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Résumé de l'article

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"Because Boys Don't Do Ballet": Boys, Femmephobia, and the Potentials of a Femininity-Affirmative Pedagogy in Kindergarten

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In this article, the authors draw on feminist theorizations to examine ethnographic data, illustrating how femmephobia is enacted among boys in kindergarten. They also examine how teachers' well-intended responses may inadvertently legitimize femmephobia when a femininity-affirmative orientation is not applied. The authors argue that intentional gender-affirming actions by education stakeholders are necessary for promoting and supporting fluid gender explorations in kindergarten, especially in terms of valuing and validating femininity among boys. Specifically, they consider the potentials of femininity-affirmative pedagogy as one approach to countering femmephobia and working towards gender inclusion and equality in early education.

Key words: *childhood, early education, feminist theory, gender-affirming, gender policing*

It is not uncommon for early education environments to feature the devaluation of femininity, as well as activities, interests, and self-expressions that are feminized or deemed feminine (Prioletta & Davies, 2022). Despite conversations regarding the gendered dynamics in early education environments that devalue care work and deeply ingrained societal sexism and misogyny that denigrate "women's work" and professions that feature workforces who are predominately women, there is still little analysis in early education regarding the regulation and devaluation of femininity, or femmephobia (Davies & Hoskin, 2021, 2023). Femmephobia, or the societal devaluation, regulation, and denigration of femininity (Hoskin, 2017; Serano, 2007), is a structure that seeks to diminish femininity, or activities, interests, and forms of self-expression that are feminized, while also regulating *who* can express femininity (i.e., fixing femininity to those who are read as female). In this sense, femininity becomes a target (Hoskin, 2017) whereby individuals who are feminized or who are constructed as feminine become highly policed, are bullied, and experience discrimination at individual and societal levels.

While research and theorizing in the field of early education has attempted to challenge the sexism and misogyny that construct care work as less-than and inferior to assessment and standardized instruction, there is still much work to be done to address the gendered dynamics within early education and pedagogy that still devalue femininity and that naturalize and fix feminine expressions to girls and women (Davies & Hoskin, 2021, 2023). In particular, for young boys, experiences of bullying, interpersonal violence, and epistemic violence can illustrate the danger

for many in being feminized or expressing femininity (Kuhl & Martino, 2018). Such gender policing reinforces the "targeting [of] gender performances that do not conform to binary gender norms" (Payne & Smith, 2016, p. 129) and the gendered hierarchies that specifically encourage young boys to hide, be ashamed of, and thus regulate their expressions of femininity or interests in activities that might be coded as feminine (Payne & Smith, 2016). Given these realities, this article takes interest in how young boys navigate structures of femmephobia in kindergarten classrooms that regulate, police, and often surveil their gendered subjectivities, interests, and interactions with peers.

Drawing on ethnographic data collected in two Ontario kindergarten classrooms, in this article we examine how femmephobia circulates within and across boy friend groups at school and dictates (un)acceptable ways of being a boy. Here, we use the phrase *boy friend group* to describe groups of young boys who are friends and who play together. While various patterns of femmephobia among boys occur on a daily basis, we focus our discussion on two prominent ways that boys delineated and policed acceptable expressions of being a boy within the kindergarten settings in this study: (1) boys denigrating femininity within their friend groups; (2) boys publicly humiliating boys who show interest in femininity. We also examine how teacher responses, while well intended, may reinforce traditional binary structures when a femininity-affirmative orientation is not applied. We end this article with a discussion on the potentials and limitations of a femininity-affirmative pedagogy for fostering a context in which all gender expressions and identities are valued and included in the kindergarten classroom.

Theoretical framework

In this article, we bring together feminist poststructuralism (B. Davies, 1989, 2014), critical femininity studies (Dahl, 2012; Hoskin & Blair, 2022; McCann, 2018), and femme theory (Hoskin, 2017, 2020, 2021; Scott, 2021) to examine the devaluation of femininity and its regulation in young boys in kindergarten. We draw on feminist poststructuralism to challenge the dominant notion that gender is a static, natural, and universal binary between the categories of man/boy and woman/girl to examine instead how gender is socially constructed and to illuminate the multiple gender identities and subjectivities that exist. Feminist poststructuralism is also applied to draw attention to the ways that dominant gender discourses produce and maintain inequalities within and between masculinities and femininities (Connell, 1995; B. Davies, 1989). We draw on critical femininity studies for its commitments to centering the examination of femininity and to do so to revalue femininity and to underscore the multiplicities of feminine identities (Hoskin & Blair, 2022; McCann, 2018). Within critical femininity studies, we turn to femme theory for its emphasis on femmephobia and thus for its analysis of the ways in which femininity is devalued in the first place and regulated across bodies and identities (Hoskin, 2017, 2019, 2020).

