Building-Blocks: Children's Reflection on Gender

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses how gender is constructed through building blocks toys. Using the perspective of post developmentalism, we examined the building blocks as learning media in early childhood education. We conducted a two-month focused ethnography in a kindergarten in the city of Bandung, Indonesia. We found that gender stereotypes in the society are implicated in children's interaction with the building-blocks. Thus, the building-blocks toy becomes a medium of gender binary construction. Through playing with the building blocks, boys and girls constructed an understanding of what boys could do and girls could not do, which result in strict limitation of girls' access to the building blocks, an effective medium to develop spatial and other cognitive abilities. Based on the findings, we recommend that teachers improve their gender awareness especially in the context of early childhood learning so that the teachers can create a more gender equal learning athmosphere.
Keywords: Blocks, children, reflection, gender

1. INTRODUCTION

Learning media play a significant role in the process of early childhood learning (Mantzicopoulos, 2011; Kendal, 1999). With learning media, young children can use multiple-senses to understand a concept. Learning media also conveymessages for children. Various studies have shown how learning media are able to facilitate emotional development, language development and cognitive development of early childhood (Farizah & Astiningrum, 2016; Ahyani, 2010).

Learning media are always considered to be able to stimulate early childhood development (Hasanah, 2013; Ernest at al., 2014). It is also shown how learning media are always positioned as a positive tool for developing various children's skills. Howeverm there is another side to learning media when they are linked to gender development in early childhood. Several studies conducted abroad show that learning media have a role in constructing children's understanding about gender in early childhood (Kilvington & Wood, 2016).

After doing observation for two months in a kindergarten, we found that building blocks are learning media through which gender was constructed and reproduced by the children. What we mean by building blocks in this article is units of block with various shapes and colors that can be arranged, interlocked, combined and assembled to build/ create something. The blocks are usually made from plastic or wood. In the context of early childhood education, building blocks is a form of visual reality learning media (Setiawan, 2018).

Building blocks are available in most kindergartens in Indonesia that use BCCT learning model (Beyond Center and Circle Time) (Indriyani, 2009; Hartini, 2016). Teachers often use them to develop mathematical skills and early childhood spatial visual intelligence (Park, Chae, & Boyd, 2008; Cohen & Emmons, 2017). Using building blocks, children learn spatial, mathematical skills (Verdine at al., 2014) and team work (Hasanah, 2013), the skills that stereotypically associated with men (Allen, 2000). These abilities are required for professions like engineering, a highly gender segregated profession.

Egalitarian gender understanding should be introduced in early childhood. According to Smith (2017), children are capable of learning gender from an early age. Thus, it is important for adults around children, knowing how learning media used in the classroom and outside the classroom can have positive implications for the development of egalitarian gender understanding in early childhood.

There are not many research studies in Indonesia showing how learning media are related to gender (Emilia, 2017; Education Sector Analytical and Capacity Development Partnership (ACDP) Indonesia, 2013). Most of the studies on gender and learning media in ECE are specifically related to studies about electronic media such as computers or television (Hobbs, 2013; Wartella at al., 2015). Research on learning media and gender in the classroom setting is very rare (Riding & Grimley, 1999), more so in Indonesian context.

In this paper, we will show how building blocks preserve gender segregation. Building blocks are often thought of as boys' toys, so girls are sometimes not encouraged to play them. This phenomenon shows how block becomes one of

the learning media that has the potential to strengthen gender segregation.

Our research shows that children use building blocks as one of the media by which they separate boys from girls. Through building blocks children developed their stereotype understanding about boys and girls (Fabes, Pahlke, Martin, & Hanish, 2013; Good, 2010). Building blocks are used by children as a forum to channel their gender understanding. Gender understanding shown by the children is a gender understanding that separates things that can be done by boys and cannot be done by girls.

2. METHOD

We did an ethnographically inspired observation or focused ethnography (Knoblauch, 2005) in a kindergarten for two months. Ethnography is usually used when a researcher wants to analyse specific cultural elements (Denzin & Lincoln, 2009). Since gender construction is part of a culture, we used ethnographic observation to understand gender culture of children in a kindergarten setting.

We chose the kindergarten based on the sex ratio of the students. In the chosen kindergarten there was 21 boys and 18 girls, with a total of 31 children and 6 teachers. The almost equal number of boys and girls eliminated the possibility of one gender dominant over the other because of number. We believed this would give us a fair analysis. We recorded important events and incidents in field notes which became the main data we analysed.

We used the grounded theory data analysis technique (Charmaz, 1996). After observing and processing data from field notes and focusing research coding, we identified 114 codes. The codes are then categorized based on several themes. Furthermore, in analyzing the data researchers uses a post-developmentalism perspective. The post-developmentalism perspective believes the child as a person who is a subject and not an object, meaning that the child has the role of building his knowledge independently (Burman, 2016).

