Construction of Gendered Meanings in the Imaginary Play of Preschool Children in Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

This study explores the ways in which a group of preschool children enacted gendered social and occupational roles in their imaginary play. The research question interrogates the ways children reproduce or produce new meanings about the social and occupational roles of being boys and girls during unstructured play in the playhouse corner in a preschool classroom. Data were collected through fieldnotes, photographs, and audio records and transcriptions of children's play narratives over a period of five months in a preschool setting in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. The analyses discussed in this paper focus on three selected play episodes in which five preschool children constructed and negotiated their understanding of various social and occupational roles in their everyday experiences. The selected play narratives portray children's awareness of the acceptable and recognizable gendered practices in their cultural world. Children's understanding of the interdependence between gender and social and occupational roles is present across their storylines and performance. The children recognized the social positioning of gender. They also challenged existing gender norms through subtle ways, particularly disguise.

Résumé

Cette étude explore comment un groupe d'enfants du préscolaire a joué des rôles sociaux et professionnels genrés dans son jeu imaginaire. La question de cette recherche examine les façons dont les enfants reproduisent ou produisent de nouvelles significations sur les rôles sociaux et professionnels d'être garçons et filles, en période de jeu non structuré dans le coin de jeu de la maison d'une classe de maternelle. Les données ont été recueillies par des notes de terrain, des photographies, des enregistrements audio et des transcriptions de récits de jeux d'enfants sur une période de cinq mois dans un cadre préscolaire de Riyad en Arabie saoudite. Les analyses présentées

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dans cet article se concentrent sur une sélection de trois épisodes de jeux au cours desquels cinq enfants du préscolaire ont construit et négocié leur compréhension de divers rôles sociaux et professionnels dans leurs expériences quotidiennes. Les récits de jeux sélectionnés illustrent la conscience qu'ont les enfants des pratiques genrées acceptables et reconnaissables dans leur monde culturel. La compréhension par les enfants de l'interdépendance entre le genre et les rôles sociaux et professionnels est présente dans l'ensemble de leurs scénarios et de leurs performances. Les enfants reconnaissaient le positionnement social du genre. Ils remettaient également en question les normes de genre existantes par des moyens subtils, notamment par le déguisement.

Resumen

El presente estudio explora la forma en que un grupo de niños de preescolar materializó los papeles sociales y ocupacionales de género en su juego imaginario. La pregunta de investigación explora la forma en que los preescolares reproducen o producen nuevos significados sobre los papeles sociales y ocupacionales de niños y niñas durante el juego libre en la esquina de juego en un salón de preescolar. Se recolectó información mediante notas de campo, fotografías y grabaciones de audio, así como transcripciones de las narrativas de juego de los niños durante un período de cinco meses en una escuela de preescolar en Riyadh, Arabia Saudita. Los análisis que aquí se presentan se enfocan en tres episodios seleccionados en los que cinco niños de preescolar construyeron y negociaron su comprensión de varios papeles sociales y ocupaciones en sus experiencias cotidianas. Las narrativas seleccionadas ilustran la conciencia de los niños sobre prácticas aceptables y reconocibles de género en su mundo cultural. La comprensión de los niños de la interdependencia entre género y papeles sociales y ocupacionales se evidencia en sus historias y desempeño. Los niños reconocieron la posición social de género. A su vez, retaron las normas actuales de género mediante formas discretas, en especial mediante el disfraz.

Introduction

Children begin the lifelong process of constructing their views on self and the other from a very young age and through active participation in their social world (Davies 1989; Paechter 2007). In this qualitative research, I explore cultural and gendered understandings of social and occupational roles for a group of children during their everyday unstructured play routine, particularly imaginary play in play-house corner. Three play episodes are reported as performed by a group of five preschool children to illustrate the ways in which preschool children can produce and reproduce their understanding of social and occupational roles of their social and cultural world. The data also demonstrate how children can disguise familiar meanings of social and occupational roles and produce new meaning of their own.

