrogating “the cultural logics of gender normativity” which underscore “the consequences of being either misrecognized or unrecognized for many trans people in everyday spaces.”

Such a position of embracing a transgender imaginary of gender democratization and a queer sociological framework is also consistent with transgender studies scholars such as Stryker (2006, 3), who argues that transgender studies is “concerned with anything that disrupts, denaturalizes, rearticulates, and makes visible the normative linkages we generally assume to exist between biological specificity of the sexually differentiated body, the social roles and statuses that a particular form of body is expected to occupy, the subjectively experienced relationship between a gendered sense of self and social expectations of gender role performance, and the cultural mechanisms that work to sustain or thwart specific configurations of gender personhood.” Moreover, it is the critical attention to the political questions of positionality, embodiment, and self-understandings of gender as contingent and mediated practices that are central to an understanding of the biologically sexed body “as a ground for the act of speaking, but it has no deterministic relationship to performative gender” (Stryker 2006, 10). As Noble (2004, xi) argues, “No one articulation (of gender) is original. And thus each is capable of re-articulation and/or re-construction.”

However, as Butler (2004) cogently articulates, there are clearly social justice implications to these cultural mechanisms and social norms that work to define and solidify what is to count as viable expression of embodied gendered personhood:
Justice is not only or exclusively a matter of how persons are treated or how societies are constituted. It also concerns consequential decisions about what a person is, and what social norms must be honored and expressed for “personhood” to become allocated, how we do or do not recognize animate others as persons depending on whether or not we recognize a certain norm manifested in and by the body of that other. The very criterion by which we judge a person to be a gendered being, a criterion that posits coherent as a presupposition of humanness, is not only one which, justly or unjustly, governs the recognizability of the human, but one that informs the ways we do or do not recognize ourselves at the level of feeling, desire, and the body, at the moments before the mirror, in the moment before the window, in the times that one turns to psychologists, to psychiatrists, to medical and legal professions to negotiate what may well feel like the unrecognizability of one’s gender, and hence, the unrecognizability of one’s personhood. (p. 58)

It is to such questions pertaining to the recognizability and avowal of gender nonconformity and gender-variant expressions of embodiment to which we now turn our attention to raise important pedagogical questions about how norms governing what is to count as a livable expression of gender identity come to define one male teacher’s refusal to acknowledge its admissibility and thinkability in the elementary school classroom.

**Tom and the Problematic of “Princess Boys”**

Tom, aged fifty-four, is a gay-identifying, White male who teaches in a mid-sized urban city in Ontario. He has thirty years of teaching experience, the past thirteen years in the current elementary school where he has been teaching a grade 3 class for the past eight years. The school has a population of 550 students and is located in a poor neighborhood where Tom indicates that there is a prevalence of government housing and a significant number of “split families, blended families, single parent, either mother or father, kids that have been withdrawn by Children’s Aid so lots of problems.”

Tom indicated that he was familiar only with the text, *And Tango Makes Three*—that he knew both the story and the book “about the penguins in the New York Zoo.” Initially, he speaks very positively about the text and about how he would use it and immediately distinguishes it from *My Princess Boy*, which he appears to find problematic:

*And Tango Makes Three* is very... I call it calm and the storyline is there and can be taken many different ways. *My Princess Boy* is full on in your face as far as I’m concerned.

However, Tom does identify “the graphics” and “the faceless characters” as positive aspects of the *Princess Boy* text: “I love the graphics, the illustrations are excellent, you know, no faces, really not of any one culture right, so it will... you know,
nobody’s going to be labelled, oh this Princess Boy is of this background or whatever right, so it’s faceless which I really think is a great idea.” He also mentions the development of the plot, with its repetition, and how it relies on inciting the reader’s expectations as narrative aspects that would make the text very appealing to young children. Tom also talks about the normative representation of a family as a positive aspect of the book: “I like that there’s a whole family you know, it’s like an entire family, it’s not siblings . . . like it’s not a step or blended or anything but it’s all family.” This notion of family, albeit rendered intelligible through a pathologizing discourse of othering, seems to be important for him, pedagogically speaking, as it serves to counterbalance the prevalence of other sorts of nonnormative family structures that exist in his current school community.

