Heteronormativity in Kindergarten Classrooms

by

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Abstract

Heteronormativity is the belief that people fall into distinct and complementary genders with natural roles in life. The idea is that the culture within elementary schools influences the children's academic, behavioral, and psychological well-being. During this period of a child's life, heteronormativity develops. The purpose of this research is to gain a greater understanding of the prevalence of heteronormativity in elementary school classrooms, specifically kindergarten. To understand this process, I will systematically observe classrooms within kindergarten. The methodological approach of this research will include both qualitative and quantitative analysis, specifically interviews with teachers and content analysis of the classroom environment. Teaches within these ages are constantly decorating their classroom environment in ways that shows students' normative behaviors. We want to take these behaviors and subdivide them into those that meet a typical boy behavior and a typical girl behavior. Guided by relevant research, I will construct a list of examples as well as interview questions for the teachers of what I believe would prevail heteronormativity. While observing the classroom environment I will better understand the qualitative and quantitative aspects of heteronormativity. After observation, I believe the results I discover will determine just how prevalent heteronormativity is among elementary school classrooms.

A Content Analysis over Heteronormativity in Kindergarten Classrooms

When I first started my research four months ago, I was very interested in how and why self-esteem and body image of oneself had lowered so much. After researching many articles about this topic, I knew the root cause of this in teens and adults was media (See Appendix A). I wanted to then dig even deeper into the background and the spark that could have started it all. That is when I learned about heteronormativity.

Heteronormativity is the belief that people fall into distinct and complementary genders with natural roles in life. The idea is that the culture within elementary schools influences the children's academic, behavioral, and psychological well-being. During this period of a child's life, heteronormativity develops. That absolutely makes sense. All my life I had been taught to follow a specific set of guidelines based on my gender. I was to only play with barbies, baby dolls, kitchen sets, and dress up clothes. I was not to play in the dirt, play with trucks, cars, or blocks because those were "boy toys." That was over twenty years ago, so I wanted to know if it was still like that now, in 2018. I then decided that was what my research would be over: how has kindergarten changed in the last fifteen or so years? I wanted to find out just how much and in what ways kindergarten teachers were enforcing heteronormativity in their classrooms without even knowing they were doing it.

Background

There have been studies, experiments, and surveys done over heteronormativity for years and that shocked me. I had no idea that people were discussing the idea of heteronormativity before I was even born. I found an article from 1992 over "Socialization to Gender Roles: Popularity among Elementary School Boys and Girls" by Adler and Kless. This is how one can tell just how prevalent this subject matter was even almost twenty years ago. Adler and Kless

found that "within their gendered peer subcultures, boys and girls constructed idealized images of masculinity and femininity on which they modeled their behavior." These factors came reflected on how their peers viewed them regarding popularity. Boys were viewed more popular for their athletic ability, toughness, dating girls, and social skills whereas girls were viewed more popular for their academia, physical appearance, and their parents socioeconomic status (Adler & Kless, 1992). The research shows that not many factors have changed when someone's popularity is getting ranked, even throughout all these years.

In 2001, Tatar and Emmanuel investigated attitudes and perceptions of teacher's behaviors regarding students' gender roles. A questionnaire was given to 221 Israeli teachers and the responses were categorized according to education setting and gender (Tatar & Emannuel, 2001). "Only 15% of teachers in this sample had attended courses on gender equality. Over 50% of teachers did not respond to the question concerning their school's gender policy" (Tatar & Emannuel, 2001). In general, though, the results did not show any extreme opinionated or egalitarian responses (Tatar & Emannuel, 2001). These findings make aware the lack of awareness teachers have on the nature of gender stereotypes and the influences they have overall.

A study like the one previously mentioned was administered to a group of 72 children ages 4, 6, and 8 years by interviewing them about the flexibility of gender norms from their perspective (Conry-Murray & Turiel, 2012). Most participants, of all ages, "judged gender norms as a matter of personal choice and they negatively evaluated a rule enforcing gender norms in schools" (Conry-Murray & Turiel, 2012). Most of the 6- and 8-year-olds showed more signs of flexibility and also "viewed the rule enforcing gender norms as unfair" (Conry-Murray & Turiel, 2012).

