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## Taking a Journey to The Land of All: Using Children's Literature to Explore Gender Identity and Expression with Young Children

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## Taking a Journey to The Land of All: Using Children's Literature to Explore Gender Identity and Expression with Young Children

### Cover Page Footnote

We gratefully acknowledge Dr. Thomas Bryan Crisp, an authority on the subject of using children's literature to explore gender with young people, for reviewing this manuscript and providing enormously helpful feedback prior to publication.

# Taking a Journey to the Land of All: Using Children's Literature to Explore Gender Identity and Expression with Young Children

*Kerry Elson and Kindel Turner Nash*

As a powerful form of media, children's literature can help young people develop deeper and more nuanced understandings about gender, gender identity, and gender expression (Crisp, Gardner, & Almeida, 2017; Crisp & Hiller, 2011; Tsao, 2008). Gender identity is a person's internal understanding of their gender, or "the roles, behaviours, activities, attributes and opportunities that any society considers appropriate for girls and boys, and women and men . . . different from . . . binary categories of biological sex" (World Health Organization, n.d.). Gender expression denotes the ways in which we outwardly communicate our gender (Crisp, 2020; GLAAD Media Reference Guide, n.d.). Schema and stereotypes about gender identity and expression develop between the ages of three and five (American Psychological Association, 2015).

This article shares how Kerry Elson used children's literature to explore gender identity with young children. Kerry is in her eleventh year of teaching and has been teaching in New York public schools for five years. She identifies as White, cisgender, and nondisabled. The population of the school where Kerry teaches kindergarten and first grade, Central Park East II in East Harlem, New York, is richly diverse in language, ethnicity, and the lived experiences of the community. Eighty-eight percent are students of color—about 47 percent Latinx, 31 percent Black, 10 percent interracial, Asian, and American Indian.

Kindel Turner Nash is an associate professor at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. Kindel identifies as White, cisgender, and connected to the Black community by marriage. Kindel and Kerry met four years ago in October 2016, when Kindel visited Kerry's classroom as part of a national study of the literacy practices of high-performing teachers in urban early childhood classrooms. Since that initial visit, Kindel and Kerry have been thinking and writing together about teaching for justice (e.g., Nash, Elson, & Panther, 2019; Nash, Arce-Boardman, Dorhn-Melendez, & Elson, in press). As Kerry thinks about and implements literacy curricula, she shares ideas and reflections with Kindel, who, in turn, shares additional resources and ideas.

As White, cisgender women, we mirror the majority of U.S. teachers (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2019). Despite attempts to recognize and unlearn our biases, we acknowledge that our understandings about gender identity in general and the ideas shared here may still reflect lack of awareness. We do not claim authority on the subject of using children's literature to explore gender with young children. This is one reason why children's books that accurately reflect children's lives and the world are crucial in our work—the books we share can become the teachers we cannot be.

In this article, we briefly review the professional literature on children's books about gender identity and expression. Kerry describes a curriculum she implemented with first-grade students that focused on gender identity and expression, primarily using children's literature to invite thinking and discussion. She reflects on what she learned about herself, her students, and the value of using children's literature to further children's ideas about gender identity and expression.

## Children's Literature about Gender Identity and Expression

Children's literature can be a powerful mode of value transmission and can shape children's understanding about gender expression and gender identity (Crawley, 2017; Crisp, Gardner & Almeida, 2017; Naidoo, 2017; Tsao, 2008). Children's books create models that scaffold children's understanding about themselves and the world (Bishop, 1990; Crawley, 2017). Over the last few years, there has been an increase in the number of children's and young adult books published about LGBTQ-identified people, gender identity, and expression (Cart & Jenkins, 2015; Naidoo, 2017). This has resulted in an increase in LGBTQ-inclusive resources and publishers in annual lists of recommended picture books and in curriculum resources for teachers of young children (see Table 1).

