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Article abstract

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Exploring Sexuality Education Through Play and Queer Joy with Rural Early Childhood Teachers

Melissa Keehn and Casey Burkholder

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How might we reimagine early childhood sexuality education so that queer joy flourishes in these spaces through play? In this work, we come together as two queer researchers and ask how we might inhabit both play and queer joy to create a space where children can engage in queerer worldmaking and disrupt adult norms about sexuality, bodies, and identities in ECE classrooms. We describe how we engaged a group of 13 ECE teachers from a rural New Brunswick community in collage, zine, and cellphilm production to explore the ways sexuality education unfolds in their teaching practice. We specifically prompted participants to design and draw play spaces where young children might queerly and joyfully inquire about ideas of gender, sexuality, and identity. Ultimately, we propose that play-based approaches to teaching sexuality education creates room for young people to dream, joy, tap into their queerness, and rearticulate their bodies in ways that help them form and contribute to knowledge about the world around them.

Key words: early childhood education, queer joy, rurality, sexuality education

In a time of transphobic state violence directed at queer and trans young people in schools across Canada (CBC News, 2023), it's time to dream up something more playful and adventurous in sexuality education classrooms. In this work, we come together as two queer researchers—a white bisexual femme university professor (Casey) and a white femme lesbian and assistant professor (Melissa)—and ask how we might engage both play and queer joy to create a space where children can immerse themselves in queer worldmaking and disrupt adultist and deficit norms about sexuality, bodies, and identities in early childhood education (ECE) classrooms.

Binary gendering, heterosexuality, traditional families, and notions of sexual innocence continue to be established norms in ECE settings (Prioletta, 2020; Robinson, 2005). And yet, children have queer and trans childhoods, come from queer families, and routinely explore sexuality (Keenan & Hot Mess, 2020). This disconnect means that children are often denied access to crucial information about their identities, families, desires, and lives in ECE classrooms, creating a situation where young people perpetuate heteronormative ideals and choose not to talk about sexuality issues

with adults (Prioletta, 2020; Robinson, 2005; Ryan, 2016). In response to this ongoing erasure of 2SLGBTQIA+¹ children, families, and identities in ECE sexuality education classrooms (Burkholder et al., 2025; Davies et al., 2023), we take up queer joy as a framework for reimagining how sexuality education in ECE classrooms might be explored differently. Duran and Coloma (2023) explain that queer joy offers a mode of being and living queerly: one that centers the “joy, laughter, love, fabulosity and more-than-life sort of energy” (p. 115) that can be found in all childhoods. Through queer joy, we argue that sexuality education in the context of early childhood can move away from rigidity and toward something queerer, something joyful.

With an eye to queer joy (Wright et al., 2024) and participatory visual research (C. Mitchell et al., 2017), we engaged a group of 13 ECE teachers (K–3)² from a rural New Brunswick community in collage (de Rijke, 2024), zine (Creasap, 2014), and cellphilm (short videos filmed on a cellphone based on a prompt; MacEntee et al., 2016) production during a workshop held at their school to explore the ways sexuality education unfolded in their teaching practice. The workshop was part of an ongoing SSHRC-funded project about the supports and barriers to teaching comprehensive sexuality education in New Brunswick called Sexuality NB, of which Casey is the PI. During the workshop, we prompted participants to design and draw play spaces where young children might queerly and joyfully inquire about ideas of gender, sexuality, and identity, which we refer to as invitations to play. We asked: How might we reimagine early childhood sexuality education so that joy flourishes in these spaces through play?

In what follows, we begin by addressing the current backlash against queer and trans kids in New Brunswick (CBC News, 2023) and show how policy violence (specifically Policy 713) has moved into the province's sexuality education spaces—reminding us that sexuality education does not occur in a vacuum. Then, we describe what we learned from our workshop with teachers at a rural school in New Brunswick and talk about the methodological possibilities of play-based activities in sexuality education. We end the paper by providing some ideas for practice for ECE sexuality education teachers interested in evoking queer joy in their own classrooms. Ultimately, we propose that play-based approaches to teaching about sexuality education creates room for young people to dream, bend rules, craft futurities, tap into their queerness, and rearticulate their bodies in ways that help them form and contribute to knowledge about the world around them—even in spaces that seek to contain and erase queerness, like New Brunswick's public schools and early childhood centres.

The New Brunswick context: “Sex shows” and “shady practices”

