

# Uncovering Invisibility: Bringing Queer Representations into Early Childhood Education

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# Who am I?



# Why does queer visibility matter in the context of early childhood education?

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We exist.

We exist and we  
were once children.

Queer children exist.

Queer children  
matter.

Queer children are hurt  
by lack of positive  
representation.

# What is LGBTQIA?

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**L - Lesbian**

**G - Gay**

**B - Bisexual**

**T -  
Transgender**

**Q - *Queer***

**I - Intersex**

**A - Asexual**

# So Why 'Queer?'

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Queer is most broadly defined as non-normative gender and/or sexuality (Wesling, 2008).



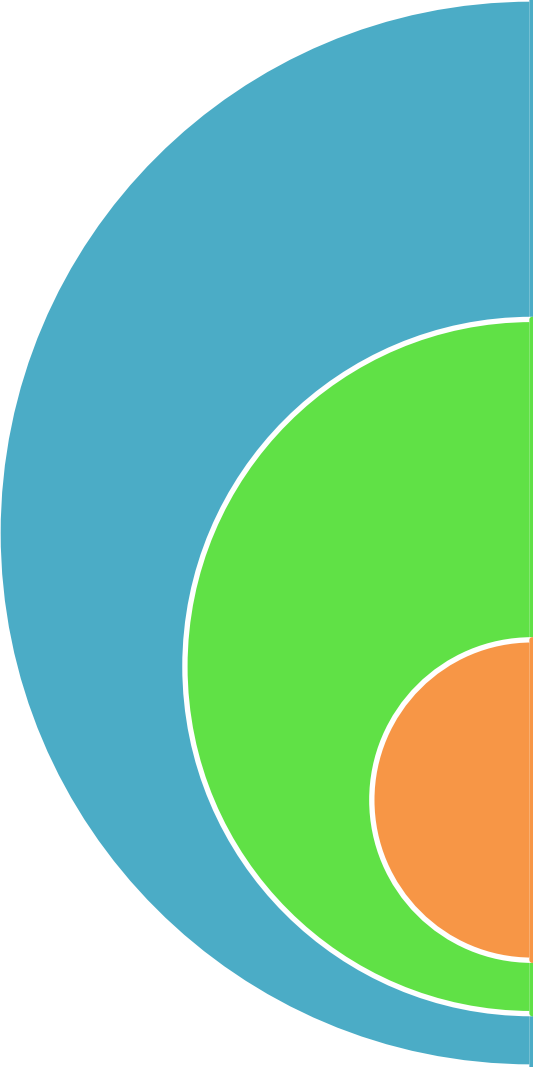
But the essence of queerness is in many ways it's lack of singular definition.



The term queer allows for greater inclusiveness & fluidity, encompassing more than sexual attraction and disabling the idea of 'fixed' or 'intrinsic' gender or sexual identities.

# The Facts & numbers

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“Australians of diverse sexual orientation, sex or gender identity may account for **up to 11** per cent of the Australian population.” (Department of Health, Australian Government.)

The number of Australians identifying as homosexual is increasing, from **2.4%** in 2006-2008 to **3.4%** in 2012-2014 (Roy Morgan)

A recent survey in the US has found only **48%** of Generation Z (21 & under) identify as **‘exclusively heterosexual’** compared to 65% of Gen Y/Millennials (21-34) ( J. Walter Thompson Innovation Group)

# Development of LGBTQIA/Queer Identity

## A small scale study

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105 participants. Age range 12 – 44 years.

Respondents from Australia, U.K, U.S, Argentina, Austria, Brazil, Canada, Germany, Iceland, Ireland & Peru.

16 questions regarding the development of their LGBTQIA/Queer Identities.

