Introduction

THERE IS A WIDESPREAD BELIEF that children either do not or should not know about sexuality, and attempts to engage with young children around issues of sexuality is problematic in the early years (Epstein, 1999; Renold, 2005; Robinson, 2005; Sears, 2009; Tobin, 1997). Cullen and Sandy (2009) argue that dominant and romantic discourses of presumed childhood innocence (James, Jenks & Prout, 1998) construct young children as naïve, with little knowledge about gender and sexuality. This is a common idea that has been supported by some research. For example, in the health sciences, Brilleslijper-Kater and Baartman (2000) investigated the sexual knowledge of 63 Dutch children (two- to six-year-olds) and determined that they only had a basic grasp of sexuality. This project defined sexual knowledge as children’s ability to determine sex differences; name sexual body parts and functions; and describe what they knew about the birth process, reproduction, and adult heterosexual behaviours. Although children in the study showed evidence of talking about adult heterosexual behaviours, such as males and females kissing each other or cuddling, the authors conclude that children’s ability to understand the differences between physical intimacy and heterosexual interactions does not play a significant part in contributing to children’s sexual knowledge. On the other hand, there is gender and sexuality research situated within the sociology of education, drawing from poststructuralist and queer theories, arguing that children’s understandings about gender differences and heterosexual interactions, even ones that might not appear to be about sexuality per se, are significant and do show that young children have sexual knowledge. These perspectives consider gender and sexuality to be socially constructed and have rethought the relationship between sex, gender and sexuality in ways that show how gender and sexuality are deeply interrelated. Research conducted in education shows how children use their knowledge of gender norms and (hetero)sexuality to regulate and construct what it means to be a girl and boy (Blaise, 2005, 2009; Blaise & Andrew, 2005; Bhana, 2007; Davies, 2003; Francis, 1998; Grieshaber, 2004; Reay, 2001; Renold, 2005; Skattebol, 2006; Taylor & Richardson, 2005; Tobin, 1997). Attempting to resolve these two competing discourses about children’s sexual knowledge and its role in identity construction, a small-scale qualitative study framed by poststructuralist and queer perspectives was conducted over a five-day period. This project set out to explore how young children talk about gender and sexuality while engaging with activities commonly found in early years’ settings.

Kiss and tell:  
Gendered narratives and childhood sexuality

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THIS PAPER IS BASED ON a small-scale qualitative study framed by poststructuralist and queer perspectives that explored how young children talk about gender and sexuality while engaging with activities commonly found in early years settings. Findings show that children are eager to talk about gender and sexuality and do have a considerable amount of sexual knowledge. Questions are raised regarding the role of the early years’ teacher and the responsibility the field has for opening up spaces in the curriculum for children’s gender and sexual knowledge to be heard, valued and considered.
Researching gender

Since Davies’ work (1989, 2003) 20 years ago, early years education has been generating a body of gender research that draws from conceptualisations of subjectivity associated with poststructuralist theories (i.e. Grieshaber, 2004; MacNaughton, 2000; Yelland, 1998). This research shifts away from understanding gender as biologically fixed, coherent and stable towards situating gender as a social and relational construction. Additionally, this work recognises young children as active agents in their gender identity work. That is, children are not simply ‘learning’ or ‘soaking-up’ the social meanings, values, and expectations of how to be a girl or a boy exclusively from their parents, teachers, peers or the media. Rather, children themselves are producing and regulating gender by taking part in constantly ‘doing’ and ‘redoing’ femininities and masculinities. From this perspective, children’s identity construction is a dynamic and continuous process in a constant state of renegotiation. For instance, while reading feminist stories to preschool children and then discussing with them what they thought, Davies (2003) found children did not simply accept the notion that boys and girls can do or be anything (i.e. boys wearing dresses or girls choosing not to marry a prince). Instead, children’s resistance to these feminist storylines meant that the field needed to rethink their beliefs about how children take up gender. In the second stage of her research, Davies observed children taking up gender in a range of ways, disclosing the strategies they used for maintaining and transgressing the male/female binary. Her research also shows that young children are aware of the difficulties involved in transgressing gender norms. For instance, four-year-old Anika explains how she feels funny: ‘… when the wrong kind of human being does that [transgressing gender norms] I get a (pause) tickle in my brain …’ (Davies, 2003, p. 119). Davies’ work was groundbreaking because not only was it the first qualitative study to use poststructuralist concepts for understanding children’s gender identity, but it also shows clearly that they take an active role in constituting themselves as girls and boys.