The New Brunswick Conservative government exposes its deep fragility when it comes to sexuality education and queer people. In the spring of 2023, the New Brunswick premier and education minister put into motion their plan to amend New Brunswick's school inclusion policy (named Policy 713), making it mandatory for schools to obtain parental consent before teachers could use the names and pronouns of students under age 16 (Ibrahim, 2023)—a move that denies queer and trans youth agency and highlights the government's queerphobic position that trans and nonbinary kids do not get to make decisions about their own bodies. Since the amendments to Policy 713, gender and sexuality education in schools has become a target for radical conservative zealots, mirroring the much broader transphobic and homophobic political and educational conversations currently sweeping across Canada (Latimer & Sciarpetti, 2023; RCI, 2023). The freedom convoy movement during the 2022 pandemic lockdowns was widely associated with queer and transphobic rhetoric and imagery (see Bissett, 2022; Molas, 2022), and extremist groups across the country have since capitalized on its anti-2SLGBTQIA+, xenophobic, anti-masking, and racist tenets (Li, 2022), holding regular rallies and protests in opposition to 2SLGBTQIA+ educational programming and sexuality education curriculum in Canadian communities and cities (King, 2023; O'Connor, 2023; Richardson, 2023). One of these groups, The 1 Million March 4 Children, has held various protests in New Brunswick since the provincial government's decision to weaken Policy 713, advocating for the “elimination of the Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (SOGI) curriculum, pronouns, gender ideology and mixed bathrooms in schools” (1 Million March 4 Children, 2023, para. 1). In September 2023, New Brunswick's premier and the education minister engaged and shook hands with 1 Million March 4 Children protesters who held signs that read “I need real education, not sex,” “No sex shows in schools,” “Stop normalizing sex and nudity,” “No grooming, no porn, no secrets,” “Leave the innocence of children,” and “Education not indoctrination” (see Figure 1). One journalist commented, “[the premier] waded into a crowd of about 250 people on the front lawn of the New Brunswick Legislature, shaking hands with people carrying signs denouncing sex education and LGBTQ rights”

(Poitras, 2023, para. 2). We looked on from across the street as we attended the counter protest, noting that the premier and education minister did not offer the same kind of welcome to queer, trans, and allied protesters.



Figure 1. Stop the sex shows. Photo credit: Melissa Keehn.

Shortly after the protest, the education minister announced during a CBC interview his government's plans to review the province's sexuality education programming: "We are looking at [the sexuality education curriculum] from an ... age-developmental point of view" (Hogan, 2023, as filmed by CBC News, 2023, 0:10). Sexuality education has long been part of New Brunswick's ECE and elementary programming, and contrary to current conservative political and public discourse, it does not feature "sex shows" (see Figure 1). In the primary years (K–2), young people learn about personal safety, boundaries, and terminology for body parts; in grade 3, students learn about personal consent and boundaries, and they explore vocabulary to describe their own unique identities; in grade 4, they begin to learn about the changes that happen in their body during puberty (e.g., voice changes, hair growth, menstruation); in Grade 5, they learn ways to give and withdraw consent and explore topics like menstruation, sperm production, the reproductive system, and community diversity (Government of New Brunswick, 2023). In our own work in sexuality education, we seek to engage with queer joy and play through these existing outcomes, but we also look to joyfully queer play with them too. Our sense is that the review of New Brunswick's sexuality education programming is less about children's supposed innocence or "developmentally age-appropriateness" and more about the Conservative government's discomfort about sexuality and the existence of queer people. Having established the socio-political context in which our study occurs, we now turn to an examination of sexuality in ECE spaces.

Sexuality in ECE spaces

Phillips (1998) explains that "children want to know about sexuality, but the grown-ups tell them that they need to know about something else; and they need to know about something else—call it culture—to distract them from what they are really interested in" (p. 21). Controversies surrounding sexuality education being present in ECE and elementary settings have always simmered in the public and political discourse. For instance, when a

Liberal provincial government in Ontario attempted to revise their sexuality education curriculum in 2010, it was met with pushback from conservative parent and religious groups (Maitland, 2023). In 2015, a Conservative premier repealed the province's comprehensive sexuality education for grades 1–8 (which included topics related to pleasure and gender/sexuality diversity) in a highly publicized and contentious political move that vilified teachers and positioned parents as the experts in sexuality education (Bialystok et al., 2020). More recently, a Conservative provincial government in Saskatchewan scaled back their own sexuality education, no longer allowing outside agencies to deliver instruction in schools, specifically targeting organizations that included gender and sexuality diversity as part of their programming (Latimer & Sciarpelletti, 2023). In January 2024, Alberta's premier, Danielle Smith, expanded on these restrictive practices and has included policies where parents "will have to opt students in to every lesson about sex education, sexual orientation or gender identity" (Bellefontaine, 2024, para. 8). Then, in May 2024, New Brunswick's premier, Blaine Higgs, banned a third-party organization from presenting about youth sexual health after seeing an image of their presentation pertaining to masturbation and porn, outcomes directly tied to the province's existing sexuality education curriculum (Armstrong, 2024).

At the heart of these controversies is the underlying message that children are too young to learn about or embody sexuality (Robinson, 2008), particularly queer sexuality or genderqueer, nonbinary, or trans identities. We gently push back at a peer review of this article that asked us to moderate our way of articulating the arguments of this paper, and we turn to Florence Ashley (2023), who reminds us that "for all its talk of academic freedom, academia is deeply sex negative" (p. 140). Ashley adds, "Academic sex shaming is well suited to dominant interests, to those who never had to learn they have a body" (p. 140). Ten years after Gilbert (2014) proposed in *Sexuality in School: The Limits of Education* that young people have queer childhoods, conservative school boards and governments continue to balk and push forward a prejudice that a queer identity has a minimum age requirement. Not enough has changed. Yet Robinson and Davies (2008) note that this silencing of sexuality—queer and otherwise—in schools negatively impacts young people's self-esteem and understanding of their own bodies and desires. The socially constructed notion of childhood innocence (Priolella et al., 2022)—an idea that says that young people should not explore sexuality in order to maintain their purity and youthfulness—maintains these sanitized renderings of sexuality in curricula across Canada, including in New Brunswick. Rather than positioning children as having a right to claim queer or trans identities, New Brunswick's Conservative government has directly positioned them as needing protection from 2SLGBTQIA+ futures, communities, and desires (see Gilbert, 2014). But studies have shown that children regularly discuss, envision, embody, and remix sexuality in ECE classrooms, and they glean their understanding about sexuality from the fragmented messaging they receive—in part from each other (Davies & Robinson, 2010; Keenan & Hot Mess, 2020). Children routinely construct gender roles, inquire about genitals, talk about childbirth, play house and doctor, masturbate, become infatuated with their peers, live queerly, and show tenderness and love toward others (Balter, van Rhijn, & Davies, 2016; Blaise, 2009; Cacciatore et al., 2019, 2020, 2023; Dyer, 2017; Keenan & Hot Mess, 2020).

