

Reproducing (and Disrupting) Heteronormativity: Gendered Sexual Socialization in Preschool Classrooms

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Abstract

Using ethnographic data from 10 months of observations in nine preschool classrooms, I examine gendered sexual socialization children receive from teachers' practices and reproduce through peer interactions. I find heteronormativity permeates preschool classrooms, where teachers construct (and occasionally disrupt) gendered sexuality in a number of different ways, and children reproduce (and sometimes resist) these identities and norms in their daily play. Teachers use what I call facilitative, restrictive, disruptive, and passive approaches to sexual socialization in preschool classrooms. Teachers' approaches to gendered sexual socialization varied across preschools observed and affected teachers' response to children's behaviors, such as heterosexual romantic play (kissing and relationships), bodily displays, and consent. Additionally, my data suggest young children are learning in preschool that boys have gendered power over girls' bodies. I find that before children have salient sexual identities of their own, children are beginning to make sense of heteronormativity and rules associated with sexuality through interactions with their teachers and peers in preschool.

Keywords

sexuality, gender, preschool, childhood, ethnography

Preschool is an important site for socialization and the production of ideas about social life and inequality. Interactions in preschool facilitate the construction of gender (Martin 1998), race (Van Ausdale and Feagin 1996), and social class (Streib 2011), but could preschool also be an important site for sexuality? We know later school years construct sexuality and heteronormativity (e.g., Best 1983; Pascoe 2007; Thorne 1993), and we know other spheres—family (Martin 2009) and media (Martin and Kazzyak 2009)—teach sexuality, but we do not yet know about the role of preschools in teaching, constructing, or disrupting sexuality. Preschool is an important and foundational educational context in which to examine sexual socialization and heteronormativity. Many

children attend the social institution of preschool, and children's interactions in preschool provide the foundation for teacher–student interactions, expectations of themselves as students, and views toward education more generally.

This article examines the gendered sexual socialization children receive from interactions with teachers and peers in preschool. Sexual

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socialization is the process through which children come to understand rules, beliefs, and codes of conduct associated with sexual behaviors and sexuality, for example, messages about appropriate physical contact and behaviors with others. These messages about sexual behaviors and sexuality that children receive are gender specific (Martin and Luke 2010). Sexuality and gender are constructed part and parcel of one another; namely, to be a feminine girl/woman or a masculine boy/man requires that one also be heterosexual (Butler 1990; Ingraham 1994; Rich 1980; Rubin 1984). To “do gender” correctly, one must obey heteronormative ideals and heterosexual scripts (Rich 1980; West and Zimmerman 1987). As Martin and Kazyak (2009:316) state, “Heteronormativity structures social life so that heterosexuality is always assumed, expected, ordinary, and privileged.” This entanglement of sexuality and gender leads to gendered sexual socialization. Gendered sexual socialization is the process through which individuals, in this case, preschool children, come to understand rules, beliefs, meanings, and gender-specific codes of conduct associated with conducting oneself as “proper” girls or boys with respect to sexuality and sexual behaviors. Interactions with teachers and peers in schools provide messages about topics such as compulsory heterosexuality, sexual standards, and relationships (Rich 1980). Identifying how heteronormative culture is constructed and reproduced through school interactions may prevent the reproduction of inequalities pertaining to gender and sexuality that classroom processes often construct and maintain (Wilkinson and Pearson 2009). Gendered sexual socialization in preschool has significant consequences, as it creates differences in children’s classroom experiences, especially in terms of their interactions with teachers and peers, and facilitates heteronormative gendered and sexual double standards for girls and boys (Martin and Luke 2010). Preschool is a good place to begin this examination, because practices that facilitate heteronormativity in classrooms become more engrained in later years of schooling.

Using ethnographic data from 10 months of observations in nine preschool classrooms, I examine the gendered sexual socialization children receive from teachers’ practices and which children then reproduce through peer interactions. My findings extend our understandings of gendered sexual socialization through demonstrating the pervasiveness of heteronormativity in young

children’s (three- to five-year-olds) early interactions in school. I find heteronormativity permeates preschool classrooms, where teachers construct (and occasionally disrupt) gendered sexuality in a number of different ways, and children reproduce (and sometimes resist) these identities and norms in their daily play. I suggest heteronormativity influences teaching practices in preschool. Teachers use what I call *facilitative*, *restrictive*, *disruptive*, and *passive* approaches to sexual socialization in preschool classrooms. Teachers’ approaches to gendered sexual socialization varied across preschools observed and affected teachers’ responses to children’s behaviors, such as heterosexual romantic play (kissing and relationships), bodily displays, and consent. Additionally, my data suggest children as young as age 3 are learning in preschool that boys have gendered power over girls’ bodies. My findings demonstrate that before children have salient sexual identities of their own, they are beginning to make sense of heteronormativity and rules associated with sexuality through interactions with their teachers and peers in preschool.

GENDER AND SEXUALITY IN SCHOOLS

Schools are heteronormative social contexts that often mirror the dominant beliefs and structures of society, including and especially the norms and behaviors associated with “acceptable” sexuality (Epstein and Johnson 1998; Wilkinson and Pearson 2009). As a result, schools are critical sites in which dominant beliefs about sexuality and gender are (re)produced and enforced (Wilkinson and Pearson 2009). Pascoe (2007) argues that school rituals, pedagogy, curricula, and disciplinary practices inform heterosexualizing processes from elementary through high school. Explicit and implicit lessons about sexuality, masculinities, and femininities are also routinely conveyed to students through curricula and rituals as well as interactions with peers, teachers, and school administrators (Garcia 2009; Wilkinson and Pearson 2009). Sometimes heteronormativity is relatively subtle in classrooms, exhibited through pervasive heteronormative practices and discourses and displays of appropriate gender roles (Eder and Parker 1987; Kehily and Nayak 1997). Other research has found explicit homophobic and sexualized forms of harassment are

used to enforce heteronormativity in schools (e.g., Pascoe 2007). In classrooms, the collection of teachers' and students' habitus or cultural schemas can create and enforce the level of heteronormativity developed within schools (Bourdieu 2001; Hallett 2007; Wilkinson and Pearson 2009). These cultural schemas or habitus consist of teachers' and students' experiences, expectations, beliefs, and perspectives about sexuality. Heteronormativity gains more legitimacy in schools when a significant number of individuals utilize heteronormative schemas (Wilkinson and Pearson 2009). Heteronormative educational contexts also confine adolescents' sexuality while stigmatizing same-sex relationships or desires (Wilkinson and Pearson 2009).

