

Artful Early Years: Children's Gendered Awareness and Expression

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Abstract

The gender binary, as a socially constructed framework, continues to shape early childhood experiences in ways that marginalise gender diverse identities. This critical arts-based research (CABR) study examines how children aged 3–9 understood and expressed gender through artistic creation within a community-based setting in Oshawa, Ontario. Grounded in a Pedagogy of Care (POC) and Critical Transformative Learning (CTL), participants created visual representations of gender using loose-parts and engaged in semi-structured interviews and a gallery walk. Qualitative thematic and resonance analysis revealed that these participant children actively negotiate gender through processes of social regulation, imagination, and resistance, rather than passively internalising gender norms. Findings highlight the role of their socialisation agents in reinforcing binary constructs while also demonstrating children's capacity to reimagine gender in fluid and expansive ways. This study contributes to transformative pedagogical approaches that centre relational care, creativity, and inclusive gender possibilities in early years educational settings.

Keywords: gender binary, early years children, pedagogy of care, critical transformative learning theory, critical arts-based research, social identity

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Introduction

Transformational equity work in early childhood education requires attention to how gender is produced, regulated, and negotiated through everyday social, linguistic and imaginative practices (Blaise, 2005; Butler, 1990, 2004; MacNaughton, 2000; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Rather than treating gender education as a later corrective intervention, this study examines the micro-politics of belonging, recognition, and power through which participant children encountered gender in relationships, classrooms, media, and play (Ahmed, 2006; B. Davies, 2003; Foucault, 1978; hooks, 1994; Paris & Alim, 2017).

As a gender-fluid educator and researcher, my experience of gendered discrimination and work with Ontario educators through the Principal Qualification Program courses have made me attentive to educators' uncertainty around gender diversity, shaping my commitment to care-based approaches that create opportunities to question, expand, and reimagine gender (Butler, 1990, 2004; B. Davies, 2003; Freire, 1970; Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 1984, 2002). Early-years education can move beyond performative inclusion when care sustains dialogue, imagination, and belonging happen (Freire, 1970, 1998; Gilligan, 1982; hooks, 1994; Paris & Alim, 2017).

Situating Me in the Research

Consistent with Creswell and Poth (2018), Lincoln and Guba (1985), and Tracy (2010), positionality is central to qualitative inquiry because researchers bring values, experiences, and assumptions into interpretations. I am genderfluid and use he/him/il pronouns; my Gender Sexual Minority (GSM) identity and experiences within cisnormativity and homophobia heighten my sensitivity to moments in which the gender binary is reinforced or challenged. I also recognise privileges associated with being a White, educated, and able-bodied, male-presenting person, which limit what I know about the broader GSM groups and may shape my interpretations.

I am Canadian-born to immigrant Portuguese parents and raised within a Christian-Judeo cultural context that initially framed gender within the binary. My experiences as an artist, performer, and educator have enabled me to interpret diverse and non-binary representations as meaningful. Drawing on McIntosh's (1998) "invisible backpack," I used reflexive journaling to examine how privilege, emotion, and power operated visibly and invisibly in the research (Foucault, 1978, 1995; hooks, 1994; McIntosh, 1998). Butler's (1990, 2004), Freire (1970), and Kumashiro (2001) further informed my attention to how gender norms become normalised through educational practices.

My preference for gender-fluid possibilities is acknowledged as a bias grounded in an academic and pedagogical commitment to equity, relational justice, and disrupting normative power structures (Blaise, 2005; Butler, 1990, 2004; B. Davies, 2003). This commitment informs my use of Pedagogy of Care (POC), Culturally Relevant/Sustaining Pedagogy (CRP/CSP), and anti-oppressive education towards gender-inclusive practices in early years settings (Freire, 1970, 1998; Gilligan, 1982; Paris & Alim, 2017). Reflexivity and transparency were used not to eliminate bias, but to remain attentive to conformity and resistance and interpret the participant children's meaning-making in their own terms/contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Holmes, 2020; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Theoretical Framework

This study brings together POC and CSP, critical feminist theory (CFT), queer theory (QT), critical transformative learning (CTL), and Foucault's conception of power. Together, these perspectives position gender as relational, socially produced, and open to negotiation while positioning educators as participants in, rather than authorities over, children's gender meaning-making.

Pedagogy of Care (POC)

A POC positions education as relational and ethical, foregrounding attentiveness, connection, responsiveness, and mutual responsibility (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 1984, 2002). Davey's (2023) "good enough" teacher extends this orientation by balancing care of students with care for educators. In this study, care creates conditions for dialogue and exploration without immediate correction or categorisation. Freire's (1970) dialogical pedagogy and hooks' (1994) education as a practice of freedom further connect care with social justice in educational practice.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP)

CRP/CSP extends culturally relevant and responsive approaches by sustaining and generating educational cultural practice from the ground-up, rather than simply responding to difference(s) (Paris & Alim, 2017). It centers students' voices, lived experience, choice, collaboration, and cultural plurality. In this arts-based gender inquiry, CSP supported open-ended narratives and material choices through participants' children expressed gender using colours, textures, ornamentation, imagery, and storytelling.

Critical Feminist and Critical Queer Theories (CFT/QT)

CFT and QT challenge the binary and heteronormative structures and examine how gender categories become socially intelligible and regulated (Butler, 1990, 2004; hooks, 1994; Jagose, 1996; Sullivan, 2003). Butler's (1990, 2004) account of "performativity" shows how repeated norms reproduce regulation while also creating possibilities for "slippage" and "resignification". Early childhood scholarship similarly demonstrates that children negotiate gender through discourse, play and peer relations (Blaise, 2005; B. Davies, 2003).

Critical Transformative Learning (CTL)

CTL adds reflection and shifts in perspective (Mezirow, 1978, 1991; Taylor, 1997), while critiques of its rational emphasis foreground emotions, symbolism, imagination, and embodied experiences (Boyd, 1989; Boyd & Myers, 1988; Cranton & Roy, 2003; Dirkx, 1998). Accordingly, this study treats transformation as relational and creative, rather than a single cognitive change.