However, apart from these aspects of the book, he spends much of the interview questioning the pedagogical utility and effectiveness of the text and sees the text as setting up a reception regime in its capacity to foreclose the generation of any productive discussion:

I don’t know how much you can have a discussion about this book. I know the author on the back cover says that she wrote this because of her son to start a discussion. I don’t know how much there is to discuss because . . . it’s just out there. It’s sort of like, “Here’s my Princess Boy, accept my Princess Boy. I have accepted my Princess Boy; you need to accept my Princess Boy”. It’s pretty strong . . . Whenever I read a book, I always want to see . . . if I can generate a discussion or if you can make a connection to something . . . I think you can make a connection but I don’t know where the discussion would go. I really don’t because it’s just, it’s so so in your face . . . the kids would totally make the connection, Princess Boy, princess is a girl, here’s a boy who’s a princess, dressing in a dress you know, I just . . . it’s a real hard line if there’s ever going to be a discussion. And I don’t know if somebody at age eight or nine in a primary level has enough sophistication to make that kind of in your face come back and make a judgment value and discuss it. I don’t know if they could. I really don’t. I really don’t. And I showed it to people and everybody says ‘wow’ after they finish reading it. Every single teacher said ‘wow’; the librarian said ‘wow’, teachers of the 7 and 8s said ‘wow’ and teachers in primary said ‘wow’. . . . I just said read it and tell me what you think, but everybody’s comment was ‘wow’, like it’s out there.

Tom resists the “Princess Boy” text based on that “it’s so in your face” and “out there.” He does not feel comfortable, nor does he see the potential for using the text to discuss questions related to gender expression and identity. His aversion or resistance appears to stem from the fact that the text is too contrived and deliberate in its intent and perhaps too controversial or personally threatening. What emerges later in the interview is his preference for a more understated and nuanced approach to addressing nonnormative expressions of gender and sexuality in the classroom. A text such as My Princess Boy leaves him with little room to avoid an explicit discussion of a boy who consciously chooses not only to wear dresses but also to embrace
gender nonconforming behavior. The potential of the text for opening up discussions about various nonnormative expressions of gender identity, however, is not entertained. For example, what does it mean for boys who embrace the feminine or transgress such normative expectations for the gender assigned to them at birth? What are the consequences and effects for boys who behave or choose to behave and/or dress differently from other boys? and What is the difference between being identified or read as “a sissy boy” as opposed to actively embracing a transgender identification? These sorts of questions signal the need for a particular threshold knowledge or at least a professional learning context that affords teachers with the opportunity to build their knowledge and understanding of the politics of gender expression and transgender identities in school contexts (DePalma 2013; Ryan, Patraw, and Bednar 2013).

In fact, Tom immediately reads the Princess Boy’s gender nonconforming behavior as an expression of his gay sexuality, which leads to a foreclosure around addressing the previous questions with their potential for building a teacher threshold knowledge about transgender identifications and identities, gender variance, the significance of gender expression, “gender bashing,” effeminacy as an abjected status, and the gendered body as a regulatory site for the policing of boys’ masculinities (Butler 1993; Namaste 2006; Martino and Pallotta-Chiarolli 2003). Moreover, his argument for raising questions about the suitability of the text also relates to the fact that children aged eight or nine are somehow not sophisticated enough cognitively to be able to process or deal with the recognizability and livability of the Princess Boy’s expression and embodiment of gender (Butler 2004). As he indicates subsequently, this is because they lack familiarity with such boys who are outside of their everyday experience. Interestingly, Tom resorts to the same arguments that have been used to reject pedagogical interventions aimed at addressing nonnormative sexuality and same-sex desire in the elementary classroom. As Robinson (2002, 428) points out, addressing sexuality with young children in schools as an integral and necessary part of the social justice curriculum “rely on the educator’s perception of what they consider relevant and appropriate in their settings, as well as their own personal comfort levels in addressing such issues.” This justification for not addressing potentially threatening topics and including texts which make available nonnormative expressions of sexuality has also been supported by other teachers in our research and also that conducted by DePalma and Atkinson (2006, 340) who argue that such positions rely on “the assumption of naivete [which] relates to the psychological developmental stages argument that small children are not ‘developmentally ready’ to understand certain things”: “This notion that development is restricted by a child’s step-wise progression through pre-programmed stages most commonly evokes Piagetian stages of child development...and has been criticized as overly rigid, individualistic and culturally specific....” (see also Martino and Cumming-Potvin 2011).

