Teacher Perceptions of Gender Roles, Socialization, and Culture During Children's Physical Play

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Abstract

Play involves activities promoting children's development in physical, social, emotional, and cognitive domains (Dewar, Servos, Bosacki, & Coplan, 2013). The existing literature describes ways in which teachers' perceptions may influence children's emerging gender roles during physical play. This paper describes teachers' perceptions of children's gender roles and the relationship with physical play. A teacher's potential influence on emerging gender roles during physical play is discussed.

Keywords: Physical play, gender, early childhood education, preschool

Introduction

Physical play in young children's daily activities can be defined as "any body movements produced by the skeletal muscles and that results in a substantial increase over the resting energy expenditure" (Reunamo, Hakala, Saros, Lehto, Kyhälä, & Valtonen, 2014, p. 32). Logue and

Harvey (2010) describe how opportunities for physical play in early schooling often contribute to children's brain development, while improving social skills during later years. It is relevant to explore how early childhood educators can help their students to develop socially in regard to physical play and emerging gender roles. For instance, when these educators support active, physical pretend play, such as "running, chasing, climbing, playfully wrestling, grabbing, kicking, and tumbling," they contribute positively to children's social behavior (Logue & Harvey, 2010, p. 34). Through socialization with their peers during play, children develop behaviors, interests, and personality traits.

In addition to social experiences, children's cultural and ethnic backgrounds effect gender role expectations (Servos, Dewar, Bosacki, & Coplan, 2016). Teachers' understanding of the ways that children's home life influences their choice of gender roles becomes important. Servos et al. (2016) found in the culture of some families, boys demonstrate empowerment as girls take on subservient roles, especially during physical play in preschool settings. It is critical teachers of young children create a range of learning environments wherein physical play affords flexibility regarding gender role learning and development.

Educators create environments that support both boys and girls in choices about gender that lead to opportunities for social, emotional, and cognitive growth. By achieving this goal, early childhood educators use play to help children make sense of their gender roles. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to explore how preschool practitioners perceive children's gender roles as influencing their physical play.

Physical Play Defined

Child's play is an experience in socialization that supports physical, emotional, and cognitive development in boys and girls. Physical play is a typical form of child's play, occurring during the preschool years. In terms of a muscular perspective, physical play comprises movements, which are classified as gross motor skills (Reunamo et al., 2014). Examples of gross motor skills include running, throwing, and chasing; gross motor skills differ from fine motor skills, like writing and drawing. It is critical educators help children to achieve basic motor competence with fundamental motor skills (FMS) development. Reunamo et al. (2014) explain, "FMS are movements intended to gain or maintain balance, transport the body from one point to another and impart force to or receive force from an object" (p. 32). Through active physical play, children learn to support their physical well-being as a whole.

Physical Social Orientations

Physical play dictates children's physical orientation. Referring to children's personal choices and production of activities during play, physical orientation concerns the transition of a child learning to play alone to engaging in group play (Reunamo et al., 2014). Physical play demonstrates the potential to improve children's social skills. Because children learn during play, they indicate capacity to build their inner selves. Inner self refers to children's understanding of themselves, their needs and feelings "who they are, what they know and how they feel" (Reunamo et al., 2014, p. 34). In addition, participation in physical play in early childhood education contributes to societal trends, such as safety, weight management, and active lifestyles

(Reunamo et al., 2014). Furthermore, physical play links to short and long-term consequences of social prowess or competence. According to Colwell and Lindsey (2015), play becomes a reflection of a child's competence with peers and a direct cause of skill building that leads to positive relationships.

Play orientation affords children with the ability to perform socially. Colwell and Lindsey (2015) noted that some children experience "improvements in peer interaction skills following play training" (p. 497). These dynamics suggest the relationship between physical orientation and social competence among boys and girls. In play, boys and girls evidence different play preferences. For example, girls tend to engage in play activities involving soft animals and dolls; they depend on oral interaction, such as drama, while boys usually engage themselves in play activities involving aggressive play and physical interaction, such as superhero play and playing with action figure toys. Colwell and Lindsey (2015) suggested that the primary reason for gender segregation in children's play is the boys' orientation for dominance and competition and their preference for rough-and-tumble play. Colwell and Lindsey (2015) further report, "These aspects of boys' interactions are aversive to girls, whereas boys find playing with girls less interesting than playing with other boys because girls do not respond to boys' bids for rough-and-tumble, or competitive, play" (p. 498). By observing children's choices for play orientations, it is possible to gather information about their social skills. This allows educators the opportunity to plan for and direct beneficial play activities that improve peer relationships among children of both genders.

