Sexist and Heterosexist Responses to Gender Bending in an Elementary Classroom

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ABSTRACT

In this article, the work of Judith Butler and Eve Sedgwick is used to analyze responses to gender performances in the author's elementary classroom. Beginning with the story of one "gender-bending" boy, Butler's theories are used to understand how incidents in the daily life of the classroom point to the phallocentricism and heterosexism that, when articulated and strengthened through a shared logic of "normalcy," lend intelligible identities to each member of the classroom community. Challenging her young students to accept a broader range of gender and sexual performances, Boldt points out many ways in which this is both problematic for the students and resisted by them. The author ends by revealing how some of her major assumptions about how to address the problems caused in the classroom by the operative gender and sexual normativities were themselves locked into a heterosexist logic, and she offers a very partial but hopeful glance at how she now tries to respond to problems of sexism and heterosexism faced by all her students.

On a fall day, I found one of my eight-year-old students outside of our classroom sobbing. It was several minutes before Stephen could stop gasping and tell me what was wrong. He continued to feel so distraught that he called his parents and went home early. Stephen was upset by a conversation he had with Nicole and Sarah, who had been his best and exclusive friends since kindergarten. Sarah and Nicole told him that, because he was a boy, he could no longer come to their houses for sleepovers, and, as the girls put it to him, "It is time for you to start playing with boys and us to start playing with girls." Stephen's response was "It's not fair."!

This was not the first time Stephen had his feelings hurt by his classmates. His personal style, mannerisms, and interests were such that his classmates sometimes teased or questioned him, calling him "girl" or "she."
By the end of school that day, I had worried the incident into a scenario that went far beyond the afternoon, and it left me feeling sad and helpless. I imagined things getting progressively more difficult for Stephen as he got older, picturing him as an effeminate high school student. I wondered if Stephen at some point would find that his sexual desire was for males, and I feared that he would have little preparation and support to know how to respond to this. I imagined him having to endure harassment and having to make his way largely alone. I wondered if his family would accept him. I felt cowardly over the realization that I did not feel the support at the school to address homophobia, which I felt was at the heart of the students’ reactions to Stephen, and thus far I had not had the courage to deal with it without this support.

Quite coincidentally, at the same time this happened I was involved in a university reading group that began studying works by queer theorists and feminists Judith Butler and Eve Sedgwick. Their writings gave me a way to begin composing a story that made sense of what had transpired between Stephen, Nicole, and Sarah, as well as of many other events I witnessed daily in my classroom.

The work of Butler and Sedgwick helped me understand why this article could not be the story of a young, effeminate, possibly gay boy, of how he came to be who he was that day, and of who he would be in the future. Rather, it had to be my attempt to understand how both phallogocentrism and heterosexism have called into being every member of our classroom community, creating a sense of identity that, while giving more power to some than to others, works to confine all of us to roles that lie within a normatizing, exclusivizing logic.

I came to view my own intertwining of gender norms and sexuality in the opening vignette as part of the same heteronormative constructions of reality that so worried me. Stephen’s choice to play with girls did not predict his future sexuality, nor did his gender performance or his sexuality predict his future state of well-being. As I came to understand from Judith Butler’s writing, heterosexism and phallogocentrism are articulated, strengthened, and enforced through one another. 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. One must be a masculine male who desires (or is expected to grow up to desire) females, or one must be a feminine female who desires (or is expected to grow up to desire) males. Thus, the regulations of gender and sexuality go hand in hand.

This does not mean I believe that the problems of straight women, lesbian women, gay men, tomboy girls, and effeminate boys are all the same, and I do not wish to imply that by having begun with the story of an effeminate boy I am more sympathetic to that position than to others (although Stephen was a child entrusted to my care and I do not apologize for my loyalty, sympathy, and solidarity with him). I am a feminist who is particularly concerned with the way these systems continue to construct “male” and “power” in synonymous terms. Nevertheless, it was through
taking the time to grapple with my own response and those of others to Stephen that I began to develop what feels like a more powerful way to understand sexism, as well as the concerns and causes that should be shared among feminists—both lesbian and straight—"gender-bending" men and women, gay men, and indeed anyone who is concerned with the narrow demands of gender and sexual "normalcy." This seems like a story worth telling.

My chagrin in realizing the blindness of my own responses—good intentions notwithstanding—makes me finally claim this as an article more about myself than about my students. While I will use this article to analyze my students' constructions of gender and sexuality (some of which I find to be quite troubling), the question and responsibility that always falls to me as their teacher is, "What will be my pedagogic response to this?" Addressing that question will occupy much of the second half of this article.

Finally, although in this article I read the episodes with the children for ideologies of gender and sexuality, it does not mean that I take this to be an exhaustive reading. The students and adults in these scenes have multiple subjectivities at every moment. We are not only male or female, feminine or masculine, straight or gay, within or without discourses on proper gender and sexuality; we are also positioned by race, class, age, physical size, and countless other identificatory possibilities. I have chosen incidents that show struggles and negotiations carried out in terms that seem to me to point to constructions of gender and sexuality, but other positions and interests are often rendered and disputed through events that, at first glance, seem to be primarily or exclusively about something more obvious. Just as I will argue, following Judith Butler, that the logic of heterosexism is rearticulated in the logic of phallologocentrism, so might I begin considering Butler's statement that racializing norms, gender norms, and sexual norms are all articulated through one another. A Marxist analysis, for example, would certainly yield insight on how class norms are rearticulated along with or through gender and sexual norms. The focus on gender and sexuality is for me a jumping-off point, a place to begin grappling with a few issues of subjectivity. Examining the same episodes from various lenses provides different, even conflicting, readings. It is my belief that subjectivity is almost always a massively contradictory affair; and in the last section of this article, I will discuss some of the troubling but apparently necessary problematics created by my attempts to take profeminist or antihomophobic stances in my classroom.