Feminist poststructuralism maintains that gender is fluid and that multiple gendered subjectivities and gendered social positionings exist within and across social sites. When applied to the study of childhood, feminist poststructuralist analysis has been critical of child development theories for legitimizing biological determinist and passive sex-role socialization frameworks in understandings of gender and childhood (Blaise, 2005). Feminist poststructuralism holds that these frameworks maintain young children as passive in their gender constructions and as inherently cisgendered and heterosexual, failing to recognize how young children are constantly navigating, negotiating, and taking up multiple, contradictory, and shifting gendered subjectivities across and within social sites such as schools, homes, and neighbourhoods, among others (Blaise, 2005; Cannella, 1997; B. Davies, 1989; Greishaber, 1998; MacNaughton, 2000; Osgood & Robinson, 2017; Robinson & Jones-Díaz, 2016; Thorne, 1993; Walkerdine, 1990). Feminist poststructuralist theorizations have been important in deconstructing the image of the innocent child upheld by developmentalist frameworks that has dominated Western understandings of children and childhood (Bhana, 2003; Cannella, 1997; Robinson, 2013). These discourses position children as too

young to know and understand gender and gender relations (Blaise, 2005; MacNaughton, 2000; Robinson, 2013) and encourage the pathologization of gender diversities among children, positioning gender-diverse children as disruptive to the "purity" and "innocence" of children (Balter et al., 2021; Davies & Kenneally, 2020; Robinson, 2013; Robinson & Davies, 2008).

Critical femininity studies builds on these poststructural theorizations, examining femininities as they intersect with embodiment and specifically as separated from "women" (Dahl, 2012; Hoskin & Blair, 2022; McCann, 2018). The field draws on feminist, queer, and intersectional theories in attempts to challenge notions of femininity as exclusively disempowering or as a patriarchal tool to oppress women/girls towards queer possibilities of femininity (McCann, 2018). Critical femininity studies seeks to dislodge femininity from its associations with white cisgender heterosexual able-bodied womanhood and analyze femininity through various positionalities and frames (Hoskin & Blair, 2022). The study of femininity has an ongoing historical and theoretical legacy yet receives less attention within gender studies and feminist literature and writing in comparison with studies of masculinities or critical masculinity studies (Hoskin & Blair, 2022). Critical femininity studies also seeks to analyze and understand femininity within and outside of identity—that is, to comprehend how femininity and affects and feelings deemed feminine are highly regulated (McCann, 2018). In this sense, while femininity can be considered an element of the human experience, critical femininity studies research and writing has taken to examining its more-than-human elements as well (McCann, 2018). Femininity can thus be considered a relational and affective experience that is not just associated with the human psyche (McCann, 2018).

Connected with critical femininity studies, and in conversation with femme lesbian activism (Brightwell & Taylor, 2019; Hoskin, 2021; Schwartz, 2018), femme theory is particularly invested in addressing systems of femmephobic gender policing and the regulation and devaluation of femininity across bodies and identities (Hoskin, 2017). Femmephobia can be thought of as a gendered system of regulation that explicitly devalues and denigrates femininity, feminine people, and feminine expressions (Hoskin, 2017). Femmephobia is connected to experiences of feminization that equate being feminized with devaluation and oppression (Davies, 2020, 2023). Instead of conceptualizing feminization as a process of devaluation, femme theory seeks to resist femmephobia by valuing femininity and honouring feminine expressions, including care and relationality, across bodies and identities (Davies, 2020, 2023; Davies & Hoskin, 2021, 2023; Davies & Neustifter, 2022). Femme theory affirms femininity and feminine expressions for all people and thus challenges dominant notions that boys and men must perform hegemonic masculinity or else they are gender failures (Davies & Hoskin, 2021). Femme theory therefore carves out space for femininity as a life-affirmative component of selfhood and subjectivity (Hoskin, 2021).