Tom even spends some time circulating and discussing My Princess Boy with a number of other teachers, perhaps to gain some confirmation and support from his
colleagues for his own misgivings about the text. In fact, in trying to unravel further what he meant by the repeated assertion that the text is “in your face,” he actually admits that he does not feel comfortable:

In your face . . . it’s almost like, do you know anybody like that? Probably not. Has anybody ever come to school dressed in a dress? Well not in my 30 years . . . I don’t know of anybody personally . . . it was just a really strong message . . . it’s just out there.

Tom’s disavowal of the Princess Boy, therefore, is explicitly linked to the notion that such boys are outside of the common or everyday lived experience of most students and certainly his own experience as a teacher with some thirty years’ experience. However, such nonrecognizability and unthinkability, which are tied to his disavowal of the Princess Boy and his threatening presence, are certainly linked to broader heteronormalizing regimes that require the containment and exclusion of the abjected other as a necessary basis for sustaining the hegemonic social order. This analysis is consistent with Butler’s (1993, 3) argument about the “exclusionary matrix by which subjects are formed [and which] thus requires the simultaneous production of a domain of abject beings, those who are not yet ‘subjects’ but who form the constitutive outside to the domain of the subject”: the abject designates here precisely those “unlivable” and “uninhabitable” zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject, but whose living under the sign of the “unlivable” is required to circumscribe the domain of the subject.

The Abjected Status of Princess Boys and Pedagogical Foreclosure

This notion of the abjected status of the Princess Boy’s gender identity and its unrecognizability and unlivability are further reiterated subsequently by Tom’s resistance to introducing what may well be termed a trans social imaginary through creating spaces for entertaining certain gendered identificatory possibilities for his students through deploying the text in his classroom (Britzman 1998; Rooke 2010). Such identificatory possibilities remain unthinkable, outside of what he considers to be the intelligibility and livability of gender expression and embodiment for boys as they are represented by the male character in the picture storybook:

I wouldn’t feel comfortable at a Grade 3 level . . . you know, there’s so much teasing unfortunately that goes on . . . I don’t even think it’s something that they’ve encountered or that they’ve thought of. . . . That somebody would actually come to school . . . like a boy in a dress and like would live their life that way. I don’t think they’ve ever even thought of that. . . . That somebody would go to that extreme . . . I mean there are boys and girls sitting in my class that are probably good to end up being gay and lesbian, right? . . . I think they would make the connection that maybe this person is gay, but I don’t think they would ever fathom somebody coming to school . . . a boy coming to
school in a dress and living his life in a dress . . . it’s so far out there that somebody would do that. Would they take a chance to be a little bit different? Probably not! Would they take a chance to be really different? Absolutely not!

However, when Tom is prompted to consider, hypothetically, how he might deploy the text to engage his students in a class discussion about gender expression and its recognizability as a transgression, he indicates that he would resort to a pedagogical approach that is underscored by a liberal and celebratory discourse of acknowledging individual differences—a position that denies or erases the political volatility of drawing attention to asymmetrical and hierarchical power relations that underscore various subject and identificatory positions related to gender expression and sexualities. For example, he asserts that “you could have a discussion of differences” and proceeds to give an account of one of his classes involving “math presentations from a graph” where the students were required “to produce a math poster from this graph and answer some questions.” The fact that “everybody’s poster was different” serves as an impetus for him to launch into a discussion about respecting individual differences: “everybody’s is different” and we accept absolutely everybody’s right.” He asserts that he is “big on equality” and that he stresses with his students how important it is to accept differences:

... maybe you have different clothes or a different culture or eating a different food yes, differences in sexuality, I don’t know if they’re there yet, personally, somebody at their level being different. Differences with family, like maybe two dads, two moms, they’re there. I teach kids with two dads and two moms. They don’t spread it around all the time, but they know . . . they know differences, they understand differences, they seem to be accepting of differences in their family, you know, sexual differences, but at an age eight and age nine level, I don’t think they can figure out [what it really means].

