

EXAMINATION OF YOUNG CHILDREN'S GENDER-DOING AND GENDER-BENDING IN THEIR PLAY DYNAMICS: A CROSS-CULTURAL EXPLORATION

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SUMMARY

The purpose of the study was to explore how young children express their perception of gender dynamics (e.g., gender-bending and gender-doing) in their play. A total of 84 children (52 boys and 32 girls) and 4 teachers from the U.S. and South Korea participated in the study. To capture perspectives from the children, qualitative data were collected from semi-structured interviews, classroom discussion, and children's free drawings. Data were descriptively analysed to find patterns of the children's perception. The findings indicated young children from both cultures were aware of the gender differences in their play that reflected gender-doing. The children also perceived that they could bend a little to act like members of the other gender (gender-bending) as their interests emerged within a play context; however, S. Korea kindergarten children, particularly boys, clearly exhibited discomfort when playing with members of the opposite gender or gender-bending in their play dynamics.

RÉSUMÉ

Le but de cette étude était d'explorer la façon dont les jeunes enfants expriment leurs perceptions de la dynamique sexuelle (par exemple, travestissement ou appartenance sexuelle) au cours de leurs jeux. Au total, 84 jeunes enfants (52 garçons et 32 filles) et 4 enseignants des Etats Unis et de la Corée du Sud ont participé à cette étude. Les données qualitatives ont été collectées sur les points de vue des enfants à partir d'interviews semi-structurés, des discussions de classes et des dessins libres réalisés par les enfants. L'analyse descriptive des données a permis de trouver les modèles de perception des enfants. Les résultats ont indiqué que les jeunes enfants provenant des deux cultures étaient conscients des différences sexuelles au cours de leurs jeux; ce qui prouvait leur appartenance sexuelle. Les enfants se sont aperçus aussi qu'ils pourraient se travestir pour agir comme les membres de l'autre sexe (travestissement) si leurs intérêts étaient menacés lors d'un jeu ; cependant, les enfants Sud-Coréens de la maternelle, particulièrement les garçons, ont clairement affiché leur gêne au cours des jeux avec des membres du sexe opposé.

RESUMEN

El propósito de este estudio fue investigar como los niños expresan su percepción en relación a la dinámica entre sexos mientras juegan (e.g. deferir y ser). En este estudio participaron un total de 84 niños (52 niños y 32 niñas) y 4 maestras de los Estados Unidos y Corea del Sur. Para recopilar data cualitativa y la información relacionada con las perspectivas de los niños, se llevaron a cabo entrevistas semi estructuradas, discusiones en los salones de clases y se recopilaron dibujos completados libremente por los niños. La data fue analizada descriptivamente para determinar los patrones en las percepciones de los niños. Los resultados indicaron que los niños de ambas culturas sabían de las diferencias entre los sexos en aquellos juegos que reflejaban

“ser”gender doing. Los niños también percibieron que podían deferir (gender-bending) un poco para poder actuar como miembros del otro sexo según fuera necesario para participar en el juego. Es importante indicar que los niños del Corea del Sur, especialmente los varones, claramente exhibieron incomodidad cuando jugaban con miembros del sexo opuesto o tenían que deferir durante el juego.

KEYWORDS: Gender-doing, Gender-bending, Child play, Cross-cultural comparison

BACKGROUND

Gender (as opposed to sex) is a social construct always at work (Butler, 1990; Yelland, 1998). For example, in the U.S. a particular colour signifies a child's gender at birth: a baby girl may receive a pink stuffed animal tied with a pink ribbon, whereas a baby boy may receive a blue one wearing a blue necktie. In S. Korea family members decorate the entrance of their home with a garland of red peppers for the birth of a boy and a coal-black sash for the birth of a girl. In both cultures, adults typically buy toy cars and trucks for boys, so boys play with such toys; adults buy dolls for girls, so they play with them. S. Korea parents and Korean American parents are stricter than most U.S. American parents in teaching different social roles to boys and girls, and that usually reflected through children's interaction among themselves (Min, 1988). These societal uses of gender as functional category increase gender stereotyping as cultural actions (Bem, 1983, 1981; Fagot & Leinbach, 1993, 1989). Gender is, therefore, understood as cultural performance: Gender is doing.