This study was conducted in a preschool classroom in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. The self-learning program offered in preschools, and supervised by the Ministry of Education of Saudi Arabia, provides a comprehensive resource for early childhood

teachers that includes a detailed written account of materials required for teaching aids (Alqassem et al. 2016). This approach implemented in preschools promotes play-based and child-directed approaches to learning. This self-learning curriculum for early childhood education programs was first developed by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization and the Arab Gulf Program for United Nations Development Organization, as well as the General Presidency for Girls' Education developed in this region (Alqassem et al. 2016). The General Presidency for Girls' Education was created in 1960 to govern the education offered to girls including early childhood education as a response to opposition and demonstrations against girls' education (Aljabreen and Lash 2016; Hamdan 2005). Since 2002, however, girls and boys have been receiving education under the Ministry of Education, with equal distribution of resources, curricula, and textbooks (Hamdan 2005).

These qualitative analyses of play narratives performed by a group of preschool children can contribute to new knowledge in early childhood and gender studies within the Saudi Arabian context, as well as other national contexts. With the current reformation policies in early childhood education in Saudi Arabia including redesigning curricula and increasing access to quality early childhood education (MOE 2020), this study could contribute to progressive pedagogies that celebrate difference and promote equitable practices.

Children's Understandings Of Gendered Roles: Theoretical Perspective

Children play an active role in forming their understanding of meanings of femininity and masculinity within their social realm (Blaise 2005, 2014). However, the agency that children have for learning and meaning-making is limited to the discourses available to them (MacNaughton 2005). That is, the active role in constructing one's identities is never a boundless activity, but rather a set of processes that functions within the power dynamics and social relations within the contexts in which one lives. In their appropriation of meanings and materials, children not only learn about social reality but can actively, as well as selectively, transform and construct their own realities by choosing what to be and say in a particular time and place (Blaise 2014).

The reality is that children are born into a preexisting world with a set of dominant social orders that play a key role in constructing children's views of their subjectivities as boys and girls (Blaise 2005, 2014; Davies 1989). Such existing relations of power position certain practices and ideologies as dominant over other practices and ideologies (MacNaughton 2005). The dominant practices and ideologies are sustained by historical, sociocultural, and institutional forces which inform the existing social discourses (Gee 2000). The concept of discourse is expressed and produced in many ways of 'being-doing certain kinds of people' within a particular frame of time, space, and group of people (Gee 2000, p. 21).

Within children's play and when they engage with one another in negotiating practices and ideas, they develop a set of resources for the multiple dominant discourses in their lives (Keenan et al. 1999). As they participate in and engage in the

dominant discourses available to them, children actively construct meanings about how to position themselves within recognizable categories (MacNaughton 2005). For example, children are aware that some discourses of being a certain type of girl or boy are dominant in a school setting, while other ways of enacting the appropriate gender can be more desirable in a community ritual (Keenan et al. 1999). MacNaughton (2000) argued that when a child speaks or enacts social roles that correspond to the dominant gender discourse, she/he feels in control and finds pleasure in depicting the norm. On the other hand, a child's resistance to fitting into those social orders may be deemed as failure or lead to lack of recognition in their group or society (Davies 1989).

The possibility of deviating from the norm can be disguised for the purpose of deconstructing categories of identities (Davies 2003). Disguise is defined by Davies (2003) as 'concealing in the sense of misrepresenting (employing false elements),' whereas masquerade refers to 'assuming false appearance,' and masking indicates 'hiding from view' (p. 2). The ambiguity in imaginary and unstructured play opens possibilities for children to experiment with ideas and roles.

Furthermore, unstructured imaginary play as a social activity creates a form of discourse. Sawyer (1996) suggested that unstructured social play is a complex discourse genre; its complexity comes from the absence of explicit rules. Because imaginary play as a discourse is complex and involves participation in multiple social roles, its possibilities provide a fluid site in which children can experiment with different identities (Wohelwend 2009). Within imaginary play, children engage with one another as a community to enact roles that may produce and/or reproduce discursive practices. Those discursive practices may anchor children's construction of meanings by offering dualistic definitions about who they are and how they should perform. Nonetheless, it has been suggested that in imaginary play children have been shown to disrupt the taken-for-granted assumptions through experimentation with ideas and materials (Wohlwend 2007, 2009).

