

Breaking Gender Barriers in Early Childhood Education: An Exploration of the Reggio
Emilia and Montessori Approaches

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From the time we are born, we are indoctrinated with cues from family, friends, teachers, playmates, strangers, and the media on how to perform our genders, and which gender we should be performing. New parents are often barraged with compliments on how “beautiful” their little girl is, or how “strong” their little boy will be—compliments that carry loaded messages about what girls and boys should be. However, seemingly innocent compliments and day-to-day gendered messages have a profound and lasting impact on the way children learn and internalize the concept of gender. According to Hendrix and Wei, early gender biases that children encounter can shape their attitudes and beliefs related to their development of interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships; access to education equality; and stifle their physical and psychological well-being (2009). While children constantly learn from their environment and peers, Aina and Cameron found that children develop their gender identity and begin to understand what it means to be male or female between the ages of 3 and 5 (2011). Because children develop such a crucial aspect of their identity during their preschool years, it is essential that teachers recognize this fact and adapt their teaching methods to reflect learning and play that encourages children to think outside of rigidly defined gender norms. This article will examine the influences of gender bias and identity for children, the challenges associated with implementing gender neutral learning and play in the United States, and how the teaching techniques from renowned Reggio Emilia and Montessori schools work to deconstruct gender biases for preschool aged children.

Even before children begin school, they are inundated with messages, both direct and indirect, that construct their ideas of gender. In addition to the gendered messages children receive from parents, children observe gender at work in television, movies, books, and illustrations (Gosselin, 2007). Children are exposed to a range of programming that show them

messages about gender, which range from traditional depictions of men and women in gendered professional occupations and family roles, to messages that equate femininity with thinness and submissiveness and masculinity with brawn and violence (Witt, 2000). Consumer products are another source of gendered messages and are often laden with gender-typed messages on bed sheets, towels, bandages, clothes, school supplies, toys, and furniture (Freeman, 2007). Not only are these products marketed for specific genders, but they are merchandised in stores by gender, creating segregated pink and blue aisles (Aina & Cameron, 2011). Mega-companies that are geared toward children, such as Disney, are still depicting women as helpless creatures who can only survive with the help of a prince. One study showed that among young women and especially immigrant girls, Disney's portrayal of women had led the young women and children to accept the images of princesses having to face external obstacles to marriage, such as family approval or laws, while princes could marry according to their own will (Lee, 2008). Aside from gendered merchandise, children learn from their parents, family, and peers what it means to be a boy or a girl and what behaviors are associated with each gender. Just from observing their parents, many children quickly learn that men traditionally fulfill a breadwinner role within the home, and that women, even those who work, assume the caretaker role and are responsible for cleaning, cooking, and taking care of children. Given the multitude of gendered messages that children receive each day, by the time children reach preschool, there are a number of difficulties for teachers to encourage gender neutral play and learning.

When it comes to using a gender neutral curriculum, teachers in the United States face a number of challenges including gender biases inherent to teachers, a predominantly female workforce in early childhood education, and books, toys, and other teaching materials that enforce traditional gender stereotypes. As Aina and Cameron found, teachers have a tremendous

influence on how children develop ideas of gender and gender significance (2011). However, while usually unintentional, a teacher's inherent biases can perpetuate unfair stereotypes and may be manifested in discriminatory classroom practices (Aina & Cameron, 2011). For example, a study showed that one group of teachers perceived girls to be passive learners and therefore more "teachable" than boys (Erden & Wolfgang, 2004). The way a teacher handles obedience issues may also be clouded by gender biases—because males tend to demand and receive more attention from teachers, they also tend to receive more specific, instructive feedback (Erden & Wolfgang, 2004). In comparison, females tend to act out less and demand less of a teacher's attention, therefore receiving less specific and instructive feedback (Erden & Wolfgang, 2004). In observing classroom behavior of preschool and kindergarten children, Ikram noticed that boys tended to challenge teachers more often, interrupted teachers when they spoke, told jokes about body parts and functions during large group interactions, wrestled and play fought, jumped off chairs, tables, and ran around the room (2011). When conflicts arose between a boy and a girl, boys were blamed, regardless of the girl's behavior, such as name calling or interfering in a game (Ikram, 2011).

