

Gender, Power and Play in Early Childhood Education

Suci Ramdaeni, Vina Adriany and Hani Yulindrasari

*Department of Early Childhood Education, Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia, Jl. Dr. Setiabudhi Bandung, Indonesia
suciramdaeni@student.upi.edu, vina.@upi.edu, hani.yulindra@gmail.com*

Keywords: Gender, Power, Play, Early Childhood Education.

Abstract: The aim of this paper is to explore the relationship between gender, power, and play. It attempts to see how gender and power are interwoven and interfere with children's construction of gender during their play. This paper is predicated on the basis that play is considered one of the most important aspects in early childhood education. The discourse of play is so pervasive that many educators take it for granted and never question it. Using poststructuralism, this paper tries to deconstruct the discourse of play by illuminating the gender-power relations embodied in it. This paper will be adopting a meta-analysis to demonstrate how gender, power, and play interact in early childhood education. The analysis yields that play is often gendered as some children are very often excluded from certain types of play due to their gender. Findings from this paper call for educators and ECE teachers to include gender perspective when trying to understand children's play.

1 INTRODUCTION

Play is an activity that children do in their daily life. Many studies reveal that play can develop children's cognitive (Bruner, 1964), mental (Vygotsky, 1967), knowledge and skills (Fromberg and Bergen, 2006), as well as social and physical activity (Barnett et al., 2017; Chase, 2009). Hence, related studies in Indonesia often show the positive impact of play on children development. Research by Khasanah et al. (2011), for instance, demonstrates that traditional games provide meaningfulness in improving a child's mental development. Istiarini (2014) also explains that playing with blocks can help improve children's speech ability, and research conducted by Siska (2007) shows the benefit of role playing, that is to improve social and speech skills.

The large amount of research focusing on the positive impact of play makes teachers and adults believe that playing is neutral. In fact, as expressed by feminist poststructuralist groups, gender and power are interwoven when children engage in play activities and this creates inequalities between boys and girls in early childhood education (Blaise, 2013; Burman, 2008; Walkerdine, 1998; Yelland, 1998). During playing, there is often unequal access between boys and girls (Smith K. et al., 2017; Aina and Cameron, 2011). As Bhana (2003) notes, when teachers are aware of the unequal access between

boys and girls but they do not take any action, often girls are the ones at disadvantage. The lack of concern with gender issues in play frequently occurs because gender issues are often considered trivial (Smith K. et al., 2017).

Research conducted in Indonesia also still shows the lack of awareness of the negative impact of play, as can be seen in the very limited amount of research focusing on play from a gender perspective. So far, there has been only one study by Adriany (2013) using a gender perspective in Indonesia that shows gender-power relations in play activities in young children, although play was not the focus of her study.

The scarce research on the relations between gender and power in Indonesia proves that play is often taken for granted. Teachers or adults often do not realize that games are often gendered. Meanwhile, research that shows awareness of gender, power, and play is more frequently carried out in the Global South countries.

Herein, this paper attempts to fill in the gap in the literature and previous research on gender and play in Early Childhood Education in Indonesia. The results of this research are expected to help teachers understand play from a gender perspective to avoid the negative side of play. Thus, it is also expected that teachers and adults can be the facilitators to

make children more flexible in play activities regardless of gender.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

This paper uses the feminist poststructuralist perspective in analysing gender, power, and play. Feminist poststructuralism is the theoretical basis for analysing the subjectivity of boys and girls related to language and socially constructed cultural practices (Gavey, 1989), where this theory has been used in research on young children with a focus on how they construct gender (Adriany, 2013).

Gender is commonly understood in the context of sex between girls and boys, whereas gender in poststructuralism is defined as a social construct that shapes the masculinity and femininity of an individual in a social environment (MacNaughton, 2000; Anggard, 2011). Hence, gender is the result of social construction (Warin and Adriany, 2015).

In constructing gender, feminist poststructuralism also explains the existence of social discourse of different historical and cultural powers (MacNaughton, 2000), historical, social, and political configurations (Messner, 2000). Education practices are also influenced by social and political discourses (Warin and Adriany, 2015), in which pedagogy also contributes to unequal power relations (Bhana, 2003). This fact shows how one's gender identity is not merely a biological construction, but also social and cultural construction.

The poststructuralist perspective also looks into how gender is constructed in schools (Bhana 2003). MacNaughton (1997) explained that children learn what it means to be male and female in a culture where masculinity is constructed superior to femininity, thereby creating unbalanced relationship between boys and girls (Adriany, 2013).