IDEALIZED GENDER NORMATIVITIES

I offer the following conversation I had with my students to illustrate my analysis. One afternoon I was sitting with some kids who were watching and commenting on a game some other kids were playing. The conversation went like this:
Brian: I wonder who will win this time, a boy or a girl.
John: It has to be a boy. There are only boys left.

Several children in and outside of the circle smiled and nodded, including the one girl who clearly was in the game.

Me: What do you mean there are only boys left? Kelly is still playing.
John: Oh, well, Kelly is a boy.
Me: Really?
Kelly: Yeah, I'm a boy, a tomboy, and Stephen is more like a girl.

Several classmates confirmed this observation with nods and "Yeahs." After three more rounds, Kelly emerged the winner of the game.

Brian: A boy won, a boy won!
Me: What do you mean Kelly is a boy and Stephen is more like a girl?
Brian: Kelly's tough and she likes to play with the boys. She plays like a boy.
Me: How does someone play like a boy?
Lani: She doesn't cry.
John: She plays kinda rough.
Fisher: She pretends she's a horse or dog and pulls the girls around.
Keith: She likes doing boy things. She just seems more like a boy.
Kelly: I don't like all that stuff like Sarah and Nicole like. I like to play more like the boys, like sports and adventures. And I'm rough.
Me: What about Stephen?

Stephen was across the room from the group I was questioning, and the children's responses about him seemed more hesitant and were spoken in quieter voices.

Mark: Well, he only likes to play with girls. He's been that way since kindergarten. Nicole and Sarah have been his best friends since kindergarten, you know.
Kelly: Stephen doesn't like sports and he's terrible in P.E.
Lani: He likes to write and make plays and do art and music.
Mark: He never plays with us at recess. He only plays with Nicole and Sarah and they only play girls' games, like pretend house. And they pretend they're taking a trip to Japan.
Me: Have you talked about this before?
Several children: Yes.
Brian: We talk about this all the time, how Kelly is a boy and Stephen is more like a girl.
Me: Kelly, do you like them saying you're a boy?
Kelly: I don't care. I am more like a boy.
Me: Does Stephen know you say this about him?
Several children: Yes.
Me: Does he like it?
John: No, he just gets mad and tells us it's not very nice to talk about people and that he doesn't talk about us.
Lani: And sometimes he says he is a boy, but boys or girls can do whatever they want.
It appears to me that the expectation exists among the eight- and nine-year-old students I teach that there are certain ways that boys by nature feel and behave and certain things that they like, and these are often different than the behaviors, feelings, and likes that girls by nature have. In conversations with my students on this topic, they have told me that: boys are rough and girls are nice; boys are tough and girls are emotional and cry easily; boys like sports, gross things, fighting, and scary adventures; girls like cute things, stories about animals and friends, and happy endings; boys are messy and girls are neat; boys are loud and girls are quiet; boys are naughty and girls are good.7

My students’ descriptions of those interests, desires, and feelings are curious to me, because they are rarely accurate when I compare them to the individuals who make up our class. When I protest such descriptions, saying, for example, “But Lani likes sports and she is a girl, and Tony doesn’t like sports and he is a boy,” the students answer me with exasperation, “But Ms. Boldt, mostly boys like sports.” I believe that they are exasperated with me because I am “not getting” what they are really saying. What I am not getting is that my students are not wholly describing any of themselves individually; rather, they are describing an “idealized gender identity.” For my students, the expectation exists that there is something real that it means to be a boy and something that it means to be a girl. Although the students’ ideals vary with the identities that construct them, there is much consensus within my class on these ideals. Furthermore, all the children, regardless of the specifics of their ideals, are constantly performing (or failing to perform) these roles that are ascribed to them and that they ascribe to themselves by virtue of their physical bodies. As Judith Butler writes: “Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts ... that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being.”8

In the tradition of Foucault, Butler is arguing that it is not possible to talk about a true or real gender, sex, or sexuality, but only to describe the acts that constitute the illusion of a natural gender, sex, or sexuality. That there is an illusion of a natural identity is critical here—the illusion operates to create a sense of the basis in truth of what we are experiencing and doing. Truth, in part, is made up of those ideas and beliefs that are understood to be natural, normal, commonsensical, even intuitive; that are supported by custom and tradition; and that are researched, tested, protected, and enforced by science and epistemology. The critical point here, however, is that such truths can also be understood to be not finally “natural,” “normal,” or “true” but rather to be constructions that create and reiterate the sustaining logic of any exercise of power.

