

Playing with Gender

BY ANN PELO

Three 4-year-old boys sat in a circle, each with a doll tucked under his shirt.

"It's time to have our babies!" Nicholas* declared. One by one, the boys pulled their babies from their shirts and cradled them tenderly for a moment before they leaped into action, cutting the babies' umbilical cords, wrapping them snugly in small cotton blankets, and holding their babies to their chests to nurse.

"You gotta feed your baby some milk," Jon instructed. "When your baby cries, that means he wants some milk."

"Or he might have a poopy diaper," Sam added. "Then you gotta change the diaper or the baby gets a rash."

"We're the dads of these babies," Nicholas said.

"But dads can't have babies," Sam objected. After a brief pause, he found a way to resolve the conundrum: "We're human sea horses!"

The boys tended to their babies gently and deliberately, alternating between nursing and diapering their newborns. Their game stretched until lunchtime, when they carefully tucked their babies into little improvised bassinets—dress-up clothes bundled into soft nests.

At the beginning of the school year, teachers at Hilltop Children's Center, the full-day childcare program where I worked in Seattle, took up a research question: How are the children exploring and expressing their identities through their dramatic play?

This was the second year we had explored a yearlong research question as a way to make our teaching more intellectually engaging for ourselves as well as for the children. Working with a research question helped us with detailed observation of children's play, and our observations were the foundation for our curriculum planning.

We chose the research question because we wanted to bring an intentional focus to our learning about anti-bias principles and practices. We'd said for a long time that anti-bias, culturally relevant practices were integral to our program. But we hadn't invested institutional energy to explore what this meant or to reshape our pedagogy. The research question helped us do that.

Hilltop is located in an affluent Seattle neighborhood, and, with only a few exceptions, the staff and families are mainly white. They are also, for the most part, politically and socially liberal and highly educated. While many of the teachers live paycheck to paycheck, as most childcare workers do, the families at Hilltop are from upper-income brackets. With our research question, we began to look directly at the issues of culture and class that shape our program. We wanted to deepen our understanding of what it means to do anti-bias work in a privileged community.

When we began our work with the research question, our goal was to learn about how the children understood gender, race, class, and other core elements of cultural identity, so that we could either reinforce their understandings or challenge them. We wanted to get better at responding to the subtle "teachable moments" that children create. And we wanted to plan a curriculum that counters racist, sexist, and classist understandings. We didn't anticipate the ways our study would lead us right to the heart of anti-bias teaching and learning.

Our Research Begins

That year there were 55 preschool-aged children at Hilltop, in four classroom groupings of various sizes, each with two, three, or four teachers (we had 12 teachers in our preschool classrooms). Once a week, each team came together for collaborative curriculum planning for an hour and a half. As the mentor teacher at Hilltop, I facilitated each team's meetings. Teachers would bring detailed notes about children's play and conversations to the team meetings. We studied teachers' observations and asked ourselves the following questions: What questions are the children

expressing in their play? What understandings or experiences are they drawing on? What theories are they testing? How does this present an opportunity for us to strengthen the values we want to pass on to the children?

From our study and reflection, we planned one or two concrete next steps the teachers would take in the classroom and in communications with the children's families. These steps were intended to extend, deepen, or challenge children's thinking about identity, difference, and issues of culture. These next steps, in turn, launched us into another round of observation and study.

Early in the year, Sandra brought to her team meeting the notes she'd made as Nicholas, Jon, and Sam played about birthing and caring for babies. As we looked beneath the surface details of the game, teachers began to tease out elements of identity and culture.

"Sam clearly understands that men don't birth babies, but he wanted to be in that 'maternal' role and found a way to do that by being a sea horse," Megan said.

"I was curious about why they wanted to play this game at all," Sandra added. The teachers shared hypotheses. One teacher pointed out that Sam's mom had recently had a baby: "Maybe this game is a way for Sam to stay connected to his mom." Another teacher called attention to the boys' knowledge of the tasks of caring for babies, and the mastery they demonstrated with diapers and nursing; clearly, they'd been watching adults take care of babies. A third teacher commented on Sam's leadership role in the game: "That's new for Sam, to give direction to a game. I see this game as a way for him to try on this new role, now that there are younger kids in the group and some of the older kids have gone on to kindergarten."

