

A Literature Review of Gender stereotypical Play Resources and Educators' Attitudes in Early Childhood Settings

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ABSTRACT

Gender stereotypes are 'normalized' in current educational systems worldwide, especially in early childhood play environments. However, these stereotypical toys and games might distort the development of young children's gender identities. This literature review selects eight typical articles to explore gender issues in contemporary early childhood play settings. Specifically, this review focuses on educators' different gender attitudes toward children's play and children's own play preferences. In addition, it discusses suitable research methods and summarizes the insights drawn from these researches. Finally, it provides implications for future research.

Keywords: *Gender Stereotypes; Play resources; Educators' perceptions and practices; Gender roles; Early years education.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Gender stereotypes are 'normalized' in modern educational systems in many cultures [1]. Children start to recognize and establish gender roles by describing themselves as 'boys' or 'girls' and being encouraged to repeat gender-appropriate behaviour [2] [3]. To prevent students from taking such gender differences for granted, educators should indeed challenge the polarized gender discourses espoused by some classical social theories [4]. Although UN Women [5] regards the elimination of gender inequality as a priority in the global educational system, many national or local professional documents, such as *Early Years Framework and the National Quality Standards* [6], appearing to lack formal guidelines to gender stereotypes. In this case, although some educators point out the need for gender equity, they lack specific measures and training to tackle gender issues and may unconsciously reinforce and perpetuate gender stereotypes in their teaching process [7].

This study is a literature review which aims to examine educators' attitudes toward the gender-stereotypical play. As direct contacts in microsystems play essential roles in children's development [8], educators' ingrained gender views might hinder them from displaying an open-minded approach in their daily

teaching practise [9]. As a result, educators' inflexible gender perceptions may reinforce children's traditional gender understanding when educators arrange play resources and room settings, develop and organize games.

Another focus of this review relates to the impact of play resources on the development of gender norms in children [10] [11]. As a necessary part of children's gender education, play allows them to establish their own understanding of gender roles from observing, interacting, imitating, and putting these behaviours into action [12]. Hence, unsuitable toys or games are likely to skew children's gender roles and generate stereotypical identities.

This literature review selects eight high-quality articles to investigate different countries' cultural and educational systems about gender stereotypes. These articles involve valuable factors such as play resources, gender stereotypes, children's behaviours as well as educators' attitudes and are integrated as four sub-headings in the following contents:

- Play resources and gender factors
- Children's preferences in play
- Educators' gender perceptions in play

- Educators' interaction in children's play

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Play resources and gender factors

Gender stereotypes in play activities and physical locations are common in early childhood settings. Although most early childhood settings give opportunity for both boys and girls to play, "availability does not always entail equal opportunities" [13]. Chick et al. [14] support this view by claiming that children's toys are stereotypes. Girls, for example, are typically given 'female toys', such as culinary utensils and dress-up clothes, but they rarely have access to 'boy toys', such as construction kits and toy cars.

In addition, many activity spaces and play areas in early childhood settings are designed up with clear gender expectations and intentions in mind [13]. Lyttleton-Smith [15] observes that two play areas in a classroom have separate gender tendencies: the 'home corner' favoured by girls with themes around caring, homemaking and pretend play, while the 'small world' preferred by boys with open areas occupied with building bricks, cars and mathematics materials. These symbolic play resources strengthen children's conventional gender roles. Apart from the indoor physical space and toys, Lynch [16] notices that children receive gender cues in outdoor play, such as certain play facilities entitled for boys only.

Therefore, children in many early childhood settings have restricted choices for games and play materials, limiting their ability to challenge gender boundaries through gender-neutral play [13] [17].

2.2. Children's preferences in play

Most studies indicate that boys and girls show different preferences in selecting games and toys. Toys deemed 'masculine', such as popguns and puzzles, are preferred by boys, while 'feminine', such as plush toys and dolls, are preferred by females [14] [16] [18]. In terms of play activities, boys spend more time on physical games while girls participate in creative sensory play [19] [20], which aligns with widespread gender stereotypes and promotes the notion of gender differences in early childhood settings.

Børve and Børve [13] observe children's playing in physical areas and find that boys' and girls' preferred areas are relatively segregated: boys frequently occupy larger areas where they may utilize their bodies and voices, whereas girls' playing is usually quieter with limited space. In addition, some researchers indicate that girls prefer to play with one another [13], for boys, they occasionally play with girls by employing power and control tactics to support gender separation [14]. This

propensity might be attributed to deep-rooted patriarchal norms and privileged males aggregated by specific cultures [17]. In such sociocultural background, children might be uncomfortable with crossing 'standard' gender boundaries, as evidenced by girls being anxious to pursue 'boyish' activities like climbing trees and boys being hesitant to participate in the cooking or wearing 'princess outfits' in role plays [18].

