

Exploration of Gender Identity Development Paths in Early Childhood Education from the Perspective of Queer Theory

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Abstract: Using queer theory, this paper studies the development of gender identity in early childhood education. Instead of viewing gender identity as an inevitable outcome of biological development or mere learning through imitation, the paper believes that the environment in early childhood is unstable, and gender norms are continuously reproduced, negotiated, resisted and changed here. Based on queer theory, feminist poststructuralist scholarship and research in early childhood classrooms, this essay examines how young children experience gender through discourse, play, embodiment, peer regulation and institutional expectations. Determine whether early childhood education is likely to reinforce the heteronormative binary or create more open paths for children's gendered self-exploration. The paper proposes six teaching paths: discursive recognition, play-based experimentation, relational support, pedagogical interruption of normative gender rules, reflective teaching, and responsive dialogue about gender, sexuality and relationships. A queer-theory approach does not disregard the developmental needs of children; rather, it extends the scope of interpretation for educators to identity formation and promotes an all-encompassing, reflective, and ethical early childhood education.

Keywords: Queer theory; gender identity; early childhood education; heteronormativity; gender discourse; child development.

1. Introduction

Developmental psychology, socialisation theory and classroom management have often addressed problems of gender in early childhood education. In many of these talks, gender identity is viewed as a relatively stable result that arises from age, family background and imitation of social roles. Although the above views explain some of children's gendered experiences, they may also naturalise binary assumptions and overlook the active, relational and institutional processes through which gender is produced in daily life for young children.

Now it is known that early childhood education classes are not free from prejudice. They are environments where children learn rules of behaviour in appearance, play, language, body, friendship and emotion. Although not directly taught, these rules still influence how children learn what is considered proper femininity, masculinity and so on. Therefore, early childhood education also affects the gender identity of children by means of curriculum content, subtle teaching routines and peer relationships.

Research on the development of gender identity in early childhood education through queer theory. Gender identity is not to be regarded as the result of normal growth, but rather as a product of language, behaviour, social control, opposition and institution recognition. Based on the above, this paper reviews queer-theoretical and early-childhood studies, analyzes the deficiencies of normative developmental systems, and puts forward several paths for promoting inclusive development of gender identity in early childhood education.

2. Queer Theory and Early Childhood Gender Identity

All queer-theoretical discussions of gender identity begin

with a critique of essentialism. Butler thinks that gender is not something in our bodies, but rather the result of constantly repeating norms and social expectations through behaviour and recognition [1]. This idea is very suitable for early childhood education; instead of asking if the children have the right gender identity, we can ask how gender categories become understandable and reasonable in daily life. Gender is not presented to children in the classroom. It is repeatedly organised in the form of routines, speech, objects and embodied practices.

Poststructuralist studies of preschool children also propose that gender is produced in interaction and not given by fixed social norms. Davies shows that preschool children actively participate in the creation of gendered meanings and in maintaining the male-female division in daily language and play [2]. One such case is that very young children are also free from rigid gender stereotypes in their behavior. They are participants in the discourse who learn how gender is socially enforced.

Early childhood education research has begun to explore the gendered impacts of practice at this time. MacNaughton does not think that treating children as individuals in early childhood education will lead to gender equality automatically; otherwise, teaching practices may still be biased against or exclude certain genders [3]. Browne has also shown that policies and practices for young children significantly shape their ideas about masculinity and femininity and inequality [4]. Collectively, these studies indicate that the development of gender identity in early childhood education is closely linked to the institutional organisation of daily life.

Research on classroom interaction also has a particularly queer and feminist poststructuralist dimension. Blaise's research on children's "doing" of gender in kindergarten indicates that young children actively create meanings for femininity, masculinity and heterosexuality through

classroom talk and peer regulation [5]. In a later work, she also examined the gender discourse that shapes what children are permitted to say, wear, wish for and be in early childhood education settings [6]. Thus, a queer-theoretical lens is not imposing abstract theory on childhood from the outside. It can show us what is normal in children's spaces and how to change that norm.