According to Bigler's study (1995), the functional use of gender leads to the stereotypical gender-doing, particularly among those children with less advanced classification skills (e.g., categorization, grouping). A group of researchers (e.g., Fagot & Leinbach, 1993, 1989) studying gender-role cognition in three-year-old boys and girls determined that because of the substantial differences in the ways male and female roles are portrayed in human cultures, boys and girls may think and learn about socially expected gender roles differently. In gender-doing, the male role was more clearly defined, more highly valued, and more prominent than the female role; thus, children's social cognition of gender-doing in these two roles may predictably differ. Researchers also found that, at age 3, boys were less able to label gender and less knowledgeable about gender roles than girls (Fagot & Leinbach, 1993). Boys knew more about male stereotypes than female stereotypes, whereas girls knew considerably more than boys about the female role and as much as boys about the male role (O'Brien et al., 2000). Boyatzis and Eades (1999), examining gender differences in preschoolers' and kindergartners' artistic production and preference, reported that boys and girls drew gender-stereotypical pictures. Boys' choice of a “typical masculine” (e.g., choosing a hunting theme or a construction tractor colouring-book) and girls' choice of a “typical feminine” (e.g., choosing a house play theme or a flower gardening colouring-book) colouring-book sheets serve as examples of gender-doing. Boys' typical

masculine play behaviour means stereotypical male-like physical actions and presenting high frequency of large scale movements. Girls' typical feminine play means stereotypical female-like behaviours representing a home setting (e.g., Connell, 1995). Ignico's (1990) study reported young children's activity preference that was influenced by stereotypical gender-roles, which indicated various play favourites that reflected on gender-doing.

Within gender-doing gender-bending also occurs. In addition to "getting gender right," young children engage in gender-bending when they move between and adopt different gender positions to gain strategic advantages or further their interests. Boldt (1997), Davies (1989), and Yelland (1998) explained how across cultures young children use different gender positions when adults are present or absent and how position may change in the presence of peers. Presence of adults and peers tends to hinder children's gender-bending because culturally shaped gender-doing may overpower gender-bending.

Previous research related to young children's gender characteristics, however, did not capture the play dynamics of young children's both gender-doing and gender-bending from teachers' perspective. For example, Hyun and Tyler's study (2000) on preschool teachers' perception on gender differences in young children's play was only based on the notion of gender-doing. In addition, previous researchers neither explored the notion of gender-doing or gender-bending from children's viewpoint nor made cross cultural comparisons.

From the perspective of gender as a social construct of doing, the current research involved exploring how young children from two different cultures perceived gender-based behaviours in the classroom play contexts. The notions of gender-doing and gender-bending formed the conceptual framework with which to interpret the children's gender-based perceptions expressed through their group discussions and free drawings. The research findings were also triangulated with the classroom teachers' perception on children's play that is gender related.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study explored the following research questions:

How do young children from two different cultures express gender-based characteristics in their play? (Gender-doing)

What kinds of cross-cultural gender-bending characteristics appear in their expression? (Gender-bending)

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

CONTEXTS

In order to capture young children's authentic expressions through their habitual school experiences, the classroom teachers interacted with the children to collect

the data during their regular curriculum activities. Local preschool, pre-K, and kindergarten teachers, who had known the researchers during the previous 4-5 years, were individually contacted (site visit, e-mail, or phone call) and invited to participate in the study. Four female teachers volunteered. The participating classrooms included the following:

- Two pre-K classrooms for children aged 4 and 5: one in Seoul, S. Korea, with 23 preschoolers (12 boys and 11 girls) and one in Florida, U.S., with 16 preschoolers (8 boys and 8 girls).
- One preschool classroom in S. Korea for children aged 3 and 4 (15 boys and 4 girls).
- One kindergarten in S. Korea for children aged 5 and 6 (17 boys and 9 girls).

A total of 52 boys and 32 girls participated in the study. (Note: The volunteered S. Korean classrooms for this study had more boys than girls in their classrooms. In current days, there are more boys and than girls in most S. Korea early childhood classroom settings. A complex cultural practices and values have influenced in this demographic matter which is not part of this study focus).