In other words, the fact that my students experience, describe, and attempt to act out unified, consistent genders does not mean that such genders exist. Rather, it indicates their participation in, and reiteration of, systems of power relations that produce us all as gendered subjects; these systems then derive power by acting to protect our so-called natural inter-
ests. Gender is an easy example of this. 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. These exercises of power are not neutral or accidental—they create and protect the power of some and work against others.

Butler offers an alternative point of view on the nature of gender.

Gender ought not be construed as a stable identity ... from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts. The effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self. . . . the appearance of substance is precisely that, a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief.9

My students perform gender norms in behaviors, desires, gestures, talents, interests, and stylizations that are so naturalized for them that they feel like and appear to be their own, an internal identity. They wear clothes and hairstyles, play games, speak, move, and express emotions in ways that identify them as masculine or feminine. Their sense of a gender ideal tells them how it is normal for boys and girls to behave and when they have transgressed those norms.

Butler’s analysis informs me, however, that what the children are experiencing and doing is performing gender, and that gender is a performance that is not chosen but is forced and enforced from the time the social interpellation “It’s a boy” or “It’s a girl” is made.10

It is important to understand that it is not possible to talk about a subject standing behind performance. Butler writes that, rather than understanding subjects who assume identities, subjects only become intelligible through the performance of identity.

Where there is an “I” who utters or speaks and thereby produces an effect in discourse, there is first a discourse which precedes and enables that “I” and forms in language the trajectory of its will. Thus there is no “I” who stands behind discourse and executes its volition or will through discourse. On the contrary, “I” only comes into being through being called, named, interpellated . . .11

That performances forcefully choose us rather than us choosing them is a point that Butler develops by referring to Althusser’s notion of “interpellation.” According to Butler, in Althusser’s analysis it is the image of the police calling, “Hey you!” that socially constitutes subjects by binding the law to the one who is hailed. Butler says, “The reprimand does not merely repress or control the subject, but forms a crucial part of the juridical and social formation of the subject. The call is formative, if not performative, precisely because it initiates the individual into the subjected status of the subject.”12 The interpellation, a reprimand, reminds us of the law’s force-
ful demands for who we must be at the same time it admits us as socially recognizable.

That gender is performed rather than possessed means that the illusion of its reality must constantly be reiterated through the performance, and that violations of the performance norms pose the threat of exposing gender as less than real. The children in my class, like the adults all around them, have learned to ignore most of their own and others’ violations in action and contradictory opinions regarding gender norms. They sometimes “catch themselves” or are caught doing or saying the wrong thing, such as when a boy in my class suddenly realized that the book he had been reading was “a girl’s book” and threw it down in disgust. But for the most part, the children’s constructions of their own identities make it difficult and unpleasant to perceive the many “slipups” that constantly occur. This makes their awareness of Stephen and Kelly all the more urgent. As Butler points out, although both “normal” and “abnormal” gender identities are constructed and enforced within the same sexist/heterosexist power matrix, they are not equal identities. Power comes through the existence of norms, and it requires aberrant identities for the norms to function; notions of “normal femininity and masculinity” have neither intelligibility nor power without the contrasting presence of “abnormal gender.”

Even though descriptions of Stephen and Kelly at times seem neutral and matter of fact, they carry a cost. Kelly and Stephen were often teased and regarded as “not quite normal” by classmates and adults alike. They were often excluded, whether they wished to be or not, from same-sex play groups, and were subjected to attempts by adults to make them perform in more “gender normal” ways, such as suggesting to Kelly that she alter her clothing and hairstyle, play differently, and change her voice and gait, and suggesting to Stephen that he play more with boys, act tougher, and get involved in sports.

In the dialogue between me and the children in the introduction, Kelly appears to like and accept her role outside of “girl.” I have seen other evidence that it is a role she sometimes plays with discomfort. I am certain that the role of “tomboy” is different in many important ways from the role of “effeminate boy.” The role of tomboy in our context appears to be more accepted and does not seem to generate nearly the concern that the role of effeminate boy raises. This is not to downplay the difficulties tomboys may experience with the regulatory system operating around gendered identity. For the moment at least, Stephen’s discomfort with the role in which he is cast appears to be much greater than Kelly’s. Stephen likes many things that girls like, but these are things that simply are not valued by boys and often are not valued within the larger context of school and society. To be a girl called a “boy” often carries with it the promise of increased opportunities, but to be a boy associated with girls’ interests and desires is construed as a step away from power and possibility. Stephen feels insulted and assaulted when his classmates say he “is more like a girl,” and calling another boy a “girl” is an insult that boys hurl at one another with some frequency. When I questioned the boys about using “girl” as an insult,
they explained that to be called a “girl” is a terrible insult, on par with calling someone “stupid,” “ugly,” and “really a gross thing to be.” I do not believe that Stephen’s problems around this devaluation of the female and all things feminine are the same as those that face the girls. After all, girls are perceived as being inferior by nature, whereas Stephen’s problem is one of acting in an inferior manner. Nevertheless, it is a moment when we can see sexism clearly revealing itself in relation to a male.

If it were true that gender has natural and recognizable actions and boundaries, or even if I accept that gender is a performance that is played out as if it has recognizable actions and boundaries, then the children may be accurately describing Stephen when they say that he is “more like a girl.” There is a critical difference, however, between saying that the boundaries are natural and saying that we only perform as if they were. If gender truly has such boundaries, then Stephen is a freak, some kind of failure who needs help. But if I understand that what appears as “true” or “natural” is not true but a function of a normalization of power, I can understand that it is the description of gender that fails Stephen and not Stephen who fails gender.

