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Challenging Gender Certainties in Early Childhood Care and Education: A Participatory Action Learning and Action Research Study¹

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Abstract

For deep-rooted gender equity and social transformation, we need to challenge so-called certainties or dominant ideologies about gender. Many dominant ideologies centred on gender abound in society, and these need to be addressed at the earliest opportunity. Early childhood care and education (ECCE) refers to the care and education of children from birth to 4 years old, and this is an opportune period for teachers to examine and challenge certainties regarding gender. This article reports on a segment of a larger study on inclusion involving a virtual learning participatory workshop with six ECCE teachers and two ECCE teacher trainers that aimed to address a knowledge gap; ECCE research into gender is scarce in developing countries like South Africa. Due to the social distancing necessitated by the coronavirus pandemic, all interactions were facilitated through the WhatsApp platform. The study employed a participatory action learning and action research (PALAR) design that focused on collaborative and contextually relevant learning and research. Data were generated in two iterative cycles using a baseline questionnaire, photovoice, reflective journals, and purposeful conversations. Data generated in Cycle 1 revealed that participants required greater awareness regarding their current views on gender and sexuality. Data revealed that members of the action learning set (ALS) required clarity on gender binary, heterosexuality as a dominant ideology, and on gender stereotyping. The ALS transformed their learning environments by addressing those concerns in Cycle 2. The findings in Cycle 2 pinpoint how the respective learning environments were transformed by challenging gender binary, heterosexuality, and gender stereotyping. This research serves to challenge certainties regarding gender. Knowledge presented here could lead to more equitable gender practice at the participants' respective centres, which may impact positively on wider societal transformation.

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Keywords: early childhood care and education, gender, certainties, participatory action learning and action research

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Background

The early years are a critical period for learning in all domains, including the acquisition of gender norms and gender expectations. When children are born, they are usually assigned a biological sex (Morgenroth et al., 2020). However, gender is primarily socially constructed when children begin to observe the gendered roles enacted around them (Devarakonda, 2014). It is the interplay of biological disposition and, to a greater extent socialisation, that build ideas regarding gender expectations and roles where nurture amplifies nature (Hofstede et al., 2015). These societal roles are culturally defined and therefore easily moulded. Indeed, from a very young age, children become gender detectives (Martin & Ruble, 2004), and these authors have explained that by the age of 5 years, children have already acquired a vast array of gender stereotypes using gender cues provided by societal interactions. In support of this, Freeman (2007) revealed that by 5 years, children show more evidence of conforming to gender stereotypes than their 3-year-old counterparts due to the attitudes of the adults they are in contact with. Hence, working with children before the age of 5, early childhood care and education (ECCE) teachers may play a pivotal role in forming children's ideas regarding how boys and girls should behave. Gender certainties (Govender, 2018) influence the thoughts and actions of teachers in the early learning environment. According to Freire and Macedo (1987), "a pedagogy will be that more critical and radical, the more investigative and less sure of 'certainties' it is" (p. 36).

Certainties identified in this study include firstly, the gender binary concept where gender is regarded as either male or female. Individuals may have elements of each gender category or they may not fit into a single gender category (Morgenroth et al., 2020). According to Msibi (2011), an individual's gender identification may also be fluid and dynamic. This is not something new given that many African cultures recognised gender as non-binary prior to colonisation. For instance, in the Dagaaba tribe in Ghana, gender was not determined by physical anatomy but by vibrational energy, and the Mbuti tribe in Central Africa only assigned gender at puberty (Collins, 2017). Closer to home, among the Zulus, the traditional healers or izangoma often show non-binary characteristics and are accepted to be the carriers of androgynous spirits (Mnyadi, 2020). Globally, official state policies in countries like Germany have recognised a third sex for individuals born with ambiguous sexual traits or those who do not fit neatly into a gender or sex category (Eddy & Bennet, 2017). Recent laws in Scotland also allow children as young as 4 years to change their names, pronouns, and gender identity without parental consent (Sanderson, 2021). Evidently, challenging binary thinking is imperative for social justice and inclusion given that these certainties silence children who do not fit neatly into a gender identity.