The use of projects as the main curricular practice and the presence of play centres were features shared by the four classrooms in this study. Gender-stereotypical block and housekeeping areas were located side by side with a divider, precluding the sharing of the space for children's play, suggesting that the setup of the classroom itself may have limited gender-mixed play.

LIMITATIONS

Because of the limited number of classrooms participating in the study, the researchers were only able to explore a cross-cultural comparison of the two countries' pre-K classrooms. The comparison of S. Korean children aged 3 to 6 drew only upon those with middle to high socio-economic status therefore, the study was limited in its presentation of diverse children's perceptions of gender-based play characteristics.

DATA COLLECTION

To maintain consistency in data collection from each classroom, the participating teachers used an interview-oriented activity based on the interview questions suggested by the researchers during their daily group discussion. Each teacher facilitated group discussion by asking the children how boys and girls play similarly and differently in their preschool/pre-K /kindergarten, why they did or did not play together, how they played together, and how they could play together. The classroom teacher or assistant and the researchers documented the discussion. Followed by the children engaged individually in a free drawing activity to express how they played with other children and to indicate the children with whom they most frequently interacted. As they worked on their

free drawing, the classroom teachers conducted a casual interview asking about what they were drawing. In the corner of each child's drawing, the teachers wrote a brief description of the child's comments about the drawing. Lastly, the teachers documented their interpretation of the discussion and drawings. The main data comprised a) written documentation of the discussion in their classroom settings, b) children's free drawings, and c) teachers' written interpretation of the discussion and drawings.

Data were collected during the second semester of the children's school year to capture their socially established perceptions of play within school contexts. Observations of the children's free play were made in each classroom and on their playground; however, the observation data were collected neither in a fully contextualised format nor in the equal segments of time needed for systematic data collection. Thus, the observation data of the children's free play were not used as a primary data resource for analysis; instead they were used as a reference in the process of data triangulation.

DATA ANALYSIS

The qualitative data were analysed by using open, inductive, axial, selective coding systems (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) and data reduction (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The data analysis focused on emerging patterns and categorizing the children's expressions in light of the research questions. Open coding entailed the process of breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualising, and categorizing data. We used this coding system as the initial procedure in studying the data to capture emerging patterns from the children's expressions. Axial coding involved a set of procedures whereby data were rearranged based on the emerging patterns from the open coding in light of the research questions to determine the children's perceptual world of gender-based play. Selective coding occurred in the process of selecting the core categories, systematically relating them to other categories, triangulating and validating those relations, and filling in categories needing further development for emerging themes and grounded theory building. Based on the selective coding analysis, the paper presents research findings.

Descriptively quantified data analysis (e.g., frequency of incident) was also used in the process of data triangulation to support validity of the patterns of children's expressions. The frequencies of children's expressions presented in the findings (see numbers in parentheses on the tables) do not match with the number of boys and girls participating because some of the children expressed themselves more than one time during the discussion. During the group discussion each child's voice was coded only for gender identity, not individual identification; therefore, the data did not convey any individual child's play characteristics, but instead presented overall group characteristics.

FINDINGS

FINDING 1. CHILDREN'S PERCEPTION REFLECTING ON GENDER-DOING

Pre-K children from both countries indicated that boys and girls play differently (67% of U.S. children and 80% of S. Korean children). Their perception of gender differences in their play exhibited a clear reflection of gender-doing:

U.S. pre-K children:

Girls like Barbies. Boys like Batman.

S. Korean pre-K children:

Boys play fight and block play, and girls play housekeeping and mommy.

All pre-K children in this research perceived that boys were more physically active than girls: "Boys are builders, and they like to play with blocks to build things." In S. Korean boys' expressions, the pre-K boys also indicated how girls' physical appearance (e.g., their long hair) and voices were different from those of boys. In contrast, the U.S. pre-K children focused more on differences in their social behaviour: "Boys are goofier than girls; girls are bossy" (see Table 1).

Table 1. How do they play differently? Why do they play differently?