In this article, we draw on these theoretical frameworks to illuminate children's deep awareness of dominant gender discourses and their constructions of the acceptable, or not, gendered subjectivities in kindergarten. In doing so, we examine how contemporary kindergarten education can be a site for the regulation of feminine identities and expressions in ways that limit children's gender explorations to reflect patriarchal gender regimes. We also draw on these frameworks to examine the possibilities for kindergarten to be a site in which the early normalization of femmephobia is countered through a femininity-affirmative pedagogy that is invested in valuing femininity and nurturing its queer possibilities. Next, we turn to literature on gender policing and regulation in early years education and the potentials of a femininity-affirmative pedagogy.

Literature review

Gender policing in early education

It is well documented in the extant literature that severe gender policing occurs among children at school (e.g.,

Martino, 2000; Mayeza, 2018). Developmental logic and assumptions, however, make invisible how children wield gender power (or not) and how they are actively involved in setting gender boundaries and perpetuating gender inequalities. The ages and stages logic in particular assumes children to be human "becomings" rather than human "beings" in their own right (Bhana, 2003; Lee, 2001; Prout, 2005) and thus legitimizes the positioning of young children as incomplete versions of adults who are not yet able to make sense of the world around them (Bhana, 2003, p. 43). Thorne's (1993) seminal work, however, shows the ways in which children are constantly policing gender boundaries at school. Because school is a public space, children are particularly invested in working hard at "getting it right" (MacNaughton, 2006, p. 131) when it comes to "correct" gender expressions. As newer members of a society, children are invested in being seen as competent about their social and cultural contexts (West & Zimmerman, 1987). In earlier work, Bronwyn Davies (1989) introduced the concept of "category-maintenance work" to illustrate how children in preschool actively maintain binary boy/girl categories through their daily interactions. As they learn particular discursive practices around gender, children draw on them to re-create gender. Francis (1998) builds on this concept, showing how children may take up strict gendered positions by exhibiting visual signs of stereotypical masculinity or femininity through clothing, activities, and behaviour, among other things, and by "coercing their peers to do the same, in an attempt to create a firmer gender identity" (p. 10). Thorne's (1993) concept of borderwork also illuminates children's efforts to "correctly" position themselves as girl or boy. Thorne shows how children's borderwork strengthens the gender dichotomy as girls and boys deliberately exhibit opposite ways of being in their interactions with one another to clearly delineate gender lines. This research has been important in underscoring how children actively and collectively produce gender and may do so in ways that maintain gender as a hierarchical binary construct.

Despite children's efforts to correctly position themselves as a boy or a girl, Lyttleton-Smith and Robinson (2019) explain that "girls have more freedom to experiment with gender fluidity and the taking up of masculinity … than boys' engagement with femininity" (p. 70). Young boys are regularly sanctioned for subverting hegemonic masculinity and for showing interest in feminine-coded characteristics, activities, materials, roles, and more (Prioletta & Davies, 2022). For instance, Mayeza (2018) found that boys who crossed gender boundaries and engaged in "feminine" activities such as playing with "girl" toys like dolls faced derogatory labelling at school (see also Bhana & Mayeza, 2016). Hegemonic masculinity centers around masculine ideals of strength, action, toughness, authority, domination, and violence, among other related characteristics (Bhana & Mayeza, 2016; Connell, 1995). Because socially acceptable gender performances within Western societies are underpinned by patriarchal values and ideals, such hegemonic masculine gender expressions are often deemed as the appropriate, if not the only, form of masculinity (Bhana & Mayeza, 2016; Connell, 1995).

These hegemonic ideals of masculinity, however, are also informed by complex intersections of race, culture, and class, among other things, that shape how masculinities are constructed and played out in schools. For instance, the hegemonic standard of masculinity to which all boys must adhere particularly privileges white boys. As Bryan (2020) argues, white men/boys are given unearned rewards for exhibiting hegemonic masculinity that Black men/boys do not benefit from in the same ways. In schools, this has meant that Black boys are often positioned as "dangerous, inhumane, and monstrous on the playground" (p. 8) when exhibiting similar forms of hegemonic masculinity as white boys. Mayeza and Bhana (2017) also point to the effects of economic and material conditions on Black boys' engagements with masculinity at school. They show how food insecurity within the region of their study fuelled the uptake of violence by the hegemonic "big boys" as they coerced others, such as smaller boys, to give them their snacks.