Rather than avoiding potential adult discomfort, what might it look like to lean into young people's questions, curiosities, and queerness in early childhood spaces? As Ashley (2023) explains, "learning to find comfort in the messiness of human experience is a queer virtue" (p. 105). And what might be the place of play in addressing these messy provocations?

Queer/ing play

Play is a generative space in ECE sexuality education. Keenan (2017) draws our attention to the importance of experiential inquiry and free play in ECE and elementary settings, asserting that,

in trying on costumes, building structures of their own design, and learning to interact with one another without explicit adult direction, free play offers children sites to construct and experiment with the possibilities they imagine and to act out and alter the realities they perceive. (p. 552)

We think about the possibilities of play, drawing on Keenan's theorizing, and see it aligning with our shared vision of how play might be employed in ECE sexuality education contexts: a playful, joyful, queered, imperfect, and adventurous practice. In New Brunswick, ECE teachers are expected to cover learning outcomes related to "play and playfulness"—where learners "engage in activities that introduce elements of risk, novelty, and the unknown" and "ask questions of each other, tinker, wonder, and prompt new play" (Government of New Brunswick, 2024, "Big Idea: Play and Inquiry," n.p.). In other words, there is ample curricular support for ECEs in New Brunswick to cultivate joy through play-based practice. We see this kind of playful engagement in Antunes and Butler's (2023) work when they craft genitals with glitter, pompoms, and textiles alongside young people as a way to interrogate gender norms around bodies and expression. We also see queer joy emerging in Keenan and Hot Mess's (2020) work when they bring the over-the-top spirit of drag into the elementary classroom, complete with outrageous costuming, inclusive storytelling, and glitter. We, too, seek to mobilize adventure, play, and wonderment in sexuality education (see also Barcelos, 2023; Roberts & Labuski, 2023; Wolfe, 2018), while also looking to radically remake this kind of work in the specific context of New Brunswick's ECE classrooms through the lens of queer joy.

However, a more critical reading of play in ECE contexts is needed. We already know that gender policing takes place regularly in children's play spaces, perpetuating problematic gender norms and inequalities while silencing queer perspectives (Allan et al., 2008; Blaise, 2012; Cullen & Sandy, 2009; Renold, 2006; Ryan, 2016). Allan et al. (2008) found that some children in their study replicated heteronormative ideals by rejecting the lesbian space their teacher created during an adapted reading of a popular children's fairy tale. Ryan's (2016) study revealed children slighting queer sexualities and constructing heteronormative perspectives in an ECE classroom; observing the nonneutrality of the children's play, Ryan wrote: "Through their anti-gay talk and, more regularly, through their narratives and play that silence all but normative heterosexuality, children learn and perpetuate the idea that LGBT identities and practices are not normal, not acceptable and not valued" (p. 87). All children, Istar Lev (2010) argues, experience external pressure to comply with societal and institutional demands of conventional gender and sexual norms. And yet, many children transgress these gender boundaries by engendering queer identities, friendships, and romances in their unstructured play (Gagliardi, 2014). Our inquiry starts from the position that ECE teachers need to counteract the learned antiquesqueer messaging and queer silencing that children may perpetuate in their play—and also foster the queerness that always already exists in the classrooms—by foregrounding opportunities for children to play with gender expansiveness, see queer families and relationships represented, and celebrate bodies in all their magnitudes.

Going deeper into queer joy

Queer joy is a burgeoning field of study that emerges from critical queer theory (Parker, 2023), queer of colour joy (Tristano, 2022), and Black queer joy (R. Mitchell, 2022). Wright et al. (2024) explain that queer joy "has the potential to bring powerful and unpredictable effects that can challenge norms, positively impact the self, and connect communities" (p. 2). Tristano (2022) asserts that queer of colour joy is a decolonizing tool that can renegotiate what relationships "can look, feel, sound, and smell like" (p. 279). Taken together, queer joy becomes a radical force that asks us to embrace the expansiveness of queer life and relationalities, to offer generosity and care toward ourselves and communities, and to dream forward and dream backward across queer temporalities, even in carceral spaces like schools. Queer joy gives us a language and a practice to confront settler colonial logics that police gender and sexuality diversities (Driskill et al., 2011). In this paper, we situate queer joy as an

access point into these alternative, anticolonial, and queerer worlds and consider how joy can be a useful frame to reconceptualize sexuality education in ECE spaces, including play-based spaces.