**Gender and Family Project**

**Gender Justice in Early Childhood**

**GenderSpectrum**

**Welcoming Rainbow Families in the Classroom: Suggestions and Recommendations for Including LGBTQ Children's Books in the Curricula**

**Sex? Sexual Orientation? Gender Identity? Gender Expression?**

**Rainbow Booklist**

**Stonewall Book Awards**

**Early Childhood: Learning about Gender Identity**

**Blood Orange Press**

**Reflection Press: Home**

Table 1. Selected LGBTQ-inclusive Resources, Booklists, and Publishers

Yet there is still a paucity of children's literature featuring LGBTQ-inclusive characters (Crisp & Hiller, 2011). Children's literature has historically reinforced gender stereotypes (Tsao, 2008). This is seen in an underrepresentation of female characters in children's books generally (Tsao, 2008) and in non-fiction books specifically (Crisp, 2015). Researchers point to the importance of diverse depictions of non-gendered characters and LGBTQ-inclusive people in terms of race, ethnicity, language, social class, religion, disability, ways of being, and theme (Crawley, 2017; Crisp & Hiller, 2011).

Teachers need to thoughtfully plan the way they create curriculum and share LGBTQ-inclusive children's literature so that they do not isolate LGBTQ students (Blackburn & Clark, 2011). Selecting books that are authentic in that they are authored/illustrated by members of the communities depicted is critical (Blackburn & Clark, 2011; Boutte, 2002). Finally, when sharing LGBTQ-inclusive literature, teachers must take care not to choose only those books that conflate gender expression (e.g., clothing choice or hairstyle) with gender identity (Abate, 2008; Flanagan, 2013).

In planning the gender identity curriculum, Kerry anticipated children would engage in discussions and meet characters whose gender identity and expression might reflect themselves or the people they love.

She hoped the curriculum would offer depictions of gender identity or expression that differed from the children's expectations, leading them to talk about their responses, comfort, or discomfort and, ultimately, not just accept but identify with these characters. Kerry hoped children might extend this acceptance, appreciation, and empathy to people they knew, and to themselves. In the next section, Kerry describes how this curriculum unfolded.

### **Taking a Journey to the Land of All**

One afternoon in early March 2019, I was observing some of my first graders playing in our classroom's block area. The students had built a sprawling castle and were playing in it with small characters they had drawn on paper and taped to blocks. One student, Thando (all children's names are pseudonyms), had drawn a queen character and was speaking in a high voice as he bounced her around the castle. I overheard another child in the block area, Gloria, say to Thando, "Why do you always pretend to be a girl?" She tilted her head to the side and smiled as she asked, her voice a kind of sing-song. She sounded as though she were teasing him a bit, but also curious about his choice to pretend to be a girl. Thando paused and said something like, "Because I like to."

Though I generally teach the same group of students for two years (kindergarten and first grade), sometimes new students join us in year two for first grade. Thando was one such student; he had recently moved to the neighborhood. Kind and imaginative, he was a sought-after playmate and students were fascinated by his stories. For example, at writing time, Thando often wrote stories about a teenage girl named TJ whose mother was the planet Neptune.

Some children seemed puzzled by Thando, I think because his clothing and play preferences and demeanor didn't match their idea of being a boy. Sometimes he would stretch out the neck of his t-shirt, pulling it down like an off-the-shoulder top. Once, when he was wearing his shirt this way, a boy turned to him and said, "Ew!" Thando quickly adjusted his shirt so it covered his shoulders again.

Another time, Thando and a classmate, Alejandro, had returned to the classroom after working with a literacy specialist. The literacy specialist told me that Alejandro said, "Thando's a girl," during their session. It was clear that children were teasing Thando about how he expressed his gender identity, and I knew I needed to address it.

At first, I tried addressing the issue with individual students. After Gloria asked Thando why he pretended to be a girl, we had a conversation about the interaction. I tried to emphasize that it was okay for a boy to pretend to be a girl. However, she didn't seem convinced and as we spoke, her voice was quiet and she looked down; she seemed unsettled. I realized that individual conversations in response to harmful, teasing comments would not be enough to change how students interacted with Thando. I needed to have conversations with all of my students about gender and gender identity to create a more inclusive community.