In 2011, Lanuza presented a study that observed certain elementary school students to investigate the use of gender roles in the play stage. "Observing the performance of popular childlore and analyzing the lyrics, it employs Huizinga's phenomenological approach to play, Vygotsky's sociocultural approach to child development, and poststructuralist feminist theory of identity, in analyzing rhymes and actions involved in child's play" (Lanuza, 2011). This study was focused more on the fact that most children are molded and shaped to fitting into what the idealistic gender roles are according to the adults they are surrounded by. "While childlore, especially chant games, initiates children into the gendered world of adults, it also offers children liminal spaces where children can suspend rigid gender roles" (Lanuza, 2011).

In 2012, Patterson conducted a study that examined the relations among gender-typed attributes, gender stereotype endorsement, and self-perceived gender typicality with a sample of 100 elementary school children ages 6 through 12 from Midwestern United States. Children who perceived themselves to be more gender-typical were more interested in activities and occupations that pertained to their same gender (Patterson, 2012). Children who saw themselves as less gender-typical had more of an egalitarian attitude than the children who saw themselves being more gender-typical (Patterson, 2012). These findings did not differ among age or gender. "These findings indicate that even young elementary-school-aged children use their knowledge of cultural gender roles to make subjective judgments regarding the self, and, conversely, that views of the self may influence personal endorsement of cultural gender stereotypes" (Patterson, 2012).

I read all these articles and I told myself, the teachers must play a huge role in heteronormativity in some way or another, I just need to find out where it starts and then I found Gansen's research over "Gendered Sexual Socialization in Preschool Classrooms." Gansen

observed preschool classrooms over a 10-month period to see just what children were receiving

from their teacher's practices and how they reproduced those practices through their peer

interactions (Gansen, 2017). Gansen states that, "I find heteronormativity permeates preschool

classrooms, where teachers construct (and occasionally disrupt) gendered sexuality in a number

of different ways, and children reproduce (and sometimes resist) these identities and norms in

their daily play. Teachers use what I call facilitative, restrictive, disruptive, and passive

approaches to sexual socialization in preschool classrooms." This is how children do not get to

decide for themselves what roles they want to take on, they are learning gender norms from

interactions with their teachers and peers in preschool and taking that learned behavior with them

throughout the rest of their lives. Gansen's article is why I am choosing to d delve deeper into

East Texas elementary schools to find just how prevalent heteronormativity is in kindergarten

classrooms.

Methods

I went through many different steps while conducting my research. I first began to think

about topics that intrigued me. I knew I could do my research over just about anything I wanted

to, so I wanted to research a topic that not many people like to discuss. I ran through some ideas

in my head and then I decided to choose one that was near and dear to my heart as well as so

many others in society. I decided to start researching self-esteem and body image and why it was

that most people were never satisfied in their own skin.

To find most of my articles, I went to Tyler Junior College's website and I used their

Library Database. I made sure I filtered the articles to only show results that were scholarly, had

the full document, and were conducted after 1990. I searched a couple different key terms,

mainly "self-esteem" and "body image." But then I started to see the two coincide with each

other. I soon realized that the root cause of negative self-esteem and body image dissatisfaction (BID), was the media (Flores-Cornejo, Kamego-Tome, Zapata-Pachas, & Alvarado, 2017) (See Appendix A). The media has such a huge impact on the way adolescents view themselves. I read so many articles over how the media is making girls and boys feel pressured to have a "perfect body" (Uchoa, et al., 2017). I figured there had to be something else that triggered girls and boys to think this way. In elementary school, they knew what was considered "socially acceptable" or "popular" (Adler & Kless, 1992). So, who or what made them think or act this way? Someone or something before they were exposed to the media had to have had an influence. That is when I learned about heteronormativity.

As stated earlier, Heteronormativity is the belief that people fall into distinct and complementary genders with natural roles in life. The idea is that the culture within elementary schools influences the children's academic, behavioral, and psychological well-being. During this period of a child's life, heteronormativity develops. With that being said, I went back to Tyler Junior College's Library Database and started to search terms such as "heteronormativity" and "gender-norms." I even searched the long line of: heteronormativity in elementary schools. I used the same filters as before to ensure I only got scholarly articles and ones that were no older that 1990. I found several different experiments done discussing heteronormativity in elementary schools.

The article that grabbed my attention most was Gansen's research over "Gendered Sexual Socialization in Preschool Classrooms" where he discusses how he spent ten months observing nine preschool classrooms. He noticed that teachers tend to push their students to participate in gender-typical activities and disrupts students who are wandering away from those guidelines. Gansen concluded that children were actually beginning to understand gender-norms

and the so-called rules affiliated with them just by interacting with other students or their teachers at school (Gansen, 2017). That is when I realized that these children, in preschool, are not getting to decide for themselves the roles they want to take on but instead, they are being decided for them by their teachers. I realized right then that I was going to focus my research on heteronormativity in kindergarten classrooms.