First of all, it's important to note that queer joy already exists in the ECE sexuality education classroom. Queer joy emerges when children play broadly with topics like family, touch, gender, affection, love, care, expression, boundaries, and consent—topics that are often already part of ECE spaces (Robinson, 2005). Queer joy happens when teachers introduce gender-neutral language to talk about bodies and genitals and identities and desires in their classroom practice. Queer joy is inviting in drag queens (Keenan & Hot Mess, 2020), playing with costume closets (Keenan, 2017), sculpting soft clay vulvas and penises (Ringrose et al., 2020), engaging in adventures and smellwalks (Allen, 2023), and imagining futures oriented toward queerness through fantasy play (Dernikos, 2023). Perhaps most fundamentally, queer joy recognizes and makes space for the queerness of our childhoods, telling us that trans and queer children exist in schools and that they know themselves better than the politicians, teachers, and adults in their lives.³

At the same time, it is also necessary to recognize that queer joy can be silenced in ECE classrooms: Educators might choose to ignore queerness, to downplay it, or to be constrained by broader antiquesqueer contexts of education (like Policy 713 in New Brunswick). Shelton et al. (2019) argue that the heteronormative landscape of education means that teachers often have fears about getting into trouble or losing their jobs when they engage with queer ally work. Children themselves can also perpetuate heteronormative ideas about relationships and police each other's gender expression (Ryan, 2016), minimizing queer joy. In our own New Brunswick context, schools operate under white and settler colonial logics (Burkholder, 2021; Noriega & Nason, 2023), and we recognize that Black joy, Indigiqueer joy, and queer of colour joy in ECE classrooms may be subjected to deeper containment and control.

The “Supports and Barriers to Teaching Comprehensive Sexuality Education” study

In 2021, Casey and her colleagues conducted a quantitative survey of 412 preservice and in-service ECE, elementary, and secondary educators from across the province between 2021 and 2022 as part of a SSHRC-funded project called “Supports and Barriers to Teaching Comprehensive Sexuality Education.” The majority of teachers disclosed that they were never trained in teaching sexuality education during their preservice or in-service years and that they were uncomfortable teaching particular topics like pleasure, gender identity, and sexual diversity. ECE and elementary teachers reported significantly lower levels of comfort than the middle and high school teachers. Importantly, the majority of teachers surveyed (82%) suggested that sexuality education should start in ECE and elementary classrooms and felt that the following five topics should be taught at this level:

- correct names for genitals
- puberty/physical development
- personal safety (e.g., child sexual abuse)
- gender identity, diversity, expression, and inclusion
- sexual identity, orientation, and diversity (Burkholder, Hamill, & Thorpe, 2021; Byers et al., 2024).

In October 2023, the New Brunswick education minister pointed out in a media interview that teachers were using “non-prescribed resources” in their instruction of sexuality education (Simpson, 2023, para. 7)—using finger-pointing language that discounts sexuality education teachers' expertise and makes them appear shady, dishonest, creepy. But given the results of the Supports and Barriers study, we also find his observation unsurprising. The

historical lack of sexuality education resources in New Brunswick has put teachers in a position where they have to seek their own programming, often from online resources created outside the province. This kind of do-it-yourself (DIY) approach to teaching sexuality education is something that we have seen repeating itself in our conversations with ECE, elementary, and secondary teachers, and it is a direct response to the province's enduring failure to provide teachers with the materials they need to teach the curriculum they are mandated to teach.

Doing participatory visual research, rurally

In this rural workshop, we used participatory visual methods to coproduce collages, cellphilms, and zines as a way to think about how sexuality education unfolded in the participants' classrooms. Cellphilms production (MacEntee et al. 2016; MacEntee & Flicker, 2023) provides a means for people to speak out against routine injustices in their lives (C. Mitchell et al., 2017); cellphilms are deeply political (Burkholder, 2017). In a previous article, Casey and a colleague wrote, "cellphilms method as DIY techno-craft makes visible and allows for an exploration of school landscapes and nonhuman actors, which encourages a spatial, institutional and material deconstruction of existing power dynamics [in these landscapes]" (Burkholder & Thorpe, 2019, p. 296). Thus, we find cellphilms particularly useful in nudging teachers toward thinking disruptively and creatively about their sexuality education practice and its historically heteropatriarchal projects. We also use collaging in our workshops and see it as a deeply unruly art practice that brings "the incongruous into meaningful congress ... and give[s] the uneventful, the commonplace, the ordinary, a magic of its own" (Waldman, 1992, p. 15). In the workshop, we use 1950s-era magazines and texts that Casey purchased from Chase Benjamin Antiques, an antique store in Fredericton, New Brunswick. The images in these texts are sometimes problematic (white, ableist, racist, sexist), and we encourage teachers to repurpose these images to collage about sex, bodies, gender, sexuality, and pleasure as a queer worldmaking praxis. In the process of collaging pieces of torn newsprint, old photographs, and shredded paper, participants manipulate, remix, make and unmake, and construct a rearrangement that invites a rethinking of their own sexuality education practices.