I had been unsure about talking about gender with children in the past. I worried that we would end up talking about private body parts and that children would feel uncomfortable or silly. This is a common fear among educators (Blackburn & Clark, 2011). I worried that if children did mention penises, vaginas, and other parts in these discussions, parents would be upset. I also thought parents might be upset if I talked about gender identity in a way that didn't match how they talked about gender at home.

I also worried that I would give the wrong information or fumble. I'm a cisgender woman who is still learning about gender. But I felt that I needed to talk about gender in an explicit way, even if I was worried about it, because I wanted Thando to feel welcome, safe, and supported in our classroom. While I initiated these discussions partly because I wanted to protect Thando, I didn't want him to feel self-conscious. So in planning the curriculum, I decided to focus on general ideas about gender, rather than interactions children had with Thando. Another goal was to shift children's thinking so that they might adjust how they interacted with one another.

Researchers have found that teachers need to be careful when studying gender in response to harmful comments about gender identity and expression; such a curriculum can make the children who have been teased feel more isolated (Blackburn & Clark, 2011). I was not aware of this research when I was planning the curriculum, but in thinking through possible activities, I followed what I had learned about using children's literature in curriculum focused on students' identities in general (Bishop, 1990). I don't want anyone with a particular identity to feel that I am asking them to be an example for their classmates or to teach their classmates about this aspect of their identity. Instead, I want to talk about general ideas and invite students to share personal experiences only if they wish.

I planned morning meeting discussions we could have and books we could read. I figured I would adjust the plans based on the children's comments and questions. I wanted to start by asking children, "What is a girl?" and "What is a boy?" to uncover what they thought those words meant. I had attended a workshop on talking about identity with young children earlier in the year (S. Park, Personal Communication, October 11, 2018). In the workshop, teachers shared a gender curriculum they did with kindergarteners and said they started by asking students to define "boy" and "girl." As the curriculum continued, students realized that many things they felt were unique to girls or boys actually applied to both girls and boys. I hoped my students might come to similar conclusions.

I researched books that I could read aloud to help children think about gender, as well. Some of these books were explicitly about gender, while others featured characters with diverse gender identities and expressions (Table 2). I chose these stories in part because they feature bilingual characters who are Black and Latinx; I thought my students, many of whom are Black and Latinx and bilingual, might relate to these aspects of the characters. I mostly chose books that were written by people who are members of the community about which they write; such books would possibly present more accurate, authentic representations (Boutte, 2002). In addition, I chose books that featured characters that did not necessarily fit into one gender category. It seemed as though my students thought of gender as binary and became unsettled when a classmate's clothing or behavior did not match what they felt was appropriate. I hoped that meeting these characters could help students broaden their ideas of how boys and girls could be.

*They, She, He, Me: Free to Be!* by Maya Gonzalez and Matthew SG  
*One of a Kind Like Me/Único como yo* by Laurin Mayeno  
*They Call Me Mix/Me Llanan Maestre* by Lourdes Rivas  
*Neither* by Airlie Anderson

Table 2. Children's Literature about Gender Identity and Expression

In the next section, I discuss how I read these books with children and the conversations that unfolded during the read-alouds and morning meetings.

## The Land of All: Meeting the Characters

One morning in late March 2019, I was reading aloud *They, She, He, Me: Free to Be!* by Maya Christina Gonzalez and Matthew SG (2017). My students and I were sitting in our classroom meeting area, where we usually have lessons and read-alouds. The book presents images of people with different styles and lengths of hair and different styles of clothes. Under each person is a pronoun: me, he, she, they, tree, and ze. The images do not adhere to stereotypical images of boys and girls. For instance, on the pages featuring “he,” the individuals depicted have long hair, short hair, dresses, and pants.