U.S. Pre-K Children (16 children: 8B, 8G) Total number of responses: 22		S. Korea Pre-K Children (23 children: 12B, 11G) Total number of responses: 14	
Boys' Responses (8)	Girls' Responses (14)	Boys' Responses (14)	Girls' Responses (0)
Boys are faster than girls; the girls can't catch us. (3)	Boys run faster, girls run slower. (4)	Boys can play with girls and play differently. (1)	NONE
Boys want to be the taggers. (1)	Boys are taggers: he is trying to tag me, and I am trying to get away. (2)	Girls like role-playing and art. (2)	
Girls are bossy: Girls tell us what to do; girls yell at boys. (2)	Boys are rougher with dolls. They take the clothes off and pull their heads off. (1)	Boys like computers, manipulatives, language arts, and block play. (2)	
Boys build towers, and girls build animals and houses. (1)	Boys act silly: When we play in house boys will put bowls on their head and act silly; boys are goofier than girls; boys like to trick you. They sneak up on you; boys like scarier things. (6)	Girls do not fight each other, but boys do. (2)	
Some girls, not all of them, don't follow the rules. (1)	Girls don't like certain things like Batman, Army men, and Spider Man. (1)	Boys take toys away from one another, and rebuild them as their own. (2)	
		Girls have long hair, and their voices are different from boys. (2)	
		Boys and girls do not like each other; but if they like each other, they can play together. (1)	

As presented in Table 1, children of both genders could explain how the opposite gender played differently from their own gender, except for girls in S

Korea. Similar to O'Brien et al. (2000) and Fagot and Leinbach's (1993) reports, the U.S. pre-K girls were more descriptive and more verbally expressive than the U.S. pre-K boys in their responses regarding how and why they play differently. By contrast none of S. Korean pre-K girls responded to why and how boys and girls play differently. S. Korean pre-K boys were more like the U.S. pre-K girls in a way that they were descriptive and verbally active in their expressions about gender differences. Thus, the previous studies (O'Brien et al., 2000; Fagot & Leinbach, 1993) do not support S. Korean preschoolers' gender characteristics.

The U.S. pre-K girls more verbally expressive than boys, especially when responding to question 3 (How/why do they play differently?) (see Table 2). Girls articulated more about play preferences of the two genders and expressed more about how boys and girls play differently. In contrast, S. Korean pre-K boys could identify more about the different play topics of two genders than girls did.

Table 2. Frequencies of Boys' and Girls' Responses

Question #	U.S. Pre-K children (16 children: 8B, 8G)		S. Korea Pre-K children (23 children: 12B, 11G)	
	Frequency of Boys' expressions	Frequency of Girls' expressions	Frequency of Boys' expressions	Frequency of Girls' expressions
Question 1	5	7	6	4
Question 2	12	10	9	1
Question 3	8	14	14	0
Question 4	7	9	14	11
Total frequencies	32	40	43	16

Question 1: Do boys and girls play same?

Question 2: How do they play same or together? Why do they play together?

Question 3: How do they play differently? Why do they play differently?

Question 4: What is your favourite play when you play with your friends in your classroom?
Why is that particular play your favourite?

Note: the frequencies of children's expressions do not match with the number of boys and girls because some children expressed more than one time.

S. Korean pre-K boys' voices dominated in responding to the questions. None of S. Korean girls responded to the question 3. Instead, they responded to question 4 with high frequency. Among the questions, only the question 4 was gender non-specific. It seemed that in the context of large-group discussion, boys might be more socially powerful than girls among S. Korean pre-K children, especially if the topic or question was gender-specific. Another interpretation might be, as Min (1988) indicated, Korean culture is stricter than the most U.S. culture in teaching different gender-related roles to boys and girls, and across cultures male role tends to be more clearly defined than female role (Yelland, 1998); thus, these kinds of gender-doing might be the reason that S. Korean children were more aware of gender specific and stereotype characteristics than girls.

FINDING 2. GENDER-DOING AND GENDER-BENDING IN CHILDREN'S PLAY

Similar to Ignico's (1990) study, the U.S. pre-K boys and girls stated various play favourites that reflected gender-doing:

U.S. pre-K boys:	I like blocks; I like to build and work. Block play because I can make things like cars... and big or funny objects and figures.
U.S. pre-K girls:	Colouring because I like to talk with my friends when I am colouring. Housekeeping because I always get to be the mom. My friend D (a boy) lets me; I love to be the mom.