Taken together, the above theoretical resources indicate that young children's gender identity is neither purely internal nor solely external. Relationally generated in the spaces where institutional categories, peer cultures, adult language and children's imaginative practices converge. Queer theory helps us recognise the regulatory power of these intersections without assuming that children are simply products of these spaces. It offers a field for research on childhood gender that is both limited by existing norms and open to modification through educational practice.

3. Limits of Normative Developmental Frameworks

The traditional development system generally believes that children will gradually form a stable and consistent gender identity in stages. The above approaches may seem convenient for teachers because they provide order, division and clear requirements. However, in terms of queer theory, these models may also restrict what educators are able to observe. If binary gender is assumed to be the norm of development, differences in children's meaning-making may be incorrectly interpreted as confusion, delay or deviation, rather than as a feature of diversity among children.

Heteronormativity is also relatively absent according to the above data. Robinson believes that early childhood education often presumes heterosexuality and binary gender as the default mode of behaviour, thus restricting what children are allowed to express and what teachers are willing to discuss [7]. Surtees shows that teachers' talk of sexuality can normalise or suppress children's sexuality through heteronormative, developmentalist and biological discourses, and silence marks the limits of what is regarded as normal or abnormal [8]. Therefore, based on the above analysis, the development of gender identity is multifaceted. It is also formed by what cannot be expressed, is unknown, or is too early.

Normative developmentalism is also flawed in that it often separates cognition from culture and identity from power. Blaise has studied gendered narratives and childhood sexuality to show that young children actively talk about and negotiate meanings of gender and sexuality in early childhood settings [9]. Therefore, classroom gender norms are also sources of behaviour. They determine who is considered ordinary and who is ridiculed, corrected or learns to hide.

Therefore, a queer perspective does not oppose development inherently. On the other hand, it does not assume that development needs to be in line with gender equality. Developmental approaches for early childhood educators that can embrace experimentation, ambiguity and nonconformity without turning them into educational problems are needed. Many of the early interventions concerning gender have been promoted under the guise of protection, but they may have inadvertently reinforced conformity and stifled children's exploratory self-understanding.

There is a problem of methodology in the concept of normal development. After training teachers to interpret

children through pre-established categories, they may fail to recognise that the very routines in the classroom produce the behaviours these teachers describe as natural. Separate children by gender, set different play expectations for boys and girls, and respond differently to their voices, movements and emotions to make gender binaries appear natural during development. Queer theory can help us see that the norm is reproduced in pedagogy before it is acknowledged as a feature of development.

This criticism is particularly relevant in early childhood because adults' interpretations have a certain authority there. Young children are often seen as innocent, pre-social, or lacking mature self-awareness; thus, adults may assume that children cannot articulate their experiences in gendered life and fail to listen attentively. A queer perspective does not idealise childhood freedom. Instead, it asks educators to notice how quickly institutional language closes off the children's play. What adults consider an inconsistency may be a way for children to learn about society through play.

Normative systems can also promote premature closure of family-school communication. If teachers believe that they need to reassure parents that children are developing normally, they may avoid raising issues of gender difference unless they are problems that need to be corrected or addressed. This reduces pedagogy to comfort rather than exploration. A more reflective one would be to talk about the gender diversity of the classroom as part of life in the class without labelling all non-conforming behaviour as a problem. If early childhood education is to support development without restricting identity, then the above change is required.

4. Gender Identity Development Paths in Early Childhood Education

If gender identity development is considered to be socially produced and institutionally mediated, then early childhood education should shift from helping children form an identity to expanding the ways in which children can be recognized by themselves and others. The first is discursive recognition. Butler's account of performativity suggests that identity is maintained by repeated norms and recognition [1]. In other words, teachers need to pay attention to how classroom language names, limits or validates children's gendered possibilities in practice. It is likely that the simple sentences "boys do this" and "girls do not do that" will restrict the range of recognition for children.

