

# The Arts as a Pathway to Inclusive Kindergarten Sexuality Education

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Article abstract

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## The Arts as a Pathway to Inclusive Kindergarten Sexuality Education

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*This inquiry examines how comprehensive sexuality education in kindergarten can be enriched through arts-based pedagogy and queer theory. Guided by autoethnography, it explores how music, movement, and material provocations can embrace gender diversity, support inclusion, and challenge developmentalist delays that marginalize queer identities and experiences. Analysis examines the tension between responding to teachable moments and taking a proactive, scaffolded approach that weaves inclusive values through learning. Findings highlight the arts as dynamic means for expressing identity, advancing relational belonging, and cultivating inclusive, imaginative environments that affirm the right to self-expression.*

**Key words:** *sexuality education, early childhood education, the arts, queer pedagogy, queer theory*

Sexuality education in early childhood plays a critical role in shaping children's understanding of their bodies, personal boundaries, and interpersonal relationships. A good quality program can foster positive attitudes, values, and behaviours related to gender and sexuality and overall gender and sexuality equality (Balter, van Rhijn, & Davies, 2016; UNESCO, 2018). Robinson and Davies (2016) emphasize that learning how to build respectful and ethical relationships is central to developing young children's sexual citizenship and overall well-being. In this inquiry, sexual citizenship involves acknowledging young children as gendered and sexual subjects. Pedagogically, it calls for ethical and respectful relationships grounded in consent, care, and affirmation of diverse identities (Robinson, 2016, p. 485).

Despite these aims, 2SLGBTQIA+ students navigating diverse gender identities and sexual

orientations remain vulnerable in educational contexts. Exclusion and marginalization persist due to entrenched heteronormative discourses and rigid gender binaries that position children expressing gender diversity as existing beyond what is socially accepted (Blaise, 2013; Davies, Balter, & van Rhijn, 2023; Kane, 2013). Recognizing and addressing these challenges early is essential. Comprehensive sexuality education (CSE), an inclusive, rights-based approach to exploring gender, sexuality, and relationships (Balter et al., 2021; UNESCO, 2018) offers a way to destigmatize and affirm diversity in children's identities and relationships, including gender identity and sexual orientation. Central to this framing is the understanding that, in early childhood, gender identity and sexual orientation are not about sexual activity but about children's emerging understandings of relationships, belonging, and self-expression.

As a musician, researcher, and elementary school music teacher—an a/r/tographer (Springgay et al., 2008)—I work to promote the transformative potential of the arts, especially music and movement, in advancing understanding and inclusion. I believe the arts can empower children to discover personal, social, and aesthetic possibilities. Eisner (2002) contends that the arts can become a means for children to explore their inner landscapes: "When the arts genuinely move us, we discover what it is that we are capable of experiencing. ... They provide resources for experiencing the range and varieties of our responsive capacities" (p. 11). Building on this perspective, I posit

that the arts serve as a powerful medium for shaping self-concept in early childhood. They support inclusive understandings of gender and diversity, offering creative means for all children to navigate and articulate their identities. This includes children with queer and gender-diverse subjectivities, who can use the arts to express themselves with nuance and assurance.

Meyer (2007) asserts, “By developing a more critical understanding of ... sex, sexual orientation, and how these identities and experiences are shaped and taught in schools, educators can have a profound impact on the way students learn, relate to others, and behave in schools” (p. 17). Embracing Meyer’s perspective, I am committed to positively impacting the lives of all learners, dismantling heteronormativity, and fostering inclusivity. My focus in the current inquiry centers on the use of the arts, particularly music and movement, in early childhood sexuality education. I examine how these practices can help destigmatize 2SLGBTQIA+ identities and gender diversity, and how children’s meaning making can extend beyond the limits of conventional teaching frameworks, opening new possibilities through the arts. I aim to advance understanding of how young learners can engage with concepts of gender, relationships, and self-expression in imaginative, expansive, and inclusive ways.

## Grounding literature

To inform the current inquiry, this literature review examines elements of kindergarten sexuality education curriculum, explores how arts learning experiences can enhance children’s understanding of gender identity and inclusive perspectives on diversity, and highlights key contributions drawn from queer theory and pedagogy.

In Canada, several provinces strive to align sexuality curricula with progressive values, emphasizing gender and sexual diversity, bodily autonomy, and consent (Davies et al., 2022). The kindergarten curriculum in British Columbia (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2022) focuses on learning scientific terms related to anatomy and reproduction, managing uncomfortable situations, and demonstrating respectful behaviour. However, in the grade-level curriculum pages on the BC’s Curriculum website, the concept of self-identity does not appear until grades 2 and 3, and sexual and gender identity outcomes are not introduced until grade 4 (Province of British Columbia, 2026). This delay reflects a developmentalist view of sexuality as something that emerges in preadolescence, yet it overlooks how children construct meaning around sexuality from an early age (Robinson, 2013; Taylor, 2010).