Hidden curricula also operate within schools. Hidden curricula are covert lessons that often act as means of social control (Giroux and Purpel 1983; P. Jackson 1968). Sociologists have noted hidden curricula effects in topics such as social class (e.g., Anyon 1980; Bowles and Gintis 1976), disciplining bodies (e.g., Carere 1987; Foucault 1979; Martin 1998), and political socialization (e.g., Wasburn 1986). However, we know little about how teachers utilize hidden curricula on sexuality in ways that construct, normalize, and disrupt heterosexuality in classrooms, particularly during the early years of schooling. Students' interactions may reproduce and, at times, challenge heteronormativity and normative expressions of gender (Eder, Evans, and Parker 1995). Through pedagogical practices, disciplinary practices, and interactions with students, high school teachers use informal curricula about sexuality to shape how (hetero)sexuality is constructed within schools (Pascoe 2007). These repetitive and regulative practices in classrooms contribute to students' habitus as they acquire knowledge about school and the social and cultural capital valued by teachers (Bourdieu 2001).

Young children's peer cultures involve the active construction, enforcement, and "doing" of sexuality and gender (Best 1983; Blaise 2005; Davies 2003; MacNaughton 2000; Renold 2002, 2005; Robinson 2013; Thorne 1993; West and Zimmerman 1987). Renold (2000) argues that students engage in a "heterosexualizing process" beginning in elementary school. Through this process, students utilize heterosexual discourses and practices to portray themselves as "proper" girls and boys and to develop feminine and masculine identities. Thorne (1993) concludes that children

in elementary school construct gender differences by utilizing heterosexuality to maintain gender boundaries and process cross-sex interactions. Children call upon sexual meanings to guide their gendered play practices, such as "chase-and-kiss" (Thorne 1993). Heteronormative play narratives, like marriage and rehearsing relationships, also guide young children's early peer interactions (Robinson 2013). Best (1983) found that second-grade girls participated in gendered heterosexual discourses and practices through talk of having boyfriends and girlfriends. Additionally, in examining gender and sexuality from elementary school girls' points of view, Myers and Raymond (2010) found that girls defined their interests as boy centered, and they performed heteronormativity for other girls. Research shows adolescents are immersed in heterosexual interactive processes and performances, including homophobic and heterosexist harassment (Renold 2002, 2005). Middle and high school boys use name-calling and "fag" discourses to protect and police masculinity (Pascoe 2007). In "doing gender" in these ways to avoid social sanctions, boys and girls simultaneously produce and enforce heteronormativity (Neilson, Walden, and Kunkel 2000; Pascoe 2007; Wilkinson and Pearson 2009).

A vast body of literature points to students' awareness and sophisticated heteronormative understandings of sexuality in elementary school through high school. However, little work examines how heteronormativity is socially and developmentally constructed, and there are even fewer developmental accounts of how heteronormativity is founded in preschool (but see Martin 2009). Gendered power is embodied on several levels and in many contexts, but theory rarely explains how gendered power is learned. With more U.S. children attending preschool (61 percent of children spend an average of 33 hours per week in preschool; Laughlin 2013), and amid calls for universal preschool, preschool is a good place to begin examining children's sexual socialization, including how gendered power and heteronormativity are learned in schools.

Additionally, we know very little about how teachers' practices inform or disrupt heterosexualizing processes in schools. How might teachers construct or challenge discourses about sexuality in preschool? I suggest heteronormativity and gendered power begin to shape teachers' delineation of behaviors as appropriate, or in need of discipline or intervention, as early as preschool. My

data contribute to scholarship on the role of schools in shaping the gendered sexual behaviors of students by demonstrating how preschool teachers' approaches to gendered sexual socialization shape students' sexual behaviors and interactions, often in gendered ways. Examining teachers' approaches to gendered sexual socialization illuminates how heterosexual discourses and practices become constructed, normalized, or disrupted in preschool classrooms. By focusing on teachers' active role in students' sexual socialization, we can further our understanding of the role of schools in shaping children's sexual behaviors and identities.

DATA AND METHODS

My data come from a larger ethnographic study in which I conducted extensive participant observations from July 2015 through April 2016 in three preschools in Michigan: Imagination Center, Kids Company, and Early Achievers.¹ This larger study focuses on teachers' use of disciplinary practices in preschool classrooms and how these practices vary by children's race, gender, and social class. Teachers and parents were informed I was conducting a study about disciplinary practices and their effectiveness in preschool classrooms. Upon completion of data collection and analysis for this project, I inductively recognized I had large codes regarding gender and sexual socialization from my observations. These data are the findings of this article.

In total, I observed nine preschool classrooms yielding more than 400 hours of observational data. Given the focus of the larger project on preschool disciplinary practices, I chose preschools based on their quality and size. Previous research indicates quality, type of preschool program (e.g., public, for profit, faith based), and size of classroom are predictors of preschool expulsion (Gilliam 2005; Gilliam and Shahar 2006). I determined preschool quality based on schools' Michigan Great Start to Quality rating. All three preschools received 4 out of 5 stars through Great Start to Quality, they ranged in total capacity from 86 to 138 children, and Early Achievers was nationally accredited through the National Association for the Education of Young Children (see Table 1 for study overview). Two preschools (Imagination Center and Early Achievers) also participated in Michigan's Great Start Readiness

Program (GSRP). GSRP is Michigan's state-funded preschool program for four-year-olds with risk factors for educational failure. The curricula and daily schedules of the three preschools were similar. Imagination Center and Early Achievers followed High Scope Curriculum; Kids Company followed Creative Curriculum (see Table 1).

A total of 116 children, primarily three- to five-year-olds, and 22 teachers (15 teachers and seven part-time aides) were observed.² All but two teachers were women, and the majority of teachers (16 of 22) were white.³ At Imagination Center, four teachers and one part-time aide had bachelor's degrees in early childhood education, and three teachers had child development certificates (one- to two-year degree programs); at Kids Company, one teacher had a bachelor's degree in early childhood education, and three teachers and two part-time aides had child development certificates; at Early Achievers, two teachers had bachelor's degrees in early childhood education, and two teachers and two part-time aides had child development certificates. Of the children observed, 52 percent were girls and 48 percent were boys. There were 24 African American children, 13 Hispanic children, five Middle Eastern children, five Indian children, and three Asian children.⁴ The remaining children were white. Teachers at Imagination Center and Kids Company perceived the majority of children as middle class, based on parent occupation, number of parents in home, number of siblings, tuition cost, and teachers' perceptions of families' class status. Teachers sat and went through their students' family information binders with me when describing the children's class backgrounds. Children at Early Achievers were identified as low income, as they all received free or sliding-scale tuition (see Table 1).

On average, I observed two days a week: Tuesdays and Thursdays from 8:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. This was the majority of children's school day, prior to their nap. In total, I observed five classrooms at Imagination Center, with classroom averages of eight children and one teacher; two classrooms at Kids Company, with classroom averages of 20 children and two teachers; and two classrooms at Early Achievers, with 16 children and two teachers in each classroom. The demographics of children at each preschool were as follows: the majority of children at Imagination Center were white and middle class; at Kids Company, half of the children were white, half were nonwhite,

Table 1. Study Overview.