Foucauldian Conceptions of Power

Foucault's (1978, 1995) conception of power provides the framework for regulation. Power is diffuse, productive, and enacted through everyday practices rather than only formal authority. Language, peer judgement, colour coding, play, and social roles can become micro-politics through which gender categories are produced and maintained. Resistance emerges within

relations of power rather than outside them (Foucault, 1978), allowing conformity, imagination, and resistance to be understood as interconnected rather than sequential.

Research Questions

The main research question guiding this work was: “How do children aged 3–9 understand and express gender identities/constructs through art in their social environments?” Two sub-questions refined this focus:

1. How do 3–9-year-olds interpret gender from interaction with social agents and adults?
2. How can educators unpack and interrupt traditional gender relations among 3–9-year-olds?

The literature review explores these factors and addresses the gaps regarding gender in early years education.

Literature Review

Gender is widely understood as socially constructed through discourse, practice, interaction, and institutional regulation rather than a fixed binary attribute (Butler, 1990; Crenshaw, 1989; B. Davies, 2003; J. Lorber, 2014, 2018; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Children encounter cultural understandings early through family, peers, educators, and cultural scripts, which can reinforce gendered expectations through everyday interactions (Blaise, 2005; B. Davies, 1989; Leaper & Friedman, 2007; C. L. Martin & D. N. Ruble, 2004). Developmental research has described early gender categorisation as stage-based, with children siding with one of the binaries (Kessler & McKenna, 1978; Kohlberg, 1966; C. L. Martin & D. N. Ruble, 2004; Signorella et al., 1993), while critical early childhood scholarship shows that gender cues and categories are negotiated within social relations rather than simply acquired and fixed (Blaise, 2005; B. Davies, 2003; Halim et al., 2017; Hanish & Fabes, 2014; King et al., 2021; Leaper & Friedman, 2007). The persistence of the binary reflects historical, cultural, and institutional systems that privilege certain identities while marginalising others (Butler, 2004; Collins, 1990; Foucault, 1978; J. Lorber, 2014, 2018).

Educational environments can reproduce gender expectations through language, materials, grouping, and play. Educators may unintentionally encourage nurturing behaviours for girls and competitive or physical behaviours for boys (Balter et al., 2018; A. Davies et al., 2021; MacNaughton, 2000; B. Martin, 2011). Socialisation can occur through subtle feedback rather than explicit teaching, shaping what children perceive as recognisable or acceptable gender behaviour (Butler, 1990, 2004; Cherney et al., 2003; Foucault, 1978, 1995; Freeman, 2007; hooks, 1994; B. Martin, 2011). Media is another significant socialising agent, with historical and recent research identifying stereotypical representations alongside some marketable-diverse moments (Bailey, 2009; Chapman, 2021; Clarke et al., 2024; Davey, 2022; Giroux, 1999; Picker, 2002; Rollero et al., 2023; Santoniccolo et al., 2023; Skjelstad & Ellefsen, 2024; Terán & Conroy, 2025). Children therefore encounter gender messages across interconnected social environments, not only educational settings (Blaise, 2005; B. Davies, 2003; MacNaughton, 2000; Muchabaiwa & Makonye, 2025; 2000; Renold, 2005; West & Zimmerman, 1987).

Gaps in the Research

Despite increasing attention to gender-inclusive education, practical research on everyday early-years implementation remains limited (Balter et al., 2018, 2021; A. Davies et al., 2021; K. H. Robinson & C. Davies, 2017). More research is needed on how contemporary media, social media, digital platforms, and artmaking influence gender meaning-making in early childhood (Buckingham, 2013; King et al., 2021; Picker, 2002; Santoniccolo et al., 2023; Scarcelli et al., 2021), and how educators balance gender inclusivity with social and cultural resistance (Barone & Eisner, 2012; Beren, 2013; Trout et al., 2022). This study addresses these gaps through participant children's art, language, social relationships, and interaction, with attention to pedagogical applicability.

Methodology

I employed critical arts-based research (CABR), integrating critical theory with participatory and creative practices to examine gender meaning-making with participant children (Janmohamed, 2010; Leavy, 2023a, 2023b). CABR supports multimodal, participatory inquiry in which art was treated as a way of knowing rather than simply an illustration of verbal responses (Barone & Eisner, 2012; Eisner, 1965; Leavy, 2023a, 2023b; Springgay et al., 2005). This design aligned with the Ontario Kindergarten Curriculum (OKC), care, co-creation, multimodality, and ethical engagement through collage with loose-parts, semi-structured interviews, and a gallery walk (Davey, 2023; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016; Trout et al., 2019, 2022).

Research Design

The three primary methods were (a) collage with loose-parts for artmaking, (b) semi-structured artwork-based interviews, and (c) final gallery walks. The design encouraged participant children to construct meaning of a girl, a boy, and a person through open-ended materials and minimal preset prompting, allowing visual and verbal meaning-making to develop together (Leavy, 2023a, 2023b).

Participants and Context

Six children (four females, two males), aged 3–9, participated in the study within a community-based rental space in Oshawa, Ontario. Recruitment expanded from the original age range because of recruitment constraints. Participants represented diverse backgrounds of age, gender, race, and socioeconomic status, and engaged voluntarily with parental consent and ongoing daily assent through the four research sessions (Table 1). While all participants initially identified within the gender binary, their expressions revealed more nuanced understandings of gender throughout the study.

