

HOW YOUNG CHILDREN REMAIN AUTONOMOUS IN EXPRESSING THEIR GENDER  
IDENTITY: PARENT PERCEPTIONS OF THE EXPERIENCES HAD BY THEIR GENDER  
NONCONFORMING CHILD IN THE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION  
ENVIRONMENT

Thesis  
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the  
Degree of  
Masters of Arts in Early Childhood Education  
Mills College  
Spring 2012

By  
Riley Graham

Thesis Advisors:

---

Priya Shimpi  
Assistant Professor of Early Childhood Education

---

Linda Kroll  
Professor of Education

---

Sandra C. Greer  
Provost and Dean of the  
Faculty

UMI Number: 1510997

All rights reserved

INFORMATION TO ALL USERS

The quality of this reproduction is dependent on the quality of the copy submitted.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.



UMI 1510997

Copyright 2012 by ProQuest LLC.

All rights reserved. This edition of the work is protected against unauthorized copying under Title 17, United States Code.



ProQuest LLC.  
789 East Eisenhower Parkway  
P.O. Box 1346  
Ann Arbor, MI 48106 - 1346



# AUTONOMY IN EXPRESSING GENDER IDENTITY

## Notes to the Reader

This text examines autonomy in young children gender nonconforming and the support they receive from their teachers and schools to express their gender identity. While it is important to recognize that when talking about gender, there are no absolutes, it is essential to give a clear definition of the terms used in my research. Many people are familiar with the term transgender which defines a person whose gender identity does not match their assigned birth gender. Because gender identity is emergent throughout life and it is not known who children will grow up to be I use the term gender nonconforming which can characterize a person who expresses themselves through dress, play, and behavior in a manner not considered to be typical of their assigned birth gender. Furthermore, although gender variance is used in much of the literature, I chose not to use this term because of the negative connotation the word variance has. Thus I utilized the terms gender nonconforming and questioning for children and transgender for youth and adults. Finally, I will be using they/their instead of she/hers he/his to be more inclusive of all the children's gender identity.

## AUTONOMY IN EXPRESSING GENDER IDENTITY

### Acknowledgments

I would like to recognize the bravery of the children reported on in this study for being who they are and the support and love displayed by their parents through their responses. These people inspire me to create change through my practice in the Early Childhood Education environment and to continue to research the imperative topic of young gender nonconforming children.

To my advisor, Linda Kroll, I would like to offer my gratitude for your support and encouragement of my growth and development while at Mills College. You modeled for me how inquiry and self-reflection foster a better understanding of my practice with young children. To my head teacher, Paula Buell, I would like to thank you for nurturing my independence in the classroom and supporting my ever emerging connection of theory to practice. Your example has inspired the dynamic interactions I had with the children and my fellow student teachers in the Blue Room.

I would like to thank the Bowli clan for their love and support throughout the journey that is life. I know that no matter how far away I go or how long I stay, I will always have family and a home to come home to. With that secure base to explore from, I have been able to have experiences which have informed my practice with young children.

To Sarah G. Hansen, I would like to express my gratefulness for your untiring support in so many aspects. As my co-regulator and peer reviewer, you have helped me through my experience at Mills College. You are a source of inspiration. I am proud of you.

## **Abstract**

Little is known about the young gender nonconforming child's experience in the Early Childhood Education (ECE) setting. It is thus difficult to know how to best support them in their expression of their gender identity. This paper looked at autonomy in young gender nonconforming or gender-questioning children in relation to expressing their gender identity in the ECE environment. This paper sought to answer the questions of how autonomous the young gender nonconforming child is and if teacher support in the ECE setting facilitate the young gender nonconforming child's expression of their gender identity. Parents and legal guardians of gender nonconforming children between the ages of 3.7 and 11.5 years old, solicited from parent support groups and websites for families of gender nonconforming children completed an online survey. Questions in the survey addressed child autonomy and teacher and school support. These data provided insight into the young gender nonconforming child's autonomy in expressing their gender identity in the ECE setting and how educators can support these children in their developing sense of self.

*Keywords:* transgender, gender nonconformity, preschool, autonomy

**Table of Contents (TOC)**

Abstract	p. v
Introduction	p. 2
Literature Review	p. 4
Methods and Procedures	p. 20
Validity	p. 23
Hypotheses/Prospectus	p. 23
Results	p. 24
Discussion	p. 33
Limitations/Future Directions	p. 35
Implications	p. 36
References	p. 39
Appendices	p. 46
Appendix A	p. 46
Appendix B	p. 49
Appendix C	p. 50
Appendix D	p. 51
Appendix E	p. 52

## AUTONOMY IN EXPRESSING GENDER IDENTITY

### How Young Children Remain Autonomous in Expressing Their Gender Identity: Parent Perceptions of the Experiences Had By Their Gender Nonconforming Child in the Early Education Environment

The importance of family involvement in the early childhood setting is crucial for the healthy development of young children. Children do not exist in two closed off spheres of school and home; rather they bring their family with them into the Early Childhood Education (ECE) setting. Children who are gender nonconforming are no different than other children in that they need home and school to work together in supporting the development and learning of the young child. Some Children between 3 and 4 years old have made it clear to those around them that their gender identity does not harmonize with the gender assigned to them at birth. Of these, a small number have made a social transition of their gender, meaning that they present themselves and function in the world as the gender they identify with (Boenke, 1999 as cited in Dykstra, 2005, p. 8). These children need validation in their affirmed gender identity while their peers need to be supported in their understanding and acceptance of the gender nonconforming child in their program. The family, in conjunction with the ECE setting, must work to support young gender nonconforming children.

Generally speaking, transgender people are vastly misunderstood, due to the common perception that gender is binary and fixed (Biegel, 2010). Thus, input from the family is of utmost importance to maintain a welcoming and inclusive environment for the young, gender nonconforming child. Family members can play a vital role in advocating for the inclusion of their gender nonconforming children. Parents know their



children differently than caregivers do and often have insights into their child's personality which are not held by caregivers. Every parent must support their child in forming their individuality while concurrently teaching their child about the culture they are a part of (Ehrensaft, 2007, p. 282).

Currently, there is very little literature about young children who are gender nonconforming. Articles that report on parents and their experiences with their children who are gender nonconforming are found within the discipline of psychology but are more descriptive of the parents and give them a limited voice. According to Luecke (2011), "(t)here is substantially less writing about gender non-conforming youth outside of the realms of sexual/affectional orientation" (p. 117). Research needs to be done that is multi-disciplinary to broaden current understanding of transgender people.

The need for research from a multi-disciplinary perspective—which includes, for example, the fields of psychology, education, and sociology—is significant as transgender youth face a tremendous amount of harassment in school (McGuire, Anderson, Toomey, & Russell, 2010, p. 1175). This harassment has dire consequences on the development of children and youth who are gender nonconforming. According to McGuire and colleagues (2010) "(t)he cumulative literature suggests that some transgender youth face significantly more mental health difficulties, such as depression, anxiety and self harming behaviors, and engage in more sexual risk-taking than their gender conforming peers" (p. 1175). Literature that does not pathologize but rather looks at gender nonconformity as a natural part of human life is critically needed in order to help people understand the realities faced by transgender people.

## AUTONOMY IN EXPRESSING GENDER IDENTITY

This study will look at the experiences of young gender nonconforming, gender nonconforming, or gender-questioning children in the ECE environment. Parents or legal guardians will answer questions from an online survey on their opinions about the experiences their children had in the ECE setting. Data from the online survey will be analyzed through two theoretical lenses: the theory of a “hidden curriculum” and Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory. Bronfenbrenner (1979) maintains that human development is influenced by the ecological systems which make up their surroundings. The Ecological Systems Theory will be used to analyze data because the young gender conforming child needs the active collaboration between home and school life to support positive development. The theory of a “hidden curriculum” posits that covert lessons about socially constructed norms, values, and beliefs are taught every day in the classroom (Mufti, E, 2009). The “hidden curriculum” theory will be used because, although gender identity and the expression thereof might not be an obvious part of the curriculum, young children receive cues from their surroundings which support or denigrate their gender identity.

This study seeks to answer the following research questions: 1) How autonomous is the young gender nonconforming, gender or gender-questioning child in expressing their gender identity in the ECE setting? 2) Does teacher/school support facilitate the young gender nonconforming or gender-questioning child’s expression of their gender identity in the ECE setting? The hypothesis is that young gender nonconforming or gender-questioning children are more autonomous in expressing their gender identity in the ECE setting when their teachers and school support the children in their identity

expression. 3) Is there a correlation between teacher/school support of expression of gender identity and parent or legal guardian participation in support services, e.g., therapy, parent groups? The hypothesis is that parents or legal guardians who receive support services regarding their child's gender identity are more likely to attempt collaboration between their child's teacher and school which would result in more support for the child in the classroom.