Variable	Imagination Center	Kids Company	Early Achievers
Classrooms observed	5 classrooms (~8 students and 1 teacher each)	2 classrooms (~20 students and 2 teachers each)	2 classrooms (~16 students and 2 teachers each)
Tuition rate	\$205 per week	\$230 per week	Free or sliding-scale tuition
Preschool rating	4 out of 5 stars	4 out of 5 stars	4 out of 5 stars
National accreditation	No	No	Yes, National Association for the Education of Young Children
Participation in Michigan Great Start Readiness Program	Yes	No	Yes
Curriculum	High Scope Curriculum	Creative Curriculum	High Scope Curriculum
Teachers			
Mean years of experience	3	17	6
Education			
BA	4 teachers, 1 aide	1 teacher	2 teachers
CDA	3 teachers, 2 aides	3 teachers, 2 aides	2 teachers, 2 aides
Demographics of children	White Mostly middle class	Half white, half nonwhite Middle class	Nonwhite Low income

Note: CDA = Child Development Associate Credential.

and the majority were middle class; and at Early Achievers, the vast majority of children were nonwhite, and all were lower class. The majority of children at these three preschools attended preschool all day and at least three days a week. Children typically arrived between 7:30 and 8:30 a.m. and left between 3:30 and 5:30 p.m.

During observations, I carried a small notebook and recorded extensive fieldnotes, making sure to record direct dialogue when possible (see Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995). In most of the classrooms I observed, teachers introduced me to children as a visitor, and in interactions with children, I confirmed my role as a nonsanctioning adult. In classrooms, I was a “reactive observer” (Streib 2011); when children invited me, I sat with them and joined in their play, listening intently to their conversations. During observations, I took on a middle-manager role (Gansen 2017; Mandell 1988). In a middle-manager role, researchers do not align themselves with teachers or children but instead seek to establish rapport with teachers and children simultaneously. I realized how much rapport and trust I had gained

when teachers shared opinions about children and parents who got on their nerves and when children shared opinions about other students, invited me to join in their play, and taught me about classroom jobs or rules. I varied my approach between holistic observations and more structured techniques, in which I observed one area of the classroom, particular children, or particular teachers (especially if a child was being disciplined). I followed Thorne’s (1993) caution about “big man bias” and observed children for equal amounts of time, making sure to observe not only classrooms’ popular and active children.

Given the larger project these data stem from, my observations were primarily focused on children’s involvement in behavior management with peers and teachers, and teachers’ use of disciplinary practices. I coded fieldnotes using the qualitative software program NVivo. Coded categories emerged from my data and were not predetermined (Glaser and Strauss 1999). Some of my most commonly used codes, and the themes that emerged as the findings of this article, were kissing, relationships/crushes, bodily displays,

consent, house play, wedding play, and same-sex relationships. These codes, along with others, were subcoded based on teachers' responses to children's behavior (by the child's gender) and by teachers' gendered sexual socialization approaches. For example, I applied the code *bodily displays* any time children revealed their nude body or underwear in the classroom. I then subcoded this by gender to separate incidents in which boys versus girls engaged in bodily displays. I also subcoded teachers' responses to bodily displays to assess how children's gender affected teachers' approaches to these incidences. I coded teachers' responses to children's sexual behaviors by teachers' approach, for example, facilitative, restrictive, passive, or disruptive. I assessed disconfirming evidence through my codes on teachers' restrictive and disruptive approaches to capture not only the ways in which heteronormativity permeated the preschool classrooms I observed but also how the construction and normalization of heterosexuality was disrupted by teacher and peer interactions in preschool classrooms.

FINDINGS

How do preschools participate in the gendered sexual socialization of children? What approaches to sexual socialization do teachers use in preschool? What messages about sexuality and gender do young children receive from teachers' sexual socialization approaches, and how do they reproduce, or resist, these messages with their peers? I argue that heteronormativity permeates preschool classrooms, where teachers construct (and occasionally disrupt) gendered sexuality in a number of different ways, and children reproduce (and sometimes resist) these identities and norms in their daily play. Specifically, I find that preschool teachers use four approaches to gendered sexual socialization in preschool classrooms: facilitative, restrictive, disruptive, and passive approaches (see Table 2 for an overview of these approaches across preschools observed). Facilitative approaches include teachers actively promoting or encouraging heterosexual discourses and practices in preschool classrooms. Restrictive approaches involve teachers sanctioning children's engagement in sexual discourses and practices. Disruptive approaches consist of teachers' acknowledgment or acceptance of counterhegemonic performances of sexuality (i.e., actions

that interrupt heteronormativity). Finally, passive approaches to sexual socialization involve teachers ignoring sexualized behaviors without imposing disciplinary consequences.

In the following sections, I demonstrate how teachers' approaches to gendered sexual socialization affected how heterosexual discourses and practices were constructed, normalized, or disrupted in preschool classrooms I observed. Additionally, I highlight how teachers' approaches to gendered sexual socialization varied across these preschools and affected teachers' responses to children's behaviors, such as heterosexual romantic play (kissing and relationships), bodily displays, and consent. I also demonstrate how teachers' years of experience, and potentially, age, may have affected how problematic or progressive teachers' approaches to gendered sexual socialization were in the classrooms I observed.

Facilitative Approaches: Constructing and Normalizing Heterosexuality at Imagination Center

Across preschools, teachers used facilitative approaches to gendered sexual socialization in which heteronormativity was constructed and normalized through everyday classroom practices (e.g., reading traditional fairy tales and heteronormative play). I focus on Imagination Center because facilitative approaches were most pronounced and most frequently used at this school. At Imagination Center, teachers allowed, and at times actively constructed, heterosexuality through facilitative approaches to sexual socialization. Teachers at Imagination Center were much younger and had less teaching experience than teachers at the other preschools; most were in their early to mid-20s and had three years' teaching experience, on average. In these five classrooms, teachers allowed children to kiss children of the opposite gender if the child did not say "Stop" or "Get away from me." These teachers also had heteronormative ideas of children who had "crushes" or "boyfriends/girlfriends," and they allowed and encouraged these children to kiss. For example, one day a toddler-aged class was walking down the hall as an older class was lining up for recess. A teacher said to Alexis (three years old), "Oh, Paul [two years old] is coming down the hall. Alexis, do you want Paul to kiss you?" Alexis replied, "No." Another teacher said, "Not

Table 2. Approaches to Gendered Sexual Socialization by Preschool.