Methodology

Research Site

After I had visited seven preschools in the northern district in Riyadh city, one approval was received from a private preschool to conduct this research. Inclusion criteria for selecting a preschool included identifying a site that implemented a self-learning program, specifically a classroom with a play-house corner, as well as that the preschool offered education for both boys and girls in the same classrooms.

In the field site, the preschool followed the self-learning curriculum, implemented with monthly themed activities, and offered a space divided into multiple learning corners. The play-house corner was equipped with props and culturally appropriate materials such as a dresser and mirror along with a few assorted colorful fabrics and a box of fake jewels, wooden oven and sink, and two small seats. The various corners were divided by shelving/cabinets across the classroom. To join a play corner, the children had to take a badge upon entering. The badges were meant to regulate the number of

children in each corner with little supervision required from the classroom teacher. The school day started at 7:00 a.m. beginning with structured literacy lessons that were delivered through tracing and copying Arabic letters and words. The school day included 30 min of recess time and another 30 min for snack time, and finally 45 min of free playtime which took place in different play corners, before the preschool day ends at 12:45 p.m.

Ethical Considerations

This research was approved by McGill University Research Ethics Board III prior to the fieldwork. At the beginning of the research study at the preschool, I spent full school days in the classroom with the purpose of initiating rapport with the children (Harcourt et al. 2011). During the initial two weeks, children would come and look at my fieldnotes and I would, in return, share my journal with the children and introduce myself as a learner. Consent and information letters were distributed to the parent/guardian of every child in the classroom. Consequently, I have focused primarily on the participation of children whose parents or guardians had provided a written consent. After I had received nine parental approvals, I began to engage as a participant observer within the classroom across five days per week from 11:00 a.m. to 11:45 a.m. each day. Children's names presented in the findings are pseudonyms to protect the privacy of the children and their families, as indicated in the consent forms.

My position as a Saudi woman who grew up in the same culture as my participants and my prior experience of conducting research with young children in Saudi Arabia led me to draw additional attention to how power relations are dealt with during the data collection process (Khoja 2016). The participants and I come from a culture in which a child's refusal or disagreement with an adult may, to a large extent, be considered a marker of impoliteness. Thus, I chose to listen to children's multiple way of assenting or dissenting throughout the course of data collection. I provided the children with hints to assist them to express their desire to opt out; for example, I demonstrated to the participants how to disable the sound recorder. Whenever I placed the recorder in a corner, I would show the children how to operate it and invite them to disable the sound recorder if they wished for privacy. While I employed that strategy for ethical purposes, I had doubted that children would relate to the phrase 'wish for privacy' as children live in a world where adults monitor children's behaviors and actions (Spyrou 2015). However, I decided to give them one direct strategy to express their dissent, and to potentially encourage them to express their emotions about my presence. The children never stopped the recorder, but, on occasions, they repeatedly removed the sound recorder to another spot or used it as a play object.

Research Approach

Data Collection

As a participant observer, I attended the daily, free playtime and placed particular attention on the stories told and performed in the play-house corner. I began my informal visits to the classroom by observing and taking notes, and, gradually over time, my presence shifted between observing children's play and playing with the children (Warming 2005). The participant observer role in the field took many forms; it involved tasting imaginary coffee and sweets with Fatima and feeling the confusion in Maha's eyes when I invited her to play with cars. Being a participant observer was about being accepted by the children to join in the play, by having children offering me imaginary food, asking me to enact a role, or in feeling rejection of my participation in their play. Such acknowledgment of the role of emotions in understanding my own experience and using reflective notes as a medium to understand those feelings contributed significantly to my understanding of children's construction of meanings in their play (Pink 2015).