As there is minimal research on transgender issues in education (Luecke, 2011; Rands, 2009), this study seeks to broaden the current research with a focus on young gender nonconforming or gender-questioning children in the ECE environment. Because children express their gender identity at a young age (Boenke, 1999 as cited by Dykstra, 2005), it is imperative for educators to understand how they can best support gender nonconforming children in their classrooms. Through this study, I hope to provide early childhood educators with information on how autonomous the gender nonconforming children in their care are in expressing their gender identity. An additional goal is to illustrate how teacher and school support of gender nonconforming children supports these children in their evolving sense of self.

### **Literature Review**

The experiences of gender nonconforming children in preschool are not well researched. A search conducted from August 2011 to April 2012 utilizing Academic Search Premier, ProQuest Research Library, and Wiley Online Library with the keywords "transgender", "gender nonconforming", "gender-variant" and

“preschool” resulted in just two articles. As little is known about young gender nonconforming children’s educational experience, it is not known how to best support support their development in the early childhood education setting. According to Rands (2009), limited research on transgender issues in education prevents educators from fully serving transgender students who are a part of the educational setting from preschool through university. Without proper education and training, educators are unable to meet the needs of transgender students. Gender nonconforming students are incapable of fully accessing their education because of discrimination. Numerous studies have documented the deleterious effects of a school environment which does not meet the needs of gender nonconforming students (Kosciw, Greytak, Diaz, & Bartkiewicz, 2010; McGuire, Anderson, Toomey, & Russell, 2008; Sausa, 2005)

Whereas it is important for older gender nonconforming children and youth to be supported in the educational environment, it is absolutely crucial for the learning and development of young children to be fostered in order to provide a solid foundation for their later learning capabilities. Oftentimes, this is not the case with young gender nonconforming children as Burt, Gelnaw, and Lesser (2010) claim in their article on creating a safe and inclusive educational setting for LGBT families. Young gender nonconforming children are not receiving the support they need to explore their gender identity. Educators are responsible for preventing young children from coming to harm in their care (Burt, et al., 2010; NAEYC, 2005). According to Burt and colleagues (2010) gender nonconforming children are being hurt in preschool. The psychosocial

development of these children is being compromised by the lack of support for the expression of their gender identity in the ECE setting.

This literature review seeks to illustrate how insufficient the current research on young gender nonconforming children is. Through a careful analysis of the current literature, I will attempt to build a case for further research on the experiences of very young gender nonconforming children. In the body of the literature review, I will address gender nonconformity as well as how to incorporate an understanding and acceptance thereof into the ECE curriculum.

I will begin with a discussion on how gender identity develops and how young children communicate their gender identity with the world around them. Second, I will discuss transgender issues, specifically discrimination against transgender adults in society and prejudice against youth in schools. Third, I will describe the qualities of parents who support their gender nonconforming children. Lastly, I will consider how to incorporate transgender issues into the ECE curriculum.

### **The Autonomous Child Comes Out**

Young children are well aware of their gender identity which forms in the first years of life. Around age four, the young child's gender identity is stable (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010; Schor, 1999). The young child, according to Piaget and Inhelder (1962) is from 2 to 7 years of age in the Preoperational stage of development which is characterized by the progressive ability to represent objects with mental images, words, and drawings. The child is also able to

conceptualize constant and stable perceptions, including the concept of gender identity and how that identity can be expressed.

Young children do not have adult terminology and cannot “come out” as adults do, and to them, their identity is just who they are. However, given that gender identity is one of the first forms of identity to form, children will know from a very young age if their gender identity is in agreement with the gender assigned to them at birth, or not (Brill, 2008; Vanderburgh, 2009). Piaget and Inhelder (1962) assert that the young child is egocentric and believes that everyone around him thinks as he does. Thus, while the young child autonomously develops their gender, they think little of how their gender is perceived by others, and do not understand that people will see and interact with them according to their gender assigned at birth. Toddlers without language may choose to only play with toys meant for the stereotypical opposite gender to indicate their identity, while the preschooler might declare his gender to his family and teachers.

Based on 25 years of work as a developmental and clinical psychologist, Ehrensaft (2011a) offers that one of the ways gender nonconforming children come into an understanding of their gender is by “simply” presenting “themselves early in life to their parents” (p. 9).

Vanderburgh (2009) confirms that gender formation is done in the early stages of child development. After a close analysis of clinical records from his practice from the years 2001 to 2008, Vanderburgh found that over half of his female-affirmed (male-to-female transgender) clients and 60.4% of the male-affirmed (female-to male transgender) clients were aware of their gender identity between 4 and 6 years old.

Without language from the dominant culture to describe their experiences, children and youth construct their own language around their identity. In her discussion about a young child in her clinical practice who identifies as a “Prius (car),” Ehrensaft (2010) states how amazed she is “...at the gender creativity both in language and action of children who live against the social grain of gender” (p. 50). Indeed there are many ways in which children and youth talk about their experiences and gender identities (Sausa, 2005). Children might make up their own language, or adapt language to fit their identities. One child explained to his mother, “mommy, you know how some girls are tomboys. Well, I’m a tom*girl*” (Waterman, 1999 as cited in Ehrensaft, 2007, p. 271). In the construction of their gender identity, young gender nonconforming children alter language to delineate their concept of themselves.

Identity formation occurs very early in young children. According to Derman-Sparks and Edwards (2010), “learning what our various social identities mean is a lifetime journey that begins in toddlerhood” (p. 12). The authors go on to state that gender is one form of identity that children notice the earliest. Children who are gender nonconforming are no different from other children in their search for their identity and begin constructing their gender identity at the same time as their peers.

While the young child’s identity development may be informed by outside influences, the child’s true self cannot be changed. Parents, according to Menvielle (2004), have a negligible impact on the essential understanding of self that defines a child as either gender nonconforming or gender typical. Menvielle

goes on to state that “(s)uch core feelings are immutable” (p. 3). This claim is supported by Brill (2008) who maintains that no one can do anything to change a child’s gender identity. A child’s gender identity, then, cannot be altered by the people around them but should rather be supported through love and acceptance.

In contrast to the assertion made by Menvielle and Brill that a person’s gender identity cannot be changed by others, some researchers suggest otherwise (Meyer-Bahlburg, 2002; Zucker & Bradley, 1995). In an article on treating boys with gender identity disorder, Meyer-Bahlburg (2002) discusses therapy treatment to “speed up the fading of the cross-gender identity” (p. 361). The premise of Meyer-Bahlburg’s argument is that “(b)y adolescence, the cross-gender identity of *most* (boys) appears to have faded, although the process or the causes of such fading have not been systematically studied” (p. 361). Meyer-Bahlburg reasons that young boys will have to face certain ostracism by peers, family, and others; negative emotional experiences and a possible extended and arduous process of sex reassignment should the gender identity remain consistent within these boys.

Meyer-Bahlburg does not take the young child’s autonomy into consideration in his argument but rather discusses changing the child instead of changing societal attitudes to be more supportive of diversity in gender identity and expression. The “treatment” proposed by Meyer-Bahlburg implies that gender nonconformity is an objectionable outcome and does not consider the gender binary system to be a social construct which needs to be examined (Hill & Menvielle, 2009, p. 247). The child’s self-determination is overlooked in treatment that seeks to divert the child from their expressed identity.



Attempts to change a child's gender identity will only harm their sense of autonomy and self-worth (Erikson, 1959; Hill, Menvielle, Sica & Johnson, 2010). A strong feeling of self-worth in gender nonconforming children is necessary to support them through the harassment and discrimination they are almost certain to face when they get older.

### **The Experiences of Transgender Youth and Adults**

Transgender people face extreme discrimination in many aspects of their lives. Lombardi, Wilchins, Priesing, and Malouf (2002) report that it is believed by those in the transgender community that there is a ubiquitous paradigm of prejudice and discrimination against transgender people in society. In a study on discrimination against transgender people, Lombardi and colleagues administered questionnaires and collected 402 cases, over half of which reported experiencing some form of harassment or violence in their lifetimes. Lombardi and colleagues state that because transgender people are perceived as transgressing gender norms, they are subject to tremendous punishment by other members of society in the form of violence and discrimination. These findings are supported by various studies on discrimination against transgender people (Addis, Davies, Greene, MacBride-Stewart, & Shepherd, 2009; Lombardi, 2009; Sangganjanavanich & Cavazos 2010; Willoughby et al., 2010).