Preschool	Facilitative	Restrictive	Passive	Disruptive
Imagination Center (5 classrooms)	Encouraged boys and girls to kiss Did not require girls' kissing consent Interpreted behaviors between boys and girls as romantic Promoted "crushes" and relationships between boys and girls	Same-gender displays of affection, or homosocial behaviors, interpreted by teachers as friendly Disciplined girls for bodily displays and for commenting on boys' bodily displays	Ignored boys' bodily displays	Wedding girl incident: teacher corrected children that girls can marry girls
Early Achievers (2 classrooms)	Minor heteronormative practices (e.g., teachers read traditional fairy tales, children engaged in heteronormative play)	Same-gender displays of affection, or homosocial behaviors, interpreted by teachers as friendly Disciplined girls for bodily displays and for commenting on boys' bodily displays Policed kissing, e.g., save kisses for family	Ignored boys' bodily displays Boys given control over girls' bodies without their consent	
Kids Company (2 classrooms)	Minor heteronormative practices (e.g., teachers read traditional fairy tales, children engaged in heteronormative play)	Same-gender displays of affection, or homosocial behaviors, interpreted by teachers as friendly Disciplined girls for bodily displays and for commenting on boys' bodily displays Policed kissing, e.g., save kisses for family Parents had active role	Ignored boys' bodily displays	Mermaid incident: teacher allowed girl to play same-sex relationship scenario

today.” The teacher then looked at me and said, “It’s so cute. Paul has a crush on Alexis and he loves to kiss her. Usually, Alexis wants him to, which is why I always ask her when we see Paul if she wants a kiss.” In this example, teachers participated in the construction and normalization of heterosexuality by facilitating heterosexual discourses and practices for Alexis and Paul. Teachers assumed Paul (despite being two years old) had a “crush” (language typically used for adult and adolescent attraction) on Alexis, so much so that they asked Alexis for Paul, even though Paul was unable to ask and did not articulate the request to kiss Alexis on his own.

At Imagination Center, teachers’ facilitative practices shaped their responses and interpretations of children’s behaviors as romantic in nature. Imagination Center teachers often talked about two children, Carson and Lydia (both three years old), as if they were in a relationship. At the start of my Imagination Center observations, Carson and Lydia resisted any notions they were boyfriend/girlfriend, but they were opposite-gender friends who often played together. While playing in the house area one day, Lydia said to Carson, “I’m the Mom, you’re the Dad.” Carson replied, “Who’s your sweetie?” Lydia looked at Carson and said, “You are.” Carson quickly responded, “I am only your friend.” However, two months into my observations, Carson would say things like, “Where’s my Lydia?” when looking for her on the playground. Teachers, too, frequently asked Lydia about Carson’s whereabouts through questions such as “Where is your husband [Carson]?” Teachers would even talk with one another, and me, about Carson and Lydia’s relationship futuristically, saying things like, “Could you imagine if Lydia and Carson got married? They would be the spiciest couple ever.” In asking these questions, teachers reinforced children’s reproduction of adult culture. By using facilitative approaches to sexual socialization, teachers at Imagination Center constructed and normalized heterosexual discourses and practices in ways such that heteronormativity permeated children’s peer interactions. When a preschool teacher was about to get married, she talked to one child, Willow, about how the child too will wear a wedding dress when she gets married. A couple days later, Willow wore a dress to school, and the teacher commented that Willow was “practicing” wearing a wedding dress. Other teachers complimented Willow on how beautiful she was and what a pretty bride she would make someday.

Teachers at Imagination Center also used facilitative approaches to sexual socialization in which they encouraged “new” relationships between boys and girls. For example, during lunch one day, Ms. Mary said to three-year-old Aiden, “Hi, Aiden, how are you?” “Great,” Aiden replied. Ms. Mary turned to Ms. Amanda and said, “He’s so cute.” Ms. Mary then looked at Kennedy, a three-year-old girl sitting next to her, and said, “We like Aiden; he’s great, and really cute. Do you know who he is?” Ms. Mary motioned to Aiden, pointing him out to Kennedy. In this example, Ms. Mary normalized and promoted heterosexuality to Kennedy, encouraging her to “like” Aiden, a boy Ms. Mary identified as “cute.” This example demonstrates teachers’ participation in facilitating the construction and normalization of heteronormativity by assessing and promoting the cuteness and boyfriend viability of young children—here, a four-year-old.

At Imagination Center, teachers were often amused by children’s heterosexual relationships and laughed when girls made comments like “Everyone with boyfriends stop and kiss.” Occasionally, after these comments, some girls would find and kiss their boyfriends. More often, though, girls would chat among themselves about who in the class did or did not have a boyfriend. Additionally, when children of the opposite gender walked around holding hands, teachers, in front of other children, commented, “Look, there’s a budding romance emerging.” Through these “budding romance” comments, and by allowing girls to stop and kiss their boyfriends, teachers facilitated children’s sexual socialization through promoting and normalizing heterosexuality.

However, teachers did not apply these comments equally to children’s actions. Despite its frequent occurrence across all nine classrooms, teachers did not make “budding romance” comments when children of the same gender engaged in hand-holding behaviors. Instead, teachers responded to same-gender signs of affection or homosocial behaviors as friendly. One day during recess at Imagination Center, Katie and Annie (both three years old) were walking around the playground talking and holding hands. Ms. Amanda turned to me and said, “Look at those two, they are best friends.” Teachers frequently responded this way when two girls or two boys engaged in homosocial behaviors, and occasionally teachers ignored homosocial behaviors. However, girls participated in homosocial behaviors

more frequently than did boys. These examples illustrate that teachers were not just promoting romance among children; rather, and more specifically, they were promoting heterosexual romance.

Heteronormativity includes and requires certain kinds of gendered roles and power. At Imagination Center, gendered power became visible through teachers' approaches to kissing consent. By "kissing consent," I am referring to teachers' rules regarding when children, primarily boys, could kiss girls, with and without girls' permission. One day, after witnessing Aiden kiss Hannah (both five years old), I heard Aiden ask Hannah, "What's the matter? It's just a kiss!" Ms. Brittany, who overheard the interaction between Aiden and Hannah, said to Aiden, "Do you have a crush, Aiden?" Aiden blushed and, while scooting away from Ms. Brittany, replied, "Yeah." Ms. Brittany smiled at him and Aiden ran off to play. Ms. Heather, who was also nearby, said to me, "Aiden gave Hannah a kiss yesterday for her birthday; just planted a big one on her! It was so sweet!" In this case, teachers did not reiterate rules of kissing consent with Aiden. Rather, teachers facilitated heterosexual discourses and practices by brushing off Aiden's kisses as sweet gestures that resulted from his "crush" on Hannah. These teachers engaged in facilitative practices of sexual socialization through imbuing and normalizing Aiden's gestures in heterosexuality by calling it a "crush." By using facilitative approaches in this instance, teachers gave Aiden gendered power over Hannah in terms of consent; Aiden's desire to kiss Hannah was put ahead of Hannah's lack of consent on her birthday and the day after. In doing so, teachers facilitated children's sexual socialization through providing messages about heterosexuality, gendered power, and consent—that girls' consent was not required, or at least was less important, than boys' desires.