He attributes this inability to “something that’s beyond their age . . . like if they have two moms, you know, that’s an old person having two moms, not and an eight year old, a girl liking a girl or a boy liking a boy or a boy in a dress . . . I think you know, like differences, like sexual differences I think they identify it, they know it, they realize it but it’s almost like its removed to somebody who’s different, somebody who’s older.” So it is in this sense that he constructs both gender and sexual differences being outside of young children’s experiences—it is an understanding of the desire for and livability of alternative gender and sexual expressions that remains foreclosed to them. There is some degree of recognizability when it comes to the reality of same-sex relationships, but Tom understands this recognizability as being confined solely to children’s supposed understanding that such desire is confined to the adult world of relationships.

Once again, there are certain normative assumptions about the cognitive and developmental readiness of young children which, when coupled with their naivety
and innocence, supposedly renders them incapable of understanding the significance of sexual and gender differences, particularly in relation to the intelligibility of same-sex families and the recognizability of same-sex desire. This perception is interesting, particularly given research which tends to highlight the consciousness of children in terms of how sexuality, gender, and desire get played out and are enacted by young children in elementary schools (see Renold 2005; Blaise 2005). DePalma (2013) specifically portrays children’s willingness and depth of understanding when being introduced to carefully scaffolded and thought out discussions related to the livability of transgender and transsexual embodied realities—a critical queer and transing literacy project that is also exemplified by the teacher in Ryan, Patraw, and Bednar’s (2013) study in her approach to addressing gender variance and transgender expression with young primary school-age children.

Conceiving of ‘Gender Trouble’ as a Liberal Humanist Enterprise

Tom does acknowledge that he could just focus on gender issues in introducing My Princess Boy to his students, but that he would find this difficult as he immediately identified the princess boy’s gender nonconformity as a clear sign or indicator of the latter’s homosexuality, a reading he claimed that was confirmed by all the other teachers with whom he discussed the picture storybook. In reflecting on this question of focusing on gender, he considers how he would use the text as a springboard for discussing “boy colors and girl colors” and would interrupt the notion that pink is simply a color for girls. This reflection leads him to reflect more strategically on how he might productively work to loosen certain gender constraints and to disrupt a binary system of gender that regulates the embodiment of normative masculinities and femininities. He mentions specifically how he engages in nonnormative gender behaviors himself in the classroom, which he sees as instructive in terms of interrupting the norms that constrain what is to count as a gender appropriate or gender proper behavior. In so doing, he raises key questions about the conscious and deliberate use of the teacher’s body as a pedagogical site for interrupting a binary system of gender attribution and its effects in terms of limiting the expression of gender (Cooks and LeBesco 2006; Laubscher and Powell 2003). For example, he talks about a ritual in his classroom for celebrating children’s birthdays. On a child’s designated birthday the class sings “happy birthday” and then is given a choice to wear either a crown or a tiara for the day to celebrate their birthday. He is emphatic that they may wear whatever they want: “I never say the crown is for the boy and the tiara is for the girl, but I’ve had girls choose the crown and I’ve had a few boys choose the tiara . . . and so as they’re being dismissed, I’ll take it from the student and I’ll put it on . . . and people will laugh.”

In this capacity, Tom sees himself as making a conscious or strategic decision by allowing the celebration of birthdays in his classroom to become a site for playing with gender signifiers in terms of body adornment. In making available these options where children can feel comfortable to choose either a tiara or a crown, he is careful
to avoid signifying to his students the gender appropriateness or suitability of either head piece. Such a practice, however, is framed or cast, not so much in terms of its subversive potential to transgress gender norms, but as a means by which to exemplify a liberal humanist commitment to fostering acceptance of individual differences (Weedon 1997). In fact, he indicates that he often wears either a crown or a tiara as a manifestation of this gender flexibility:

I think I do it because I like my classroom to be totally accepting, totally calm, totally comfortable, like very safe. You could say anything and it will be respected, . . . we’re very respectful of anybody at any time when answering the question, asking the question, giving a presentation, so it goes along with accepting and I do it because I want everybody to be accepted for whatever reason . . . so maybe later on they can hopefully accept somebody on their sexuality . . . I don’t do it as a gay man who had a terrible outing because I didn’t . . . I mean I played sports all my whole life. I wasn’t the classic or what you might think of as the stereotyped gay . . . So I played all those sports and had jobs that were physical and did all of that sort of stuff. I just want people to be accepting of everything you know, abilities in the classroom, differences in the classroom, and I do it purposely, and it’s not because of a sexual or any kind of orientation, I just want it to be accepting.