Balter, van Rhijn, and Davies (2018) argue that such omissions in early childhood hinder understanding and contribute to the invisibility, marginalization, and stigmatization of queer lived experiences in early learning contexts. Similarly, Janmohamed (2010) critiques the dominance of “developmentally appropriate practice” in early childhood education, noting how it often delays or excludes conversations about sexuality and gender diversity (pp. 306–308). Together, these critiques highlight how curricula, and even well-intentioned frameworks such as CSE, which often rely on “age-appropriate” logics (e.g., World Health Organization, 2023), can reproduce developmentalist assumptions. This can inadvertently reinforce exclusion at the very moment the frameworks aim to promote inclusion.

### *Arts-based pathways for exploring identity*

The arts create rich opportunities for exploring questions of identity, making them a powerful site for enacting inclusive and comprehensive sexuality education in early childhood. As Snowber (2016) writes, “The best you can bring to both words and worlds is yourself, because no one can be like you. The world needs all of you” (p. 10). In this spirit, Malaguzzi (2012) reminds us that young children possess “a hundred languages,” with each language offering a distinct mode of meaning making. Rooted in this philosophy, the Reggio Emilia approach

to early education emphasizes nurturing multiple ways of thinking, speaking, loving, and understanding. It not only encourages engagement with diverse media to construct meaning, but also empowers children to choose the medium through which they wish to express their understandings (Yanko, 2019, p. 271). Dance (Deans & Wright, 2018), drama (Roy & Ladwig, 2015; Yanko & Lee, 2023), and studio arts (Vecchi, 2010) have all been shown to support a strong sense of self by affirming diversity in gender expression and sexual orientation. In particular, the performing arts offer 2SLGBTQIA+ students a powerful creative means to navigate heteronormativity and to challenge the marginalization of queer lives that the hidden curriculum sustains (Bergonzi, 2015; Pereira-García et al., 2022; Risner, 2007; Yanko & Lee, 2023).

My own practice draws on the intersection of music, movement, and identity. Inspired by the ateliers of Reggio Emilia schools, I have transformed my elementary music classroom into a studio space for collaborative, self-directed, and nonverbal artistic inquiry (Gouzouasis & Yanko, 2018). In alignment with Morrison's (2001) emphasis on the value of diverse student contributions, the music studio offers a productive space for identity negotiation and coconstructed understanding (Yanko, 2019). While social constructivism has shaped many Reggio-Emilia-inspired contexts, my approach aligns more closely with postdevelopmental and relational perspectives that reject universal stage-based models and emphasize emergent, situated learning. In this context, learning is viewed as emergent, embodied, and coconstituted through dynamic intra- and interrelational processes involving body, mind, and the sociocultural environment (Blaise, 2009, 2013, 2014; Janmohamed, 2010; Robinson, 2013). This orientation moves beyond binary notions of nature versus nurture, encouraging a more fluid, situated, and relational understanding of identity formation, which resonates with queer, arts-based inquiries.

### *Queer theory and queer pedagogy*

Alongside the arts, queer theory, as postdevelopmental and relational framework, offers a critical lens for challenging normative assumptions and advancing a more inclusive sexuality education. Scholars such as Balter, van Rhijn, and Davies (2016), Blaise (2009), Blaise and Taylor (2012), and Janmohamed (2010) have foregrounded the importance of queer perspectives in early childhood education, shifting discourse around identity, gender, and sexuality. Blaise (2009), for example, emphasizes the role of active questioning in children's gender constructions during play, while Blaise and Taylor (2012) advocate for examining children's gender play through a queer lens to deepen understandings of orientation and lived experience. These contributions position queer theory as essential to disrupting the silences left by developmentalist framings and to affirming children's capacity for complex identity work from the earliest years. With this in mind, queer theory serves as a deconstructive tool for interrogating the heteronormative underpinnings of curriculum and pedagogical practice, promoting a reflective praxis capable of resisting exclusion and harm in early learning settings.

Building on these critical perspectives, queer pedagogy encourages educators to question the normative routines and assumptions that shape young children's understandings of gender (Drazenovich, 2015; Nemi Neto, 2018). In early childhood settings, this involves attending to the subtle ways cisheteronormativity is reproduced through language, materials, routines, and everyday interactions (Ederoclite, 2025; Leonardi & Staley, 2021). Queer pedagogy offers a way to respond by nurturing spaces where fluidity, curiosity, and multiple forms of meaning making can emerge. Studies show that teachers support this orientation by inviting children to question binary categories, engage with diverse narratives, and explore identity through relational and affective encounters that honour children's embodied ways of knowing (Leonardi & Staley, 2021; Nemi Neto, 2018). Ederoclite's (2025) work further illustrates how subtle gestures, presence, and emotional dispositions function as everyday forms of queering that reshape the affective climate of the classroom. Such research demonstrates how queer pedagogy can support imaginative, nonlinear, and coconstructed explorations of identity and relationships in early learning.