Throughout observations at Imagination Center, teachers' facilitative approach of using the word *crush* operated as a justification for certain behaviors that obfuscated (1) the necessity of discipline and (2) the notion that these behaviors could be read as a safety concern. For instance, if a child hits another child because he or she is angry, then that is a safety concern and discipline is implemented. However, if the child hits another child because he or she "likes" or has a "crush" on the other, then teachers using facilitative approaches to sexual socialization interpreted these same behaviors as affectionate. Here we see examples of how the same actions get marked

differently based on teachers' approaches to sexual socialization, affecting how heterosexual discourses and practices are constructed, normalized, or disrupted in classrooms.

Passive and Restrictive Approaches to Gendered Sexual Socialization

Some structural policies in place at preschools dictate aspects of teachers' sexual socialization approaches, particularly those concerning children's bodies. Teachers instruct children on the importance of keeping their clothes on, particularly their underwear; their bodies covered; and "good touch, bad touch" to keep their bodies "safe" from potential harm, such as sexual abuse (see Martin 2014; Martin and Luke 2010).

I found that preschool teachers' sexual socialization approaches to monitoring children's naked bodies varied by children's gender. Across all nine classrooms, teachers did not apply policies regarding "appropriate" sexualized behaviors equally. Teachers utilized passive approaches to sexual socialization with boys; that is, teachers ignored many of boys' sexualized behaviors, including showing their bodies to children. For example, in one classroom at Early Achievers, as a group of three-year-old boys were playing, a boy pulled down his pants, revealing his underwear to the boys while making flatulent noises. The teachers were sitting directly across from the boys but did not intervene. In addition to ignoring boys' bodily displays, teachers in all nine classrooms I observed reprimanded girls for commenting on boys' bodily displays. For example, in the other classroom I observed at Early Achievers, a five-year-old boy was using the classroom bathroom with the door open when a four-year-old girl, Imani, said, "I can see Willie's bottom." Ms. Donna immediately yelled, "Imani," and shook her head in a "no" motion. However, Ms. Donna did not discipline Willie for revealing his body. Here we see one way children's gender influenced teachers' approaches to sexual socialization; Ms. Donna utilized a passive approach with Willie in which she ignored his rule violation of showing his body, but she used a restrictive approach to sexual socialization with Imani by scolding her for "inappropriately" viewing and commenting on Willie's body. These types of behaviors, often referred to as "potty humor," were frequent among girls and boys in the

classrooms I observed. However, when girls revealed their bodies as expressions of humor, teachers shook their heads no and informed girls their behavior was inappropriate.

Additionally, in all nine classrooms I observed, when girls showed their bodies to other children, teachers used restrictive approaches to gendered sexual socialization by disciplining girls for their actions. One day upon arrival at a Kids Company classroom to observe, the head teacher, Ms. Sara, said, "It's a crazy day and going outside did not help. Audrey [five years old] pulled her pants down in block area today to show the boys her body." When associate teacher Mr. Corey arrived, Ms. Sara informed him of Audrey's behavior:

Audrey showed her body twice before you came. We are going to have to call all three families and keep a close eye on Audrey because I know I have her parent conference on Friday but it cannot wait till then. I'm going to have to talk to the boys' parents too [the parents of the boys who viewed Audrey's body].

A similar situation involving a girl revealing her body occurred at Imagination Center, and the parents of the children involved were also called. These interactions demonstrate how teachers' approaches to sexual socialization were gendered; girls were disciplined by teachers (a restrictive approach) for discussing boys' bodies, and girls received serious sanctions for showing other children their bodies (a call home). However, teachers utilized passive approaches with boys; they ignored boys who showed their bodies, and boys did not receive disciplinary consequences. These gender disparities in teachers' approaches to children's bodily displays have implications for gendered power. Individuals embody gender both psychologically and physically through gendered bodily performances and displays (Butler 1990; Martin 1998). Therefore, teachers' gendered sexual socialization approaches to bodily displays provide one source from which children learn how to use their bodies and bodily displays "to do" gender normatively. Boys learn that gendered bodily displays are a source of status and masculinity, whereas girls learn their bodily displays, at least at the preschool age, are inappropriate and violate norms of feminine modesty (e.g., Connell 1995).

Instances of gendered power frequently occurred at Early Achievers, too. Gender

asymmetry is built into heterosexuality and depends on gendered roles and arrangements that perpetuate men's hegemonic status and women's sexual subordination (Ingraham 1994; S. Jackson 2006). Two boys in a three- to four-year-olds' room at Early Achievers would often chase girls on the playground in attempts to catch up with them so they could slap girls' bottoms:

Aisha and Desmond were running around the playground chasing each other. Ms. Kathy yelled, "Aisha Smith, no running." Desmond continued chasing Aisha, swinging his arms while attempting to slap Aisha on the bottom. Desmond caught up with Aisha, tackled her to the floor, and began slapping her on the bottom. Three teachers were monitoring the small playground but none of them intervened and Desmond continued to slap Aisha on the bottom until she wiggled away from him, and Aisha ran as Desmond continued to chase her around the playground. (Fieldnotes)

Similar instances occurred six times during my observations in this classroom at Early Achievers. In allowing Desmond to chase, tackle, and slap Aisha on the bottom without disciplinary consequences, teachers utilized passive approaches to gendered sexual socialization. Specifically, teachers' passive approach of ignoring boys' engagement in these behaviors facilitated hegemonic performances of gender and sexuality. Namely, boys were given control over girls' bodies, without their consent, and boys' use of cross-sex touching affirmed and maintained their heterosexuality and masculinity (Pascoe 2007). My findings suggest children are learning about gendered power dynamics in part through teachers' sexual socialization approaches (often facilitative and passive approaches) and at very young ages (three to five years old), much earlier than previously thought. Research has examined men claiming rights to women's bodies in late adolescence and adulthood (see Pascoe 2007, for one example), but my findings suggest this happens at much earlier ages.

Teachers' restrictive approaches to children's relationships and kissing. Kissing (often a peck on the lips or cheek) was the most prevalent sexualized behavior children engaged in; it occurred in eight of nine classrooms I observed. In these eight classrooms, children kissed each other playing

cooties, to soothe a hurt, playing house, and for many other reasons. At Kids Company and Early Achievers (four of nine classrooms total), teachers used restrictive approaches to sexual socialization; they policed kissing and taught children to “save kisses for their family” at home. When a child tried to kiss, or successfully kissed, another child (regardless of the child’s gender), teachers in these four classrooms reminded the child of the “save kisses for your family” rule, thereby sanctioning the child’s behavior. At Kids Company, a head teacher, Ms. Sara, held a “special meeting” with the children in her class (four- to five-year-olds) to address kissing:

Destiny kisses Michael while playing in the block area. Ms. Sara sees the kiss and says, “Absolutely not happening here. Save it for your family!” Destiny, “Michael said we’re going to get married.” Ms. Sara, “We’re going to have a group talk about that.” Destiny, “Ethan said it too.”

