Master in Children's Rights, Faculty of Sociology and Social Work, Babes-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania

Pink vs Blue. Barbie vs Bionicle. About and Beyond Dichotomies: in Search of a Comfortable Gender Space

A Qualitative Research about the Construction of Gender Identity/-ies with and for some Romanian kindergarteners.

Professor Maria Roth   Silvia Cobusneanu

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CONTENTS

Acknowledgements

Introduction

CHAPTER 1

The social construction of gender with kindergaten kids. Theoretical background.

1.1. Topic, objectives, research questions.

1.2. Conceptualization

       1.2.1. Gender, kindergarteners, peer group.

       1.2.2. Contextualization.

CHAPTER 2

Methodology

2.1. Setting and participants.

2.2. Data collection and analysis. Validity revisited.

2.3. Ethical issues in researching children.

CHAPTER 3

Results

3.1. Beliefs and behaviours : The Time Line

3.2. Children's beliefs

       3.2.1. Jobs/activities: *'When I grow up I want to be Snow White so that the prince can come.'*

       3.2.2. Clothes and colours: *'Pink is just only (sic !) for little girls.'*

       3.2.3. Toys: '*Forget about cars, they are for boys !'*

3.3. Children's behaviour

       3.3.1. Choosing a play partener. Whom do girls and boys play with ?

       3.3.2. How do girls and boys play ?

- Segregation
- Mixed play.

- Transgressions
- The gendered geography of the playground.

3.4. Children's rights

    3.4.1. Which children's rights were respected and how ?

    3.4.2. Gender discrimination.

    3.4.3. Gender discrimination only ?

CONCLUSION

1. **About the social construction of gender with kindergarten kids in Romania.**
2. **Openings : virtual questions for new research in Romania.**

    2.1. Teachers and pupils.

    2.2. Parent roles. Discussions about marriage.

    2.3. Reactions to gender non-conformity.

    2.4. Teams, conflicts, negotiations.

Appendics

Bibliography

Introduction

About Gender and Dichotomies

Gender refers to the cultural, social and psychological differences between men and women in terms of femininity and masculinity. Gender identity is related to the extent to which a person considers him/herself a boy/man or a girl/woman. This analysis brings about the way kindergarten children construct their gender identities, trying to answer questions as to what it means to them to be a girl or a boy.

The starting point was the premise that the way children define their gender concepts manifests concretely through what **they think** about being a girl/boy , what they choose, what they prefer, how they **behave**, with whom, with what and how they play. In order to observe and describe these **beliefs** I used methods that brought out their opinions about gender, their attitudes in different gender constructed contexts and the value they attach to their beliefs. When describing children's **behaviours** I focused on the way children play, how girls and boys act. Their beliefs and behaviours showed variations and similarities within the same category as well as between the two categories.

Contiguous themes were also pondered on: gender segregation, mixed play, transgressions or whether the interactional history of children could be a marker of high or low level of the above mentioned phenomena. As to gender discrimination , various situations showed that it can occur not only from society or adults exclusively, but also within the peer group. In these cases we refer to discrimination based on the choices the children make for example when choosing a play partner : children's preferences for play partners and their beliefs are related to the acceptance or refusal coming from their peers in case they choose a girl or a boy as play partner. Thus, children already have expectancies as concerns choices of play partners, toys, usage and negotiation of interactive space. Other types of discrimination besides the kind based on gender were observed and discussed : sometimes, other markers reinforced boundaries, markers that were more powerful than gender, such as common interests, knowledgeability in one field-eg. Bionicles- or social skills.

Children's Rights throughout the social construction of gender

The interest that I took in doing research on this peculiar topic had two major reasons: on one hand the scarcity of any kind of qualitative research with very young children in Romania in general. On the other hand this study was meant to be a practical tool for teachers as well as for parents in the sense that it summarizes many studies that recommend avoiding gender stereotypes and promoting equal chances for girls and boys while making the most out of their different innate potential. This study was constantly filtered through the topic of children's rights: apart from gender which can clearly be put into relation with children's rights on the level of discrimination, I also considered aspects related to ethical issues in researching children's universe(s), choosing the right methods or the way we can relate to them as researchers.

Why kindergarten kids?

Kindergarten kids take gender stereotypes from different contexts and use them to suit their needs in their interactions within or outside their peer group, in their daily lives. Fortunately these stereotypes are flexible up to a certain age and can still be changed. Recent studies show that parents don't take notice of gender differences before children go to school and by then they have already formed stereotypes in attitudes and behaviour. Whether society directs us to look through this gender identity lens and think in dichotomies, we cannot any longer accept it as fact, as this would mean limiting children's life choices. Instead of dividing the world into halves, girls and boys, pink and blue, Barbie and Bioncle, it would be advisable to find that space where children could feel at ease, comfortable to choose from a wide range of attitudes, values and behaviours. Enforcing stereotypes reduces access to balanced chances for both categories and according to CRC as well as European legislation which promote equality between men and women and plead for non-discriminative education we want children to be able to live in a free society.

Gender across cultures

Gender is a cultural construction and it varies in importance across social contexts. The latest studies in sociology show the importance of the cultural context when we talk about gender. Gender is to be considered inside the parameters of values and parental practices of each country. As gender identity is differently constructed by children belonging to various cultures or subcultures transcultural, comparative and recent analysis are needed in order to reflect the newest changes in menthality across cultures. The Gender Barometer (August, 2000) offered interesting data about gender stereotypes in Romania.