Discrimination is not just a hardship faced by gender nonconforming adults but is also felt by transgender youth. Transgender youth face prejudice in school where they are harassed by their peers, faculty, and staff. McGuire,

Anderson, Toomey, & Russell, (2010) used a mixed method research format to look at the experiences of transgender students in the school environment. Survey data were collected from participants of Gay Straight Alliances at middle and high schools in California. Focus groups were conducted at community resource centers that serve LGBT youth in cities in the Western United States. McGuire and colleagues found the school environment to be a place of harassment for transgender youth. Schools are a location of substantial oppression and discrimination for gender nonconforming and transgender youth.

Students who are gender nonconforming confront verbal harassment and physical violence on an almost daily basis (Holmes & Cahill, 2004; Kosciw, Greytak, Diaz, & Bartkiewicz, 2009; Kosciw, Greytak & Diaz 2009; Sausa, 2005). The intimidation transgender youth face in school negatively impacts their academic performance. It is often the case that transgender students are unable to benefit from their education because they transfer schools, drop out, or cut classes—these actions are all taken in response to the violence youth who are gender nonconforming face at school (McGuire et al., 2008; Sausa, 2005).

Transgender youth encounter discrimination at school and are also subject to prejudice at home from their families. In three different studies on the experiences of transgender youth and their families, Grossman and his colleagues (Grossman & D'Augelli, 2006; Grossmann, D'Augelli, Jarrett Howell, & Hubbard, 2005; Grossman, D'Augelli, Hubbard, & Salter, 2005) reported that some gender nonconforming youth fear rejection by their parents. Grossman and D'Augelli (2006) found that many

transgender youth suffer from instability in home life and experience an interruption in caregiving from family members.

### **Parents Who Support Their Gender Nonconforming Children**

Not all parents turn away their gender nonconforming children. In her clinical work with gender nonconforming children and their parents, Ehrensaft (2007, 2011b) found that some parents are what she terms “facilitating” (p. 273; p. 121). Both Ehrensaft (2011a) and Vanderburgh (2009) found that parents who support their gender nonconforming children have a strong sense of self and a healthy ego. Ehrensaft and Vanderburgh claim that these parents recognize their child as an individual. Parents who are accepting and supportive of their gender nonconforming children recognize their child’s autonomy and allow their child to be themselves.

Accommodating parents are more likely to seek out affirmative therapy which supports them in their understanding of their child. In a study on affirmative therapy for families with gender nonconforming children, Hill, Menvielle, Sica and Johnson (2010) found that the parents who contacted the Children’s Gender and Sexuality Advocacy and Education Program at the Children’s National Center in Washington D.C. did not seek out services because they were upset or discomforted by their gender nonconforming child. Forty-two parents participated in this study and completed the Child Behavior Checklist (Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1981) and the Gender Identity Questionnaire (Johnson, et al., 2004) to determine the degree of gender nonconformity in their children based on parent observation and child behavior, respectively. The parents also completed

the Gendersim and Transphobia Scale (Hill & Willoughby, 2005) to measure their cognitive, affective, and behavioral reactions to extreme gender nonconformity. These parents were, in comparison to a sample of university students and a sample of parents from the community, very open-minded and accepting of gender nonconformity. The fact that these parents sought not to change their children but rather to support them in their explorations of gender is indicative of their acceptance of their gender nonconforming children.

Indeed, some parents recognize their child's need for active support from their family in the face of antagonism from society. In their group therapy sessions for parents and other caregivers of children and adolescents with what they refer clinically as gender identity disorder Di Ceglie and Thümmel (2006) found that most of the parents and caregivers believed that it is imperative that they be encouraging and supportive of their gender nonconforming children who otherwise meet with aggression and isolation in much of their lives. The group sessions conducted by Di Ceglie and Thümmel took place over a period of 6 months with ten caregivers in attendance. Although this was a limited study in terms of generalizability, the authors found that the group sessions were of benefit to this particular group and suggest that other professionals utilize group work with parents of gender nonconforming children. These parents and caregivers, rather than adding to the hurt and confusion their gender nonconforming children already experience in a transphobic world, are cognizant of their responsibility to provide unconditional love and support.

### **Incorporating Transgender Issues into the Early Childhood Education Curriculum**

*In A Framework for Culturally Relevant, Multicultural, and Anti-bias*

*Education in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Derman-Sparks and Ramsey (2000) discuss how young children learn about diversity. Young children, according to Derman-Sparks and Ramsey “...absorb the images, stereotypes, and assumptions that are in their social milieu” (p. 385). When young children observe people behaving in stereotypically gendered ways, they do not learn that there are many ways for people to live and be. These stereotypical expressions of gender make up part of the lesson in the “hidden curriculum” on gender in the classroom. This limited view of the world prohibits the young child from developing an understanding of the diversity found within society.

Without an adequate understanding of the diverse elements that make up the world, young children will not be able to adequately function in today’s society. Derman-Sparks Ramsey (2000) state that children need to learn about and respect the differences in order to fully participate in today’s world. According to Derman-Sparks and Ramsey, children in today’s diverse world “cannot function effectively” if they are cognitively and affectively constrained by prejudiced information about the people of the world around them (p. 394). Children must learn to operate in different settings and to acknowledge and respect different experiences. This includes the transgender experience.

It is important for not only the gender nonconforming child but also the gender typical child to see the diversity of gender illustrated in the classroom. In her article, *Trans-Friendly Preschool*, Dykstra (2005) discusses how uncomplicated changes in the

existing curriculum and materials can create a trans-positive environment. All children, including gender nonconforming children, need an educational environment that mirrors their lives and experiences (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010; Dykstra, 2005; Style, 1996). This reflection of the child and her family supports her development and self-esteem as well as possibly introducing different life experiences to the other children in the class.

Burt, Gelnow and Lesser (2010) discuss supporting the young child's self-esteem in the classroom in by making the classroom a place that welcomes and includes all children. Burt and colleagues state that the use of inclusive language and materials that represent all children and families fosters the young child's self-esteem and sense of safety within the classroom. Teacher language and materials that feature diversity communicate to children that *everyone* is valued and has an important place in the classroom.

While curriculum plays a large part in supporting self-esteem and acceptance of diversity in the classroom, parent involvement is important to maintain a connection between home and school. When the teacher actively involves the family in the classroom, the bond between the family and child is strengthened and supported (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010; Eldridge, 2001; NAEYC, 2005). Family members know the child the best and should be engaged in supporting the gender nonconforming child in the ECE environment.

An example of home-school collaboration to support a gender nonconforming child can be found in an article by Julie Luecke (2011) in which the author documented a

school district's efforts to foster a supportive environment in which a child, Jaden, could transition socially to her true gender self. Luecke gathered data through examination of lesson plans, journal entries, and interviews with Jaden, legal guardian, and district employees, Jaden's teachers and a specially appointed district liaison. Luecke found that those involved with the child's transition believed the process to have been successful, especially regarding classroom management, peer involvement, and providing safety for everyone involved. It was through the active cooperation between Jaden's legal guardian, her teachers, and the district liaison that Jaden received the support she needed to express her gender identity in school.

### **Conclusion**

#### **What needs to happen in the ECE classroom?**

A change needs to be brought about in the Early Childhood Education setting to create a more open and accepting environment for young gender nonconforming children. As more children are identifying as gender nonconforming (Hill & Menvielle, 2009, p. 244), perhaps because parents are displaying more tolerance toward behavior and attitudes which are not stereotypically gendered, it is important for Early Childhood educators to ensure that their practices create classrooms that are safe places for the gender nonconforming children in their care. Dyktra (2005) states that teachers must be actively trans-positive rather than just claim to be accepting of transgender issues. They must work to familiarize the children and families in their classrooms with the different ways that gender can be expressed in order to foster acceptance in children and families.

The classroom environment needs to not only be a safe place but also affirmative so children can explore their gender identities. Grossman, D'Augelli, Howell, and Hubbard (2005) describe the affirmative setting as a place that is receptive to the individual identities of children as well as a place for them to investigate and discover their gender identity. A positive environment allows gender nonconforming children as well as their peers to explore different and perhaps novel ways of expressing gender.

### **Summary of the literature.**

As discussed earlier, young children develop an individualized concept of their gender identity very early and express this identity through their actions and words (Brill, 2008; Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010; Ehrensaft, 2011a). Children construct their identity through language that they create to compensate for the inadequacy of existing language to label their experiences. Characterized as egocentric, young children are unable to take another person's perspective and thus are unable to comprehend that the world might see and understand them as the gender they were assigned with at birth. Although there are many ways in which gender identity can be influenced by outside agents, such as the media, family, other children, no one can change the young child's gender identity.

