Challenging Gender: Teachers' efforts to work with young children.

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Abstract

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Early childhood education has been largely ignored in national efforts to address issues of gender. Early childhood educators have had little guidance as to how they might begin to work with children to achieve more emancipatory understandings of what it might mean to live as an embodied female or male in our society. In a DEET funded project, a number of teachers in ten sites throughout Queensland and New South Wales participated in an action research study, Addressing the Construction of Gender in the Preschool to Grade Three Years. This paper reports on the work of these teachers, the issues they addressed, the strategies they adopted, and their reports of success in working with children in the four to eight year age range. The paper also asserts the need for early childhood education to move from the margins
to the centre of research and international dialogue on gender.

Challenging Gender: Teachers' Efforts to Work with Young Children

Introduction
This paper attempts to make visible the omission of early childhood education in national debate and policy making in relation to gender issues. To date, there has been little attention in educational deliberations to the ways in which the early years of institutionalised care and education serve to generate, to maintain and to lay the foundations for asymmetries in gender relations that may not be contested until later years of schooling. This paper will highlight a Gender Equity in Curriculum Reform project that provides insights to

the kinds of work on gender politics that can be undertaken with children in the early years. The pervasiveness of gender inequities uncovered in the project, combined with the success of the teachers in working with the young children, strongly suggest the significance of beginning programs of redress where the inequities begin, in the early years of life.

The exclusion of early childhood education
Perhaps because of its poor press as a semi-profession, or because of its distance from the gender segregated workforce, early childhood education has received only the most cursory inclusion in national debate about gender inequities that become so palpable in terms of life opportunities as children exit secondary school. Imbued with the history, the imagery, and the status of Froebel's "mother-made-conscious" (Steedman, 1988), of "nice ladies who love children" (Stonehouse, 1988), or more recently, of a "mum's army," early childhood educators have been too easily overlooked in discussions about gender politics. What national policy makers have not recognised is the position of early childhood professionals either to naturalise and so endorse, or to challenge and to deliberately disrupt emerging asymmetries of power between girls and boys. The profound work that early childhood educators can do with young children to loosen the strictures of gender as an identity category is neglected, at a cost.

While much debate about the achievement of gender equity has been directed at the upper levels of schooling, early childhood education has been severely marginalised in terms of systematic research effort, inclusion in State and National policy documents, and the thinking through of contextually and "developmentally" appropriate strategies for working with young children. In-servicing, professional development, consultancy and support services have not been understood as priorities for early childhood professionals to begin to address gender issues as they emerge in the early years of life. Rather, national preoccupation with gender as it relates to high school
retention rates, subject-specific attainment, tertiary entrance scores and post-school options has invisibilised the highly gendered worlds of home, nurseries, child care centres, kindergartens, preschools and the early years of compulsory schooling.

Wide media attention to projects like Gender Equity in Senior Secondary School Assessment (ESSSA) (SSABSA & ACACA, 1992) provides few clues as to how young children learn to do their gender, to get their gender right, and to often resist adult efforts at achieving more gender equitable outcomes from the processes of schooling. Focus on documents like ESSSA give early childhood educators, (including parents), no idea of how they might be implicated in the production and maintenance of inequities that cause such concern in the upper grades and in later life. Given a dominant discourse of child-centredness, and a progressivist pedagogy that emphasises the needs of the individual child, it is easy to understand how early childhood educators might see themselves as removed from concerns about gender and opportunity; how they might read early manifestations of gendered behaviours in children as expressions of a natural, untainted, inner self. In brief, gender is largely left unproblematised in mainstream early childhood education—presumably at the very time when young girls and boys begin to learn about the gender appropriateness of ways of behaving and relating, of academic areas of interest and of achievements, of contextually determined relations of power, and of patterns of desire.

In view of the lack of substantial reference in national policy to the early childhood years, parents and educators might be excused for thinking that early childhood centres represent gender free zones; that the dominant pedagogies promoted within the rhetoric of "developmentally appropriate practice" guarantee opportunities for individual children to bloom in genderless (kinder)gardens. Paradoxically, recent research suggests that early childhood classes/centres can represent highly gendered environments.

