

# Learning Media and Gender in Early Childhood Education

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**Keywords:** Learning Media, Gender, Early Childhood Education.

**Abstract:** This paper aims to unpack the extent to which learning media contribute to gender construction in Early Childhood Education (ECE). This article is based on assumptions that media very often sustain traditional gender construction. Using post-develop mentalism, this article will be adopting a meta-analysis of previous research and literatures on media and gender in ECE. Findings from this article are expected to illuminate the extent to which media interfere with gender construction in ECE and what kind of gender construction is perpetuated by the learning media. It is hoped that the paper will inform teachers and educators in ECE to include gender awareness in their teaching.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Much research on learning media has been conducted in Indonesia (Kozma, 1991; Lieberman and Colleagues, 2009; Ahyani, 2010; Santoso, 2011). However, research that raises gender issues in relation to learning media is still rare. Such research more often focuses on the influence, impact, or application of learning media in early childhood education on both the development and learning of young children themselves (Ernest and Colleagues, 2014; Ahyani, 2010; Farizah and Astiningrum, 2016; Hasanah, 2013). In most cases, learning media are used as one of the alternatives and choices for educators to help young children's development. Ahyani (2010), for instance, used the learning media of storybooks in implementing teaching and learning. The storybooks were used to develop young children's moral intelligence, which is one aspect of development that pre-schoolers must achieve. Other research on learning media by Farizah and Astiningrum (2016) attempted to develop media to develop aspects of child language development by designing a series of computer applications using kinect technology. In addition, research on learning media has been done in one of early childhood education institutions in Jakarta using whiteboard with pictures as the learning media to illustrate the aspect of children's cognitive development, namely young children's mathematical logic (Khasanah, 2013).

Meanwhile, a large amount of research taking the theme of learning media and gender has been carried out abroad (Liang and Colleagues, 2016; Ernest and Colleagues, 2014; Kotaman and Tekin, 2016; Jenkins and Colleagues, 1993). The research has analysed and found that learning media also play a role in the introduction and construction of gender in early childhood. In Pakistan, for example, even the Minister of Education made a massive effort to reconstruct the learning media of school textbooks considered to contain elements of gender and stereotypes. The government believes that the learning media of school textbooks are able to give opportunities to close the gap in gender; hence, reconstructing school textbooks is an appropriate effort that can be made (Ullah and Skelton, 2013). Furthermore, other studies reported that learning media have the power to shape attitudes and trigger changes, but often they lack knowledge of gender in them (Made, 2000).

Based on the explanations, it is clear then that the analysis of the use of learning media in reconstructing early childhood gender has been done in many countries abroad; however, this is not the case with research of the same theme in Indonesia. Research on the involvement of learning media and the extent to which they contribute to young children's gender construction in Indonesia has never been done by Indonesian researchers. Meanwhile, according to Silver (1999), appropriate learning media will be able to fight against negative gender stereotypes and able to assist in providing

materials related to the construction of gender in young children. Furthermore, gender is an inseparable part of child development since an early age. According to Smith and Colleagues (2017), young children develop their knowledge about gender from the age of three. Based on this argument, the discussion of how learning media contribute to the development of children's gender and the values given by the learning media in developing children's gender becomes important to be traced.

## 2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The present research employs post-developmental theory. Post-developmentalism is a paradigm emerging as a critique of the theory of developmentalism (Burman, 2008; Walkerdine, 1998). One of the problems with developmentalism is the assumption of universal truth, in which the stages of child development throughout the world are considered to be similar (Adriany, 2016; Burman, 2008; Edward and Colleagues, 2009; Walkerdine, 1998). Post-developmental theory rejects the notion of universalism in the theory of developmentalism (Burman, 2008; Fakhri, 2009; Janssen, 2013).

Post-developmentalism often tries to deconstruct what we consider to be "truth" in early childhood education; for example, in media studies. From a developmentalist perspective, the media are regarded as a means to stimulate early childhood development (Calvert and Barbara, 2009; Santrock, 1995). From the perspective of post-developmentalism, however, media are seen as a means of perpetuating traditional gender ideas (Karniol and Colleagues, 2000). It certainly shows that learning media according to post-developmentalism are a source of learning full of gender stereotypes and inequalities. Based on post-developmental theory, thus, it is important to pay attention to learning media in order not to further perpetuate gender inequalities, considering how learning media also interact directly with young children (Yeoman, 1999; Hurley, 2005).