Adding to the problem of inherent gender biases is a teaching workforce that is predominantly female. Teaching in early childhood education is an example of a gendered profession that is organized by images, symbols, and social understandings that allow for great distinctions in the enactment of gender roles (Sargent, 2005). In particular, women are encouraged to become teachers and are viewed as the nurturing mother, whereas men who wish to become teachers in early childhood education face a stigma of being homosexual, effeminate, and/or pedophiles (Blount, 2005; Fifield & Swain, 2002; Weems, 1999). This is damaging to the profession and to the messages that children are receiving about which gender is capable of

teaching, and which gender should be teaching. In the United States, the Bureau of Labor Statistics shows that men make up only 2% of teachers in preschool and kindergarten classrooms, showing that early childhood education has been deemed to be “women’s work” (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2007). Recognizing this disparity in male teachers in early childhood education, some countries have made recruiting efforts to draw male teachers to the profession, raising the percentage of male teachers to approximately 8% (Sumsion, 2005). Because of the lack of male teachers, early childhood education context often enact “common-sense identities” that create and sustain the notion that teachers, especially those in early childhood education, are expressly female and heterosexual, further solidifying socialized notions of gender that children see (Fifield & Swain, 2002; Gilbert & Williams, 2008).

Classroom materials, such as books and toys, as well as segregated play, also pose challenges for schools and teachers that are consciously trying to implement a gender neutral curriculum. Gee and Gee found that one of the two main aspects of the early childhood environment that influence young children’s perceptions of gender and gender stereotypes is classroom materials (2005). Although one study looked at individual preschool classrooms and found the proliferation of gender-typed toys such as pink kitchen sets and a large proportion of books in the classroom library containing a gender bias, this scene is commonplace in many preschool classrooms (Chick, Heilman-Houser, & Hunter, 2002). Estola suggests that it is important that all play domains are not culturally divided into separate boys or girls games since this narrows children’s possibilities to develop their full potential (2011). Echoing Estola, Gosselin found that when boys and girls play separately, the opportunity to learn new interaction strategies becomes limited (2007). Classrooms that endorse gender-separated practices not only proactively support boys’ and girls’ use of gendered voices and actions, they may also

unintentionally create social conditions that limit them to it (Gosselin, 2007). Although children may have a tendency to play together based on gender—girls with girls and boys with boys—research has found that playing together makes girls livelier and boys more agreeable (Paley, 1984). This is consistent with Vygotsky’s social-constructivist concept that children are capable of doing much more in collective activity (1978; Daitsman, 2011). Encouraging cross-gendered play can be enticing, interesting, and even tantalizing to young children when the classroom environment allows and welcomes such play (Serriere, 2010).

When it comes to early childhood education, the Reggio Emilia approach is often seen as the “gold standard” for preschools. Reggio Emilia is a small city in northern Italy that stands out for its contribution to the field of education (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1995). In Reggio Emilia, children from all socioeconomic and educational backgrounds attend and more than 14% of the city’s budget goes to support this early childhood system, which includes more than 30 municipal infant-toddler centers and preschools (Edwards et al., 1995). As for the Reggio Emilia teaching and learning experience, young children are encouraged to explore their environment and express themselves through multiple paths and all of their “languages,” including the expressive, communicative, symbolic, cognitive, ethical, metaphorical, logical, imaginative, and relational (as cited in Reggio Children, 2010). Within the Reggio Emilia experience, children are encouraged to experiment and develop competencies in using spoken language, gestures, drawing, painting, building, clay and wire sculpture, shadow play, collage, dramatic play, music, and emerging writing (Edwards et al., 1995). Reggio teachers emphasize achievement in personal expression and reflection on one’s own patterns of thinking, and rather than an early push to reach, teachers support a competent ability to communicate with others through speech and other means (Edwards et al., 1995). Central to the Reggio approach is the partnership