Ms. Sara: No one is in trouble, we’re just going to talk about it. Come over and have a seat everyone. We need to have a very serious meeting. [The whole class of children came over and sat on the carpet in front of Ms. Sara.] Okay we need to have a serious talk about boyfriend, girlfriend, and married and all this business. Where do kisses go? *Children: Our family.* And is anyone family in this room? *Children: No. No.* So should you ever be kissing anyone in this room? *Children: No.* Why not? *Children: Because it will share germs.* Yes, because it will share germs. Do you guys like getting sick? *Children: No.* No and we’ve had lots of people sharing colds. Is it okay to be friends? Yeah we’re all friends, but do you ever hear of anyone at four and five getting married? *Children: No.* No. Worry about that when you’re older, but at four and five no married talk or boyfriends or girlfriends. I’m not saying you’re in trouble, I’m just saying it’s not appropriate. We can worry about being friends, but some mommies and daddies are worried about you playing like that, they think you’re too little. When you come to Kids Company your job is to play, is that hard? *Children: No.* No, it’s not. So when you come here [to school] we’re going to play with our hands on our

self and we’re all friends, so we’re not going to worry about boyfriends and girlfriends. You all have a long time before you have to worry about that. (Fieldnotes)

Ms. Sara’s special meeting about kissing came after a couple instances of teachers catching boys and girls kissing in the classroom and on the playground. After this meeting, Ms. Sara informed me that she decided to hold the meeting because some parents expressed concerns over their children coming home from school and talking about kissing their friends. In this meeting, we see teachers’ restrictive sexual socialization approaches in action as Ms. Sara gave children several messages about sexuality: (1) children were not in trouble, but kissing was inappropriate; (2) children were too young to engage in such behaviors; and (3) children’s parents made this rule about appropriate behaviors, not Ms. Sara. After this meeting, the class sang a “friendship” song and then went outside for recess. Ms. Sara, through sanctioning children’s kissing practices, attempted to restrict the permeation of heteronormativity and normalization of heterosexual discourses and practices in her classroom. From what I could hear, children in this classroom did not say anything to their peers about the meeting. However, after the meeting, children continued to kiss and have boyfriends/girlfriends (albeit less frequently and more covertly).

Disruptive Approaches to Gendered Sexual Socialization

Teachers across the nine preschool classrooms I observed did not always facilitate or restrict children’s engagement in heterosexual discourses and practices. In two classrooms (two different preschools), teachers disrupted heteronormativity on two occasions. At Kids Company, a three-year-old girl, Holly, was playing with a basket of mermaid dolls quietly by herself. She came up to Ms. Stacey and, with a concerned look on her face, said, “They [the mermaids] want to marry each other but they’re both girls.” Ms. Stacey shrugged her shoulders and replied, “Okay.” Holly went back to playing mermaids quietly. Given Holly was not talking aloud, I could not tell if Ms. Stacey’s response affected her play in whether she decided to allow the mermaids to marry. However, Ms. Stacey’s passive response

of “Okay” to Holly, while not completely disrupting heteronormativity, opened the door for counterhegemonic performances of sexuality, allowing Holly to play however she wished without an adult correcting her play and enforcing heterosexuality.

Shortly after the U.S. marriage equality ruling in the summer of 2015, I observed the following interaction at Imagination Center between a group of five-year-old children while they were waiting to go on a field trip:

- Bailey: “Where’s my wedding girl, Marie?”
 David: “You wanna marry Marie?”
 Bailey: “Yeah.”
 David: “Girls can’t marry girls! Eww!”
 Bailey: “I’m waiting for my wedding girl.”
 Emmett overheard: “Girls can’t marry girls!”
 Bailey to Emmett: “Girls can marry girls!”
 Emmett whispered: “Homosexual” to Valerie, and laughed.
 Marie to Ms. Brittany: [Marie is fighting back tears] “She [Bailey] won’t stop calling me her wedding girl, and she’s a girl but girls can’t marry girls.”
 Ms. Brittany: “Yes they can.”
 Marie paused quietly: “But I don’t want to marry her. I have a crush on Scott.”
 Ms. Brittany replied: “Okay” and resumed applying sunscreen on children for the field trip.
 Bailey sat back down: “Marie’s beautiful.”
 David to Bailey: “Well, you can’t get married till you’re 30.” (Fieldnotes)

This excerpt illustrates several important aspects of teachers’ roles in sexual socialization, specifically teachers’ ability to utilize approaches that disrupt heteronormativity. This excerpt also provides a window into children’s reproduction of sexuality. The children, except for Bailey, were under the assumption that girls could not marry girls, and they attempted to regulate Bailey’s experiences and sexuality. It is unclear if these children picked up this cultural understanding from media, their families, or somewhere else. However, through responding, “Girls can’t marry girls,” children demonstrated their knowledge of heteronormativity: same-sex relationships were not allowed, or same-sex partners could not get married. Additionally, by pointing and laughing at Bailey while whispering, “Homosexual,” Emmett demonstrated his understanding of the label *homosexual* as an unfavorable social

sanction. The children also sanctioned Bailey’s opinions about Marie, presumably resulting in Marie’s upset reaction, causing her to seek help from her teacher. Had Ms. Brittany not intervened when Marie approached her for help resolving this peer conflict, or had Ms. Brittany responded, “Girls cannot marry girls,” heteronormativity would have been reified.

Ms. Brittany, perhaps due to the recent court ruling, utilized a disruptive approach to sexual socialization: she engaged in a counterhegemonic discourse of sexuality by correcting Marie in front of the other children and stating that girls can marry girls. In responding this way, Ms. Brittany, at least in this instance, disrupted heteronormativity by recognizing the legitimacy of gay marriage, thereby directly challenging the peer group concern that girls were not allowed to marry girls. These data provide a keen snapshot into how children make sense of information that does not fit their developing notions of heteronormativity, and they illuminate how teachers and children uphold and disrupt heteronormativity in peer interactions. In this peer interaction, heteronormative discourses within children’s understandings of love and marriage did not prevail; they were disrupted by Bailey and then ultimately by an adult authority figure, Ms. Brittany. Following the “wedding girl” incident, there was no change in children’s willingness to play girl-girl or boy-boy relationships; children continued to hold heteronormative ideas about relationship configurations in their play. However, after this incident, Marie continued to talk about Bailey as her “wedding girl,” and other children, including David and Emmett, did not make any additional sanctioning comments about Bailey’s desire to marry Marie. This conversation highlights one way counterhegemonic discourses about sexuality were introduced in preschool through teachers’ disruptive approaches, and it provides an example of children challenging normative discourses about sexuality through interactions in preschool.