I wanted as much accurate data as possible and I knew the only way I could get that was by sitting down and interviewing the teachers. I also wanted to sit in a kindergarten classroom and observe the students but that was a bit riskier for what I was trying to accomplish. I then had to decide what elementary school was going to let me interview their kindergarten teachers. I knew my mom worked in the office at an elementary school, so I took my chance and asked the principal for permission to interview their four kindergarten teachers for my research project. I got permission and set a date for me to come to the school that worked best for both our schedules. In the meantime, I started conducting my interview questions. The obvious goal of these questions was to probe the kindergarten teachers into admitting in some way or another that they enforce heteronormativity in their classrooms. After using the material provided for me by my professor on how to construct interview questions, I came up with seven I wanted to ask (See Appendix B).

The week prior to my teacher interviews, I went over the questions time and time again to make sure I could make them sound as conversational as possible. I practiced asking the questions to my professor, peer, and sister to make sure I got feedback on what I needed to do or say differently to make the teachers not feel as if they are being attacked. I also did not want the teachers to feel as if they were in an awkward interview, but rather have them feel like we are just having a simple conversation over the way they run their classroom.

When the day came to do the interviews, I made sure I sat down with each teacher while their students were not in their classroom. This made them be able to focus more and get a clear understanding of what I was asking them. I sat down with each kindergarten teacher and made them aware of what I was doing my research over and why. I explained to them these interviews would be anonymous and to refer to any of their students using pronouns if they were giving an example. I also got each teachers permission to record the interviews on my phone through voice recordings as well as take pictures of their classrooms.

As soon as I got done with my first interview, I knew I wanted to include another question or two for the rest of the teachers. I also got a very quick reality check as to the fact that kindergarten was not the same as it was whenever I was attending it. After I started to get a lot of the same answers for my questions, I knew I was asking the right ones but I also knew I was about to have to go a different route with what I did my end results on.

After I left the elementary school, I reviewed my interviews by listening to each recording and looking at the classrooms that matched the teachers voice memo. I then typed up, word for word, what each teacher had answered on every question so that I would be able to have an easy reference if I needed to pull a direct quote or review what I had found. After doing that I was also able to see what I wanted my presentation to include.

Results

The results I got from my interviews changed my whole outlook on kindergarten. As soon as I asked, "Do you have what you would consider girl toys and boy toys in your classroom? Such as a kitchen set or dolls for girls and action figures or cars for boys?" in my first interview, I knew that kindergarten was no where near the same as it used to be twenty years ago. The first teacher I interviewed answered that question by saying,
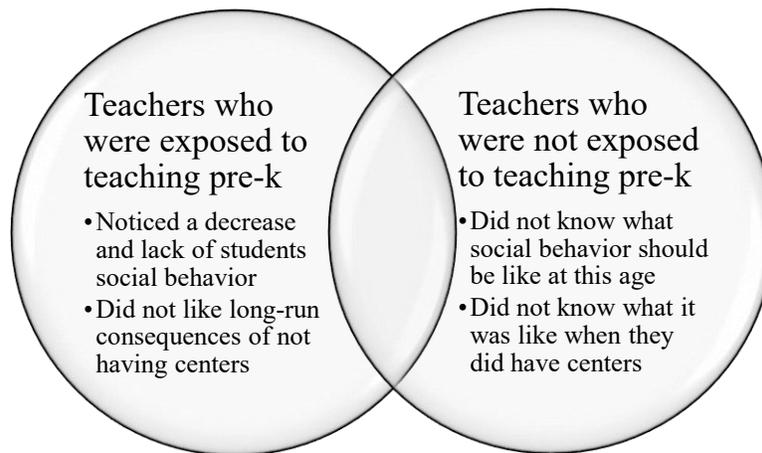
"Not so much in Kindergarten anymore because as the state standards change and the

state expects them to do more and more higher academic things in Kindergarten we lose

some of our "center times" and some of that just free play where they can just do

whatever they want to do. So we don't have a home center or any of that in Kindergarten

anymore."

She knew why I was asking the questions I was asking because she had taught pre-k before and

those were the things she saw in pre-k a lot. She gave me her insight from when she taught pre-k

and how they had what was called "home center" where they have dress up clothes and dolls.

