Chapter 6
Shaping Gender Relations in Early Childhood Education: Children's Interactions and Learning About Gender

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Introduction

There are many theories about how one *gets* their gender and what this may mean for how people live their lives. Developmental texts typically present a range of psychological theories for sex differences, gender, or sex stereotyping and are replete with explanations for why children do the gendered things they do. In the West and until the late twentieth century and the rise of feminism, psychologists regarded the development of quite strictly governed gender roles and beliefs in children as a healthy expression of so-called normal gender development. With renewed interest in the study of genders however and an increased awareness that in fact, at the extremes of continua of so-called normal gender development, social expectations are not necessarily healthy and supportive of an individual's wellbeing, views on concepts of gender roles and gender development have begun to change. A diversity of explanations for why children do their gender the ways they do now sits alongside each other and give rise to people's different conceptions of gender and its development in early childhood.

In this chapter, I revisit several influential notions of gender development that have held sway in modern Western thinking around childhood and early childhood education (including in New Zealand). Then, I discuss data from a current study of children's storytelling to illustrate how within the collective co-production of a gender story at kindergarten, children's learning about gender can be understood, as Paechter (2003, 2007) argues, from a community of practice (CoP) perspective (Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger 2000). This view reveals the power of social interactions in learning in the early years and raises questions for how teachers may intervene in this. My analysis shows how children co-produce a narrative about

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gender and gender relations that draws upon entrenched cultural tropes that some children take up and others seem ambivalent to or refuse.

For me, the notion that gender is an outcome of reflexive relationships between complex cultural, physiological, and psychological processes, situated in a place and time, is a given. In engaging with the CoP view of gender as I do later in this chapter, I reify arguments that suggest gender is indeed performative, relational, and fluid. My analysis borrows from feminist poststructuralist thinking (Butler 1999; Davies 1989, 1994; Weedon 1987) and a community of practice theory of learning (Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger 2000). The CoP view is kin to cultural theories of human development (e.g. see Bronfenbrenner 1993; Rogoff 2003), which have held sway in policy and scholarly thinking about early childhood education in New Zealand since the mid-1970s. An aim of developing this chapter is to engage in new thinking about the impact of interactions as a basis for learning about gender in the early childhood education using CoP as a tool.

Traditional Gender Theories and Early Childhood Education

Up until the late twentieth century, it was common sense to hold quite fixed notions of the concepts of male and female.[1] Everyday thinking about gender became stereotypical in nature, supported by science – especially biology – and, for its coherence, fixed to a stable gender binary. Common sense conflated gender with sex and reduced the legitimate human expression of one's gendered self to a simple dualistic configuration of male/female, applicable to all and stable across the lifespan. Gender science abounded in the twentieth century. We were given explanations of how one came to be girl or boy, rooted in biological determinism and, later, social learning theory. The inevitability of the so-called normal gender development, sedimented in age-and-stage theories of human development, provided neat and predictable sequences of how *normal* boys and girls would be.

I am confronted with such thinking regularly in my current work within early childhood education. This is despite the late twentieth-century rise of feminism and the offering up of various different explanations for gender and gender development (e.g. feminist poststructuralist positions, queer theory views, and the CoP approach to gender). Stereotypical thinking about gender rests on a dualism or binary. It is infused with power of the kind feminist scholars and activists have long sought to expose and disrupt. From a stereotypical point of view, some kinds of gendered behaviours are thought to be representative of the masculine or feminine sex and are therefore considered normal and desirable. Variations are typically not desirable (nor considered

[1] In this discussion of genders, binaries, and stereotypes, I draw the reader's attention to the fact that there are many experiences and expressions of gender outside of these traditionally constituted categories of male/female. Nevertheless, this structure is what children are typically born into in NZ and other world countries, what adults work to reinforce, and what children rely upon to build a sense of gender in their early years, hence my uses of it in this chapter.

