

A Critique of Normative Play Constructs and Their Impact on Gender Diverse Children

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Abstract: The paper examines how play in the early years contexts continues to be informed and governed by parents and professionals through normative gender play constructs. It explores how psychologies of development read play in particular ways that can impact how children learn about gender especially when their movements and interests are corrected by adults in their lives. Play through a dominant developmental psychology approach is a mechanism for assessment where diversions of play outside normative gender play expectations can be questioned and lead to intervention. With play at the centre of practice in the field of early childhood education, it is critical to examine how normative pedagogical structures of play informs children's gender expression. This research aims to examine what happens when children's play is viewed predominantly through a traditional developmental psychology approach and how these perspectives are detrimental to young children's sense of self. The data is derived from a qualitative research study that used semi-structured focus groups with 15 early childhood educators (ECEs) who work with young children, ages 3-5 years, at licensed early childhood centres in Nova Scotia, Canada. ECEs play an important role in shaping young children's understandings of gender, therefore it is necessary to learn more from their lived experiences. The findings show that when play is structured predominantly through heteronormative forms of gender categorization it can stifle children's diverse gender expression. This research concludes by arguing that diverse forms of play that support gender fluidity for young children is crucial to liberate children from traditional gender normative play paradigms.

Keywords: Gender, Play, Normative, Early Childhood Education, Critique

1. Introduction

Early childhood education has a long history of being derived from principles of developmentally appropriate practice (DAP). The importance of play development in the early years is evident as leading scholars, like Piaget, Vygotsky, Bowlby and Erickson are emphasized as authorities on play. Traditional psychological developmental approaches to play that reproduce normative boy/girl gender expectations are potentially harmful to children who have a desire to explore gender identity roles and different play situations in more open ways. In this paper, I argue the requirement to disrupt normative gender constructs of play that limit young children to explore their gender identities in diverse ways. I draw on data from two previous studies that I conducted on gender in the early years' context within Nova Scotia, Canada to highlight how normative gender play schemas regulate the ways that children perform gender. For example, we have typologies of play, namely: exploratory play (e.g., child explores materials), symbolic play (e.g., use materials to symbolize something else; a plate is a steering wheel), dramatic play (e.g., role playing as a mother; reenact social scenarios), pretend play (e.g. playing dungeons and dragons), and locomotor play (e.g., physical movement; expectations for how girls play - art vs how boys play - rough and tumble) that early childhood educators (ECEs) prioritize to enhance child development. Play then becomes this mechanism to assess children's development and the consequence is often boys and girls can only play in particular ways. That is, a child performing outside the binary of boy/girl is subject to intervention to normalize their play. Here, I aim to present a critique of what happens when children's play viewed by adults predominantly through a traditional developmental psychology approach is detrimental to young children's sense of self. This work is important as early years settings are primary sites of normalization and where binary constructs of gender are legitimized. Moreover, families and ECES play a pivotal role in shaping young children's understandings of gender as they spend a significant amount of time with them from the ages of 12 months to 5 years (Reddington, 2023).

2. Normative Gender Expectations

Early year environments have a long history of reproducing heteropatriarchal values that send problematic messages to young people, families, and educators regarding the maintenance of gender rules and norms. Critical early childhood researchers who examine children's gender expression acknowledge this history flagging how the actions of parents and educators often unknowingly reinforce normative gender constructs (Abreu et al, 2019; Aina and Cameron, 2011; Blaise, 2005; Callahan and Lucy, 2019; Neary and Rasmussen, 2020; Reddington, 2020; Servos et al, 2016). For example, we see stereotypical gender play directed by adults routinely in public spaces. Boys are invited to engage in rumble and tumble play, yet girls are cautioned not to get their