She explained how even then she was always very careful to not direct her students as to which

outfits they could and could not put on based on gender. She noticed that girls seemed to not pay

attention to gender boundaries at that age but still gravitated towards more gender-typical clothes

and toys. I had one other teacher who had taught pre-k before and gave me similar insight to her

experience. The other two teachers who had not taught pre-k before felt as if I was attacking the

way they ran their classroom and became very defensive when I started to ask more questions

over heteronormativity. I think that was mainly because they did not understand why I was

asking them those questions like the teachers who had taught pre-k understood exactly why I was

asking them.

        I was also made aware that pre-k is not a mandatory grade level. It is funded by the

school district and your child does not have to attend, you can choose to send your child straight

to kindergarten. If a child misses pre-k and goes straight to kindergarten, they are missing the

socialization and learned behaviors they would get if they went to pre-k due to the fact that

kindergarten does not offer these things in their curriculum anymore. It is heart breaking and

shocking to think that children are missing out on needed social skills because the state is so

focused on pushing academia on the students as early as they can.

To go from having specific areas in your classroom assigned to different subjects to not

being able to has taken a huge toll on not only the teachers but the students as well. Before, one

area of the room would be for reading, another area for "home center," another area for toys, and

so on. Now, the students are forced to sit in the same seat at the same table while they are in the

classroom. These four- and five-year-olds are missing the time in their day where they get to just

play and interact with their peers inside a controlled environment and use their imagination.

Teachers who were exposed to teaching pre-k
- Noticed a decrease and lack of students social behavior
- Did not like long-run consequences of not having centers

Teachers who were not exposed to teaching pre-k
- Did not know what social behavior should be like at this age
- Did not know what it was like when they did have centers

o   In results to this diagram, teachers who were exposed to the important traits Centers

allowed their students to develop, saw just how much an affect not having them had.

Conclusion

I did not expect to get the results I did but I am so glad I did. I learned so much from the

interviews with teachers that I was not aware of. I went into the interviews thinking I was going

to get certain answers back and I got a whole different perspective. The things I learned were

important because people needed to be made aware of the change in our education system.

Parents are going to have to make the decision to pay to send their child to pre-k or to wait and

send them to kindergarten. They need to be made aware of the consequences if they choose to

send their child straight to kindergarten. Their child may never have the social skills and self-discovery that they could have if they had chosen to go to pre-k.

For only having a couple months to prepare for this research project, I would say it ended up better than I could have imagined. I did not think I was capable of conducting research, analyzing data, interviewing teachers, and designing a poster but Dr. Button had such high hopes in me that it gave me faith in myself and made me determined to finish and present my research results to the world. I believe I was able to educate several people over what heteronormativity is, how prevalent it is, how kindergarten has changed over the years, and the consequences of that change.

There were some things I wish I could have done differently throughout this research project. Even though I was given four months, I still wish I had more time. I wish I had known about the changes in kindergarten before I started my research because I would have gone a whole different route. I probably would have altered my questions to be more towards how the teachers felt about the changes in Kindergarten over the last couple years or I would have just interviewed pre-k teachers over heteronormativity instead of kindergarten teachers. I also would have added a couple different questions to my interviews such as asking the teachers which college they got their degree from and how they think that had an affect on how they set up and ran their classroom. Those seemed to have been the only problems I ran in to which caused weaknesses in my research.

Implications for Further Research

There are many opportunities to further the research and discoveries on this topic. If I was able to have more time on this project I would have found out just when state curriculum changed to not allowing centers in kindergarten classrooms anymore. Also, to find out why

centers are not in kindergarten classrooms anymore especially when pre-k is not a mandatory grade level. I would also like to find out the actual affects not having centers versus having centers has on students of this grade level.

Other areas that came to light would be the differences between students in Head Start versus students in Pre-K. Head Start is a pre-k program funded by the government to allow lower-income families, who would otherwise not be able to pay the tuition to send their child to pre-k, to send their children to pre-k. This separates lower-income households and upper-class households by putting them in separate classrooms. That, right there, is already showing the students that there is a difference between the two of them. I am also curious as to how the middle-class fits into this equation. I am sure there are some families who do not qualify for the government funded option, but they also do not make enough money to pay to send their children to pre-k themselves. Therefore, are they missing out the most?

I am intrigued by all the different option there are available to start delving deeper into this issue. Pre-K and kindergarten are two of the most important and influential years of a child's life. Without pre-k, children must be suffering in the long-run.

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Appendix A

Articles Supporting Body Image Dissatisfaction and Negative Self-Esteem is caused by Media

As stated in the paper, there were many articles supporting the linking factors of BID and negative self-esteem to the media. The media has caused people of all ages to suffer with accepting themselves. Below are several articles that support this correlation.

