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Gender in the Early Years

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Gender is constructed socially. That is, gender is not a biological ‘given’, rather it is a complex social phenomenon which changes over time and between cultures, resulting in ‘norms’ being associated with gender (i.e., the expectations regarding the characteristics and behaviour associated with being a woman or a man).

Gender is entrenched in society and it is therefore unavoidable. This means that gender norms are experienced and engaged with from birth (and arguably before birth with the rise of so-called ‘gender reveal’ parties where the colours blue are used to signify the sex of the foetus).

Infants and young children are increasingly spending their early childhood at early years settings. Early years is a sector with an almost all-female workforce in professional caring roles. This has consequences for the ways infants and young children experience gender norms and roles performed by adults.

Gender is learned in multiple ways including through social interactions, toys, objects, clothing, colours, the media, community - but not passively! Infants and young children are agents in their own gender identity development as they challenge and police gender norms in their play and interactions.

Research questions

How do concepts of gender materialise within the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) environment?

- How do gender norms inform the human and more-than-human intra-actions which take place in ECEC?
- How does infants’ and young children’s engagement with space, time, and the environment influence their knowledge of their own and other people’s gender?
- How are gender norms promoted and challenged in ECEC?
- How do infants and young children engage with gender?

Methodology

- Participants: Infants and young children (from 6 months to 4 years-old) who attend settings and adult practitioners who work there.
- Participant observation, fieldnotes, audio recorded practitioner interviews.
- Thematic analysis.
- Theoretical framework: Feminist New Materialism

Preliminary Findings

Practitioner thoughts:

I think nurseries try and work around everyone’s likes and dislikes and conversations. We try and offer all opportunities for them (children), but obviously parents are their way, one of their main influences (of gender) at the end of the day.” - Penny

“Give me a boy that perhaps you think has got more energy, read more clothing and things like that, need to be considered but actually I think you can get some girls like that as well.” - Penny

“I could have a boy that perhaps you think has got more energy, read more clothing and things like that, need to be considered but actually I think you can get some girls like that as well.” - Penny

“You could have a boy that perhaps you think has got more energy, read more clothing and things like that, need to be considered but actually I think you can get some girls like that as well.” - Penny

“The environment:

Objects

Gender norms/expectations

Play and exploration

Social experiences

The environment

Discussion

Generally, practitioners showed a stereotypical view of being a girl or a boy. However, they believed that different things influenced how children become girls and boys. Such as, parents, other practitioners and the toys and objects in their environment. Some of the practitioners perceived the children as individual and that they did not all behave in gender normative ways.

Infants and young children exhibit gender normative behaviour from a young age. However, their understanding of gender norms increases as they get older when they begin to binary gender (girl/boy) and play in gendered groups, while rejecting those outside of their perceived group. However, this is not true for all children, rather the majority.

Finally, the ways in which gender is learned in early years are multiple. Infants and young children’s understanding of their own and other people’s gender is influenced by their social interactions, gender norms and expectations, the objects in their environment such as toys and clothing, as well as their own play and gendered expectations of their peers.

Novel contribution: Inclusion of infants as participants, looking at the whole nursery - not just one age group, generating data with both adult practitioners and children at the nurseries.

References


New Materialism

Ethnography

Theoretical framework:

ECEC

Children’s engagement with space, time, and the environment influence their knowledge of their own and other people’s gender. 

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