I nudged the teachers to turn their attention back to the elements of gender identity in this game: "The boys acknowledged that men don't give birth or nurse babies, but they weren't willing to let go of the maternal role. Instead, they let go of being human and became sea horses, which allowed them to stay male and keep doing the maternal work that's associated with being

female. They seem to be wrestling with how to be both male and maternal. What can we learn about their understandings of masculinity? Of moms and dads?”

I wanted to move us away from individualistic explanations. While these factors are important, they don't give us the full picture of children's identities. In our discussion about the three boys' play, I hoped to focus us on gender identity, through their internalized understandings of masculinity, caregiving work, and the distinctions between motherhood and fatherhood.

It took a lot of effort continually to refocus the discussion on the social and political contexts shaping this play—and my efforts weren't particularly successful. At the time, I attributed the struggle to the newness of our work with the research question; we were still training ourselves to look through the lens offered by the question. I expected that this would soon become a regular, familiar practice. I underestimated the work we had in front of us.

Unexpected Challenges

Week by week, our teams' collections of observations expanded.

Claudia, a 3-year-old, emphatically refused the role of princess in a game with three other girls. “I hate princesses, and that's why I'm a boy!” she exclaimed fiercely.

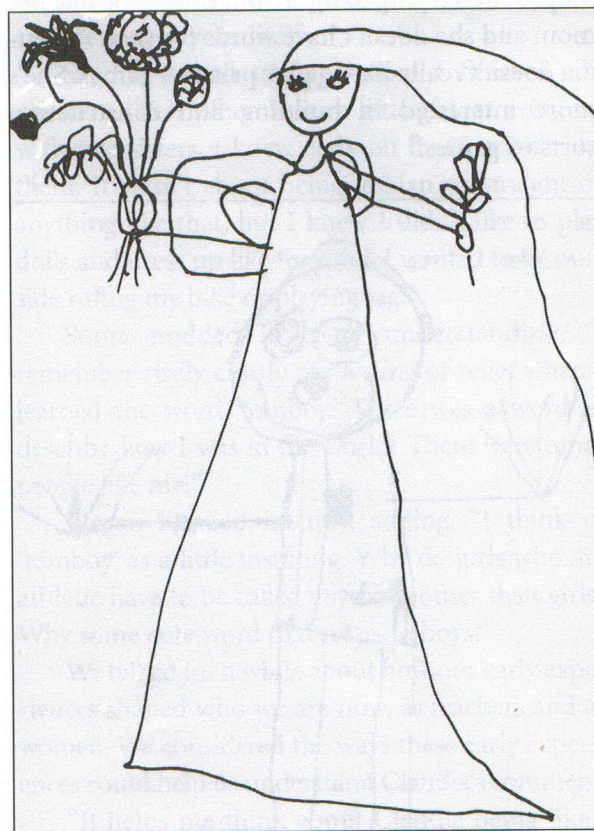
Two-year-old Juliet chose a mask to wear. It was a mask with long braids and with freckles. “This is a girl mask,” she explained, “because it has freckles.” She noticed the mask that Molly was wearing, a mask with short hair: “You look like a boy in that mask, Molly.”

Matthew and Joshua, 4-year-old buddies, slipped capes over their shoulders. “We're rescue heroes and our job is to save babies who are in danger!” Joshua called out, as he and Matthew raced across the room.

Kathryn, a 3-year-old, initiated a game with John. She draped a piece of silky fabric over his shoulders, shawl-like, exclaiming delightedly, “You're Cinderella!” Then she shifted the fabric onto his shoulders to be more like a cape: “Now

you're the prince.” Back and forth, from shawl to cape, Cinderella to prince, Kathryn transformed John again and again.