The reinforcement of hegemonic forms of (hetero)masculinity as ideal and violence against those who attempt to subvert it can have long-term impacts on young boys' sense of self (Mittleman, 2023). Historically (and currently),

femininity in boys and men has been pathologized through psychiatric discourses that deem feminine boys and men as potentially mentally ill and therefore in need of medical and psychological/psychiatric intervention (Kuhl & Martino, 2018). Such discourses are the result of moral panics regarding femininity in men and particular fears of effeminacy and the collapse of traditional gendered norms and (hetero)masculine superiority (Serano, 2007). Ultimately, this devaluation of femininity in men/boys can be conceptualized through gendered hierarchies that devalue femininity in men/boys and seek to only conceptualize gender in men/boys through masculinity, even, as Hoskin (2017) describes, considered through the term *effeminacy*, which is associated with a failed masculinity and avoids using the term *femininity*. Within modern cultural imaginaries, femininity, when associated with men and boys, is often only equated with devaluation and emasculinization (Davies, 2020, 2021; Hoskin, 2017).

Femininity-affirmative pedagogy

While education contexts can be spaces of intense gender policing and violence, scholars have examined pedagogies that aim to challenge hegemonic structures and transform societies through education. Critical pedagogy is one such approach, seeking to illuminate how education systems are embedded within systems of domination but also envisioning the potentials of education for emancipation (Freire, 1968). While critical pedagogy was largely developed to examine and redress the reproduction of class inequalities through education systems (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Freire, 1968), scholars have extended the analysis to account for the marginalization of girls and women, gender-diverse learners, people of colour, and more (hooks, 2014; Troutman & Jiménez, 2016). A central aim of critical pedagogy in K–12 contexts is for students themselves to become actively involved in their learning and to ultimately develop critical consciousness where they are empowered to examine and reimagine the social structures that hold them in subordinate positions as nonadults, but also the classed, raced, gendered—among other—inequalities that are upheld between them (Kumashiro, 2000).

While an important contribution to social-justice-oriented education, critical pedagogy has been critiqued for centering an "active learner" that assumes a masculinized characterization of the learner (Sheldon, 2017, as cited and described in Davies & Hoskin, 2021). For example, Ellsworth's (1989) writing illustrates how critical pedagogy is embedded within rationalist "myths" that imagine students and teachers as subjects who can pick up rational argumentation under liberal humanist assumptions of personhood, which are gendered as male and masculine. Ellsworth theorizes how critical pedagogy, in its emphasis on rational dialogue, deliberation, and the mediated expression of various perspectives before consciousness raising, can reinforce the assumption of a universal masculinized subject who is able to retain reason during deliberation and classroom discussions. These gendered and masculinized assumptions behind critical pedagogy are important to critique in order to move towards more relational and partial perspectives within classroom pedagogies (Ellsworth, 1989). Femme pedagogy seeks instead to counter the hypervaluation of masculine values and ideals in education and encourages care, compassion, relationality, and community as qualities that may bring about social change (Bimm & Feldman, 2020).

Femininity-affirmative pedagogy relates to femme pedagogy by interrupting femmephobia while also unbinding femininity from strictly belonging to certain bodies, namely cisgender heterosexual girls and women (Davies & Hoskin, 2021; see also Martino & Cumming-Potvin, 2019). This makes space for all people, especially boys and men, to identify with femininity or to take up feminine expressions in safer spaces. A femininity-affirmative pedagogy is thus intentional in challenging the hypervaluation of hegemonic and heteromasculine norms in education and that are enforced even within early education contexts, such as masculinity as inherently boisterous, aggressive, and physically strong (Davies & Hoskin, 2021, 2023). Connected to feminist care ethics and pedagogies (Langford, 2019), femininity-affirmative pedagogies underscore caring relations and nurturing spaces where children can authentically explore their interests in ways that are affirming and not necessarily tied to (hetero)

normative gender ideals. Such pedagogies emphasize intentionally cultivating gender-expansive and inclusive spaces alongside children, with particular attention paid to the valuing of femininity within these spaces (Davies & Hoskin, 2021, 2023).