THE CO-CONSTRUCTION OF “INTELLIGIBLE” GENDER AND SEXUALITY

Central to Butler’s argument is the realization that the power of gender norms extends to and derives strength from linking gender, physical sex, and sexuality: “‘Intelligible’ genders are those which in some sense institute and maintain relations of coherence among sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire.”

Butler argues that the appearance of naturalized gender and sexuality and the linking of gender performativity to expectations about sexuality (e.g., the effeminate boy grows up to be the gay man) are in the service of (among other things) both sexism and heterosexism. The normativities of gender and sexuality define those who are “inside,” that is, those who reiterate the norms sufficiently and consistently enough, as well as all of those who are “outside,” whose gender or sexuality is not consistent with the norms for their sex. Those “inside” are often the ones with certain officially sanctioned and recognized privileges of power, and those outside are generally marginalized at least in some ways.

With Stephen and his peers, I never had to deal directly with the seemingly inevitable and usually cruelly intended connections that are made between gender performance and sexuality. To my knowledge, Stephen was never called “gay” or “fag” by his peers when he was in my class. But I know that the connections had already been made in the minds of adults because I had made them myself, as when I pictured Stephen’s future as a gay teenager. On several occasions I heard other adults make the statement that Stephen had better start playing with boys or he would grow up to be
gay. I expected that it was just a matter of time before Stephen's classmates began to make overt connections and to call him names in an accusatory or shaming way. Although I considered my own imaginations on the subject to be nonhomophobic—I supported Stephen's decision to play with girls, and I was in no way troubled by the prospect of his growing up to be gay—I felt that the responses of the adults who were worried about his playmates (as well as those I imagined from the kids in the future) were motivated by homophobia.

Lest I begin to feel too self-congratulatory, Butler's argument calls into question any linking of gender performance and sexuality. The same logic that supports a sense of naturalized, normative gender supports a sense of naturalized, normative sexuality; as sure as gender is constructed as following in a certain way from physical sex, so also is sexual desire constructed as following from gender and physical sex. If Stephen's body is male, his so-called normal gender would be masculine and his desire would be for females. Given that Stephen's gender appears to be at least in part feminine, it throws into question within this logic—the inevitability of which I now wish to trouble—whether his desire might not be for males.

In "How to Bring Your Kids Up Gay," Eve Sedgwick explores some of the ties between "effeminate boys" and gay men. She points out that in 1980, the American Psychiatric Association (APA) published the first Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-III) that did not list homosexuality as a pathology. That same manual was the first that did include a category called, "Gender Identity Disorder of Childhood." Under this category, a girl can be treated for pathology if she asserts that she is anatomically male, whereas a boy can be treated as pathological if he asserts "that it would be better not to have a penis," or if he displays a "preoccupation with female stereotypical activities as manifested by a preference for either cross-dressing or simulating female attire, or by a compelling desire to participate in the games and pastimes of girls." Sedgwick notes that the depathologization of homosexuality and the simultaneous pathologization of gender identification (and particularly of effeminate males), ironically, has occurred even as the APA and gay activists were making the potentially subversive assertion that sexuality does not follow from gender; that is, one could be masculine and desire a man, or feminine and desire a woman.

Sedgwick makes the case, however, that the pathologizing of gender roles conceptually positions psychiatry at the very least as a participant in the abjectification and isolation of effeminate boys and men, and worse, as a potential ally in the cultural fantasy of the elimination of homosexuality. Under post-DSM-III accounts, effeminacy in boys and men is a pathology, a failure to consolidate the proper masculine "Core Gender Identity." This serves to continue the tradition of maintaining sexist (genderist?) hegemony through the belief in normal gender. Stephen may (or may not) grow up to be an effeminate man, and he may (or may not) grow up to be a man who has sex with other men. To see his adult sexuality, regardless of what it is, as normal, while seeing his current and potentially future gender as a developmental failure, is a troubling victory at best.
IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE

It would be gratifying if I could now reveal how a concerned teacher could help the children in her/his care to become more accepting of a broader range of gender and sexual identities both for themselves and for others. This is the ending for this piece that I tried to write several times; although emotionally satisfying, it never quite worked intellectually. That is, although it felt right to suggest things that concerned teachers might do in their classrooms to address the problems implied throughout my article, I was always aware both of how the children have resisted me when I attempted these things myself and of how the solutions I was offering continued to reinscribe the original assumptions about identity, gender, and sexuality that led to the troublesome exclusions in the first place. In other words, simply shifting the boundaries of identity did not cleanly resolve the problems created by identity as we presently construct it. Both difficulties, those of the students’ resistance and of identity, are worth exploring further.