Social Characteristics and Gender

The gender effect influences social characteristics of physical play experiences. Through observations, Colwell and Lindsey (2015) describe how, for some preschool children, it appeared they were more liked by their peers during same-sex physical play. Additionally, teachers, who observed the children who played with same genders, tended to believe those children exhibited higher levels of social competence. These data suggest some evidence that same-sex physical play is associated with same-sex peers' acceptance; these findings indicate same-sex physical players may also improve social competence. In contrast, playing with mixed-sex peers during physical play was related to less peers' approval, which provides fewer opportunities to develop social competence (Colwell & Lindsey, (2005).

Next, it is important to discuss the issue of gender-stereotyping, which occurs frequently in the social environments of preschools. Keller (1986) defined gender as "what a culture makes of sex" (p.172). Gender stereotypes refer to a cultural categorization for people based on their biological sex and, consequently, assign the roles and assumptions about how they should look, interact, behave, and even play according to their sex. In Chapman's (2016) case study, data described how teachers remain instrumental in creating social environments that "do not implicitly or explicitly encourage gender stereotypes" (p. 1271). As gender is often defined as a social aspect of feminine and masculine types, it affects boys and girls in different ways. Utilizing a feminist poststructuralist approach (Blaise, 2005), Chapman (2016) sought to determine if preschool teachers' perceptions about gender influenced the nature of play. She described many ways teachers' perceptions showed relevant effects on play; she declared,

> The educators' perceptions emerge, and are thus transferred to the children, through their program planning, resources offered, feedback provided, general interactions with other educators and the children themselves, and, most significantly, the amount of facilitating and involvement in the children's play (p. 1280).

Research findings indicate that during play, there exists a relationship between social characteristics and gender roles. Additionally, the literature suggests the influence of early childhood practitioners as both establishing and observing the relationship between children's gender roles and their physical play activities. Finally, studies show teachers notice how play may change due to gender roles and stereotypes (Chapman, 2016). By providing a range and variety of inclusive physical play events, early childhood educators affirm children's natural gender role learning and development. For example, preschool teachers design lessons incorporating play that focuses on the individual child, and not his or her sex (Chapman, 2016). Consequently, children develop and understand gender role as a result of the social environment and those individuals who participate.

Preschool Children and Gender Roles in Physical Play Environments

The play spaces, such as playgrounds, provide children with opportunities for gender roles. For instance, Conry-Murray (2013) found children exhibited gender-atypical experiences in different educational settings, preferring to experience opposite gender roles in their activities and gender expression from what is typically a cultural expectation. This finding may also indicate how a child's learning environment can pressure him or her to adopt traditional gender norms. Moreover, the Conry-Murray (2013) study "examined the question of whether young children consider the context and personal preferences when judging whether people should adhere to gender norms" (p. 211). Thus, preschool children balance concerns about gender roles in physical play, which hones their reasoning skills across different educational settings (Conry-Murray, 2013). Consequently, there exists many variations in preschool boys' and girls' involvement in gender-typed activities. For example, one cause of variation is the social situation in which a boy or girl may play with a same-sex peer, opposite-sex peer, or interact with a teacher. This social situational variation influences the rate of children's engagement in particular activities. Goble, Martin, Hanish, and Fabes (2012) conducted a study to identify children's gender-typed activity choices related to preschool, physical play. These researchers noticed that children's choices reflected their gender role as well as their identity when they play with the same-sex peers or alone. This finding indicates children's social interactions with peers and teachers help to expose them to a wide range of physical activities which involve gender-typing and gender differences.