Methods and analysis

This article draws on data collected for the first author's doctoral study, for which she implemented a year-long institutional ethnography (Smith, 1987, 2006) in two Canadian kindergarten classrooms (Prioletta, 2020). Given the recent shift to full-day play-based learning for kindergarteners in Ontario at that time and the extant literature on gender inequalities in children's play, Prioletta sought to examine the potentially hidden gendered effects of the new program. She visited each classroom several days a week for three and a half months. The classrooms were located in different areas of the same city and thus belonged to different schools and school districts. The first school was in a predominantly upper-class area of the city. The classroom she visited had 22 students, 11 of whom identified as girls and 11 as boys. Most of the students were five years old at the time of her visits. The second school was located in a more diverse area of the city where students from varying cultures, racial identities, linguistic backgrounds, and socioeconomic statuses were present in the classroom. This classroom had 29 students, with girls outnumbering boys by one. During her fieldwork, most of the students were four and five years old. The educators and preservice educators across both classrooms identified as women with the exception of one preservice educator who identified as a man.

Drawing on Dorothy Smith's (1987, 2006) ethnographic approach, Prioletta (2020) implemented several qualitative methods to collect data, including participant observation, interviews, and examining education documents. This article focuses on data collected through participant observation. Prioletta recorded her observations through thick verbatim description in field notes and through video and audio recordings. Prior to commencing her fieldwork, she obtained ethics approval from the university and approval to conduct research from both schools. Informed consent was also obtained from the educators and the students' parents, as well as assent from the students prior to data recording. The participant names used in this article are pseudonyms.

Data analysis for this study involved explicating participants' daily lives in kindergarten and how institutional forces coordinated their lived realities (Deveau, 2009; Smith, 1987). This process entailed tracing the daily social and material organization of the kindergarten spaces, the practices carried out by participants, and the interactions among participants. Prioletta's (2020) analysis showed that play was a key site in which hierarchal gender divisions were produced and normalized. While play was a prevalent breeding ground for the reproduction of patriarchal gender regimes, these regimes were present and mobilized across other kindergarten sites, including during morning meetings, story time, mealtimes, outside on the playground, in the hallways, and during other periods such as gym class. In what follows, we trace specifically how femmephobia underpinned boys' interactions and gender policing in kindergarten across multiple sites. We show how femmephobia was mobilized through the belittlement of feminine-coded characteristics, objects, and activities among boys within their friend groups and through the public humiliation by boys of boys who showed interest in "feminine" activities. We also examine how a teacher's response to the latter, while well intended, functioned to maintain traditional gender divisions and hierarchies.

Results

In this section, we examine two ways that femmephobia was enacted among boys in this study. First, we show how boys regularly belittled femininity by mocking feminine-coded characteristics, objects, and activities within

their boy friend groups. These interactions established what was deemed (un)acceptable gender expressions for boys within these groups and settings. Second, we illustrate how boys who crossed these gender boundaries were sanctioned by other boys, including those in their friend group, through public humiliation. Public humiliation of boys showing interest in feminine-coded things occurred in the presence of people outside of the friend group and functioned to police the boundaries of what were (un)acceptable gender expressions for all boys in these settings, as well as publicly disparaged femininity and girls as a group. Both these practices functioned to construct gender as dichotomous and hierarchical, with feminine gender expressions as necessarily tied to female bodies and subordinate.

Demarcating the borders: The denigration of femininity within boy friend groups

The denigration of femininity occurred regularly within boy friend groups, and one prominent way it happened was through boys' mockery of feminine-coded characteristics, objects, and activities. In these moments, boys privately ridiculed things coded as feminine. Femininity was something to laugh about and ultimately denigrate. Through these interactions femininity was devalued and constructed as inferior. Importantly, these interactions created gender boundaries, demarcating to the boys involved which gender expressions were acceptable at school and which were not, and specifically that feminine-coded characteristics, objects, and activities were for girls only and thus not acceptable for boys to engage with or take up in serious ways and thus in which to show genuine interest.

The account below occurred during a snack period and involved a boy's unintentional encounter with a pink cup. Classroom artifacts that were pink were often strictly avoided by many boys whenever possible. John, however, was late to join the snack table and had to use the pink cup because it was the last cup left. As demonstrated in the interaction below, the use of a seemingly neutral object, the cup, and the mundane practice of using a cup of water during the snack period functioned to reproduce gender as a binary, denigrate femininity, and delineate acceptable gender expressions for boys.