Researching gender and sexuality

Scholars have been building on this important gender research by using insights from queer theory (i.e. Blaise, 2005, 2009; Blaise & Andrew, 2005; Boldt, 1997; DePalma & Atkinson, 2009; Renold, 2005, 2006; Robinson & Davies, 2007; Skattebol, 2006; Taylor & Blaise, 2007; Taylor & Richardson, 2005) to show how children produce and regulate gender within early years settings. These findings tell us that children do have knowledge about gender and sexuality, an idea that challenges conceptions of childhood innocence. The work of Judith Butler (1993, 1999) and Michel Foucault (1978) has been crucial for critiquing heteronormativity and rethinking the relationship between sex, gender and sexuality, proposing a new understanding of gender as performance, and suggesting that heterosexuality is an effect of gender (Richardson, 2008). These ideas have been pivotal for researching gender/sexuality1 in the early years.

Rethinking sex, gender and sexuality

As well as taking up poststructuralist perspectives to understand subjectivity, scholars have used queer theory to reject the idea that gender is simply an expression of sex, or that gender and sex are biological or natural traits that reside inside us. Foucault (1978) argues that sexuality is neither a fact of life nor something that is natural. Instead, sexuality is considered a constructed category of experience, which has historical, social and cultural origins. By re-examining the relationships between sex, gender and sexuality, it becomes possible to explore in different ways children’s knowledge about gender/sexuality.

Gender performativity

Butler (1999) contends that gender is the process through which different human cultures make sense of sexual identity. Her understanding of gender as performative is the idea that a gendered identity is produced only as it is enacted. At first, this conceptualisation of gender performativity might seem similar to a gender socialisation perspective where girls and boys are learning (and doing) certain gendered practices. Gender performativity rethinks the sex-gender-sexuality relationship in two important ways. First, it rejects the assumption that sex is seen as prior to gender or the common sense logic that insists there must be a time when the sexed subject is un-gendered. Second, it contests the idea that there is a ‘doer behind the deed’ (Butler, 1999, p. 34) because gender identity is produced through specific bodily practices, gestures, actions and declarations. Gender identity is an effect of doing gender, rather than a cause. For Butler, gender is not a noun, but a verb, because it is always about doing. Butler believes that ‘[g]ender is the repeated stylisation of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance of a natural sort of being’ (1999, p. 45). Following Butler’s logic, by acting out or performing gender children are making sense of and producing what it means to be ‘girl’ and/or ‘boy’. ‘Talk’ is one of the key ways that we do gender because it constitutes a powerful set of actions, enacted communally, which functions to create gender.

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1 Following Butler, I will be acknowledging the intimate connection between gender and sexuality by using the construct gender/sexuality.
Heterosexual discourses

Queer theory is also concerned with heterosexual discourses and how they influence the social construction of gender (Warner, 1993). Our gender performances take place within a dualistic framework of male/female that Butler (1999) calls the ‘heterosexual matrix’ (p.6). This matrix should be thought of as a specific regulatory structure that produces femininity, masculinity and heterosexuality as intelligible. From this perspective, the concept of feminales or maleness becomes meaningless in the absence of heterosexuality because intrinsic to this concept is the idea of an opposite or complementary sex (Jackson, 2006). Heterosexuality, as an institutionalised set of power relations, is enforced through rewards for ‘appropriate’ or normative gendered behaviours and non-normative behaviours are marginalised. For instance, Blaise (2005) recounts an incident when a five-year-old boy showed an excited interest in the make-up a girl had brought to school. His classmates let him know the ‘inappropriateness’ of his interest in this highly feminised item by ignoring his questions about the make-up, dismissing him with body language denoting disgust, and laughing at him. These children were not only actively regulating what it means to be a boy in this kindergarten classroom, but they were also shoring up the heterosexual matrix. Because the heterosexual matrix privileges some desires over others, a few children will inevitably be excluded when these actions are left unchallenged. The children’s actions with the boy, Cheng, were reinforcing the heterosexual matrix because wearing make-up is an activity available only to one gender (female) with the explicit purpose of attracting the other gender (male). This is considered problematic because children’s behaviours are limiting the possibilities for all girls and boys.