normal). Binary or dualistic thinking is fundamental to creating and maintaining meaning (Davies 1994), especially for young children who rely upon the very visible extremes of stereotypes to inform their conceptions of what it means to be *girl* or *boy*. Binaries also reflect and uphold asymmetrical power relationships in society more generally. In a binary formation, the first term represents a standard against which the second or subordinate term is measured or understood (Burr 1995). The second term is conceptualised as troubling because it represents a deviation from the norm (MacNaughton 2005). Hence, stereotypes are so difficult to exceed and disrupt. Gender stereotypical thinking is rooted in deep historical investments in the categorisation, description, production, and management of the gender binary. Adults have been found to vigorously apply stereotypes to children (Witt 1997) and children too impose them upon themselves and others (Chapman 2016), in doing so, assist the cultural production of gender along strict lines. The cultural value ascribed to certain expressions of male and female may come to govern what we do with the body as we strive to meet our own and others' expectations about how bodies of a certain type will act, dress, move, and be interpretable as one or other of the identifiable categories. As mentioned, children in their early childhood years draw upon the visible signs for what is taken to mark one as boy/girl and man/woman and as a cue for their own performances of their gendered selves: hair length, facial hair, and dress, for instance, are all markers that young children rely upon to understand themselves and others. However, accounts of gender as purely biologically or culturally produced in themselves go only part way to accounting for how one becomes gendered. A more likely account of the process inheres in the reflexive relationship between biology and culture and in how we, as interpretive beings, make sense of gender in our world. In thinking as such, it becomes possible to understand that one's gender is part of a lifelong process of critical examination of the self in relation to beliefs, society, and culture. Gender can change dramatically over time and with context and as one interacts with the world.

A theory of gender that can accommodate this more situated and reflexive view emerges from feminist poststructuralist (FPS) thinking. Regularly attributed to the work of Judith Butler, in a book with the short title *Gender Trouble* (1999), the FPS view rubs up against traditional accounts of gender to argue that gender isn't simply a biological part of who we are (although FPS doesn't discount the influence of genetics or hormones in the body, e.g. see Davies 1989) but that gender inheres more in what we do – in a performance of gender that over time may emerge to appear relatively stable and recognisable to others and ourselves. FPS works to uncouple biological sex and gender and to acknowledge that gender is in a constant state of flux – continually performed and constructed as people interpret themselves in the world in particular times and places. Therefore, there can be no one fixed gender identity to be learned; gender is constructed within a discursive framework, historically and materially reified through what people say and do. Gender, when thought of in this way, can be seen as an element of the social structure and part of the individual at the same time. The individual is evidenced in what FPS would refer to as the subject (see, for instance, Davies 2006), a *person* constituted in time and place within discourse. Within this, language becomes key to how we understand gender and ourselves relative to it. Importantly, and with gender in mind,

the means by which social structures are historically polarised and gendered have an impact on what it's possible to know, say, and do.

Paechter (2003, 2007) takes up some of these ideas as she explores the production of gender within localised communities of practice (CoP). A CoP, at its basic level, can be described as a community engaging in a shared practice (Wenger 2000), for example, groups of girls and boys at kindergarten negotiating over and performing what it means to them to be girl or boy *at kindergarten*. Novices to a CoP learn practices through what Lave and Wenger (1991) call 'legitimate peripheral participation' – whereby a newcomer to a community takes part in peripheral aspects of the practice of the community and is recognised to be doing so while gradually being inducted into more central and often more complex practices.

It is *practice* that brings the community together. The sense of community depends upon factors of mutual engagement, joint activity, and a shared repertoire of action. These factors bring the community together, reify it, and demonstrate to others that it exists. A CoP is thus a location in and through which individuals develop a sense of the self in relation to both other members of the community and to members of other communities. As Paetcher (2003) argues, the theory 'should help us to understand not only how different masculinities and femininities are performed in different social situations, but in relation to this, how communities of masculine and feminine practices are established, perpetuated, and changed' (p.71).