In working with ECE teachers in this specific rural community, we prompted teachers to respond to various questions through artmaking, like: What supports do you need to teach sex ed in ECE contexts? What is something that you want your community to know about sexuality education in the ECE classroom? What does sexuality education look like in the ECE and elementary classroom? What can we do to make our sex education classrooms more comfortable? After, we invited them to share what they made with the larger group to generate a discussion, which we recorded and then later transcribed. We also created artwork alongside participants and then talked about our own bodies, sexualities, and sexuality education experiences as a way to position ourselves in relation to the work, the teachers, and our workshop space. Near the end of the workshop, we invited teachers to specifically think about how sexuality emerges in their classrooms through play, and together we designed and drew play spaces where students would play with ideas of sexuality and gender. We asked the teachers: How might we create spaces for children to play with key concepts in sexuality education, including: gender, families, consent, and bodily autonomy? What might we learn from children about these themes through play?

A note on rurality

Falvey's (2015) graduate thesis disrupts the common perception that New Brunswick's rural communities are stagnant and backward by exposing a rich history of queer organizing and socializing. Rural New Brunswick is, in fact, quite queer (Batt & Green, 2022; Burkholder & Thorpe, 2019; Cummings, 2023; Keehn, 2023), and we entered this workshop space with the understanding that this school community had queer spaces contained within the school, regardless of whether they were implicitly recognized within its formal sexuality education practices. We also draw on Marr's (2020) work, which draws attention to the binary narrative of the urban/rural space (one

that foregrounds the image of the urban as safe and the rural as dangerous for queers) and argues that each space becomes watered-down and conceals “the danger that exists in urban centers and malign[s] small towns and rural areas as always already spaces of suppression and threat” (p. 249). Having witnessed multiple hostile anti-2SLGBTQIA+ protests unfold in our own city this past year (Burkholder & Wright, 2024), we call attention to the reality that all schools and communities across New Brunswick are currently grappling with transphobic and queerphobic educational and political violence, and it is most certainly not isolated to rural settings.

Findings

Navigating fears through play-based sexuality education

While teachers initially expressed worry about teaching sexuality education in their rural context, many responded positively to incorporating play-based methods into their practice. For instance, after prompting teachers with the question “What does sexuality education look like in the ECE and elementary classroom?” a teacher responded by telling us, “I think the thing that we’re up against is, like, I think that the community is worried about the age that [sexuality education is] presented at. And I think the problem is that there are some kids that are exposed to [sexual imagery and content] at a younger age.” Other teachers raised concerns about local parental attitudes toward sexuality education and conservative community norms around sexuality. A teacher said, “The [community] rhetoric is that we’re teaching about sex to kindergarten kids.” Another said, “I have colleagues who are really uncomfortable and don’t want to teach health or sex ed, and they use that as their excuse, like ‘well I haven’t had the training on it.’” One teacher wrote on a sticky note for our anonymous question box “How young is too young for sex?”

The teacher participants’ concerns were unsurprising given the inadequate training and support they receive, the current antisex/antiqueer political context in the province, and the broader moral panics around sexuality education in ECE contexts (Balter et al., 2021; Byers, et al., 2024). When we invited teachers to make collages and zines in response to the prompt “What is something that you want your community to know about sexuality education in the ECE classroom?”, this fear of parental perception repeated itself again and again in their artmaking (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. Participant-produced collage.

However, we noticed that many teachers were quite comfortable creating play spaces (through artmaking) for their students to explore themes generally associated with sexuality education, including family composition,

relationships, friendships, boundaries, and consent. For this part of the workshop, we prompted participants to design a space for young people to play with these key concepts in sexuality education in their classrooms, calling them invitations to play. We provided colourful paper, photographs, markers, sticky notes, and collage materials to design their spaces, and most teachers decided to work in small groups. When prompting the teachers, Casey noted,

The work that children do through play, especially after a book or a read-aloud, is their intellectual work. They're making sense of what just happened through their play. And the play is deeply important and smart and thoughtful, and it shows what they value from what they've heard or read and also what's missing.⁴

In response, a small group of participants worked together and created a play space pertaining to family composition with the prompt "Can you make a family and a place for them to live?" (see Figure 3). In this play space, they included inclusive picture books, classroom manipulatives, and various types of toys for students to create a family with.

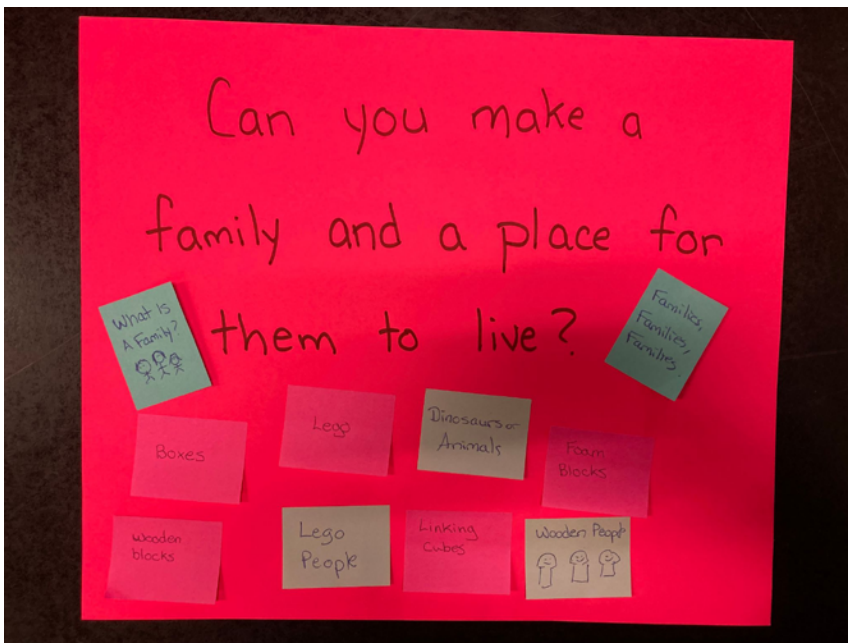


Figure 3. The teachers' "can you make a family?" play space.