*A queer autoethnographic lens*

To guide my inquiry, I weave together queer theory and autoethnography. In contemporary autoethnographic research (e.g., Bochner & Ellis, 2016; Denzin, 2014; Ellis, 2004), particularly within early childhood and music education, scholars demonstrate how pedagogical practice and identity formation are shaped through aesthetic, embodied, and socially situated encounters (Gouzouasis & Yanko, 2018; Yanko, 2019, 2021; Yanko & Gouzouasis, 2020; Yanko & Yap, 2020). When framed through queer theory, autoethnography becomes not only a tool of self-reflection but also a mode of disruption, challenging dominant narratives and highlighting the affective, embodied, and relational complexities of pedagogical life. Both queer theory and autoethnography confront normative assumptions and embrace partiality, intersubjectivity, and situated reflexivity (Holman Jones & Adams, 2010; Spry, 2001). Their alignment is particularly valuable in inquiries that seek to unsettle heteronormative structures and affirm diverse expressions of identity.

Autoethnography, derived from *auto* (self), *ethnos* (culture), and *graphy* (writing/inquiry), positions the researcher's lived experience as a site for examining how identity, power, and culture intersect. In a queer research context, this approach situates the self within shifting sociocultural relations and unsettles the assumption of a fixed or fully coherent identity. It invites reflexive, embodied, and politically situated storytelling. Autoethnographers compose vignettes in a creative nonfiction style, drawing from observations, journal entries, artefacts, and memory. This narrative practice emphasizes emotional resonance and meaning over representational objectivity, recognizing that every account is filtered through the lens of the currently lived self.

My inquiry draws on queer autoethnography to explore teaching and learning through the arts while illuminating how structures surrounding gender and sexuality are lived, felt, and reimaged in early childhood classrooms. Queer autoethnography resists linearity and closure, offering textured re/presentations that invite readers to linger, reflect, and respond. This approach engages readers on affective and imaginative levels, encouraging encounters with stories that may provoke discomfort, resonance, recognition, or critique. Within these narrative spaces, pedagogical moments are not treated as fixed accounts but as openings for ethical and relational reflection.

With this orientation in mind, the etymological root of *auto*, meaning "self," "they," or "those" in Greek, invites a queering of subjectivity that resists singularity and embraces multiplicity. In this inquiry, *auto* becomes a site of relational possibility in which the self is always in flux, entangled with others, and open to continual reinterpretation. This linguistic ambiguity aligns with queer theoretical commitments to fluidity, partiality, and the refusal of fixed identity categories. To queer autoethnography is not merely to write from the self but through the self, as evolving and socially embedded, while also inviting readers to reflect on their own roles in the stories we tell about education. Reading oneself into the story becomes an invitation to confront complicity in dominant narratives, consider one's pedagogical stance, and imagine more expansive, justice-oriented possibilities for education.

Two contemporary autoethnographic vignettes emerge from this inquiry, drawn from my lived experiences as a music teacher. While the current inquiry builds on documentation collected during a three-year study (conducted with research ethics board approval), the vignettes presented here are not direct accounts of individual children.<sup>1</sup> Instead, they are composite, fictionalized narratives that weave together my reflections, professional observations, and pedagogical experiences from that period. In this way, the stories are grounded in empirical textures of early childhood education while remaining firmly anonymized and interpretive. The characters and scenarios are fictional, designed to evoke the essence of learning encounters rather than represent actual students. This approach ensures confidentiality while allowing the vignettes to serve as pedagogical documentation and sites of critical reflection, offering nuanced, arts-based portrayals of how identity and relationship education can unfold in early childhood contexts.

### Vignette one: The melodic contours of music

Ms. Nielson's kindergarten students have embarked on various collaborative, student-centered inquiries in their classroom. To support their cross-curricular learning, particularly with regard to identity development, I have been encouraging them to use musical instruments as a means to illuminate various aspects of their inquiries.

"Yesterday, you began adding musical instruments into your group projects. Today, you're going to return to that, but first, I'd like you to explore how to express yourselves through music by making a rhythm about you. It could be a fast rhythm if you're an ice skater, or perhaps a light rhythm if you're a dancer. This exploration should help those of you who are struggling to figure out how to come up with musical ideas for your projects."

"Can I use long du-u-u-u donut notes [whole notes]?" asks Todd. "I like donuts."

"Of course. After you create a rhythm, pick an instrument to play it on that also gives an idea of who you are. For instance, I would choose the guiro because it sounds like riding my bike, and the wooden part of the instrument reminds me of riding outside in the fresh air."

After the students explore, we gather in a circle on the carpet to share. Todd shakes a series of long whole notes using egg shakers for his ice-cream rhythm. Following him, Phil plays a pattern consisting of eighth and sixteenth notes on a bass xylophone.