Children are novices to adult COPs but importantly, in a place like kindergarten, to localised child COPs as well – especially when they are first beginning to attend. Newcomer children to kindergarten observe their more experienced peers and teachers – figuring, for instance, how they should interact as a boy or girl in this place. I think that if teachers begin to recognise how children learn gender through their interactions with each other and with us, we can make decisions as teachers about whether the forms of masculinity or femininity being taught and learned with environments we are supposed to have a hand in designing, are defensible. In the following section, I turn to an examination of such processes in action. I return to the theory later to explain how children may be being observed, learning about and performing certain forms of gender in their daily kindergarten lives. The remainder of this chapter will focus on an event at kindergarten one Tuesday morning and illuminate how the interactions between people in localised communities of practice provide much opportunity for children to learn about gender and gender relations in that place and in relation to others.

The Research Project

The paper emerges from a study of children's narrative competence in the early years (Bateman et al. 2014; see also Chap. 4, this volume). The study follows a number of case-study children ($n = 12$) in two city locations in New Zealand (six in each city), as they participate in everyday teaching and learning events within their early childhood education and primary school settings. Our sites were purposively

selected based on factors of cultural variation (we sought early childhood education settings where the family and child population was diverse and contained a diversity of home language expertise, in particular Māori and Pacific languages), and where, in recognition of current government policy initiatives, the settings were located in lower decile areas[2] of the cities in which we were to work. The researchers also had prior working relationships with teachers in each of the early childhood education settings, and they, the teachers, were keen to collaborate with the research team on the project. An acknowledged outcome of the project is a proposed teacher professional learning and development resource about storytelling; this may have positively disposed the teachers towards working on the project as well.

Kindergarten teacher recruitment was secured in the process of negotiating access to the sites in which we worked and informed consent for participation was sought and granted. The teachers then recruited case-study children and families to the project on our behalf, using criteria of age (we wanted children who would be turning 5 years old between June 2014 and June 2015) and likely school choice. We aimed to recruit families who were likely to send their child to one or two local (to the kindergarten) schools. Once participants had been recruited, and after the project had begun and the children transitioned to school, we sought access to school sites. Thereafter we sought and gained informed consent from school-teacher participants as required. All non-case-study children and families who were in the kindergarten and classroom settings of the children who participated in our study were informed of the study and given the opportunity to have their children withdrawn from any data-gathering situations. Case-study children have been given the opportunity to assent and dissent to participation in any data gathering on every occasion. This has been by way of discussing the video recording with the researchers and having control over whether they will wear the microphone (for a fuller explanation of the means by which we have been striving to work ethically with children in the study, refer to Gunn 2015). In some instances where children have been happy to be videoed but did not want to wear the microphone, the teacher nearby will have worn or held the microphone themselves, so the interactions between children and others have still been recorded.

We are researching narrative by observing children's expertise as storytellers. We have used video observation and the analysis of video and conversations as the principle data sources. The project has thus far (up until December 2015) gathered data on five of six planned occasions (within the 3-year timeframe for the work). Up to 1 hour of 'free play' video (raw video footage) of each case-study child on each visit to their kindergarten or school setting has been collected. From the gathered raw video footage, episodes of storytelling have been identified; these sections of

[2] In New Zealand, the *decile* is a widely used measure of socioeconomic status. It is used by the NZ Ministry of Education (MoE) and other government departments to differentiate communities according to relative (financial) wealth. Decile's fall along a 10-point scale, with decile 1 representing the most impoverished and decile 10 the most wealthy. The data is derived from 6 yearly census data and rankings used by policymakers to differentiate funding and resource allocation.

video have been edited out of the raw video footage and constituted as data for analysis. We initially constituted story as a minimum of two clauses, joined by a temporal structure (Labov and Waletsky 1967/1997), and recognise that stories are produced in a place, relative to things and people therein. Bruner's description of story (2002, p. 34) has also been informative to our work, 'a story … requires an Agent who performs an Action to achieve a Goal in a recognisable Setting by the use of a certain Means' (formatting as per the original). Our analytic approach combines two forms of narrative analysis (sociologically informed, after Labov and Waletsky 1967/1997, and psychologically informed, after Reese et al. 2012), conversational analysis (after Goodwin 2015; Mandelbaum 2013; Sacks 1992) and an analysis of mediating tools to understand how children's storytelling is being supported by people, places, and things within early learning settings.