Tom rejects or refuses the abjected status that is often attributed to gay subjects and rather sees himself in more agentic terms and less as a pathologized subject (Rasmussen 2006). However, there is a sense in his response to the princess boy that his aversion may well be related to rejecting discourses or games of truth that link or tie gayness to effeminacy:

Wayne: But there you’re playing with gender by having a jewelled tiara on your head as a man, it’s sort of disrupting you know . . .

Tom: But I do it with the crown too, it doesn’t matter . . . So like if it’s a boy’s birthday and he’s chosen the crown, at the end of the day I’ll take it and I’ll put it on during dismissal. But if it’s a girl and she’s chosen the tiara, I’ll put it on. It doesn’t matter, and sometimes I put them on upside down just to show them that you know, and again I’m playing with them right, that you know, who says that the top has to be top. You know, the point has to be at the top. You could wear it a different way right? Just a different way to look at things.

Rather than embracing the explicitly transgressive gender politics associated with his performance with the tiara, Tom reduces it to a liberal strategy of celebrating difference. To what extent is such a strategy to divert attention away from acknowledging his own body as a pedagogical site for enacting a potentially transgressive gender politics related to a question about his own discomfort with effeminacy and his embodied politics of straight-acting masculinity with residues of what Kimmel (1999) terms “masculinity as homophobia” (see also Martino 2006)? Nardi (2000), for example, speaks specifically about the identity project of defeminization
that is embraced by gay men who define themselves as straight-acting which needs
to be understood within the context of both the persistence of contemporary media
representations of gay men as effeminate and the historical legacy of the late-
nineteenth-century sexual inversion theories of homosexuality. In this sense, this
question about Tom’s own discomfort and refusal to engage with questions of the
thinkability, admissibility, and the livability of gender-variant expression in his own
classroom through the deployment of *My Princess Boy* raises some questions about
the politics of masculinity in male teachers’ lives and how such identity politics and
gender embodiment play into and constrain their pedagogical practices with regard
to embracing a more explicitly progressive interventionist approach—clearly an area
for further research (Francis 2008; Martino 2008).

Tom elaborates at length on this point about embracing a more liberal peda-
gogical practice in the interview in terms of identifying the celebration of dif-
ference as a defining characteristic of his approach. For example, he goes on
to talk about how he uses a picture of the earth from space and how he will
“flip it upside down” which inevitably leads to some children raising questions
to which he responds: “I’ll say well what if you came at it space, from a differ-
ent galaxy or somewhere, just to get them thinking.” Tom proceeds to assert
that he does not want his students to have “all these like preconceived ideas”
and how celebrating difference permeates his whole pedagogical approach in
delivering the curriculum, from stressing the different ways in arriving at the
answer to a mathematical problem to acknowledging differences in writing a
story about a topic such as horses:

So with just anything I always put it out there, anything is accepted…and I push it
because I want them to be creative and I want them to think and I want them to be
accepting all the time. It helps with everything, like the way the kids treat each other,
the way that they will say please and thank you, the way that they will love math, they
will love science.

So when Tom is presented with a reading of his playfulness with the tiara as a strat-
egy for disrupting certain regulatory norms governing sexual difference or the sexed
body and their materialization as a static condition (Butler 1993, 1–2), he is quick to
redirect the focus of his pedagogical strategy to a discussion about his commitment
to endorsing freedom of individual choice—the freedom of individual students and
their right to choose—which he frames within the context of endorsing a liberal ima-
ginery of embracing and acceptance of differences in his classroom.