Table 1*Participant Demographic Characteristics*

Participants Number	Gender Disclosed During Research	Age	Race
Participant 1 (P1)	female	3 years old	non-racialised
Participant 2 (P2)	female	5 years old	non-racialised
Participant 3 (P3)	female	8 to 9 years old	non-racialised
Participant 4 (P4)	female	4 years old	racialised
Participant 5 (P5)	male	9 years old	mixed-race
Participant 6 (P6)	male	3 years old	mixed-race

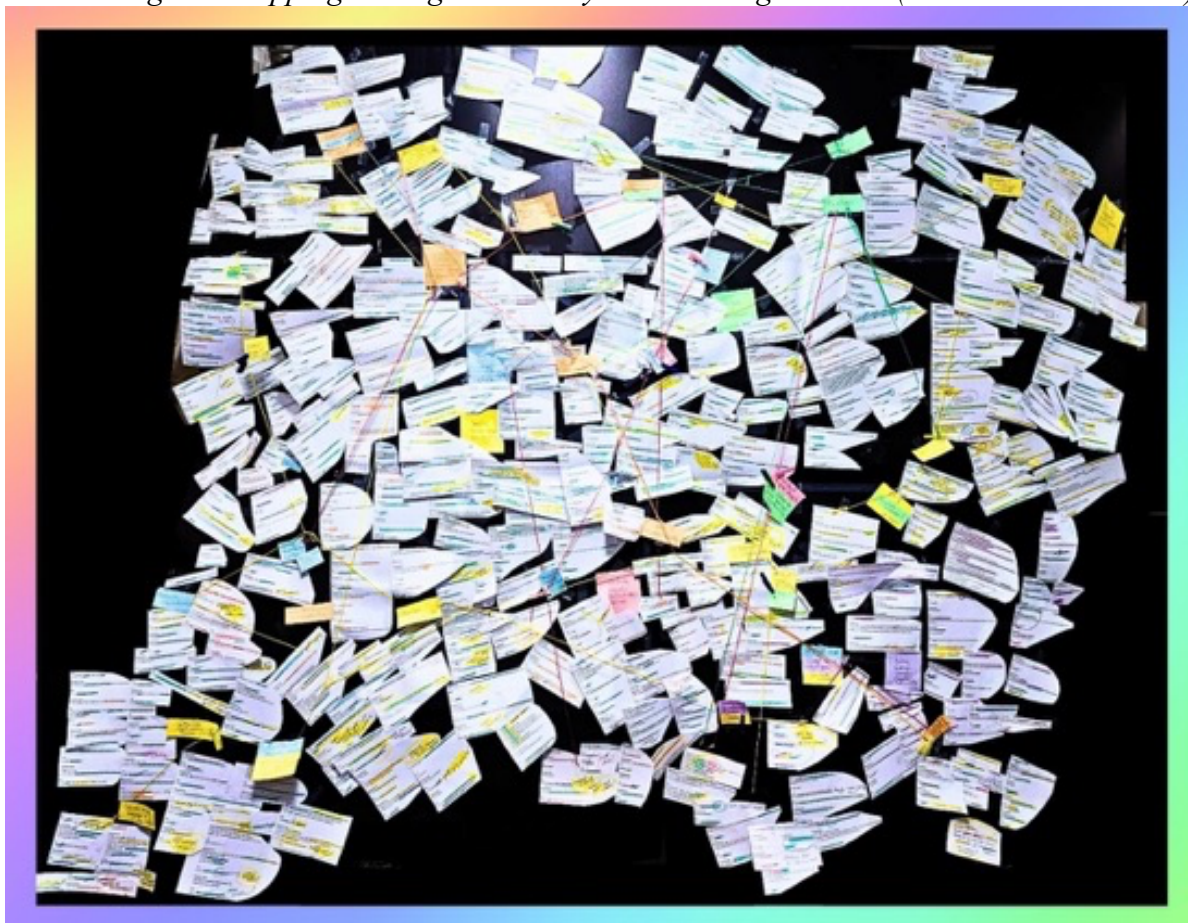
Note. An overview of recruited participant demographics that situate their multiple identities.

Methods and Data Collection

Data were created across four sessions. In the first three sessions, participant children created loose-parts collage art representing a girl, a boy, and any person they wished, followed by an individual interview. The fourth session was a collective gallery walk where all participant art pieces were displayed, and participants discussed their artwork with peers and the counsellor (adult proxy), while I observed and recorded field notes as a non-participant observer. Each session included renewed assent, reminders of support, and opportunities for breaks (V. Braun & V. Clarke, 2006; V. Braun & V. Clarke, 2021; Cahnmann-Taylor & Siegesmund, 2018; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