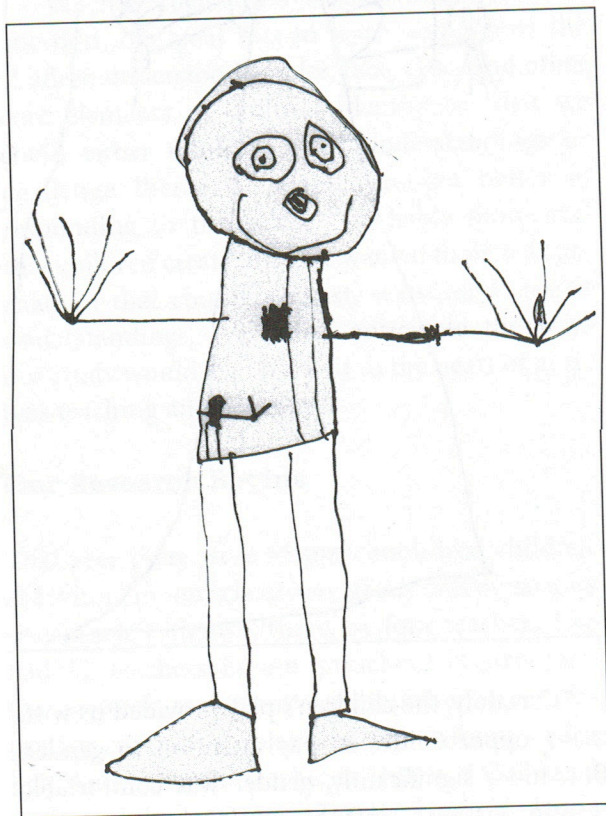
As fall slipped into winter, a couple things became increasingly apparent to me. Within the context of our research question, children's exploration of gender identity had become teachers' primary focus. When we launched our research question in the fall, we'd started out with a bigger frame. We naively expected that we'd be looking at race, class, and gender, all lumped together under the vague heading of “culture.” As the fall progressed, our focus narrowed as gender became the lens through which we explored the idea of cultural identity.



Certainly, the children's play provided us with many opportunities to pay attention to gender. But, more significantly, gender was comfortable terrain for our staff of predominantly white women. We were familiar with considering the impact of sexism on our lives. We assumed that we shared values and goals about what we want children to learn about gender identity. Gender

seemed a safe starting place for our staff as we stepped into more conscious and intentional anti-bias work.

The other striking aspect of our work with the research question was that, even within the fairly comfortable arena of gender identity exploration, teachers continued to struggle to stay focused on the social and political aspects of children's play. In their discussions about their observations, teachers emphasized children's individual developmental and family stories. For example, reflecting on Claudia's assertion that she hates princesses and that's why she's a boy, teachers made the following observations: "Claudia's mom is athletic and strong, and not very 'princessy.' Maybe she's trying to figure out how to be like her mom and she doesn't have words for that." "Claudia doesn't really like to play princess games. She's more interested in building and construction sorts of games."



I asked, "What if Claudia's comment isn't really about princesses at all? What if she's trying to find words for questions about what it means to be a girl or a boy? What if she's asking, 'To be a

girl, do I have to wear dresses and play games about being rescued and feasting and dancing? If I don't do that stuff, does that make me a boy? What is possible for me as a girl?'"

With our research question we wanted to develop the habit of paying attention to the ways children's play reflects their understandings of their political and social contexts. We wanted to strengthen this practice in ourselves until it became as easy and instinctive for us as paying attention to children's individual circumstances like their family relationships, their play and learning styles, their skills with literacy or math. But this effort was much more difficult than we'd imagined.

Why was this so challenging?

Claiming Our Cultural Perspectives

Four months into our work with the research question, I experienced a dramatic moment of understanding. During one week's team meeting, Lisa brought an observation of 5-year-old Jamie's play with his younger friend, 3-year-old Laura:

Jamie ran to greet Laura at the door as soon as she arrived. He swept her into his arms, exclaiming, "Let's play baby and dad!" Laura grinned her agreement, and Jamie picked her up, carrying her to the drama area. As their game unfolded, Jamie told Laura what to do: "Now cry, baby." "Now go to sleep." "Now eat, baby." Laura cheerfully followed Jamie's directions. Jamie picked her up, set her down, rolled her over, changed her diaper, put her to bed, woke her up; Laura didn't move her body on her own, but waited for Jamie to instruct her or physically to move her.

Lisa's co-teacher, Kirstin, had an immediate and strong reaction: "I see Jamie and Laura play this game just about every morning that they're both here, and I've been putting a stop to it. I tell Laura that she's a powerful girl, that she can move her own body. And I tell Jamie to let Laura walk, that he's not to carry her anymore."

Lisa quickly echoed Kirstin's passionate words: "I absolutely agree with your decision.

This game really bugs me, and I'm not sure why—but I don't like it."