new sparkly tops dirty. As Osgood and Robinson (2017) state, “children actively negotiate, resist, constitute, and perpetuate the cultural narratives of what is considered *appropriate* and *correct* gender performances of being male or female” (pp.40-41, emphasis added). Thus, play becomes this site in which children are expected to maintain what it means to be a boy or a girl. Children’s play is also under scrutiny and surveillance in the context of early years spaces with the expectation that young children maintain heteronormative constructs (Reddington, 2020). As Berkowitz and Ryan (2011) remark “one of the primary roles of parents is to train children to fit in appropriately with prescribed gender norms” (p. 333). This is a product of Westernization and the accepted cultural perspective that view gender within two categories of being; man and woman (West and Zimmerman, 1987). The implications of traditional Western perspectives on gender are that doing gender in early childhood often equates to constructing differences between boys and girls that reinforces an essentialist view and aims to legitimize traditional gender constructs (Gunn, 2011). Given this, there is a dire need for educators to disrupt normative play expectations regarding gender and to respect children’s freedom of expression (Hill and Bartow Jacobs, 2020). However, research shows that early year settings continue to reinforce normative gender play constructs (Blaise, 2005; Osgood and Robinson, 2017, Reddington, 2020). “Boys, for instance, typically dominate blocks centres, which are often set up to reflect the public sphere, while girls tend to dominate socio-dramatic play centres” (Prioletta and Davies, 2024, p. 259). This is further complicated when early years sectors pedagogies are rooted in developmental models.

Reddington (2023) addresses the frequency in which educators turn to developmental logic when addressing gender dynamics during unstructured play. It becomes an act of boundary maintenance where adults consistently take on the role of monitoring children’s gender expression to maintain gender normativity. Kane (2012) similarly highlights this form of surveillance, calling it a “gender trap” and explaining how even the best-intentioned adults will still expect young children to fit within the parameters of a masculine boy/feminine girl binary (p.3). For instance, Kane (2006) interviewed 43 parents whose fathers went to great lengths to ensure their sons reproduced masculine ideals and would take drastic measures if their sons were engaging in feminine types of play. Alternatively, girls are often given more leeway (Reddington, 2023; Thorne, 1993). Other studies show how young children imitate homophobic and transphobic language they hear from families, and this is further complicated when parents associate diverse gender expression in the early years with future homosexuality that then elicits parents to influence their children’s gender identity (Martin, 2005; Robinson, 2013). Averett (2016) explains how parents often feel “observed, scrutinized, or held accountable for their child’s gender behaviour” (p. 199) and thus work to reinforce normative gender processes to silence the public scrutiny.

Notably, we have seen some shifts towards adults supporting gender variance. Rahilly’s (2015) study of 24 parents with transgender children highlighted how adults in their children’s lives took great measures to protect their gender diverse children in public spaces. However, Rahilly describes how the adults still felt pressured to maintain normative gender expectations describing how one parent would permit their son to wear pink socks in public, but not a dress. This addresses the potential pressure parents face to produce an “overall front of normativity” (Rahilly, 2015, p. 347). Research comparatively shows that children who have supportive parents have higher life satisfaction and self-esteem, and fewer depressive symptoms compared to children with non-supportive parents (Olson et al, 2016). There is a requirement to explore deeper the implications normative constructs of play have on young children’s gender expression. To support this inquiry, I draw on the experiences of 15 ECEs working with 3–5-year-old children in licensed early childhood centres in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada. The first voice perspectives of ECEs are important as they have the capacity to disrupt static normative gender play expectations for young children and attend more readily to the messy entanglements of gender in early years settings (Dyer, 2017; Reddington, 2023).

3. Critical Gender Framework

I apply a critical gender framework to disrupt traditional developmental psychology approaches and prioritize the situational ways in which children express their gender during play. Critical scholars in the field of early childhood and education have already advanced this agenda through the critique of normative gender constructs within early year spaces as mentioned earlier. Part of this critique has been to question hierarchical gender binaries and how adults play a role in reinforcing (often unknowingly) normative gender-stereotypical play expectations (Blaise, 2005; Mac Naughton, 2000; Pacini-Ketchabaw et al, 2015; Prioletta and Davies, 2024; Reddington, 2020, 2023; Richardson and Langford, 2022; Robinson et al, 2017). For example, Dyer (2017) illuminates how developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) models are problematic as they stifle young children’s capacities and limits their possibilities to express their gender in more open and fluid ways. This is further complicated when play environments continue to reproduce traditional binary family-related play

values, such as: dramatic play areas dominated by girls and block areas used mostly by boys (Reddington, 2020). Prioretta and Davies (2024) identify how “architectural design of classrooms functions to regulate gender to specific specialities that reinforce its dualistic conceptualization” (p. 259). A critical gender framework can, therefore, shift the focus “from the individual child produced through developmentally appropriate practice models towards more fluid understandings of gender informed by children’s affective relations within early learning spaces” (Reddington, 2023, p. 13). It provides opportunity to examine the interpersonal processes children have with others and materials during play rather than applying universalized ways of thinking. A critique of traditional developmental approaches also offers opportunity to give greater attention to the mediated gender relations that children experience during unstructured play. It acknowledges that children’s ideas on play are expansive.