Secondly, certainties regarding heterosexuality as a dominant ideology foreground opposite-sex partnerships in the learning environment. Historically, same sex marriage has been accepted since 2006 when the Civil Union Act came into power in South Africa (de Vos & Barnard, 2007). Constitutional law, however, does not always guarantee social acceptance or visibility. In a report by The Other

Foundation (2016), it was found that 72 per cent of South Africans felt that same sex activity is morally wrong. Arising from the same report, data generated from the narratives of LGBTQI+ South Africans, revealed that 44 per cent of these people had experienced verbal, physical, and/or sexual discrimination due to their sexual orientation (The Other Foundation, 2016). A failure to represent the lived experiences of these families in early childhood learning environments denies their representation and inclusion (Liang & Cohrsen, 2020). It is also important to realise that early childhood settings are not devoid of sexuality. Robinson and Jones Diaz (2005) pointed out that children's play is often characterised by mock weddings, reenacting spousal roles, and kissing games. A study by Soteyik et al. (2019) suggested that teachers need to observe how children engage with heteronormativity during play and suggest options that challenge this heteronormativity during pretend play. Unfortunately, children's knowledge of dominant heterosexual ideologies is seldom challenged—perhaps, like other forms of social justice, due to the homophobic and heterosexual value systems or misconceptions about sexual age appropriateness among teachers and parents (Robinson & Jones-Diaz, 2005). Teachers may also fear dismissal when school policies and school governance discourage them to engage in taboo topics (for example, Fernández, 2020). In this way, certainties regarding heterosexuality can silence certain minorities in early childhood settings.

Thirdly, these certainties could also depict gender stereotyping in terms of prescribed traits for each gender or gender role. Researchers (Chick et al., 2002; Jennet, 2013) have pinpointed that teachers are often unaware of the gender stereotypes that they reinforce through the hidden curriculum. Here, a hidden curriculum refers to the implicit values, behaviour, and norms transferred without conscious intention and awareness by children and teachers in the learning environment (Sedigheh et al., 2019). An increased awareness would assist teachers in examining their implicit attitudes. For example, in a project in the United Kingdom by the National Union of Teachers (Jennet, 2013), which involved five nursery and primary schools, it was found that certain items, for example colours, toys, games, activities, and books, were associated with a single gender. Jennet (2013) stated that most of these distinctions had no importance in society but worked towards enforcing and exaggerating certain gender stereotypes. For instance, in the study, boys would refuse to play with bicycles or other toys that were pink and would be teased for wearing pink clothes or choosing items that were pink (Jennet, 2013). The study also revealed that this arose because teachers treated boys and girls differently by using gender groupings, allocating certain colours as gendered symbols, stipulating gendered play areas, and assigning gendered tasks. Also significant, in a study by Chick et al. (2002) using infants, toddlers, and children younger than 4 years, it was revealed that boys, even though in the minority in a playgroup, were given greater attention by teachers. The study also disclosed that teachers and caregivers were unaware of their language and sent unconscious messages that expected boys to be rough and play boisterously, compared to girls (Chick et al., 2002). Evidently, teachers project their personal beliefs onto children, and teachers' voices have a profound impact on children's beliefs regarding gender.

Activities in the daily ECCE programme create opportune moments for gender roles to be unlearned and relearned. One such activity is pretend play, which serves as a powerful means for children to make sense of their life worlds (Rao & Gibson, 2021). Play-based activities enable children to understand complex forms of knowledge in the social and cognitive developmental domains (Excell & Linington, 2015). The latter-mentioned authors suggested that teachers should adopt a pedagogy of play, where important values are purposefully taught using play as a medium. In studies, for example by Breneselovic and Krnjaja (2016), teachers found no need to intervene when children played out stereotypical roles—but would take notice if their play mimicked unconventional gender roles. Therefore, using this pedagogy of play, the teacher could mediate play and use opportune moments during play to correct misconceptions and stereotypes that arise. Besides play, teachers need to select stories, nursery rhymes, and poems carefully to challenge harmful gender stereotyping. According to Burton (2020, p. 36) "story time shapes children's developing views of themselves, their peers, and the

adults in their lives.” Indeed, all activities and resources in the early learning environment are value laden and may challenge or support dominant ideologies regarding gender.