However, when pushed to consider much more explicitly the question of gender
expression and how he might see himself as addressing this embodied reality in his
classroom, Tom is quite adamant that he would not use *My Princess Boy* in this ped-
agogical capacity. In his justification for such a refusal, he reiterates his previous
point and aversion to the book being “too much in your face” and “extreme” and
argues for a more indirect approach:
So my idea of gender non-conformity is to bring it about subversively so they’re going to pick up the main idea and make a connection themselves, right, either through something they’ve read, seen on TV or in the movies or a book... I want them to sort of reason through it and if everything in the class has been really accepting, then they’re going to be open to those kind of things, not here it is, you must accept a boy that comes to school in a dress, no matter what his sexual orientation is!

Tom is adamant in casting *My Princess Boy* as a text which forecloses discussion, rather than using it to authorize reading practices that point to identificatory possibilities in terms of gender expression. Rather he sees himself as addressing gender expression and transgression in terms of offering up texts which challenge traditional gender roles. This reading practice would involve presenting the children with “stories,” which feature female characters in nontraditional roles such as “firewomen” and “police women” as a basis for introducing students to disrupting gender stereotypes:

So get at it that way, then they can say well the safety patrol officer is a female so they would make that connection right, so you could be anything and do anything right... I would never want to sort of put that in their face and then tell them what they have to think about it... if we accept everybody, if that’s all out there, then reading a story about somebody who might be a little different you know, Johnny has two dads or something, then they’re going to get there... like the other book [*And Tango makes three*] lends itself to discussion more because its... it’s about families.

On one level, Tom justifies his objection to *My Princess Boy* as a pedagogical text on the basis that it forecloses the opportunity for kids to make connections for themselves and seems to be advocating more exploratory and open-ended approach to addressing gender in his classroom. In other words, he wants his students to come to an understanding of gender normativity and its regulatory constraints much more indirectly. He identifies such an approach as much more subversive. He appears to be casting *My Princess Boy* as one which adopts too much of a direct approach which compels pedagogical intervention that subscribes to a nonnegotiable position of indoctrination or telling students what to think. However, his account of how he would go about disrupting gender norms and what he considers to be an instance of enacting gender nonconformity is cast in terms of attempting to get kids to disrupt conventional or traditional gender roles, particularly in relation to participation in the workforce. In this respect, it is possible to understand Tom’s pedagogical interventions as being circumscribed by a liberal humanist social imaginary of individual acceptance of difference, which relates to his reliance, for the most part on questioning sex-role socialization, as opposed to a more critical trans-informed position which is concerned with a politics of gender democratization and embodied identification. This latter position is one that takes into
consideration the politics of gender “as a material and embodied reality” (Alexander 2005, 45).

**Conclusion and Implications**

In this article, we have used a case study approach to raise some questions about the reception regimes and foreclosures that are brought into play for one male elementary school teacher in terms of deploying a picture storybook about princess boys as basis for addressing the case thinkability and viability of variant and gender nonconforming identificatory with his students. The case study method enabled us to investigate the micro-political dimensions at the heart of one male teacher’s pedagogical reflections on addressing gender nonconformity and transgendered identification in the elementary school classroom. It was this in-depth focus on individual teachers as specific cases (Yin 2009), which enabled us to generate particular insights into their pedagogical repertoires and threshold knowledges, particularly with regard to addressing sexual and gender minority issues in schools (see Martino and Cumming-Potvin 2014). Such a focus on gender diverse practices and identities as well as transgendered embodied identifications has also been influenced by our engagement with a range of queer sociological and trans literature which has come to inform how we envisage texts and reading practices such as *My Princess boy* as important and productive sites for investigating the possibilities for addressing gender democratization in elementary schools. Of course, there are clear limits to focusing on one teacher and one particular text, but such specificity enabled us to unravel and unpack the politics of gender embodiment, especially in terms of addressing the thinkability and admissibility of gender queer and transgender personhood and what this might entail with regard to deploying reading practices in the elementary school classroom as sites of identificatory possibilities or not.