Jamie and Laura's baby game was in itself fairly innocuous in the context of our program; we tend to be quite comfortable with kids' physicality and with affectionate, informal touch between children. However, Lisa and Kirstin had stepped away from the usual perspectives that shape discussions at Hilltop about this sort of game. They began their conversation by focusing on aspects of Jamie's and Laura's personal circumstances: Jamie's much older than Laura, he's an only child and just beginning to develop the flexibility in his play that makes room for other children's contributions; Laura is young and is just beginning to move into collaborative play. But Kirstin and Lisa quickly left this terrain of individual psychology and circumstances and stepped emphatically into the terrain of gender identity.

"As a woman, I hate seeing a girl being so passive," said Kirstin, startling me with the force behind her words.

"I see Jamie telling Laura what to do and even moving her body for her and all my protectiveness for Laura as a 16-year-old girl on a date comes out," Lisa continued. "I want Laura to tell Jamie, 'No!' and I want Jamie to hear it!"

Lisa and Kirstin were responding to the children's play as women, reflecting on Jamie and Laura's play through their own experiences. They responded to their students' play with their hearts as well as from a more considered, measured place of intellectual reflection.

As I listened to Kirstin and Lisa talk, I experienced a sudden clarifying of what we'd been working with (and against) all fall. We'd been paying attention to children's gender identities but not paying attention to our own understandings and identities. We'd failed genuinely to acknowledge our own lenses, our own experiences, values, questions, and tensions related to gender. In order to see children as cultural beings, we must see ourselves as cultural beings, and we hadn't tended to that work.

We weren't asking central questions of ourselves: What does each of us know about gender? How have we each experienced the meaning and impact of gender in our lives? What values and goals

do we each hold for children's learning about gender identity? With the research question, we'd challenged ourselves to pay attention to gender identity as the children experience and understand it. Now, we needed to investigate the ways in which we adults express and explore our gender identities.

I brought this new awareness to Claudia's teachers, eager to examine her comments about hating princesses and being a boy through the lens of the teachers' experiences of gender. "We've been trying to understand what's going on for Claudia," I said. "But we haven't talked about what each of us has experienced about gender. I think that could help us understand Claudia's experience. When you think about Claudia rejecting princesses and claiming to be a boy, do you see any connection to what you've experienced in your life?"

Sandra started talking before I finished my question: "Yes! When I was a little girl, growing up with two sisters, I knew early on that I wasn't like them. It wasn't about being lesbian or straight or anything like that, but I knew I didn't like to play dolls and dress up like they did. I wanted to be outside riding my bike or playing tag."

Sonja nodded in eager understanding. "I remember really clearly my feeling of relief when I learned the word 'tomboy.' There was a word to describe how I was in the world! There were other people like me!"

Megan listened intently, adding, "I think of 'tomboy' as a little insulting. Why do girls who are athletic have to be called anything other than girls? Why some cute word that refers to boys?"

We talked for a while about how our early experiences shaped who we are now, as teachers and as women. We considered the ways these early experiences could help us understand Claudia's comment.

"It helps me think about Claudia being like I was as a kid," said Sandra. "She's not necessarily trying to figure out if she's a girl or a boy, but what it means to be someone who's not a girlie girl. Maybe the only language she has for 'not a girlie girl' is 'boy.'"

"When I remember my own girlhood, trying to reconcile what I felt excited by and what I knew I was supposed to be excited by as a girl, it helps me think about Claudia," said Sonja.

“I wonder if Claudia knows the word ‘tomboy’” I asked. “I wonder what it would mean to her to hear your stories about growing up as girls.”

The teachers made plans to share their stories with Claudia and the rest of the group, as well as to bring in photos of themselves from childhood soccer games and tree-climbing adventures. Their planning was anchored by an explicit awareness of their political and social experiences and perspectives, and by their goals for children. These teachers, all of whom are female, knew how it feels to be a girl growing up in a sexist culture, and they wanted to support Claudia as she claimed her identity as a girl who rejects princess play and embraces full-bodied adventure.

Our Journey Continues

Once a month, all four preschool teaching teams would come together for a two-hour meeting for reflection and study. At this meeting, after my conversations with Kirstin, Lisa, Sonja, Sandra, and Megan, I shared my new awareness and questions.