It is important for ECCE teachers to contest harmful stereotypes and gender exclusion. The effects of early gender stereotyping and exclusion may have far-reaching effects on the child’s interests and career choices. For instance, Dickins (2014) reported that in the construction area, girls may be discouraged from participating in activities with mechanical and wheeled toys. This author explained that these toys develop foundational skills for later interest and understanding of the STEM (science, technology, engineering, and maths) learning subjects (Dickins, 2014). Also, studies have revealed that society may have stereotyped beliefs regarding females’ capacities to cope with STEM subjects (Leslie et al., 2015). Perhaps teachers in the early years could shape stereotypes about children’s intellectual ability. Such stereotyped beliefs emerge early and may have far-reaching influences on children’s career choices (Bian et al., 2017). Markedly, a report by Makunga (2020) claimed that males still dominate in the STEM fields despite programmes to encourage the participation of girls and women. Drawing from the above, we can deduce that increasing teacher awareness of gendered play may encourage female interest in the STEM fields. Boys who prefer to nurture and care may also be disadvantaged when teachers encourage such stereotypical types of play. By encouraging rough play among boys, this imposition of hegemonic masculine traits (Yang, 2020) may subordinate little boys who prefer more quiet and subdued activities. Moosa and Bhana (2020, p. 56) stated that all males may not possess the qualities of a “hegemonic heterosexual masculinity.” In their study for example, such gender stereotyping impeded men’s participation in care professions like foundation phase teaching (Moosa & Bhana, 2020). Teachers in ECCE therefore need to go beyond hegemonic understandings to pave the way for a more gender equitable schooling experience for both boys and girls in the early learning environment. For teachers, this would mean moving away from certainties regarding gender or sexual normativity (Govender, 2018). In this study, research participants actively identified and challenged these certainties in their respective learning environments.

Theoretical Framework

Freire’s (2000) concept of critical pedagogy was used to underpin this study because it foregrounds how the learning environment can be used as a space for social transformation. According to Freire, education is a political act that seeks to liberate or silence marginalised groups of people (as cited by Chalaune, 2021) including those who deviate from gender and sexual norms. Critical pedagogy highlights the interplay of power, domination, oppression, and ideology in the learning environment (Villanueva & O’Sullivan, 2019). Teachers need to question why certain groups are considered more powerful and how existing ideologies perpetuate the dominance of these groups in the learning environment (Gelot, 2019). Consequently, teachers using a critical pedagogy should develop an awareness that certain groups are silenced—and alleviate this inequity. Spaces for these difficult conversations need to be created to allow teachers to move beyond preconceived certainties (Govender, 2018). The central principles of critical pedagogy aim to reveal these certainties perpetuated in the learning environment and the need to act against them.

Central to critical pedagogy is the concept of conscientisation, which enables teachers to develop a critical awareness of power dynamics in the learning environment and to act against these (Gelot, 2019). This serves as a point of departure for teachers to examine how dominant beliefs about gender are enmeshed in the hidden curriculum. Jansen (2009, p. 278) declared that a teacher is not one who has,

figured out the problems of an unequal world and stands to dispense this wisdom to receiving students . . . the teachers are themselves carriers of troubled knowledge, and this has serious implications for critical education.

Dialogue can be seen as a catalyst for reflection and action that results in the awareness of this troubled knowledge. Through the process of dialogue, the role of the teacher is redefined (Abraham, 2014). This encourages teachers to invent and reinvent themselves continually; a loss of this fluidity results in a loss of a critical stance (McLaren & Kincheloe, 2007). Teachers should be prepared for a role-reversal and a rejection of the banking model of education, in which a knowledgeable adult deposits content into the passive minds of children (Bohórquez, 2020).

This banking model is aligned to the theory of anti-dialogical action, which serves to oppress (Pouwels, 2019). It is through dialogue and mutual collaboration that the learning space is democratised (Villanueva & O'Sullivan, 2019). Here, the marginalised are able to emancipate themselves by making valuable contributions and by developing their agency (Ebrahim et al., 2011). Dialogical action also aims to challenge dominant ideologies regarding sexual and gender-based norms. In this study, we refer to ideology as the “normalized and naturalized production of meaning by which people make sense of the world” (Brown & Sekimoto, 2017, p. 21). In the context of the study, we seek to challenge the dominant ideologies or certainties that silence those who deviate from gender and sexual normativity. Therefore, we question hegemony, which can be regarded as an organising force that seeks to maintain the status quo within unequal societies (Jaques et al., 2019). The practice of gender inclusion contests hegemony in the early learning space when teachers start to question and challenge why certain groups (for example, those conforming to heteronormativity or those labelled as cisgender) are considered more powerful or notable.