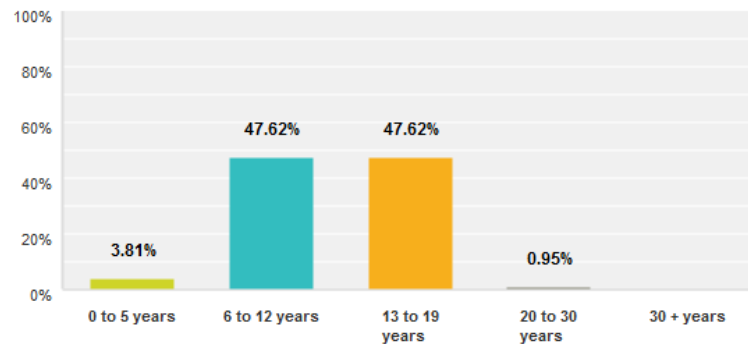
# Development of LGBTQIA/Queer Identity

## A small scale study



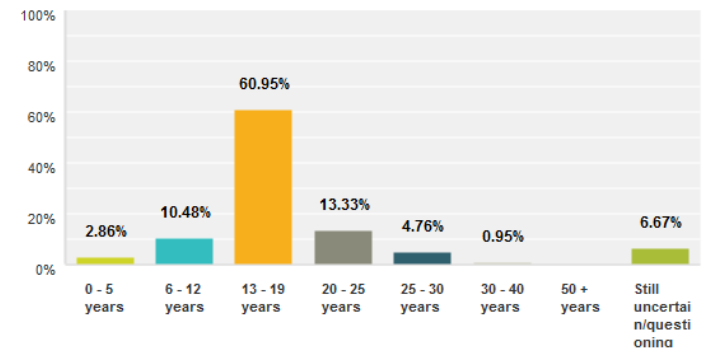
At what age did you first become aware of / learn about LGBTQIA / Queer identities?

Answered: 105 Skipped: 0



At what age did you become certain of your identity? (Note: answer is about personal understanding of identity, not whether or when you 'came out'.)

Answered: 105 Skipped: 0





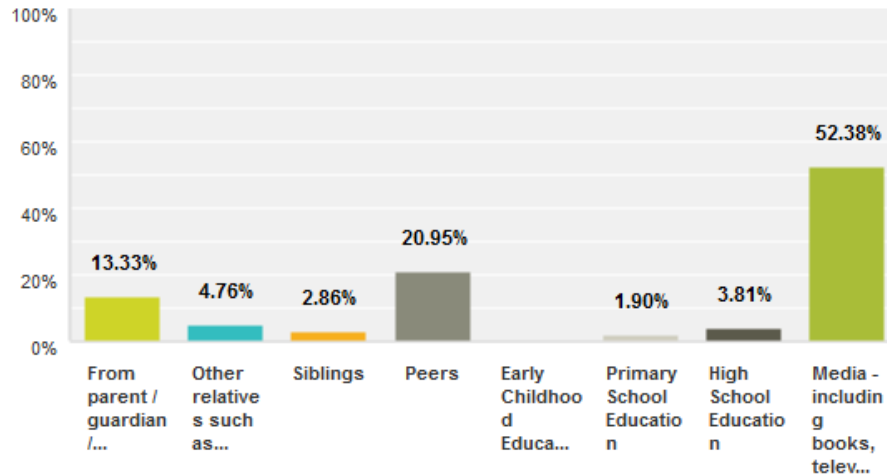
# Development of LGBTQIA/Queer Identity

## A small scale study



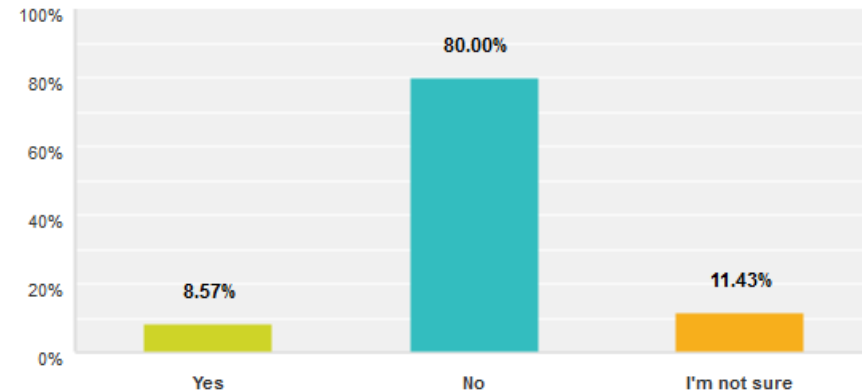
### Where did you first learn about LGBTQIA / Queer identities?

Answered: 105 Skipped: 0



### Do you feel that information about LGBTQI / Queer Identities was freely available to you within educational institutions?