The turn to a critical gender framework is particularly pertinent as previous work shows that educators can feel stuck within the realms of developmental logic and fear the repercussions if they invite children to explore their gender more freely (Dyer, 2017; Prioretta and Davies, 2024). Thus, “critical” is understood in this research to challenge normative gender constructs of play and work towards more gender inclusive practices in early childhood education. It is important to stipulate that a critical framework is not one view or lens on gender, rather, it invites a multiplicity of critical views on how gender gets constructed in the lives of young people. Therefore, in this study, I draw on critical gender scholars in my analysis to highlight the limitations when thinking through developmentally appropriate practice approaches in relation to gender and play. By mobilizing a poststructural stance from gender scholars in the data analysis, we can begin to account for the complexity of gender in the field of early childhood education. This is needed as developmentally appropriate practice continues to dominate the early childhood sector in Canada. As Richardson and Langford (2022) state, “as college and university educators who have taught ECE students for many years, we are troubled by this dominance because it limits opportunities for students to engage with different perspectives on children’s development and experiences” (p. 409). Therefore, in this inquiry the use of a critical gender framework offers a space to question normative gender constructs of play and to think about alternative ways to support gender diverse children.

4. Nova Scotia Early Years Curriculum

Given this research was conducted in Nova Scotia, it is important to briefly outline the Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development’s (DEECD, 2018) early years curriculum framework in relation to its approach to gender inclusive programming. The early years curriculum framework, titled, *Nova Scotia Early Years Learning Curriculum Framework: Capable, Confident, Curious* makes a statement about “not making assumptions about a child’s gender, to see the full potential of a child and to trust the child’s choices in relation to toys, play, self-identification and expression” (DEECD, 2018, p. 31). In addition, it encourages ECEs to follow these gender inclusive principles:

- Use gender inclusive language as much as possible. Rather than addressing groups of children as “boys and girls”, use “children” and “everyone.”
- Organize children into groups rather than “boys or girls.”
- Avoid using gendered terminology to make it easier for children and families who are gender non-conforming to feel valued and included.
- Ensure all children have access to materials and encourage children to explore their full range of interests without gendered expectations (e.g., “this area is for boys”).
- Include a diverse selection of literature in the learning environment around gender identity, gender expression, and family diversity, such as families with same sex parents or guardians, single parent families, grandparents and extended family roles, and foster families.
- Educators may wish to engage children in conversations that broaden their understanding of gender, being oneself and respect for gender diversity. (DEECD, 2018, p. 50)

Given the participants in this study are guided by this early learning curriculum framework, it is helpful to see the curriculum approach on gender inclusion in advance of sharing the ECEs perspectives on gender during unstructured play.

5. Method

This paper builds on two previous qualitative research projects that I conducted that explored the lived experiences of early childhood educators (ECEs) in the province of Nova Scotia, Canada when working with

gender diverse children, ages 3-5 year. The two previous research projects explored the perspectives from ECEs when having conversations with families about gender inclusivity in the early years (Reddington, 2023). The other research project focused on building gender inclusive pedagogical approaches in the field of early childhood through discussions with ECEs in the sector (Reddington, 2020). This study is intended to expand the inquiry further beyond family perspectives and gender inclusive pedagogy to learn more about how normative gender play constructs also inform children's gender expression. The participants included 15 ECEs who are employed at licensed early childhood centres in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada. Five participants have over 20 years of experience, three had between 10-20 years and seven had under 5 years of experience. 13 of the 15 participants self-identified as women, one as a transman and one participant chose not to self-identify their gender. All participants had either a Level II certification (Early Childhood Diploma from a community college) or a Level III (undergraduate degree in Child and Youth Study). The early childhood centres are in modest income urban centres in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada. I acknowledge that the sample size is small, however, the aim was to gain in-depth understandings of ECEs experiences in relation to children's gender expression and how normative play constructs can potentially inform children's future actions. One limitation to a small sample size is that it is not generalizable to the field. However, there is value in learning about the complex, in-depth experiences that centres have when supporting young children's gender and sense of self.

