

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

Jeonghee Choi
Arkansas State University

Abstract: This qualitative study examines how masculinity is constructed and negotiated in a third-grade classroom. Grounded in a post-structural perspective on gender and informed by critical literacy, I describe two students who represent contrasting performances of masculinity: One aligning with dominant norms of competitiveness and athleticism and another demonstrating a more relational and flexible identity. Classroom literacy activities, including discussions of *William's Doll*, created opportunities for students to question rigid gender expectations. Findings show that dominant masculinity is reinforced through peer recognition and status, while alternative expressions of masculinity are negotiated within social constraints. Elementary classrooms are spaces where gender norms are both reproduced and disrupted. Critical literacy supports more inclusive understandings of masculinity.

Gender in elementary classrooms often operates as an invisible organizing force — shaping how children interact, how they are recognized, and what forms of behavior are considered acceptable. These norms are rarely taught explicitly. Instead, they are produced through everyday classroom practices, including peer interactions, teacher responses, and participation in academic and social activities. Gender norms often function as part of the hidden curriculum of schooling (Jackson, 2012; Francis et al., 2017). From a post-structural perspective, gender is not a fixed trait but a repeated performance shaped by social expectations and power relations (Butler, 1990). Classrooms, therefore, function as key sites where these performances are both enacted and regulated. Children learn not only how to “be” boys or girls, but also which performances are rewarded, ignored, or marginalized. Recent research has increasingly emphasized that young children are active participants in constructing and negotiating gender norms rather than passive recipients of preset rules about acceptable gendered behavior (Blaise, 2014; Paechter, 2018; Davies, 2012). At the same time, dominant constructions of masculinity — often associated with athleticism, competitiveness, and emotional restraint — continue to be privileged within school settings (Renold, 2017; Francis et al., 2017; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2015). Critical literacy offers one possible avenue for disrupting these norms. By encouraging students to question taken-for-granted assumptions about gender “traits” in texts and social practices, critical literacy creates opportunities for examining how identities — including gender identities — are constructed and maintained (Vasquez, 2014; Ryan & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2018). Even elementary-aged students can engage in meaningful conversations about identity, difference, and fairness when supported appropriately. This study builds on these perspectives by examining how gender is performed, recognized, and negotiated within a third-grade classroom. In particular, I focus on how two students — one aligning with dominant masculine norms and one adopting a more flexible stance towards masculinity — navigate and respond to these expectations. Additionally, I explore how classroom literacy practices can open space for questioning and reimagining gender norms.

Gender as Social Practice

Contemporary research conceptualizes gender as a social practice that is continuously produced through interaction rather than a stable individual attribute (Paechter, 2018). Within

classroom contexts, children actively construct gendered identities by drawing on available discourses and negotiating their positions among peers (Blaise, 2014). These constructions are not neutral. Certain forms of masculinity — particularly those associated with physical competence, dominance, and peer recognition — are often privileged, while alternative expressions of masculinity may be marginalized (Renold, 2017; Francis et al., 2017). Schools remain key sites where normative gender expectations are reinforced, even within environments that aim to promote equity and inclusion. At the same time, children demonstrate agency in how they take up, resist, or rework these norms. Gender in classrooms should be understood not as fixed categories, but as dynamic processes shaped by both structure and interaction.

Research on boys' peer cultures highlights the importance of recognition in shaping gendered identities. Boys who embody dominant forms of masculinity — often through athletic ability, competitiveness, or social dominance — are more likely to achieve popularity and status (Adler et al., 1992; Renold, 2017; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2015). However, this recognition is relational and context-dependent. Boys who do not align with dominant norms may be positioned as less competent, less mature, or socially marginal (Francis et al., 2017). At the same time, alternative masculinities — such as those emphasizing care, creativity, or collaboration — can emerge, though they often require negotiation within existing power structures (Paechter, 2018; Anderson, 2011). These dynamics highlight how masculinity is not simply expressed but interpreted and valued, making recognition, both institutional recognition *and* interpersonal recognition, a key mechanism through which gender norms are maintained and reproduced.

