

How, When, and Why Early Childhood Educators Address Gender with Young Children?

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Background

Children develop gender stereotypes between ages 2-5 (Martin & Ruble, 2010). Early childhood classrooms are one of the first settings where children receive messages about gender, partly from teachers (Chapman, 2016; Chick, 2002).

Teachers' use of gender labels and gender to organize classrooms increases children's gender stereotyping and decreases preference for other-gender peers (Hilliard & Liben, 2010).

However, work is largely missing about early childhood educators' "gendered" beliefs and classroom practices. These topics are examined using an online survey.

Current Study

Participants

341 early childhood educators (99% female; 61% White) filled out an online survey about their attitudes & classroom practices about gender.

Measures

Gender-blindness: 17 items assessed the trivialization of sexism & gender discrimination, and male privilege (e.g., "Sexism against women in the U.S. involves rare, isolated situations"). Items were rated on a 6-point scale, $\alpha = .80$.

Sexism: 10 items assessed hostile & benevolent sexism with the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (Glick & Fiske, 1996). Ex: "Women are too easily offended" and "Women should be protected by men." Items were rated on a 6-point scale, $\alpha = .79$.

Gendered Classroom Practices: 23 items assessed the use of gender labeling, linguistic bias, lining up children by gender, and encouragement of gender-typical/atypical play. Items were rated on a 7-point scale, $\alpha = .83$.

Educators also answered: "Can you share a time when you recently addressed gender diversity in your classroom?" Open-coding was used to identify salient themes.

Results

Gender-Blindness

The mean was 3.02 out of 6 ($SD = 0.70$), falling closest to the *Slightly Disagree* option, meaning that teachers slightly disagreed with gender-blind ideologies.

Educators scored higher on *Unawareness of Gender Privilege* ($M = 3.66, SD = 0.96$) compared to *Unawareness of Institutional Discrimination* ($M = 2.90, SD = 0.79$) ($t(287) = 14.17, p < .001$) and *Unawareness of Blatant Gender Issues* ($M = 2.35, SD = 0.83$) ($t(285) = 23.29, p < .001$).

Educators scored higher on *Unawareness of Institutional Discrimination* compared to *Unawareness of Blatant Gender Issues* ($t(287) = 10.83, p < .001$).

Sexism

The mean was 2.94 out of 6 ($SD = 0.92$), falling closest to the *Slightly Disagree* option, meaning that teachers slightly disagreed with sexist ideologies. Teachers scored higher on *Benevolent Sexism* ($M = 3.06, SD = 1.17$) ($t(281) = -3.27, p = .001$) than on *Hostile Sexism* ($M = 2.85, SD = 1.03$).

Gendered Classroom Practices

Teachers reported infrequent use of classroom practices that made gender salient (e.g. the use of gender labels) ($M = 2.36$ out of 7; $SD = .98$).

Teachers were more likely to encourage gender atypical play in girls (e.g., playing with trucks) than in boys (e.g., playing with dolls). ($t(285) = 23.29, p < .001$).

Teachers were more likely to compliment girls' appearance ($M = 3.74, SD = 2.11$) than those of boys ($M = 3.50, SD = 2.10$). Educators were more likely to compliment girls' strength/abilities ($M = 4.40, SD = 2.10$) than those of boys ($M = 4.24, SD = 2.10$) ($t(325) = -2.96, p = .003$).

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Results Continued

Gender Issues in Early Childhood Classrooms (open-ended themes):

- Child pointed out/was confused by gender
- Child expressed gender prejudice
- Adult (colleague or parent) expressed bias

Teacher Responses:

Gender-Explicit

- Anti-bias/counter-stereotypic responses
- Encouraged mixed-sex play
- "Gender neutralizing" responses
- Emphasized gender similarities
- Emphasized gender differences
- Reinforced gender stereotypes
- Comforted child who was teased
- Told perpetrator(s) it's not ok to tease

Gender Non-Explicit

- Mentioned respect & equality
- Religious justifications
- Curriculum/unit references

Domains:

- Appearance
- Ability/Traits
- Colors
- Activity/Toys

Discussion

Teachers did not report sexist and gender-blind ideologies, an encouraging finding. When these attitudes were present, they were strongest in the male privilege and benevolent sexism domains.

Future work can clarify how societal level attitudes about gender translate to classroom practices in early childhood.

Another encouraging finding is the support of gender-atypical play in girls. Educators seem to recognize the importance of exposing girls to diverse skills. Classroom observations are needed to confirm these results.

Children's perceptions of teachers' practices as well as child outcomes will be important to assess in future work.