As in broader society, there is a commonly held belief in education that one of the causes of stereotype and prejudice is lack of exposure to a broad and positive range of images or exposure to only negative images of those who are “other.” It is popularly held that children will grow up with less prejudice and be more accepting of difference and open to a broader range of possibilities for themselves if they are exposed to difference in a positive way. In schools, it is suggested that this take place through literature, discussion, artwork, and curricula that show people from around the world as “the same” in such important ways as caring for others and having basic needs, and as “different” in a way that promotes acceptance of difference as exciting, creative, and even ingenious. This is the logic of “multicultural education.” The “antibias curriculum” goes a step further in arguing that it is not enough to talk about difference; children need to consciously inhabit a world of difference, in schools where there are teachers and kids of many ethnicities and where the differences and similarities are openly explored and discussed; where teachers discuss, deliberately act out, and encourage the children to act out nontraditional gender roles; and even sometimes where gay and lesbian teachers are encouraged to be out, with antihomophobia as part of the school agenda.21

I hold on to the belief that schools that are committed to an antibias position are trying to offer a more moral choice for society than schools where the assumptions continue to reflect more exclusive and biased approaches to what counts as worthwhile. These are the kinds of commitments I attempt to uphold in my classroom. For example, it is important that in the classroom and in society I continue to refute through words and actions the exclusivities of the definitions of “boy” and “girl,” “masculine” and “feminine,” “homosexual” and “heterosexual.” The evidence is plentiful that boys and girls still receive differential treatment in classrooms, reinforcing daily the realness of gendered norms. It is important that I work to identify not just the simple things, like how boys are called on much more often than girls, but the more difficult things, like how epis-
temology and pedagogy may actually be based on gendered, exclusivizing binaries such as active/passive, understanding/memorization, or risk taking/conforming. I not only have to concern myself with providing equal opportunities for my students and with eliminating sex as a basis for participation or opting out of participation. I also have to be aware of the temptation to attach value judgments to children’s behaviors when variations arising out of gender performativity occur (as they will constantly because the children are performing differentiated gender roles). I must avoid interpreting a child as better or worse, more or less successful, more or less normal, more or less likable, based on how much I value the norms the children are replicating or failing to replicate.22

My hope in all of this would be to open up the categories of boy and girl, to give the children reasons to accept the solution that Stephen offered them that “boys and girls can do whatever they want,” so that Stephen’s version of boyness as well as all other versions would become intelligible. It would be that the category of “girl” would be opened up not only to include Kelly, but to make it a category that does not provoke a devaluing or even horrified rejection of anyone and everyone who occupies the category. The hope would also be to help the children realize that it is permissible, even desirable, to consider possibilities they did not previously know they wanted or even rejected wanting.

These are my hopes, but thus far I have not had much reason to celebrate. My students have proven resistant, perhaps sometimes rightly so, to my versions of gender and sexuality. I have had long discussions about gender biases with my students. I have been very careful to present them with literature that reflects a variety of gender models, and I have initiated and led conversations when stereotypes have come up in classroom materials. I have been conscientious in reexamining treatment that is differentiated by gender, often trying to turn the tables by praising boys in terms predominately reserved for girls, and girls in those usually reserved for boys. I have sharply revised the terms in which I evaluate students, no longer assuming that silence and passivity are necessarily indicative of lack of knowledge or that activity denotes understanding or potential. In spite of all of this, the children’s behaviors and beliefs about themselves, their families, and their peers appear largely unaltered.

Students may say things that show that they understand what I want them to believe. They can point out instances of stereotypes in stories they are reading or will agree that women and men and boys and girls have the right to like and do what they want. Often, however, these turn out to be words spoken for their teacher’s sake, not for the children’s lived realities. Typical observations include the time when one girl talked about a stereotype in a book and shortly thereafter identified math as a “boys’ subject” and “too hard for girls”; a boy explained in discussion why it was okay if boys liked to dance but then was upset when some of the girls asked him to join them in dancing; after the boys came in angry one day, claiming that “junk girl players” were “ruining” their recess soccer game, they reluctantly admitted that some of those “junk girl players” played as well as or better than they
did, but the next day they still did not want to let the girls in the game, protesting that the girls were no good at soccer and would ruin their game.23

One obvious explanation for the contradictory words, beliefs, and actions is that the children have learned what they are supposed to say to make their teacher happy. They know how to play the “school game” of giving “right answers” to leading questions. Another explanation is that even when children think they believe the words, they often believe them only about other people, not about themselves, their peers, and their families. They continue to feel the need to hold themselves and those around them to different standards. The children have much evidence that the traditional approach is the safe one, that I am wrong in my beliefs. If I or one of the students say, “Boys and girls are equal,” or “Boys and girls can do whatever they want,” the children know that it is not true. The adult world has hardly presented them with great models in equity, and they know that the liberties I try to promote in my classroom often do not extend beyond our four walls. One day, for example, one of my students used his belief that females are not allowed to become president of the United States to explain his reasoning that it is better to be a boy than a girl. This child’s own experiences told him that there are boys and there are girls and that the two are different and unequal.24

I want to believe that I can influence my students’ beliefs and actions around gender and sexuality, because I hope that more of them would be happier and our society would be more just if we could come to value a broader range of performances as worthwhile for others and for ourselves. That my students often resist my efforts in relation to their own identities and the identities of those who most matter to them should not surprise me. Identity is usually constructed in Western discourse as unitary and noncontradictory. To be something is meaningful only in relation to all that one is not. To identify oneself as a girl, there has to be all that is “not girl.” To identify oneself as heterosexual, there has to be all that is “not heterosexual.” These identities count for something; they exist within the sexist and heterosexist matrix that accords power and privilege to possessing the correct identity.