Critical literacy provides a framework for examining how texts and social practices reproduce dominant ideologies, including those related to gender (Vasquez, 2014). Stories like Charlotte Zolotow's *William's Doll* (1972), a text we read and discussed in class, are important because they *recognize*, that is, they *give recognition to* alternative ways of being. Through critical discussions, students can begin to question assumptions about what is considered "normal" or "appropriate," opening space for alternative perspectives. Recent work has shown that elementary students are capable of engaging in these conversations in meaningful ways, particularly when instruction is grounded in their lived experiences (Ryan & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2018; Rowsell & Pahl, 2015). These discussions can support what some scholars describe as "gender literacy," or the ability to recognize and critique gender norms and inequalities (Stromquist, 2014). However, introducing critical perspectives does not automatically transform students' beliefs. Instead, it often produces moments of tension, negotiation, and partial change. Understanding these moments is essential for examining how classroom practices can both challenge and reproduce dominant discourses.

Setting up and Carrying out the Study

This study employs a qualitative, classroom-based approach informed by ethnographic sensibilities. The purpose is not to generalize across contexts, but to develop a nuanced understanding of how gender is performed, recognized, and negotiated within the everyday life of one elementary classroom. Rather than treating gender as a fixed variable, I approach it as a social practice that emerges through interaction. Accordingly, attention is given to the ways students position themselves and others, how those positions are taken up or resisted, and how meaning is constructed through language and participation in classroom activities.

Context and Participants: The study was conducted in a third-grade classroom in a public elementary school in the United States. The classroom consisted of a diverse group of students

with varying academic abilities and social backgrounds. Within this setting, two focal students — referred to by pseudonyms as John and Chris — emerged as particularly illustrative cases. These students were not selected in advance; rather, they became focal through ongoing observation due to the ways their behaviors, interactions, and peer positioning made visible different constructions of masculinity. John was widely recognized by peers as athletic, competitive, and socially dominant, while Chris was described as kind, cooperative, and creative. Their contrasting ways of participating in classroom and peer activities provided a lens through which to examine how gender norms operate and are negotiated.

Data Generation: Rather than separating data collection from teaching, data generation was embedded within everyday classroom practice, with fieldnotes used to document significant interactions, recurring patterns, and moments of tension or negotiation. To enhance the credibility of the study, multiple data sources were used to capture different aspects of classroom life. Observations were supported by student dialogue and artifacts (written work and shared stories), allowing for triangulation of emerging patterns. In addition, attention was given to maintaining detailed descriptions of classroom interactions to support transparency in interpretation. Rather than seeking definitive conclusions, the goal was to present a rich, contextually grounded account that allows readers to consider the transferability of findings to similar settings. Classroom observations focusing on peer interactions, class participation patterns, informal social dynamics; student talk from whole-class discussions, small-group interactions, and informal conversations composed the bulk of the data. Instructional moments, particularly during literacy activities such as reads-aloud and writing workshop, were important sources of data. One key instructional context was the read-aloud and discussion of *William's Doll* (Zolotow, 1972), which served as a catalyst for explicit conversations about gender norms and provided insight into how students articulated, defended, or questioned dominant ideas about masculinity.

Data Analysis: Analysis was ongoing and iterative, occurring alongside data generation. Rather than applying predetermined categories, patterns were identified through repeated engagement with the data. The analysis focused on how students constructed and performed gender in interaction, how certain behaviors were recognized and valued by peers and the teacher, and how dominant gender norms were reinforced, negotiated, or resisted. Particular attention was given to micro-level interactions — brief but meaningful moments such as comments, responses, and peer reactions — that revealed underlying assumptions about gender. Through this process, John and Chris emerged as contrasting cases, highlighting both the stability of dominant masculinity and the possibilities for alternative expressions.¹

Constructing Masculinity: Recognition, Power, Performance, and Possibility

Taken together, and presented in tabular format to facilitate comparison and contrast, John and Chris illustrate that masculinity in the classroom is not singular or monothematic but exists along a spectrum shaped by recognition, power, and social context.

¹ Note on Researcher Positionality: As a researcher and educator, I was actively involved in the classroom context in which the study took place. This dual role provided close access to students' everyday interactions, while also requiring ongoing reflection on how my presence and interpretations shaped the research process. My interest in gender and critical literacy informed both the focus of the study and the design of instructional activities. At the same time, I remained attentive to students' perspectives, allowing their voices and interactions to guide the direction of the analysis.