Children’s Reproduction of Gender and Heteronormativity

While observing, I witnessed countless examples of children reproducing sexuality and gender through their play and peer interactions. Across

all nine classrooms, children frequently played house or wedding in the house center. This classroom area contained a kitchen set with pretend food, cooking utensils, and dress-up clothes and was predominantly used by girls engaged in house play, although boys would occasionally join in. Children acted out all kinds of imaginative scenarios in the house center, such as pretending they were a family of horses going on a road trip, or kitties going to the coffee shop, but bending gender roles and norms during house play was not acceptable. While playing house, children appointed gender roles, such as mom, dad, baby, or sister. However, children did not allow cross-gender roles; for example, girls could not play the role of dad. When a girl asked to play dad, the other girls would say no, but children rarely had to say no because children hardly proposed cross-gender roles. Girls frequently got into fights about who was going to play the mother role. In all nine classrooms, teachers frequently intervened in girls' "mom role" conflicts through use of facilitative approaches—teachers would offer children other suggestions for "appropriate" and gendered roles the girls could play. Interestingly, teachers never suggested children allow two moms in their play. For example, one day while observing at Kids Company, three-year-old Mia approached Ms. Stacey crying and saying a group of girls playing in the house area would not let her play the role of mom, because Holly was already the mom. Ms. Stacey replied, "You could play as the sister, or cousin."

Despite one child having lesbian parents, children across the nine classrooms I observed did not allow for two moms or two dads during house play. The same was true when children played wedding. If two girls were playing wedding, they could both be brides, but children made it clear their female toys were marrying male toys. These rules applied to children's wedding play even after the "wedding girl" incident at Imagination Center. When a girl suggested two girls play mom, another child replied, "No, we can only have one mom," and then offered up a different gender-appropriate role.

Children in all nine classrooms I observed actively constructed and normalized heterosexual discourses and practices with their peers. As previously noted, many children had "boyfriends" or "girlfriends," and they engaged in hetero-romantic behaviors, such as kissing or holding hands. Children, particularly girls, explicitly shared these

relationship titles with other children in the class, saying things like "Landon is my boyfriend." However, with the exception of the "wedding girl" incident, children never claimed relationship titles with children of the same gender. Yet, girls would often hug other girls and kiss them when teachers were not watching, particularly girls in one classroom at Early Achievers. Girls were not as cautious about kissing boys; they did not check first to make sure a teacher was not watching. Perhaps girls' lack of caution stemmed from some teachers' indifference, or acceptance, of boys and girls kissing. When teachers who did not approve of children kissing (those at Kids Company and Early Achievers who used restrictive approaches and taught children "kisses were for family") caught girls kissing boys, girls seemed unfazed by teachers' disciplinary response; they would smile or blush and soon reattempt to kiss the boy. Girls' awareness to scope out their surroundings before kissing other girls demonstrates some notion of heteronormativity: heterosexual practices are expected and "normal," and same-gender practices are different, resulting in increased risk of social labels or at least increased risk of teacher monitoring or disciplinary sanctions.

DISCUSSION

My analyses suggest preschool teachers' approaches to gendered sexual socialization affect how heterosexual discourses and practices become constructed, normalized, or disrupted in preschool classrooms. First, my findings point to preschool teachers as socializing agents of gendered sexual socialization. Media and parents play a role in children's early sexual socialization, but preschool teachers' heteronormative understandings, practices, and gendered expectations imbue children's social context of heteronormativity and gender power at early ages, before children enter elementary school. Second, my data demonstrate how children both reproduce and challenge sexual norms and behaviors based on messages they receive about sexuality from interactions with their teachers and peers. Third, I find teachers discipline some expressions of children's sexuality and gender, while at times allowing for conversations about same-sex relationships. These findings demonstrate ways in which heterosexuality becomes constructed and disrupted through children's interactions with peers and teachers in preschool classrooms.

My data illustrate teachers' active role in children's socialization through demonstrating when and how preschool teachers sexually socialize children. Teachers' use of gendered sexual socialization approaches varied based on children's gender (namely, teachers' approaches to children's bodily displays), but their approaches varied little based on children's race or social class. Each preschool had been operating for 15 or more years and had similar training and licensing requirements, but none of the preschools had official "handbook" policies regarding how to handle gendered or sexual behaviors in classrooms. Teachers' use of facilitative, restrictive, passive, or disruptive approaches to gendered sexual socialization varied substantially across the three preschools I observed. Although one cannot know for sure what caused these three preschools to develop different socialization practices, administrative and ethnographic data suggest level of teaching experience and teachers' age may have affected their socialization approaches. On average, Imagination Center teachers were younger (most in their 20s) than teachers at Kids Company and Early Achievers, who ranged in age from 30 to 50 years old. Extant research finds new teachers during their first few years of teaching are less effective than teachers with more years of teaching experience, especially when examining long-term student outcomes, such as achievement (Herzfeldt-Kamprath and Ullrich 2016). Across the three preschools, level of teaching experience was associated with teachers' sexual socialization approaches. Out of the three preschools, teachers at Imagination Center had the least teaching experience (three years on average), and these teachers engaged in facilitative approaches to gendered sexual socialization. Teachers at Kids Company had the highest level of teaching experience (17 years on average), and these teachers engaged in the most progressive (and least heteronormative) approaches to gendered sexual socialization. Given these findings, it seems possible that teachers' age and level of teaching experience had effects on their approaches to gendered sexual socialization. Perhaps with age and more teaching experience, teachers come to understand children's sexualized behaviors, regardless of whether they find them to be "appropriate," as simply disruptive to the classroom flow and therefore requiring restriction.

These findings have several policy implications for early childhood education and educators

more generally. First, preschools should adopt conscious and explicit policies for how to manage and respond to children's sexualized or "romantic" behaviors. Preschools typically have school-wide policies about children keeping their bodies clothed and, occasionally, restroom policies about only children of the same gender using restrooms at the same time, but the preschool classrooms I observed did not have any policies for how teachers were to respond to children's sexualized or romantic behaviors. Preschool teachers also receive little to no training on how to manage children's sexualized behaviors in classrooms.

Even in preschools that utilized the most restrictive approaches to sexual socialization, children still engaged in some heteronormative practices with their peers (e.g., kissing and relationships), albeit less frequently and more covertly. These findings demonstrate the importance of teachers actively working to disrupt heteronormativity, which is already ingrained in children by ages 3 to 5. I suggest that teachers use everyday "teachable moments" in classrooms to educate children about safe and respectful relationships (Martin and Bobier 2017). For example, preschool teachers read children several stories throughout the day. When reading a book that offers messages about sexuality, such as a child kissing another child without consent, teachers could pause the book and use that scenario as an opportunity to remind children about the rules of consent. Teachers could say something like "That was not very nice. That child did not respect the other child's personal space. We do not get into someone's personal space or kiss them without asking them first if it is okay."

