

Negotiating Gender in Childhood: Insights From Third Graders' Classroom Experiences

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Abstract

Drawing on Butler's (1990) concept of gender as performative, this ethnographic case study examines how traditional gender norms shape classroom interactions and responses to students who demonstrate nontraditional gender behaviors. Conducted in a third-grade classroom, the study focuses on two students, Chris and Tracy, whose behaviors challenged dominant constructions of masculinity and femininity. Data were collected over a five-month period through observations, student work samples, and interviews with students and the teacher. Findings indicate that although both students engaged in gender-nonconforming behaviors, their actions were interpreted through dominant gender expectations. Chris's emotional sensitivity was often framed as immaturity, while Tracy's assertiveness was perceived as bossy and socially undesirable. These responses influenced peer interactions and teacher perceptions, reinforcing traditional gender norms within the classroom. The study highlights the persistence of binary gender expectations and underscores the role of educators in fostering more inclusive environments. Implications suggest that critical literacy and intentional classroom dialogue can support students in recognizing and challenging limiting gender norms.

Keywords: gender norms, classroom interactions, early childhood education, gender identity, critical literacy

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Introduction

Drawing on Butler's (1990) concept of gender as performative, this study examines how gender is not an inherent trait but something constructed and enacted through social interaction. While gender remains a highly visible component of identity, it is often treated as a taken-for-granted binary category in classroom settings. As a result, students and educators may rarely question how these categories are formed and maintained.

Recent research continues to emphasize that gender development is shaped not only by individual cognition but also by social and environmental influences, including classroom interactions and expectations (Halim & Ruble, 2016; Martin & Ruble, 2019). Although children embody diverse forms of masculinity and femininity, these expressions are often constrained by socially defined expectations of what it means to be a "boy" or a "girl" (Paechter, 2017).

This case study explores how educators can challenge traditional gender categories and acknowledge gender variance in the classroom. Specifically, it examines how dominant gender norms shape peer and teacher responses to students who demonstrate nontraditional gender behaviors. In doing so, the study contributes to ongoing conversations about the importance of inclusive and responsive pedagogy in supporting diverse student identities (Meyer, 2018; Shelton & McDermott, 2018).

Conceptual Framework

This study is informed by Butler's (1990) concept of gender as performative, which positions gender as a socially constructed and enacted identity rather than a fixed trait. Within classroom contexts, gender is often reinforced through everyday interactions, expectations, and social norms. Research suggests that children actively construct their understanding of gender through both cognitive processes and social experiences (Halim & Ruble, 2016; Martin & Ruble, 2019).

Additionally, gender expectations in school settings are shaped by broader cultural discourses that define appropriate behaviors for boys and girls (Paechter, 2017). These norms often influence how students' behaviors are interpreted and responded to by both peers and teachers. Drawing on this framework, the present study examines how gender norms are maintained or challenged through classroom interactions.

Study Context

This study was conducted in a third-grade classroom in a public elementary school in a Midwestern city. The classroom teacher, Mrs. B, was a White female with over twenty years of teaching experience. When discussing gender dynamics in her classroom, Mrs. B noted that students' understandings of appropriate gender behaviors are formed at an early age, suggesting that challenging these norms at this stage can be difficult due to their deeply embedded nature.

The classroom consisted of twenty students (eight girls and twelve boys). Through ongoing observations, interviews, and analysis of student work, two focal participants—Chris and Tracy—were identified as students who resisted traditional gender expectations through their behaviors and interactions.

Data collection occurred over a five-month period, with classroom observations conducted two to three times per week for approximately three hours per visit. Observations focused primarily on literacy instruction, including reading and writing workshop, as well as informal settings such as recess and lunch when possible. Data sources included field notes, student work samples, audio and video recordings, and both formal and informal interviews with students and the teacher.

Data were analyzed using ethnographic methods, with attention to recurring patterns in students' behaviors and interactions. Initial coding categories such as "crossing gender boundaries" and "immature boy and bossy girl" were refined into broader themes that guided the analysis. Triangulation across multiple data sources and member-checking with participants were used to strengthen the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings.

Chris: "He is so different"

Chris drew the researcher's attention early in the observations. He frequently kept photographs of his family on his desk and carried them with him during recess and lunch. When asked why, he explained, "Because I miss my mom. My mom works, so I have to be alone for hours before she comes home." Chris was warm and affectionate, often greeting the researcher and occasionally offering hugs. Although he struggled with reading, he enjoyed listening to others read and often asked classmates—particularly girls—to read to him.

Chris's behaviors, including expressing emotions openly and forming close relational connections, contrasted with dominant expectations of masculinity in the classroom. Such behaviors are often viewed as gender nonconforming, as boys who demonstrate emotional sensitivity may be perceived as deviating from traditional masculine norms (Coyle et al., 2016; Martin & Ruble, 2019). His teacher, Mrs. B, described him as "immature," suggesting that his behaviors did not align with what she perceived as developmentally appropriate for boys his age. While she acknowledged that some boys may be "nice and gentle," she distinguished this from what she interpreted as Chris's lack of maturity.

Despite the teacher's concerns, Chris was generally well-liked by many classmates, particularly girls. During recess, he often chose to play in mixed-gender groups, engaging in imaginative play rather than competitive sports. He also demonstrated strong empathy toward peers, such as comforting classmates who were upset or including children who were often excluded. These behaviors, often associated with femininity in traditional gender discourse, positioned Chris as both "different" and socially accepted within certain peer groups.