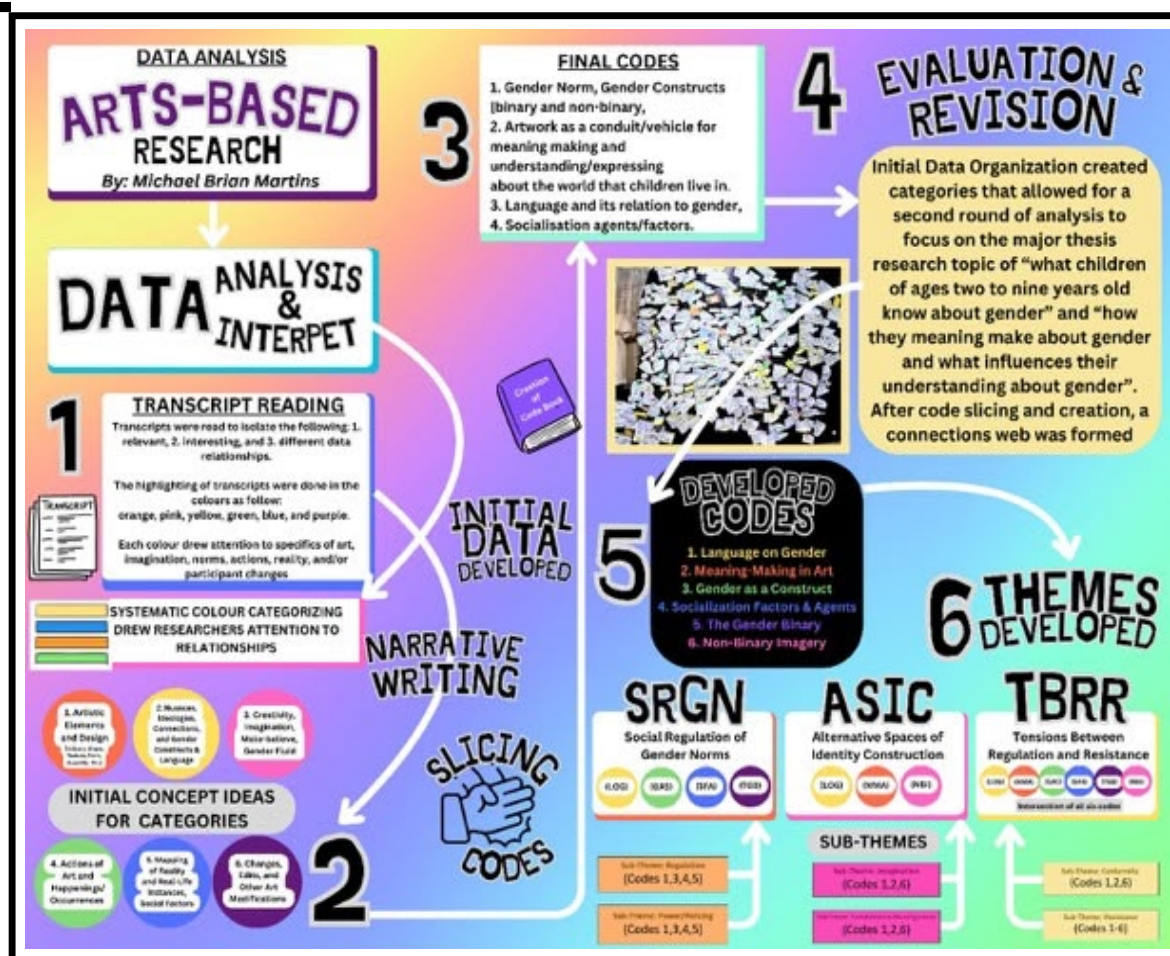
Data Analysis

Data analysis combined visual and thematic approaches through qualitative research resonance (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Good, 2023; Tracy, 2010). I examined patterns in transcripts and field notes alongside visual, verbal and non-verbal features (weak codes), including colours, textures, spatial placement, ornamentation, layering, imagery, pauses, gestures, and narrative explanations (Saldaña, 2015) (Figure 1).

Figure 1*Code Slicing and Mapping During Data Analysis and Categorisation (Full Board–Overview)*

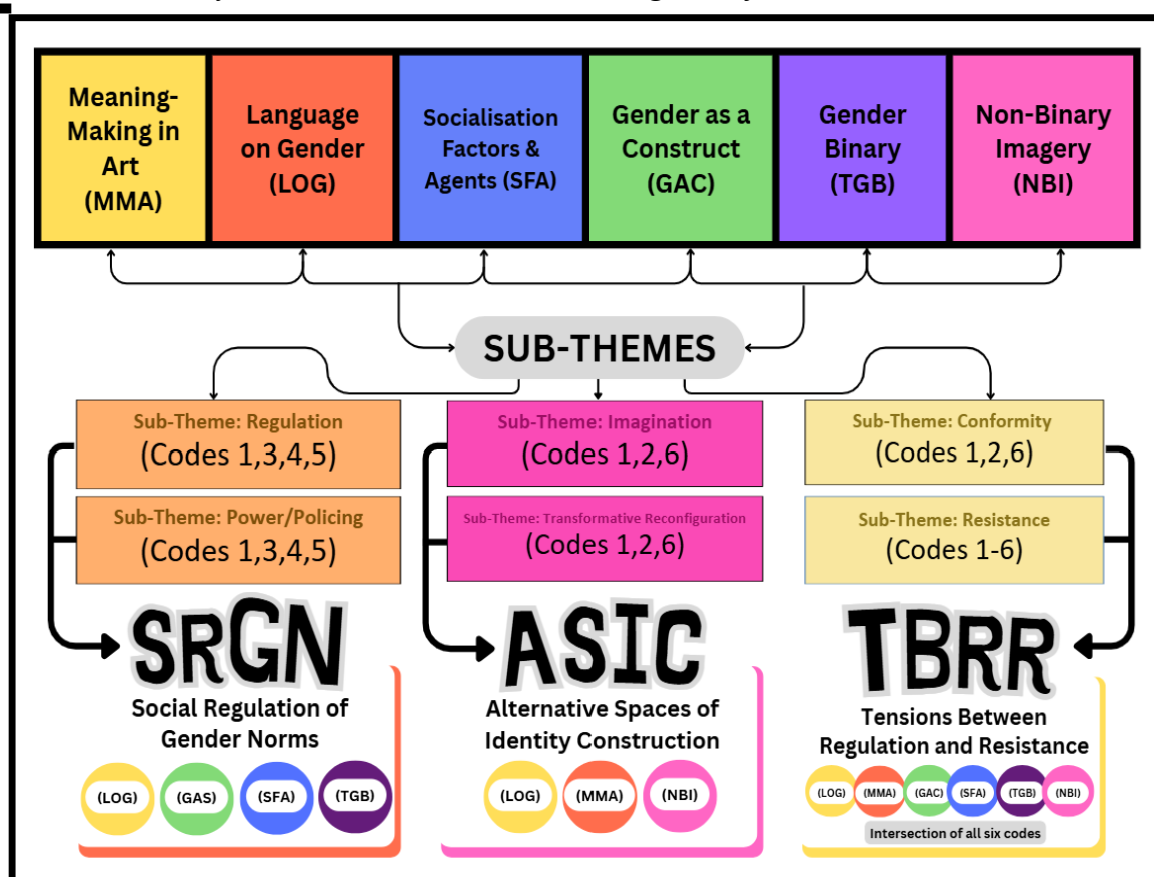
Note. This figure visualises the categorisation process, using colored paper to show weak and strong code connections and coloured yarn to outline how these codes converge into themes.

Open coding incorporated inductive and deductive processes, followed by iterative clustering into six stronger codes: Meaning-Making in Art (MMA), Language on Gender (LOG), Socialisation Factors and Agents (SFA), Gender as a Construct (GAC), The Gender Binary (TGB), and Non-Binary Imagery (NBI) (Fife & Gossner, 2024; Saldaña, 2015). Attention was given to shifts in meaning across contexts, highlighting the relational nature of gender construction. Constant comparison across artwork, interviews, and the gallery walk observation supported interpretive and thematic coherence (V. Braun & V. Clarke, 2006; V. Braun & V. Clarke, 2021; Fife & Gossner, 2024; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Miles et al., 2013; Saldaña, 2015) (Figure 2).

Figure 2*Data Analysis and Interpretation: Code Formation and Explanation*

Note. This figure outlines the data analysis process, illustrating the procedural flow, interconnection, and interpretation of codes as they culminate in sub-themes and major themes.