A queer understanding of gender assumes that heterosexuality functions to produce regulatory notions of femininity and masculinity. Particular forms of femininity are produced in relation to particular, and highly valued, forms of masculinity. It is not that heterosexual practices are a problem in themselves, but they become problematic because they constitute the only powerful and socially approved form of sexual expression within the heterosexual matrix. These are critiques on the discourses of heterosexuality and how they have become embedded into our thoughts and everyday actions (Butler, 1999; Rich, 1980; Sedgwick, 1990). Queer theory makes it possible to understand how the institution of heterosexuality entails more than simply sexual relations; for example, the nuclear family, wedding ceremonies and bridal showers. Many of these are dominant ideas within our culture and thus have become instruments of power, positioning heterosexual relationships as the most valued and acceptable form of sexuality.

There is a growing body of early years research that utilises queer theory for understanding the processes and practices of heterosexuality in children’s play (i.e. Blaise, 2005, 2009; Boldt, 1997; DePalma & Atkinson, 2009; Renold, 2005; Robinson & Davies, 2007; Skattebol, 2006; Taylor & Richardson, 2005). In particular, these studies have used Butler’s conceptualisation of gender performativity (1993, 1999, 2004) and how hegemonic gender practices are produced through the heterosexual matrix (1999) to understand the ways children are engaging with heterosexual gender norms for the purpose of constituting gender in early childhood. Findings from these studies repeatedly show that young children do know about gender and (hetero)sexuality. For instance, Skattebol (2006) engages with queer and poststructural theory in order to show how young children embody age, race and gender while negotiating identity in an early childhood centre. This research is significant because Skattebol is making a deliberate ‘material turn’ (Alaimo & Hekman, 2008, p. 6) in order to highlight that language is not the only way children negotiate and construct their identities. Her practitioner inquiry shows how a four-year-old boy named Zac embodied hegemonic masculinity to exclude others in cross-gender play. Zac’s repeated calls for not playing with girls is an example of how a particular form of masculinity (boys don’t play with girls; boys are different, and better, than girls; boys and girls do different things, etc.) becomes categorically fixed, stabilised, and constructed as ‘normal’.

Since the gendered subject is produced, gender can be seen as neither fixed nor stable. It is gender’s instability, as well as the matrix’s permeability (Butler, 2006), that opens up possibilities to resist gender norms. Several studies use Butler’s theory of gender performativity to explore the fluidity and instability of gender (i.e. Blaise, 2005, 2009; Reay, 2001; Renold, 2005, 2006; Robinson & Davies, 2007; Taylor & Richardson, 2005). In particular, Taylor and Richardson (2005) present a series of narratives they created from observational field notes of children’s home corner play in an Australian early childhood centre to illustrate the ways children regulate and transgress gender norms. Their analysis uses Butler’s (1999) theory of gender performativity and Foucault’s (1986) concept of heterotopia to deconstruct children’s domestic play in the home corner. These narratives show the fluidity of children’s gender-identities, including how positions of power were overturned. Not only were children observed exceeding normative ways of being girl and boy, but they were also transforming what it means to be gendered as they performed hybrid and queer identities.

Collectively, the gender/sexuality research conducted in the early years troubles the myth of childhood innocence by revealing the multiple ways that children draw upon
Developing a collaborative and generative research approach

Since young children are in the process of working through their theories of sexuality, it is important to remember that these might be difficult for adults to locate or even to recognise how those ideas might be related to sexuality (Britzman, 1998). Therefore, this study explored how children, not adults, knew and talked about these concepts in their everyday worlds. With this goal in mind, this study moved away from situating children’s sexual knowledge as simply naming body parts or explaining where babies come from, to generating data that showed how they talked about gender/sexuality in their own terms. If gender is an effect of sex, as Butler’s (1993, 1999) work suggests, then children’s understandings of gender, especially when situated within heterosexual discourses, might provide access to understanding their sexual knowledge. In short, poststructuralist and queer perspectives mean that children’s talk offers one way to document children’s understandings about gender/sexuality.