> It's snack period. John fills up a cup of water at the sink. As he returns to the table, he holds up the glass and says to Anthony, "I got a pink cup!" He laughs. Anthony goes over to John. They laugh together. (Prioletta, 2020, p. 73)

John and Anthony were good friends and part of the same friendship group. In this classroom, they were among the "hegemonic boys" (Paechter, 2018) and held status among other boys and the girls. In this scenario, John was amused by the situation he was in with the pink cup. He quickly brought Anthony's attention to it by stating to his friend, "I got a pink cup." Anthony, who interrupted his snack period, went to John and they laughed about the pink cup. John's statement indicated to Anthony that it was not by choice that he was using a feminine-coded object, and through laughter showed his awareness that pink things are not for boys. This seemingly playful interaction functioned to construct femininity as categorically distinct from masculinity and to position femininity as inferior by subordinating femininity through comedy (Hoskin, 2017). It also produced the notion that things associated with femininity were not for boys to take up. Interestingly, with only a few cups in each colour available, girls were regularly left with "masculine"-coloured cups to use during snack, yet no attention was brought to these encounters, let alone ridicule. This suggests that while it was considered acceptable for girls to use masculine-coded colours, it was not acceptable, and was altogether amusing, for boys to use feminine-coded colours. Such femmephobic gender regulation and policing in kindergarten limits feminine gender expressions to female-presenting bodies and denigrates everyone who takes up feminine gender expressions. It functions to "other" femininity as it positions masculine gender expressions as "neutral" and acceptable for everyone to undertake.

The denigration of femininity also occurred through more intentional encounters between boys and femininity. In these instances, boys actively sought out something deemed feminine or mockingly exhibited "feminine" behaviours with the intent to ridicule and degrade femininity. The account below was observed during an outdoor play period. The boys in this class were often curious about hair length and had raised questions within their peer groups around acceptable hair lengths for boys and girls. The scenario below involved a boy's intentional encounter with a rake, which he transformed into a hairbrush to mock femininity.

> John and Anthony are on tricycles talking by the fence. Jack is also on a tricycle and rides towards the boys with a rake in one hand. He yells out, "Hey girls! Hey girls! Can I brush your haiirr?" (Jack uses a taunting tone and "feminine" actions as he waves the rake around at John and Anthony.) All three boys laugh. They then exchange a few words and scatter away on their tricycles. (Fieldnotes)

Jack belonged to the same high-status friendship group as John and Anthony. In the account above, Jack transformed the rake into a hairbrush to "jokingly" remind his friends, John and Anthony, that passively hanging around and chatting is something that girls (supposedly) do; actively riding around the playground on tricycles is something that boys (supposedly) do. This interaction also maintained the notion that a care routine, like brushing one's hair, is a feminine activity and thus further demarcated the gender boundaries in this setting, specifically that such care routines are for girls only. Importantly, since chatting and "feminine" care routines were something to laugh about, the interaction also functioned to construct femininity as frivolous and ultimately inferior. Such femmephobic actions and interactions are often subtle and seemingly trivial, but are powerful in upholding patriarchal gender regimes, in setting strict boundaries around (un)acceptable gender expressions, and in contributing to the overall devaluation of femininity.

Sanctioning the border crosser: The public humiliation of boys by other boys

In this section, we illustrate what the consequences were for boys who crossed the gender boundaries set through interactions like the ones outlined above and who showed genuine interest in feminine-coded things. Boys who broke the "boy code" (Pollack, 1998) and crossed gender boundaries were severely policed by their boy peers and faced the ultimate sanction, public humiliation, even by their own friends. We also examine the teacher's response to such moments to consider how well-intended interventions by educators who strive for gender inclusion and equality may sometimes function to maintain the gender order as dichotomous and hierarchical.

Alvin and Mark were best friends in this classroom. Though they did not belong to the high-status boy group, they had status in the class as boys and played with the high-status boys. In the account below, Alvin publicly humiliated Mark in front of the whole class during a morning meeting period for confessing to him in private that he likes ballet. In this classroom, ballet was an activity that many of the girls took part in after school and talked about at school with their girl friends. In this scenario the teacher was present and paused the morning meeting to directly address the incident.