The story that this chapter discusses has been subject to a form of narrative analysis in order to both observe the story form and to show how children's narratives are bound to wider negotiated social worlds and roles. It is the second aspect of this analysis that is discussed in this chapter because this is what illustrates how interactions between peers can influence learning, in this case, learning about gender. What follows is an example of children co-producing together a story about 'counting boys and girls'. The analysis will focus on the interactions between children as they learn about culturally valued ways to be girl or boy at kindergarten.

Counting Boys and Girls

The story I represent here is not a typical narrative account by a single storyteller directed at a listener audience. The story's representation in this chapter is as a second-order story (Elliot 2005), told in the written form, descriptively, by myself as observer/researcher/writer. It is structured with a sequential beginning, middle, and end and is inclusive of temporal aspects, complicating actions, and resolution. The actual story, as it was lived by children and teachers one morning at the end of a busy kindergarten day, took quite a different form. For children, the story was collaborative and embodied, its beginning arising from a teacher's decision to respond to a comment from a child about there being many more girls than boys that day on the mat. It is unlikely the children went into the experience with storytelling in mind, and in fact, they may not have left the experience with such a notion either. Nevertheless, the experience was replete with storytelling features, and its narrative quickly recognised and embodied by those who were there.

This story is bound to children's wider social worlds of family life, community life, etc. It is also tied to children's local interpretation of what it means to be part of communities of femininity and masculinity at kindergarten. As a performed collaborative narrative, the logic and meaning of the story are sometimes shared and sometimes not by the participants. Rooted in cultural tropes about gender relations, 'counting boys and girls' simultaneously teaches and represents children's local knowledge about gender and gender relations to those involved and observing from the periphery.

Eight boys stand shoulder to shoulder at the front of the mat. Their teachers, myself, and their girl peers sit on the mat opposite looking on as one girl Lucy, who has been invited to come and count her peers, reaches to touch the shoulder of the boy at the start of the line. 'Starting there Lucy' says the teacher. Lucy begins. 'One, two, three…'. As Lucy touches boy number one on the right shoulder he stands straight and square to her and watches as she walks by. Lucy moves on to boy number two and repeats her action. He makes eye contact with Lucy, smiles at her, rocks his head from right to left, and shrugs his left shoulder as she passes. Boy number three steps back on his right foot as Lucy goes to touch him on the shoulder. When she makes contact he speaks an audible 'argh' and shrugs both of his shoulders in an exaggerated upward movement. Boy four makes the same sound and shrug, accompanied by boy three, who watching on, repeats the same. As Lucy continues down the line the other boys shrug and utter similarly, as boys further back along the line, as far as number three, chorus the same 'argh', exaggeratedly and rhythmically, together. Boys one and two watch. Boy number eight who has been observing the approach of Lucy, allows himself to be touched on the shoulder and counted. There is no visible bodily response (other than to watch her), nor any repetition of his peers 'argh'. Lucy turns to the right and quickly sits back on the mat with her girl peers who, along with their teachers and me, have been watching on.