Another teacher created a play space around notions of touch and consent. She told us,

I came up with conversations that come with play. So like "hands off" versus "bodies off"—you are in control of your body and what happens to your body. So if somebody is coming at you [to] give you a hug and you don't like it and you tell them to stop and they don't stop, that's when you might have to go turn to somebody for help—like [teaching] consent without talking about [consent].

Responding to this prompt, another group of teachers created a play space around relationships with the invitation "Come play with these dolls and action figures to show what healthy friendships look like" (see Figure 4).



Figure 4. The teachers' "come play with these dolls and action figures" play space.

In explaining their play space, one teacher said,

I might do a play with the puppets in front of [students] and show a fight and then say, "What happens next?" [I'll get them to] turn to another partner and then tell what happens next. And everyone's going to come up with a different way. And you could even have them in a group themselves without ever telling them "We're going to talk about consent today. We're going to talk about fighting." You don't ever do that. You just do. You model it through those kinds of play. And then ... see what they came up with. And that would tell you so much about the values in your room.

Casey responded to the group,

Conflict is everything. Also, it hurts so much more when a friendship is lost than a relationship. Like it's really an aching kind of a feeling of a loss and talking about grief in that kind of a way around friendships. ... [You can prompt children] "What does it feel like when someone was your friend and now you're not friends? How does that feel? What do you do?"

While the teachers told us that sexuality education was not formally happening in ECE and elementary contexts in their school, we realized that play-based activities (like the ones they codesigned in this workshop) might offer other reticent teachers an entry point to engage their students in sexuality education, even within conservative community contexts and constraints.

Overall, we saw teachers engaging with the possibilities of play as a way to queerly and joyfully confront the conservative community norms that were creating barriers to their teaching. In our workshop, play emerged through the teachers' artmaking and discussions as a way to capture the boundlessness of children's imaginations and create space for them to dress up, sculpt, build, create possible families and friendships, experiment, and experience joy in their bodies. As one teacher noted in our workshop through a drawing, there is a place for pleasure and joy in ECE sexuality education spaces (see Figure 5), including in the existing New Brunswick curriculum (Government of New Brunswick, 2024), and perhaps creating play spaces where children could explore these ideas might offer teachers a possible path forward.

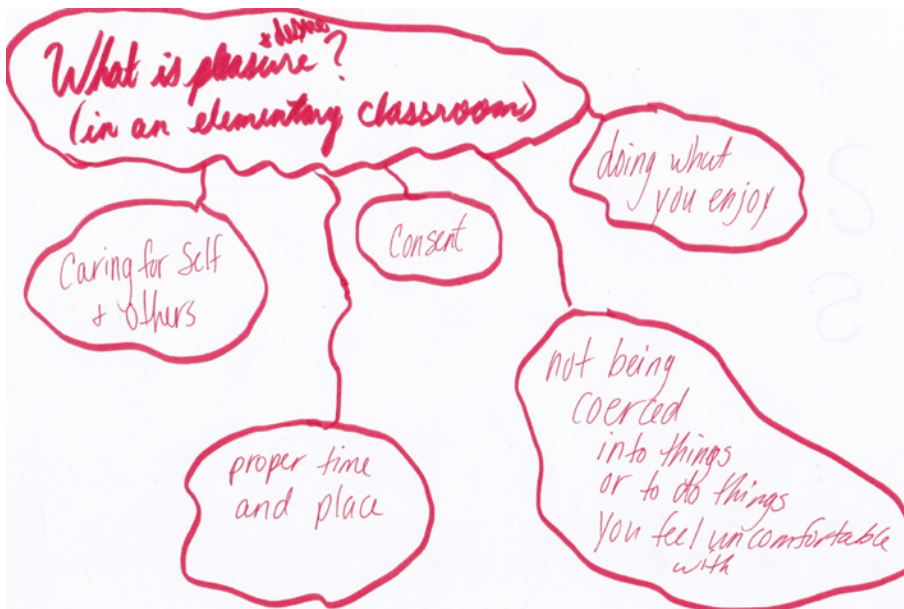


Figure 5. A teacher's "What is pleasure & desire in an elementary classroom" drawing.

Queer (im)possibilities

Just as play can open possibilities, it can also reproduce gender binaries and heteronormative family structures (Blaise, 2010), and we noticed that queerness only appeared minimally in our workshop, including in our invitations to play. In New Brunswick, the current political context has facilitated the falsehood that queer school workers and youth alone bring sexuality into schools, stirring up a culture of queer panic. As one teacher explained,

There is this overwhelming belief, especially in the media right now, that if you talk about queer and trans people in a school context, that will mean that young people will experiment [with their gender]. That's what the premier says with gender.