## 3 GENDER IN YOUNG CHILDREN

Gender can be briefly defined as the comprehensive social construction of roles, attitudes, and attributes

that are associated with men and women. Although the definition seems simple, throughout the history gender has meant more than just biological sexes (Lövheim, 2013). Based on the theory of post-developmentalism, gender means socially constructed roles and expectations for women and men. The gender construction of men and women will therefore differ depending on the expectations of the people in the area (Mosse, 2007; Mohamad, 2002).

The existing theories on gender in early childhood tend to regard children as passive beings, who have not completely understood the issue of gender (Kohlberg, 1966). Meanwhile, in the perspective of post-developmentalism, children are considered as not only being able to construct gender identity, but also to challenge the existing gender construction (Blaise, 2005; Browne, 2004; Burman, 2008; Edwards et al., 2009; Walkerdine, 1998; Yelland, 1998).

## 4 METHODOLOGY

This paper uses meta-analysis methodology. It analyses previous research on learning media and gender in young children from various countries. In this case, meta-analysis methodology is a process of studying and researching by analysing and reviewing various papers from previous research pertaining to learning media and gender in relation to young children (Elyasir, 2015). The present research analyses 7 studies of learning media and gender in early childhood. The research itself is part of broader research that seeks to develop a gender sensitive curriculum in Early Childhood Education.

## 5 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

After studying several papers in the analysis, the researchers found two major themes related to learning media and gender. The two major themes are contribution of learning media towards gender and media and gender ideologies in learning media. The following sections discuss the two themes contained in the analysed papers.

### 5.1 Gender and Media

An analysis of the research by Hendriyani and Colleagues (2012) reveals that the learning media of books were more frequently accessed by girls than

by boys. According to this research, learning media affect how boys more often interact with passive learning media and do not require interaction with others, while girls prefer to use learning media that demand more frequent communication with peers. This is consistent with the argument of post-developmental theory that learning media which are supposed to improve the developmental aspects of a child, in fact, only increasingly perpetuate traditional gender (Yeoman, 1999). In this case, the research further reinforces the notion that girls have higher literacy intelligence than boys, although it is actually the text that tends to segregate boys and girls.

Another study conducted by Hendriyani and Colleagues (2012) shows how gender stereotypes are still very strongly demonstrated by learning media. Children become more frequently involved in activities that show how girls should be feminine and boys masculine.

Although the two studies show how learning media reinforce traditional gender notions, another study conducted by Friesem (2016) suggests the otherwise. According to Friesem (2016), when learning media are given to children with the right approach, they can help children understand the complexity of the learning environment and dismantle the formation of gender identity embedded through strong ideology. This is in line with Fiske's (1996) opinion in his book that gender, race, class and age are constructed and hence they can be reconstructed. This argument is supported by Made (2000) who shows how learning media actually have the power to dismantle the existing traditional gender values.

## 5.2 Gender Ideologies in Learning Media

Next is research conducted by Hurley (2005), which examines how learning media in the form of text, either verbal or visual, affect children's self-image. In his research, Hurley explained that learning media in the form of storybooks such as Snow White, Beauty and The Beast or other children's storybooks are laden with elements of traditional gender. The books tend to perpetuate the idea of women as weak and passive. Yeoman's research (1999) also shows how storybooks further perpetuate the traditional gender, where the storybooks contain feminine elements and minor female protagonists. Hurley (2005) also said that teachers as individuals who have committed to teaching social justice and gender equality should be able to choose teach media that

can describe these values to young children. This is in line with Kirkorian's (2008) argument that educators or teachers have an important role to maximize the positive influence of learning media on the development of children's gender and minimize the negative effects that may arise from learning media laden with traditional gender values.

Research on learning media and gender was also conducted by Ullah and Skelton (2013). According to their research, learning media in Pakistan need to be reconstructed because they still contain elements of gender inequality. Ullah and Skelton (2013) also stated in their research that the learning media in the form of textbooks in Pakistan still inculcate the message of gender bias and stereotypical representation of men and women. The existing books tend to extend the idea of male and female stereotypes, in which boys are considered to have different brain abilities from girls. Meanwhile, the idea of different brain structure and ability between boys and girls has long been abandoned because it is considered to have no clear empirical evidence (Browne, 2004).

## 6 CONCLUSIONS

Findings of this paper yield the extent to which learning media in early childhood education are very much gendered (Smith and Colleagues, 2017; Gill, 2007; Made, 2000; Friesem, 2016). Learning media have considerable contribution in the inculcation of gender values. These values can reach children through a hidden curriculum that is consistently and continuously disseminated by teachers to children (Singer and Singer, 2012; Friesem, 2016). Hence, the results of this research invite early childhood educators to have greater sensitivity and gender awareness in using media in the classroom so that gender values that provide equal opportunities for boys and girls can continue to be introduced.

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