

## Children At Play: Learning Gender in the Early Years

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### Abstract

**This is a review of Martin's book Children at Play: Learning Gender in the Early Years. The author first introduces the main content of the book, and then analyses its theoretical basis. Finally, the author puts forward some own thoughts.**

### Keywords

**Gender; Play; Feminist Poststructuralism; Developmentally Appropriate Practice.**

## 1. Introduction

Most of the time, education researchers and policy makers have reached a consensus that play plays an important role in early childhood development and should be in the central position in preschool education. At the same time, teachers and school administrators are only responsible for providing enough time and space for children's play. In short, play is described as a necessary and appropriate education means for children to develop their full potential. What teachers need to do is to let children play freely and try not to interfere, which will naturally promote the development of them. This romantic view of children's play makes people ignore many things, and gender is one of them. As we all know, the early school for children, whether in society or education, is a period of great significance. It is at this time that children not only lay an solid foundation for their education, but also their identity with their group. They have to learn to operate as part of the nursery and school community and understand what it means to be a nursery and school child. As part of this activity, children learn to be a boy or a girl in play [1]. In her book children at play: learning gender in the early year, Barbara Martin makes a detailed and insightful analysis of this process. I have to say that Martin's work has given us a better understanding of how children construct masculinities and femininities through play. I will first give a brief introduction to this book, analyse the theoretical basis of this research, and finally, write some of my thoughts.

## 2. What Does This Book Say

### 2.1. Objective

This book is based on a longitudinal research project conducted with young children in early years classes in a London primary school --Ash Vale--over two years. As Martin puts it, she sought to contribute to feminist understandings of how young children develop gender identities in the early years of schooling [1], therefore, the key research questions were:

What discourses of femininity and masculinity do young children draw on in the early years of schooling?

How do young children embody and perform masculinities and femininities in their activities and relationships in the early years of schooling?

At ash vale, Martin's research lasted two years and followed cohorts of children from Nursery into Reception to see how their ideas and behaviour about gender developed as they moved from Nursery to Reception [1].

## 2.2. Method

Martin supports the growing tradition of participatory research with children, understands children as active social players, and draws on ethnographic and discourse analytic methods. Therefore, ethnography is used to understand children's play practice through participant observation, data collection and analysis based on two years of field note. Martin participated in activities based on story, writing, painting, architecture and role play. Also, she had ongoing discussions with children and adults and conducted semi-structured interviews with children. She documented how girls and boys used the space and resources too, such as who used different spaces in classrooms and playgrounds, who moved, where, and when. Her detailed observation shows how children entering nursery observe the behaviour of those who have settled there and try to follow suit. She shows how new children are supported by others, become legitimate peripheral participants in nursery and reception activities, shape 'right' behaviour, and condemn 'wrong' behaviour. Martin carefully reveals these processes, showing us how masculinity and femininity forms are constructed between children in nursery and reception classes and how children develop and evolve as they move in the space and time of nursery and reception life, both for individuals and groups. Because of the application of these methods, we can see that her book is full of a large number of detailed records and analysis. These records include not only her conversations with children and staffs but also her observations. She always analyzes after presenting these contents, which makes the understanding of the phenomenon more in-depth. The first-hand data from her observation and interview and some existing theories confirm each other.

## 2.3. Outline

In the content outline, I will first show the content outline of the main four chapters of the book horizontally, and then show the criticism of some theories throughout the book vertically.

### 2.3.1. Four Chapters' Outline

In addition to the introduction of the research itself at the beginning and the final summary, there are four chapters left in this book, which are the main part of the book.

The development of gender identities. In this chapter, Martin uses a lot of field note to show how children learn about gender. Children know they are girls or boys and that gender is dimorphic and fixed. Some spaces and activities are considered to belong to boys, while others are considered girls. Martin observed that the older children in the reception class only play with children of the same sex most of the time. The new children in the nursery either observe or join the older children's play together or play parallel beside the older children. Martin analyses this phenomenon by using Lave and Wenger's Communities of Practice and Paechter's theoretical work [2] [3]. She believes that it is in this process that new children become legitimate peripheral participants by observing and imitating the old children's play and taking part in minor aspects of a central activity of the same-sex groups. When new children can share the core meaning or participate in shared repertoire performances and so on, they become full participants in the community of practice. In this process, children completed gender identity in play. From this chapter, we can see the general idea of Martin's whole book. The following chapters are more like Martin's further elaboration from three aspects: outdoor play, masculine and feminine play activities, and imaginative and social-dramatic play [1].