Boys' typical masculine (i.e., physically more active and presenting high frequency of large scale movements) and girls' typical feminine (i.e., stereotypical female-like images representing a home setting) gender typed characteristics were clearly reflected in the children's perception of their play.

In S. Korean pre-K children's expressions, a sense of "playful gender-bending" conveyed their awareness of their own gender; at the same time they could move in and out of two different gender-typed play behaviours based on their interests (see Table 3):

S. Korean pre-K boy:	Yes, I am a boy, . . . but my favourite activity is role-playing because I can raise a baby; I can play dad; I can play with baby [dolls] like girls. I mean like mom."
S. Korean pre-K girl:	I am a girl My favourite play is block play; I can make things that are interesting; I can build cars; I can build robots...like boys [do]."

This is a good example of how young children could engage in a gender-bending in their processing gendering.

Table 3. What is your favourite kind of play when you play with your friends in your classroom? Why is that particular play your favourite?

U.S. Pre-K children (16 children: 8B, 8G) Total number of responses: 16		S. Korea Pre-K children (23 children: 12B, 11G) Total number of responses: 25	
Boys' Responses (7)	Girls' Responses (9)	Boys' Responses (14)	Girls' Responses (11)
<p>Lego/block building: They [Legos] are so cool. You can make anything you want. Blocks—I like to build and work. (3)</p> <p>Body/kinesthetic play with games: Play on the playground. I play tag with my friends. Cowboys and Robbers [a chase game they made up]... I like cowboys. I like stealing the money. Champion racers [a running/tag game they made up]. I like to race. Dinosaurs. It's my favourite game in the whole world. (4)</p>	<p>Colouring/drawing because I like to talk with my friends when I am colouring. Colouring with my friends. (2)</p> <p>Role-play: Housekeeping because I always get to be the mom. My friend D lets me; Kitchen—I love to be the mom. (2)</p> <p>Body/kinesthetic play with games: Champion Racers. I like to race. Monkey bars—I like climbing. (2)</p> <p>Science/animal: I get to play with my friends in science. Animals. They are so interesting; Cowgirls and horses—I can take care of them. (3)</p>	<p>Block play because I can make things like cars and big or funny objects and figures. (7)</p> <p>Role-play because I can raise a baby; I can play dad; I can play with baby [dolls]. (3)</p> <p>Computer (2)</p> <p>Toys (2)</p>	<p>Block play: I can make things that are interesting; I can build cars; I can build robots. (2)</p> <p>Role-play: I can play mom. I can play with a baby. (5)</p> <p>Computer (3)</p> <p>Drawing: (1)</p>

FINDING 3. PLAY DIFFERENTLY BUT COULD PLAY TOGETHER

Even though most pre-K children from the two countries perceived that boys and girls play differently, they could play together:

U.S. pre-K children:

When on the playground, we run or chase, and that's how we play the same. . . . We play same games. . . .”

S. Korea Pre-K children:

Because they are close friends and good friends. . .
Because they feel bored they play together. .
Because they both like to play with blocks and computers....role play.”

In this study, the U.S. pre-K children seemed to perceive that both boys and girls enjoyed sports or games (e.g., running and chasing, soccer and baseball), causing them to connect socially and play (or could play) together. In contrast, S. Korean pre-K boys seemed to perceive that they were close, good friends because they liked to play with the same kinds of materials; thus, they played (or could play) together (see Table 4). The U.S. children seemed to hold a play from/type-based reasoning. On the other hand, S. Korean children seemed to be

based on an interpersonal reasoning. According to Stewart and Bennett (1991) and Hyun (1998), there are cross cultural differences in people's reasoning that reflects cultural orientation: U.S. culture is more orientated to objects, facts, and is individual based; Korean culture is more group oriented and relationship based. Considering these particular cross cultural differences, further study is needed in young children's gender related relationship building in their play context.

Table 4. How do they play same or together? Why do they play together?