Also, teachers need to be provided with free resources or trainings that provide tools for how to respond to children in safe and affirming ways when these issues arise. Preschool is a foundational socializing context in which children are learning about consent and starting to develop a positive self-concept about their bodies and sexuality. Teachers can positively affect children's self-image by making sure children are told their bodies are good but should be respected (and not shown or touched by others) and by making sure children are not forced or encouraged to kiss other children. Teachers already instruct children to say "Stop" or "I do not like that" if they are having a peer conflict, and teachers often have a classroom rule requiring children to keep their hands and bodies to themselves. These classroom rules

should be applied equitably, across genders, to sexualized behaviors, such as kissing and consent.

Finally, we need to make it easier for preschools to retain the kinds of experienced teachers who seem to do a better job of dealing with issues of gender and sexuality in classrooms. Increasing preschool teachers' pay and benefits may be a good place to start—preschool workers have extremely high rates of turnover due to the very low pay and quality of benefits they receive for these demanding positions (Cassidy et al. 2011).

Of course, parents play a substantial role in children's gender and sexual socialization both in the home and in school. In many cases, teachers' gendered sexual socialization practices were reactive rather than preemptive—they responded to ideas and scripts children brought with them to school (e.g., from parents and popular culture). Efforts to "correct" heteronormative socialization cannot focus just on teachers, but given the significant amount of time children spend at preschool, preschool teachers play an important and often overlooked role in the sexual socialization process.

It is also important to understand tensions between school and home regarding children's sexual socialization. At Imagination Center and Early Achievers, parents appeared unaware of teachers' sexual socialization practices. These practices were not actively hidden from parents, but parents were not in the classrooms long enough to know what was going on. As a result, parents at Imagination Center and Early Achievers never pushed back, challenged, or attempted to guide teachers' sexual socialization practices. Parents at Kids Company, however, were informed of children's kissing practices and relationships, because their children were coming home from school and sharing they were kissing their boyfriends or girlfriends. These parents expressed concern to the teachers at Kids Company, and the teachers took parents' concerns seriously. So much so, teachers at Kids Company allowed parents to take an active role in children's sexual socialization by guiding the teachers' classroom practices: they imposed new classroom rules that kisses should be saved for family and that preschool children are too young to have boyfriends or girlfriends. These findings have implications for how we think about teacher-parent relationships, as they suggest that parents' awareness, and teachers' willingness to take parents' concerns seriously, can affect how, and in what forms, socialization practices are implemented and

enforced in classrooms beginning in preschool. Additionally, these findings contribute to scholarship on social class and parental involvement and intervention in school (e.g., Lareau 2000; Lewis and Diamond 2015). The families at Kids Company (where parents pushed back and tried to guide teachers' sexual socialization practices) were predominately middle class, and teachers were highly responsive to their concerns. Middle- and upper-class parents are more likely than lower- or working-class parents to be viewed by teachers as supportive and involved in supplementing and reinforcing the classroom experience at home (Lareau 2000; Lewis and Diamond 2015).

My findings contribute to gaps in extant research by providing a developmental account of gendered sexual socialization, including how heteronormativity is promoted, normalized, and enforced in early childhood before children themselves have a salient sexual identity (Martin 1998; Myers and Raymond 2010). As Martin and Luke (2010:278) argue, "Early childhood is a period of intensive gender socialization and given the extent to which (hetero)sexuality informs gender (Ingraham 1994), it is also plausible early childhood marks the beginning of a gendered sexual socialization that leads up to and through adolescence." My data offer insights into what the beginnings of gendered sexual socialization look like, demonstrating how heterosexual discourses and practices make it into children's understandings of their social world in preschool. I challenge discourses that view children as asexual and innocent of sexuality by showing how heteronormativity permeates, and how heterosexuality is presumed (and at times encouraged) by teachers, in even our youngest social beings.

Alarmingly, my data suggest children as young as three years old are learning that boys have gendered power over girls' bodies. At Early Achievers, teachers passively gave boys gendered power over girls' bodies, allowing them to chase, tackle, and slap girls' bottoms without reprimand. At Imagination Center, boys were allowed to kiss girls, without a girl's consent, under teachers' justification and assumption of "crushes" or romantic feelings on the part of the boy. Research demonstrates how men claim rights to women's bodies at later ages, but my findings show this form of gendered power is instilled early on, in preschool. These early socialization messages may contribute to the larger rape culture that other scholars have described by instilling messages in children about men's physical power and ability to overcome

women's bodies (Pascoe 2007). My data offer examples of how heteronormativity and gendered power begin to shape teachers' delineation of behaviors as appropriate, or in need of discipline or intervention, as early as preschool. My findings suggest children enter elementary school (1) aware heterosexuality is normative, (2) skilled in policing and enforcing heteronormativity in their play and peer interactions, and (3) aware of negative social consequences associated with disrupting heteronormativity.

Finally, it is important to note that students' race and ethnicity affects how school authorities respond to students' gender and sexuality embodiments in later school years (see, e.g., Cohen 1997; Garcia 2009). The preschools I observed were diverse, but I found teachers' approaches to gendered sexual socialization varied little based on children's race or social class. More work is needed to explore the role of race and social class in young children's exposure to, resistance to, and reproduction of heteronormativity. It may also be important to further examine the impact of preschool quality on teachers' use of sexual socialization approaches and children's reproduction of gender and sexuality. The preschools I observed were average-quality, run-of-the-mill types of preschools. Future research is needed on preschool teachers' sexual socialization approaches in low-quality and public preschools. Finally, future work should interview teachers directly about the training they receive regarding gender and sexuality socialization and their approaches to sexual socialization in classrooms.

RESEARCH ETHICS

This research was reviewed and designated exempt by a university institutional review board and performed in a way consistent with the American Sociological Association Code of Ethics. Numerous steps were taken to protect participants' confidentiality, including the use of pseudonyms for names of participants and preschools.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A previous version of this manuscript was presented at the 2016 Midwest Sociology of Education Conference. I am deeply grateful for comments and insights from Karin Martin, Elizabeth Armstrong, Erin Cech, Fatma Müge Göçek, Morgan Purrier, the Gender & Sexuality workshop

at the University of Michigan, the 2016 Midwest Sociology of Education Conference attendees, Linda Renzulli, and five anonymous *Sociology of Education* reviewers.

NOTES

1. All names in this article are pseudonyms.
2. The nine classrooms I observed each had one head teacher and one assistant, but occasionally I observed other head teachers when they acted as substitutes or when classes merged together. Part-time aides' approaches to gendered sexual socialization often mirrored the approaches of the head teacher in that classroom.
3. All five head teachers observed at Imagination Center were white. The two head teachers observed at Kids Company were white; the two assistant teachers observed were African American. At Early Achievers, one head teacher and one assistant teacher observed were white, and one head teacher and one assistant teacher observed were Filipino.
4. Children's race was determined based on teachers' perceptions.

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