John: Performing Dominant Masculinity	Chris: Expanding Masculinity through Care, Creativity, and Flexibility
John emerged as a highly visible and influential figure in the classroom, embodying what might be described as a socially valued form of masculinity. Although he did not initially present as physically dominant — being one of the shorter boys in the class — he actively constructed his identity through other recognizable markers of masculinity, particularly athletic competence and competitive behavior.	Chris represented a less dominant but equally meaningful way of performing masculinity. Described by peers as “nice” and widely accepted across social groups, Chris occupied a position that did not rely on athletic dominance or overt competitiveness; but rather on ease and enjoyment of association.
Peers consistently positioned John as a “sports expert,” and his participation in recess and physical education reinforced this identity. His performances — boasting about physical abilities, dominating games, and displaying competitive intensity — aligned with what prior research has identified as key pathways through which boys achieve peer recognition and status (Adler et al., 1992; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998).	Chris constructed his identity through qualities often undervalued in dominant masculine discourse, including kindness, empathy, and cooperation. He demonstrated a willingness to work with all peers, regardless of gender, and consistently resisted the binary logic that framed boys and girls as oppositional groups.
John’s identity work extended beyond physical spaces into academic contexts. His repeated production of sports-centered narratives illustrates how literacy practices can function as sites for identity construction. His stories, structured around competition, professional sports, and victory, consistently centered male characters and excluded female presence. These texts did more than reflect interest; they reproduced a particular version of masculinity that was both exclusive and hierarchical.	Chris gained recognition through creativity and literacy. His writing — particularly <i>The Clam Trilogy</i>, stories about a caring clam family including parents and a baby clam featuring themes of affection and protection in everyday interaction — combined humor, narrative coherence, and imaginative detail, challenging commonly reported gendered patterns in boys’ writing. Rather than privileging action over structure, Chris integrated both, producing texts that were widely appreciated by peers.
At the same time, John complicated traditional dichotomies between “athletic” and “academic” boys. He was both physically competitive and academically competent, positioning himself as a leader within the classroom. His election to student council further reinforced this status, suggesting that dominant masculinity, when paired with academic success, can become especially powerful.	Chris’ engagement in literacy highlights how writing can serve as a space for negotiating identity. As Lensmire (1994) suggests, fiction provides distance, allowing students to explore aspects of themselves without direct exposure. Chris used this space to construct an identity that was playful, creative, and agentic — distinct from the quieter persona he displayed in classroom interactions.

John's construction of masculinity relied heavily on boundary-making — defining what boys are <i>not</i>. His comments frequently reinforced a rigid binary between boys and girls, positioning masculinity in opposition to femininity. For example, he rejected working with girls, framed their work as less competent, and consistently described gendered differences in essentialized ways.	Perhaps most significantly, Chris demonstrated a more flexible understanding of gender. He repeatedly emphasized that “everyone is different,” explicitly rejecting the idea that behaviors should be determined by gender. In discussions about boys engaging in traditionally feminine activities, he acknowledged social risks while still expressing acceptance: “Some boys think boys doing girls’ stuff is weird, but I don’t think so...if girls can do boys’ stuff, then it will be okay for boys to do girls’ stuff.”
This boundary-making became especially visible during the reading of <i>William’s Doll</i> (Zolotow, 1972). John openly resisted any attempt to disrupt traditional gender norms, stating that boys playing with dolls was “weird” and associating nonconforming boys with negative labels such as “losers.” His responses demonstrate Butler’s (1990) description of gender as a repeated performance that produces the illusion of stability.	Chris’ comment about boys and girls doing each other’s gendered “stuff” suggests a post-structuralist awareness of contradictions within dominant gender discourse. While he resisted rigid binaries, he also recognized the social consequences of challenging them. His suggestion that nonconforming behaviors might be kept “a secret” illustrates the tension between personal beliefs and social pressures. This tension aligns with Butler’s (1990) notion of gender as a regulatory practice. Chris did not fully reject dominant norms, but rather negotiated within them — maintaining social belonging while subtly expanding what masculinity could include.
Importantly, John’s resistance to blurring gender lines should not be understood simply as individual bias, but as participation in a broader social discourse that rewards certain performances of masculinity. His strong rejection of alternative masculinities reflects both the pleasure and power associated with occupying a dominant position. As Gilbert and Gilbert (1998) argue, boys are not merely resisting change; they are protecting identities that offer them recognition and status.	Chris constructed his gender identity through qualities often undervalued in dominant masculine discourse: acceptance of difference, flexibility regarding self-expression, and development of a personal sense of creative agency. These forms of masculinity, sometimes described as more inclusive or caring masculinities, have been increasingly recognized as important yet underrepresented in school settings (Anderson, 2011; Francis et al., 2017).
As the school year progressed, John’s stories composed during literacy instruction remained consistent with broader patterns in which dominant masculinities are constructed through competition and exclusion (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2015).	For Chris, engagement in literacy highlights how writing can serve as a space for negotiating identity. Literacy practices provide opportunities for students to explore and reimagine identities beyond dominant norms (Rowse & Pahl, 2015; Ryan & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2018).