I documented the stories told and performed by the children using my fieldnotes and a sound recording device. I wrote reflective accounts of my efforts to understand my everyday experience in the field, view it from a theoretical perspective, and evaluate my ethical approach in context. The fieldnotes included maps and photographs of the play corner for the purpose of reliving my experience during the analysis (Johansson and Løkken 2014; Pink 2015).

Data Analysis

The process of analysis entailed transcribing the audio data into text on the same day of each school visit, a process through which my preliminary understandings of imaginary play episodes emerged. The play episodes were transcribed and translated from Arabic to English for the reporting of the research. Simultaneously, I constantly revisited the transcribed text in its original language, Arabic, and included commentaries about children's emergent play episodes. In so doing, my analysis was partially situated within the fieldwork process.

After I had completed my work in the field, I revisited the written account of the data that included my fieldnotes as well as the transcribed narratives of children's imaginary play. In my efforts to contextualize my analysis, I read each transcribed narrative along with the available reflective and descriptive notes of the classroom environment and children's performance on a particular day. As such, the collected social text of data, which ranged between fieldnotes on images, conversations, and body movements as well as the transcribed play episodes, were examined in relation to one another rather than as disjointed pieces of data (Saldana 2016). I was then able to create a map that illustrated the components of each performed narrative. These steps allowed me to familiarize myself with data and develop a cohesive understanding of children's play narratives and thus to code and interpret them.

Findings

The choice of the following three narratives was based on their relevance to the focus of this paper about how gendered social and occupational roles were performed in children's imaginary play. Within each of the following narratives, the children shared their awareness of the acceptable social and occupational roles in their cultural context within the lens of gender. The children were also prepared to disrupt conventional gender norms and 'disguise' their awareness to produce alternative narratives.

Episode 1: Playing a Princess!

My relationship with the children was just being established at the time that this play episode was observed. I entered the classroom and sat on a chair near the play-house corner. I began taking notes when I spotted Sara (girl, 4 years and 10 months old) and Ghada (girl, 5 years old) walking into the corner and later Salem (boy, 4 years and 7 months old) joined their play. Ghada and Sara walk into the house corner. Sara is in the kitchen area washing plastic fruits and vegetables. Ghada is sitting on the couch in the living-room area.

Sara: Would you like some salad?
Ghada: No, I would like pizza (holding a pink wooden piece as a cell phone).
Sara: Pizza for free for the princess. Understood your Majesty! (holding her imaginary cell phone)

One minute into the scene, a conflict arises between Ghada and Sara about who should be the princess. Sara asks Ghada to move to the kitchen so that she could sit on the couch and be the princess. Ghada refuses to stop being the princess. Sara insists and Ghada leaves the corner.

At the same time, Salem walks into the kitchen. Sara is sitting on the couch and holding her imaginary cell phone.

Sara: Hello, bring me some food. The food must be for free because I'm the princess.
Salem does not respond.
Sara: What's your phone number? (talking to Salem)
Salem: 5,679,400
Sara pretends to dial some numbers.
Sara: Hello!
Salem: Hello, hold on for 5 min, I am busy preparing food right now.
Salem brings a big bowl and places it on the table in front of Sara.
Sara: Pour some for me and add salt and pepper.
Salem takes the dish to the kitchen, adds salt and pepper, and brings the dish back to the table.

Sara: Did you add enough salt?
Salem: Yes.
Sara: No, not in the food! Just bring the salt and pepper here on the table.
Salem brings a few boxes to the table and sorts them neatly.
Sara: Good, you may leave now.
Salem stands next to the couch for a few seconds then he sits next to Sara.
Sara: I am the princess!! (looking at him with confusion)
Salam: You are the princess, and so I am the prince!
Sara attempts to remove the badge (typically worn by the children upon joining a corner) from Salem. He refuses to give it up. Sara leaves the corner.

Reflective Commentary

In this play episode, Sara initiated the play by inviting Ghada to take up a proposed role, a princess. Sara enacted an inferior role, a servant, through which she created an imbalanced relationship based on title and service (setting dinner table and preparing food). Then, Sara firmly asked Ghada to switch roles, but Ghada refused and left the space. When Salem joined the play, Sara was already enacting the role of a princess. She noticed Salem's presence in the kitchen and immediately assigned him as her servant. While Salem showed indifference to the new role, he agreed to prepare food. Soon, Salem sat next to Sara announcing himself to be the prince. Sara rejected that proposal both verbally and physically and, finally, by submitting and leaving the space.