The six stronger codes were connected through 29 weaker codes, creating six sub-themes: regulation, power/policing, imagination, transformative reconfigurations (TR), conformity and resistance. These developed into three major themes: Social Regulation of Gender Norms (SRGN), Alternative Spaces of Identity Construction (ASIC), and Tensions Between Regulation and Resistance (TBRR). Visual and verbal data were treated as interconnected because artistic features could carry meanings that language alone might not access (Figure 3).

Figure 3*Interconnection of Codes to Minor Themes, Leading to Major Themes*

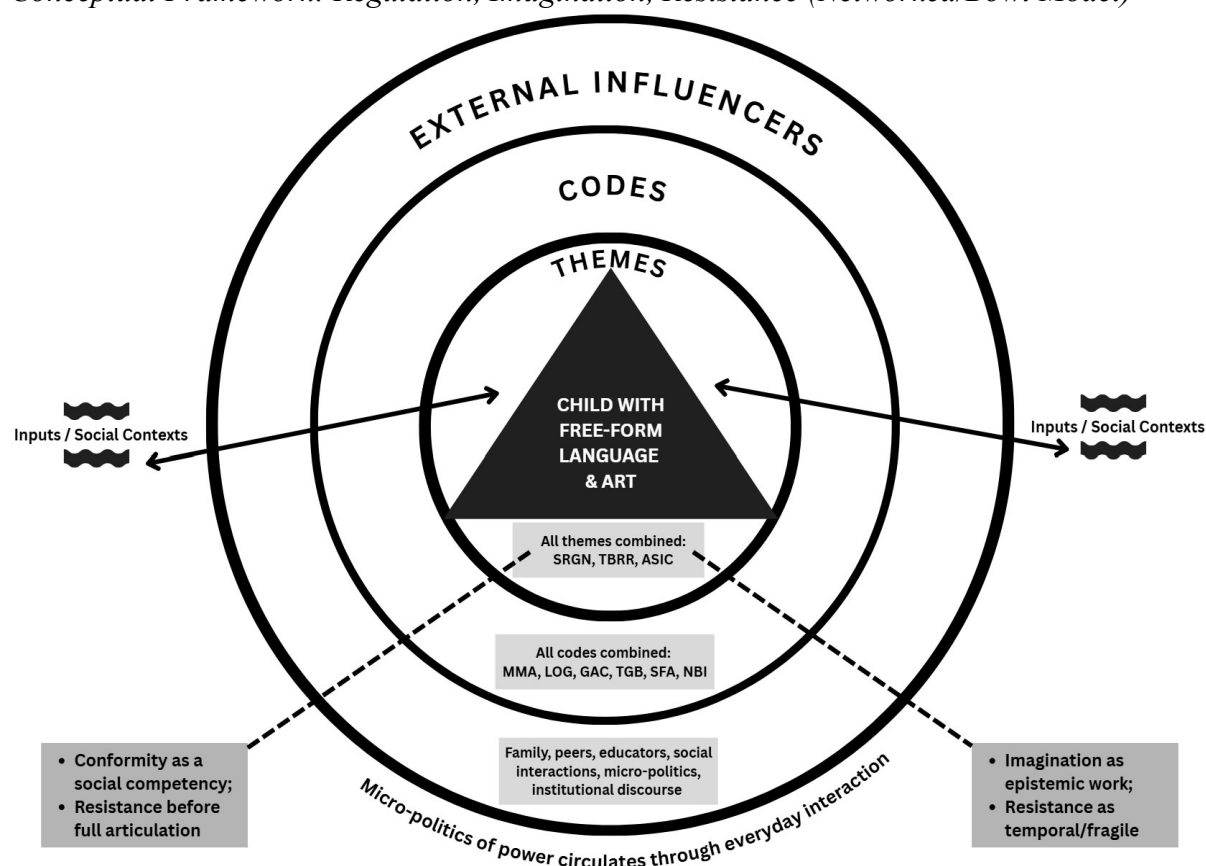
Note. This figure demonstrates the progression of codes leading to sub-themes and how these codes and minor themes work in conjunction, forming the thesis's major themes.

Conceptual Framework (TF)

This study's conceptual framework (CF), akin to the atom/molecule analogy, conceptualises gender as relational, dynamic, and embedded within power. Figure 4 centres participant children's language, communication, imagination, and artmaking potential; surrounding layers represent the codes, sub-themes, socialisation agents, and broader social contexts. The three themes: SRGN, ASIC, and TBRR interact fluidly in a cumulative, non-linear manner; regulation may prompt imagination, imagination may create resistance, and resistance may return to conformity or generate further reconfigurations. This layered approach makes visible how art creations, play, narratives, and interactions inform, with credibility, the study's conceptual claims.

Figure 4

Conceptual Framework: Regulation, Imagination, Resistance (Networked/Bowl Model)



Ethical Considerations

Ethical care included parental consent, renewed child assent, confidentiality, voluntary participation, withdrawal option, secure data storage, REB approval, and counsellor support. The counsellor remained present to support risk management, breaks and debriefing, while open-ended interview prompts and children-driven artmaking helped minimise leading or harmful interactions. Amendments to the age range and sessions were approved by REB before implementation. Participant information was anonymised, and parents could request transcripts as needed. Personal-reflexive journaling and professional support managed researcher positionality and emotions, recognising care as an ethical responsibility to participants and the researcher.

Clarification on Conflation of Biological Sex and Gender

Throughout the findings, these children often used “girl” and “boy” as linguistic placeholders for culturally learned notions of femininity and masculinity, rather than as scholarly distinctions between biological sex and gender identity (Butler, 1990, 2004; B. Davies, 1989, 2003; C. L. Martin & D. N. Ruble, 2004; Signorella et al., 1993). This language conflation reflects developmental and socially produced binary patterns and should therefore be understood as participants’ everyday categories, and not essentialist understandings (Grossman, 2023; Joyce, 2021; Sax, 2026; Shrier, 2020; Stock, 2021).