It's worth noting that some researchers propose atypical cases of children's efforts to subvert gender discourses of power. For example, Meland and Kaltvedt [18] declare that girls can also dress up as Batman, and Lyttleton-Smith [15] finds that children reconfigure physical spaces (boys are attracted by the dancing doll in the 'home corner' and abandon construction toys from the 'small world'). These episodes demonstrate that children secure innovative thinking to challenge traditional gender norms. However, educators often modify them with taken-for-granted gender stereotypes, resulting in the retention of conventional discourses [18], which will be examined further in the next section.

2.3. Educators' gender perceptions in play

Research reveals that most educators have deeply ingrained gender views triggered by biological and societal factors [19] [17]. Motivated by such 'normalized' gender attitudes, educators thus select games and toys that are supposed to be 'appropriate' for boys and girls. For instance, drama plays are 'girly' games while 'masculine' body-related activities are for boys [13] [16].

Interestingly, some educators have responded differently to boys' and girls' cross-gender play. According to Lynch [16], educators rarely perceive girls playing with 'boyish' toys and activities as abnormal but consider boys playing with 'girlish' pastimes, such as princess dresses and high heels, as problematic. This supports by Pardhan and Pelletier [17] who find that "girls want to be more like boys, not boys want to be more like girls", which explains why educators are more worried about boys' dress-up or kitchen play. Such a complex perspective could be attributed to the joint influence of feminist poststructuralism and ecological systems theory [8] [21], both of which constantly reconstruct discourses of female power. Therefore, educators shape perceptions on girls with more choices in play while boys with more limitations, and the guiding concept for boys needs more attention and support from educators [13].

By contrast, a minority of educators who recognize the existence of stereotypical gender views arrange play resources differently: some re-evaluate their efforts to cultivate a non-stereotyped play environment, while others keep a neutral stance by designing activities and programmes only for children's interests and neither

discourage nor reinforce gender norms [14]. Meanwhile, several educators maintain neutral attitudes by indicating their programmes are designed for children's interests rather than for typical boys' and girls' play [19].

2.4. Educators' interaction in children's play

Researchers also highlight how educators adopt double standards and varied expectations when it comes to children's play [20]. They may unintentionally utilize gender-stereotypical discourses to define masculinity and femininity when they interact with children during playing. For instance, educators may praise girls for being 'sweet' or 'cute' while describe boys as 'strong' and 'brave' [18]. Moreover, educators respond differently to boys and girls who engage in the same play behaviours [18]. For example, girls are restrained and advised not to get hurt during the adventure play, whereas boys receive no comments [14]. During the doll play, however, boys' caring behaviours are applauded while no feedback is provided to girls [18].

Additionally, early childhood educators offer more attention, reactions and interactions to boys' behaviours than girls' [14] [16] [20]. For example, educators usually respond to boys' requests for help in time but ask girls to wait quietly for their turns [18]; such differences could be explained by boys' endowed characteristics of 'active' and 'disruptive', whereas girls' labels are 'submissive' and 'organized' [14] [17].

In contrast, positive discourses that confront children's conventional gender views also appear in these studies. Educators attempt to develop a non-differentiated play environment for children of both sexes. Their practices include incorporating gender-equal play materials, proposing boys and girls to regularly exchange their play spaces and encouraging children's active participation in 'atypical' roles in pretend plays [14] [16] [19]. With these interactions, educators can positively challenge inherent gender attitudes by interacting with children's play and play significant roles in positively reshaping children's stereotypes about gender-related play.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES

Among these eight papers, qualitative research methods are employed to investigate the target participants' perspectives. Rather than using objective metrics and statistics, qualitative research focuses on participants' subjective experiences, ideas, and feelings through watching, organizing, and interpreting their responses [22] [23].

3.1. Qualitative Design

Case study designs are frequently applied in the above articles, aiming to assist researchers to understand and expand experiences as well as reinforce their known beliefs [24]. Case study designs can be descriptive, reporting objective information in detail, or interpretive, conveying the character of events [23]. Børve and Børve [13] use a case study of interviews with staffs in a Norwegian kindergarten to descriptively elaborate their attitudes on the influence of indoor physical environments on children's play, whereas Chapman [19] collect information from two early years' settings to interpretively evaluate the relationship between educators' gender views and children's play.