The study took place in a three- and four-year-old’s room at an Australian childcare centre and Elaine was the teacher for this group. Over a five-day period, multiple methods were used to generate data with children, including participant observations, field notes, and audiotaped formal interviews and informal daily research de-briefs were conducted with teacher Elaine. These were strategies for strengthening the collaborative researcher–teacher relationship and developing child-centred research activities used throughout the study. Field notes and audiotapes were reviewed and listened to nightly and critical incidents were noted. The following day, these initial findings were presented to Elaine at the morning de-brief. During this time Elaine would add her perspective to the data, findings, and research process. It would then be decided how the original research plan would be modified. Finally, after fieldwork, a daily researcher notebook was left in the room for parents to read. This notebook contained a summary of the research activities and initial findings. Families were encouraged to respond to questions such as ‘Do you hear similar kinds of talk about being handsome, cool, pretty or sexy at home?’, ‘What kinds of dress-up games does your child like to play?’ For a thorough discussion of the strategies used to support this research collaboration and the generation of data over a short time see Blaise (in press). Elaine first introduced the project to families. I then attended a parent social night at the centre and discussed the project with families, answered questions and collected the required paperwork.

Although 18 children’s parents consented for their child to participate in the project, a total of 12 children were involved in different aspects of the study. Because of the nature and structure of the childcare centre, as well as the design of the study, not every child who had parental consent participated. Some children were either not present for the research activities or they were not interested at that time. Elaine and I decided to conduct the research activities in ways consistent with the room’s daily routines and structures. For instance, in this room it was common for some children to participate in a special learning activity the teacher had prepared, such as art, while others might decide to play outside or in another area of the room. By following the room routine, sometimes children would choose not to participate in the research activity and chose other activities instead. At times children ‘opted in’ or ‘opted out’ of the research activity, depending on their current interest.

Initial analysis took place when summarising the daily activities in the researcher journal left for parents’ response and when de-briefing with Elaine. These initial summaries and questions informed the next day’s research activity. In particular, they influenced how the research activities were conducted, including which ideas about gender/sexuality were highlighted and talked about with children. Formal analysis occurred after data was generated and was conducted by reading and rereading the audiotaped transcripts of discussions with children, teacher interviews and de-briefs, field notes, and the researcher journal. The initial codes were influenced by discursive understandings of gender/sexuality, particularly as they are constituted through the heterosexual matrix. Transcripts were first coded by how children talked about gender differences. These codes included gender descriptions used by children and how they talked about and reacted to topics associated with gender/sexuality. These categories were then expanded through queer and poststructural ideas related to relationships and desires in order to explore what children know about femininities, masculinities and (hetero)sexualities. Although children showed knowledge about a range of gender/sexuality discourses, this paper focuses primarily on the topic
of kissing, and this provides us with an insight into children’s sexual knowledge.

‘Have you ever kissed a boy?’

On the second day of the project, the popular picture book, *Clarice Bean, that’s me*, by Lauren Child (2000) was read to a small group of children (four girls and three boys) in order to engage them in a discussion about gender/sexuality. This book was chosen for two reasons. First, as an award–winning author/illustrator, Child has an established international reputation and it has been my experience that girls and boys enjoy these stories about the main character. Clarice Bean is a confident and precocious school-aged girl, who introduces readers to her large extended family (father, mum, older brother and sister, cousin, grandad, plumber, neighbours, pets, etc.) and instigates several adventures. Second, this story includes pictures and text about Marcie, Clarice’s older sister. In particular, one page shows Marcie sitting on her bed, reading a fashion magazine. Several thought bubbles give the reader a sense of the content of Marcie’s magazine. They include: ‘Do boys give you the dreamy eye?’, ‘??’, ‘!!!’, ‘Are you a flirt?’, ‘Have you ever kissed a boy?’, ‘Is your mum your best pal?’, ‘Do you love gossip?’. In addition, the bedroom wall is covered with pictures of friends, including a teenage girl and boy. These are accompanied with more thought bubbles such as, ‘Fave footie fellas, are you my dream date?’, ‘I know Tara is crazy about me’, ‘I really like Tara but she’s only interested in Damon’, ‘Boys are fab’, and ‘Damon’s crazy about me, but I really like Kevin’. Similarly to how Davies (2003) and Davies and Kasama (2004) used picture books with children to document their understandings of gender, I also used books as a way to engage with children about their understandings of gender/sexuality. However, one difference is that I chose books that were deliberately heterosexual, in order to provoke talk around gender and heterosexual discourses.