Outdoor Play: 'Skipping is for girls' and 'football is for boys'? In this chapter, Martin explores how children learned gendered behaviour in outdoor play. Although Ash Vale staffs encouraged all boys and girls to play with ropes and balls, and no adults told children that skipping is for

girls and football for boys, Martin still observed girls playing rope skipping with girls and boys playing football with boys. Generally speaking, gender segregation in play is very common in many cultures. What Martin saw is not surprising. Here, she also draws on Lave and Wenger's term 'technology' to describe that only when newcomers master tools can they become full members of the community of practice: girls became members of a community of practice of femininity by playing with skipping ropes; boys joined a community of practice of masculinity by playing football. The level of playing technology may determine their status in the community. Simultaneously, she observed that boys did not allow girls to join in football and girls held on to skipping as a girls-only activity [1]. Those who try to cross gender boundaries are at risk of being rejected or ridiculed by boys and girls. There is another important phenomenon observed by Martin, that is, boys occupy almost most of the playground space.

Masculine and feminine play activities. This chapter discusses how children learned about symbols and markers of femininity and masculinity and how they struggled either to police or to cross gender boundary in their play. Martin observed that pink is considered a symbol of girls, girls have a great interest in appearance, and the girl's self-portrait is usually the princess's dress. Martin thinks it is because girls embody and enact heteronormative practices of femininity, displaying knowledge of female fashion, makeup and beauty and positioning themselves within discourses of emphasized femininity. However, boys in Ash Vale learned to take an active part in three key hegemonic practices of masculinity in the setting: superhero play based on battles, football, and construction (including Lego, train and car play) [1]. It is especially emphasized that taking part in battles and associated superhero play is the central symbol of masculinity. At the same time, Martin also draws from Thorne's 'borderwork' and Foucault's 'panoramic surveillance' to illustrate the disciplinary gaze between the members of boys and girls' community of practice, and this encourages the conformity to the gender norms of the group [4] [5]. So children's cross gender boundary behaviour is often ridiculed, but Martin thinks it should be encouraged by the staff.

Imaginative and socio-dramatic play. This chapter explores how new children in Ash Vale early years classes learned to take gendered roles in imaginative and socio-dramatic play. It is commonly, boys' imaginative and socio-dramatic play are usually superheroes and battle play, while girls' are fairy tales and home life. Similarly, children will be in strict supervision of gender boundaries, which Thorne calls gender border work [4]. In this chapter, Martin also explores the characteristics of successful children across gender boundaries.

### 2.3.2. Martin's Criticism

Criticism of gender dualism. Many feminist Educators have found a common phenomenon when boys and girls play: not only do boys and girls play with different toys, but also play in different areas [6] [7] [8]. How to explain the gender differences in children's play? Gender dualist holds that boys and girls are born different, so boys and girls have different interests and make different choices when playing. Boys choose football, and girls choose family corners are all free choices they make according to their nature. In a word, gender dualist believes that boys and girls are different and this difference is natural. It is a very influential theory, which has a large number of supporters, and even many national policies will be based on it. As a feminist, Martin strongly criticizes gender dualism in this book. First of all, she believed that the gender difference of children's play is not children's free choice but the result of social construction, which is what she wanted to express in the whole book. She took boys' occupation of the construction area as an example to show that girls' play choices are limited. She argued the gender differences in the play based on gender dualism would limit children's development [1]. Second, she believed that there is a huge theoretical loophole in gender dualism, that is, it can not explain the individual differences between boys and girls [1]. Although most boys will choose football between football and doll, and most girls will choose a doll, as individuals, boys and girls are diverse. Some boys and girls will also show behavior across gender boundaries [1].