In the first stage of this research, the 15 participants were invited to observe and document the interactions they had with children as it relates to gender and play for a period of eight weeks. Each participant during this eight-week observation period documented their experiences through anecdotal notes. The purpose of this observation and documentation was to account for how children explore play and the role of gender norms during play. The participants were invited to send the researcher via email in advance of the eight-week observation period a response to two questions: What comes to mind when you hear the term, "gender"? What comes to mind when you hear the term, "gender stereotype"? The purpose of these initial questions was to prompt ECEs to begin to think about gender. The responses to the first question on describing connections to the term, "gender" included: *male, female, boy, girl, man, woman, never assume a gender, wide spectrum of gender, non-binary, transgender, gay, and gender neutral*. Their responses to the second question, "What comes to mind when you hear the term, "gender stereotype?" were: *boys like trucks, boys wear black and blue, boys are rough, boys can't sit still, boys are loud, they are physical, boys do tumble play, boys are aggressive and do sporty things. Girls like dolls, like the color pink, everything sparkly, girls play house, girls like dramatic play, role play, girls are quiet and nurturing, play Barbies, and do art*. The participants identifying with developmentally appropriate forms of gender practice for boys and girls is consistent with previous literature that identifies how dominant normative gender discourses are in the context of early childhood settings (Burke and Duncan, 2014; Pacini-Ketchabaw et al, 2015; Reddington, 2020, 2023; Richardson and Langford, 2022).

In the second stage of the research, the 15 participants were invited to participate in two semi-structured focus groups. The focus groups were designed to bring the ECEs together to discuss how gender informs children's play experiences. Three small focus groups were created that were each comprised of four to six participants. Each small focus group met on two separate occasions, 2 weeks apart. Each focus group lasted approximately 60 minutes and was audio recorded. Participants during the two focus groups were invited to share their thoughts, ideas and pedagogical approaches to play and how gender informs play experiences for young children. For example, some questions were: If I were to walk into your center what types of activities would I see? Do you witness gender stereotyped play? Do you observe gender storylines in children's play? Are children free to express their gender openly? Are there any gender routines or gender rules at your center? Are children offered materials and activities that encourage gender diversity? Would you consider your centre a gender-neutral learning space? Are children offered materials and activities that reflect gender diversity?

The data was transcribed verbatim, and a thematic analysis was conducted. Transcripts were read and re-read, and individual transcripts were coded for common words, and phrases that focus on the ECEs perspectives on how gender informs children's play. An open coding of individual transcripts was completed producing a list of thematic categories and page numbers referenced for illustrative quotes. The set of initial categories were then organized into potential thematic codes. The thematic codes were reviewed and revised to ensure that each theme has enough data to support the inquiry. I turn now to share the perspectives of 15 ECEs who work in licensed early childhood centres in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada, and their experiences in relation to play constructs and how they inform children's gender expression. What follows are excerpts from ECEs comments after observing and documenting young children during unstructured play. Quotes from the participants are provided to illustrate their perceptions of how children perform gender during unstructured play. You will see that the ECEs drew on gender stereotypes and normative gender structures when discussing their observations.

6. Results

6.1 Theme 1: Heteronormative Play Structure Design

The first main finding from this study illuminates how the physical layout of play materials can contribute to normative gender constructs of play experiences for children. For example, the participants routinely commented on how the block area became a masculinized play space dominated by boys whereas the dramatic play area was largely occupied by girls.

In our dramatic play zone, the girls always play the role of mom, and the boys are told by the girls to play the baby or the puppy. Sometimes the boy will say they want to be a mom, but the girls take over and "Say no! You can only be a puppy or a dad".

The girls need to be the mom. The girls want to be in charge and be the ones to say, "Eat your food and go to bed." They need to be in control and the leader.