The following discussion was audiorecorded, transcribed, and discussed with Elaine. At one point during the discussion, children are so excited that they are talking over each other and it is difficult to determine who is speaking. Therefore, the children in the following transcript are identified as girl or boy. I am sitting on the floor, with a small group of children (four girls, three boys), reading the book, *Clarice Bean, that’s me*. I focus on the page where Marcie is sitting on her bed and reading a fashion magazine.

Mindy: Here she is (pointing to Marcie) looking at the boys and this says (pointing to the thought bubble) ‘Do boys give you the dreamy eye?’

Mindy: (Turning to the group) Do boys give you the dreamy eye?

Mindy: Why is that silly?

Mindy: (Referring back to the book and continuing to read) Do boys give you the dreamy eye?

Group: No.

Mindy: Are you a flirt?

Group: No.

Mindy: Do you love gossip?

Group: No.

Mindy: Is your mum your best pal?

Group: No.

Mindy: Have you ever kissed a boy?

Group: (Slight hesitation) No (A few children are smiling and looking at each other).

Mindy: I guess these are the kinds of things that …

(Mindy’s interrupted by a flurry of talk).

Girl: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, I’ve kissed a boy.

Girl: No (a few children say this together and it is hard to determine who is saying no).

Girl: Only when you grow up.

Boy: Older.

Girl: When you get married.

Girl: Yeah, older.

Girl: Only when you get married you can kiss a boy?

Girl: I’ve dated a boy.

Girl: Okay, okay, wait (refocusing on the page in the book). Marcie (pointing to Marcie) must be …

(Mindy’s interrupted).

Girl: I have friends who kiss each other.

Girl: Well, I’ve kissed a boy.

Girl: (Gasp) Only when you’re older.

Girl: No.

Girl: Only when you’re married.

Girl: No, before.

This group is eager to talk about their kissing knowledge, including who has or has not kissed, who gets to kiss, and when it is appropriate to kiss. Although the girls claim they don’t know about boys giving girls the ‘dreamy’ eye, their giggling and body language says otherwise. It is possible that they are unsure...
how to proceed because I have intentionally brought a topic into the preschool that adults usually ignore or shut down, rather than encourage (Blaise, 2009). Kelley, Buckingham and Davies (1999) conducted a series of open-ended interviews and structured research activities with two groups of children (aged six-seven and 10-11) regarding how they interpreted and responded to sexual behaviour they encountered on television programs. Similarly to how the children exhibited excitement with laughter while talking about kissing, Kelley et al.'s study showed how children used laughter to reflect recognition of crossing into adult territories, often considered taboo for young children.

Children contributed enthusiastically to the discussion and interrupted each other in order to share what they knew about kissing. Because of the slight hesitation when I read the words, ‘Have you ever kissed a boy?’, the laughter from the group, and the gasp from one of the girls when someone states, ‘Well, I’ve kissed a boy’, it was clear that this is a taboo topic. Kissing itself is not problematic (i.e. some cultures greet each other with a kiss on the cheek, or children are often told, ‘Go and give your mum a kiss goodbye.’). However, in this discussion kissing represents a whole realm of sexuality, including danger and risk. This discussion about kissing is akin to how the group of children in Blaise and Andrew's (2005) study understood kissing. For instance, when explaining the rules for a kiss-and-chase game they were playing in preschool, the word ‘kissing’ was used to mean having sex. What is of significance is that young children are showing us, via their reactions, that they have an understanding of sexuality.