Play Themes

By observing differences in play environments, early childhood educators can see the variety in gender-stereotype of play themes in which children engage. For example, Änggård (2011) focused on children's gendered and non-gendered play in natural play environments. Ethnographic data revealed four different preschool play themes—war and superhero, family, animal, and physical. These themes reflect ways children develop their understanding of gender

role during play activities. For example, gender role differences appear across play themes, such as rough and tumble play (R&T). "R&T play is a form of play that is both social and locomotive, and it co-occurs with pretend play, which is parsed into two categories: thematic fantasy play and social dramatic play" (Storli & Sandseter, 2015, p. 2004). Boys are more apt to engage in pretend roles typified by superhero play involving play fighting, jumping, and running. Boys and girls display contrasting behaviors often on the playground. For instance, boys tend to react physically as opposed to verbally when compared to girls. Physical behavior is then channeled into improved social competence, self-regulation, social problem solving, and trust (Hart & Tannock, 2018). Wohlwend (2012) described critical sociocultural perspectives regarding play, literacy, and gender role as social practices.

Findings involving princess play, a Disney-created activity that features masculine and feminine characters, (Wohlwend, 2012) suggest how boys and girls practice with the princess play texts correlated to gender role expectations in children's play. Data indicate boys and girls chose to play the characters that are compatible with the cultural assumptions and show their gender construction for their gender roles as male and female. This finding leads one to compare and contrast different forms of play as well as to consider a variety of environments with differing themes. For instance, Giraldo and Colyar (2012) investigated gender roles within the classroom. Using qualitative research, Giraldo and Colyar (2012) examined the effect of teachers' practices on the construction of children's gender identities. After observing and using teachers' case studies, the researchers suggested a connection between teachers' practices and interaction, and the handling of gender-stereotyped situations. These findings indicated how teachers' interactions affect young children in early childhood. For example, teachers who used inclusive gender language and inclusive gender practices promoted neutral teaching environments. They helped to create the impression both genders can be involved in similar activities in their classrooms. They also improved their students' ability to express themselves freely without fear of discrimination. In contrast, teachers, who used gender-stereotyped language and interacted differently with boys and girls, supported gender segregation and stereotypes in children's interpersonal relationships and interactions with one another. Importantly, play themes reflect vigorous behaviors that allow children to explore and develop gender roles. Rough and tumble (R&T) play is a frequent activity among preschool-aged children, particularly with boys. This play theme enhances children's social competencies and it provides practice for skill building (Storli & Hansen Sandseter, 2017). Many researchers find that gender roles influence both teachers and students during R&T play (Colwell & Lindsey, 2015; Goble et al., 2012; Logue & Harvey, 2010). For instance, gender differences among teachers can impact the way they perceive play themes, like R&T play (Storli & Hansen Sandseter, 2017). Many studies demonstrate male teachers as more positive and as more willing to allow children to engage in R&T play than female teachers who look at this kind of play as aggressive and fostering violence (Logue & Harvey, 2010; Sandberg & Pramling-Samuelsson, 2005; Storli & Hansen Sandseter, 2017).

On the other hand, children take on different gender roles based on the nature of play themes. For example, between the ages of two and six years, boys tend to engage in physical play, such

as R&T, and they often avoid playing with girls who engage in feminine activities, such as playing with dolls or using kitchen materials (Servos et al., 2016).

Thus, by interacting with adults and peers representing different gender roles, preschool children learn to represent their gender identities while participating in a variety of play themes. They tend to internalize and imitate the roles the adults and same-sex peers perform during their interaction with others and bring this understanding of role into their play.

Play Culture, Gender, Environments, Social Competence and Culture

Play Culture. The culture of play among young children affects their preferences of play type because culture permeates every human activity including play. Børve and Børve (2017) describe how culture is ingrained in all play activities. For instance, the culture of rural South American Indian society encourages boys to play by using bows and arrows because this kind of play enhances children's hunting skills. However, this kind of play in other cultures may be considered a form of violent play. Therefore, play differs across cultures based on cultural beliefs and lifestyles. As a consequence, cultural gender assumptions and rules about how to act as a male and female effect gender roles and preferences even during play.