The second way is play-based exploration. Davies and Blaise have both shown that children work through gendered meanings in play, talk, dress, movement and peer interaction [2, 5, 6]. Therefore, play should be viewed as both a way of development and a place where children can test, repeat, and sometimes defy the dominant gender scripts. Early childhood education can help foster flexible and all-encompassing identities by protecting imaginative play from rigid gender stereotypes and leaving materials, roles and expressions free from pre-categorisation.

The third way is relational support from adults and peers. According to MacNaughton and Browne, the gender climate in early childhood education institutions is mainly due to teachers' daily teaching behaviour and not by school policies [3, 4]. Children develop gendered self-awareness based on who pays attention to them, who corrects them, who laughs at them, and who supports them when they deviate from the norm. Relational Safety is therefore not secondary. It is a

prerequisite for children to explore their sense of self freely without the fear of mockery or alienation.

The fourth is pedagogical interruption of heteronormativity. Robinson's study of heteronormativity in early childhood education and Surtees's discussion of teacher talk both indicate that silence frequently serves as a means of control [7, 8]. Teachers should not assign adult identity labels to children, but rather question the idea that only one gender expression, one family model and one future sexuality are considered normal. Such interruptions may take the form of story selection, inclusive examples, open-ended classroom discussions, and a refusal to normalise teasing or exclusion.

A fifth way is reflective teaching practice. Blaise believes that at the right time, interrupting gendered development is necessary because the taken-for-granted discourse of development often hides how gender norms are transmitted in early childhood environments [10]. Therefore, teachers should consider both the behaviour of children and how that behaviour is being interpreted. Teachers decide whether to help students grow or make them conform.

The sixth way is responsive conversation about gender, sexuality and relationships. Cahill and Theilheimer have pointed out that the questions young children put forward in these areas need to be addressed seriously by early childhood educators, not ignored [11]. Therefore, a queer-theoretical approach asks educators to take children's questions and expressions seriously without imposing adult identity labels or treating difference as a problem.

The above paths should be regarded as interconnected rather than independent plans. Discursive recognition without relational support will remain shallow, and open play without pedagogical reflection may still reproduce dominant hierarchies. It is sufficient to create classroom environments in which children can experience more than one legitimate way of being gendered. Such Environments do not erase structure. They modify the structure of recognition to reduce the constraint of conformity for development.

Therefore, queer theory does not aim to replace all developmental language but rather to change what is considered a developmental success. Success should not mean making children too independent too early because adults are uncomfortable with ambiguity. A better educational goal is to help children participate in society safely and with dignity, in a free and expressive way, and be allowed to make mistakes. Early childhood education will be more inclusive if it supports the development of identity as an open-ended process rather than a fixed type.

Therefore, the teachers require both conceptual and institutional support in practice. Even if there is individual goodwill, the continuous favouring of rigid binary norms by classroom resources, school policies, parents' communication and teacher training will not help. Therefore, all-encompassing development of gender identity requires the construction of an extended teaching culture that supports critical thinking, diverse learning materials and responsive communication. Based on the above analysis, early childhood education can be a place where children are truly valued rather than merely labeled.

5. Conclusion

According to queer theory, the process of gender identity

formation in early childhood education is not about reaching an established, binary sense of self. This is the result of discourse, play, embodiment, relational recognition and institutional norms. Early childhood settings do not just show children's gender identities; rather, they actively create certain gendered possibilities as the norm, which are easy for children to understand and desire, while making others difficult, risky or out of sight.

Queer theory provides a way to change our understanding of these processes, according to this paper. By challenging essentialist and heteronormative assumptions, it can help educators learn about the development of gender identity as open, relational and contextually produced. Therefore, more inclusive early childhood education should not be seen as the absence of development, but rather as a re-thinking of developmental interpretation through discursive recognition, play-based openness, relational support, pedagogical interruption, reflective teaching, and responsive dialogue about gender, sexuality and relationships.

The actual use of this view is in ethics. It can help teachers create a space for children to be free from early restriction by narrow gender roles and explore their own identities freely with dignity and security. Therefore, early childhood education will be both developmental and more responsive to the various demands of life for young children.

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