And perhaps this fear also influenced what teachers chose or chose not to include in their invitations to play. While one group included a gender-neutral family in their play space and the queer picture book *Families, Families, Families!* (Lang, 2015), we did not see or experience any other teacher explicitly foregrounding queer childhoods, families, relationships, or bodies in their conversations, including the families and bodies of BIPOC, intersex, and/or disabled queer and/or trans folks. This reflects the broader literature that highlights the white supremacist, settler colonial, and anti-queer erasures commonly found in sexuality education classrooms (Riggs & Bartholomaeus, 2018; Roberts et al., 2020; Whitten & Sethna, 2014).

Still, the potential for queer joy was there in the room, emerging in the form of this popular children's book and a small sticky-note drawing of a potentially queer family. And so, we propose that creating play-based ECE spaces for children to explore notions of families, friendships, bodies, and boundaries *can* create possibilities for queerness, for queer joy. Martin and Licon (2018) tell us that children's play is both queer joy and radical practice, and that their playfulness often breaks rules about bodies, identities, sexuality, and desire in wildly creative if not impossible ways. While play-based sexuality education might edge toward something heteronormative or (perhaps more likely) toward conversations about pirates, magic, a story about a beloved pet, or a cheeky joke, it might also edge toward something queer too. The utopic and spontaneous edginess of this play rests on its childishness, its worldmaking, and its (queer) joy.

Dreaming up something adventurous: Ideas for a queer joy praxis

We know that one of the ways young people explore sexuality in ECE and elementary settings is through play. Children often recreate scenes of romance, families, love, and desire when they engage in peer interactions and informal games (Ryan, 2016), and this play is often “rooted in a spirit of amusement” (Keenan & Hot Mess, 2020, p. 448). This is something we have observed and experienced in our own lives: Casey has watched her own child doing this through imaginative play with friends and with their parents; Melissa has observed it while teaching elementary students; and as young children ourselves, we made our Barbies engage in sexual activity, including queer sex. Through their dreaming and wondering, children do the work of pushing forward notions of gender, sexuality, bodies, queerness, and identity on their own terms and in sexuality education classrooms. In working with the sometimes reticent teachers in our workshop, we see deep value in play-based, child-driven activities in the ECE sexuality education classroom. It can provide an unscripted space (Keenan, 2017) for children to dream, wonder about, and reimagine ideas of sexuality and gender. And in our dialogue with teachers about conservative community norms and parental backlash, one teacher poignantly asked us, “So how do I deal with this?” Based on the findings from this workshop, we want to offer some ideas for practice for those ECE teachers who are interested in inviting in more joy, queerness, and play into their classrooms. We offer four provocations for educator praxis: queer joy centers children’s experiences; queer joy encourages play; queer joy crafts worlds and futures; and queer joy respects boundaries.

Queer joy centers children’s expertise

Allen and Carmody (2012) remind us that “what is often forgotten in the struggles around competing discourses of education is to listen to the voices, the desires and the pleasures that young people want to explore” (p. 465). Far too often, sexuality education fails to account for the expertise and wisdom of youth and “neglects all the ways youth make and remake, receive and resist the lessons about sexuality and gender on offer, within and beyond school” (Gilbert, 2021, p. 457). What this means is that ECE teachers can create opportunities in classrooms for children to talk and think about the topics they already talk and think about all the time (for example, their families, relationships, bodies, gender, desire, and the joy of being queer). This does not mean that teachers have to push beyond their own teaching boundaries, but it does mean they might lean into the stories and deep knowledge that children are already bringing into the classroom: *What are they already telling us about their families? What questions are they asking about their bodies? How are they negotiating personal space, relationships, excitement, and hurt feelings as they play?* We invite ECE teachers to also adapt the following play-based prompts to their own classrooms:

- Using items in the classroom space, create a group of friends. Can you make a feast and invite other newly created friends from the classroom to join together? What will you serve? What can you do to make everyone’s friends comfy? What will the space look like?
- Read a story about community care. We love the book *Abolition is Love* (Ware & Fricker, 2023). Ask learners to create drawings that respond to the readings and capture the ways that communities show up in the story and how it makes them feel. Encourage them to also act out community care with some friends by responding to the prompt “Imagine that you are caring and helping. What are you doing? What does that look like? What does it feel like?”

Queer joy encourages play

Despite concerns about sexuality and the presence of queerphobic and transphobic political practice framing our workshop space, the teachers were still willing to explore topics like family, bodily autonomy, and consent through play-based inquiry. For this reason, we propose that play-based sexuality education can be an entry-point for ECE

teachers to joyfully talk about sexuality and gender in their classrooms, particularly in rural and conservative communities. By setting up spaces where children can try on different kinds of clothes, imagine different kinds of family compositions, design homes for them to live in, and play with toys and figures in different ways, teachers can work with the curiosities that already exist in their classrooms and create a space where children can partake in learning, questioning, worldbuilding, and adventure. At the same time, we acknowledge that children can also be strict about what they “can” or “cannot” do in play based on gender or sexuality norms, and for this reason, we encourage teachers to model examples that encourage queer joy in play (e.g., incorporating read-alouds that feature gender-expansive characters and queer families, exploring concepts like chosen families, and inviting students to challenge gender norms using classroom dolls and figures). We invite ECE teachers to also adapt the following play-based prompts to their own classrooms.