Salem's proposal of occupying an equal position by sitting next to Sara and enacting a similar role might have been perceived as domination rather than partnership. In their context, the children live in a society in which the titles such as King, Prince, and/or servants are pivotal aspects of children's understandings of the social order in society and, thus, their social status. A prince in Sara's world may not be a figure of romance. Sara sought someone to serve her as the princess, not to save her, as in Western children's stories. Yet, her efforts to stop Salem from dominating the scene failed, and she soon left the space, when Salem began a new play episode in which he acted as the prince.

On my fist few visits to the preschool, I began to notice Disney characters and superheroes printed on children's school bags and lunchboxes and, thus, I learned about how Western popular culture was evident within my research. Having read the stories told by young children in the existing Western literature on play and gender, such as in the work by Paley (1984, 2004) and the studies by Wohlwend (2009, 2012), I entered into the play of children in the field work expecting to hear stories about princesses and castles. In Paley's stories (1984, 2004), for example, the boys kept rejecting the girls' invitation to enact the role of princes. The girls attributed that to the nature of boys because enacting a prince entailed kindness and romance, while boys liked to be 'bad guys'. During my fieldwork, however, the story of being or enacting princes and princesses only came up once in the classroom.

Episode 2: Playing Housekeepers!

Earlier in the week in which this observation was recorded, a new theme, *My Hands*, was introduced to the children in the classroom. This theme explored the many skills that use wrists, hands, and fingers. This provided children with new options and choices in the play-house corner. The classroom teacher made minimum changes to the play corner by keeping the kitchen, living room, and dresser while making some space for free painting. Since my participation and presence was limited to free play time, I had little information about the theme content presented to the children. However, I suggest that the development of this storyline might have stemmed from a discussion around using hands for cooking, cleaning, washing, and other household chores. On this particular day, Sara puts on a pair of eyeglasses, wears a few necklaces in different colors and sizes, and bangles on each arm, and speaks and moves with confidence. She invites Fahad (boy, 4 years and 9 months old) and later Tamara (girl, 4 years and 3 months old) to join the play.

Sara: I am the mom (she gazes around the kitchen area in which Fahad (boy) and another non-participant boy are playing.
Sara continues: You guys are my housekeepers.
She initially addresses them using a masculine Arabic pronoun but soon changes to a feminine pronoun. Sara then moves to the dresser area.
Ghada walks into the corner. She goes to the dresser where Sara is standing.
Sara: You're my elder daughter, Ghada.
Sara calls Ahmad (boy), inviting him to be the father, but he refuses to join. She then calls one of her girl peers.
Sara: You will be the Dad, Tamara (girl).
Sara: I am the mom, my name is Ghala (female name), and Tamara is the Dad. Her name is Rashid (male name).
Sara: Rashid, go check on those housekeepers (speaking in a furious tone)! Oh wait, Rashid, see this necklace before you go (pointing to the necklace and smiling coyly).
Tamara (named Rashid in the scene) leaves the corner without responding.
Sara: Put the food in the oven now. No!! Not here, in there!! (speaking to Fahad whose role in the play is a foreign housekeeper. She orders him in simplified Arabic to do some chores, emphasizes some words, and uses her hands and body to demonstrate her order).
Fahad: Okay, madam!
(a few minutes later)
Sara: Who made this drink? And who put it here? (speaking in simplified Arabic)
Sara and Fatima are fighting over the jewel box.
Sara: Those are for grown women, only women.
Salem comes to the dresser area where the girls are still arguing over the jewels.
Salem: Can I make a cake, Sara? (speaks in simplified Arabic)
Sara ignores Salem's request. She comes closer to him attempting to put a necklace around his neck.
Salem: No, I am not a girl! (responds in his regular Arabic dialect)

Salem leaves the corner while Fahad mops the floor, and the girls argue about who gets to wear the jewels.