U.S. Pre-K Children (16 children: 8B, 8G) Total number of responses: 22		S. Korea Pre-K Children (23 children: 12B, 11G) Total number of responses: 10	
Boys' Responses (12)	Girls' Responses (10)	Boys' Responses (9)	Girls' Responses (1)
When on the playground we run or chase, and that's how we play the same. (2)	We play the same when we run around (2).	Because they are close friends and good friends. (4)	Because they like to role-play. (1)
[We play together because] we play the same games: Doggie Power Rangers, Champion Racers (5); or sports (soccer, baseball) (4).	We both run and we don't hurt each other. (1)	Because they feel bored, they play together. (1)	
Boys and girls both like to play a lot (1).	We both follow the rules. (1)	Because they both like to play with blocks (2) and computer (2).	
	We love toys. (2)		
	[We play together because] we play the same games: Chugga-choo-choo, Simon says, Champion racers. (4)		

FINDING 4. PLAY PARTNER PREFERENCE

In this study, S. Korean young children in preschool, pre-K, and kindergarten exhibited unique patterns of play partner preference (see Table 5).

Table 5. S. Korean Children's Play Partner Preference

	Preschool		Pre-Kindergarten		Kindergarten	
	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys
Same gender (only)	1(25%)	2(13%)	4(36%)	2(17%)	5(56%)	13(76%)
Opposite gender (only)	3(50%)	7(47%)	5(46%)	6(50%)	1(11%)	3(18%)
Both genders (together)	1(25%)	6(40%)	1(9%)	1(8%)	2(22%)	0
Play alone	0	0	1(9%)	3(25%)	1(11%)	1(6%)
Total # of each cell	5	15	11	12	9	17
Total # of group	20		23		26	

Younger children tended to be more interested in playing with children of the opposite gender than with others of the same gender. In contrast, S. Korean kindergarten children preferred playing with children of the same gender.

Gender-segregated play-partner preference was more prevalent among kindergarten children than preschool or pre-K age children. Boys in kindergartens showed stronger gender-segregated play-partner preference compared to kindergarten girls. This gender-segregated play-partner preference may reflect the culture with its strong emphasis on gender-stereotyped social expectations; thus cultural aspects of gender-doing influences the children's play-partner preference.

Some of S. Korean preschool boys (four out of fifteen, about 25%) and a few pre-K boys and girls clearly identified with their own gender. At the same time, they exhibited their gender-bending characteristics within their mixed-gender play:

S. Korean preschool boy: I am a boy, but I can play housekeeping with girls. We play with dolls. I can take care of babies like my mom.

Some of S. Korean kindergarten boys (seven out of seventeen, about 41%); however, revealed a negative perception about playing with opposite gender. Gender-bending among them may less likely occur. Some of S. Korean kindergarten boys expressions were somewhat troubling:

S. Korean kindergarten boy A & D: If I play with girls, I regret it later.

S. Korean kindergarten boy B & C: If I play with girls, I feel shame. I don't know why."

S. Korean pre-K girls seemed to perceive that playing with boys could be a substitute or an addition to playing with girls, but it was still acceptable:

S. Korean pre-K girls: Because I feel bored, I play with them [boys].
Since I have many girlfriends, I like to play with boys.

Like boys in kindergartens, S. Korean girls in kindergartens also revealed an uncomfortable feeling about playing with opposite gender: "I feel strange if I play with boys."

Playing with the opposite gender seemed to be a socially difficult task for kindergarten boys in their play dynamics and negatively affected their social-image. Perception oriented toward gender-doing seemed to be prevalent in their play. For example, the kindergarten boys were more articulate in discriminating differences between boys' and girls' play characteristics:

S. Korean kindergarten boys: We [boys] like to play with blocks and manipulatives and everything. But girls like only one area/thing.
Because girls only play arts; I don't like to do arts, so I don't play with them.

S. Korean kindergarten girls: It's not fun to play with boys because they fight.

Most S. Korean preschool and pre-K boys in the study stated that they played with those of the same gender because “boys like to do same thing, so we play together (play-bound).” In contrast, most S. Korean girls’ played with those of the same gender “because I am a girl, I play with girls and it is fun” (gender-bound). These S. Korean boys’ and girls’ statements exemplify gender-doing within the social and cultural context: in Korean culture, same-gender play is strongly emphasized. Within in the gender-doing, the boys’ perception seemed to be play-bound with same-gender play. The girls’ reasoning seemed to be gender-bound rather than play-bound.