The discourses that occur in early childhood education practices affect how children construct their gender. First, Bhana (2003) explained that teaching discourse is involved in the regulation of gender identity. Second, child-centred discourse is considered the only way to understand child development despite the fact that it perpetuates the stereotype (Adriany and Warin, 2014). Third, biological discourse can construct a child's gender identity (Bhana, 2003). Fourth, there is religious discourse, in which gender construction is the result of interaction through this discourse. In Indonesia, the concept of "divine nature" is practiced in early childhood education. This concept is interdependent

with biological essentialism (Warin and Adriany, 2015). Fifth, there is the discourse of superhero, which explains that the identity of a child is constructed through the masculine nature of the superhero discourse manipulated by media and toys that carry the popular culture such as Superman, Power Ranger, Batman, X-man (Bhana, 2003). Sixth, there is cultural discourse, in which gender is traditionally constructed through culture. Play is thus determined by whether or not girls or boys in a certain culture can be accepted by the society (Chase, 2009).

This paper also attempts to explain the meaning of power through a poststructuralist perspective. In poststructuralism, power is not something centralized; rather, it flows through the existing discourses in the society (Foucault, 1980). One discourse will be considered more correct when other discourses are marginalized. Discourses that are considered more correct do not always literally mean so, but often they are regarded as correct because they have more power than other discourses.

3 METHODOLOGY

This paper employs the meta-analysis methodology, referencing the research results to integrate findings (Glass, 1976). The researchers used eight papers to be analysed. In conducting the analysis, the researchers identified the themes arising from the eight papers. The papers were derived from two studies conducted in Indonesia and Sweden (Warin and Adriany 2015; Adriany and Warin 2014) and six overseas studies (Bhana, 2003; Marsh, 2000; Messner, 2000; Lappalainen, 2004; Chase, 2009; MacNaughton, 1997). The present research is part of the broader research that attempts to develop a gender-sensitive curriculum at the level of Early Childhood Education.

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis shows two major themes from the eight papers analysed, namely: 1) Gender relations in play, and 2) power relations in play.

4.1 Gender Relations in Play

When playing, children often position gender identity through their social environment. As

explained by several studies, children gain their gender identity through teachers (Warin and Adriany, 2015; Bhana, 2003; Adriany and Warin, 2014), friends (Chase, 2009), parents (Messner, 2000; Chase, 2009), popular culture (Marsh, 2011), and cultural significance (Messner, 2000; Lappalainen, 2004; Chase 2009). Hence, teachers and adults indirectly contribute to gender construction in play.

Parents play an important role in constructing a child's gender, in which they sometimes give labelling to boys and girls in relation to how to choose games and with whom they play according to the implicit rules that are prevalent in their social environment. Chase's research (2009) proves that girls often play with fellow girls because their parents do not want them to play with boys. The finding corresponds to Messner's argument (2000) that conservative parents are happy to provide Barbie dolls to girls and divert boys from being interested in Barbie doll games. Messner's argument is also proved by Formberg (2006) who revealed that boys often avoid Barbie dolls because of the labelling they get. Aina and Cameron (2011) concurred that when parents show labelling to children, the children will subsequently show their reactions when playing. This labelling is not realized by parents because since birth they often distinguish between boys and girls through different play variations (Paechter, 2006b).

Besides parents, teachers contribute to the labelling received by children. The results of research by Warin and Adriany (2015) prove that teachers apply religious discourse to construct traditional gender in children. In addition, Adriany and Warin's research (2014) demonstrates how teachers maintain traditional gender to children based on the child-centred discourse, where teachers ignore the unequal access to play between boys and girls on the grounds that it is the children's wish. Bhana (2003) also explained that teachers often apply biological discourse, in that girls are often associated with femininity, so they are often excluded from games that are considered masculine.

Meanwhile, research findings of Messner (2000) show that children construct gender through the evolving culture, where cultural symbols often create biological differences between boys and girls. Chase's research (2009) also shows that such culture is created from one generation to another, thus perpetuating the stereotypes. Lappalainen (2004) even cautioned about the stereotypes developing in culture, where his research proves that physical activities make girls excluded.

Popular culture can also contribute to a child's gender construction. Marsh's research (2011) proves that children construct gender identity and sexist characters from superhero figures. Hence, they often imitate the gender identity shown by the superhero figures.