When I read this book aloud, at first my students seemed at ease; they were sitting comfortably on our rug, looking at the pictures and listening as they would when I read any other story. As I continued to read, however, a few children squinted and tilted their heads to the side. I paused and asked, “What do you notice?” One child, Giacomo, said something like, “There’s a ‘he’ but he doesn’t look like a boy.” When I asked why, Giacomo said, “I don’t know.” Maybe he was unsure how to articulate his thinking or felt unsure about the picture. At the end of the book, the authors provide information for children about pronouns. For example, they explain,

Pronouns can be a way to share how you feel on the inside. Because this inside part is the most important part of you, it cannot be about outside ideas of how people think she or he is “supposed” to act. It has to be how you feel. (Gonzalez & SG, 2017, p. 27)

I read this information about pronouns to the class and then set the book aside because it was time for recess. I knew we needed more time with the book, but I told children it would be in our classroom library, in a basket of books about families, where I thought it might fit best for the time being. I said they could look at the book when they read classroom library books together on the rug, an activity that happened twice a day.

I regret that I did not read this book with children again. One reason was that children didn’t seem as engaged in it as I had hoped. However, the book’s text is simple and details are in the illustrations; children might have been more engaged if they had seen the illustrations better. Children needed to see the pictures up close and think about the pronouns associated with each character.

I did not have a working document camera and Smartboard at the time, but I do now; next time, I imagine showing the book under the document camera to help children see the pictures better. The first time we read it, maybe we could look only at the pictures; the second time, we could read the text, as well. In a guide for grown-ups at the back of the book, the authors say reading the book this way can help “kids feel free to relate and associate with who they want without judgment or expectations” (Gonzalez & SG, 2017, p. 36). We may need to read the book a few times to think carefully about its content.

I also may not have revisited the book because I was uncertain about how to lead discussions around it. I didn’t encourage the children to share ideas as much as I could have. For instance, after Giacomo made his comment about the character not looking like a boy, I could have asked other children, “Do you think the pronouns match people in the illustrations? Why or why not?” Asking this type of question would have allowed them to hear different perspectives on how people of specific gender identities can look. Children who thought boys needed to wear pants and have short hair, for instance, might begin to shift their thinking if they hear classmates’ varied answers to that question.

When I read aloud other stories, I pushed past my discomfort and encouraged children to share their responses. I tried to allow for different perspectives, but also to steer children toward accepting varied forms

of gender expression. I worked to strike this balance when we read aloud Laurin Mayeno's *One of a Kind, Like Me/Único como yo*, a book about a boy who wants to wear a princess dress to his school's Halloween parade.

After I finished reading the story, children shared ideas about whether a boy can wear a dress and pretend to be a princess. One child said, "It's okay for boys to wear dresses. Boys can wear whatever they want. I remember in pre-K, William wore a dress to school." William, who was now her first-grade classmate, became a bit flushed, laughed, and said, "Yes, I did." Another child quietly said to himself, "Boys can't wear dresses."

When I heard this comment, I said something like, "People's families have different ideas about how boys and girls can look. Children and their families get to decide which clothes are just right for them." I also said it's important to be kind and that if you don't agree with how someone is dressed, you would need to keep that idea in your mind. However, I hoped that by continuing to introduce children to characters who express their gender in various ways, and by talking about gender as a class, my students would begin to broaden their ideas about how boys and girls can look and behave. I hoped that with time, they would begin to see a boy wearing a dress, for example, as totally fine.

Children were wide-eyed as I read aloud *They Call Me Mix/Me Llamo Maestre* by Lourdes Rivas, a non-binary kindergarten teacher in Oakland, California. It's about Rivas's life growing up and explores how they came to realize that they were non-binary rather than someone who identified as a "boy" or "girl." I read this story because I wanted children to begin to think about gender beyond the "boy" and "girl" categories.

I also wanted to read this story because it talked about how so much of our everyday experience is affected by gender norms. In one part of the book, Rivas describes how lost and sad they felt when they went to clothing stores as a child and saw that clothes were divided into "boy" and "girl" sections. They also describe how toy stores often have separate sections for "boy toys" and "girl toys." This aspect of the book was relatable to my students because they had been to toy and clothing stores that were divided by gender. Many children appeared sad or concerned when we got to this part of the book; they seemed to understand how this character must have felt when they were little.

