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Playing It Straight: Uncovering Gender Discourses in An Early Childhood Classroom
Book Review

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Introduction

Mindy Blaise (2005) confronts gender practices in an expository manner in her book, *Playing it straight: Uncovering gender discourses in the early childhood classroom.* Blaise is a professor at Victoria University in Melbourne. Her work focuses on both early childhood education and gender studies.

In her book, Blaise looks at the daily practices of early childhood professionals through a post-developmental lens. The book is loudly inviting early childhood educators to reconceptualize their practices regarding gender. The book is a perspective on a kindergarten classroom where a teacher (Isabel Beaton) and a participant observer (Mindy Blaise) "recognize that young children take an active part in their gender construction" (Blaise, 2005, p. 183). Blaise illustrates that young children are active participants in both maintaining and breaking gender discourses that are taking place every day by observing and analyzing the conversations of children through feminist post-structuralism and queer theory lenses. The author conceptualizes gender as a social, historical, cultural, and political construction.

Overview

The main purpose of the book, as Blaise explains, is to view children beyond developmental theories. These theories tend to ignore social issues such as gender, race, and ethnicity. So, how should educators view gender? According to Blaise (2005), "feminist poststructuralism and Queer theories open up alternative pathways for thinking about how children become gendered, making it possible to rethink, create, and invent gender equity" (p. 30). The author begins the research by identifying and explaining major gender discourses that take place in the classroom and how children and teachers are trying to maintain a heterosexual matrix. Blaise examines gender formation by looking at five different gender discourses amongst children: wearing femininity, body movements, makeup, beauty, and fashion talk.

The book includes multiple examples of conversations and events that took place in the classroom which put light on how children shaped gender. In the following chapters, the

author writes in detail about their engagement with children, Alan, Madison, and Penny, by attending to their ways of making and breaking the heterosexual matrix. Blaise's (2005) fieldnotes demonstrate how both Alan and Penny "play it straight" while Madison searches for more liberating discourses (p. 184). The author invites the readers to think with new pedagogies that are more inclusive of post-developmental ideas. This can be achieved by creating a space that provokes critical thinking and carrying out risky gender work in the classroom.

Strengths

The author includes conversations taking place amongst children to highlight how children socially and politically construct gender. This approach contextualizes the discourse by providing real-life examples of how children engage with gender. The author has intentionally or unintentionally paid attention to some children more than others and has questioned their own bias a few times in the book.

In a class swayed by developmentally appropriate practices, some words might be seen unsuitable to be used by children. Teachers might try to restrict the conversations amongst children by pausing or interrupting them to stop using "inappropriate" words.

Some of the prominent statements in the book were made by Madison, one of the children in the classroom:

"He's got to kill you."
"I see a boy part right on my private part. So, I think I am a boy." (Blaise, 2005, p.155).

The book also illustrates the hegemonic discourses of masculinity. Girls in Isabel's class are very fascinated by Lego. But the absence of Lego figures makes Isabel, followed by Madison, to write to the Lego company requesting more girl characters and female action figures. Isabel, even if aware that girls do not have much influence in STEM, does not give in and continues to encourage girls in creative patterns and appreciate their science work. This book illustrates ways in which gender stereotypes among children can be broken.

Relevance

Throughout the book, the author, through relevant examples, invites the readers to engage with post-developmental lenses and include them into their practice. The book can act as a

wonderful resource for educators who want to shift their conventional understandings of gender. The book requires educators to push their pedagogical and theoretical boundaries to rethink gender in an early childhood education setting. The book is also valuable by how it contextualizes gender. Blaise puts light on how race and ethnicity can affect the way children create gender.

In conclusion, this book is a brave attempt to put forward an alternative image of the child who is learning how to be a boy, girl, or both in society. Blaise requires early childhood practitioners to work from queer perspectives, to challenge categorical thinking, to promote interpersonal intelligence, and to foster critical consciousness. Using a feminist poststructuralist and queer theory lens, the author invites the reader to locate gender discourses together with racial, class, and sexual discourses.

References

Blaise, M. (2005). *Playing It Straight: Uncovering Gender Discourse in the Early*

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Author

Jasnoor Rolay is a second-year student at Capilano University in Early Childhood Care and Education diploma program. She is interested in exploring ideas about being pedagogically with children in ways that go beyond developmental theories.