- Build a personal space boundary around your body using classroom manipulatives. Who might you invite inside your boundary and when? Does your personal space boundary change when you are at school? At home?
- Using the provided materials, design a costume for yourself and show it off in a fashion show (Keenan, 2017). If you and your classmates feel comfortable, invite other classrooms in to share your creations.
- Design a chosen family only using nonhuman (and nongendered) classroom materials (garbage cans, manipulatives, fabric, buttons, etc.). Then, create a space for them to live. What items in the classroom can you use to imagine your family? What different kinds of families can you make? What happens when you blend one family with another family? What does your family need in their home to feel comfortable?

Queer joy crafts worlds and futures

In observing teachers in our workshop ease into the possibilities of sexuality education through the creative praxis of collage production, we also see value in employing craft-based activities and artmaking in ECE sexuality education settings. Artmaking invites children to design futures, imagine relationships, dream up new worlds, and then play with them. For instance, teachers can prompt children with questions like: *Can you design a friend out of scraps of paper and magazine images? What might they look like? What could they smell like? What are their boundaries? What qualities make them a good friend?* These types of activities and questions create opportunities for children (and teachers!) to think deeply about sexuality education topics and what makes different kinds of bodies and relationships possible. We invite ECE teachers to adapt the following artmaking activities to their own classrooms.

- Sculpt a penis and/or vulva and/or body out of clay (Antunes & Butler, 2023). What are all the different colours you can use to make your clay body or clay genitalia? What words can we use to describe all the different clay bodies and genitalia?
- With consent, ask a friend to lie down on a large piece of paper. Draw around their outline, capturing their hands, feet, head, legs, and arms. Then, get your friend to draw around your outline. Colour your outlines in to show the different feelings you are feeling today. How will you show these different feelings? What colour is happy? What colour is sleepy? What colour is...?

Queer joy respects boundaries

We also want to acknowledge the teachers who were struggling with the ideas that emerged from our workshop around queer joy and provide a pathway forward for reticent practitioners. A study by Wright et al. (2024) reveals that queer sexual joy is often fostered when people feel safe and their boundaries are respected during sexual

activity. As queer joy praxis, we see value in foregrounding ongoing, negotiated conversations of consent and boundary setting in sexuality education classrooms, including in our own workshop spaces. Teachers are given multiple opportunities to opt in or out of the recorded discussions and artmaking. At this particular workshop, one elementary teacher asked that we not record the group conversation, and we obliged. This participant eventually left the workshop because they were uncomfortable with the themes being discussed, including the existence of queer sexuality. Some participants chose not to participate in the artmaking or discussions but remained in the room and listened. Before taking anonymized photographs or filming the participants' artwork, we asked for verbal and written consent.

By foregrounding consent and boundary setting, we noticed it helped ease some teachers' initial discomfort with the topics being discussed. In adapting these findings to the classroom, we suggest that ECE teachers explore their own boundaries in their sexuality education practice, asking themselves: What do they feel comfortable teaching about? What conversations bring them discomfort? What brings them joy? What might be the boundaries and desires of their students and their students' families? By setting boundaries, teachers can engage with queer joy praxis in ways that feel comfortable to them while also considering local contexts and communities, including the desires and needs of the many queer children and queer families that exist in their schools.

Conclusion

In this article, we describe how play and queer joy circulated in our artmaking workshop with 13 ECE sexuality education teachers in rural New Brunswick. While teachers were concerned about parental backlash and conservative community contexts, they were also willing to transgress these concerns through play-based sexuality education practices. While queer joy was largely minimized in the workshop, it still emerged when teachers were designing play-based spaces for their classrooms. For this reason, we argue that play-based sexuality education methods in ECE settings—including the ideas we suggest in this paper—might help teachers working in conservative, antiqueschool contexts to find ways to encourage gender expansiveness, queer childhoods, and queer joy. At the same time, we recognize that for this to happen, ECE teachers in rural New Brunswick (and elsewhere) also need more resourcing, time, and support, especially around themes related to sexual and gender diversity.

And while children can perpetuate the pressures of heteronormativity, white supremacy, and carceral logics in their play, we also foreground the reality that children can also produce queer worlds, including in New Brunswick schools (Burkholder et al., 2025). Moving forward, we encourage ECE teachers in New Brunswick to consider their boundaries, look for the queerness that (of course!) exists in multitudes in their schools (Burkholder & Keehn, 2024), lean into the genders, curiosities, and wonderings that children are already bringing into our classrooms—and rediscover the queer joy of play.

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- 1 The abbreviation 2SLGBTQIA+ stands for Two Spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, intersex, and asexual. We intentionally place Two Spirit at the beginning to acknowledge that Two Spirit people and identities were the first sexually and gender-diverse individuals in this territory (Sylliboy & Young, 2017).
 - 2 ECE teachers in New Brunswick carry a New Brunswick Teachers Certification and are qualified to teach kindergarten to grade 3 in the public school system (Government of New Brunswick, 2023).
 - 3 We roll our eyes at and resist—as feminist killjoy practice (Ahmed, 2017)—the adults who seek to harm by telling children that they don't know their own bodies and experiences (e.g., Premiers Higgs (NB), Moe (SK), and Smith (AB)).
 - 4 Casey was inspired by a remark made in a presentation by Melissa-Ann Ledo at the McGill AIRG symposium that drew on findings from her master's thesis (2017) where she described the intellectual work children do in their drawing practices (Ledo, 2023).

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