Answered: 105 Skipped: 0



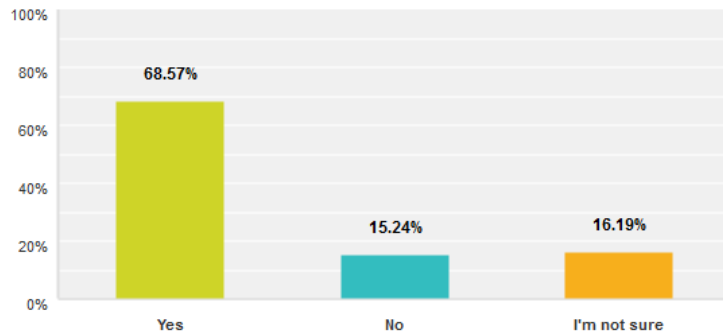
# Development of LGBTQIA/Queer Identity

## A small scale study



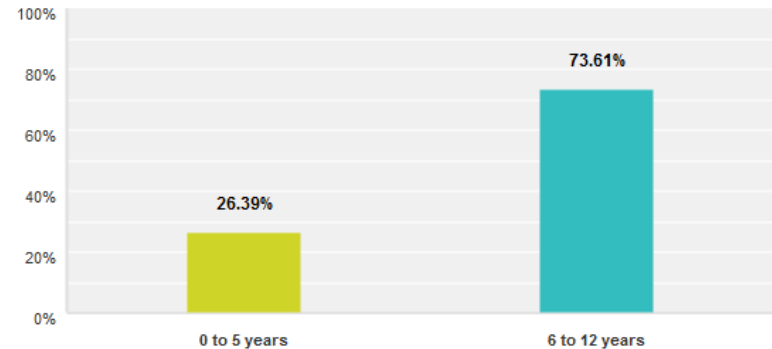
Reflecting on your childhood, do you think elements of your identity were present / recognisable even if not fully understood by yourself at the time? For example feelings that your gender did not match that which was assigned to you at birth, high interest in game/activities/toys which were generally considered for the 'opposite' gender, a more prominent interest in peers of your own gender etc.

Answered: 105 Skipped: 0



If you answered YES to previous question please specify at what age you feel elements of your identity had become present / recognisable even if not fully understood by yourself at the time.

Answered: 72 Skipped: 33



# What's representation got to do with it?

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“The description or portrayal of someone or something **in a particular way.**” (Oxford Dictionary.)

Absence itself is a way of portraying that something is irrelevant.

The Early Childhood Education industry clearly understands the importance of representation in many ways. Catalogues are full of books, puzzles, dolls, and costumes designed to ensure diverse cultures are represented. But how and where is Queerness represented within Early Childhood Education?

		
<b>Caucasian Bendable Wooden Doll Family – 4</b>	<b>African Bendable Wooden Doll Family – 5</b>	<b>Asian Bendable Wooden Doll Family – 4 pieces</b>
<b>\$19.95</b>	<b>\$19.95</b>	<b>\$19.95</b>
\$21.95 <small>inc GST</small>	\$21.95 <small>inc GST</small>	\$21.95 <small>inc GST</small>

# Representation is powerful & empowering



“It’s got  
a leg like  
me.”

“Thank  
you for  
making  
a doll  
like me.”