Reflective Commentary

On that day, I was amused by Fahad's acceptance to enact a female role and his complete immersion in the character. He wore an apron and accepted the docile position as opposed to previous observations of his assertive manner in interacting and playing with the girls. Similarly, Salem barely spoke and rather he mopped and cooked, making little interaction with Sara, the source of authority. Both Fahad and Salem had consistently rejected the prospect of identifying themselves with female-ness in other play events and, thus, I was drawn to follow the progression of this play episode.

I initially viewed the boys' acceptance of being foreign female housekeepers as a way of disrupting the social norm. Fahad and Salem showed particular interest in preparing food, washing dishes, and mopping the floor. However, they never entered the kitchen when the girls were around. I had spotted them a few times in the kitchen playing together as two chefs in a restaurant or male friends in a vacation cabin. They would joke about making 'meat juice' and create names of food that may not be particularly associated with feeding and care. Such observation correlates with the existing literature within which boys carry distinctive understandings of male-ness and thus deliberately detach themselves from enacting care and kindness (Paechter 2007).

Later, I came to realize that by enacting the role of foreign female housekeepers, Salem and Fahad may have found a gap in the regular discourse or the social norm, which opened routes for them to express their interests without the failure of aliena-tion. I further argue that the children may have associated the role of housekeeping with foreignness, as the presence of foreign labor within the family characterizes current Saudi society (Gahwaji 2013). In adopting the role of a foreigner or stranger, the ambiguous category created a gap in the norms and, thus, offered a safe space for the boys to disrupt a taken-for-granted role without the 'risk' of deviating from the correct category (Davies 1989, 1992). The uncertainty surrounding children's per-ception of enacting housekeepers encouraged the boys to disguise themselves with little chance of being placed in the 'wrong' gendered category. Salem was aware of his housekeeper's masquerade in the play; when Sara came closer to him with a necklace, which in Saudi society is typically associated with beauty and femininity, Salem revealed the mask and explicated his masculine gendered self.

Additionally, the girls' awareness of the power dynamics in their hierarchical social system was overt. Sara positioned herself as a privileged housewife by enact-ing and embodying femininity, appropriating from the available gendered social norm in her society within which women dominate households and childrearing. She sought to find herself a husband and further demonstrated her understanding of the role of a husband, to compliment her beauty and reassure her about her feminin-ity, and to sustain the quality of everyday life. Interestingly, Sara's conversation with her husband, Rashid, was carried out in a completely different manner than her way

of communicating with the housekeepers. She smiled coyly and fluttered her eye-lashes when speaking to Rashid.

Episode 3: But You are a Girl!

Thus far, I had been visiting the classroom for a month and had begun to feel comfortable in conducting casual conversations, as well as assisting the children and the classroom teacher. This episode took place during the first few days in the new theme, Health and Safety. The playing-house corner was modified and reorganized, and children were keen to take turns playing in the corner. There were clinic and pharmacy sections where the teacher had displayed a variety of pictures of boys and girls dressed in different medical uniforms.

Sara puts on a white coat. Salem is busy trying to put on the scrubs.
Sara: You are my assistant, Salem. You are the doctor's assistant.
Salem does not respond. Sara sits down and pulls out her imaginary cell phone.
Fahad (boy): Hello, may I speak to Dr. Ahmad? (speaking in his imaginary cell phone from the other side of the corner)
Sara: Who here is Dr. Ahmad?
She looks around and says, "Salem, are you Dr. Ahmad?"
Salem: No.
Tamara: All right, all right, you can come and see me at 9 (speaking in the phone).
Salem: Fine, I can be Dr. Ahmad.
Fahad: But Tamara is Dr. Ahmad.
Tamara: No, I want to be a pharmacist (using feminine pronouns).
Fahad: But you are a girl! (with confusion)
Sara: It's okay, she can be a boy, and I can be a boy, too.
Sara: It is fine, I will be Dr. Ahmad.
Tamara: Hello, Dr. Rashid? (speaking on her phone while looking at Sara).
Fahad: Are you a female police officer? (directing his question to Tamara)
Sara: I want to be a pharmacist. (using feminine pronouns)
Tamara: I want to be a physician. (using feminine pronouns)