The boys and girls are invited by a teacher to change places. Eighteen girls stand shoulder to shoulder at the front of the mat. Artie is invited to come and count. Artie touches the first girl on the right shoulder as the counting begins. Along with most everyone else on the mat, Artie says, 'One…' the girl makes no visible response other than to watch Artie pass by. 'Two…' the second girl giggles as Artie reaches for her right shoulder. The girl next in line watches, and as Artie's arm stretches out towards her, 'three…' she smiles and shrugs her shoulders slightly upwards. Girls four and five have been observing Artie's approach. They make no visible or audible response to Artie as he passes by touching their shoulders and, in turn, counting. Girl number six on the other hand squeals, giggles, smiles broadly, and gives a large shoulder shrug; actions the next six girls along the line repeat to varying degrees. Lucy is next. She accepts

46. Artie's shoulder touch and watches him pass by counting.
47. Girl number 14 squeals loudly, shrugs, steps back, and
48. giggles as Artie reaches for her; it takes a while for her
49. composure to be restored. The end of the line is
50. eventually reached with the remaining four girls to varying
51. degrees, smiling, giggling, moving and shrugging in
52. response to Artie's approach, touch, and the act of
53. counting the girls.

Analysis

The storytellers (each collective girl/boy subject who is interacting from within localised CoPs of boys and girls at kindergarten) are teaching the audience, the other girl/boy CoPs, their teachers, and myself, about gender relations at kindergarten. In doing so, each CoP both reifies and distinguishes itself – reflecting tropes about gender relations rooted in historical cultural practice: boys and girls don't easily mix; when they do, it is with reluctance and encumbered by rules of interaction that govern what it is possible to say and do. The analysis that follows demonstrates how this occurred.

Nothing remarkable, in the interaction between Lucy and boy no.1, happens (l.7–9), but that interaction is noticeably different to those that follow, and so in hindsight, boy no.1's response stands apart from the dominant practice within the boys' CoP. Boy no.2 moves his body in response to Lucy's touch (l.10–12). The next person in line repeats an augmented version of the movement, accompanied by a step backwards – in retreat – and with an audible exclamation (l.13–16). The following boys have understood the requisite performance, and each does his own version of the same, enthusiastically encouraged by almost all of those back along the line (not boys 1 and 2), who chorus rhythmically and with increasing volume and vigour, counting, in time with Lucy's approach (l.19–21), until boy no.8.

Despite having observed the movements, sounds, and patterning of his peers, this boy breaks momentum and, like boy no.1 at the beginning, does little in response to Lucy's touch (l.24–28). He is clearly not central to the current instantiations of localised practice within the boy's CoP and the form of accepted masculine response to a girl's approach being performed therein – not that it seems to bother anybody. Boy no.8 is neither mutually engaged nor participating in the joint enterprise. He, as was the first boy in line, seems peripheral to this localised expression of masculine and feminine relations. His refusal to take up the loud, rambunctious, and demonstrative subject position on offer resists the practice. It is not possible to say definitively why his response was such, but the CoP view allows us to theorise that he may have been acting as a novice to the CoP and therefore not fully immersed in its practice but, alternatively, that he contested the practice that he and we (the audience) observed, and that he was in fact acting to expand the repertoire of practices available to the CoP.

By the time Artie is invited to come and count his girl peers, there is a well-established collective narrative about how boys and girls in the story relate and

about how these localised CoPs performances of gender will be. Despite this, girl no.1 makes no move to repeat the central action of retreat, shoulder shrug, and utterance (l.34–35) and neither does girl no.2, although she does have a bodily response to Artie's approach, she giggles (l.36). Rather than exclaiming loudly an 'argh', her giggle is altogether much more demure. Girl no.3 repeats an action from the earlier boys' repertoire, a shoulder shrug (l.38–39); her next two peers do not share the same. Then comes a period of clear mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and common action as girls 6–12 perform a stylised sequence of actions involving stepping backwards away from Artie, smiling, having fleeting eye contact with him, giggling, squealing, and shoulder shrugging (l.43–45). Lucy does not repeat this (l.46). Perhaps she, as recipient of the boys' version of the same interaction, is not prepared to sustain the practice when it comes to her. Again the CoP theory allows us to consider Lucy as a CoP participant who may be working to expand the community's practice or who is on the periphery to it. However, the rest of the girls after Lucy come back into line and repeat the collective endeavour (l.46–53) of how to relate as girls to the boys in this story of 'counting'. In doing so, they are reifying the gender practice to themselves and us the audience. They are also demarcating their localised CoP and its difference to the boys' COP at the same time.