The difference between some children of the same sex is greater than that between the two sexes. Finally, gender dualism not only fails to explain this difference, but also supports gender stereotypes [1]. People generally hold gender stereotypes, and they have different opinions on the personality characteristics and behaviour of boys and girls. In terms of personality characteristics and behaviour, boys are often considered to be more attractive, rational, brave, strong, active, adventurous, eager for independence etc, girls are more perceptual, gentle, considerate, careful, quiet. Gender stereotype is the source of gender prejudice. In general, gender dualism will rationalize the gender differences between boys and girls in the play so that many staffs think that this difference is the result of children's free choice, which is in line with their nature. I'm afraid that's one of the reasons why people ignore gender issues in play.

Criticism of Developmentally Appropriate Practice. The term Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) was formalized when the American National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) released the book *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth Through Age 8* In the late 1980s [9]. DAP is based on various theories of child development, especially Piaget's [1] [10]. Developmental psychology is closely related to children's pedagogy and practice. The main pedagogical theory of children has always insisted that the curriculum should provide information through understanding the development level of each child. The expectation of children's pedagogy is that it can promote children's development. To be considered good, the early childhood curriculum needs to be developmentally appropriate. Therefore, DAP has been the mainstream discourse in the field of children pedagogy for many years. Almost all early childhood educators know DAP, which plays a significant role in children's pedagogy and practice. Nevertheless, with the rise of post-developmentalism, developmentalism and DAP have been criticized [11]. For example, Burman believes that developmental psychology ignores that children and childhood are constructed by society [12]. Martin also criticized DAP from the following aspects. First of all, because DAP focuses on children's individual development, many early childhood staffs often do not realize the importance of children's gender issues, although many studies have elaborated the importance of gender in children's development. For many staffs, the important thing is to make appropriate pedagogy plans according to children's development stage to promote children's development. Gender issues have not entered their vision at all. So, although these staffs will also carefully observe children, 'seeing gender' has also proved to be such a difficult task in early childhood education [13]. All leads to the marginalization of children's gender issues. Meanwhile, the blind attention to children's gender issues will lead to the prevalence of innocent childhood discourse. The core of this innocent childhood discourse is that children are childish compared with adults, their knowledge is unreliable, and they need adult monitoring. At the same time, children are constructed as asexual. This kind of innocent childhood discourse, in turn, will strengthen the neglect of children's gender issues. Some scholars believe that children are too young to understand gender issues, which may make the practice of teachers inadvertently safeguard patriarchy. Second, DAP is closely related to free play discourse, which makes it impossible for teachers to intervene. DAP based children's free play or self-directed play has been widely accepted by early education practitioners. It is generally believed that children's autonomous activities are most beneficial to their development, which leads to resistance to intervention. Therefore, the role of teachers is only limited to facilitator and encourager. Although it is common for boys to play football and girls to skip rope, this gender difference seems to be a free choice for children, but in fact, it is not the case. Both boys and girls have monitored gender behaviour. At the same time, although people have a romantic view about children's play, the playground is a dangerous place. From the perspective of gender, there is not only gender segregation but also aggression and harassment, even racial segregation. If we are aware of this, it is doubtful children's free play, and teachers' non-intervention attitude are still a good practice for children. Thus, many

feminists criticize this kind of free play discourse and non-intervention discourse and think that it connives at male hegemony, aggression and harassment in the playground and maintains gender segregation and gender discrimination. In a word, in the view of feminists, DAP with Piaget's theory as the core only pays attention to individual development, understands children as natural growth rather than a social construction, ignores gender issues, denies the role of social background and social relations, and eventually leads to gender inequality and maintains patriarchy. MacNaughton supports teachers' active intervention and proposes reconstructing developmentalist pedagogic gaze, which requires more feminist perspectives on children's curriculum and practice [10]. Like MacNaughton, Martin, of course, advocates teachers' intervention. In the latter part of each chapter, there are detailed suggestions for teachers, such as setting up a special time for girls in the construction area, and teachers should encourage children's cross-gender behaviour, etc.

### 2.3.3. Theoretical Basis

In the process of discourse analysis, Martin draws on the theories of Paechter, Lave and Wenger, Foucault, Connell, and feminist poststructuralism, which are the theoretical basis for her to explain how children form masculinity and femininity.

