

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).

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.

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.

Preliminary Findings

Practitioner thoughts:

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

"I think nurseries try and work around everyone's likes and dislikes and interests. We try and offer all opportunities for them (children), but obviously parents are their main, like, one of their main influences [of gender], at the end of the day." - Alice.

"It depends on the practitioner because there's girls interested in dinosaurs, you've just got to support them being interested in dinosaurs, erm, so I wouldn't say there's gendered toys, more the staffs' views." - Amanda.

"You'll see more of the girls there (play kitchen) because I guess they see their mums at home, like, cooking or cleaning or playing with the baby dolls. Whereas the boys don't really go towards that. So, yeah in that way, cars and dinosaurs are mainly what the boys play with." - Emma

The children:

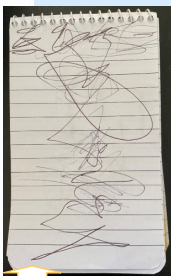
Lexi (1 y.o) picks up the giraffe and begins carrying it around like a baby. She takes it into the soft book area and begins to cuddle it, babbling softly. She takes great care in how she holds it. She gets back up and takes it over to Isabella (practitioner), holds it out and says "baba".

"I'm playing with the dolls. Nate said that boys don't like girls, but I like girls." - Jack (3 y.o).

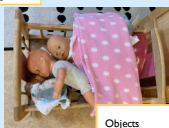
Quentin (3 y.o) is sat in a children's chair in front of the other children who sit on the carpet. I sit down on the rug with the children, and I ask Quentin "are you the teacher?", he replies "yes, but I [sic] a man"

Benjamin (1 y.o) shouts "ilk, ilk!" at Penny (practitioner), she laughs as says "yes, Benjamin. I know you want your milk". Penny hands both Benjamin and Elizabeth (1 y.o) a cup of milk Benjamin shouts "yick, uck!". Penny says, "you're not stuck. You like that word. That and 'no' are your favourites" she laughs. Penny begins peeling a banana, "nana, nana!" Benjamin shouts. "Would you like some banana?" Penny asks each infant. "Nana, nana!" shouts Benjamin, this time with excitement. Throughout this Elizabeth has been silent.

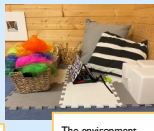
How is gender learned in early years?



Daisy (2 y.o): "girls"



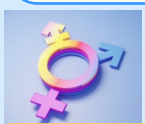
Objects



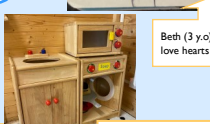
The environment



Social experiences



Gender norms/expectations



Play and exploration

Beth (3 y.o) "sisters, love hearts and brains."

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

- ◆ **Ethnography** over 12-months, across **three ECEC settings** in the East of England. Accessed through existing contacts.
- ◆ **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



Discussion

Generally, practitioners showed a stereotyped 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 binarise 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 expectation, 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

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