“I’ve noticed that, in our team meeting discussions about our research question, we’ve struggled to stay connected to the political and social contexts of children’s play,” I said. “We’re really good at seeing kids as individuals with individual life stories, but we’re not as good at seeing them as political, cultural beings. When we fail to recognize children’s social identities, we erase fundamental aspects of who they are and who their families are. And when we fail to give voice to our cultural identities or to acknowledge our co-teachers’ cultural perspectives, we erase fundamental aspects of ourselves,” I added.

I posed several questions for discussion during our full-staff meeting:

- Why is it an effort for us at Hilltop to address the political and social context that shapes children’s identities?
- What are the societal values and belief systems that focus us on individual circumstances rather than broader cultural identities?
- What do we gain when we emphasize political and social identity—both the children’s and our own?

The discussion that unfolded was rich with insight and with contradiction.

Lisa described her sense of not wanting to emphasize what could divide people: “I want to bring us closer together, not make us feel different and separated.”

Susan said, “Our society’s storyline is that we achieve or fail as individuals. When we emphasize being women, or people of color, or white, we either are held back or we get unfair advantages—according to society’s storyline.”

“We haven’t had to look at these issues as teachers at Hilltop because of our cultural privilege on many fronts,” I added. “It’s an aspect of white privilege not to think about race, for example. We need to keep asking ourselves: How have we each experienced the meaning and impact of gender—or race, or class—in our lives? What values and goals do we each hold for children’s learning?”

During the rest of that staff meeting, we took the first steps toward explicitly naming the cultural lenses that shape how each of us experiences our teaching and

learning. First, Lisa and Kirstin recapped our discussion about Jamie and Laura’s game. And Sonja, Sandra, and Megan told the story of their conversation about Claudia and tomboys. Then, we practiced doing what these teachers had done, acknowledging our cultural perspectives as we studied children’s play. Teachers worked in small groups with one of

Trying to Be a Boy

Makely: “I’m trying hard to be a boy.”

Megan: “Why?”

Makely: “They have cooler bikes.”

Jamice: “They’re stronger than us girls.”

Makely: “No, actually girls can do more sooner than boys.”

Jamice: “Well, they can pee standing up.”

Makely: “But that’s not why I want to be one.

They get treated better! They get to watch more violent things like Pokemon and Yu-Gi-Oh. Plus their clothes are really cool—like I have old clothes from my brothers and they’re so cool.”

several observations of children's play that I provided. A typical example focused on a conversation I'd overheard among several children as they tried to figure out why their buddy (a girl) had commented that "she's trying hard to be a boy" (see sidebar, p. 72).

I asked teachers to read and talk about each observation "not as teachers trying to understand the children's points of view, but as who you are: a lesbian, or a person from a working-class background, or a Filipina, or a European American, or a woman." I posed several questions to guide their discussion of the observation:

What caught your attention right away? What was your first reaction or judgment?

What experiences in your life are you tapping into?

What values come to the surface for you? Can you trace those values back to their roots in the political and social context of your life?

With this activity, I introduced what I hoped would become a regular element in our team meetings: I wanted us to make explicit the social and political contexts and assumptions that shape our thinking and planning as teachers, so that we bring clarity and awareness to our planning for the children's learning. I wanted us to acknowledge and claim our work as political work—seeing teaching as not only about supporting children's individual development and learning, but also about cultivating particular values and practices that counter oppression and enhance justice.

This staff meeting launched us into a new stage of our journey. Our practice with the research question unearthed our collective discomfort with talking about culture—and talking about culture is

essential if we are to take up the work of anti-bias, culturally relevant teaching and learning. Probably at the beginning of the year we could have said that we needed to examine our own political and social identities at the same time as we pay attention to children's political and social identities. But without our observations of the children's interactions and our deeply felt reactions, our inquiry would have remained abstract.

For too long, our anti-bias efforts at Hilltop had been standard-issue: brown play dough, books with characters from a range of families, dolls with different skin colors. The new work we were aiming to do was much less comfortable and easy; it made us squirm and stammer and get angry and defensive to look at the ways in which our cultural privileges had been knit together to form the fabric of our program.

As we continued to do this work, we looked more closely at race, building on the work described above. And we added a step to our curriculum planning process. In addition to reflecting on the possible meanings of the children's play, staff committed to considering the personal social-political experiences and identities that they bring to their observations before planning next steps and curriculum investigations to take up with the children. Our encounter with the research question initiated a slow-but-sure transformation of practice. ■

* Names have been changed.

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