FINDING 5. TEACHERS’ PERCEPTION

The U.S. and S. Korean pre-K teachers noted gender-based characteristics in young children’s play dynamics. First, both teachers quoted below indicated that if children played with those of the same gender, their play engagement seemed to frequently reflect gender-doing and be of longer duration than their mixed-gender play:

Boys tend to stick to a play activity or ‘theme’ for longer periods of time with a typical theme of boys’ play; girls will change their play themes more often, but they still exhibit “typical” girls’ play. (U.S. pre-K teacher)

Same-gender play seems more frequently observed than mixed-gender play. If boys and girls play together, their playtime seems shorter than same-gender play. (S. Korea pre-K teacher)

These two teachers’ claims were also supported by the researchers’ field observation notes: In most cases boys’ playful gender-bending of girls’ or typically perceived as “feminine-like” play (e.g., holding and feeding baby doll as a mom in role play) were shorter in terms of the length of the play or less frequently occurring than girls’ gender-bending of boys’ or typically perceived as “masculine-like” play (e.g., pretending to be a T-Rex dinosaur or T-Rex hunter). For example, the time U.S. preschool boys spent playing with a doll lasted between 9 and 16 seconds and occurred 3 times during 10 days of observation. The time U.S. preschool girls spent pretending to be a dinosaur hunter lasted an average of 2 minutes and 5 seconds and occurred 6 times in 10 days of observation.

Second, similar to Hyun and Tyler’s (2000) and Tyler and Hyun’s (1999) studies, the teachers perceived a clear gender-specific difference among pre-K boys and girls in their play styles. The U.S. pre-K teacher perceived gender differences in the comparison with boys’ divergent vs. girls’ convergent ways of interacting with play materials. The S. Korean pre-K teacher interpreted children’s gender differences based on their particular choices of play areas:

Boys will find ways to use toys in divergent ways; girls will more often use objects for their intended use. (U.S. pre-K teacher)

Boys tend to play in block and computer areas; girls tend to play in arts and role-play areas. Boys tend to show stronger tendency of choosing ‘male-like or masculine’ play. (S. Korea pre-K teacher)

Third, teachers from the two different countries perceived that pre-K girls were more interested in whom they play with rather than what they play with. Boys were more interested in what they play with:

Girls tend to be more concerned with their play partners.

Boys care more about what their toy or play is, not who is playing with them.

I found it interesting that most girls depicted just two people in their drawings—one boy, one girl—rather than the classroom group. Specific play partners were indicated—as compared to general play characteristics. (U.S. pre-K teacher)

Girls prefer to play with their favourite friends more than boys do.

Girls seem more interested in interaction among themselves rather than what they play with. . . . If there is a theme in their role play, both genders play well together. . . you could see a gender-bending as well as gender-doing in their role play within a theme. Even though they play in the same block area, if there is no theme, they tend to play separately within the area; girls seem to be discouraged playing [boys and girls] together by boys' aggressive behaviours. (S. Korea pre-K teacher)

The S. Korea pre-K teacher indicated that role-play with a theme could enhance mixed-gender play with gender-bending. In block area, if the children had devised no theme, boys and girls tended to play with those of the same gender. Girls might not appreciate boys' play style (teacher interpreted as aggressive behaviour), especially with no theme designated by both genders in the same play area.

Finally, gender-doing can be easily observed and reflected in children's play behaviour; however, when the children and teacher attempted to talk about how boys and girls play same or differently, most children showed some kind of thought confusing before they attempted to answer the questions:

Most of the time, boys and girls play and behave differently. . . . I know boys can 'be' girls, and girls can 'be' boys. I have seen them behaving like the other gender, and in fact I encourage children to be free engaging in various gender-based expressions. . . ; however, boys tend to play more with blocks, cars, trucks, tools. . . . Girls play with dolls more frequently than boys do. . . ; however, . . . it [talking about how boys and girls are similar or different in their play] was a very difficult concept for most of the children. . . . They could easily tell me 'what,' not 'why' or 'how.' (U.S. pre-K teacher)

It is very clear that boys and girls play differently. . . . Of course, sometimes we see boys play like girls and girls play like boys for fun and for their some kind of emerging interests [gender-bending]. . . , but boys are more physical and boisterous than girls. . . . Girls seem to be calmer than boys, and girls enjoy more with arts and crafts than boys do. . . ; however, talking about how boys and girls are similar or different in their play was a very difficult concept for most of the children; they started saying 'We don't know' or 'I don't know' before they think hard and answer the questions. (S. Korea pre-K teacher)