The young gender nonconforming child will face harassment, discrimination and violence as an adolescent and adult. Transgender adults face discrimination in employment, housing, and healthcare. Transgender youth experience discrimination at school which can lead to an inadequate education caused by poor performance due to



missing class, transferring schools, and dropping out. Family members may not be supportive of transgender youth which further exacerbates their susceptible situation.

Parents who are supportive of their gender nonconforming children have a strong sense of self and a healthy ego. They are able to see their child as separate from themselves and thus recognize that their child is an individual. Tolerant parents seek out affirmative therapy which supports them in understanding how to best support their children. Accommodating parents might also understand that they need to support their children in the face of hostility from society.

Another location young gender nonconforming children need support is at their preschool. All young children need to learn to recognize and respect differences in order to be able to interact with the diversity they will encounter in life. The transgender experience needs to be mirrored in the curriculum through language used by the teachers and materials used in the environment. The classroom that is inclusive and welcoming to all children supports them in developing a positive self-esteem. Parent involvement is necessary to create a connection between the home and school in support of positive self-esteem in young children.

### **Future research.**

The goal of this study is to expand the current body of literature on young gender nonconforming children. As noted above, not enough research about gender nonconforming children and youth has been conducted (Luecke, 2011; McGuire, et al., 2010; Rands, 2009). According to Rands (2009), aside from *The Transgender Child* (Brill, 2008), the literature focuses mainly on transgender adults. Research on gender

nonconforming children is crucial to form a solid body of evidence-based practices designed to support gender nonconforming children in the ECE environment. Children are coming to harm in the ECE setting (Burt, et al., 2010), and only through research and education around the issues that young gender nonconforming children face can educators foster age-appropriate identity development in gender nonconforming children and a welcoming and inclusive ECE environment.

The purpose for the current study is to examine parent's opinions on the experiences their young gender nonconforming child has in the ECE environment. Through the use an online survey to question parents and legal guardians of gender nonconforming children about how supportive the ECE teacher and environment are in fostering the gender identity and gender expression of gender nonconforming young children, this paper seeks to answer the following research questions: 1) How autonomous is the young gender nonconforming, gender or gender-questioning child in expressing their gender identity in the ECE setting? 2) Does teacher/school support facilitate the young gender nonconforming or gender-questioning child's expression of their gender identity in the ECE setting? 3) Is there a correlation between teacher/school support of expression of gender identity and parent or legal guardian participation in support services, e.g., therapy, parent groups? This research will provide insight into the autonomy of young gender nonconforming children in expressing their gender identity in the ECE setting and parent perceptions of their child's autonomy. The current study will offer ECE educators fundamental information about the importance of supporting young gender nonconforming children in their classrooms and schools.

## **Methods and Procedures**

### **Participants**

Recruitment of participants for this study occurred nationally through websites, listservs, and from parent support groups devoted to families of gender nonconforming children (see Appendix B). Participants were parents or legal guardians of gender nonconforming or gender-questioning children ages 3.7 to 11.5 years old. It was assumed that participants of this study will have a range of experience with support services regarding their child's gender identity although involvement in such services was not a requirement for participation. There were a total of thirty-five respondents. Note that the number of responses may vary per question as completion of the survey was optional.

### **Procedures**

The online survey (see Appendix A) consisted of questions which were graded on a Likert scale in addition to three open-ended questions. The main body of the survey was compiled from sections of four surveys: the Teacher's Relationships with Students Questionnaire: Teacher's View (Leitão & Waugh, 2007), the Learning Climate Questionnaire (Williams & Deci, 1996), a survey about educational provisions which compared the assessments and experiences of parents with children on the Autism Spectrum Disorder and parents with children with other disabilities (Parsons, Lewis, & Ellins, 2009), and a survey created to judge parent's views on the role of educational psychologists in supporting children in the educational setting (Squires et al., 2007). The demographics portion of the survey was pulled from the U.S. Demographics section

of the Question Bank on SurveyMonkey.com (Question Bank, n.d.). Two questions in the demographic section ask about parent involvement in support services regarding their child's gender nonconformity, e.g. therapy, support groups, and were created by the author of the study.

### **Measures**

The survey for the current study seeks to measure how the ECE teacher and environment support young gender nonconforming children in autonomously expressing their gender identity and how teacher involvement determines their knowledge of the child and fosters child well-being. In addition to measuring teacher and school support, the current study examined a potential correlation between teacher and school support and parent involvement in support services.

The first section from the main body of the survey, questions regarding the early childhood education setting, was taken from a survey about educational provisions comparing the opinions and experiences of parents with children on the Autism Spectrum Disorder and parents with children with other disabilities (Parsons, Lewis, & Ellins, 2009). This survey was created specifically for this quantitative study and has been peer reviewed. The study was published in the journal *Educational Psychology in Practice*.

The second section, teacher supporting autonomy, was pulled from the Learning Climate Survey (Williams & Deci, 1996). This survey was conducted for a quantitative study with 140 2<sup>nd</sup> year medical students in an interviewing course at two medical schools to test for students feelings of autonomy support from their professors at the end

of 24 weeks of class. The survey had 15 scale items with 5-point Likert-scale. The Cronbach alpha reliability of the scale was 0.96.

The third section of the survey was broken into two subsections and looks at teacher involvement. The first subsection asked the parent to rate teacher involvement through a scale that measures teacher demonstration of connectedness, a portion of which was drawn from a quantitative study on teacher-student relationships from teacher's the point of view (Leitão & Waugh, 2007). The Rasch Unidimensional Measurement Model was used to analyze data and create a scale of teacher-student relationships from the teacher's point of view. The Pearson Separation Index resulted in a 0.93 which proved there was a good global teacher and item fit to the measurement model.

The second subsection asked the parent to rate teacher involvement through a scale that measures how helpful teacher involvement is around child autonomy. This section was adapted from a qualitative study which examines how helpful educational psychologists are in supporting children in school (Squires et al., 2007). Data were interpreted through systematic groupings of ideas using thematic analysis.

The final section of the survey used in the current study was comprised of open-ended questions created by the author of the study. These questions sought to provide the parent or legal guardian the opportunity to state in his or her own words how the ECE teacher or environment supported his or her gender nonconforming child's expression of gender identity.

### **Validity**

The validity of my study was threatened by my personal views on the subject matter. I believe *all* children have the right to a welcoming and inclusive classroom that supports how they express their identity regardless of how they identify. I also have personal connections to the transgender community in the San Francisco Bay Area which influences how I feel about transgender rights. In addition to my personal bias, parent or legal guardian bias might have affected the validity of my study. The potential for parent bias is two-fold: one, parents who completed the survey may be biased against the ECE teacher or school and two, I assumed that all of the parents who participated in this study are supportive of their gender nonconforming child. An additional threat to the validity of my study was the fact that I created my survey from sections of four different surveys. It has not been proven that the four sections, when put together, are still valid.

To protect the validity of my study, I ensured that all data are correct and complete. Next, I separated the qualitative data into indexes based on themes that emerged. I had a peer review all my data to confirm that my bias did not influence the analysis of the data. As for the validity of my survey, all the surveys I drew from were peer-reviewed which reduced the chance of low validity.

### **Hypotheses/Prospectus**

While conducting my research I expected to find parents would report that young gender nonconforming, or gender-questioning children are more autonomous in expressing their gender identity in the ECE setting when their teachers and school support the children in their identity expression. Additionally, I hypothesized that parents

or legal guardians who receive support services regarding their child's gender identity are more likely to attempt collaboration between their child's teacher and school.

### **Results**

#### **Demographics**

Out of the 35 parents, 32 are European-American with one Hispanic/Latino parent, one Jewish and European American parent, and one half European American half Arab parent. The children reported on were slightly more diverse in ethnicity, with 88% European-American children and the remainder of mixed ethnicity representing African American, Native American/Alaskan Native, Hispanic/Latino, and Jewish. The majority of parents are from the East and West Coasts with the Southwest and Midwest represented as well. Two parents responded from abroad, one from Canada and the other from Australia. A little over half of the parents have a Graduate degree or higher and almost a third of the parents have a Bachelor degree. The rest of the parents had an associate degree or had attempted some college.

The children reported on ranged in age from 3.7 years old to 11.5 years old. Parents were asked to give both the sex and gender of their children. Out of the 35 children, fifteen were male/girls, seventeen were male/boys, two were female/boys and one was female/girl. Additionally, one parent described their child as 'variant' and one stated, '...fluid...(h)e often describes himself as half girl, half boy but lately it is more boy.' In answer to how their children did not

conform to gender stereotypes, 86.6% chose toy choice and play activities while 82.9% indicated playmates and 74.3% appearance.