Chris's writing further reflected his emotional openness and strong attachment to his family. Unlike many boys who wrote more detached descriptions, Chris's narratives were highly expressive and relational. However, he was also aware that his topics differed from those of his peers and expressed hesitation about sharing his work publicly, fearing a lack of interest rather than direct criticism. This awareness highlights the subtle social pressures that regulate gender expression in the classroom.

Although Chris's behaviors challenged traditional gender norms, they did not significantly disrupt dominant gender expectations within the broader peer group. His actions were often interpreted as signs of immaturity rather than as alternative forms of masculinity. As a result, while Chris occupied a unique social position, his behavior did not necessarily lead to broader shifts in how gender was understood by others.

Tracy: Can a Smart Girl Be Popular?

Tracy, in contrast, demonstrated behaviors that challenged traditional expectations of femininity. Academically strong and highly confident, she often took on leadership roles in the classroom. However, her assertiveness was frequently interpreted by peers as “bossy.” For example, when assisting classmates, Tracy would provide direct instructions, which some students perceived as controlling rather than helpful.

The teacher was aware of Tracy’s tendency to be directive and often corrected her behavior publicly, emphasizing the importance of allowing others to contribute. While Tracy’s academic strengths were evident—she consistently performed at a high level and participated in a gifted program—her assertive communication style was not equally valued.

Tracy’s assertiveness and leadership behaviors challenged traditional expectations of femininity, which often emphasize quietness, compliance, and cooperation. Research suggests that girls who demonstrate confidence and assertiveness in academic settings may be perceived negatively by peers and teachers, as these behaviors are seen as inconsistent with gender norms (Freeman, 2019; Raby & Pomerantz, 2015). This reflects broader gendered expectations in which girls are often expected to be cooperative, quiet, and accommodating. Tracy’s refusal to conform to these expectations made her highly visible in the classroom, but not necessarily well-liked.

Despite her intelligence and influence, Tracy struggled with peer acceptance. She was recognized as “smart” by her classmates but was not widely considered popular. In some cases, her academic success and strong personality appeared to contribute to her social marginalization. This aligns with research suggesting that girls who demonstrate high competence and assertiveness may be perceived as violating gender norms and, as a result, may experience negative peer responses.

Tracy’s experiences highlight the complexities of navigating gender expectations in academic settings. While her behaviors positioned her as a capable and influential student, they also placed her at odds with both peer and teacher expectations regarding appropriate feminine conduct.

Discussion

The cases of Chris and Tracy illustrate how children actively negotiate gender identities within the constraints of dominant social norms. Both students demonstrated behaviors that challenged traditional gender expectations; however, their experiences also reveal how strongly these expectations continue to shape classroom interactions.

Chris’s emotional sensitivity and preference for relational interactions positioned him outside traditional constructions of masculinity. While he was accepted by some peers, particularly girls, his behavior was often interpreted as immaturity rather than as a legitimate expression of alternative masculinity. Tracy, in contrast, challenged norms of femininity through her assertiveness and academic confidence. However, her behaviors were frequently framed negatively, suggesting that girls who do not conform to expectations of quietness and compliance may face social and institutional resistance.

These findings highlight the persistence of binary gender norms in classroom contexts and demonstrate how both peer and teacher responses contribute to reinforcing these expectations. Although Chris and Tracy exhibited gender-nonconforming behaviors, their actions did not significantly disrupt dominant gender discourse. Instead, their experiences suggest that gender norms remain deeply embedded in everyday classroom practices and interpretations.

Implications

The findings from this study suggest that educators play a critical role in either reinforcing or challenging traditional gender norms in classroom settings. Simply allowing diverse expressions of gender is not sufficient; rather, teachers must take an active role in creating learning environments that critically examine and question these norms (Meyer, 2018; Paechter, 2017).

One effective approach is the use of critical literacy pedagogy, which encourages students to explore how social norms and power structures shape their understanding of identity (Lewison et al., 2002; Vasquez, 2017). Through the use of classroom discussions, children's literature, and reflective activities, educators can support students in recognizing and challenging restrictive gender expectations.

Additionally, creating inclusive classroom environments that affirm diverse gender identities is essential. Recent research highlights the importance of intentional and responsive teaching practices that validate students' experiences and promote equity (Shelton & McDermott, 2018). By providing opportunities for students to engage with multiple perspectives and by fostering open dialogue, teachers can help expand students' understanding of gender beyond binary frameworks.

Ultimately, classrooms should serve as spaces where diverse identities are acknowledged and valued. Through intentional instructional practices and ongoing reflection, educators can support more inclusive and equitable learning environments that allow all students to explore and express their identities more freely.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study underscores the importance of recognizing and addressing the subtle ways gender norms are reinforced in everyday classroom interactions. While students like Chris and Tracy demonstrate the potential to expand traditional understandings of gender, their experiences also reveal the limits of individual resistance within established social structures. Therefore, meaningful change requires intentional and sustained efforts by educators to create inclusive spaces that challenge binary thinking and support diverse identities. By doing so, teachers can foster learning environments that not only promote academic success but also affirm the full range of students' social and emotional development.

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

The author used ChatGPT (OpenAI) for language editing and formatting assistance. All substantive content, analysis, and conclusions are the author's own.

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