Findings

The findings revealed that these children's gender meaning-making was neither fixed nor uniformly binary. Across the data, participants reproduced familiar gender markers while also using art, language, imagination, and interactions to expand and renegotiate gender actively, beyond developmental arguments of age appropriateness (Blaise, 2005, 2009; Cherney et al., 2003; MacNaughton, 2000; National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], 2020; Paris & Alim, 2017; Thorne, 1993). The analysis developed six interconnected code clusters—MMA, LOG, SFA, GAC, TGB, and NBI—which informed the three major themes below.

Theme 1: Social Regulation of Gender Norms (SRGN)

Participant children frequently used familiar gender markers in artwork, including colour, hair, body size, clothing, ornamentation, family roles, and language. The MMA, LOG, GAC, and TGB codes showed how visual and verbal signs worked together to position characters within familiar feminine or masculine categories. Participant One used bows and lipstick to signal femininity, while Participant One linked their father being “bigger than mommy,” and Participant Three said that beards, body hair, and larger size were masculine traits. Furthermore, Participant Four stated, “strong and fights bad guys.” These artistic attributes categorised traits into gender expectations. Participant Five explained gender role categorisation in their “Minion girl” character was “waiting for her husband” (Figure 5). These examples demonstrate patterns in how gender categories become intelligible through socially recognisable artistic and linguistic cues (Butler, 1990, 2004; B. Davies, 2003; MacNaughton, 2000).

Figure 5

Children's Gendered Feminine and Masculine Art Pieces



These distinctions were often presented as natural or self-evident, suggesting that repeated interactions with social agents normalised gender expectations for these children (Butler, 1990, 2004; B. Davies, 2003). Participant Five's artwork connected language, art, and socialisation and the gender binary, demonstrating how objects carried learned relational meaning. Together, these examples illustrated SRGN as everyday regulation rather than explicit instruction in the absorption of gender norms (S. Nicholson, 1971).

Theme 2: Alternative Spaces of Identity Construction (ASIC)

Alongside regulation, artmaking created spaces for imaginative experimentation. Participant children used rainbow colours, crystals, shine, magical characterisation, super-heroism, and hybrid forms to move beyond familiar gender markers. As Barone & Eisner (2012), Eisner (1965), and Springgay et al. (2005) suggested, art can function as inquiry cognitively, where participant artistic choice allowed them to assign and reassign meaning through materials and visual symbols, not always inherently gendered.

Participant Five explained, “The shine means you’re a different kind of boy,” transforming a familiar masculine colour marker into a more flexible identity. Participants Three and Five described pink and blue as available to any gender (influenced by peer/parents). Participants One and Two used rainbow colours for characters they described as “a girl, a boy, or a person.” Participant Six’s Sky Giant and other fantastical figures further demonstrated that imaginative worlds could suspend ordinary gender rules by blending “Supersonic” and “Glenda” into the giant with both genders. In doing so, many participants used terms such as “beautiful” and “handsome” in ways that crossed conventional gendered language (Figure 6).

Figure 6

Mixed Participant Artwork Exhibiting Alternative Constructions



These moments resonate with J. Nicholson and K. Steele’s (2020) emphasis on resistant imagination and Tsai’s (2012) account of creative play. As participant children navigated their imagination alongside learned gender notions, social contexts actively shaped their new learning (Hickey-Moody, 2013; Renold, 2005; Ringrose, 2013; Skeggs, 1997; Walkerdine, 1990, 1997). Participant children shifted between binary and non-binary expressions, demonstrating that gender was continually negotiated and that imagination could function as an epistemic resource with new possibilities (Butler, 1990, 2004; Greene, 1995; Leavy, 2023a, 2023b).

These children’s responses indicate that when given the opportunity, they used binary norms merely as a starting point to understand and explore genderfluidity. Understood as an epistemic practice(s), art creations did not simply reflect internal beliefs but reworked them through social interactions with others and participants’ social world (Butler, 1990, 2004; Renold, 2005; Ringrose, 2013; Skeggs, 1997; Walkerdine, 1990, 1997). For example, Participant Three stating, “boy hair and girls’ clothes,” “can be for both,” and Participant One simply stating their

art as “just a person.” They knew this because they said, “all people can wear clothes and rainbow colours”, displaying deliberate resistance to gender categorisation (Figure 7). Participant Four hybridised names in fantastical imagined concepts, blending “Supersonic and Glenda” to map/mix “amazing qualities,” creating “Sky Giant” akin to their dad. The findings indicate that participants were actively testing, combining, and reconfiguring gender in regulated social contexts with agency (Greene, 1995; Leavy, 2023b).

Figure 7

Children's Flexible Gender Art Pieces



Theme 3: Tensions Between Regulation and Resistance (TBRR)

Resistance was often fragile and rarely appeared as outright rejection of gender norms. Participant Three stated, “Not all boys have short hair,” and recalled, “Once my dad wore a dress,” disrupting a gendered marker without rejecting the category of boy. Participant Five retained that “blue means you’re a boy” while adding that shine meant a “different kind of boy” and blended “beautiful” and “handsome” across genders, fluidly understanding body and ornamentation markers. Participant Six reworked “shine” and “sparkle” as attributes available beyond femininity, applying them to the masculine (Figure 6). These moments illustrate partial resistance through reconfiguration using “slippage” moments for new gender possibilities (Butler, 1990, 2004; Foucault, 1978).

The gallery walk demonstrated how relational contexts could shift meaning. Non-judgmental interactions created openings for participant children to explain, reconsider, and extend their gender representations, including when Participant Three connected Pride, rainbow, and mixed gender markers as safe zones of resistance to binary constraints through hybrid, fantastical imagery, where various colours, sparkles, rainbows, bows, and lipstick can be for all (Greene, 1995; Jagose, 1996; Sullivan, 2003) (Figure 6 & 7). These moments suggest that resistance can emerge through an individual's flexible gender position using dialogue and social context rather than a fixed, stage-based conformist position (Greene, 1995; Foucault, 1978; hooks, 1994; Kohlberg, 1966; C. L. Martin & D. N. Ruble, 2004). Often, the binary functioned as a strategic mechanism for social intelligibility rather than a developmental limitation.