John's masculinity was highly visible, rewarded, and reinforced through both peer and teacher interactions. His dominance was not simply a product of his behavior, but of how that behavior was interpreted and valued. In contrast, Chris expressed a quieter and less dominant masculinity, yet still a socially accepted one. His example suggests that alternative masculinities are possible, but they often operate within constraints. What is particularly important is that both boys were navigating the same classroom environment, yet arrived at different ways of enacting masculinity. This highlights the role of agency within structure — students are not passive recipients of gender norms, but active participants in negotiating them (Corsaro, 2015; Blaise, 2014). At the same time, the classroom itself played a significant role in shaping these possibilities. Through everyday interactions, peer dynamics, and instructional practices, certain forms of masculinity were normalized while others were subtly marginalized. Disrupting rigid gender norms in elementary classrooms requires more than simply introducing diverse texts. While critical literacy practices can create openings for reflection, these efforts must be accompanied by careful attention to everyday classroom interactions. Educators should consider how recognition is distributed among students, how language reinforces or challenges gender expectations, and how peer dynamics shape what is socially acceptable. Supporting students like Chris — who demonstrate openness to alternative gender expressions — may be particularly important, as they occupy positions that can bridge dominant and non-dominant discourses. Similarly, working with students like John requires thoughtful consideration. Rather than positioning dominant masculinity as something to be dismantled outright, educators might focus on expanding its boundaries, creating space for multiple ways of being masculine without diminishing the sense of competence and identity students derive from their current positions.

References

- Adler, P. A., Kless, S. J., & Adler, P. (1992). Socialization to gender roles: Popularity among elementary school boys and girls. *Sociology of Education*, 65(3), 169–187.
- Anderson, E. (2011). Inclusive masculinity theory: Overview, reflection, and refinement. *Gender & Society*, 25(3), 250–268.
- Blaise, M. (2014). *Gender discourses and play*. Routledge.
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. Routledge.
- Charmaz, K. (2014). *Constructing grounded theory* (2nd ed.). Sage.
- Connell, R. W., & Messerschmidt, J. W. (2005). Hegemonic masculinity: Rethinking the concept. *Gender & Society*, 19(6), 829–859.
- Corsaro, W. A. (2015). *The sociology of childhood* (4th ed.). Sage.
- Davies, B. (2012). *Gender and education*. Sage.
- Francis, B., Skelton, C., & Read, B. (2017). *The identities and practices of high achieving pupils*. Bloomsbury.
- Gilbert, R., & Gilbert, P. (1998). *Masculinity goes to school*. Routledge.
- Jackson, P. W. (2012). *Life in classrooms* (Updated ed.). Teachers College Press.
- Lensmire, T. J. (1994). *When children write: Critical re-visions of the writing workshop*. Teachers College Press.
- Paechter, C. (2018). Rethinking the possibilities for hegemonic femininity: Exploring a Gramscian framework. *Gender and Education*, 30(1), 121–135.
- Renold, E. (2017). *Boys and girls speak out: A qualitative study of children's gender identities*. Routledge.
- Rowell, J., & Pahl, K. (2015). *The Routledge handbook of literacy studies*. Routledge.

- Ryan, C. L., & Hermann-Wilmarth, J. (2018). *Reading the rainbow: LGBTQ-inclusive literacy instruction in the elementary classroom*. Teachers College Press.
- Stromquist, N. P. (2014). Gender, education, and development. *Comparative Education Review*, 58(3), 481–502.
- Vasquez, V. M. (2014). *Negotiating critical literacies with young children*. Routledge.
- Zolotow, C. (1972). *William's Doll*. Pene du Bois, W. (Illustrator) Harper & Row.
- .