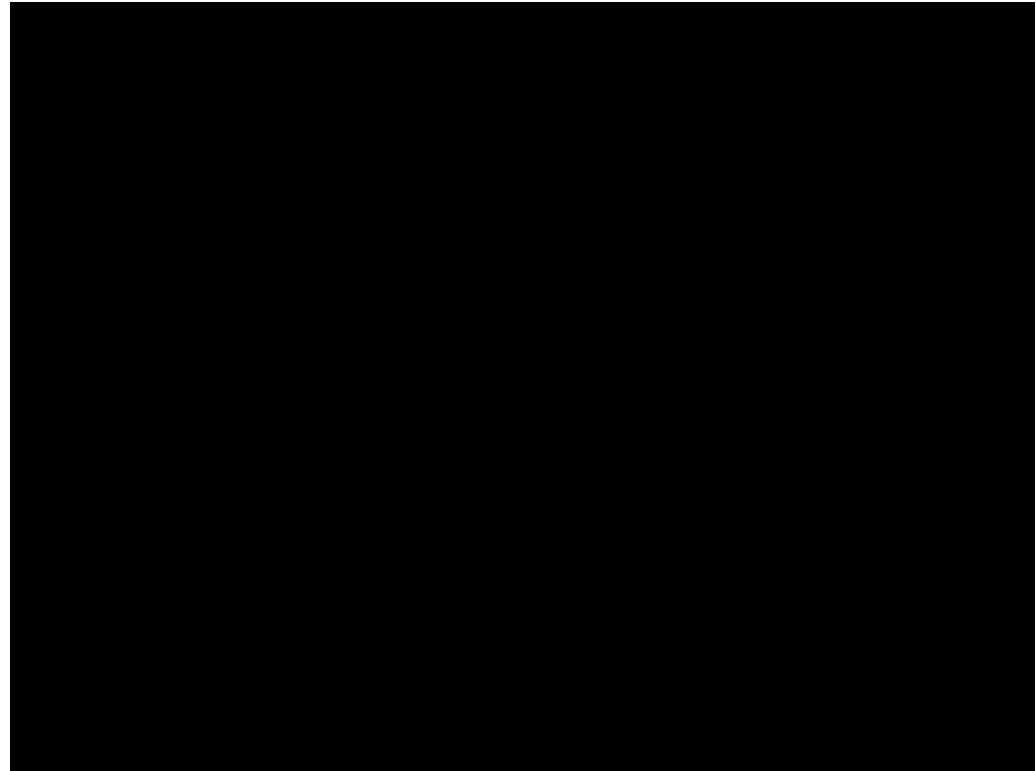
# Representation as a mirror

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“As a girl who loved other girls, I had **no reflection of my existence.**” - Ronni Sanlo

I know you, I **know** you. - Alison, Fun Home

“Priscilla, Queen of the Desert came out and while listening to my parents rant about paedophiles in dresses and godless perverts, I had a glimpse of ...something **familiar?** ....Priscilla was my introduction to normalcy.” - Survey Respondent



# Invisibility (lack of representation) is damaging

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“I had crushes on girls all through high school but because I also had feelings for boys I spiralled into self-hate because I didn't understand that you could like both.”

“I felt ashamed of who I was, I felt like a freak - if I'd been shown I wasn't a freak, I was just another person, that there were other people like me out there... then yes, I think that would have had a huge impact on my mental health and my development as a transgender lesbian.”

“I didn't have any way of understanding or explaining how I was different, and my first exposure to the word 'lesbian' was as an insult, which definitely shaped how I viewed my queer identity for a long time and I had to deal with a lot of internalised homophobia/biphobia/transphobia as a result.

Early positive representation could have avoided that problem and a lot of confusion down the line. If I had been exposed to a variety of queer identities as well, like non-binary genders, bisexuality and asexuality, I probably wouldn't have spent so much time trying to shoehorn myself into either boy or girl, gay or lesbian.”

“I heard the term transgender at about fourteen on the internet in passing and even then I didn't really learn about it more until I was sixteen and it took me another year to accept that it applied to me. By this time I already suffered from a lot of anxiety and depression, I had issues with self harm. If I had not felt so isolated as a teen and was able to understand my dysphoria earlier I believe I would not have reached such poor mental health.”

# Representation in context

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## Early childhood

Queerness is almost completely invisible.

## Middle childhood

Some peer discussion, queer labels (gay, lesbian) often have negative connotations, limited media representation.