Both teachers also mentioned gender-bending as a part of the children's play characteristics, but gender-doing is much more prevalent. None of the teachers in this study were interested in discussing or deeply exploring children's gender-

bending play characteristics. They seemed to perceive it simply as a part of children's play behaviour that appeared once in a while because of their emerging interests. More in-depth inquiry and exploration is necessary on the subject of children's playful gender-bending in their play contexts and the way it affects their play dynamics, divergent thinking, and social and intellectual flexibilities, which are parts of children's current and future self-images in their later lives.

Gendered behaviours are social-culturally learned behaviours that are part of an individual's self-identity and self-image. They begin even before the first day of the child's birth (e.g., gender signified "baby shower" in the U.S. culture), before an individual could realize the cultural influence that will shape him or her. Gendered behaviour is deeply rooted in the individual's social ontology; thus, expressing one's own gendered behaviour using words can be a difficult task for young children.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Young children from both cultures are clearly aware of gender differences in their play that children reflect their gender-doing. They can explain how boys and girls play differently based on their play experiences. They can identify various play favourites that are different for each gender. At the same time they also know that they can bend a little bit and behave like those of the other gender as their interests emerge into a play context; however, S. Korean kindergarten children clearly exhibited a discomfort playing with those of the opposite gender or using gender-bending in their play dynamics. Gender-bending seems to be more natural to younger children (preschoolers) than older ones (kindergarten age) perhaps because preschoolers are still in the process of exploring the two different types of gender-doings as part of their social learning processes of gendering (Yelland, 1998). Preschoolers' gender-bending may not be interpreted the same as older children's gender-bending that leans more toward social-cognitive flexibility.

In the group discussion setting, the U.S. pre-K girls and S. Korean boys of all ages exhibited more expressive and verbal activity than S. Korean girls did. It seemed that in the context of large-group discussion, boys were more socially powerful than girls among S. Korean children, especially if topics or questions were gender-specific. The culture strongly emphasizes the need for boys to know how boys and men should behave; thus it might be a socially shaped knowledge for boys to articulate the gender-based behaviours and characteristics. The phenomena of unbalanced gender makeup (i.e., more boys in the classroom) in S. Korean early childhood education settings and socially learned gender-specific expectations seemed to affect deeply the children's play dynamic as well as their large group discussion. In many cases, boys dominated in their voicing, and girls seemed not to mind the boys' domination. This is a very disturbing social dynamic in S. Korea early childhood classrooms. Further

study is needed in this particular matter that will promote gender-equal, gender-fair and gender-balanced interactions in early childhood classroom settings.

Based on the study, one may conclude that children's gender images in their play are affected by their age and social-cultural influences. Young children as early as age three can indicate their gender differences and similarities in their play. Because of the high emphasis on "getting gender right" in S. Korean culture, Korean kindergarten boys least shown their interests of playing with mixed genders or opposite gender. Gender-bending seems to be a more difficult task among S. Korea boys than girls. Both countries' preschool girls showed more fluency in gender-bending than boys in their play. Gender-bending could empower girls, but not boys because of the contemporary culture that has greater tolerance for young girls' non-traditional gender-stereotyped behaviour than for young boys.

In the process of young children's constructing self-image of gender (called gendering), race, class, ethnicity and age, and the ways in which these factors are actively involved in constructing the gendered identities of young children and those with whom they interact (Connell, 1995; Yelland, 1998). Early years of experience affect an individual's later adult life. Adults (teachers, parents) need to support young children's engagement in a gender-fair and gender-balanced play experiences, meaning children will be freely and flexibly in and out of masculine-like play behaviours and feminine-like play behaviours as their creative and meaningful strategic play engagement, so that through their play-oriented experiences they may be able to have a good understanding of the characteristics of each gender as well as learn effective (and respectful) communication skills between the two genders. Nurturing children's balanced play with both genders and promoting the both genders' gender-bending for their play fluency seems to be an important area of study for researchers and classroom teachers.

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