I agree there always must be one mom and one dad, like, you can't have two dads.

I've had a situation where it was a group of girls, and somebody had to be the dad. There couldn't be a mom, or a dad, or two moms or three moms. There had to be a mom and a dad. The girls are always in charge of house play. The girls are loud. I'm not going to say bossy, but they are quite demanding. There is one child in particular that will not give up.

The data shows how the girls dominate and occupy the dramatic play area. They allow the boys to enter, but assign them roles, such as the puppy or dad. The girls actively policing others demonstrates how normative constructs of gender influence play experience. The "girls take over" as described by one ECE shows how girls have predetermined ideas on house play as evidenced when assigning boys specific roles. Here, the heteronormative house play structural design of the space reinforces traditional gender roles. It brings into question the unspoken power of materials and how materials when set up as "house corners" can send messages to children to maintain traditional gender role play (Priolella and Davies, 2024). ECEs and their decisions around pedagogical design of play spaces have a critical role during this process by either establishing or challenging gender stereotypes. As Thorne (1993) explains, if young children are provided with traditional stereotypical play options, they are more likely to adopt traditional gender values and beliefs. MacNaughton (2000) similarly explains how children mediate their understandings of gender through the messages they receive from adults, including learning environments and play materials.

In our centre, I will encourage the children to explore various roles in the dramatic play area. I always find it interesting that the girls never want to play the dog or the dad. They are always insistent that the boys play the baby or puppy or dad. There couldn't be a mom, or a dad, or two moms or three moms. The children always chose the traditional structure of mom, dad, baby and puppy.

We see this too in our centre. I have said to the children, you can be anything you want to be, there can be three moms in this situation. It doesn't matter. I have even seen boys wanting to play the mom, but the girls continue to tell them it is not allowed. Even when I insert and try to remind them, they can play any role, they always go back to one mom and one dad.

Here, a play structure of traditional house still incites the girls to maintain heteronormative roles of mom and dad regardless of the prompts ECEs make to disrupt the normative constructs of gender play. The data brings forward the question of how practitioners and educators might begin to change the physical landscape of play space to normative gender constructs of play and encourage children to uproot static gender roles. By applying a critical gender framework, we can begin to mobilize more fluid ways of understanding gender and disrupt static developmental models of practice. In my discussions with the ECEs, they indicated that the boys also occupied and controlled certain play spaces, namely the block area.

It is very common for children to say blocks are only for boys. Even though we have a rule that says the blocks are for everyone, the boys insist the block area is their space.

At our centre, the boys control the block zone and will tell the girls, "boys only". I have even watched the boys make walls and barriers to the girls cannot enter.

I see this too. I have seen girls trying to get in and boys tell them they are not strong enough to play there.

The boys when dominating the block area asserted masculine qualities to maintain control of the area. The actions of the boys policing the blocks is similar to the girls policing the dramatic play area. Here, it is the cues the children receive from each other that largely determine their gendered play choices. Critical gender scholars argue the gender boundaries in play are often established by children, who then police each other's

adherence to specific gender roles (Mac Naughton, 2000; Martin, 2011; Reddington, 2020). However, we must consider how the heteronormative play structure design produces often unknowingly predetermined ideas on how children should play to adhere to boy/girl roles. In addition, we must understand how gender stereotypes can unknowingly place children in the societal binary of feminine or masculine limiting their self-expression (Chapman, 2016). This data brings forward the call for ECEs to pay close attention to their play structure design, including how gender power relations between children can influence children's gender performance. For example, we see from the data above how a predetermined block area can transmit ideas about masculinity and how a dramatic play corner incites typically feminized play experiences. It is the continuous reproduction of normative gender constructs of play within early years settings that requires significant attention so we can begin to dismantle pedagogical practices, like the "home corner". We must consider how we position materials within early year play spaces, so they do not reinforce or solidify gender stereotypical forms of play.

6.2 Theme #2: Essentialist Forms of Gender Performance

The second main finding from this research identifies how essentialist forms of gender performance that situate children in the binary of feminine or masculine can negatively impact children's identities and senses of self. For example, the ECEs commented on how the girls would often position themselves as helpless, weak, and vulnerable to appeal to the boys.