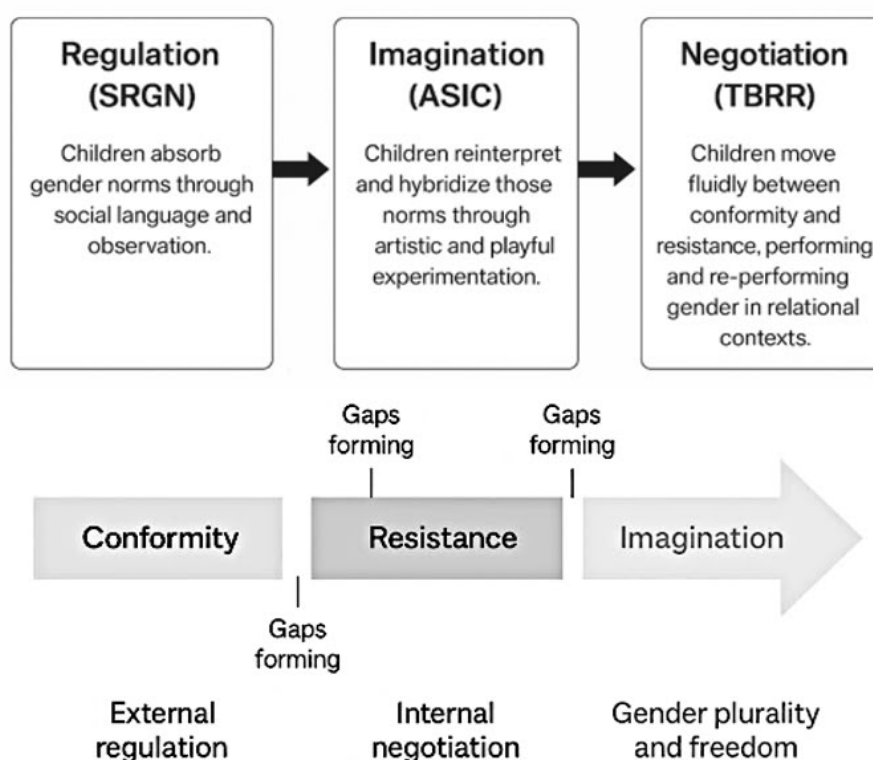
These findings suggest that resistance is an emergent, relational process shaped by complex contexts and micro-politics of social interaction (Foucault, 1978). “Fragile resistance,” drawing on Blaise (2005), B. Davies (2003), and MacNaughton (2000), captures moments when several

participants reworked gender meanings without fully rejecting familiar categories. Resistance therefore appeared as a possibility that could strengthen, recede, or re-emerge across participant interactions, where a non-linear continuum across themes SRGN, ASIC, and TBRR opens new gender possibilities (Figure 8).

Figure 8

Continuum of Early Years Understanding About Gender Through Themes and Concepts

Regulation → Imagination → Transformation Continuum



Note. Regulation (SRGN) structures gender learning; imagination (ASIC) offers openings—*cracks*—within the gender structure; resistance (TBRR) transforms openings into possibilities for participants' new gender understandings.

Discussion

The findings indicate that early-years gender meaning-making is socially regulated, relationally negotiated, and imaginatively mediated by participant children. Gender appeared less as an individual cognitive milestone than as something learned through repeated interactions with socialisation agents, supporting West and Zimmerman's (1987) "doing gender", Butler's (1990, 2004) accounts of performativity, and early childhood scholarship outlining how children negotiate gender within social relations, and not only developmentally (Blaise, 2005; B. Davies, 2003; R. W. Connell, 1995; R. W. Connell, 2000; Kessler & McKenna, 1978; Kohlberg, 1966; C. L. Martin & D. N. Ruble, 2004; Muchabaiwa & Makonye, 2025; Signorella et al., 1993; Thorne, 1993). Art simultaneously reiterated and destabilised gender norms, showing how power could operate both regulatorily and productively (Butler, 1990; Foucault, 1978; hooks, 1994).

First, social regulation operated through ordinary practices rather than only explicit instruction: colour, bodily descriptors, relational roles, labels, and peer judgements became gendered cues

in the micro-politics of gender (Foucault, 1978). Bourdieu's (1984) habitus explains how repeated classifications of gender can be made intelligible by participants (Bhana, 2007; Blaise, 2005, 2009; Hanish & Fabes, 2014; MacNaughton, 2000; Thorne, 1993). The regulatory politics of belonging were interactional by policing gender while recategorizing it (Bali, 2021; Cherney et al., 2003; Freeman, 2007; Grant & Pittaway, 2022; B. Martin, 2011). Second, conformity should not automatically be interpreted as passive compliance; participants sometimes used familiar gender categories to secure recognition, social competence, and belonging within the binary system (Butler, 1990, 2004; Clarke et al., 2024; R. W. Connell, 1995; R. W. Connell, 2000; Skeggs, 1997; Schiele et al., 2020; Terán & Conroy, 2025; Walkerdine, 1990, 1997).

This study examines the binary opposition between biological essentialism and social constructionism. While essentialist critiques view gender as fixed or adult-induced (Grossman, 2023; Joyce, 2021; Shrier, 2020; Stock, 2021), these findings show participants actively reworking social scripts. This aligns with NAEYC's (2020) updated Developmentally Appropriate Practice statement, which prioritises context-dependent, sociocultural interpretations over universal age stages (Terán & Conroy, 2025). Consequently, resistance manifested as child-centred agency through repetition, slippage, and reconfiguration. Conformity and resistance fluctuated across contexts, while artmaking and children's dialogues created relaxed openings for imaginative reconfigurations (Barone & Eisner, 2012; Eisner, 1965; Greene, 1995; Leaper & Friedman, 2007; Ruble et al., 2006; Springgay et al., 2005). Art provided fluid pathways for new learning where verbal language was constrained or socially risky (Atkinson & DePalma, 2009; Butler, 1990, 2004; Tsai, 2012). Through hybrid representations, these children constructed inclusive visual metaphors for fluidity, creating "safe zones" where binary rules dissolved (Greene, 1995; Jagose, 1996; Sullivan, 2003).