I inquire, "Phil, how does that represent you?"

"That's me playing soccer. I play every day at recess with the big kids."

Christel exclaims, "I have a connection with Phil, but I'm faster." She zips through a melody on a glockenspiel.

Kevin raises his hand to go next. He simultaneously taps a row of quarter notes on a drum and shakes eighth notes on jingle bells.

I inquire, "Two instruments? You were supposed to pick one. What do they represent?"

"That's me and Tino. I'm the drum. He's the jingly-sounding thing. That's the sound of us playing on the playground. My song is about how our sounds go together and make my heart feel happy. It's like our own special song."

"Playing with Tino makes your heart feel special?" Whitton murmurs.

"When I play with Tino, it's like my heart is really happy. We're really good friends, and I care about him as much as I love my family."

Christel interjects, "Ewww. You love Tino."

I respond, "Christel, Kevin can love Tino. Love can look and feel many different ways. It's wonderful that Kevin cares about Tino like he does. Let's hear more from others, too—can you think of different ways we care about, or show love to, the people around us?"

After the students finish sharing, they break off into their inquiry groups. I approach the group working on a butterfly inquiry.

"How is your song about Sam the butterfly coming along?"

"We're still working on it. We changed our song from being about Sam flying to it growing big and strong. I play

the egg shaker first because it is quiet. It is a baby, so it needs quiet at the beginning,” Phil says, softly swaying an egg shaker.

“Are you referring to Sam as ‘it’?”

“Yeah, Sam is not a boy or girl. We call Sam ‘it,’” he responds.

“Sam is the main character in your musical story about the butterfly life cycle, and when we use the word *it*, it can sometimes make Sam seem less important. What other words might we use if Sam isn’t a boy or girl? Some people like to use the word ‘they’ when they don’t see themselves as either.”

“Like me—my real name is Phillip, but I like Phil better,” Phil adds. His comment leads the group into a conversation about nicknames and the special names people sometimes choose for one another. We connect this to how words can reflect how someone sees themselves, and together the group decides that “they” feels right for Sam.

Christel picks up the thread of the story. “I play next in the song. I rub a stick on my instrument when *it*—I mean *they*—turn into a caterpillar. Sam moves from the egg to a leaf. They grow strong.”

Mark adds, “It’s my turn now. I have to make music for the chrysalis. I want it to feel safe like my house, but I need help with what instrument to use.”

“We can help with that,” Christel says.

The children set off to search for instruments, and I make my way to the group working on a music storytelling project. I approach them and request a glimpse of what they’ve accomplished so far. They assemble their instruments, poised and ready, akin to an orchestra awaiting the conductor’s signal to embark on the narrative through music.

Todd begins, “One day there was a fire,” while Teresa simultaneously rattles the thunder tube and shakes the egg shaker.

“In the castle. Fiona was the firefighter. She came to fight the fire.” Kevin rapidly fingers a recorder to evoke a firetruck siren.

“She saw the queen and saved her from the fire.” Teresa performs a robust, rhythmic pattern on the drum to depict the rescue.

“They become good friends, and one day Fiona asks Queen Seraphina to marry her. She says yes.” Kevin plays an upbeat musical pattern with hand bells, signalling the joyous moment of the proposal.

I interrupt. “Wait a second. I thought the firefighter was named Frank, not Fiona?”

Teresa responds, “We changed it. If Kevin and Tino can be best friends and Kevin loves Tino like his family, why can’t a girl love another girl? You always say girls can be strong characters too, and that boys don’t always have to be the heroes.”

I nod. “Yes, Fiona can be a brave firefighter and marry the queen. Stories are better when everyone gets to be who they want to be.”

Todd proceeds with the narrative, “Sir Noodlehelm the knight crowns Fiona and Seraphina as queens,” while Teresa and Kevin delicately roll cymbals together, creating a shimmering sound that adds a touch of magic to the moment.

## Vignette two: Explorations through movement

In music class this week, Ms. Nielson's kindergarten students have been integrating movement concepts into their projects, adding another layer of understanding and meaning making. Today, I share a basket of colourful tulle fabric pieces as a provocation. Many students immerse themselves in the delicate, fluid motion of the fabric, twirling and swaying throughout the room.

I head to the group working on the story of the fire at the castle and observe their tale unfold through dance. After their performance, I commend them, saying, "I appreciate the use of weight and energy in your movements."

Directing their attention to a chart depicting various movement concepts, I suggest, "Can you work a bit more on movements that represent the firefighter and the queen? Think about how they might move through different heights." I demonstrate by moving high and low. "Also, think about whether their movements are straight, curved, or zigzagging."

Kevin chimes in, "I can move like this for Seraphina," draping a long piece of purple tulle and dancing tall and proud in a straight line, ending with a twirl in the air.

Expressing her desire, Teresa says, "Seraphina is a girl. I want to be her. I want to be the queen." She pauses, looking at Kevin. "But ... I thought only girls could be queens."