Parents were asked if they received support services, eg. therapy, support groups, and if so what type and with what frequency they obtain services. Of the 35 parents, 21 receive support services and 14 do not. Therapy is the service utilized the most with 81% of those receiving services reporting weekly therapy sessions. Listservs were the second highest service reported at 67% with parent support groups coming in at 57% and conferences at 38%. Parents had access to these forms of support through public health and educational organizations and Over half of the parents receiving services reported weekly and monthly attendance, 29.5% and 25% respectively. Comments included, 'as needed', 'child goes to therapy weekly; conference yearly; support group occasionally; listserv weekly', and 'I rarely go to meetings, but do read the list serve for the group and have been to group gatherings.'

### **Analysis**

The researcher hypothesized that: Young gender nonconforming children are more autonomous in expressing their gender identity in the ECE setting when their teachers and school support the children in their identity expression. Parents or legal guardians who receive support services regarding their child's gender identity, such as therapy or parent groups, are more likely to attempt collaboration between their child's teacher and school. Data answered research questions: How autonomous is the young gender nonconforming child in expressing his/her gender identity in the ECE setting? Does teacher/school support facilitate the young gender nonconforming child's expression of



his/her gender identity in the ECE setting? Data were analyzed by looking at the percentage of parents who agreed with the survey questions. To simplify analysis, five-point Likert rating scale was condensed to a three-point scale. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the remainder of data. Survey questions which addressed the research question, ‘Is there a correlation between teacher/school support of expression of gender identity and parent or legal guardian participation in support services, e.g., therapy, parent groups?’ were analyzed using a T-test statistic. A Pearson correlation was done as *post-hoc* analysis. Short-answer questions were also used to give parents the opportunity to further express themselves. These questions were coded for themes in combination with the survey questions to provide a more dynamic understanding of parent opinion.

### **Autonomous Gender Expression in Early Education**

A majority of parents agree that their child could autonomously express her gender identity in the early childhood education setting. Most parents did not agree that their child’s gender identity or gender expression would hinder her from doing well at school, with 21 parents (62%) disagreeing. Interestingly, 9 parents (26.5%) responded neutrally while four parents agreed their child would not do well at school because of her gender identity or gender expression. Parents were asked whether teacher involvement is beneficial to their child’s future opportunities, to which 94% agreed and only three parents gave a neutral response. In response to the statement, ‘my child’s teacher supports my child’s ability to be who he/she wants to be’, 86% parents agreed. There were no parents

who disagreed and five neutral responses. In contrast to an overwhelming concurrence of parents who believe that teachers support their children on a basic level in being themselves, only 69% agreed that their child's teacher fostered children's gender expression. The negative and neutral responses doubled with one person disagreeing and ten neutral responses.

Parents could provide supplementary information on how their child was able to express their gender identity, and 32 comments were received. All of the replies were positive, for example: "At school my son feels comfortable exploring and expressing his gender roles" and,

"She's able to be who she is without questions asked. She is simply a child at school to learn."

About one-third of parents mentioned toys and play choice, eg. play partners and areas of the classroom as a mode of expression their child engages in. Over half cited their child's ability to express their gender identity through appearance. Six parents described their children as being able to go to school as their affirmed gender, for example: "In all ways, she is totally transitioned."

Additionally, pronoun and name usage were mentioned by two parents as ways in which their children expressed their gender identity.

### **Teacher and School Support in Gender Expression**

In general, parents were satisfied with the experience their child is having at school. As for how their child is treated, 77% of parents agreed that they are satisfied. Most parents believed their child goes to the school they want, with 80% of parents

agreeing. Teacher understanding of the child was strongly rated, with 80 % of parents agreeing that their child's teacher understands them. One parent commented on how their child's teacher gave their child practical advice on how to handle the attitudes of the other children in the class, for example:

Teacher taught child to say "You might not like it but I do" if other kids said anything about her clothing

### **Supportive teachers**

Parents were asked a series of questions to determine if their child's expression of their gender identity is supported by their teacher. All questions with the exception of one were answered by 35 parents. The question, 'When I offer suggestions to my child's teacher about supporting his/her gender identity/expression, he or she listens carefully and considers my suggestions seriously', received 34 responses. A widely held belief among parents was that teachers demonstrate a generally supportive attitude toward the parent's children, with 94% of parents in agreement and only two parents giving neutral responses. In relation to teachers' attempts to understand their children's gender identity, parents were not as sure as only 67% agreed while 34.3% were neutral. Parents believed, for the most part, that the suggestions they make to their child's teacher are taken seriously with 71% of parents in agreement. Only one person disagreed and nine people chose a neutral response. Parents were closely split on whether or not their child's teacher pursues information on transgender issues. Most of the

responses were neutral with 40% while 29% parents in agreement and 32% in disagreement.

Parents were asked to state how their child's teacher concretely supported their child's gender expression. Out of the 32 parents, only one reply was negative with the teacher telling the child, "boys don't wear dresses. One response was neutral: "She does not encourage his expression but she does not tolerate bullying or teasing from other children."

The remainder expressed positive attitudes toward their child's teacher. Parents felt that their child's teacher generally accepted them with support and protection consistently mentioned as ways in which the teacher showed acceptance. Two parents discussed how their child's teacher not only accepted their child, but also worked collaboratively to support their child, for example: "She accepts her as her identified gender and has worked with us on making sure she's safe & secure at school."

Education as a means of support came up eight times. This could include the other children in the class through books and discussion of differences as well as teacher education through self-initiated research such as attending a conference or reading current literature on transgender issues. Parents attitudes overall seemed to be positive about how their child's teacher supported their gender expression, for example: "They don't comment on him choosing to play with dolls or play with girls...they get that his gender exploration is developmentally appropriate."

**Schools supporting expression gender nonconformity**

Similar to parent satisfaction of teacher support of their child's gender identity expression, parents expressed contentment with their child's school. The response rate was strong with all 35 survey participants answering all but one question, 'My child feels settled at their school/setting', which was answered by 33 parents. A majority of parents agreed that the school is doing well in helping their child feel included and welcomed with 80% in agreement and only three disagreeing. Among those who responded, 79% of parents agreed that their child feels settled at their school while three disagreed and four were neutral. The next two questions addressed nonconforming gender and identity. When asked if their child's gender identity or expression is undesirably impacted by their school, 66% disagreed with 17% responding in disagreement and neutrally. Only 46% of parent disagreed that their child 'experiences difficulties because of a lack of understanding about their gender expression or identity'. Slightly less agreed at 34% while 20% of parents were neutral.

Parents were also asked to further explain in what ways their child's school was supportive of their child's gender expression, of which 32 responded. The overall themes expressed by the parents were comparable to those articulated about teacher support: basic acceptance, choice in play activities and playmates, education, and intolerance to bullying. One parent mentioned an unsupportive school saying: "The school let her be called Maddie. Other than that the attitude from the principal was that there was something wrong with my child and it was ok for the other children to reject or treat her badly."

Close to a third of parents referred to their child's school accepting of their child's gender identity with comments such as, '...it's really not an issue', and 'never questioned it.' Going a step further, some schools are making an effort to educate the school community. Parents, faculty and staff, including the principal, school psychologist, and social workers have received some form of education regarding transgender issues. Other children also had education around these issues, for example: "The entire grade was instructed to 'trust that a kid knows which bathroom they belong in' and not to say 'you're in the wrong bathroom!'"

### **Negative or Neutral Responses**

A closer look was taken at the parents who responded negatively or neutrally to questions on teacher or school support of gender nonconformity. Although the majority of negative or neutral responses were spread out over the 35 parents, five parents had consistent neutral and/or negative responses. In response to whether or not they are satisfied with how their child is being treated, two were neutral and three disagreed. Parent responses on whether or not their child goes to the school of their choice was a little more spread out with one agreeing while three disagreed and one was neutral. Out of the five parents who fell in this category, only one did not respond to the short-answer questions. In general, parents felt their child's teachers were more supportive than the schools, for example: "His teachers have been open and supportive. The school has not, except without our extreme encouragement and pressure."

### **Relationship Between Receiving Support Services and Parent Advocacy**

To test if parents who receive support services regarding their child's gender identity are more likely to attempt collaboration between their child's teacher and school, comparisons of mean scores were completed using *t-tests* which revealed no significant statistical difference.

#6 Yes/No #23 ( $M=3.15/2.46$ ,  $SD=1.77/.75$ )  $t(11) .32$ ,  $p = .8$  (two-tailed)

#6 Yes/No #28 ( $M=1.5/3.3$ ,  $SD=.823/1.1$ )  $t(12) .85$ ,  $p = .414$  (two-tailed)

### ***Post-hoc* Correlations on Parent Advocacy and Satisfaction**

*Post-hoc* analyses were performed on two questions which addressed parent advocacy both with the teacher 'When I offer suggestions to my child's teacher about supporting his/her gender identity/expression, he or she listens carefully and considers my suggestions seriously' and the school 'Have you asked the school to change any aspect of the educational setting in order to support your child's gender identity/expression?' A Pearson correlation to test for statistical significance was run on the parent advocacy questions and a list of questions which suggest parent satisfaction. Significant correlations were not found between active parent involvement in the school and questions about parent satisfaction regarding the school setting.