*They Call Me Mix* was popular with my students. After I put it in our classroom library, many children wanted to read it with classmates on the rug. Thando often chose to read this book with one of his best friends, Nyla. Often when reading time started, Thando and Nyla sat together and put this book between them, turning the pages and smiling as they looked at the pictures. Children in my class choose a classroom library book to take home each night for a parent to read to them. Several children chose to borrow this book. Among the children who borrowed it were Gloria and Giacomo, who initially seemed confused by non-stereotypical gender expressions. I thought perhaps they wanted to make sense of the content and think about it more.

I think children were interested in this book partly because it introduced them to a new idea for them: gender can be broad and you don't have to only be a "boy" or "girl"— you can identify as something else that feels right for you. The book may also have been compelling because it was written in the first person; maybe children felt connected to the story because the author spoke directly to them and asked them questions. For example, when Rivas (2018) describes visiting a toy store when they were little, they ask readers, "Have you ever noticed how almost everything is divided into Boys and Girls?" (p. 12). As a kindergarten teacher, Rivas also had experience communicating with young children and could write about complex ideas in ways that young children could understand. For example, in writing about how they came to realize they were non-binary, they write,



As a kid, I never felt like just a girl. I never felt right knowing everyone was deciding and agreeing that I was a girl. I also didn't feel like just a boy. I knew in my heart that I could never choose one or the other. (Rivas, 2018, pp. 8-9)

When students borrowed this book for a night, I worried about receiving concerned emails from their parents the next day. Perhaps parents would say they didn't think their child was ready to think about what it means to be non-binary. But I didn't get those emails. I only got one positive note from Giacomo's mom after her child borrowed the book, thanking me for talking about gender with children.

I tried to continue our discussions about the gender binary by reading Airlie Anderson's *Neither*, which is about an animal who lives in the Land of This and That, a fantasy world where only two types of animals exist. This animal is a combination of both animals and doesn't feel that they belong. The animal ends up discovering the Land of All, where all types of animals live together peacefully.

This book can be seen as an allegory for how the gender binary excludes people. I tried to help my students make that connection by asking, "What does this story remind you of in real life?" They said it reminded them of feeling sad when someone doesn't let them play a game for various reasons; it was a worthwhile discussion, but we didn't touch on the gender binary. If I had wanted students to relate the gender binary to the Land of This and That, maybe I needed to explicitly state the connection. At the time, however, I was reluctant to state the idea because it would be like telling children what to think. But perhaps I could have said something like, "Some people might say that This and That is like being a boy or a girl. What do you think about that idea?" The next time I read this book with children, I can try asking that type of question.

In addition to reading these stories, we talked about gender identity and expression at morning meetings. I wanted children to hear each other's ideas about boys and girls and, in hearing each other's perspectives, broaden their own ideas about gender. To start, over the course of a week, I asked, "What is a girl?" "What is a boy?" and "What is gender?" (Figure 1).

I chose a few ideas that children shared in those meetings to be topics for discussion at meetings in the following weeks. (In presenting a particular child's statement to the class, I didn't say which child had said it because I didn't want anyone to feel self-conscious. Instead, I said, "In a meeting, someone expressed this idea..."). For example, in response to my question, "What is a girl?" a child said, "You can name your own gender."

I wanted to talk about this idea more with students; I felt it was important for children to consider that people can name their own gender identity. So we revisited this child's statement in another meeting. I said to the class, "At another meeting, someone said, 'You can name your own gender.' What do you think about this idea?" At first, some children seemed confused, but then they talked about whether girls have to look a certain way. For example, one child said, "If you cut your hair, you can still be a girl." Now I realize I could have clarified the idea by giving an example of someone naming their gender, or asking, "What do you think that idea means?"

In another discussion, a child said, "Girls like dolls and boys like cars and girls can like cars and girls don't have to like dolls." I thought it was significant that the child didn't say that boys can like dolls, and I wondered how children would respond to that idea. So the next day, I restated that comment to the class and asked, "Can a boy also like dolls?" Children nodded. A few boys said they'd played with dolls. I hoped that talking about such an idea together, and hearing each other say it was okay, would help children feel more comfortable with the idea of a boy playing with a doll or doing something they might think only a girl would do.