"That's an interesting thought," I say. "What do the rest of you think? Can only girls be queens in a story?"

The children exchange glances. "Well, maybe boys can," Justin offers.

"Or maybe anyone who wants to," adds Kevin.

"Sounds like there's more than one way to imagine it," I say, smiling. "A queen can be danced by whoever steps into that role—because people, like characters, can be many different things."

"If Kevin feels like dancing for the queen, that's okay. I can dance for Fiona the firefighter because she becomes queen anyway at the end of the story," Teresa states.

I leave the group to continue exploring their character development through movements and head over to the butterfly group. I watch with curiosity as the students, each wrapped in different coloured fabrics, gracefully float around in various directions and levels. Perplexed, I inquire, "What is going on here?"

Phil explains, "We are moving like the butterflies who like each other and make eggs."

"Why are some of you dark and some bright colours?"

Christel answers, "Butterflies come in lots of colours, just like people. Ms. Nielson always tells us that it's what's inside that counts."

"What happens next in your dance piece?"

"I wiggle under here for the egg. It's all quiet and dark 'cause the caterpillar's still hiding," Phil explains, crawling under a large piece of black tulle.

Whitton adds, "The caterpillar dance part is next. I zigzag from here to the green fabric over there—"

"When Whitton is the caterpillar, I go under the black cloth. That way we all start at different times," Christel

interrupts.

Mark wraps himself in his yellow tulle and adds, “After the caterpillar, I spin into a chrysalis. Then, I finish dancing as a butterfly. I use pink and purple scarves to fly.”

Mark gracefully flaps the scarves in hand. After, he spins on his tiptoes and performs a sauté, lifting both feet into the air with his arms stretched wide. Whitton and Christel giggle. Their laughter could be prompted by the movement, the colour of the scarves, or something else—but it catches Mark off guard. He stops dancing and looks down with embarrassment.

I notice his hesitation and gently say, “Mark, that was beautiful, expressive movement. What made you choose pink and purple?”

He shrugs. “They make me feel like I’m really flying.”

“Exactly,” I respond. “And that’s what matters—choosing what feels right to you.”

Whitton and Christel glance at each other, then look toward Mark. They acknowledge the impact of their laughter and apologize in unison.

I pause for a moment, then ask, “Do you remember the time you had a talk about boy versus girl activities with Ms. Nielson? What did you learn about ice skating?”

Whitton states, “Skating isn’t just for girls. Some of the most famous athletes are figure skaters.”

“In lots of families and cultures, dancing is something to take pride in. Christel, you take taekwondo lessons, right? Taekwondo isn’t just for boys, is it?”

“No, girls do it too!” Christel asserts.

Following our conversation, I gather everyone to explore the many ways a butterfly might move. The bell rings mid flight, and the children scatter to clean up for recess.

## **Discourse on early childhood sexuality education through the arts**

Leggo (2008) asserts, “If we do not learn to appreciate the significance of our own lived experiences, then we will always live in the frustrating illusions of fictive creations shaped in the images of popular and dominant cultures” (p. 92). Building on Leggo’s call to honour lived experience, the following discourse examines the interplay between childhood innocence and curriculum, navigating the evolving landscape of gender-expansive practices and children’s emerging identities in education. I consider how the arts, queer theory, and approaches consistent with comprehensive sexuality education intersect to support more inclusive, imaginative, and ethically responsive learning environments.

### *Childhood innocence and curriculum*

Childhood innocence, often linked to developmentalism, positions childhood as a distinct and protected stage, separate from adulthood. Research suggests that this framing reinforces the belief that young children are too immature to engage meaningfully with discussions of sexuality and gender identity (Davies et al., 2022; Robinson, 2013; Robinson & Davies, 2008). Malaguzzi (1994), cofounder of the Reggio Emilia approach, challenged this view. He argued that seeing children as fragile or incomplete reflects adult assumptions rather than children’s

realities. Instead, he called for recognition of their rights, agency, and capacities. The autoethnographic vignettes in this inquiry similarly push back against idealized notions of innocence. They present children as fluid, capable, and deeply engaged individuals who are ready and able to participate in conversations about gender, belonging, and self-expression. In doing so, they confront the adult–child binary that often defines schooling and expose what Kennedy (2020) terms *enelicomorphism*, the belief that children should be understood only in relation to who they will become (p. 119).<sup>2</sup>

British Columbia's sexuality education curriculum is guided by a developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) model that delays instruction on gender and sexual diversity until the intermediate grades (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2022). While DAP is framed as meeting learners “where they are,” scholars argue that its logic often privileges a normative image of childhood. As Ruffolo (2009) observes, this approach can reinforce heteronormative and cisnormative assumptions, effectively erasing queer children from early learning contexts. For example, a Vancouver School Board document (2018) emphasizes the need for instruction to be developmentally appropriate for most students. This precept raises questions about whose development is prioritized and whose identities are excluded in the process.