A number of factors were positively correlated with parents who offered suggestions to their child's teacher about supporting their child's gender identity expression. Offering suggestions was correlated with: parent satisfaction [ $r(32) = .46$ ,  $p = .006$  (two-tailed)]; teacher providing child with choices in expressing their gender identity [ $r(32) = .5$ ,  $p = .002$  (two-tailed)]; teacher supports child's

capacity to be who they want to be [ $r(32) = .5, p = .004$  (two-tailed)]; teacher tries to understand child's gender identity [ $r(34) = .6, p = .000$  (two-tailed)]. There was one trending correlation between parents offering suggestions to teachers: parent feels that their child is understood by their teacher [ $r(31) = .32, p = .073$  (two-tailed)].

### **Discussion**

The main conclusion from this online survey is that parents were of the opinion that their child autonomously expresses their gender identity in the early childhood education setting. Most parents also felt that their child's teacher, as well as the school supported them in their ability to express their emerging gender identity. The hypothesis that parents who receive support services regarding their child's gender identity would be more likely to attempt collaboration with their child's teacher and school in fostering their child's ability to independently communicate their gender identity was not proven. Finally, the results of the current study show that there is no correlation between parent satisfaction and their requests to their child's school to change the school setting to support their child's gender identity. There was, however, a correlation between parent happiness and the suggestions they offered to their child's teacher in supporting their gender identity.

The majority of parents believed that their child is able to autonomously express their gender identity at school. Most parents did not think their child's gender identity would cause them to not do well in school. A third of the parents, however, did consider their child's gender identity to be an impediment in their child's capability to do well in school. Similarly, most parents thought their child's teacher encouraged their child in



expressing their gender identity while a third of the parents did not. Future research will need to examine more closely the experiences reported by those parents who believe their child is autonomously expressing their gender identity versus those parents who do not consider this to be the case.

Parents reported that in regards to general support of their child, teachers and schools were doing an excellent job. A good number of parents agreed, for example, that they are satisfied with how their child is treated and that their child goes to the school of their choice. As was the case with children's capacity to act autonomously in expressing their gender identity, most parents concurred that their child's teacher and school offered support in this matter while one third of parents did not agree. These findings partly support the claim made by Burt, Gelnaw and Lesser (2010) that young gender nonconforming children are not receiving the assistance they need to express their gender identity at school. The results of the current study show that whereas most young gender nonconforming children are supported by their teachers and schools in expressing their gender identity, some are not, which is an issue which needs to be addressed by early childhood educators.

Grossman and colleagues (2005) discuss how a positive educational setting is one that is receptive to each child's identity and provides them the opportunity to realize their gender identity. The parents who agreed that their child is autonomous and is fostered by their teacher and educational setting in exploring their gender identity described this type of environment. Those parents who agreed that their child received support were also satisfied with how their child was supported. For

example: “Our preschool allowed our child to play with whatever toys and costumes she liked and never divided into gendered groups,” and “They are completely accepting. Our school embraces diversity of all kinds and not only welcomes my child but has bent over backwards to make sure my child feels safe and welcome.” Parents mentioned teachers and administrators, who collaborate with the family on making an inclusive environment, take steps to educate the school community on transgender issues, and offer gender nonconforming children acceptance and protection.

Interestingly, results of the current study show correlations with teachers listening to parents’ recommendations on how to support their child’s expression of their gender identity and two key areas regarding gender identity. First, teachers who listen to parents are more likely to offer gender nonconforming children with options on how to express their gender identity. This is important as it illustrates that these children are, because of the choices they have, autonomous in expressing their gender identity (Kamii, 1985, p. 45). Also, it is probable that teachers who heed parent’s advice make an attempt to understand the child’s gender identity. The second point is supported by Dykstra (2005) who states that teachers must not only be non-judgmental but also actively trans-positive.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

This study had a few limitations. First, the sample size, although reasonable for an initial study was small with only thirty-five participants. Whereas a small sample size is appropriate for gathering data qualitative in nature, a larger participant pool would provide a more accurate picture of the quantitative data. Second, it was not clear through interpretation of participant data or responses if some parents were portraying the

experience their child had in preschool or early elementary school. Data were analyzed if the child reported was between the ages of two to eleven years and there was no reference to experiences a child in upper elementary or high school would have. Finally, the survey instrument used in the current study was compiled from four separate surveys. Although the original surveys were tested for reliability and validity, the current survey has not been tested for reliability or validity.

Notwithstanding the limitations of the current study, valuable information has been obtained through the data gathered. It was found that although parents overwhelmingly rated their child's teacher and school to be generally supportive, a portion of parents did not believe their child was autonomous in expressing their gender identity or that their teacher or school supports them in their autonomy. Further study to examine the experiences had by these children could provide a more in-depth consideration of the issues they face in school regarding their gender identity. Additionally, a study should be done on preschools and early childhood educators to determine how and to what extent young gender nonconforming children are being fostered in the early childhood educational setting.

### **Implications**

The current study has theoretical and practical implications for the field of education. Based on the findings, some young gender nonconforming children are unable to autonomously express their gender identity at school nor are they supported by their teacher or school. These children are being harmed through their experiences at school. This fact is in violation of the first principle in the Position Statement of

the National Association for the Education of Young Children which states: “Above all, we shall not harm children. We shall not participate in practices that are emotionally damaging, physically harmful, disrespectful, degrading, dangerous, exploitative, or intimidating to children. *This principle has precedence over all others in this Code*” (NAEYC, 2005, p. 3). Anti-bias education for teachers needs to provide them with the tools necessary for thinking about gender differently and supporting all children in exploring gender. Early childhood educators need to examine their practice and ensure that the curriculum and environment reflect the experiences of gender nonconforming people. Additionally, early childhood educators must make certain that the interactions they have with the gender nonconforming children in their care are positive and affirming.

In conclusion, although most parents were satisfied with the way their child is treated in school and believe that their child can autonomously express their gender identity, one-third of parents were not of the opinion that their child is able to express their gender identity at school or that their child’s teacher and school are supportive in regards to gender nonconformity. This is important to note as numerous studies show that transgender youth face harassment and discrimination in the school setting on an almost daily basis (Holmes & Cahill, 2004; Kosciw, Greytak, Diaz, & Bartkiewicz, 2009; Kosciw, Greytak & Diaz 2009; Sausa, 2005). Given this information, educators must actively seek out information about transgender issues to inform them on how to modify their curriculum and environment to foster young gender nonconforming children in

expressing their gender identity in the ECE setting. Furthermore, more research  
needs to examine the experiences had by young gender nonconforming children.

References

- Achenbach, T. M., & Edelbrock, C. S. (1981). Behavioral problems and competencies reported by parents of normal and disturbed children aged four through sixteen. *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development*, 46, 82.
- Addis, S., Davies, M., Greene, G., MacBride-Stewart, S., & Shepherd, M. (2009). The health, social care and housing needs of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender older people: A review of the literature. *Health & Social Care in the Community*, 17(6), 647-658. doi: 1111/j.1365-2524.2009.00866.x
- Brill, S. (2008). *The transgender child: A handbook for families and professionals*. Berkeley, CA: Cleis Press.
- Burt, T., Gelnaw, A., Lesser, L. (2010). Creating welcoming and inclusive environments for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (lgbt) families in early childhood settings. *Young Children*, 65(3), 97-102.
- Derman-Sparks, L. & Edwards. (2010) *Anti-bias education for young children and ourselves*. Washington, D.C.: National Association for the Education of Young Children.
- Derman-Sparks, L. & Ramsey, P. (2000). A framework for culturally relevant, multicultural, and antibias education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In J. Roopnarine & J. Johnson (Eds.), *Approaches to early childhood education* (pp. 379-404). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill/Prentice Hall.
- Di Ceglie, D., & Thümmel, E. C. (2006). An Experience of Group Work with Parents of Children and Adolescents with