First of all, she used the term 'community of practice' to explain how and why particular forms of gender are performed at particular times and places. The concept of community of practice was established by Lave and Wenger and further elaborated by Wenger [2] [14]. What Lave and Wenger are interested in is to establish a concept of learning, which is located in the social context and takes place in the community of practice through what they call 'legitimate peripheral participation'. Practice community, in a broad sense, is a group engaged in sharing practice. Novices of this approach are considered to develop expertise by participating in legitimate activities that contribute to practice but are not at the core of practice; as they move towards full participation, these contributions gradually become more complex and important. Through this, they not only developed their professional knowledge in practice itself but also developed their understanding and embedding of the culture surrounding practice. The concept of community of practice originally had nothing to do with masculinity and femininity, but Paechter applied it to gender issues. Paechter agrees with Butler's theory of gender performance [3]. This theory holds that 'I' am performing or imitating a certain gender. Through this repeated performance or imitation, 'I' construct myself as a subject with this gender. The subject is a performing construction subject in the process constructed by repeatedly performing behaviour. Butler hold that gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow. Rather, gender is an identity tenuously constructed through time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts [3]. However, for Paechter, if we regard masculinities and femininities as performative, we are then faced with the question of which we perform when and how this comes about. After reading Christine Skelton's recent book, *Schooling the Boys*, Paechter was inspired to apply the concept of community of practice to studying children's gender issues. She believed that it might be fruitful to treat masculinities and femininities as communities of practice. Children and young people gradually learn what it is to be male and female within particular communities [3]. Martin inherited Paechter 's application of this concept. She believes that every newcomer can be regarded as a legitimate peripheral member who observes same-sex children' play, such as rope skipping or football, and tries to join them. When these newcomers master the play technology, participate in shared repertoire of masculine of feminine activities, and show that they can use appropriate gender knowledge, they will be recognized as full members of the community of practice.

Secondly, to illustrate the disciplinary gaze between children, Foucault's concept of panoptic surveillance is a theoretical weapon borrowed by Martin. Panopticism comes from Foucault's works of *Discipline and Punish*, while Foucault draws on Bentham's concept of the modern

prison [5]. Bentham's panopticon is like this: there is a surveillance tower in the center, surrounded by round independent rooms. The originality of this design is that the situation in the independent room can be clearly seen from the monitoring tower. However, the situation in the monitoring tower can not be seen from the independent room. That is to say: the guards in the surveillance tower can see the movements of all the prisoners; on the contrary, the prisoners in the independent room have no idea what the guards are doing. Here, there is an imbalance of line of sight between the monitor and the monitored. This kind of imbalance is the symbol of power, which means that one party completely obeys the design of the other party. The major effect of the Panopticon: to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power [5]. That means that prisoners will be highly aware that they are likely to be under surveillance, so they will consciously become docile 'subordinates'. In this way, power will be deeply internalized in prisoners. In other words, power has been 'depersonalized' and has become anonymous, thus enabling it to function more skillfully and precisely. What Foucault wants to express is that the power of discipline and punish seen from the panopticon is not limited to the prison system; it is full of every corner of modern society. This principle has spread to many organizations in our society, such as schools, factories, workplaces, hospitals, the military, and plays the same role as prisons. For the formation and maintenance of social order, this role can not be ignored. In this way, the object of discipline and training is not only the human body but also the whole society. Foucault revealed the reality that people will be unconsciously dominated by power, which is of great significance. Paechter applies the concept of panoptic surveillance to communities of practice of masculinities and femininities: members exert a disciplinary gaze on one another, which encourages conformity to the gender norms of the group [15]. She suggests that panoptic surveillance is particularly important in early childhood communities of practice of masculinity and femininity, as it affects the way in which newcomers learn to engage in practices as legitimate peripheral participants. As Martin's observations and interviews show, the girls are reminded to put down their rolled up skirts, the girls are also distressed by the muddy mark on their trousers, and the boys try to avoid anything feminine. Using the work of Foucault and Paechter, we can see that in gender behaviour, not only children gaze at each other, but also children and adults gaze at each other. What's more, this kind of supervision has been internalized into self supervision. There is no need for coercion or violence. Panoptic surveillance plays a role in invisible places.