Addressing the Construction of Gender from Preschool through to Grade Three.

In recognition of the lack of research on gender in the early years of schooling, in 1992 the Department of Employment Education and Training (DEET) funded an action research project, Addressing the Construction of Gender in the Preschool to Grade 3 Years. This project was one of many funded under the Federal Government's $3 million investment in the Gender Equity in Curriculum Reform Project (DEET, 1990). For the Preschool to Grade 3 study, teachers from ten sites across Queensland and New South Wales were chosen on the basis of expressions of interest. Within their preschool/ kindergarten through to grade three classes, these teachers were asked to identify issues that caused them concern in terms of asymmetries of power relations that existed between
my position was one of three academic consultants who provided the in-service program, academic advice, regular consultation and response to the teachers throughout the project.

while teachers worked on individually tailored projects with colleagues at their school sites, particular themes, as outlined below, began to emerge from their discussions at in-service seminars and from their written documentation of the data they collected. as i read and responded to each teacher's case study, it seemed that a number of issues, although experienced at different levels of intensity at particular sites, crossed regional and state borders. as well as posing serious questions about inequities that girls and boys may face from their preschool years, the themes highlight ways in which young children take up socially endorsed patterns of gender relations. teachers' constant feedback also made it clear that in the absence of national guidelines and policy that are inclusive of the early years, and without in-service and professional development opportunities, many early childhood educators may be bewildered by notions of gender as a social construction; that they may read the early emergence of gendered behaviours as testimony to irrevocable laws of biology, as proof of 'brain-sex' (moir and jessel, 1989); that they may remain unsure of what is even worthwhile contesting.

rather than labour through the detail of case studies, the following themes, as distilled from the studies, provide glimpses of the kinds of issues that were presented within the context of girls and boys interactions in the preschool/kindergarten through to grade three years.

aggressive and harassing behaviours
perhaps the most persistent concern that teachers shared at in-service sessions was of boys' aggressive and harassing behaviours that were, for the most part, directed at the girls. teachers from a number of sites documented compelling evidence of the ways that some boys used aggression and violence to achieve their own ends. teachers recorded numerous instances like the following:

.three preschool boys throwing things at four girls on the jungle gym, presumably so they could gain access to the equipment, to the point where the girls cowered and shouted for help.

.four preschool boys coercing a girl's retreat from the sandpit by throwing blocks at her as she attempted to move toward the centre of play.

.a grade one boy balling his fist and threatening to punch a girl when she refused to hand over her book to him.

.a preschool boy adopting threatening body pose in home play and
positioning his co-player as incompetent through his verbal assault: "I'm tired of your stupidity woman. Can't you EVER do anything right".

...a year one boy tripping, kicking and laughing at a visually impaired girl as she fell to the floor.

Young boys were also seen sexually harassing girls. There were several reports of boys looking up girls' skirts and of girls not knowing appropriate self-protecting strategies, verbal retorts or grievance procedures. Such behaviours clearly constituted sex-based harassment by boys of girls rather than general misconduct of one child against another. Girls did not attempt to look up boys' shorts, neither did boys attempt to look up other boys' clothing. One grade three boy confessed to the girls' charge of "perving" on them but responded with incredulity to the proposition that he might try his behaviour on other boys.

Exclusory and monopolistic practices
Both girls and boys were seen to exert power in monopolising particular activities by reflecting a socially endorsed gender order. Children were observed excluding one another from activities through legitimating claims of gender-ownership. For example:
...a girl was able to retrieve a doll from a boy in home corner through her claim: "Give me the doll. Fathers have to go to work."

...a boy was disallowed access to the play oven by a girl's directive: "Don't touch that. That's a mother oven".

...a boy pushed a girl away from a "boys' table" that was laden with construction materials.

...boys attempted to exclude girls from "boys" sporting activities.

While attempts at monopoly and exclusion were sometimes contested by children. girls and boys generally understood the gendered nature of particular activities and the need for concerted resistance if they were to be permitted a turn.