## Teens

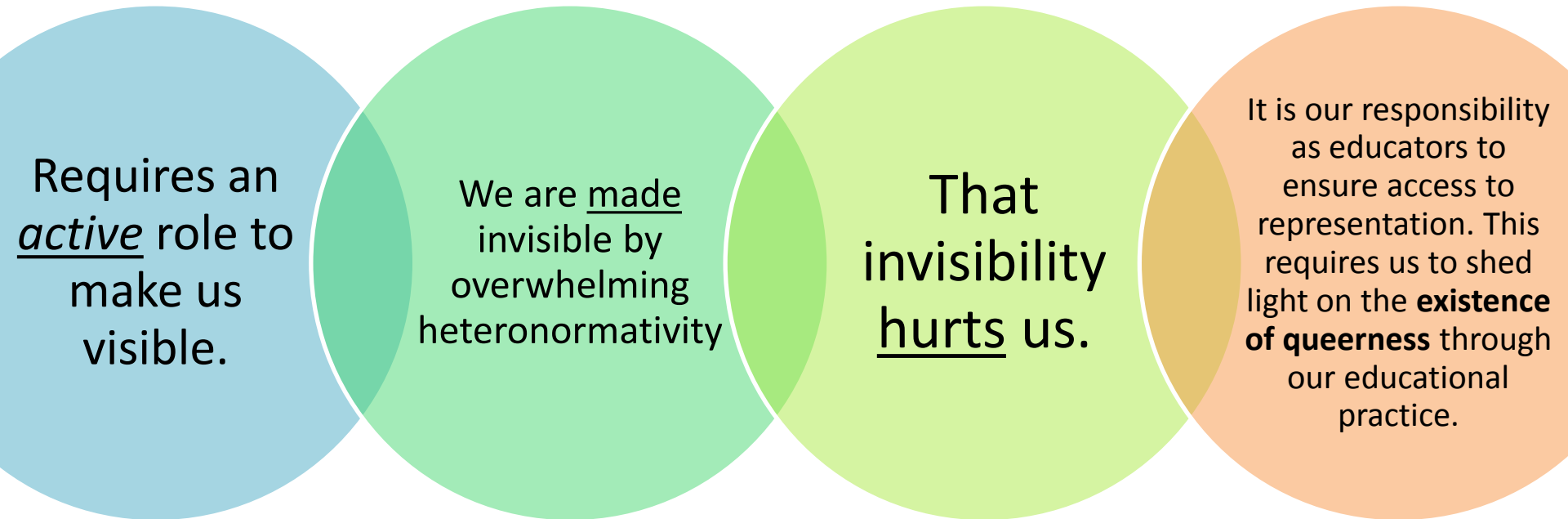
Queer issues extremely lacking in sex education, some representation in media (TV series such as Skins, Glee), negative language and significant reports of bullying.

## Adulthood

Extremely underrepresented in media, representation in TV & film is often negative, significant legal inequities & discrimination.

# Uncovering invisibility

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# What Can Early Childhood Educators do?

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Challenge heteronormativity, gender binaries & gender roles/stereotypes. Work to disable the dominance of heteronormative and cisgender representations.



Through images, books & media, & most importantly **conversations & interactions.**

# Examining the power of literature



# to uphold or challenge notions of normality

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“It is especially important in picture books to have all segments of society well represented through authentic stories...these are the stories that show children their world and that help them understand their world.” (Lechner, 1995)

Children’s literature, as a vehicle of cultural communication that can inform foundational aspects of children’s belief systems, can help combat dangerous discourse by instilling at a young age ideas of social justice and equity for all people. (Lester, 2014)

# Belinda by Pamela Allen

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Even the most seemingly innocuous narratives can inadvertently contribute to dominant cultural norms.

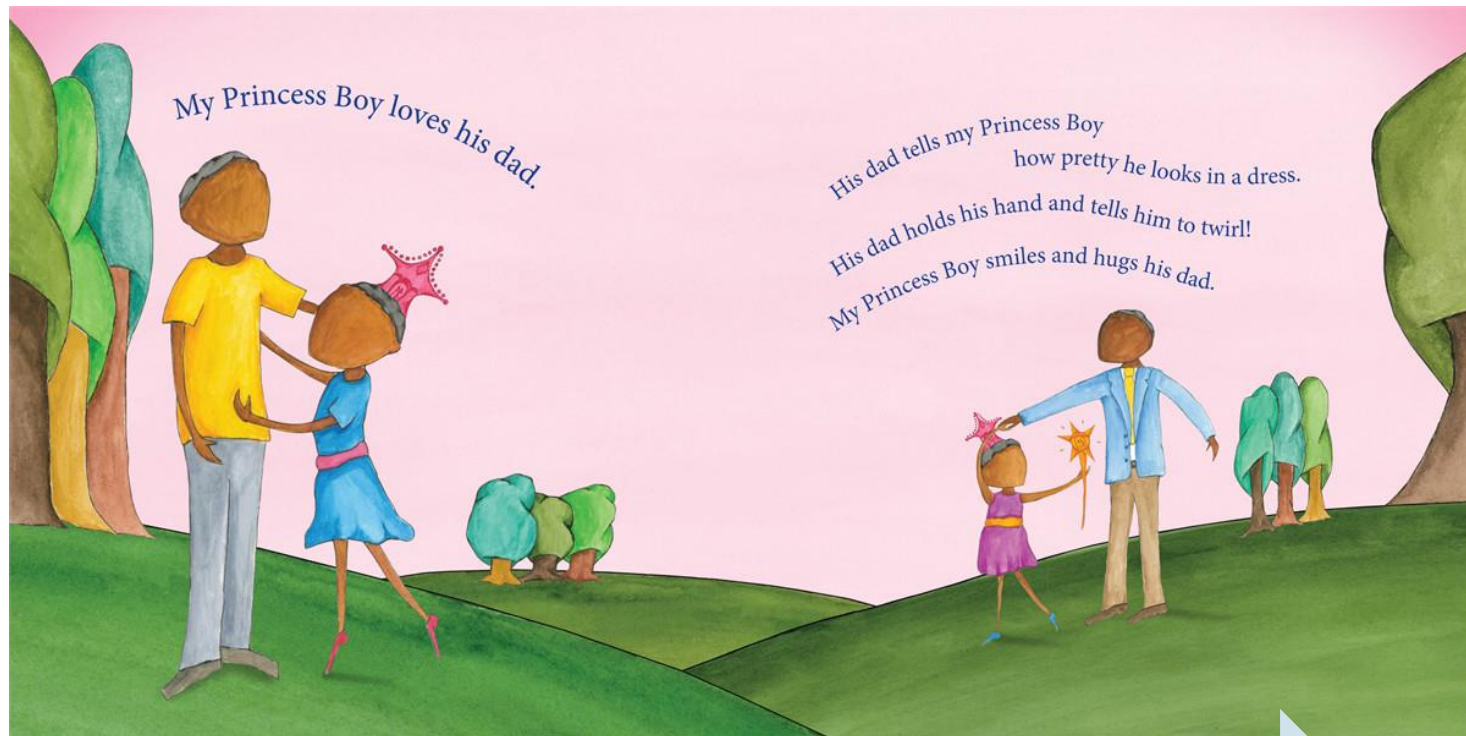
The narrative positions the idea of a man wearing a dress as an incredulous idea, reinforcing a clear gender role defined by clothes: only women can wear dresses.