In addition to the superheroes in popular culture, Chase's research (2009) found that gender is constructed by children in their daily lives through friends. Chase's argument is justified by Clark and Paechter (2007) who evinced that gender compliance is monitored through a friendship group. Paechter added that when a child maintains playing with their sexual counterpart, the child will face pressure from peers (Paechter, 2006b)

Based on the findings of the above research, parents, teachers, friends, popular culture figures, and cultural significance contribute to children's traditional gender construction that is made possible through labelling. Labelling itself is associated to the different games chosen by boys and girls. Chase's research (2009) shows that labelling can contribute to how a boy chooses soccer, car race in play or how a girl chooses to play with dolls. Maccoby and Jacklin (1987) agreed that the gender classification described by Chase serves as a powerful magnet to draw the "traits" from the labelling received by children. Formberg (2006) added that children's self-labelling is obtained after they integrate cognitive and social information.

In addition to the selection of different games by boys and girls, labelling contributes to the difference in play space between boys and girls. This is explained in the findings of Messner's research (2000) that when boys physically enter the playroom of girls, some girls expel boys. MacNaughton (1997) also agreed that the use of space is controlled by boys and girls differently, where boys use physical activity and girls with language. MacNaughton also explained that boys often harass and use physical actions to take up girls' space. Borge and Borge (2017) corresponded that the use of children's play space is different. Boys choose to play with a room containing boys' toys, while girls often occupy space with games associated with girls. Thorne (1993) argued that there is a difference in the space of boys and girls, so that when adults want to prove the difference in space, they can go to a playground and see how boys dominate.

Labelling does not only make a difference in the use of space in play. Unconsciously, labelling also plays a role in the selection of with whom to play according to gender. This is as shown by Chase (2009) that when children play there is also gender

segregation. Bhana (2003) also found that very rarely do boys and girls play together. Chase's discovery was also revealed in Messner's research (2000), where children tend to avoid playing with those of the opposite sex. Maccoby and Jacklin (1987) agreed that when children play there is gender segregation that is generated through the labelling received by the children. Maccoby and Jacklin added that the level of occurrence of gender segregation depends on the interaction regulated by adults and culture. This happens because the labelling received by children is often displayed again by the child in even more marked ways (Anggard, 2005).

Based on the explanations of the research results, there are three themes that arise. First, labelling during play separates between boys' and girls' games. Secondly, labelling during play separates the play space between boys and girls. Third, labelling generates gender segregation of boys and girls during play.

4.2 Power Relations in Play

Labelling often has power relations to some of the discourses received by children such as the teaching discourse (Bhana, 2003) child-centred discourse (Adriany and Warin, 2014), biological discourse (Bhana 2003), religious discourse (Warin and Adriany, 2015), Superhero discourse (Bhana, 2003), cultural discourse (Chase, 2009). Such discourses are often linked to children's unequal play activities.

Adriany and Warin's research findings (2014) show that power relations are often seen in children's play activities. This can be seen in the case when during a role play a boy shows his interest in playing the role of the princess and playing with the Barbie doll; however, the teacher becomes alerted because the boy's interests are not in line with the implicit school rules, in which biological discourse distinguishes between boys and girls. Warin and Adriany (2015) echoed that children are often excluded because one of the discourses developed in schools is child-centred discourse. The finding is also proved by Bhana (2003) who disclosed that teaching discourse and biological discourse often make non-traditionally gendered children passive. This discrimination against boys causes gender inequalities, in which children are powerless because of the non-traditional gender construction. Meanwhile, Bhana (2003) added that equality can be achieved if teachers are able to understand how discourse limits justice in the social environment.

Discourse also has power relations in the case where child labelling is often associated with masculine and feminine issues; more specifically, where boys show masculine issues in play activities. Marsh's research (2000) shows the issue of masculinity that is maintained by boys in a superhero role play, where he gave an opportunity to girls to take the first role of a superhero character. However, the boys refused to take the second role in the superhero role playing. Paechter (2003a) agreed with Marsh that masculine and feminine behaviours are constructed by children through the cultural and social settings, in which Marsh's research is related to the discourse of superheroes in popular culture that reinforces the issue of masculinity. In addition, Paechter (2006b) confirmed that there is power relation in the labelling of masculine and feminine knowledge to children. Herein, masculinity and femininity are frequently used differently in power relations (Paechter, 2003b). Adriany and Warin's research (2015) clearly shows how masculine values like superheroes are more appreciated in early childhood education settings.

The power of masculinity is also explained by MacNaughton (1997), where block games are considered a masculine space. MacNaughton's opinion is evidenced by Thorne (1993) who showed that block games are considered boys' games. Bhana (2003) also agreed that block games often become the power of masculinity, in which boys limit the space for girls to play an active role in the games. Bhana added that the power of masculinity is related to the biological discourse children receive.