Third, imagination functioned as an epistemic resource (Leavy, 2023a, 2023b). Participants' use of colours, textures, ornamentation, hybrid imagery, and fantastical narratives to express understandings not always fully articulated by speech provides new gender communication (Barone & Eisner, 2012; Eisner, 1965; Greene, Springgay et al., 2005). In communicating about gender, these children did not first "know" gender and then illustrate it; rather, they simultaneously absorbed social knowledge, externalised, and reworked the knowing through the material act of creation (Hickey-Moody, 2013; Leavy, 2023b; J. Nicholson & K. Steele, 2020). Fourth, resistance emerged as fragile and situated: participants reworked familiar categories artistically rather than rejecting the binary entirely. "Blue means you're a boy" could coexist with a "different kind of boy"; "not all boys" have short hair; and "beautiful" and "handsome" could be blended across genders (Barker & Scheele, 2016; Blaise, 2005). These moments support Foucauldian and Butlerian accounts of resistance and resignification while challenging claims that gender flexibility is necessarily adult-induced child-compliance (Grossman, 2023; Joyce, 2021; Shrier, 2020; Stock, 2021).

For educators, the implication is not to correct children's understandings from above but to recognise where regulation, conformity, imagination, and resistance are already occurring. Practical responses include using "everyone" rather than "boys and girls," organising groups without gender categories, keeping play materials open-ended, and responding to gender policing with calm, shame-free questions such as, "Why do you think that?" or "Could it be for anyone?" These practices preserve children's agency while widening the social possibilities grounded in POC, education as a practice of freedom, and CRP/CSP (Freire, 1970; Gilligan, 1982; hooks, 1994; Paris & Alim, 2017).

Affirming environments also require gender-inclusive literature, unlabelled play areas, and loose-parts, while remaining attentive to institutional and political constraints in learning spaces (Ahmed, 2006; Windle & Rosa, 2023). Because participants drew on familiar media characters and cultural scripts, educators can invite children to redesign characters, change roles, or imagine different relationships, using questions such as, “Could the superhero be caring?” or “Could the princess save herself?” (Greene, 1995). Teaching that is open-ended and context-responsive supports hybridisation and avoids closures (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2017). Finally, these findings support critical media literacy.

Conceptual Framework and Continuum Synthesis

This conceptual framework brings the findings together as a network rather than a sequence (Figure 4 & 8). SRGN represents the social pressures and scripts; ASIC represents the imaginative spaces through which meaning can expand; and TBRR represents the movement between conformity and resistance. Participant children did not move predictably from the binary understanding to fluidity. They could conform in one moment, imagine differently in another, and resist or reconfigure a gender norm later. The continuum is therefore recursive: regulation may prompt imagination; imagination may produce resistance; resistance may recede into conformity; and conformity may provide recognisability from which further reconfigurations become possible for children in their social contexts.

Limitations

This exploratory qualitative study has several limitations. The sample was small, context-specific, and drawn from one regional community, so the findings are not statistically generalisable. None of the participants explicitly identified outside the gender binary, limiting exploration of a wider range of gender identities. The open-ended arts-based design produced varying engagement, especially among younger participants, and interpretation of visual data involved the researcher’s judgement. Family perspectives were largely absent, only examined through participant narratives. The study was also not longitudinal, did not systematically examine cognitive processes, and did not analyse digital media as a distinct social agent. These limitations point to future comparative, longitudinal, family-engaged, and media-focused research.

Significance and Implications

This study contributes to early childhood gender research by integrating social regulation, imagination, and resistance within an interpretive framework grounded in child-centred arts-based data aligned with OKC inclusion practices (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016). It challenges deficit interpretations of children’s binary gender talk by showing that conformity and flexibility can coexist and demonstrates how artmaking can reveal affective, relational, and conceptual meanings that language alone may not access fully (Barone & Eisner, 2012; Leavy, 2023a, 2023b; Springgay et al., 2005).

Pedagogically, early childhood learning environments are active sites of gender learning. Language, play, materials, character creation, and adult or peer interactions can reinforce or disrupt gender norms. A care-centred, culturally relevant/sustaining approach therefore requires more than symbolic representation; it requires conditions in which children can explore difference, question assumptions, and participate in meaning-making. Inclusion is strongest when representation is embedded daily rather than presented as a one-off activity,

along with educator preparation and institutional support to respond to gender policing without avoiding the gender topic (Balter et al., 2018, 2021; A. Davies et al., 2021).

Recommendations

Five recommendations emerged. First, engaging in critical gender pedagogy earlier: children are already interpreting gender through art, play, language, media and relationships, so gender education should not be deferred until adolescence. Second, ground gender education in POC and cultural sustainability by centring children's lived experiences, dialogue, choices, belonging, and relational safety (Davey, 2023; Gilligan, 1982; Paris & Alim, 2017). Third, design spaces that interrupt regulation through open-ended art, loose-parts, diverse materials, and inclusive language. Fourth, integrate critical media literacy by inviting children to remix familiar characters and question gendered assumptions (Atkinson & DePalma, 2009; Greene, 1995; Muchabaiwa & Makonye, 2025; NAEYC, 2020; S. Nicholson, 1971; Terán & Conroy, 2025; Tsai, 2012). Fifth, strengthen teacher education and institutional advocacy so educators can translate critical theory into practical action and respond to gender policing without shame or avoidance (Balter et al., 2018; 2021; A. Davies et al., 2021).

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that early-years children's gender meaning-making is socially regulated, relationally negotiated, and imaginatively mediated. Across SRGN, ASIC, and TBRR, participants produced familiar norms using art, language, imagination, and interaction to renegotiate gender boundaries. Conformity supported social intelligibility, imagination functioned as an epistemic resource, and resistance emerged as partially situated, not outright rejection.

Educators can support more inclusive gender learning by recognising these processes rather than treating children's expressions as errors to correct. Grounded in POC, CRP/CSP, critical inquiry, and arts-based practice, educators can sustain the imaginative openings through which children can explore identity. Gender diversity in early years is not an exceptional topic, but part of a complex social early childhood experience.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

During the preparation of this manuscript, I (the author) used AI-assistive technology to identify text redundancies and to improve the language, stylistic clarity, and readability of this paper. Following that process, I refined the content to ensure accuracy and remain fully responsible for the originality, conceptual framework, and academic integrity of the final paper submission.

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