When Bessie came home she wondered how her pink dress came to have mud on the hem. She almost said, 'Who's been wearing my dress?' but Old Tom had been the only one at home. And it couldn't have been Old Tom — could it?

# My Princess Boy by Cheryl Kilodavis

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My princess Boy rejects gender binaries by saying a boy can be both a boy and a princess. A boy can wear a dress and be pretty. And a boy who exists so far outside of cultural norms can be LOVED and HAPPY.

# Challenging gendered & stereotyping language in play

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“We’re playing mums and dads.” “Who is mum and who is dad?” I ask. “I’m mum but she’s the sister because she’s not a boy.”



Two children were fighting over who got to be mum. I suggested, “You could both be mums?” They responded, “No we can’t, you can only have one mum.”



A child asked me to play with her and told me I was a princess and I needed to pick a prince to marry; she would tell me all the princes I could pick from. I told her I would prefer to marry a princess. She hesitated briefly but accepted and then presented me with the names of different princesses I could choose from to marry. Later another child overheard our play and said, “Girls can’t marry girls, they have to marry boys.”

# Linking to the EYLF i.e defending your practice

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“The convention states that all children have the right to an education that lays a foundation for the rest of their lives, maximises their ability, and respects their family, cultural **and other** identities and languages.” - EYLF p. 5

Melbourne declaration on Education goals for young Australians

All Australians become:

- Successful learners
- Confident and Creative individuals
- Active and **informed** citizens
- EYLF - p. 5

“Educators who are culturally competent respect multiple cultural ways of knowing, seeing and living, celebrate the benefits of diversity and have an ability to **understand and honour difference.**” - EYLF p. 16

# Facilitating positive understandings of queerness

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“Children learn about themselves and construct their own identity within the context of their families and communities. This includes their relationships with people, places, and things and the **actions and responses of others. Identity is not fixed. It is shaped by experiences.**” EYLF

“At dinner one night, my brothers were teasing each other and used the word "gay". Both my parents silenced the table immediately and told us "gay is not a put-down, and if somebody in our family was gay, that would not be a problem and they would be just as loved". I was 8 and it was the first time I had heard anybody strongly oppose homophobia.” - Survey respondent.

“Around the age of 10-12, I became more and more aware of gay and lesbian people, via hearing offhand comments. It became clear that being gay was "allowed" but it was weird and a bit gross. Despite not yet being aware of my sexuality, I developed a deep fear of "what if I grow up to be like that?" - Survey respondent

# Belonging, Being, Becoming

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The EYLF's central theme perfectly encapsulates why Queerness should absolutely be represented with in Early Childhood Education.