This discussion also demonstrates the nuanced understandings children have about competing gender/sexuality discourses. On one hand, some girls either have kissed a boy, gone on dates with boys, or know friends who kiss each other, and on the other hand some girls believe that young children, and in this case girls, should not be kissing. It is ironic that four-year-olds are arguing the adult idea of being ‘too young’ to take part in kissing. It is possible that children have learned this from how adults make comments about kissing or quickly shut down topics that make them uncomfortable (Blaise, 2009). The ways children state that kissing is something that happens ‘only when you are older’ may also represent the relief they feel at not having to engage in such a scary and yet exciting activity. Finally, girls' explanations that kissing happens ‘when you get married’ indicates the pervasiveness of the heterosexual matrix and how heterosexual norms are used to regulate and constitute what is considered ‘appropriate’ behaviour for children.

One could argue that the heterosexual matrix also plays a part in determining how the girls and boys engage with sexuality differently during the discussion. For instance, with the exception of one boy, the discussion was eagerly taken up and supported by the girls. In doing so, the girls are the creators and makers of relationships, while the boys distance themselves from the romance of relationships. This may be an example of children policing the boundaries of gender/sexuality. Children's talk and the different ways that girls and boys take up the topic of kissing is an instance when we are able to see how gender and (hetero)sexuality are discursively constituted and tightly bound. Finally, while at first glance this discussion may seem irrelevant to gender/sexuality, Jackson (2006) reminds us that the ways children talk about how girls and boys should act, and in this case that girls should not kiss until they are older or married, is how ‘normal’ forms of femininity, masculinity and heterosexuality make their way into the social fabric of early years settings and wider society.

**Boys’ desires**

Although the boys might not have been actively engaged with the discussion about kissing when reading Clarice Bean, that’s me, their interest in gender/sexuality became increasingly apparent when they were photographing objects in the room. On the third and fifth day of the study, children were given opportunities to photograph the dolls I brought in or objects in the room they thought were ‘cool’, ‘sexy’, or ‘pretty’, or things they thought girls or boys might like. Just as I used the book to provoke discussion with children, the aim of having them take photographs was to provide something to talk about, but on the children's terms. Although both girls and boys photographed a range of objects, such as backpacks, toys, or people (each other, adults in the room), this paper focuses specifically on two discussions the boys had about a Spiderman backpack and a pair of toy crocodiles they photographed. These discussions provide insight into children's desires and understandings about gender/sexuality.

**Spiderman things**

On the final day of the project, three boys (Jack, Ryan and Tim) talked eagerly about the Spiderman and his girlfriend, Mary Jane Watson. Jack initiated this discussion as he showed me on the LCD screen a Spiderman backpack he had photographed. I was seated in a chair, and a small group of children (three boys and two girls) quickly formed a circle around me and the camera, joining in the following discussion:

Mindy: What is this (pointing to the image of a backpack)?

Ryan: Oh, it is so cool.

Jack: I took it. It’s Spiderman.

Mindy: Cool? Why is it cool?
Jack, Ryan and Tim changed the conversation and began talking about Mary Jane Watson, Spiderman's girlfriend. They described her as pretty, and went into detail explaining why she is pretty. For these boys, her ‘long and sort of yellowy hair’ made her pretty, and Tim explained that she was pretty, rather than beautiful, because she had a ‘lovely dress and she sings’. The boys went on to explain that Mary Jane Watson walks and moves her body in particular ways. Jack moved away from the group in order to show us how. With a sense of serious purpose, he walked by placing one foot slowly in front of the other, while moving his hips back and forth. Both Tim and Ryan agreed that Jack was walking like Mary Jane Watson. Heather joined the group and said, ‘She (Mary Jane Watson) also wore make-up when she is going out and she is beautiful.’ The boys agreed by saying, ‘Yeah’. This conversation with the boys, coupled with Jack showing how Mary Jane Watson moved her body, highlights how children observe and understand gender/sexuality discourses. The ways the boys enthusiastically engaged with their knowledge about Spiderman's girlfriend implies that talking about gender/sexuality is not just of interest to the girls.

Children's desires are also made apparent by what they ignore. For instance, when a boy named Reagan drew pictures of rainbows, explaining that they were ‘pretty’ and that he liked ‘pretty rainbowy things’, the children at the table did not tease him for showing an interest in things usually associated with hyper-femininity. Instead, field notes indicate that the children at the table (Jack, Ryan and Claire) deliberately paid no attention to Reagan's comments.