between parents, educators, and children—classrooms are organized to support a highly collaborative, problem-solving approach to learning (Edwards et al., 1995). The Reggio approach also emphasizes the importance of pedagogical documentation, which represents an alternative language of evaluation, rather than the typical standardized yardstick of “quality” that many schools use to measure students’ progress (Dahlberg, 1999). Reggio educators believe that documentation allows teachers and children to ask questions about their work, and acts as a way to revisit earlier experiences and events (Dahlberg, 1999).

Because of the wide variety of gender neutral materials for play and learning, as well as Reggio Emilia’s approach to creating play areas that are inclusive for all children rather than segregated by gender, the Reggio approach creates an environment that helps children learn without being constrained by gender biases. As mentioned above, the Reggio approach focuses largely on allowing children to express themselves through creative mediums like drawing, painting, building, and storytelling—activities which focus less on gender roles and more on the child’s process of learning, communicating, and documenting, and having the child self-reflect on his or her process. One study found that before teacher intervention, male preschool students spent 25% of their time engaging in block and building play versus 2% of their time in housekeeping play; conversely, female preschool students spent 10% of their time in housekeeping play and only 2% of their time in block and building play (Unger, 1981). Reggio’s focus on creating and building is especially beneficial for both female and male students because it teaches female children that girls can—and should—engage in building activities, and it teaches male children that females are equally good and equally creative when it comes to building. Storytelling is also another powerful activity that Reggio Emilia schools use to break down gender barriers and biases. Daitsman found that that process of children telling stories can

be a medium for their expression of gender identity and social relationships in the classroom (2011). Further, Daitsman found in his observations of a preschool classroom that while children said that “girl” stories contain princesses and/or fairies, and boy stories contain combat and/or superheroes, many children never told stories with those gendered themes—36% of girls never dictated “girl” stories, and 30% of boys never dictated “boy” stories (2011). By encouraging children to play with others who are different from themselves—whether in terms of gender, ability, or other factors—children are enabled to explore other vocabularies and actions in order to sustain play interactions, and breaking down gender biases in the process (Gosselin, 2007).

Much like the Reggio Emilia approach, the Montessori approach has also received wide praise and is considered to be elite in the field of early childhood education. The Montessori approach was created in Rome in the 1900s by Maria Montessori, Italy’s first female physician (Torrence & Chattin-McNichols, 2012). Throughout the year, and especially as the Montessori approach became popular in the United States, the approach has been modified and adapted (Torrence & Chattin-McNichols, 2012). Maria Montessori viewed education as a vehicle for giving help to the child’s life, and was often quoted as saying “follow the child,” which mean that by following the child’s development. The educator can make the most helpful match between instructional methods, curriculum, and the child (Torrence & Chattin-McNichols, 2012). In the Montessori approach, development does not progress in one continuous inclined plane, or in a linear or constant fashion (Torrence & Chattin-McNichols, 2012). Central to the Montessori approach is the idea that when children enter the learning environment, they are unaccustomed to its materials, social expectations, and ground rules—as such, they can be impulsive and seem to lack order; however, when the child discovers something that is of deep interest, the child begins to act on it (Torrence & Chattin-McNichols, 2012). Thus, Montessori

classrooms create an atmosphere of freedom to choose and use materials with purpose and care, to direct one's own learning, to interact with others, and to move about the space freely; limits and ground rules are only imposed to offer children guidelines for peer consortium and bounds of appropriate use of materials and to maintain a sense of social dignity and peace (Torrence & Chattin-McNichols, 2012). Because the Montessori approach does not view the child as a passive recipient of experience, children in Montessori programs ideally interact purposefully and freely with a specifically designed, learner-sensitive environment for optimal development to occur (Torrence & Chattin-McNichols, 2012). Teachers in Montessori classrooms support each child's engagement with the environment by initiating a psychological tone of calm and focused activity; by responding genuinely, warmly, and with dignity to each child and his or her needs; and by helping to make a "good match" between child and material (Torrence & Chattin-McNichols, 2012). Teachers are not viewed as the central figure within the class in Montessori classrooms (Torrence & Chattin-McNichols, 2012).