> It's morning meeting in Linda's classroom. The educators and students are sitting on the carpet. Linda starts the meeting. Alvin suddenly interrupts and states to the whole group that Mark likes ballet. He laughs with his hands over his mouth. Some other boys laugh too. Linda tells Alvin that what he is saying, and especially the way he is saying it, is rude. She asks, "Why are you saying it that way?" Alvin responds, "Because boys don't do ballet." Linda explains that it's not nice to those students, girls and boys, who love ballet. She then provides examples of men who do ballet such as *The Nutcracker*. She also explains that ballet is a great activity for building muscle strength and balance. Alvin is still finding this funny and asks whether the boys who do ballet have to wear tutus. He laughs. Other boys laugh too. Nicholas has a disgusted look on his face and is blocking his ears. [...] Priya and Melanie

> raise their hands and give examples of characters in *The Nutcracker* who are boys. Melanie points out that the nutcracker himself is a boy. The group is silent. Linda proceeds with their morning meeting. (Prioletta, 2020, p. 72)

Public humiliation or shaming is a severe form of gender policing, especially since children are often concerned with "being seen as socially competent" when it comes to gender (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p. 141) and particularly in public settings (Thorne, 1993). Alvin's public shaming of his friend Mark functioned to sanction Mark for showing an interest outside the gender norm established by the boys in this class and pathologized boys who transgressed these norms and expectations. Given that Alvin and Mark were best friends, this moment is telling of the importance children ascribe to "correct" gender expressions and specifically to the regulation of femininity. Perhaps Alvin felt betrayed by Mark, whose interest in ballet undermined the stability of the gender order that maintains Alvin and the other boys in positions of power in this classroom. Mark's interest in ballet thus threatened the superior status that boys as a group held in this setting. Alvin also possibly wanted to make clear to his peers that he understands what it means to be a boy despite the fact that his best friend is a "gender failure" (Davies & Hoskin, 2021), especially since both boys did not belong to the high-status group of boys in this classroom. In both cases, Alvin's reaction to Mark's interest in ballet functioned to position femininity as "other" because he and other boys viewed this activity, which was associated with femininity, as comical and rejected the idea that anyone other than girls may enjoy the activity. Girls, however, regularly engaged in and expressed interest in masculine-coded activities such as building with blocks, yet little, if any, attention was brought to these occurrences. Instead, girls often publicly sought access to masculine-coded activities, and educators regularly encouraged girls to engage with masculine-coded activities. Evidenced again is the assumption that masculinity is acceptable for all to undertake, and thus "neutral," while femininity is something to laugh about, and thus "other."

Unlike the accounts observed in the first section, an educator was present during this interaction. The classroom teacher rightfully intervened and attempted to counter Alvin's shaming of Mark's interest in ballet. However, her intervention, while well intended, ascribed value to ballet by highlighting its associations to masculine-coded characteristics such as requiring lots of strength. The teacher was attempting to counter dominant views of feminine-coded sports and activities as easy and less valuable than masculine-coded ones by bringing attention to the physical demands of ballet. Representations of femininity as strong are certainly important and needed. However, the intervention did not necessarily redress the devaluation of femininity since ballet was ascribed value by holding it up to masculine-coded standards, such as strength. In doing so, the other valuable aspects of ballet, such as its contributions to the arts—typically regarded as feminine—were inadvertently ignored rather than also valued and made acceptable for boys to like and be good at. In other words, Mark's interest in a "feminine" activity was not recognized for transgressing dominant gender norms and expectations, but rather the "masculine" characteristics of ballet were highlighted to make it acceptable for Mark to like ballet. Consequently, an opportunity for questioning and redefining acceptable gender expressions and identities with the students was missed. Instead, the valuation of hypermasculinity was inadvertently reinforced and traditional binary gender expectations were reinstated.

Discussion

Given the findings outlined above, in this section we examine the potentials of a femininity-affirmative pedagogy in countering the feminine-gender policing that pervades kindergarten contexts. While a femininity-affirmative pedagogy may run the risk of maintaining gender constructs as binary and polarized, we consider this pedagogy not simply as a reversal of gender roles and expressions but as an opportunity to create space in early childhood classrooms for children's explorations of gender and gender expressions (Davies & Hoskin, 2021). The revaluation

and affirmation of femininity is a starting point to validate it as a viable possibility for all people to take up and explore, including within, between, and beyond current forms of femininities and masculinities. As Connell (1995) argues, there is no singular masculinity or femininity, and what is considered the norm or dominant in terms of gender is not innate or static. We see kindergarten education as having potential to be a critical site in which the inclusion of multiple and diverse gender identities and expressions, and overall gender equality, can be made possible. We propose femininity-affirmative pedagogy (Davies & Hoskin, 2021) as one potential approach for cultivating critical spaces around gender in kindergarten.