Beyond dichotomies : in search of a comfortable gender space

At some point, two 6 year-old boys in one of the groups that I was observing built a relatively small space enclosed by chairs and asked me to write on a piece of paper « The Boys' Property ». Observing that, three girls did and wanted the counterpart of that : « The Girls' Property ». The entire moment is described in my thesis, as well as a multitude of other instances like this, high in salience as they are symptomatic of how children construct gender in different contexts. The idea is that if these kids chose gender to physically mark their play space it means that gender bears a world of significance to them in this peculiar context and is a mark in some way of their identity. What I wanted to show though, end-to-end in my analysis is that what we should look for is an imaginary space that is located metaphorically between these two properties, a space that does not support gender stereotypes. I imagine this space as one where Barbie can play football without being sanctioned and out of social pressures and restraints and where boys can cook and play with baby toys without being teased or called « sissies ». What I refer to as 'A Comfortable Gender Space' is not an *a*-space (in the sense of lack of something or exclusion, negation) where gender identities cannot be evident, but rather a *pro*-space, in favour, supporting gender and gender equality. Thus my definition for « the comfortable gender space» could be understood as those psychological, cultural and social coordinates that mark the territory of femininity and masculinity in such a way that within this space norms, values, attitutes and perceptions related to gender are flexible, permissive and offer the possibility of various choices and equality of chances

for girls and boys without anihilating the biological differences in any way. The comfortable gender space offers girls and boys the freedom to develop their personal abilities and make life choices or profession choices without being restrained by traditional gender roles or stereotypes. This space excludes dichotomies : pink is only for girls, blue is only for boys, Barbie is a symbol of girlhood and Bionicle, just because it is a manipulative toy suits the boys best.

Methodology

Setting and participants

The research took place in a Romanian kindergarten. I observed and compared four groups : one with 2-3 year olds (G1), one with 4-5 year olds(G2), one with 6-7 year olds (G3) and a mixed age group with 3-7 year olds (G4). I was a participant observer, as I also worked there. The study started in October 2006 and ended in May, 2007.

To bring out the children's beliefs and behaviours as concerns gender I primarily used ethnographic observations supplimented by individual interviews, focus groups, drawings, Photo Voice, the diary and « The Spider's Web » (the sociogram adapted to research with kids)

Results and conclusions

The main questions that I attempted to answer were : What do girls and boys think about being a girl/boy ? How do they define gender ? What does it mean to them to be a girl/boy, how do they concretely manifest themselves ?

With G1 the choices were symptomatic of their developmental stage (according to Piaget's theory the pre-operative stage) : they have a hard time understanding that two beings/objects can have the same features. They only focus on one feature : the exterior aspect, the clothes. They can't perceive yet categorial simultaneity : a police officer is either a man or a woman. During the activities proposed to them, the children chose jobs either for men or for women. With the very young kids of this group I noticed rudimentary stereotypes : *« Boys don't wear skirts, trousers are only for boys, pink is just only (sic !) for little girls, blue is for the boys, girls don't wear blue ».* With this age group mixed play is very common, girls choose as play partners either boys or girls. In

return, girls choose to play with dolls or soft toys and boys with cars. With G2 kids argument their choices and what is more we can notice the presence of movie/story characters to which kids attach various qualities. Boys proved to be more flexible in choosing the same job for girls as well as for boys. There are more variations here, inter and intra categorial. Boys choose different toys, more than the girls. Girls also choose boys as play partners while boys only choose boys to play with. Mixed play is still comom but more rare than with G1. With G3 we can remark a great flexibility in assigning gender roles. Children choose jobs for themselves according to their qualities or passions, hobbies. As to toys, they only choose some very popular ones : Barbie for the majority of girls and Bionicle for the majority of boys. Boys would rather play with active, manipulative toys of this kind, while girls go the opposite direction towards more passive toys. Girls choose as play parteners girls and sometimes boys, but the boys choose only boys as play partners, proving to be again more cohesive than the girls. In the case of G4 , the mixed age group, I could notice differences according to the kids' age, without any apparent contamination of the age context in beliefs or behaviour as some studies suggest. Boys talked about differences between girls and boys based on physical difference but both boys and girls talked about emotional differences between girls and boys. The 7 year-old girls denied certain jobs arguing that they are supposed, as girls, to take care of their looks The toy range is wider in the case of this group. What we see is that children get to know quite quickly who they are in terms of biological characteristics to which they add up later on the notion of social, cultural gender, constructed across interaction within the peer group, across interactions with adults or in other contexts. This is when they start to choose what attitude to adopt, how to behave or whom to play with. Sometimes these choices are made under group pressure or out of fear to be stigmatized. As to the way children behaved, data showed as in other studies that segregation appears around 3 and becomes more evident along with age. Studies show that segregation is symptomatic of cultures with a high degree of inequality between men and women. Occurrences of mixed play became rarer with age. Mixed play with older kids was possible in instances where skills and competency were more salient than gender. Borderwork activities were quite rare with Romanian kids but still they existed and were examplified in the study when they occured. Mixed age did not count in

contaminating attitudes and behaviours, my explanation being that in this case each age group was trying to protect their space. Interactional history within the same group was important along with competencies and proved to be stronger markers than gender in peer group interactions.

Recommandations for teachers and parents were made all throughout the study, based on my own observations or other studies. My ananlysis ends with the description of some data that I did not have time to validate or data that resulted from observations and interviews but did not find their place within this peculiar topic. They could be though valuable starting points for those who want to continue research with children on the topic of gender.

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