Often when children talked about boys, girls, and gender, they came to realize that what they thought was true about boys and girls was not actually true. Some realizations were about hairstyles. For example, when we talked about girls, one child said they thought boys only had short hair. Then a classmate said she knew boys with long hair. She mentioned a boy in the class who used to have hair down to his chin. At another meeting, children talked about boys they knew who liked to paint their nails. These discussions were important extensions of the read-aloud experiences because children could continue sharing their ideas about gender and hear those of their classmates.

I was worried that these discussions would lead children to talk more about penises, vaginas, body parts, and sexuality, but those topics didn't arise. Only one child, Jamal, talked about body parts when I had asked, "What is a boy?" Earnestly, he said, "Boys have different parts than girls." As I wrote his idea on the whiteboard, I repeated it to the class, but no one talked about body parts after that. Instead, children talked about what boys wear and like to play with. Children's conversations around gender typically focus on these topics, rather than on sexuality and body parts (GenderSpectrum, 2019).

If children had talked more about body parts, I'd like to think I would have invited them to share what they knew and helped them take deep breaths if the conversation prompted giggles. I also imagine expressing a general idea about body parts and gender, such as, "Some people might think you have to be a certain way because you have certain private body parts. Is that true?" If, at that point, children had already begun to think more broadly about gender, I instead could say, "It sounds like people in our class are thinking that isn't true." I could then redirect the discussion to gender identity and expression.

Over the course of the curriculum, which lasted about six weeks, most children shared ideas and seemed engaged overall. Thando often seemed to be listening and thinking about what other people were saying, the way he did during all of our morning meetings and read-alouds. Sometimes he shared a thoughtful idea during a meeting, but often he spent more time listening. Other children were more vocal than he was in these meetings. He was more talkative in the block area, where he built castles with his friend John and continued to play with queen and princess characters he drew on paper and taped to blocks, hopping them around from one room in a castle to another.

## Lessons Learned

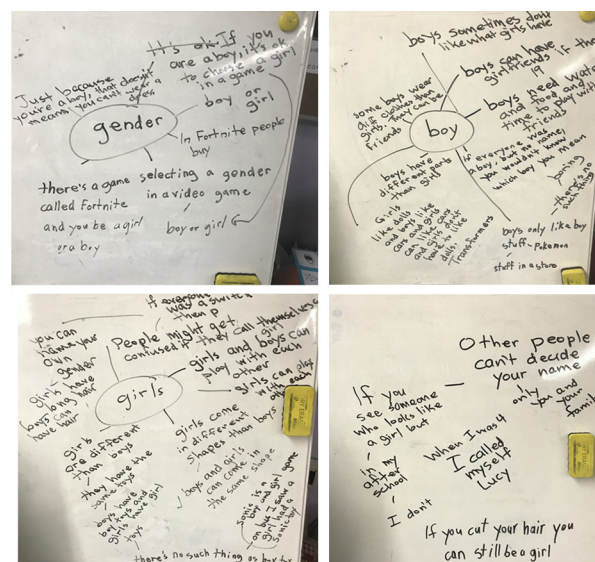


Figure 1. Morning Meeting Discussions about Gender Identity

I'd like to think the curriculum helped Thando and all children feel welcome and accepted in our group, but I don't know for sure. I do remember that once we started talking more about gender, I stopped hearing Gloria ask Thando why he always pretended to be a girl. When the literacy specialist walked with Alejandro and Thando back to the classroom, she only had brief updates about their work; I stopped hearing that Alejandro had called Thando a girl during their sessions.

At the very least, I hope that talking explicitly about gender and reading these picture books helped shift children's thinking a little. I hope the curriculum helped them feel more comfortable with people they might meet who express their gender identity in various ways. I also hope it helped children navigate their own anxieties about adhering to gender norms, and to feel freer to be themselves.