- Gender Identity Disorder. *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 11(3), 387-396. doi:10.1177/1359104506064983
- Dykstra, Laurel. (2005). Trans-friendly preschool. *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Issues in Education*, 3(1), 7-13. doi: 10.1300/J367v03n01\_03
- Ehrensaft, D. (2007). Raising girlyboys: A parent's perspective. *Studies in Gender and Sexuality*. 8(3), 269-302. doi: 10.1080/15240650701226581
- Ehrensaft, D. (2010). "I'm a prius": A child case of a gender/ethnic hybrid. *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Mental Health*. 15(1), 46-57.  
doi:10.1080/193597/05.2011.530571
- Ehrensaft, D. (2011a). Boys will be girls, girls will be boys: Children affect parents as parents affect children in gender nonconformity. *Psychoanalytic Psychology*,  
doi:10.1037/a0023828
- Ehrensaft, D. (2011b). *Gender born, gender made: Raising healthy gender-nonconforming children*. New York, NY: The Experiment, LLC.
- Eldridge, D. 2001. Parent involvement: It's worth the effort. *Young Children*, 56 (4): 65-69.
- Erikson, Erik H. (1959/1994). *Identity and the Life Cycle*. New York: International Universities Press.
- Grossman, A. H. & D'Augelli, A. R. (2006). Transgender youth: Invisible and vulnerable. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 51, 111-128.  
[http://dx.doi.org/10.1300/J082v51n01\\_06](http://dx.doi.org/10.1300/J082v51n01_06)

- Grossman, A. H., D'Augelli, A. R., Jarrett Howell, T., Hubbard, S. M. (2005). Parents' reactions to transgender youths' gender nonconforming expression and identity. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services*. 18(1), 3-16. doi: 10.1300/J041v18n01\_03
- Grossman, A.H., D'Augelli, A.R., Salter, N.P., Hubbard, S.M. (2005). Comparing gender expression, gender nonconformity, and parents' responses of female-to-male and male-to-female transgender youth: Implications for counseling. *Journal of LGBT Issues in Counseling*, 1(1), 41-59.
- Hill, D. B., Menvielle, E. (2009). "You have to give them a place where they feel protected and safe and loved": The views of parents who have gender-variant children and adolescents. *Journal of LGBT Youth*, 6(2/3), 243-271. doi:10.1080/19361650903013527
- Hill, D. B., Menvielle, E., Sica, K. M., & Johnson, A. (2010). An Affirmative Intervention for Families With Gender Variant Children: Parental Ratings of Child Mental Health and Gender. *Journal of Sex & Marital Therapy*, 36(1), 6-23. doi:10.1080/00926230903375560
- Hill, D. B., & Willoughby, B. (2005). The development and validation of the Genderism and Transphobia Scale. *Sex Roles*, 53, 531-544.
- Holmes, S. E., & Cahill, S. (2004). School Experiences of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Youth. *Journal Of Gay & Lesbian Issues In Education*, 1(3), 53-66. doi:10.1300/J367v01n03\_06



- Johnson, L. L., Bradley, S. J., Birkenfeld-Adams, A. S., Radzkins Kuksis, M. A., Maing, D. A., Mitchell, J. N., & Zucker, K. J. (2004). A parent-report gender identity questionnaire for children. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 33, 105–116.
- Kamii, C. K., & DeClark, G. (1985). *Young children reinvent arithmetic: Implications of Piaget's theory*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Kosciw, J. G., Greytak, E. A., & Diaz, E. M. (2009). Who, what, where, when, and why: Demographic and ecological factors contributing to hostile school climate for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth. *Journal of Youth & Adolescence*, 38(7), 976-988. doi: 10.1007/s10964-009-9412-1
- Kosciw, J. G., Greytak, E. A., Diaz, E. M., Bartkiewicz, M. J. (2010). *The 2009 national school climate survey: The experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender youth in our nation's schools*. New York, NY: Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network. Retrieved from <http://pennsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/2009-National-School-Climate-Report-Full.pdf>
- Leitão, N. & Waugh, R. (2007, Nov). Teachers' views of teacher-student relationships in the primary school. Retrieved from <http://www.aare.edu.au/07pap/lei07022.pdf>
- Lombardi, E. (2009). Varieties of transgender/transsexual lives and their relationships with transphobia. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 56(8), 977-992. doi:10.1080/00918360903275393
- Lombardi, E., Wilchins, R. A., Priesing, D., & Malouf, D. (2002). Gender violence, *Journal of Homosexuality*, 42, 89-101. doi:10.1300/J082v42n01\_05

- Luecke, J. C. (2011). Working with transgender children and their classmates in pre-adolescence: Just be supportive. *Journal of LGBT Youth*. 8, 116-156. doi: 10.1080/19361653.2011.544941
- McGuire, J.K., Anderson, C. R., Toomey, R. B., & Russell, S.T. (2010). School climate for transgender youth: A mixed method investigation of student experiences and school responses. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*. 39, 1175-1188. doi: 10.1007/s10964-010-9540-7.
- Menvielle, E. (2004). Parents struggling with their child's gender issues. *Brown University Child & Adolescent Behavior Letter*, 20(7), 1-4.
- Meyer-Bahlburg, H. F. L. (2002) Gender identity disorder in young boys: A parent and peer-based treatment protocol. *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry*. 7, 360-377. doi: 10.1177/1359104502007003005
- Mufti, E. (2009). White working class kids: Why are they failing. In D. Kassem & D. Garratt (Eds.), *Exploring key issues in education* (pp. 83-96). New York: NY: The Continuum International Publishing Group Ltd.
- NAEYC. (2005). Position statement. NAEYC code of ethical conduct and statement of commitment. Rev. ed. Brochure. Washington DC Retrieved from: <http://www.naeyc.org/files/naeyc/file/positions/PSETH05.pdf>
- Parsons, S., Lewis, A., & Ellins, J. (2009). The views and experiences of parents of children with autistic spectrum disorder about educational provision: Comparisons with parents of children with other disabilities from an online

survey. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 24(1), 37-58.

doi:10.1080/08856250802596790

Piaget, J., Inhelder, B. (1962). *The Psychology of the Child*. New York, NY: Basic Books.

Rands, K. (2009). Considering Transgender People in Education : A Gender-Complex Approach. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 60 419-430. doi: 10.1177/0022487109341475

Sangganjanavanich, V., & Cavazos, J. (2010). Workplace aggression: Toward social justice and advocacy in counseling for transgender individuals. *Journal of LGBT Issues in Counseling*, 4(3/4), 187-201. doi:10.1080/15538605.2010.524844

Sausa, L. (2005). Translating research into practice: Trans youth recommendations for improving school systems. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Issues in Education*. 3(1), 15-28. doi: 10.1300/J367v03n01\_04

Squires, G., Farrell, P., Woods, K., Lewis, S., Rooney, S., & O'Connor, M. (2007). Educational Psychologists' Contribution to the Every Child Matters Agenda: The parents' view. *Educational Psychology In Practice*, 23(4), 343-361. doi:10.1080/02667360701660993

Style, E. (1996). Curriculum as window & mirror. *Social Science Record*. Retrieved from <http://www.library.wisc.edu/edvrc/docs/public/pdfs/SEEDReadings/CurriculumWindow.pdf> Vanderburgh, R. (2009). Appropriate therapeutic care for families with pre-pubescent transgender/gender-dissonant children. *Child & Adolescent Social Work Journal*, 26(2), 135-154. doi:10.1007/s10560-008-0158-5

- Williams, G. & Deci, E. (1996). Internalization of biopsychosocial values by medical students: A test of self-determination theory. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. 4, 767-779. doi:10.1037//0022-3514.70.4.767
- Willoughby, B. B., Hill, D. B., Gonzalez, C. A., Lacorazza, A., Macapagal, R. A., Barton, M. E., & Doty, N. D. (2010). Who hates gender outlaws? A multisite and multinational evaluation of the genderism and transphobia scale. *International Journal of Transgenderism*, 12(4), 254-271. doi:10.1080/15532739.2010.550821
- Zucker, K. J., & Bradley, S. J. (1995). Gender identity disorder and psychosexual problems in children and adolescents. New York: Guilford Press.

**Appendices**

**Appendix A**

Questionnaire—to be completed on SurveyMonkey, adapted from (Leitão & Waugh, 2007; Parsons, Lewis & Ellins, 2009; Squires, Farrell, Woods, Lewis, Rooney & O'Connor, 2007; Williams & Deci, 1996)

Please answer these questions for gender nonconforming child who is currently attending or has completed preschool.