A femininity-affirmative pedagogy in practice involves the valuation and affirmation of femininity for all children through intentional actions by schools around gender, including explicit deconstruction work that counters problematic gender discourses and the policing of gender expressions and identities. As the findings of this study show, the belittlement of femininity is a regular occurrence in boy peer groups at school. While educators and other school staff may not always observe these problematic interactions, harmful discourses around gender, as well as harmful acts, are constantly being produced by students and may go unnoticed in part because they have become so heavily normalized in schools and broader society (Wright, 2022). Therefore, we recommend that ongoing and intentionally planned opportunities for gender-related learning are made available throughout the school year. These should be opportunities for critical discussions around the gender norms, stereotypes, and roles that children encounter and navigate daily and for opening up space for reimagining alternative ways of being in relation to gender. These discussions should create opportunities for children to explicitly challenge assumptions of feminine-coded characteristics, objects, and activities as inherently inferior and as "bad" or undesirable for boys and instead model open conversations about gender that affirm femininity as a valid form of self-expression for all children.

The use of stories has been found to be a helpful entry point into "tough" topics (Swartz, 2020). Stories was one way that Isabelle, one of the teachers in this study, explicitly addressed the problematic gender norms and expectations students were establishing in her classroom. After wearing nail polish to school one day, Isabelle learned from Juno's mother that he was told by his friend Omar that boys do not wear nail polish. In response to this, Isabelle planned a story time period around gender. She read the book *Morris Micklewhite and the Tangerine Dress* by Christine Baldacchino a few times over the course of several weeks to deconstruct gender stereotypes and problematic gender expectations with her students. Asking intentional questions, Isabelle led discussions aimed at countering the belittlement and othering of femininity and the problematic notion that femininity is something to laugh about and something with which boys should not engage.

The findings also show the importance of direct intervention during moments of gender policing and thus the need for noticing and acting on these moments. However, it is important that when educators do intervene during these moments they do so through a gender-affirming lens (Timmons & Airton, 2020), or, more specifically in this case, a femininity-affirmative lens. For instance, attending to the incident above with Alvin and Mark through a femininity-affirmative approach would entail facilitating a discussion with the class that validates Mark's interest in ballet without legitimizing or ascribing value to ballet by associating it exclusively to masculine standards. Instead, all aspects of ballet, including its feminine-coded attributes such as emotion, aesthetics, and artistic expression, should also be valued and made legitimate for all children to explore and undertake if they desire to do so (Feltham & Ryan, 2022). Importantly, when associating femininity with male bodies, it should not be presented as an outlier quality or as humorous. Activities and traits that are traditionally considered to be feminine should also not be intentionally renamed in masculine terms when being associated with boys or male bodies, as is often done with products marketed to men, such as "Dove for Men" grooming products (Amaral et al., 2019). Instead, they should be named as such and presented as a possibility that all people can take up. Moments like the ones described in this

article serve as critical opportunities for necessary discussions around gender, questioning what we know about gender, and creatively exploring what we do not know.

Conclusion

The denigration of femininity continues to pervade societies around the world, and kindergarten spaces are not immune to it. Instead, they can be breeding grounds for its perpetuation and legitimization if no action is taken. In this article, we drew on feminist poststructuralism, critical femininity studies, and femme theory to examine two ways that femmephobia circulated among boys in kindergarten. These theoretical orientations illuminate the multiple gendered subjectivities children navigate and negotiate daily at school and the ways in which children actively police feminine identities and expressions. Specifically, we showed how boys policed femininity by ridiculing it within their boy friend groups. Such ridicule functioned to demarcate (un)acceptable gender expressions for boys in these classrooms. We also showed how feminine policing occurred through public humiliation by boys and of boys, even friends, who crossed the gender boundaries and showed interest in feminine-coded activities like ballet. Moreover, in examining a teacher's well-intended intervention, we discussed how these interventions may reinstate the very gender regimes they are seeking to counter when a femininity-affirmative orientation is not applied. Given these findings, we considered the potentials of a femininity-affirmative pedagogy (Davies & Hoskin, 2021) as an approach in early education that challenges dominant (hetero)normative gender systems by promoting and supporting children's fluid gender explorations and sense of selves. We contend that intentional and gender-affirming actions by education stakeholders are needed early on to help counter the ongoing femmephobia in and outside of schools and to cultivate gender inclusion, equality, and safer learning spaces for all.

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