I learned that teens who were experiencing BID were "3.7 times more likely to report depressive symptoms" (Flores-Cornejo, Kamego-Tome, Zapata-Pachas, & Alvarado, 2017). Main sources for BID was coming from people viewing different men and women on social media and thinking lower of themselves based on what the media had to say was the "ideal" body type. One study stated that private school girls showed very high levels of BID (Uchoa, et al., 2017). This study discussed how teens are feeling pressured to achieve the media's standards of the "perfect body" and that "females are more affected than males, and private school adolescents are more influenced than those in public school" (Uchoa, et al., 2017). A study done in 2010 by Esnaola, Rodriguez, and Goñi was able to "identify the young female population as the most susceptible to body dissatisfaction problems and the most vulnerable to sociocultural pressure." In 2005, "136 U.K girls aged 11-16" were put through "experimental exposure to either ultra-thin or average-size magazine models lowered body satisfaction and, consequently, self-esteem" (Clay, Vignoles, & Dittmar, 2005). This study showed that self-esteem was lower in the older girls than in the younger girls and that this accounted for the "corresponding downward trend in body satisfaction" (Clay, Vignoles, & Dittmar, 2005).

I was also curious as to if society was more exposed to models that were considered "average-sized" then would that make BID decrease, and self-esteem increase. Haas, Pawlow, Pettibone, and Segrist did an experiment like this in 2012 where they wanted to see if "exposing

college students to some common myths about female images in the media may be part of the

solution to fostering a healthier body image." The results revealed significant positive changes in

the group's overall view on body esteem, attractiveness, and weight (Haas, Pawlow, Pettibone, &

Segrist, 2012). It was also noted that the same positive effects were taken place for both average

and overweight women (Haas, Pawlow, Pettibone, & Segrist, 2012).

      Of course, there are specific media images that make men and women very ashamed of

their lifestyles and health habits due to Body Shapers (Guðnadóttir & Garðarsdóttir, 2014). "In

both studies, the internalization of materialistic values is strongly linked to the internalization of

body-perfect ideals: the thin-ideal for young women, and the muscular-ideal for young men"

(Guðnadóttir & Garðarsdóttir, 2014). A different study focused primarily on men and how they

viewed themselves after watching specific music videos (Robl & Mulgrew, 2016). Results

include that "men in both the realistic and concentrated conditions had significantly poorer body

satisfaction, fitness satisfaction, and upper body satisfaction" (Robl & Mulgrew, 2016). In 2017,

Sonmez and Turanci aimed "to investigate the impact of media as a source of social comparison

and self-esteem on university students ' body-related decisions, such as doing physical exercise,

going on a diet or the desire to look like the people in the media, as far as body-related features

are concerned." The results showed that both genders first compare themselves to those they see

in the media and then try to look like them (Sonmez & Turanci, 2017). Males are more likely to

act upon getting rid of their BID than females by doing exercise and dieting (Sonmez & Turanci,

2017). Females tend to continue to have a negative outlook on everything and not go do anything

to change the way they feel. Another study took place in 2009 when Sohn wanted to examine

"the impacts of social comparison processes on men and women to investigate any potential

gender differences by utilizing survey research (N = 134)." Sohn looked at the different impacts

television and magazines had on males and females relating to BID. "Even though men were watching more hours of television per week, the female participants had higher levels of overall social comparison to television and magazines…. and female participants perceived their current body to be larger than did male participants" (Sohn, 2009).

Appendix B

Interview Questions

The interview questions are numbered with the probing questions italicized.

1. How long have you been teaching? *How long have you been teaching kindergarten?*

2. Do your students have assigned seating? *Such as boy, girl, boy, girl, alphabetically, or do they pick where they sat themselves?*

3. Do you see a gender preference among your students during play time? *Do boys play with boys and girls play with girls or do they seem to play equally among each other?*

4. Do you ever notice your students taking on different gender roles? *Such as boys acting like girls or girls acting like boys? Can you give an example? How did you go about handling that?*

5. Do you have, what you would consider, girl toys and boy toys in your classroom? *Such as a kitchen set or dolls for girls and action figures or cars for boys? Did they choose those toys, or did you direct them to those toys based on their gender?*

6. Have you ever noticed any boys wanting to play with those girl toys or girls play with the boy toys? *Can you give an example? How did you handle that?*

7. What college did you get your degree from? *How do you think that affected your choices in the way you set up your classroom or how you teach your students?*