The children's responses in the vignettes above demonstrate their capacity for complex thought and relational sensitivity. This challenges the logic of delay embedded in the DAP model, which can marginalize queer topics in kindergarten. When conversations of this kind are excluded from early childhood, curriculum may inadvertently silence queer identities and reinforce dominant norms. Balter et al. (2021) note that 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals are often absent or inaccurately portrayed in curricula, reinforcing social exclusion. Avoiding such topics in the name of preserving innocence does not shield children from harm. Rather, it can heighten their vulnerability, particularly when schools fail to create open and affirming spaces for dialogue (Davies et al., 2022; Robinson, 2013). The vignettes highlight how responsive practices enabled children's vulnerabilities and expressions to emerge, including Kevin's musical connection with Tino and the group's discussion of gender-neutral pronouns for Sam the butterfly. In avoiding conversations about gender and sexual diversity, educators risk reinforcing harmful stereotypes and compromising the safety and sense of belonging of 2SLGBTQIA+ students.

One teaching strategy that illustrates this tension is the reliance on “teachable moments,” where teachers intervene only when norms are transgressed or discomfort surfaces. Although often well intentioned, this approach reflects a reactive model of education, placing emphasis on correction rather than possibility. Queer pedagogy, by contrast, calls for a proactive stance that assumes gender and sexual diversity are already present in every classroom. In the vignettes, peers giggling about Mark's dancing with pink and purple scarves prompted a pause that opened space for affirmation and collaborative dialogue. Yet the need to intervene arose because the children had not been equipped beforehand with the tools to engage with gender expression respectfully through the arts. This exchange illustrates the constraints inherent in reactive teachable moments, where opportunities for deeper engagement with gender expression emerge only in the wake of corrective intervention.

Viewed through a postdevelopmental and relational lens, this moment illustrates how learning arises from the interplay of individual agency, social interaction, and the affordances of the materials at hand. Drawing on the hundred languages philosophy in Reggio Emilia schools, which positions the arts as vital modes of thinking and meaning making that support diverse forms of identity exploration (Rinaldi, 2006), the fabrics, movement, and music at the children's fingertips could have been mobilized to extend the dialogue. Instead, the teacher addressed the moment solely through verbal communication, thereby missing an opportunity to engage the children in embodied, arts-based exploration that could have deepened the exchange. Such an approach would align with the formative principles of *living assessment* (Yanko, 2021), which uses creative practices to coconstruct understanding

and provide feedback that furthers children's learning. As Greteman (2017) and Prioletta and Davies (2024) suggest, queer-affirming pedagogy must go beyond verbal interventions to create conditions in which queerness is anticipated, welcomed, and creatively engaged.

Queer-informed arts pedagogy offers a valuable alternative. Instead of aiming to resolve tension or deliver moral lessons, it embraces ambiguity, coconstruction, and open-ended exploration. The aesthetic dimensions of music, movement, and visual expression allow children to experiment with identity in ways that are nonlinear and relational. These engagements do not require fixed interpretations. Halberstam (2011) reminds us that failure and indeterminacy can open space for new ways of becoming. This was evident in the butterfly group's improvised choreography as they crawled under fabric, zigzagged across the room, and spun into flight, allowing transformation, gender expression, and interconnection to emerge through movement. Such moments do not have to be framed as lessons or resolved into tidy conclusions. They can instead be held as provocations that invite ethical responsiveness to unfold over time. In this way, queerness is understood, not as a disruption to be managed, but as a generative orientation that invites educators to remain with uncertainty, notice what emerges, and nurture pedagogies that are layered, responsive, and as vibrant as the children themselves.

### *Gender-expansive practices and children's identities*

The current inquiry aligns with Prioletta's (2018) call for educators to confront gender stereotypes and promote gender-expansive practices. Encouraging such practices in early childhood facilitates more inclusive experiences that support children's understanding of gender, gender identity, and expression through accurate and affirming information (Timmons & Airton, 2023). The vignettes illustrate how gender-expansive approaches can prevent discrimination and foster a classroom culture rooted in acceptance while also celebrating the joy and creativity that come with expressing diverse identities.

In the second vignette, the conversation turned toward broadening the idea of who could be a queen, with the children affirming that boys, and indeed anyone, could embody this role. Through playful reinterpretation, the performance space became a site where gendered roles were reimaged, allowing artistic expression and narrative invention to challenge conventional boundaries of gender identity. In doing so, the learning community not only questioned fixed gender roles but also demonstrated how the arts can open space for children to collaboratively construct new possibilities for identity and relationships. Viewed through a postdevelopmental and relational lens, this collaborative reimagining draws simultaneously on children's prior experiences, imaginative possibilities, and the affordances of the social-material environment, illustrating how identity making unfolds through these dynamic interactions.