Besides block games, masculinity also often occurs in children's games that rely on physical activity, such as playing with balls. Lappalainen (2004) explained that boys' bodies are constantly stimulated physically, while girls often do not get adequate stimulation in physical activity. As a result, girls lack the enthusiasm and athletic vigour of the game types using physical activity. Furthermore, the enthusiasm and athleticism of girls becomes unappreciated regardless of whether or not the girls desire to join such games using physical activity. Lappalainen's opinion is in line with that of Paechter (2003a) who argued that masculinity is formed with verbal support to play with the physical activities, while femininity tends to be constructed as part of the parenting game. This is often shown by boys playing attack, chase, and games involving physical activity (Maccoby and Jackin, 1987).

In the formation of masculinity, as described by Bhana (2003), domination and aggression become the forces. This is consistent with the opinion of

Paechter (2006a) who stated that femininity is not constructed in the same way as how masculinity is constructed in a patriarchal culture, in which men are considered to have a higher position than women. In his research, Paechter (2006a) also mentioned that girls are often excluded because boys defend the masculine issues that develop in their social environment while doing play activities.

There are two important points that arise in the power relations that children receive through the discourses developing in their social environment. First, the existing discourses in schools make the non-traditionally gendered children helpless and excluded from play because of the implicit norms prevailing in their social environment. Secondly, the developing discourses make boys defend the issues of masculinity, where the power of masculinity makes girls excluded. This is so because femininity is constructed differently from how masculinity develops in their social environment.

5 CONCLUSIONS

Games in children are often gendered, where children construct gender in their play activities. Children often reinforce the issues of masculinity and femininity of the labelling they receive through the existing discourses in their social environment. Hence, power relation frequently occurs, which bears a negative impact on children's play activities. Teachers and adults often find children who strengthen the feminine and masculine issues in play, but they do not see this phenomenon through a gender perspective, thereby unconsciously creating gender inequalities in children's play activities. As a result, there is often unequal access and relations between boys and girls in play activities.

Gender is important, in which traditional power relations and gender construction have a negative impact on inequality in children's play activities. The question is: How can we as teachers and adults change that power relation? MacNaughton (1997) explained that if we want to change power relations, we must change children's understanding of what it means to be a boy and a girl in a social environment and change the discourse in which they understand themselves as masculine and feminine. Before we change the children's understanding of what it means to be a boy and a girl, we as adults must first change the traditional gender that often arises because of the existing discourses within our community, school, or culture.

Some research that can help us in the development of gender in play activities in early childhood education includes: First, Warin and Adriany's research (2015) that implements the concept of gender-sensitive education, where teachers do not only accept differences in children in terms of academic and skill levels, but they must also accept those differences regardless of gender. Second, there is Adriany and Warin's research (2014) using the concept of nursing, where teachers can be a space when there are children who show non-traditional gender behaviours.

When we find a boy who is interested in a Barbie doll, let's take a look at girls who develop their speech skills through a Barbie doll. Girls often talk and interact with the doll. If we find girls' speaking ability superior to boys', let us analyse whether the stimuli and opportunities given to boys and girls have been the same. The reverse is true, when we find boys' rough physical and motor skills superior to girls', let us see if the opportunities and stimuli given to boys and girls have been the same. We must be aware of gender and power impacting on gender inequalities between girls and boys in play. It is important for teachers and adults to understand that all types of games can improve child development, so they should let children explore the games without being restricted by gender.

Thus, the results of this research indicate that teachers and adults should see children's play activities using a gender perspective. It is important in order to make children more flexible in providing opportunities and space to all their friends without being restricted by gender. The results of this research also implicitly show that children are often excluded from certain types of games because of their gender.

REFERENCES

- Adriany, V., 2013. *Gendered power relations within child-centred discourse: An ethnographic study in a kindergarten in Bandung, Indonesia*, Lancaster University, Lancaster. PhD thesis.
- Adriany, V., Warin, J. 2014. Preschool teacher's approaches to care and gender differences within a child centred pedagogy: Findings from an Indonesian kindergarten. *International Journal of Early Years Education: Routledge*.
- Aina, O. E., Cameron, P. A., 2011. Why does gender matter? Counteracting stereotypes with young children. *Dimensions of Early Childhood*. 39(3).