Research Methodology

Freire's (2020) critical pedagogy emphasised that knowledge must be deconstructed and reconstructed through dialogue. Historically, Freire provided a pathway to do this dialogically by the formation of culture circles (Reingold et al., 2020). Culture circles consist of groups of people who come together to solve a common relevant problem within their own contexts. The formation of these culture circles aims not only to conscientise people regarding their current reality but to transform this reality for the better (Souto-Manning, 2010). The outcomes of these culture circles are unpredictable, and learning is dynamic and collaboratively constructed. Each participant's contribution introduces a unique set of experiences to the circle, in which individual contributions are valued and solutions contextually relevant (Chaib, 2010).

Aligned with Freire's (2020) culture circles, participatory action learning and action research (PALAR) design goes further than just researching a phenomenon but, rather, aims to benefit a group by ensuring sustainable and meaningful learning. Hence, our study took the form of a virtual learning participatory workshop adopting the guiding principles of a PALAR design comprising the three Rs and the seven Cs of PALAR (Kearney et al. 2013; Zuber-Skerritt, 2018). The three Rs (relationships, reflection, and recognition) are intertwined with the seven Cs (compromise, coaching, communication, commitment, collaboration, critical reflection, competence) and are dependent on each other (Schoonen et al., 2021). The PALAR design involved two phases: a relationship-building phase, and a research phase. The first R, building relationships, was the most challenging because we were working in an online environment. Due to the restrictions of the coronavirus pandemic, extra time was required to build trust and to establish mutual goals. Following suggestions by Wood (2020), focused activities were planned before the research proper began in order to establish sound relationships. Using a WhatsApp group, participants shared photographs, motivational images, and personal stories that developed a team spirit and mutual goals. Zuber-Skerritt and Teare (2013) stated that this is essential for the ongoing success and sustainability of a PALAR project. Principles of compromise, coaching, communication, commitment, and collaboration strengthened relationships within the action learning set (ALS). The second R consists of reflection, which involves a critical examination of the knowledge created and of the research process itself. This allows one to view present behaviour and plan for

future behaviour (Heidegger, 2010). Zuber-Skerritt (2018, p. 519) claimed that reflection is necessary in “designing, implementing, learning through, and evaluating a PALAR research project.” This assisted in the shaping of future cycles of learning. The third R, recognition, applauds the efforts of the research group or ALS. Recognition of successful contributions and competencies is a key element of PALAR (Wood et al., 2017). Affirmation of the group’s achievements needed to be rewarded and celebrated by a publication about the research phenomenon (Zuber-Skerritt, 2018). Therefore, by including photographs, captions, and drawings in an inclusive handbook to be distributed to other ECCE centres, the efforts of the ALS in this study will be recognised.

The research objectives were:

1. To establish the current situation regarding gender certainties in the ECCE learning environment.
2. To challenge gender certainties in the ECCE learning environment.

The first research cycle aimed to identify gender stereotyping in the early learning environment, and the second cycle aimed to challenge these stereotypes.

PALAR research employs a critical emancipatory research paradigm (Chidarikire, 2017; Dube & Hlalele, 2017) that seeks to enable the voice and agency of practitioners in the field. This study thus called for a collective meaning-making (Lochmiller & Lester, 2015) resulting in greater epistemic justice throughout the two research cycles. The eight participants were purposefully selected according to whom could best inform the research objectives and enhance an understanding of the phenomenon under study (Maree, 2016). The participants, consisting of six ECCE teachers and two ECCE teacher trainers, needed to be willing to interact online, be familiar with the WhatsApp platform, and have access to a smart phone. Only female teachers were available for the study because a male teacher working in the birth to 4 years sector is rare to find. Given that PALAR research aims to gain a deep understanding of the research problem and foster close relationships among the participants, a small research sample was appropriate (Wood, 2020).