Demographic questions

- In what ZIP code is your home located? (enter a 5-digit ZIP code; for example, 00544 or 94305)
- What is your ethnicity?  
American Indian or Alaskan Native, Asian, Black or African-American, Hispanic/Latino, Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, White, From multiple races, Some other race (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_
- What is your child's ethnicity?  
American Indian or Alaskan Native, Asian, Black or African-American, Hispanic/Latino, Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, White, From multiple races, Some other race (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_
- What is the highest level of school you have completed or the highest degree you have received?  
Less than a high school degree, High school degree or equivalent (e.g., GED), Some college but no degree, Associate degree, Bachelor degree, Graduate degree
- Do you receive support services regarding your child's? If so what kind, e.g. parent support group, listserv, conference?  
Yes, \_\_\_\_\_, No
- If you receive support services, where do you receive them?  
\_\_\_\_\_
- If you receive support services, how often do you receive them?  
Weekly, Monthly, \_\_\_\_\_
- How old is your child in years and months?  
\_\_\_\_\_
- What sex is your child? (optional)  
Female, Male
- What gender is your child?  
\_\_\_\_\_

Questions regarding the early childhood education setting

1 = strongly agree, 2 = agree, 3 = neutral, 4 = disagree, 5 = strongly disagree

- The school/setting is doing well helping my child feel included and welcomed

## AUTONOMY IN EXPRESSING GENDER IDENTITY

- My child feels settled at their school/setting
- My child is making progress with his/her development
- I am satisfied with the way my child is treated
- My child's gender identity/expression will stop him/her doing well at his/her school/setting
- My child's gender identity/expression prevents him/her from learning in their school/setting
- My child's gender identity/expression stops him/her from doing extra activities run by the school/setting eg. Going swimming, going on field trips
- My child's gender identity/expression is negatively impacted by the organization of the school/setting
- My child experiences difficulties because of a lack of understanding about his/her gender expression/identity in the school/setting
- My child's gender identity/expression is just the way she/he is
- Does your child currently go to the type of school/setting that you want?
- Have you asked the school to change any aspect of the educational setting in order to support your child's gender identity/expression?
- Has your child ever been excluded from school?

### Teacher supporting autonomy

1 = strongly agree, 2 = agree, 3 = neutral, 4 = disagree, 5 = strongly disagree

- My child's teacher provides him/her with choices and options in expressing his/her gender identity.
- My child's teacher supports my child's ability to be who he/she wants to be.
- My child's teacher tries to understand his/her gender identity.
- When I offer suggestions to my child's teacher about supporting his/her gender identity/expression, he or she listens carefully and considers my suggestions seriously.
- My child's teacher shows him/her respect.
- My child's teacher seeks to inform him/herself on transgender issues.
- I feel that my child's teacher understands him/her

### Teacher involvement

3a. My child's teacher demonstrates...

1 = strongly agree, 2 = agree, 3 = neutral, 4 = disagree, 5 = strongly disagree

- a personal knowledge of my child
- a genuine care for my child
- a genuine interest in my child's life
- a sensitivity to my child's emotional state/needs
- a supportive attitude toward my child

## AUTONOMY IN EXPRESSING GENDER IDENTITY

3b. My child's teacher's involvement helpful to...  
1 = strongly agree, 2 = agree, 3 = neutral, 4 = disagree, 5 = strongly disagree

- my child's health and well-being
- my child's safety and security
- my child's capacity to get on with others
- my child's future prospects and life chances

Questions added by me

- In what ways did your child's school/setting support your child in his/her gender expression?
- In what ways did your child's teacher support your child in his/her gender expression?
- In what ways was your child able to express his/her gender identity?

Appendix B

**List of Websites and Parent Support Groups**

**Websites**

Crossport Cincinnati Gender Support (<http://www.crossport.org/>)  
Gender Diversity Education and Support Services (<http://www.genderdiversity.org/>)  
Gender Odyssey Family (<http://www.genderodysseyfamily.org/>)  
Gender Spectrum (<http://www.genderspectrum.org/>)  
Kaleidoscope Youth Center (<http://www.kycoho.org/index.php>)  
PFLAG (Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays—  
<http://community.pflag.org/page.aspx?pid=194&chid=403>)  
TransFamily (<http://www.transfamily.org/>)  
Transkids Purple Rainbow Foundation  
Trans Youth Family Allies (<http://imatyfa.org/>)

**Listserves**

TFY\_Talk ([http://health.groups.yahoo.com/group/TYFA\\_TALK/](http://health.groups.yahoo.com/group/TYFA_TALK/))  
The Outreach Program for Children with Gender-Variant Behaviors and Their Families  
(<http://www.childrensnational.org/departmentsandprograms/default.aspx?Id=6178&Type=Program&Name=Gender%20and%20Sexuality%20Psychosocial%20Programs#advocacy>)



Appendix C

**Participant Consent Form**

By filling out this survey, I agree that I am over 18 years of age and that I voluntarily agree to participate in a research project conducted by Riley Graham.

The research is being conducted in order to illustrate how the young gender nonconforming child's sense of self and independence might have been impacted by the attitudes and behaviors of the teacher in the classroom. The study will examine parents' or legal guardians' recollections of the experiences had by their transgender or gender nonconforming children in preschool. An additional goal is to provide parents or legal guardians of gender nonconforming children a voice within academic literature. The specific task I will perform requires answering several questions in an online survey for the duration of 10 to 30 minutes. Some of these questions will inquire about my opinions on the support my child received from his/her school and teacher, and how well my child's teacher knows my child. The answers will be kept anonymous and confidential.

I acknowledge that Riley Graham has explained the task to me fully; has informed me that I may withdraw from participation at any time without prejudice or penalty; has offered to answer any questions that I might have concerning the research procedure; has assured me that any information that I give will be used for research purposes only and will be kept confidential. The email address the survey link is sent to will not be stored in the data responses and the survey can be filled out from any computer with internet access. The submitted surveys will be anonymous and confidential. I understand that individuals associated with this research may request now or at some time in the future an extension of the permissions for the use of this information that I consent to here.

I also acknowledge that the benefits derived from, or rewards given for, my participation have been fully explained to me--as well as alternative methods, if available, for earning these rewards—and that I have been promised, upon completion of the research task, a brief description of the role my specific performance plays in this project. The reward for having completed the survey is an entry into a raffle for a \$30 amazon.com gift certificate. I understand that I may contact the following people if I have questions about this study at a time following my participation.

Riley Graham  
Masters of Education Candidate  
rgraham@mills.edu

Dr. Priya Shimpi  
Department of Education, Mills College  
(510) 430-2114  
pshimpi@mills.edu

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Signature of Participant)

/ \_\_\_\_\_  
(Date)

(Consent forms filled out online will have a button to signify signature)

# AUTONOMY IN EXPRESSING GENDER IDENTITY

## Appendix D Recruitment Letter

Date

Re: A Research Study You May Be Interested In

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

I am a Masters of Arts candidate in Early Childhood Education (ECE) at Mills College and for my thesis I am conducting a research study on young gender nonconforming children and their preschool. I am interested in finding out how young gender nonconforming children remain independent in expressing their gender identity. Analysis of data collected will seek to as a framework to apply in the ECE environment to better support young gender nonconforming children.

Your assistance in this study is of great importance and may contribute to making the ECE setting a more welcoming and inclusive place for young gender nonconforming children. Participation in this study will involve the completion of an anonymous online survey. The survey should take between 10 and 30 minutes to complete and can be done on any computer with internet access. Upon completion of survey, you will be entered into a raffle for a \$30 amazon.com gift certificate.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please go online to the web address: (<https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/identityexpressionyounggendernonconformingchildren>). If you have questions, please do not hesitate to call me at xxx or email me at [rgraham@mills.edu](mailto:rgraham@mills.edu). Participating in research is voluntary.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Riley Graham  
Graduate Student  
Mills College  
5000 Macarthur Blvd.  
Oakland, CA 94605

Appendix E

**Recruitment Email/Listserv Announcement**

Graduate Thesis in the School of Education at Mills College

The Young Child's Independence in Expressing Gender Nonconformity Study

Seeking new participants! Parents or legal guardians of gender nonconforming children between the ages of 2 years and 8 years old.

You are invited to participate in a study at Mills College, Oakland, CA about how young gender nonconforming or gender questioning children express their gender identity in preschool. Your assistance in this study is very important and may contribute to making preschool a more welcoming and inclusive place for young gender nonconforming children.

My study looks at:

- How the preschool environment might affect young gender nonconforming children's ability to express their gender identity
- How the preschool teacher might affect young gender nonconforming children's ability to express their gender identity
- What the connection between parent or legal guardian involvement in supportive services, e.g. therapy, listserv and their positive reports of support in preschool and by the teachers might be

The online survey will take between 10 and 30 minutes and can be completed on any computer with an internet connection. Upon completion of survey, you will be entered into a raffle for a \$30 amazon.com gift certificate.

If your child is between the ages of 2 years through 8 years of age and you would like to participate in my study, please visit [SurveyMonkey.com/.....](https://www.surveymonkey.com/) and complete the survey. If there are any questions, please contact Riley Graham at [rgraham@mills.edu](mailto:rgraham@mills.edu).