Gendered Use of Playground Space
While some teachers began to document the gendered use of playground space, it seemed that the children themselves were already aware of the playing and recreational spaces that were available to them on the basis of their gender. Grade two children in one site drew maps that showed that boys monopolised up to ninety per cent of the playing fields. According to their teachers, while boys spread out over the grassy ovals, girls were often relegated to the hot concrete surrounds or sought shelter under the shade of a tree. Girls accommodated their allotment to the borders of the fields by taking up less space-demanding activities like elastics and hand ball games.
Sex segregated activities
In some school sites, teachers spoke of the unwillingness of girls and boys to cooperate or to play with one another. Girls and boys resorted to separatist groupings whenever they were allowed an option.

Children's choices of activity groups, cooperative learning partnerships, and sports teams were sex-segregated and reflected a gender apartheid that was often acknowledged and articulated by the children. As alluded to in the following conversation, girls and boys understood themselves to be essentially different and to exist in a conflict of interests:

Teacher: Could the girls play with the boys on the oval at lunchtime?
Boy: No, our games are too rough.
Teacher: Would you change them so that the girls could join in?
Boy: I suppose so. But it wouldn't be so good.
Girl: The boys tackle too hard and hit the ball too hard. It hurts.

In such instances, girls and boys recognised that the ways in which they experienced themselves in relation to physical aggression were in conflict. For the boys, to accommodate the girls would mean a reduction of the virility of the game as they understood it. For the girls, participation would mean accepting that their bodies, as well as the ball, would be the target of play. In terms of the ways that most of the children understood themselves as masculine or feminine, the compromises necessary for cross-sex play of this kind must have outweighed the promised pleasures of playing together.

According to one teacher's report, the only way that the boys and girls in her class came together was through games on the oval of "catch and kiss". Even then, while some girls and boys attempted to enact a romantic storyline of togetherness, the most predictable denouement was one of separation, with the boys eventually physically attacking the girls, leaving the girls crying.

World of work
At a rural school, teachers reported that most children in their classes assumed highly gendered understandings of the work opportunities available to them. Even where children's mothers worked alongside their fathers as farmers, the evidence could be dismissed in favour of more traditional, patriarchal interpretations of men's and women's relations to one another. As one girl enlightened her class:

Dad and mum are farmers. Well, only Dad is really. Mum helps him.
[Girl in 1/2 composite]

A boy in the same class helped unravel the apparent error in the teacher's question about a female doctor:

Teacher: If you went to the doctor what would she do if you were not
feeling well?

Boy: He, um, she would fix me up and then she would (hesitated -looking confused) she would look after me and I could stay until I got better 'cause she might be a nurse!

Teachers deliberately attempted to disrupt gendered understandings of the world of work through visual presentations and discussions that focussed on women and men in non-traditional occupations. The extent to which these children had interpellated hegemonic images of gender appropriate work was reflected in their intellectual struggles to maintain a more widely accepted, socially legitimated gender order. Of the photo of "Ellen the Farmer", one seven year old girl wrote: Ellen lives on a farm. She is a farmer and she is giving the sheep some food and drink. I don't think Ellen has a husband. If she did he would probably be doing the farming.

A seven year old boy wrote of "Ross the Kindergarten Teacher":

Ross teaches kindergarten. In a couple of years he is going to teach grade seven.

In this rural community, children in the early grades already understood their lives and work opportunities to be restricted by gender.

Gendered readings and writings
In some case studies, teachers noted how girls and boys in their classes employed gendered discourses in discussing traditional fairy tales, in resisting feminist retellings of such tales, and in developing their own written stories.

For instance, in class discussions of Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, girls' talk focussed on romance, love and the ultimate uniting of Snow White and her Prince through marriage. Boys' talk revolved around the heroism of the Prince, his riding ability, and the violence that the boys themselves would like to do to the villainous Queen. As for Princess Smartypants, both girls and boys voiced their resistance to the textual appearance of an independent princess who refused to live out her life in relation to a man. While a group of girls suggested that Smartypants needed "to settle down", some boys threatened to take an axe to Smartypants for turning her unwanted suitor into a toad. Such findings are consistent with Davies' (1989) work with preschoolers.