PALAR, similar to other types of action research, uses four main steps consisting of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting within each research cycle. First, in the planning step, participants completed a baseline questionnaire. Ojageer (2019) claimed that the baseline questionnaire is an analysis of the situation prior to intervention at a site in order to identify possible areas of concern or gaps in knowledge among the research participants. This step revealed gender and sexuality exclusion as one of the focus areas of our study. Second, during the acting step, participants were prompted to use photovoice. According to Luthuli (2019), this is a participatory visual method in which participants use their cameras to capture images that convey their feelings, beliefs, and experiences, and narrate their everyday experiences in their own words. We gave the participants the prompt: “Present an image of a drawing or object that is relevant to gender or sexuality in the early years.” Third, the observation step involved the viewing of the photos and captions by the participants, and the discussion of meanings. The collaborative observations of the group were guided by the “SHOWED” method (Liebenberg, 2018; Luthuli, 2019; Ronzi et al., 2016). The following questions were used to guide the observation and analysis of the photographs and captions.

1. What do you See here?
2. What is really Happening here?
3. How does this relate to Our lives?
4. Why does this problem or strength exist?
5. How could this image Educate the community or policy makers?
6. What can we Do about it?

In the fourth step, reflecting involved thinking back critically about the cycle and journaling a way forward to inform Cycle 2 of the study. The generated data were interpreted and analysed using critical thematic analysis (Lawless & Chen, 2019). Similar to thematic analysis, critical thematic analysis identifies themes by noting incidences of recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness, which are then related to wider ideologies. The principal researcher categorised the data into three themes that were presented to the group for verification at the end of the cycle. The next cycle was informed by the second research objective and attempted to address the challenges revealed in Cycle 1, using the same four steps. Participants planned how to create a more gender inclusive learning environment and decided on their further action by creating resources to correct the deficits identified in Cycle 1. These were photographed and presented to the group for collaborative observation, evaluation, and analysis, which later concluded with their reflective journal entries. Cycle 2 allowed for praxis—a product of iterative, collaborative reflection and action with the participants in an attempt to effect change in their certainties regarding gender.



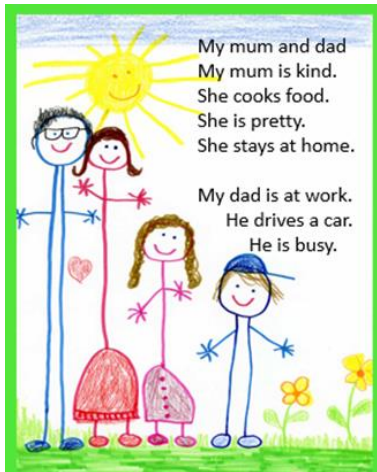

In keeping with university requirements, ethical clearance was received from the university before data generation began. In addition to the university's ethical requirements, PALAR requires researchers to ensure that the ethical considerations are accepted and negotiated by all participants. Additionally, PALAR belongs to a genre of research that needs to benefit the research participants and society in general (Wood, 2020). PALAR calls for epistemic democracy, in which the voices of participants are heard with no power hierarchies evident. This required the principal researcher to balance facilitation with retaining the autonomy of the research participants. Although this study reports on just two research cycles, the ALS will continue with future cycles of learning to develop and finalise a handbook on inclusion in ECCE.



Findings

The aim of the first research cycle was to identify gender certainties (if any) in the ECCE learning environment. Therefore, in Cycle 1, participants used photovoice as a participatory method to share instances of gender stereotyping in their respective learning environments. Captions and photographs shared the lived experiences of the participants and stimulated dialogue resulting in deeper insights and the ability of the group to collectively challenge gender certainties in the early learning environment. These conversations revealed their emerging awareness of gender stereotyping and exclusion in their respective ECCE learning environments. Cycle 2 then attempted to transform the learning environments by addressing these areas of concern. The results reported here incorporate participant messages from Cycle 1 and Cycle 2. We begin our findings by presenting the three themes in the form of photographs and captions or discussions from the research participants (RP). During the observation, participants built upon each other's interpretations and these reflections were captured from conversations in the group or their reflective journals. Table 1 presents the visual images, captions, and reflections.