The case of Tom also enabled us to foreground some questions pertaining to the questions regarding the teacher’s own gendered subjectivity, performativity and embodiment of masculinity, as both a pedagogical resource and in terms of imposing certain limits or constraints with regard to conceiving of and addressing important issues surrounding the livability of what is to count as a viable and livable gendered personhood. For example, elsewhere, we have documented how a queer and lesbian identifying teacher in our research, consciously and strategically deployed texts such as *My Princess boy* and *10,000 dresses* (Ewert and Ray 2008) in conjunction with a focus on her own nonnormative embodiment of gender and sexuality as sites for addressing identificatory possibilities and the thinkability of trams identities (Martino and Cumming-Potvin 2014). Within the context of our own graduate and preservice teaching in Education, we continue to use specific cases such as the one documented in this article to introduce theory to our students and to generate productive discussions and reflections regarding the regulatory norms as well as imaginative possibilities behind what we have come to understand as the pedagogical potential for
employing texts and reading practices in elementary school classrooms that are aligned with a broader politics of gender democratization:

What counts as a coherent gender? What qualifies as a citizen? Whose world is legitimated as real? Who can I become in such a world where the limits and meanings of the subject are set out in advance? By what norms am I constrained as I begin to ask what I may become? And what happens when I become that for which there is no place within the given regime of truth. (Butler 2004, 58)

It is in this capacity that our engagement with the transgender and transsexual theorizing has made such a significance difference in terms of how we have come to conceive of reading practices that attend to the politics of gender embodiment and identification. As Alexander (2005) argues, transgender and transsexual theorists “have argued forcefully that it is in the examination of narratives of gender that we come to a fuller and richer understanding of its composition—both personally and politically, in mind and on body”. He quotes Prosser (1998) who claims that “transsexual and transgendered narratives alike produce not the revelation of the fictionality of gender categories but the sobering realization of their ongoing foundational power” (p. 11):

We might be tempted to think of gender as a set of roles, many stereotypical, that can be critiqued and cast off, like so many changes of clothing. But Prosser (1998) maintains that gender inscribes itself at the level of the flesh. This is particularly true when considering narratives of gender transition: “Transsexuality reveals the extent to which embodiment forms an essential base to subjectivity; but it also reveals that embodiment, is as much about feeling one inhabits material flesh as the flesh itself” (p. 7). For Prosser, examining such narratives is the key to opening up a more expansive and thorough discussion of gender; as he maintains, “To talk of the strange and unpredictable contours of body image, and to reinsert into theory the experience of embodiment, we might begin our work through […] autobiographical narratives [and through the pedagogical use of picture storybooks such as My Princess Boy] (p. 70).

We see the case of Tom and other teachers in our research as offering productive possibilities for both investigating the experience and politics of gender embodiment and the use of narrative texts as a means by which to open up a more expansive and thorough discussion with our students about the livability, recognizability, and admissibility of gender-variant, transgender and transsexual personhood beyond a liberal and recuperative notion of celebrating individual differences in our classrooms.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests
The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.
Funding
The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

References


**Author Biographies**

**Wayne J. Martino**, PhD, is a professor of Equity and Social Justice Education in the Faculty of Education at The University of Western Ontario, Canada. His books include *So What’s a Boy? Addressing Issues of Masculinity and Schooling* (with Maria Pallotta-Chiarolli, Open University Press, 2003), *Gender, Race and the Politics of Role Modelling: The Influence of Male Teachers*, (with Goli Rezai-Rashti, Routledge, 2012), *Canadian Men and Masculinities* (with Christopher Greig, Canadian Scholars’Press, 2012), and *Globalizing Educational Accountabilities: Testing Regimes and Rescaling Governance* (with Bob Lingard, Goli Rezai-Rashti and Sam Sellar, Routledge, forthcoming).
Wendy Cumming-Potvin is currently an academic at Murdoch University in Western Australia. Focusing on new literacies and social justice, she has a strong interest in gender issues, technologies, communities, and teacher education. In 2012, she was named chief investigator for a Cooperative Research Centre study (Australian Federal Government program), aiming to support the well-being of LGBTQ youth. Recent publications include *Teaching about Queer Families: Surveillance, Censorship, and the Schooling of Sexualities* (Cumming-Potvin & Martino, 2014) and *Mining and Communities: Understanding the Context of Engineering Practice* (Armstrong, Baillie & Cumming-Potvin, 2014).