If the children engage in role playing schemas, the boys play police or fireman. The girls play the damsels in distress role and want to be saved by the boys.

This happens at our center where the girls will fall and shriek for the boys to come and rescue them.

When our children watch Paw Patrol the boys have the superpowers. They destroy and save the planet while the girls are the princesses.

Critical gender scholar, Ringrose (2013), discusses how girls will frequently hypersexualize their identities in feminine ways to appeal themselves to boys. It is through these dominant gender discourses that children learn that heterosexuality is the "normal, right and only way to be" (Blaise, 2005, p. 22). These dominant forms of gender performance draw attention to the intricacy in subjectivity and the decisions young children emergently make when negotiating their gender expression. As Meyer (2007) states, "children learn at a very early age that it is not biological sex that communicates one's gender to the rest of society; rather it is the signifiers we choose to wear that will identify us as male or female" (p. 19). This data draws attention to the importance of ECEs talking with children about gender and supporting diverse gender expression. This includes encouraging gender diverse play opportunities. The next excerpt of data illuminates how children become constructed as particular types of gendered subjects based on their physical appearance and interests in products traditional assigned as feminine or masculine.

Children think short hair means you are a "boy" and long hair means you are a "girl". The children are always questioning others about how they look. We had a girl with short hair, and the kids kept asking, "Are you a boy?" I will say to them, "it's just hair", and it doesn't mean whether you're a boy or girl.

We hear children asking one staff member if they are a boy or a girl. They want to categorize even if we say a person does not have to be a man or a woman or a boy or girl.

A boy at our center likes to wear dresses and the children will say, "He is a boy, he can't wear that". I try to tell the children that he can wear whatever he wants, but the children think its wrong. The same with nail polish. If we have boys that want to put on nail polish the girls will tell them no, they are not allowed.

We had that wear a boy wanted to wear nail polish, but he knew his father would be upset so he chose not to. One time we did put it on him and then took it off, so he had an opportunity to wear it and feel good.

I had one boy who loved to wear nail polish, and he was proud of it. Later in the day, the boy worried about what his dad might think about his nail polish and so I removed it before he went home.

The ECEs acknowledge the ways that normative constructs of gender when children are playing enter the space and we see glimpses of the ECEs working to disrupt static compulsory performances of gender. This is evidenced when one educator says, “it’s just hair” and supporting a boy who wants to wear a dress, “he can wear whatever he wants”. Kane (2006) stated that “children themselves become active participants in the gendering process ... typically before the age of two” (p. 150). We witness this in the above data set when boys express their desire to wear nail polish. However, the weight of the fathers’ potential disapproval impacts their joy to wear nail polish. Here, we witness the ECEs actively working to challenge views on gender to create more gender inclusive opportunities, but the children live in fear of repercussions from adults in their lives if they move outside the boundaries of acceptable boy/girl constructs. It the traditional developmental psychology model of performance that infiltrates the centers and drives certain feminine and masculine expectations for the children to meet.

7. Conclusion

You will see in this research that the ECEs view gender predominantly through the gender binary and often unknowingly construct heteronormative play opportunities that then inform the ways in which children learn gender. However, this study also shows the ECEs recognizing stereotypical gender role play and, at junctures, challenging the children to explore their identities outside normative gender processes. There is a need to explore further ECEs’ perceptions of how children perform gender and to identify ways to destabilize the normative gender constructs of play. The findings of this study call for ECEs to reconfigure the rigid heteronormative landscape of masculine boy / feminine girl from which the participants in this research speak.

As Taylor and Richardson (2005) state, the “fluidity of children’s gender identity performances and their strategic negotiation of multiple and shifting identity positions [can] challenge ... the heteronormative assumptions of stable, discrete and coherent gender categories” (p. 171). Jule (2011) similarly remarks that educators should consider using “alternative and varied metaphors for gender roles when choosing books, stories, and learning activities for the classroom” (p. 33). I hope this research will ignite ECEs to increasingly consider professional development in the areas of gender inclusive play practices. To move in this direction, we need to critically reflect on our daily pedagogical practices and in this process actively dismiss dominant paradigms of identity categorization that limit the possibilities for children to explore their identities in more open ways.

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