Identity, intricately woven into cultural and social frameworks, shapes children's learning and the norms children encounter. Actively participating in the socialization of their own understandings of relationships and belonging, children navigate, challenge, and personalize meanings within societal, cultural, and familial norms (Balter, van Rhijn, & Davies, 2016). The present study supports research by Balter et al. (2021) on comprehensive education rooted in empowerment and gender equality, prioritizing children and addressing the physical, emotional, social, and cultural dimensions of sexual development. Students' engagement with music and movement illuminates how a comprehensive sexuality education in kindergarten can actively promote values such as gender equality, dignity, respect, and freedom from discrimination and exclusion. Such learning cultivates children's self-determination and helps them develop a sense of responsibility toward themselves and others. For queer students, these experiences can support belonging and deepen understanding of diverse identities and relationships, offering the confidence and resilience to express who they are.

In the exploration of the intersection of identity and relationships through the arts, the vignettes illuminate a dynamic landscape. This process involved the unfolding of socio-dramatic play as the children mirrored societal elements, embodied roles, adhered to rules, and regulated interactions among themselves. This experience aligns with Balter, van Rhijn, and Davies' (2016) research on socio-dramatic play in classroom settings, where children assign roles and engage in both traditional and nontraditional activities. These activities can include exploring family dynamics and expressing affection through pretend scenarios—for example, when Teresa chose to play a firefighter who partners with a queen, or when Kevin and Tino's connection was expressed as a musical duet—an expression of care and belonging that held deep meaning for Kevin.

These examples show how children use play to make sense of emotions, relationships, and the social meanings of roles, suggesting that identity and belonging emerge in both imaginative and social ways. For young children, this is not about intercourse but about the early understandings they form of emotional connection, care, and belonging. Socio-dramatic play about families, love, and relationships is a familiar and widely recognized feature of early childhood classrooms. Children often pretend to be parents, partners, or caregivers as a way of exploring social roles, and such play is understood as a natural part of learning. When these scenarios include diverse identities, they function similarly to all socio-dramatic play: as expressions of relational learning, imagination, and social exploration.

#### *The arts, sexuality education, and queer theory*

Fostering arts-based learning experiences can support students to develop a nuanced aesthetic understanding of gender, identity, and relationships. This initiative aligns with Eisner's (2002) assertion that "education is the process of learning to create ourselves, and it is what the arts promote" (p. 3), emphasizing the transformative role of the arts in the intricate process of self-creation. The current study advocates for self-expression and exploration through the arts; in it, movement and music emerged as pivotal artistic languages. Movement was recognized as a dynamic form of expression, and the body transcended its physicality, becoming a tool for artistic interpretation and relationship building. In the second vignette, bodily movements served as powerful conduits for expressing emotions, thoughts, and responses related to gender, identity, and relationships. Promoting storytelling through movement created opportunities for children to express gender diversity in nonverbal, embodied ways. The act of dancing with tulle became a pedagogical medium facilitating communication, cultivating creativity, and encouraging cooperation and classroom cohesion. This experience echoes Keenan and Hot Mess's (2020) research, which explores how drag storytime offers children a path of self-determination, freedom, and dialogic engagement. Through these aesthetic practices, children explore gender, not as a fixed identity, but as a relational performance.

Music, as a deeply personal and culturally situated form of expression, played a central role in the inquiry. Collaborative music making became a space for identity exploration, relational expression, and imaginative meaning making. For example, Teresa's and Kevin's musical storytelling challenged traditional gender roles and celebrated relational agency through sound. This moment illustrates the power of creativity to transcend binary thinking and offer rich, emotionally resonant understandings of self and other. Similarly, in the butterfly group's performance, Sam was represented as nonbinary. The abstract nature of their musical choices allowed complex ideas about gender identity to emerge without being labelled or explained. These examples demonstrate that the arts can serve as vital pathways for expressing lived experiences, including those related to gender, identity, and relational belonging.

The use of creative materials and the encouragement of peer interactions vividly illustrate how the arts function as a dynamic conduit for negotiating identities. Throughout the unfolding of the learning experiences, students not only expressed their individuality but also participated in collaborative problem solving. These artistic encounters

became spaces where ideas about gender and diverse identities could be safely explored, challenged, and reimaged through dialogue and shared creation, allowing children to witness, respect, and expand one another's perspectives. This established a dynamic environment that nurtured negotiation and mutual understanding of differences (Yanko, 2019). Valuing the many ways children express their creativity lays the foundation for shared ideas, deeper understanding, and participation through the arts that supports democracy (Rinaldi, 2006, pp. 138–139).

Queer theory, with its commitment to unsettling normative structures, provided a critical lens for this study. It served as both a critique of curricular exclusion and a framework for imagining more inclusive and creative pedagogical possibilities. Drawing on queer theory invites a view of early learning as a space where difference is not merely accepted but recognized as central to how learning takes shape. The vignettes show how queer theory can augment arts-based sexuality education, giving students opportunities to express identities and relationships through sound, movement, and storytelling in ways that disrupt normative expectations. Rather than framing queerness as a problem to be solved, these practices position it as a generative force for relationship building, creativity, and critical reflection.