Kissing crocodiles

Another example that illustrates boys' desires to engage with gender/sexuality discourses occurred during a discussion about photographs taken of two ‘kissing crocodiles’. The photograph showed two yellow toy crocodiles facing each other, with their jaws touching. I showed the photograph to a small group (three girls and two boys):

Mindy: What's this?
Heather: Kissing crocodiles. That is sexy and cool!
Mindy: Why do you think someone took this picture?
Heather: Because they are getting married.
Mindy: What makes you think they are getting married?
Claire: Because they love each other.

A few moments later, Ryan and Heather are discussing the kissing crocodile photograph further:

Ryan: Crocodiles, look. They are kissing each other.
Heather: Kissing crocodiles. Crocodiles, crocodiles are kissing each other.

Ryan: They are being sexy.
Heather: One is a boy and one is a girl.

The discussion about the kissing crocodiles shows how, for young children, kissing is connected with sex and romance. They are making a link between kissing, marriage and love. The toy crocodiles might be considered un-gendered because neither exhibit characteristics associated with femininity nor masculinity, such as red lips or eyelashes as seen on female Lego action figures. Heather has drawn upon the heterosexual matrix in her naming of the crocodiles as complementary genders. In doing so, the possibility of imagining same-sex desire has been closed off. Similarly to the discussion about Spiderman, the crocodiles opened up space for boys to engage with gender/sexuality.

Conclusion

This exploratory study of children's understandings of gender/sexuality shows that children do have a considerable amount of sexual knowledge. Over a five-day period, children engaged with a range of research activities that encouraged them to talk about gender and, as a result, their attitudes toward issues of sexuality.

Although data presented here from this small study indicates that children are neither ignorant nor naïve about sexuality, it is also clear that several aspects of gender/sexuality were silent. Two silences found were same-gender desire and non-normative gender behaviours. Not once did children talk about the possibility of girls being attractive for other girls, or boys being cool for other boys. Instead, it was always about heterosexuality. Their talk indicates that children know a lot about heterosexuality and romance, and about how femininities and masculinities are constructed through relationships, as well as how desire plays a part in constructing normative understandings of sexuality. When Reagan showed an interest in ‘pretty rainbowy things’, which might be considered an example of non-traditional masculinity, the children sitting at the table seemed to ignore his behaviour. Although it is unclear what this silence means, it is possible that the children's silence is a way of covertly supporting Reagan's interests in femininity. If this is the case, it is worth considering how I might have intervened and intentionally inquired about Reagan's interest in stereotypically feminine items and how his drawing was met with silence.

Documenting children's understandings of gender/sexuality is significant for contributing to the growing knowledge base of children's sexual knowledge.
Recognising the significance of gender and how children talk about gender characteristics reveals what they know about sexuality, and usually heterosexuality. If children are in the process of creating their own theories about sexuality, and if these theories maintain normative understandings of sexual relationships, then should adults find ways to engage with young children in order to challenge this heteronormativity? If so, then we have a responsibility to engage with children differently about their sexual knowledge. Opening up, rather than always closing down, spaces in the curriculum for children's gender and sexual knowledge to be heard, valued and considered is one definite way to begin this work. Until the early years begins to take young children's views about gender and sexuality seriously, such work will continue to be regarded with suspicion.

Acknowledgements:

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References


### Table 1 Research timetable

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Day 1: Entering the field</th>
<th>Day 2: Reading stories</th>
<th>Day 3: Bratz Dolls &amp; photographs</th>
<th>Day 4: Drawing pictures</th>
<th>Day 5: Photographing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Developing rapport with children</td>
<td>Read stories and have small group discussion</td>
<td>Bring Bratz Dolls and have small group discussion</td>
<td>Drawing pictures and having discussions</td>
<td>Children photographing what they like, or what they think boys and girls will like</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent social night</td>
<td>Teacher de-brief</td>
<td>Photographs</td>
<td>Teacher de-brief (before and after)</td>
<td>Teacher interview</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teacher interview</td>
<td>Leave research notebook</td>
<td>Teacher de-brief (before and after)</td>
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