Children have the right to BELONG. We cannot belong if we are isolated.



Children have the right to BE. We cannot be if we are shamed or unsupported.



Children have the right to BECOME. We cannot become what we don't know exists.

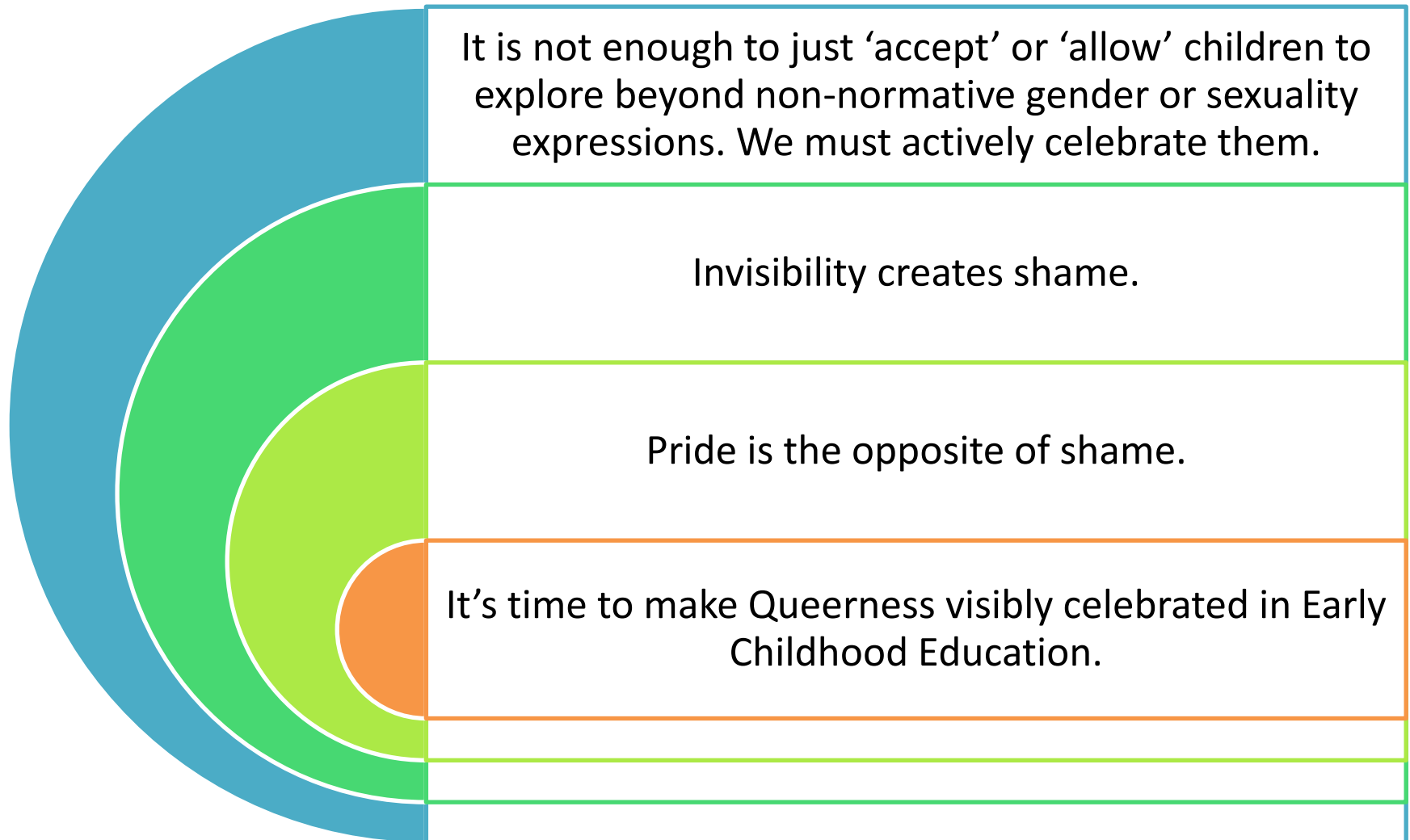


Our role as educators demands of us that we create spaces where children can safely do each of these.



# Pride and Celebration

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**Thank you so much for  
attending!**

**Questions & discussion.**

# References:



## Also known as: recommended reading!

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