The third important theoretical basis is Cornell's hegemonic masculinity. According to Cornell, the concept of hegemonic masculinity is a combination of many sources [16]. Firstly, it comes from feminist patriarchy and Gramsci's hegemonic theory. Moreover, it is also based on some empirical social studies and psychoanalytic theories. Hegemonic masculinity was understood as the pattern of practice (i.e., things are done, not just a set of role expectations or identity) that allowed male's dominance over female to continue [16]. In Martin's observation, it is found that boys always occupy most of the play space or always destroy girls' play, while girls are rarely able to carry out fierce resistance. This is a common phenomenon in early childhood play, which can be observed in many cultures. In Martin's view, this is a kind of hegemonic masculinity. At the same time, these different boys occupy different positions in the community due to their different masculinity, forming a masculine hierarchy. Men who received the benefits of patriarchy without enacting a strong version of masculine dominance could be regarded as showing complicit masculinity [16]. Compared with those boys who show typical hegemonic masculinity, they may also be excluded. In Martin's observation, those boys with outstanding skills, strong body and good endurance in football games, battle play and construction games are considered as the leaders of the boys' community. In contrast, the sissy boys are regarded as inferior or even excluded in the boys' community. Therefore, hegemonic masculinity is not only a power relationship with girls but also a power relationship within boys.

It should be noted that hegemony did not mean violence, although it could be supported by force; it meant ascendancy achieved through culture, institutions, and persuasion [16].

Finally, throughout the book, we can feel Martin's feminist poststructuralism position. MacNaughton believes that the theories of biological determinism and socialization have great limitations in explaining how children learn the gender [10]. Biological determinism holds that male and female are naturally different, which can not explain individual differences, but also can be used to support social inequality. Socialization theory holds that children's development of gender identity is due to the information provided by the surrounding environment, which can not explain why children accept some information and reject others. On the whole, these two theories worked against gender equality. MacNaughton also believes that a better perspective to understand children's gender issues is feminist poststructuralism [10] [13]. Martin agrees with MacNaughton's point of view and also holds the position of feminist poststructuralism. Poststructuralism is a school of philosophy whose main representatives are Derrida, Lacan, Foucault and so on. Weedon believes that poststructuralism provides a useful conceptual basis for feminist practice [17]. She described feminism poststructuralism as 'a mode of knowledge production which uses poststructuralist theories of language, subjectivity, social processes and institutions to understand existing power relations and identify areas and strategies for change'. Feminist poststructuralism is very different from biological determinism and socialization theory. It does not depict children as passive recipients of socialization but rather recognizes their central role in the negotiation of their own identity. We can understand that children are capable participants in their social world. In building identity, children use the meaning they can get. Some of these meanings are more powerful than others because they are easier to acquire, more desirable or more enjoyable. As MacNaughton argue, children do not just absorb identity from social institutions and people around them [10]. Children reshape and develop their identity when they receive various and often contradictory information from caregivers, families, media and preschool children. They have learned from the reactions of the people around them very early what is acceptable and what is unacceptable under various circumstances. Children have to make their own sense and choose what to do.

### 3. Some Thoughts

#### 3.1. Constructed or Born?

Feminism inevitably has to answer the question: is there any difference between male and female and what causes the difference. Although feminists have a basic consensus on striving for equality between male and female, different feminists hold different positions on gender differences. However, on the whole, many feminists emphasize that even if there are differences between the two sexes, the similarities are more than the differences. At the same time, more importantly, they think that the differences are not born, but caused by the acquired social construction. For example, Beauvoir holds that one is not born a woman but becomes one. Butler even thinks that physiological gender is constructed too. In this book, Martin holds the position of feminist poststructuralism, and also thinks that gender is constructive. Social constructionism, of course, is helpful to declare war on the superiority of male over female as a theoretical weapon in the feminist movement, to theoretically pave the way for equality between male and female. However, I think that extreme physiological determinism is not correct, and extreme constructivism may also be wrong. It is difficult to deny the physiological differences between male and female and the impact of such differences on the fate of male and female. Whether the difference between male and female is born or constructed, there is currently no way to give a convincing answer. There are no men and women who are not affected by social construction, nor are there men and women who are not affected by natural physiology. Probably all men and women are affected by these two factors, so any extreme

answer will become a fallacy that ignores the facts. In this case, I think it is best to suspend judgment. Any answer to this question can not have a sufficient basis. It can only be a battle of words between male and female.