Table 1

Participant Photographs and Narratives for Cycles 1 and 2

Broad themes	Cycle 1: Identifying gender certainties	Cycle 2: Challenging gender certainties
Gender binary: Photovoice and captions	<p>Image 1 <i>Identifying Gender Binary</i></p>  <p>Boys and girls in the class [display chart] which reinforces gender binary. (RP4)</p>	<p>Image 2 <i>Challenging Gender Binary</i></p>  <p>This [display chart] does not group children according to gender, and remedies the issue. (RP4)</p>
Participant Cycle 2 reflections	<p>Similar to the crayons in a box all children are different and unique so we avoid [gender] groupings. (RP1)</p> <p>At the centres, we firstly need to be gender-neutral and avoid grouping children according to their physical sex. Instead, we should let them play with whomever they want. Even our class lists and posters should not be divided into boys and girls. (RP4)</p>	
Heterosexuality: Photovoice and captions	<p>Image 3 <i>Identifying Heterosexuality as a Norm</i></p>  <p>The chart shows a traditional family structure. (RP5)</p>	<p>Image 4 <i>Challenging Heterosexuality as a Norm</i></p>  <p>A family with two mums. (RP3)</p>

Participant Cycle 2 reflections	<p>I do believe children learn about these things [sexuality] gradually as they grow older. (RP1)</p> <p>It's also nice to get consent from parents when talking about sensitive issues as parents may feel uncomfortable. (RP1)</p> <p>LGBTQI+ is something that can be relatable to children in their home settings. (RP2)</p> <p>We need to have a family wall with all the different family structures in our group. If we have a child from a family with two mums or dads, this must be discussed. (RP3)</p>	
Gendered play: Photovoice and captions	<p>Image 5 <i>Identifying Gender Stereotyping</i></p>  <p>A storytelling resource about a helpless princess waiting to be rescued. (RP8)</p>	<p>Image 6 <i>Challenging Gender Stereotyping</i></p>  <p>Making toilet roll puppets—an activity done in class based on the theme of community helpers. (RP8)</p>
Participant Cycle 2 reflections	<p>Posters, books, puzzles, toys and movies should show male and female performing roles that go against the grain. Our dress-up props need to encourage any gender to be firefighters and engineers. In the same way, anyone can be a nurse or a cleaner. (RP6)</p> <p>So they liked playing according to the stereotypes. The girls were playing with the dolls and dressing up. The boys had the cars. I just decided to swop them around. Girls go play with the cars. Boys go and cook. (RP8)</p> <p>Boys choose pink and girls can choose blue . . . whatever colour you choose you are still welcome here. (RP3)</p>	

Discussion of Findings

Challenging Certainties Regarding Gender Binary

Image 1 represented an instance of gender binary where boys and girls were grouped into either male or female categories on a classroom poster. The boys in the picture had blue bow ties, while the girls had pink bows on their hair. Similar gender groupings and colour coding were reported to be on participants' class registers, class lists, and bathroom facilities. Gender groupings were also used to divide children for outdoor activities. This aligned with a study by Jennet (2013), in which teachers treated boys and girls differently and used gender groupings. In the early years, children's authentic gender identification may be silenced by ideologies of gender binary in the learning environment. As mentioned previously, individuals may have elements of each gender category or they may not fit into a single gender category (Morgenroth et al., 2020). Therefore, the manner in which the ECCE teacher

plans the programme and selects stories, resources, and display board items may perpetuate these certainties of gender binary. Children who experience this exclusion are expected to fit in and assimilate into a predominantly binary world (Govender, 2018). The ALS found that many children may identify and fit into a neat category of male or female, however some were not able to—and these minorities should not feel excluded in the early learning environment. Therefore, to challenge this, in Cycle 2 a research participant designed a second poster (Image 2). In this poster, she attempted to demonstrate a more inclusive outlook by representing children as different colour crayons. Similar to the crayons in this illustration, all children are different and unique and children should not be grouped according to a teacher's perceived certainty regarding their sex. Hence, teachers adopting a critical pedagogy need to transform their learning spaces so that certainties regarding gender binary are challenged. A critical orientation to pedagogy requires conscientisation and action against these certainties.