The children have a great deal invested in their gendered identities and often find much pleasure in “being who they are.” When I asked the boys one day how many of them would rather be girls, there were no volunteers. When I asked the girls how many of them would rather be boys, only Kelly thought that she might like to try it to see what it would be like. The power differential between the boys and girls seems present once again here. The refusal of even Stephen, who seems to derive such pleasure from “girls’ things,” to consider the possibility of being a girl may reflect his knowledge that this would be a step away from power, or that to publicly admit such interest would be an impossible position for a boy to take up, whereas Kelly could express such an interest with no obvious negative repercussions. It is also important to note, however, that Stephen, along with all of the other boys, and Kelly, along with all of the other girls, were able to come up with many examples of ways in which they derived a great deal of pleasure from
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different aspects of their roles as boys or girls. I make (and will continue to make) a big deal out of everyone having equal access to all the materials and activities in the classroom. Yet many of the girls simply do not enjoy the things that many of the boys enjoy, and many of the boys do not enjoy the things that many of the girls enjoy. I understand how this comes to be in the mandatory formation of identities.

I recognize that using the identity categories “boy” and “girl” as referents implies that they are real or natural categories. Butler refutes the logic that therefore the solution is to eliminate identity categories. Attempting this would suggest that it is possible to come up with a category that is all inclusive, but such a strategy is ridiculous precisely because it renders identity itself unintelligible.25 Even the move to open up identity categories and make them less exclusive creates new difficulties; in opening up some possibilities for identity, others are inevitably foreclosed. The reality always exists of excluding some in the new category who were previously included in the old category. I must ask questions such as, for whom has this become an impossible identification? Who is now excluded from this definition because it conflicts with other identity norms of race, ethnicity, class, or religion? Further, new identifications threaten to displace some who previously had greater power due to their closer identification with or performance of the ideal. To include Stephen as a “real boy,” for example, throws into question and threatens the status of other children and adults who currently experience popularity and success because they closely approximate a dominant idealization.

Attempting to get children to accept a more partial and contradictory sense of identity is problematic for the children in other ways. It moves them into an arena of discourse that they have learned to deny; that is, all the children enact and witness constant contradictions to the ideal identities they perform and uphold, but they have learned not to notice or be bothered by the contradictions, except for cases such as Stephen’s that are understood as unusual and abnormal. Further, we are asking children to take on ideas that do not have strong societal support, which sometimes puts children in the position of having to decide between home and school values and opens them up to risk by encouraging them to take up positions that are not shared by the more powerful adults in their lives.26 A boy who came home from school and began exhibiting some of the “girlish” behaviors that he was encouraged to accept and explore at school could be subject to humiliation and punishment. In Stephen’s case, his parents became alarmed at the amount of time he spent with girls at school, and they decided to “balance things off” by enrolling him in a football program. Stephen, who hated sports and disliked rough play, reported much unhappiness over this “corrective action.”

CONCLUSIONS

It would be possible to argue that my failure to come up with a satisfactory conclusion for this article—one that would give concerned educators
direction in helping kids broaden their understanding of gender and sexuality—is simply a lack of imagination or intellect on my part. It is worthwhile to consider, however, that the problem could lie with the expectation for a certain kind of conclusion. In “The Narrative Roots of Case Study,” Tom Newkirk argues that for a case study to appear successful and satisfying, it must follow a narrative form we are familiar with: beginning, middle, and end; present problem, research problem, resolve problem. According to Newkirk, the characters who appear in case studies in the field of education are often familiar ones to us; a common form casts the heroic teacher as Anne Sullivan, the Miracle Worker, and the struggling or difficult student as Helen Keller, the child with great potential locked inside just waiting for the right teacher to provide the right outlet. Newkirk states that these narratives are inherently conservative. They cater to the demand for emotionally familiar endings that place the sympathetic reader in a gratifying moral position, when in reality such unproblematic solutions do not exist. His argument helps me understand why I find myself at wit’s end over my inability to write an upbeat, straightforward, and hopeful conclusion. As somebody reading an earlier draft of this article said, “Why can’t you just say what you think we should do, really put your opinion out there?” My answer is that it is not that I cannot, it is that I must refuse to do so.

In telling Stephen’s story, I have created a compelling narrative. It begins with a tragedy in the making of Stephen unknowingly heading down the road toward inevitable oppression and suffering. The next step should be that fate intervenes when Stephen is assigned a heroic teacher who recognizes what is happening, values Stephen for who he is, and finds a way to help everyone love and value Stephen (and others like him) as much as she does. The problem with this conclusion is that I cannot find an unproblematic way to write myself as a miracle worker and Stephen as my Helen Keller.