Case studies focus on real-life situations to get in-depth insights into recognized difficulties, while ethnographic studies have no pre-existing assumptions and derive conclusions by progressively narrowing the study scope through researchers' protracted immersion and note-taking in a setting [23]. Lyttleton-Smith [15] conducts a year-long ethnographic program in a year 3-4 classroom by capturing field notes through observation and interaction to explore variables influencing children's gender identities. Pardhan and Pelletier [17] also utilize an ethnographic design to examine the effects of educator's gender perspectives and behaviours on children.

3.2. Data Collection Methods

Observation is the most commonly employed data collection method in the aforementioned research. Chapman [19], Chick et al. [14], Meland and Kaltvedt [18], Pardhan and Pelletier [17], and Lyttleton-Smith [15] conduct thorough observations on children, educators, and other key stakeholders, as well as their relationships. Researchers can get first-hand knowledge on participants, activities, and surroundings in a holistic viewpoint through large-scale and open observations, allowing them to collect specific data and make varied conclusions in a multifaceted and dynamic environment [23].

Interviews are often used to elicit more detailed information from participants in small scales to attain perceptions and reflections which could not be witnessed [23]. Børve and Børve [13] utilize a guide booklet with standardized open-ended questions for all participants to conduct structured interviews, which enriches the credibility and reliability of the subsequent data analysis. Lynch [16], Chapman [19], Pardhan and Pelletier [17] employ semi-structured interviews in which pre-designed questions are provided but then which can also be freely modified or added. Wingrave [20] incorporates unstructured interviews into her study by inviting eight early childhood practitioners to take part in five group conversations about previous

experiences and understanding of gender. Without any pre-designed questions, this kind of interview may generate unexpected and innovative perspectives in professional interactions [23].

Lynch [16] is the only researcher who applies netnography to acquire innovative, efficient and timely data sources by collecting and analyzing educators' comments from internet message boards. Given the scarcity of research tools other than interviews and questionnaires in this issue area, netnography as an online data collecting tool may supplement standard data collection methods in qualitative research [23] [25].

4. IMPLICATIONS

The above studies provide crucial and multifaceted inspiration for the current research area, exploring early childhood educators' gender perspectives of play materials. However, applying only qualitative research throughout whole studies may cast doubts on the reliability and generalisability of data. Therefore, providing an additional questionnaire as a quantitative method may improve the objectivity and validity of data. Such a mixed-method design not only guarantees the breadth of positivist philosophy through the intuitive and visible conveyance of statistics, but also promotes the depth of phenomenology by providing more distinct, diverse, and rich insights [23].

Another implication of this literature review is the requirement for the sample of participants to be representative and generalizable. The reviewed papers involve varied types of participants, including male and female kindergarten staff (both teachers and assistants), pre-service educators and untrained teachers [13] [18] [17]. These participants' diverse genders, ethnics and educational standards could lead to more credible research outcomes.

Furthermore, the contents and quality of interviews could be influenced by different circumstances [23]. Educators with sociocultural conflicts or ethical dilemmas, for example, might conceal their true beliefs on gender and play. In this case, some interviewing approaches could be utilized to assure the authenticity and validity of data to prevent participants from any anxiety or power relations between them and researchers [23]. To make educators feel relaxed, Pardhan and Pelletier [17] conduct interviews at educators' homes at their requests. Lynch [16] communicates with participants worldwide by using online email interviews, providing participants with enough flexibility and supporting researchers to gather more comprehensive data in global educational contexts, and reducing health risks under the present COVID-19 pandemic context.

5. CONCLUSION

Exploring these current gender research, gender stereotypes still largely exist in early childhood educational institutions, including gender-biased play resources and typical gender factors in the early childhood settings, children's own play preferences related to their gender, educators' conventional gender norms toward children's play and educators' intentionally gender-biased interactions with children during the playtime.

Admittedly, a minority of educators have recognized the importance of eliminating gender stereotypes in early childhood settings and make efforts to promote a gender-equal play environment by encouraging children's free choices. However, there is still a lack of detailed pedagogical approaches and practices from educators on challenging gender-stereotypical discourse towards children's play. Meanwhile, most current studies focus on either educators' perceptions or children's play activities and toys but rarely examine the combined impacts of both. These research gaps need to be emphasized in future gender studies.

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