Physical Environments. Børve and Børve (2017) focused on how physical environments influence the construction of play activities according to gender role expectations. For example, these researchers noticed that during indoor play, rooms and zones signal to the children what materials to use, what gender role is expected, and what activities should occur (Børve & Børve, 2017). The play culture of children is greatly affected by their physical environment. Play culture is a socially constructed concept that comes about when children mingle with adults and their peers within a certain physical area. For instance, Børve and Børve (2017) described how boy's play was noisy, required more attention, and used larger spaces compared to that of girls. Additionally, data show the physical presence of adults and role models in the physical environment also significantly effect children's play. Therefore, children's play practices become influenced by gender and require different physical space guidelines.

Social Competence and Gender. As children learn how to actively play in a culture that supports learning, establishes goal setting, and develops peer competence, their social abilities tend to improve. Accordingly, relevant data exist describing play and gender's effect on children's social and peer competencies. Colwell and Lindsey (2015) looked carefully at how preschool children's pretend and physical play in same-sex, opposite-sex, and mixed-sex peer settings affected their attainment of competencies. Their results indicated the connection between play form and social competence is determined by the child's sex and gender orientation. Thus, a culture of play contributes to preschool children's social development and the effects of gender role on their preferences during play.

Gender Role and Culture. Gender roles and cultural norms affect the way teachers perceive play activity and gender roles among their students. Data describe how children learn while adults direct them to play offering education via gendered role modeling. This is achieved when adults share cultural meanings and demonstrate cultural objects (Servos et al., 2016).

Teacher Perceptions of Gender Role and Physical Play

By observing young children's gender roles, patterns, and differences, early childhood educators perceive ways to elicit student learning as a result of physical play. For example, using early childhood professionals' understandings, Ärlemalm-Hagsér (2010) examined gender choreography and micro-structures. These teacher-participants represented different understandings about teaching play from gender perspectives (considering gender identities, gender schema theory; Bem,1993), and "doing gender" (Ärlemalm-Hagsér , 2010)**.** Using early childhood professionals' understandings, Ärlemalm-Hagsér (2010) noted teachers tended to focus on socio-cultural perspectives of children's play. "Doing gender" involves allowing children to explore their gender identities through activities that specify gender roles, especially on the playground. Further, many teachers perceived outdoor play involves gender-neutral situations, while other teachers instruct play activities from a gender-blind perspective**.** Gender neutral refers to the type of situations that do not classify or treat people differently according to their sex. Gender-blind refers to the practices that reinforce gender inequality and gender differences. Other researchers investigated how male and female preschool teachers' perspectives about play and gender differences were alike or different. Sandberg and Pramling-Samuelsson (2005) observed the attitudes of preschool teachers and discussed there is a difference in the play willingness of male and female teachers. This study indicated more male teacher playfulness with young students during play than female teachers. These studies emphasize how preschool teachers share diverse perceptions as a result of their own gender roles and the gender roles of their students.

Cultural perspectives of gender roles also affect teacher perceptions of play and their students' gender role behaviors. Servos et al. (2016) discuss how children become exposed to gender dynamics which follow the cultural expectations of gender roles. This exposure shapes children's attitudes and beliefs about gender expectations later in life. Many researchers find that early childhood educators tend to represent unique ideas about the way preschool children react to gender role expectations during school activities, like play (Chapman, 2016). Granger, Hanish, Kornienko, and Bradley (2017) discuss how most teachers' perceptions regarding gender roles and play follow rigid cultural notions describing what constitutes masculinity and femininity. Teacher perception research allows educators to not only look at their students' behaviors, but also to consider their own attitudes about gender and culture (Giraldo, & Colyar, 2012). Chapman (2016) asserts the critical importance for teachers to identify their own gender role biases before they can begin to transfer these values to their students. In this way, teachers view gender role as a nuanced rather than a binary construct that is dependent on multiple dimensions of identity influenced by factors like religion, sexuality, social class, and ethnicity (Chapman, 2016). "Building on past research suggesting that educators' gender identities and gender orientations may play a role in how gendered issues are managed within the classroom setting," many findings pinpoint the importance of teachers' professional development (Dewar et al., 2013, p. 381). Therefore, in order to promote the well-being of children, teachers gain knowledge of how gender role expectations and cultural norms effect ongoing gender role learning and development.