I must resist coming up with such a morally gratifying narrative, because it glosses over many problems, including problems that the proposed solutions themselves would create. I must also recognize that the demand for a satisfactory narrative is more than a peccadillo of our literary sensibilities. More powerfully, the creation of a coherent narrative reflects a central theme in the sexist and heterosexist power matrices that this article is all about. That is, in writing this article, I have constructed a story about a child called Stephen who is troubled. In telling this story, I created for myself and possibly for my audience a sense of tragedy, of the inevitability of present and future suffering for Stephen because of his gender transgressions. I have stated that it is almost certain that soon he will be persecuted for the assumptions that are made about his sexuality based on his gender performance. What I have not done to this point is seriously grapple with the implications of Butler’s argument that the belief in the inevitable connectedness of sex, gender, and sexuality (and of all three with happiness) is itself part of the power of heterosexism. Perhaps it is the sense of inevitability, which is often constructed through the narrative telling of lives, that must be called into question.
To make the argument that Stephen is unhappy now because of reactions to his gender performance, and he will be unhappy in the future because of reactions to assumptions made about his sexuality or to his actual sexuality, and we must do something to help him is to create a powerfully coherent and familiar narrative. Stephen’s perception of his exclusion from play with Nicole and Sarah as “unfair” is certainly accurate, but what are the stakes in implying that Stephen’s experience of being excluded by Nicole and Sarah is one small step down a lifelong path of injustice and hurt related to his performance of gender and sexuality? Statistics such as heightened dropout rates and attempted suicides among gay and lesbian teens (and perhaps also straight, gender-bending kids, although I am not aware of any such statistics having been recorded) are alarming, as are accounts I have heard from many gay and lesbian adults about their difficult school years. Yet even as I write this, I am aware that the writing is a double-edged sword. Pain and suffering created by abjectification are important players in the power of heterosexism, existing as a warning for anyone who would stray too near the boundaries of normative performance. Ironically, my sympathetic naming of Stephen’s unjust construction as an abject figure ends up creating a story that potentially serves as a frightening, gut-wrenching reminder of what happens to people like him. Moreover, that it seems impossible for me to make any large-scale, meaningful changes for Stephen may further confirm the overwhelming power of heterosexism. What began as an attempt to tell a story outside of the heterosexist power matrix ends up as a fixture within it.

Therefore, it is important that I tell a more complicated story, one that calls into question my tragic narrative of Stephen’s life. Most kids suffer in school from the demands of many kinds of identity norms related not just to gender or sexuality, but also to race, class, ethnicity, standards of beauty, evaluations of success, and much more. As a teacher, I see kids being treated cruelly every day. Why is Stephen’s particular suffering so compelling to me? Should I not be suspicious of my inclination to see it as more tragic than other school stories? The suffering of gender-bending kids like Stephen or of gay and lesbian teens is real and must be addressed. But both the telling of and response to the stories need to occur in ways that do not affirm and further the sexist and heterosexist story that nonconformity to gender or sexuality norms means certain unhappiness, failure, abjection, rejection, perversity, pathology, psychosis, or suicide. Yes, it is hard to be a boy who prefers playing with girls, but to focus on Stephen’s struggles as a gender-bender may (wrongly) imply that to be such a boy is an inevitable guarantee of unhappiness and that “straight” kids find their performance of gender less problematic and more satisfying.

As bell hooks suggests, I need to listen for the stories that proclaim the margins as a place of resistance, power, and joy, a place where one can struggle for freedom of expression. Stephen’s story is not one of unrelieved misery in school. Far from it (and here we could speculate how being a boy, in spite of sometimes performing like a girl, may have contributed to Stephen’s positive experiences). When Stephen was in my class, he claimed to love school and often insisted on coming even when he was sick, because
he did not want to miss anything. Stephen was an excellent student, and his talent in writing and performing gained him much positive attention. Stephen was hard working, smart, and articulate; progress reports and awards he received in all grades show that teachers evaluated his abilities very positively. In our class, Stephen was recognized as a capable leader by his peers, was consistently chosen for small group work, and was elected class president. There were in fact many kids in the class who liked coming to school much less than he did, including the boy with large front teeth and a learning disability who was taunted as “Beaver” by the other kids, and the overweight girl who wore unstylish clothing. Even if it were the case that Stephen disliked school, to attribute all his problems in school to his gender performance would misrepresent the situation.

To create a coherent picture of some of the difficulties that arise in an elementary classroom when a child regularly violates a closely held social norm, I had to omit many stories, particularly ones that contradicted my narrative. Leaving out stories is not unique to my work, nor is it a matter of poor research on my part. The stories told about identity for purposes of research and for purposes of living are ultimately told selectively.

The sense that lives have trajectories that we can discover, predict, recognize, and intervene in for better or worse is very much part of the modernist construction of the intelligibility of human lives. As a concerned teacher and researcher, I cannot know ahead of time how Stephen will interpret his childhood experiences of gender or sexuality, nor can I devise interventions that I know with certainty will change his life for the better. How Stephen experiences school now and what stories he grows up to tell may not in the end be the same. The stories he remembers and counts as significant enough to relate may have more to do with who he perceives himself to be than what he is experiencing now. He may tell a story of how he got to be who he feels he is that does not reveal all the other stories that contradict that inevitable narrative form of beginning, middle, and end. The stories he recounts about his life will change depending on the context he is in. To think that now I could intervene unproblematically and create a better future, or to think that if I do not intervene Stephen’s future will be tragic, is to participate in the myth of inevitability and to claim the right to determine what constitutes a worthwhile identity.