Reflective Commentary

In this play event, I was surprised to see the girls disguising themselves in maleness in order to enact a profession in the medical field, especially given the visible presence of Saudi women in medicine (Gahwaji 2013). Sara, who crafted the story and assigned roles, submitted to Fahad's doubt of the appropriateness of being a female pharmacist. However, Sara gave a quick alternative scenario by choosing to disguise herself within existing dominant gender norms. The choice of enacting the role of a male pharmacist might have been more acceptable and accessible than the possibility of challenging the gendered social and occupational norm. The children have shown their understandings of what being a girl allows them to do and/or say. To

them, the social norms are strictly defined, and thus, it is easier for girls to conceal their femaleness behind maleness in order to fulfill their wishes. Yet when Fahad proposed an unusual social role for a woman in Saudi Arabia, as a police officer, the girls immediately expressed their true wishes without concealing their gendered selves, with Sara being a pharmacist and Tamara being a physician. Sara and Tamara chose to disguise in maleness in order to achieve a goal or sustain the play, whereas Fahad was more confident in disrupting the norm and proposing a social role that is atypical in his culture.

Discussion

In this section, a review of the findings is presented and interpreted from the existing research literature and the implications for early childhood education are also considered.

The children's interactions with one another and their ongoing construction of meanings on gendered social and occupational roles took multiple shapes over the course of my research. The same child showed different ways of dealing with conflicts, about social roles and gendered selves, from one story line to another. Children's understanding of what it means to be a boy or a girl, and how to enact the 'good' boy or girl was relational. Sara partook in multiple roles across the research observations from being an assertive princess, to a loving wife, and from a resilient girl to a submissive one. In their play, the children undertook different ways of being a boy or girl, and engaged in different roles, and through these ventures, they put meanings to their daily experiences. In such experimentation, the children encountered conflicts, such as alienation, when deviating from the 'correct' category in the dominant ideology. In these conflicts, the children responded with subtle strategies, such as disguise.

Through disguise (Davies 2003), the children could enact unusual or undesirable social roles with little risk of failure. The term 'disguise' is used in this discussion of the findings because, I believe, that the children in this research did not hide completely from the scene nor did they change appearance to enact roles. Instead, the children chose to conceal their gendered selves for the purpose of enacting a social or occupational role that was either not desirable within a particular discourse or was not accessible to their gender in the dominant culture.

In this study, the girls sometimes disguised themselves as males to position themselves in more powerful social roles, to exercise strength and power and, on other occasions, the boys disguised themselves in female roles to enact domestic work and also to show care and kindness. Within the stories enacted by the children, the boys accepted roles of female housekeepers and performed household chores in a few play events that lasted for days. They even adjusted their use of language to master their representation and disguise as foreign workers. On some play narratives, the girls chose to disguise their femaleness to access the power of maleness in order to perform powerful roles that may not have been desirable in their social world.

Sara and Tamara seemed to repeatedly disguise themselves in maleness to exercise power via high-status jobs. The children were able to disrupt social expectations

through concealing their femaleness and joining the powerful category of maleness. When Fahad questioned Tamara's choice of being a pharmacist, Sara interfered immediately, 'It's okay, she can be a boy and I can be a boy too,' disrupting the binary in gender roles without challenging the dominant culture. For Sara, to remain in her powerful position as a doctor in the scene reported was more important than to raise a conflict with Fahad about her capability of enacting the role. Through disguise, the children did not challenge, the moral and social meanings associated with each gender binary. Instead, the children found a myriad of moments for emancipation in their imaginary play to express their desire to enact roles that may have been more or less desirable and/or accessible only to a certain gender in their everyday worlds.