### 3.2. Intervention or Non-intervention?

As mentioned above, DAP discourse has a non-interventionist attitude towards children's play, while feminists including Martin and MacNaughton hold an interventionist position. Martin herself also put forward a series of suggestions for teacher intervention, such as providing a huge amount of equipment to allow non-dominant children to have the opportunity to use, and supporting children's cross-gender boundaries behavior. If there is a dominant boy's aggression or harassment of girls in children's play, the teacher's intervention seems very reasonable. However, if the guardian of the child does not agree with feminism and wants the boy to be masculine, and the teacher himself holds a feminist position, he encourages the child's cross-gender behaviour, such as encouraging the boy to play in the family corner. We can't help asking, in this case, do teachers have the right to intervene in this way? The gender equality plan may cause some parents' dissatisfaction. Should teachers secretly implement such a plan? What kind of ethical dilemma will teachers face? MacNaughton believes that it is necessary to explain to parents how gender discourse limits children's development to obtain parents' support. But what if parents don't support it? The ethical dilemma of teachers has not been solved. Feminists such as Martin and MacNaughton don't seem to notice this.

### 3.3. Discourse or Production?

In this book, Martin draws on Foucault's work and uses discourse to refer to social, institutional and emotional frameworks and practices through which humans make meanings of their experiences. Some discourses enable specific groups to exercise power in ways that benefit them, and others provide challenges to the status quo [1]. Martin mentioned various discourses, such as development discourses, free play discourses, innocent childhood discourses and so on. It seems that discourse is the decisive factor that determines how children construct gender identity. However, what discourse dominates in a society is the result of the power relations among various interest groups. Behind the words is power, and behind the power is the production. I agree with Engels, the decisive element of history is preeminently the production and reproduction of life and its material requirement. Patriarchy is characterized by the social structure that male is superior to female and has a long history. Men's winning their status is due to the increasing in the importance of men's work and production, while decreasing in the value of female's labour and production. Therefore, female's liberation is only possible when they can participate in the production on a large scale and social scale, while housework only takes up a small part of their time [18]. Therefore, although Martin, as a feminist poststructuralist, has grasped the role of discourse. However, I think that if female can't enter the public industry, female's liberation will be out of reach. Production is the root; discourse is the end. Children's play can not be separated from society. The power relationship in children's play is only the reflection of social power relationship, and the discourse in children's play is only the reflection of social discourse. Only when female and male have the same important position in production can the discourse change with the change of social power relations. Therefore, I think that even though Martin put forward many suggestions in the book to promote gender equality in the play, as long as the status of male and female in production remains unchanged, we still can not achieve gender equality.

### 3.4. Academic or Political?

How to treat some theories of Feminism? Is it academic or political, or both academic and political? As we all know, feminism is a political movement. In history, there have been several waves of feminism, each of which is pushing forward the cause of equality between male and



female. In philosophy, sociology, psychology, pedagogy and other fields, feminism can be regarded as thought with its own unique theoretical perspective. There is no doubt that the feminist scholarship and feminist political movement complement each other. Many feminist theories provide theoretical support for feminist movement. Therefore, some people criticize that the feminist scholarship is just a theoretical weapon of feminist political movement, which is not scientific and has less academic meaning and more political meaning. In the final analysis, this issue is actually the relationship between academic and political issues. It's hard to say how many academics have no political stance. Even in some natural science research, the phenomenon of political infiltration of academics still exists. According to MacNaughton, some discourses become dominant discourses not because of their truth or correctness, but because of the political power behind them. The study of the sociology of knowledge and the philosophy of science and technology has shown this to us. Most of the knowledge in the world is the product of society, and pure objectivity and neutrality do not exist. Therefore, the rise of feminism as an academic is essentially a manifestation of female's rising status in social life. What kind of theory feminism can construct is closely related to female's political power. Feminism is both academic and political, which is no different from others.

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