Where does this leave me? The idea that because I cannot assure the future I will do nothing is not tenable. Through curriculum and classroom practices, I will continue to try to make my students aware of some of the biases and limitations of dominant discourses. But I must also go back to the image that began this story of Stephen crying in the hall. That was the time to act compassionately on Stephen’s behalf. Realizing how little I can or want to predict the future has caused me to appreciate anew the things I can do in the present, the ways I can respond to the little and big things that happen daily in the classroom that the kids really care about, for example, who has to work in what group, who gets most of the time and attention from adults, how to make sure that the good sports equipment and time on the computers are not dominated by a few boys, and how to
help the children deal with cruelty. I want all of my students to feel happy, safe, and respected at school. Therefore, I must work diligently and passionately to figure out how to help particular children in specific situations, knowing that sometimes I am making things better and trying with all my heart to avoid making things worse. I will do well to remember and appreciate that children often experience pleasure in acting out the roles they have been given, and that those performances do not predict future suffering or happiness. I also know there will always be children who are troubled and hurt by the ever-changing landscapes of exclusions that train children into the power regimes of adults. My efforts to expand children's acceptance of broader gender and sexual identities will continue, because I believe that this offers many positive possibilities for children in the present. I need to remember, however, that no solution is unproblematic, and that I must constantly reassess with each new child and each new situation, looking to help create the only happiness I can be reasonably certain of affecting—that of the present.29

I will never solve for my students the difficulties that our construction of identity creates, but this does not make me feel hopeless. Indeed, for Butler, it is precisely the impossibility of any category of identity being complete, the constant pounding at and haunting of the boundaries of what is intelligible, accepted, and valued by what is outside and abject, that holds the potential for sometimes deviating from reiterating the norm “toward a more possible future to expand the very meaning of what counts as a valued and valuable body in the world.30 The partiality of any solution I construct is something I must embrace as the best hope. The pleasures and the hurts of my students will always be there, to show me the inclusions and the exclusions that have been instituted, to remind me that my values and beliefs are always only provisional, always only partly successful and partly failures, and to challenge me to be fully present and aware of the endless ways that my students may need me to advocate their happiness at that moment.

NOTES

1. The report of this episode and of conversations with and among my students that appear throughout this article comes from notes I have written, usually within a few hours of the happening, about classroom discussions or events that strike me as particularly interesting or puzzling in relation to gender and sexuality. They appear in dialogue form, but they do not represent verbatim transcriptions but rather my best reconstructions. The realities of my teaching life do not make it possible or practical to have a video camera or tape recorder running when these moments are happening, but I do my best to capture the details of the event. When possible, I confirm the details with the children or other adults who were present. What I find “puzzling” or “interesting,” how I remember things, and what I fail to even notice in the end may tell more about me than about my students. However, as I hope becomes clear, this article ends up being more about my perspective on my students than on the students themselves.
2. I wish to extend my deepest gratitude to Joseph Tobin, Donna Grace, Richard Johnson, Anne Phelan, and Elizabeth Fowkes-Tobin for our reading group discussions on Butler and Sedgwick, and to all of the above as well as Lynda Stone, Aaron Levine, Jonathan Silin, Diane Stephens, Judith Newman, and Cynthia Ward for discussion and feedback on this article.


4. This case is made exceptionally well in Marta Savigliano’s *Tango and the Political Economy of Passion* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995). Savigliano uses neo-Marxist, feminist, poststructuralist, deconstructivist, world systemic, and postcolonial theories to analyze the colonizations of Argentina, of the tango, and of herself as a self-described “Third World Intellectual Woman” living in exile. She demonstrates how the same text can read convincingly in terms of racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism, and colonialism.


6. Notes on conversations with my students. Certain details were altered to protect their identity, but care was taken to avoid altering the spirit of the incidents.

7. Notes on conversations with my students.


15. Notes on conversations with my students.

16. Due to our expectations for him, Stephen is undoubtedly read by his social audience as presenting a more consistent “gender-bending” performance than he does. Certainly, Stephen does not present a consistent feminine performance; just as there are things about him that set him apart from “more masculine” boys in the class, there are things about Stephen that mark him as masculine.


20. Sedgwick, p. 73.


23. Notes on conversations with my students.

24. Notes on conversations with my students.


26. Bronwyn Davies reports an incident where a boy in preschool was allowed by his teachers to paint his nails with red nail polish. This provoked an angry note to the school from the boy's father as well as the four-year-old boy explaining forcefully to his teachers the next day that "he was a good boy" and "boys don't wear nail polish." At one point, the boy exposed his genitals to his teachers to make his point that he was a boy. Davies comments that the teachers were "introducing one form of discourse here in which the possession of male genitals and 'feminine' behavior were incompatible" and that "The child's father found this a serious threat to the boy's achievement of masculinity as he understood that term." Bronwyn Davies, "The Discursive Production of the Male/Female Dualism in School Settings," *Oxford Review of Education* 15 (No. 3, 1989), p. 237.


29. I am particularly impressed by the descriptions offered by Gemma Moss in *Un/Popular Fictions* of the power that her female high school students already have to "hold their own" against the attempts of boys to "do power" over them. Moss describes her own efforts to support the girls in what they are already doing rather than worrying them into being passive, helpless victims who can only be saved by the efforts of an heroic teacher. Moss's writing has helped me to focus more on the real issues that are actually at hand with the children, rather than worrying and daydreaming about the future or about seemingly "bigger" issues. I have also become aware of the way that I often speak for the girls rather than encouraging them to speak for themselves.