Gendered discourses in children's writings were also a concern. Teachers noted how many girls and boys from grade one wrote themselves differently into their emergent stories. While boys wrote themselves
into their plots as central and agentic and heroic, girls often attributed action to characters other than themselves as they adopted the position of narrator. Gilbert (1989) noted similar trends in girls' and boys' writing in the middle primary years.

Strategies for Change
As teachers worked together in the project, asymmetries in power relations between girls and boys became more visible to them, more easily spoken about. By participating in the research, teachers claimed to be more aware of the ways in which such inequitable power relations had either been produced or allowed to flourish in their classrooms.

As the action research moved toward praxis, teachers employed a variety of strategies to denaturalise asymmetrical gender relations identified in their classrooms. For instance, with respect to aggressive and harassing behaviours, some teachers offered children immediate role plays of oppressive gender relations that emerged within their groups. Given the visual cues of a simulated action replay, children as young as four were encouraged to discuss what was happening in terms of the gender relations that generated between them.

To help children understand how girls and boys often monopolised activities on the basis of gender, some teachers used the video Who Wants to Be a Princess Anyway (Curriculum Development Centre, 1987). The video, which is more usually reserved for teacher professional development, offered the children a basis for whole group discussion about gender relations. Subsequent to this activity, at one school site, grade three children moved to a critique of gender relations based on a video of their own interactions in their class. This group of children also engaged in puppet plays, presentations to the whole school assembly, and their own action research on gender relations that operated in the school.

Other teachers made gender relations a topic for classroom discussion and challenge by having their classes map girls' and boys' use of the playing fields; by having children track their participation in sporting activities on a class graph; or by introducing new games that were not gender identified and thereby offered the possibility of being actively constructed as gender neutral play. Still others persisted in challenging gender relations by presenting children with non-sexist and feminist stories and by contesting the ways in which children wrote themselves into stories in gender limited ways.

While some children resisted attempts to alter the status quo, for the most part, teachers reported impressive moves in children's understandings of how they were constituted through gender. In one site where teachers worked with girls and boys to deconstruct
entrenched sex-segregated groupings, the children themselves expressed their enthusiasm for the new possibilities that opened to them. As affirmation of the success of such projects, children were reported to say: People aren't saying "You love so and so"! Kids are friendlier to each other (Grade 3 boy).

Kids are picking both boys and girls on teams. Boys aren't saying "Ooh! I'm not sitting next to a girl (Grade 3 girl)
The tone of children's responses was characterised by a grade two girl's comment:
Things are changing because we're talking about it.
The efforts of these teachers in researching gender and in changing gender relations bear testimony to the work on gender politics that can be done with young children.

Early childhood education at the centre of gender research
Given the educational focus on older children over the past years, it is timely that early childhood education should move from the margins to the centre of research and discussion about gender. The time to make children aware of the ways they are limited, and the ways they limit themselves through gendered identities, is in the early childhood years. The experiences of the teachers in the DEET study (Alloway, forthcoming) suggest that from preschool, at least, children have the wit and competence to begin to grapple with gender politics.

Those of us who are involved in early childhood education need to recognise the situation in which we have existed as unequal partners in educational dialogue about gender. We need to work to have our voices heard at the centre of national debate.

References


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in Curriculum Reform Project. Canberra.


Senior Secondary Assessment Board of South Australia (SSABSA) and Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Certification Authorities (ACACA) (1992) Gender Equity in Senior Secondary Schools Assessment. (ESSSA Project).


1In 1993 in Britain, the Education Secretary's suggestion for economic restraint was to employ what was referred to in the popular press as a 'mum's army' of non-graduate teachers for children from five to seven years of age.

2A detailed coverage of this study is provided in Alloway (forthcoming). Results of the study are highlighted in Alloway (in press).