As I reflect on the curriculum, I think about what I could have done differently. For example, while my students and I did talk about various ways to be a girl, our conversations focused more on boys. I think this focus made sense because the students seemed more uncomfortable when boys in the class and male picture-book characters acted and dressed in ways that didn't match stereotypical ideas about boys. It can sometimes seem more socially acceptable for girls to be masculine; this actually elevates the perspective that masculinity is ideal and the norm (Abate, 2008; Flanagan, 2013). However, with future classes, I will have more discussions about the many different ways to be a girl.

I also wish I had talked more with students about how to respond if they hear someone saying unkind words about how someone expresses their gender. This kind of discussion could have allowed children to reflect on and use what they had learned about gender to advocate for justice in their community. We did have one such discussion in early May, after a student named Julian told me classmates teased him for having a My Little Pony backpack. The next day, with Julian's permission, I talked with children about the problem at our morning meeting and by the end, Julian seemed to feel better. I wrote about this discussion in a newsletter for families (Figure 2). When I study gender with students in the future, I aim to speak more generally about advocacy and make such conversations a bigger part of the curriculum.

We continue to talk about gender. This week, we had a meeting to try solving a problem: a child in our class has a backpack with a My Little Pony character on it. He felt that some classmates were saying he shouldn't wear that backpack because he is a boy. When teachers shared this situation with the class, many said that it is fine for a boy to wear any kind of backpack. They mentioned class discussions we've had, saying, "Like when we were talking about gender, there's no such thing as boy toys and girl toys."

Children said that if you don't think a boy should have a My Little Pony backpack, you can think that idea, but you can keep that thought to yourself so the backpack-owner doesn't feel sad. We also talked about what you could say if you hear someone teasing someone else about their clothing or backpack: perhaps something like, "That's not nice. People can wear whatever kind of backpacks they like" and get help from a grown-up. Teachers were pleased to see children thinking more about gender and ways to help other people.

*Figure 2. Weekly Newsletter Referencing Discussions about Gender*

Implementing this curriculum helped me feel more confident about discussing gender with students. I worried that children might talk about private body parts, but the conversations focused mostly on appearance, activities that different people like, and how people feel about themselves. Talking about these topics can help young children develop a sense of personal identity, which is important for them. These conversations are probably going to continue to be uncomfortable for me, but I need to have them so students can share ideas with me and one another. In hearing different perspectives from classmates and books, children's ideas about gender can begin to open up.

Basing the curriculum in stories was important. The books were like another teacher, both for me and for the children. I am not an expert on gender or on discussing gender with children. I am grateful that I could read aloud the words of authors and show artwork from illustrators who have much more knowledge of gender identity and expression than I do. I am grateful that these authors and illustrators have made books for teachers and families to read with children.

The books also served to be what I thought was a neutral starting point for discussion, one that didn't shame a young child for having a narrower concept of what it means to be a boy or a girl (Crisp & Hiller, 2011). To me, children with such viewpoints have only internalized messages about gender they've received from adults and popular culture, and perhaps children's literature (Tsao, 2008). Reading stories helped us start from a place of inquiring and thinking together, rather than with me simply stating, "Boys or girls can pretend to be whomever they want. Boys can be themselves. There are many ways to be a boy or girl." Those kinds of statements may not change a mindset in a lasting way.

I am fortunate to work in a school that supports talking about gender and other aspects of identity in the classroom. Even if I am not in such a setting in the future, I will try to share these stories and talk about gender with children because I must help children of all gender identities feel safe and welcome in my classroom. I want children to feel like they can be themselves.

As the school year came to an end, Thando continued to explore ideas about gender identity and expression through play. One day in late June, he had brought a floppy, stuffed bunny to school in his backpack. He showed it to me at dismissal. "When she wears this," Thando said, wrapping a swatch of fabric around the bunny, "she's a she." He removed the fabric. "And when she wears this, he's a he." I said it sounded like the bunny was thinking about gender. Thando smiled and said, "Yup!"

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