Additionally, the children constructed meanings about their own understanding of the hierarchical structure in their everyday practices (Paley 2004; Wohlwend 2012), and thus, their exercise of power was manifested in playing the superior–inferior roles, that is, housewives and housekeepers, princesses and servants, or doctors and assistants. Though, in many cases, the power of maleness prevailed, social order was key in forming children's meanings of doing the 'right' gender in the 'correct' social class. Through the discourse of social status, Sara was empowered to perform a tough and authoritative female princess. She exercised power on Salem whom she assigned him an inferior position, a male servant. But when Salem readjusted his inferior position by proposing an equal title, announcing himself a prince, the power shifted from the discourse of class to gender. Salem stayed in the play-house corner and Sara left.

Similarly, the girls exercised agency in a couple of play episodes by enacting high-status positions as middle-class housewives speaking to their housekeepers, a role often assigned to the boys. The boys, on the other hand, concealed their gendered selves and accepted the role of foreign female housekeepers. And yet, when Salem was disturbed by Sara's attempt to put accessories on him, he clearly identified himself as a male. Once again Sara used her social status to try to control Salem, but then Salem used his maleness to exercise power over Sara. The children constantly shifted between the two discourses, the patriarchal and hierarchical structure, to position themselves as powerful figures.

Implications for Early Childhood Education

My argument does not propose that differences between femininities and masculinities are problematic, but rather to assert that differences should enrich children's learning rather than hinder one and privilege the other (Ghosh and Abdi 2013). Thus, a child's understandings of her/his roles in society are constructed through the recognition of the roles as meaningful and legitimate (Davies 1989). Within the available and desirable discourses in the classroom, the children in this study sought recognition in their social discourse by sustaining the status quo of the known and accessible roles for femaleness and maleness. Had the children been exposed to alternative ways of enacting social and occupational roles, they

might have been encouraged to disrupt the norm with less concern of deviating from the 'correct' category.

Scholars such as MacNaughton (2000) proposed that engaging with children in dialogues about their choices and problematizing their stereotypical assumptions is one way to address the politics of play. It is through play that educators can learn about children's multiple worlds and create dialogue of the many possibilities for girls and boys. However, the reality is that early childhood educators vary in their perception and appreciation of play spaces and practices in school settings (Blaise 2014; Brooker and Edwards 2010; MacNaughton 2000). Additionally, educators may not be aware of their own prejudices and assumptions (MacNaughton 2000).

This study suggests that a critical self-reflective approach can enable educators to not only recognize the unequitable practices and discriminative language in their classrooms, but also to assist teachers in understanding their own biases and subjectivities (MacNaughton 2005; Rogers 2010). The employment of a critical stance enables educators to rethink their understanding of the normalized social and occupational roles in relation to gender, and thus to question children's gendered stereotypes and assumptions. The objective here is not to regulate children's play, but rather to understand its meanings and intentions. Similarly, a critical approach to one's practices is not meant to construct new dominant discourses, but rather to question the politics of gender relations.

Conclusion

In this research, the possible selves represented in each discourse by the children are related to the many narratives and experiences in a child's life. In their imaginary play, children's narratives are never free of control and power, but rather framed within the dominant discourses available to them (Blaise 2014; MacNaughton 2000, 2005; Wohlwend 2009, 2012). The children in their play undertook or enacted different ways and roles of being a boy or girl, and through their actions, they put meanings to their daily experiences. Within their role-plays, the children encountered conflicts, including alienation, and they also deviated from dominant ideologies. In these conflicts, the children responded with subtle strategies, specifically, disguise.

In this research, the child as an active agent produced and reproduced her/his cultures and realities and participated in either sustaining or disrupting gender norms. Nonetheless, a child's agency in creating new realities is dependent on how much understanding and flexibility she/he could draw on, in enacting everyday and acceptable practices. The lack of dialogue about alternative realities confined the children to enacting the available scenarios experienced in their own lives. Even when the children had put effort in disrupting the norm or confronting the regularity, they did not seem to create other realities nor trouble the social structure. Rather, the children seemed to choose to fit into existing social norms for certain gender roles within the ambiguity of disguise.

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