- Anggard, E., 2011. Children's gendered and non-gendered play in natural spaces. *Children Youth and Environments*. 21(2), 5-33.
- Anggard, E., 2005. Barbie princesses and dinosaur dragons: narration as a way of doing gender. *Gender and Education*. 17(5), 539-553.
- Barnett, L. M., Ridgers, N. D., Hesketh, K., Salmon, J., 2017. Setting them up for lifetime activity: Play competence perceptions and physical activity in young children. *Journal of Science and Medicine in Sport*.
- Bhana, D., 2003. Children are children: gender doesn't matter. *Agenda*. 17(56), 37-45.
- Blaise, M., 2013. *Gender discourse and play*, SAGE. London.
- Borve, H. E., Borve, E., 2017. Rooms with gender: physical environment and play culture in kindergarten. *Early Child Development and Care*. 187(5-6), 1069-1081.
- Bruner, J. S., 1964. The course of cognitive growth. *American psychologist*. 19(1), 1.
- Burman, E. (2008). *Deconstructing developmental psychology*. East Sussex: Routledge.
- Clark, S., Paechter, C., 2007. Why can't girls play football? Gender dynamics and the playground. *Sport, Education and Society*. 12(3), 261-276.
- Chase, C. M., 2009. Children's play: The construction of gender roles. *Young Children*. 1(21), 83-86.
- Fromberg, D. P., Bergen, D., 2006. Play from birth to twelve: Contexts, perspectives, and meanings. *Taylor & Francis*.
- Foucault, M., 1980. *Truth and Power*. In C. Gordon (Ed.), *Power/knowledge: Selected interviews and other writings 1972-1977*. Pantheon Books. New York.
- Gavey, N., 1989. Feminist poststructuralism and discourse analysis: Contributions to feminist psychology. *Psychology of women quarterly*. 13(4), 459-475.
- Glass, G. V., 1976. Primary, secondary, and meta-analysis of research. *Educational Researcher*. 5(10), 3-8.
- Istiarini, R., 2014. Peningkatan kemampuan berbicara melalui bermain balok (Improving speech skills through block games). *Jurnal Pendidikan Usia Dini*. 8(1), 145-154.
- Khasanah, I., Prasetyo, A., Rakhmawati, E., 2011. Permainan tradisional sebagai media stimulasi aspek perkembangan anak usia dini (Traditional games as media to stimulate young children's development). *PAUDIA*. 1(1).
- Lappalainen, P. A., 2004. They say it's a cultural matter: gender and ethnicity at preschool. *European Educational Research Journal*. 3(3), 642-656.
- MacNaughton, G., 1997. Who's got the power? Rethinking gender equity strategies in early childhood. *International Journal of Early Years Education*. 5(1), 57-66.
- MacNaughton, G., 2000. Rethinking gender in early childhood education. *Sage*.
- Maccoby, E. E., Jacklin, C. N., 1987. Gender segregation in childhood. *Advances in Child Development and Behavior*. 20, 239-287.
- Marsh, J., 2000. But I want to fly too!: Girls and superhero play in the infant classroom. *Gender and Education*. 12(2), 209-220.
- Messner, M. A., 2000. Barbie girls versus sea monsters: Children constructing gender. *Gender & Society* 14(6), 765-784.
- Paechter, C., 2003a. Learning masculinities and femininities: Power/knowledge and legitimate peripheral participation. In *Women's Studies International Forum*. 26(6), pp. 541-552). Pergamon.
- Paechter, C., 2003b. Masculinities and femininities as communities of practice. In *Women's Studies International Forum*. 26(1), pp. 69-77). Pergamon.
- Paechter, C., 2006a. Masculine femininities/feminine masculinities: Power, identities and gender. *Gender and Education*. 18(3), 253-263.
- Paechter, C., 2006. Power, knowledge and embodiment in communities of sex/gender practice. In *Women's Studies International Forum*. 29(1), pp. 13-26). Pergamon.
- Siska, Y., 2011. Penerapan metode bermain peran (role playing) dalam meningkatkan keterampilan sosial dan keterampilan berbicara anak usia dini (Implementing role playing method in improving young children's social and speech skills). *Jurnal Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia, special edition*. (2).
- Smith, K., Alexander, K., Campbell, S., 2017. *Feminism(s) in early childhood: Using feminist theories in research and practice*. Springer. (Vol. 4).
- Thorne, B., 1993. *Gender play: Girls and boys in school*, Rutgers University Press. New Jersey.
- Vygotsky, L. S., 1967. Play and its role in the mental development of the child. *Soviet psychology*. 5(3), 6-18.
- Warin, J., Adriany, V., 2015. Gender flexible pedagogy in early childhood education. *Journal of Gender Studies*. 1-12.
- Walkerdine, V., 1998. *Developmental psychology and the child-centered pedagogy: the insertion of piaget into early education*, Routledge. London.
- Yelland, N., 1998. *Gender in early childhood*, Routledge. London.