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the observation, we found that children adopted traditional understanding of gender. Children tend to choose toys consistent with the stereotype of their sex. As explained above in this paper, we will focus on one type of learning media, which is building blocks. Our research found that building blocks are preferred by boys. Through building blocks they constructed their understanding about masculinity. Our field notes on April 13, 2018 recorded a boy who was playing building blocks explained that he was making a Spiderman's house. The boy also claimed that building blocks were for boys only. Building blocks are boys' toy. We interpreted this event as an event when a boy

excludes girls. This was when a boy constructs a gender stereotype. In the making of gender stereotype, the boy viewed girls as "the other" who was less competent than him in stereotypically masculine qualities. "The other" is someone/a group who is considered not a part of a particular community or group because they do not have the characteristics that define the group (Leets & Sunwolf, 2005). Here is the excerpt of the field notes

> *"A group of boys from "the dolphin class" did not follow a dancing activities that supposedly attended by all children from each class.. we saw some boys playing with building blocks in the corner of the building. We approached them. We asked what they were doing with the building blocks. A boy, Ari, said that he was building a house for Spiderman. Ari then argued that Spiderman is a boy and there are no girls. A few minutes after saying there are no girls in Spiderman, Ari then added, "Spiderman is the one that jumps from the tall places Miss, you can't do that if you're a girl".* (field notes dated April 13, 2018).

Ari's statement above that said "Spiderman is the one that jumps from the tall places Miss, you can't do that if you're a girl" while playing building blocks, shows that the boys transferred their understanding of masculinity when they played building blocks. Through playing with building blocks they reflected their stereotype understanding that boys and girls have different abilities and skills. Jumping, a motoric activity that requires physical strength and fitness, as they understood it was not for girls. The event is a window for us to be convinced that children's understanding of the characters and activities of men and women is their interpretation of what they see in the daily life shown by adults and gender representations (in the media, such as movies, books, etc) around them (Paechter, 2007; Robinson & Davies, 2010). Another factor that allowed Ari to argue that Spiderman was only for males and not for females, was also due to the fact that the figure of Spiderman who was in the movies and books seen or read by Ari was always a male figure. Female figures in the Spiderman movies were portrayed as powerless and needed to be saved by the Spiderman. The spider(man) figure was never a female. It is of course not unique, it has been a common knowledge that the hero figure or superhero who is considered strong and invincible is always linked or labeled to the male figure (Parsons & Howe, 2006).

There is a high possibility that Ari constructed his understanding about gender through the Spiderman movie and books he watched or read. This shows that children draw conclusions about gender based on what is usually seen by them. Therefore, equal gender representations become very important to build children's egalitarian gender understanding.

Ari's stereotyped understanding of gender potentially leads to biased understanding of gender which hinders him from treating boys and girls equally. Gender stereotypes do not only disadvantage females, but also disadvantage males. Boys are at risk of negative labelling when showing interest to stereotypically feminine activities a / or toys. For example, when a boy cries or plays with a doll, he will be considered "not manly" because he does not conform to the stereotype of how a boy should be.

We also found how traditional femininity was constructed by girls during the building blocks playing. An extract from of the 4th of April 2018 field notes below, shows how girls applied their understanding about gender when they played with building blocks

> *"The teacher invited the children to use building blocks to build a building. Bu Lisya said that after the children built a building, she would ask the children about the type vehicle or machine that were used to make the building. A few minutes after the activity started, we went to a group of girls. We asked Sahnas what kind of building they were building, then Sahnas said that they were building a beauty salon. After answering my question, Sahnas added that Biqis would be the salon customer. We then asked Selin why Biqis became the customer at their salon. Selin answered "Well Biqis is the girl Miss, this is a salon, it couldn't be a boy…. Haha [laughing]" Sahnas answered while laughing".* (92 - field notes dated April 4, 2018)

Children associating a certain activity with gender is often found by the researchers around the world. In our research, the findings show that children associate their gender consistently with their sex. Girls tend to group or choose activities that the community prescribes as belong to the female sex. The teachers in the kindergarten did not do anything to disrupt children's stereotype understanding about gender.

4. CONCLUSION

This research study shows that kindergarten is a place where children reproduce gender stereotype. To make gender equality comes into realization, it is very important that teachers are the agent of change for a more egalitarian gender understanding. They can disrupt children's stereotype understanding about gender. Unequal and traditional gender representations in the media, such as movies and books, are a catalyst of children's unequal gender understanding. Teachers can challenge the unequal gender representation by showing the children a representation of girls and boys who do both masculine and feminine activities. Thus, instead of showing the children that balls are for boys and dolls are for girls (Ruble.,

Martin., & Berenbaum, 2007; Adriany & Warin, 2015), the teachers should show girls and boys who play balls and dolls. Disrupting children's stereotype understanding of gender is a strategic attempt to construct children's egalitarian understanding of gender.

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