Discussion

Paetcher (2003) argues that learning to be 'male or female within a social configuration results in shared practices in pursuit of the common goal of sustaining particular localised masculine and feminine identities' (p. 71). We have observed this in the collective enterprise of 'counting boys and girls' as children, through the co-production of a narrative which was observed by onlooker teachers and myself, worked to make visible an accepted pattern of interactions (to themselves and each other) between localised girl and boy CoPs at kindergarten. The collective action of the majority of the children demonstrated these CoPs understandings of acceptable performances of girl and boy and relations between the two (the girls retreated, giggled, shrugged their shoulders in response to Artie's advance and the boys shouted 'argh', retreated, and shoulder shrugged away Lucy's touch). For Wenger, CoPs engage in practices that emerge from shared histories of learning which provide for the constant fine-tuning and representation of recognisable forms of competence – 'knowing… is a matter of displaying competences defined in social communities' (2000, p. 226) – practice is key. The majority of children in 'counting boys and girls' know a way to *be* boy or girl at kindergarten, but neither the localised CoPs nor the identities formed within them have occurred in isolation. The emphasised coyness of the girls accompanied by the bullishness of the boys may reflect local instantiations of a particular phenomenon, but practices are always related to more generalised phenomena. The pattern observed in 'counting boys and girls' reflects a configuration of gender relations that stretches to extreme opposite ends of a continuum of interaction possibilities – reflecting traditional oppositional and stereotypical configurations of gender which themselves may be found in

collective practices of the wider CoPs of which these children are part (families, communities, historical scientific notions of gender, etc.). Neither the children's teachers nor me intervened in 'counting boys and girls' to disrupt the interaction – we understood it and were therefore complicit in the reification of the performances of gender relations we observed.

However, some of the children, boys no.1, 2, and 8 and girls no.1, 4, and 5 with Lucy, had different responses to the approach of their opposite gender peers. Their actions can be explained within a CoP view as either them, the children being onlookers to the CoP of which they are not yet a central part, or acting as dissidents to the collective practice – persons with other knowledge about how girls and boys might relate. A perfect talking point for teachers and children at the conclusion of the story event that morning would have been to have discussed with the children the stories about gender that had been told that day and observed. Such a timely intervention by the adults' who were audience to the story (and gender practice embedded within it) may have worked to expand the repertoire of acceptable practices within these localised CoPs.

Children remember the manner in which they have been constituted and also how they constitute themselves as subjects of a particular kind. This is particularly so when performances of gender have been so dramatically embodied and reified in story as they were in 'counting boys and girls'. By *doing*, we stitch together memory, action, affect, and sense. For a moment, actions provide us with an illusion of a stable, coherent gendered self to be learned and performed. Practice is key. Teachers who carefully observe and analyse children's interactions in localised CoPs, as in the example shared here, can intervene to add their own expertise and different knowledge about how the world works. In doing so, they may expand everybody's learning in the process – participants and onlookers alike. Timely and sensitive questioning, pointing out when not everybody shares the same view or understanding, and bringing to the discussion alternative points of view, these are all ways teachers can help shape interactions for learning about gender in the early years.

Conclusion

The storytelling research is ongoing. This paper emerges out of the analysis of co-produced story, amongst a group of 4-year-old girls and boys, and about gender relations which were provoked by a deliberate teaching act. While the children's learning about gender comprises an important element of the work, the chapter aims to help teachers understand the many means by which children learn about and perform their gender in the early years. Studying peer interactions provides new insights for teachers into how the children they work with understand this important element of one's personhood – their gender. It provides a means by which teachers can consider how their provision of quality learning environments supports children to learn particular things.

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