Feminist Perspectives

Theoretical Concept. From a feminist standpoint (Blaise, 2005)**,** there is a growing trend to observe early childhood education, particularly in relation to children's play and gender role development. De Lair and Erwin (2000) describe how feminist perspectives offer key insights into the constructs of "race, ethnicity, social class, gender, and sexual orientation" (p. 154). As this current literature review centers on teachers' perceptions of gender roles and physical play, applying feminist perspectives is a prudent choice. This perspective uses feminism as a philosophy in which society is male dominated, causing women to become under acknowledged and to evidence less societal power (De Lair & Erwin, 2000). In a classroom setting, teachers with a feminist perspective apply this perspective to instructional practices to benefit children's views of society.

It is critical to assume the idea of many voices. According to De Lair and Erwin (2000), these voices reflect the differences in teachers and students' social and cultural backgrounds. When early childhood educators demonstrate feminist perspectives, they may help children to become empowered. De Lair and Erwin (2000) claim,

> Feminist ideas provide a way to fill in the gaps left by the traditional curriculum, a foundation for moment-by-moment decisions in the classrooms, a unique framework for examining the influences of gender, ethnicity, language, culture, social class, and sexual orientation, and validate the affective experience of children and professionals who have experiences outside dominant culture (p. 167).

Thus, the factor of multiple voices espoused by feminism can inform teachers' perceptions of their students' activities, such as play.

To be clear, the benefit of observing early childhood education data through feminist perspectives helps to illuminate gender concerns, such as inequality and male dominance. This means, teachers become responsible for forming and justifying best practice guidelines (De Lair & Erwin, 2000).

Generating from an understanding of feminist theory, the concept of patriarchy "pervades western culture, extending into the seemingly fun spaces of children's play" (Prioletta, 2019, p. 2). Preschool teachers may be unaware of gender-related inequalities during play. Prioletta (2019) found that relying on child development helped to adjust gendered power dynamics through a critical feminist theoretical lens. A teacher examines dominant cultural structures in preparing play environments. Teachers in Prioletta's (2019) research study described how they noticed gender power imbalances during play in which girls continued to navigate boys' domination.

By considering the socializing context regarding gender role expectations, the teachers in Prioletta's study made statements, such as: "I think [the boys] are just being themselves. I think they're just more physical. They use actions…Girls are a lot softer and more mild-mannered and they're not as aggressive as the boys are" (2019, p. 6).

Lastly, one of the major principles of feminism is for early childhood professionals to empower their students. De Lair and Erwin (2000) emphasize how it is integral for preschool teachers to allow their students to express their thoughts and feelings, especially during play activities, which are impacted by the media and dominant society. Hence, according to feminist views, these children begin to challenge conventional gender norms, such as boys not playing with dolls. The goal of De Lair and Erwin (2000) is to show the importance of meaningful, social relationships during preschool play that represents an inclusive community. In doing so, children become empowered to collaborate and share experiences in gender equitable surroundings.

Conclusions and Implications

When teachers understand the relationship between gender roles and physical play, they improve instructional activities, broaden materials, and ensure flexibility. A major implication is the determination of how to provide opportunities for effective physical play in children's development of gender identity and orientations in a preschool context (Reunamo et al., 2014). Physical play provides a range of learning supporting social, physical, and cognitive experiences. The knowledge of children's gender-typed activity preferences supports teaching practices, which empower student growth and learning (Goble et al., 2012). Hence, it is clearly necessary for preschool children to experience learning situations in which they "do gender," developing gender identities and exploring gender roles without being gender stereotyped. Furthermore, it is critical for future research to focus on preschool, physical activities and their effect on children's assumptions regarding play and gender. With training and study, educators develop curriculum and instruction that improves gender equality for children on the playground. As Prioletta (2019) asserts, "{the}concept of feminist pedagogic gaze may afford early learning practices and future directions for research" to develop and benefit early childhood education (p.1).

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