Queer pedagogies aim to disrupt fixed social norms and invite new ways of knowing and being. They seek out moments of flux, ambiguity, and experimentation, not to resolve them but to dwell within their potential. In this inquiry, the music teacher embraced queer pedagogy by encouraging an atmosphere of acceptance, understanding, and authenticity. He supported students in fully expressing themselves, creating a classroom culture that challenged rigid norms and nurtured inclusion. These efforts show how the arts can be embraced, not only to affirm identity, but also to coconstruct learning experiences that are dynamic, relational, and transformative. They remind us that the arts' capacity to promote belonging and spark new possibilities often lies in moments of recognition, when we see ourselves or others reflected in ways that affirm our place in the world.

### Final reflections and inclusive strategies

*It's probably conceited to say,  
But I think we're alike in a certain way  
I ... um ...  
Your swagger and your bearing  
and the just right clothes you're wearing  
Your short hair and your dungarees  
And your lace up boots.  
And your keys  
Oh, your ring of keys ...*

The lyrics above are from the acclaimed song “Ring of Keys” in the Tony Award winning musical *Fun Home* (Kron, Tesori, & Bechdel, 2015).<sup>3</sup> The song—featuring a distinctive look and a ring of keys symbolizing lesbian identity—depicts a moment in time for a character during the 1970s when she encounters a butch woman for the first time. In the character's young eyes, this image of a queer person becomes a magical statement of strength and confidence that profoundly impacts her as a child beginning to recognize her emerging sense of self and identity. This song highlights the arts' impact on identity formation and exploration, aligning with the present inquiry's emphasis on the need for a secure space for queer children to explore and affirm their identities. In this inquiry, these instances are echoed in classroom vignettes that invite children to see themselves, and others, reflected in affirming and expansive ways. While sexuality education is often equated with teaching about sexual activity, this inquiry shows how, in early childhood, it can instead focus on the arts and play as pathways for children to explore relationships,

emotions, and belonging. By illuminating this potential, the vignettes present five strategies for advancing inclusive and equitable learning environments.

- (1) Challenge stereotypes and infuse gender-expansive practices into teaching practices to actively promote equality, dignity, and respect. Deliberate pedagogical choices and materials can shape the representation of gender diversity, empowering students to explore and express their identities with confidence and resilience.
- (2) Model inclusive titles, extending beyond binaries and introducing terms that respect and celebrate diverse identities. Educators play a crucial role in fostering a transformative environment that honours individual preferences.
- (3) Emphasize inclusive language and challenge stigmas surrounding terms, providing opportunities for students to comprehend and engage with these concepts through suitable pedagogies and materials.
- (4) Center the arts as a means of cultivating artistic exploration and expressions of identity and belonging.
- (5) Employ queer theory and pedagogy to facilitate nuanced conversations and explorations on diversity and inclusion. In doing so, students can be empowered to explore and articulate their authentic selves, significantly contributing to the establishment of a classroom environment that not only values diversity but also challenges societal norms and expectations.

The current inquiry affirms that the arts can create joyful, inclusive pathways for exploring and expressing gender, identity, and belonging in early learning. It offers the above strategies as guideposts for educators seeking to nurture inclusive practices. While this study has centered movement and music, it invites future explorations into how other art forms might also create spaces for listening, questioning, and reimagining diversity across varied learning contexts. As Greene (2007) reminds us, “We know that the arts cannot change the world, but ... those who can engage reflectively and authentically with the arts may be awakened in startling ways to the scars and flaws in our society and may be awakened to transform” (p. 1). Such awakenings often emerge in the small, everyday acts of making, moving, listening, and imagining together, inviting both children and educators to see the world otherwise. In these shared acts of creation, difference is not simply acknowledged but interwoven into the fabric of learning, leaving traces that reshape how we imagine ourselves and one another.

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- 1 This inquiry draws on documentation from a three-year study that received approval from the University of British Columbia Behavioural Research Ethics Board. The vignettes presented here are fictionalized autoethnographic narratives created from my professional experiences during that period.
  - 2 Enelicomorphism refers to the inclination to perceive children's behaviour through the lens of adulthood, particularly by reconstructing developmental stages. The term adultomorphism is more commonly known, but it is a hybrid word combining Latin and Greek roots. From an etymological perspective, I prefer enelicomorphism, as it predates the hybrid word and was coined using the Greek word ἐνήλικος, meaning adult or mature (Wilkening et al., 1973, p. 66).
  - 3 An excerpt from Fun Home featuring the song "Ring of Keys" can be viewed on YouTube: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pMAuesRJm1E&ab\\_channel=TonyAwards](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pMAuesRJm1E&ab_channel=TonyAwards)

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