Although the Montessori approach focuses largely on allowing children to choose individual activities and develop their own learning, the approach allows children to focus on their own learning rather than engage in activities that may show gender biases. Former Montessori teacher Freedman explains that rather than having children play with a fake kitchen, children are taught to prepare real food for their peers; and rather than dressing up dolls, children are taught the skills needed to dress themselves (2011). The Montessori approach lends itself to being gender neutral because all of the activities appeal to all of the children and the materials in the classroom are sequential, so each child can move through them at his or her own pace (Freedman, 2011). Since dramatic play and free-form block building are not included in the Montessori curriculum, a lot of gender bias is automatically eliminated (Freedman, 2011).

Further, Montessori schools help eliminate gender biases that are inherent to teachers through the level of independent student work—this helps teachers avoid competition among students and seems to eliminate biases that may include one gender performing better than another (Stoudenmire). Although research has shown that it is beneficial for children to interact with one another, especially in diverse playgroups that consist of all genders, Montessori has found an effective way to break down gender barriers for children through individualized activities and learning.

While the Reggio Emilia and Montessori approaches to early childhood education are widely regarded as elite, these approaches may not be right for all children or in all early childhood education contexts; however, many of the concepts that are used in the Reggio and Montessori approaches reflect gender neutrality, which is important in almost all early childhood education contexts. There are a number of ways that teachers in all early childhood education contexts, regardless of approach, can make their classrooms more gender neutral and create a curriculum that helps children break down gender barriers and biases. As we learned from Reggio Emilia, using gender neutral materials and encouraging all children to partake in all activities serves to show children that certain activities, like building or storytelling and dramatic play, are not just “girl” or “boy” activities. Reggio’s approach to documentation and self-reflection also lends itself to giving children time to think about how and why they create materials and things and learn in specific ways. Montessori shows us that having more individualized activities for children can allow children to learn at their own pace and focus on their own learning without being burdened by gender biases. Further, by taking the teacher out of the spotlight and having children recognize that the teacher is not the central figure or sole source of information, the Montessori approach helps remove some of the gender biases that are

inherent to all teachers. Teachers can also make simple changes to their classrooms by eliminating gendered toys, like dolls, action figures, and cars, and trying to avoid having children's books with strong gendered themes in the classroom library. While challenging, teachers are encouraged to create a balanced mix of social interactions that support the formation of dynamic gendered identities, rather than rigidly defined gendered identities, and to promote successful cross-gender working relationships among students (Gosselin, 2007).

Gendered messages are a part of everyday life from the time we are born—whether we are learning behaviors from parents, friends, teachers, or the media, gendered messages teach us what it means to be male or female, what behaviors are associated with each gender, and which behaviors should not be performed by each gender. Because children develop their gender identity and begin to understand what it means to be male or female during their preschool years, it is essential that teachers in early childhood education contexts strive to eliminate gender biases from the classroom and help children break down gender barriers. The approaches of Reggio Emilia and Montessori schools and educators set good examples for how to create classrooms and learning experiences that are free from gender bias and barriers, including the use of gender neutral materials, building, storytelling, and even individualized activity. Encouraging children to play with gender neutral toys and materials and to engage with others outside their gender helps children develop skills in multiple areas instead of ones that gendered messages have told them are appropriate for their gender, and allows children to develop better social relationships—all of which set a more open stage for future learning.

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