Challenging Heterosexuality as a Dominant Ideology

Although the research participants emphasised a need to address all diversities, their narratives regarded sexuality and gender as sensitive and taboo topics. The ALS seemed to gravitate towards teaching about family structure as a non-risky means to address sexuality. Cycle 1, Image 3, for instance, presents a photograph of a display chart with a regular family structure. Participants in this study felt that sexuality needed to be discussed only if there were irregular relationships present among the parents of the children. The group expressed concern that these sensitive topics required parental consent. The research participants were hesitant to suggest non-heteronormative play possibilities to the children due to fear of disapproval from parents and managers. This was in opposition to suggestions by Sotevik et al. (2019) that exposure and knowledge would assist in normalising non-heteronormative play possibilities.

Participants also felt that sexuality and sexual orientation were irrelevant to this age group, but something that becomes important during puberty or adolescence. This was in contrast to Robinson and Jones Diaz (2005) who claimed that children, even from a young age, are sexually aware when they play kissing games or adopt spousal roles. When asked how to include children from irregular family structures, the group narratives suggested the use of stories, posters, and books that could contest heteronormative family structures. For example in Cycle 2, Image 4 represents a non-conventional family structure. This aligned with Liang and Cohrsen (2020) who warned that groups of children and their families who are not represented in the learning environment could be silenced and excluded. Focusing on family structure alone, group discussions in these sessions did not explore children's sexuality during play. This could be due to a number of reasons, for example, a fear of school managers and parents who might rigidly adhere to heterosexuality as a norm due to religious beliefs or societal pressure. A school code preventing teachers from discussing controversial subjects may also have contributed to the silencing of teacher voice and agency. Incidences of teacher dismissal, for instance a case reported by Fernández (2020), may have also contributed to teacher reluctance in this study. Teacher attitudes to heterosexuality as a dominant ideology require further exploration in future studies.

Challenging Gender Stereotyping

In Cycle 1, participants were reluctant to intervene when children played according to their gender expectations. For example, in instances where boys played catch and girls were playing house, the participants did not feel the need to challenge the play patterns. This aligned with a study by Breneselovic and Krnjaja (2016). Similar to that study, teacher intervention only occurred if children were seen to play in a less stereotypical manner. Thus in Cycle 2, participants found the need to intervene and challenge these expected norms. Also in Cycle 1, participants presented photographs of gender-specific toys. For instance, participants provided images of a male engineer and female nurse

on the packaging of items in the dress-up area. These items reinforced gender stereotypical roles. Contesting these stereotypes in Cycle 2, the group presented images of girls playing with cars and boys nurturing dolls. The boy in the role as a nurturer contests a “hegemonic heterosexual masculinity” (Moosa & Bhana, 2020, p. 56). A participant also pinpointed the tendency to colour stereotype boys’ and girls’ toys and how this needed to be challenged. Image 6 presented in Cycle 2, depicts toilet roll puppet crafts based on the theme of community helpers that represent female and male firefighters, police, and engineers. Activities like these challenge current beliefs of gender roles and occupations and serve to transform children’s beliefs regarding gender roles. Young children may not be able to express their interpretation of gender roles verbally but they are able to demonstrate their understandings during pretend play (Robinson & Jones-Diaz, 2005).

Besides the perpetuation of gender roles in toys and play, storytelling in ECCE is also a useful medium through which to challenge gender ideologies. According to Burton (2020), stories shape children’s views about themselves. Therefore, we need to pay careful attention to the selection of stories that could perpetuate harmful gender ideologies. Image 5 depicts a story-telling resource made by a participant using a cardboard cylinder. The story resource was used to tell the story of a beautiful helpless princess who waits in a high tower to be rescued by her Prince Charming. The story also involves an evil witch (conveniently lacking in conventional physical beauty) who has captured the beautiful princess. Thereafter, the prince rescued the princess and fell deeply in love instantly, based on the princess’ superficial beauty (without the benefit of even a conversation). Such stories were still reported to be present in children’s literature at the centres in this study, and these send dangerous messages to little children regarding the value of superficial beauty over mental capacity or physical prowess. In fact, women are depicted inaccurately to be needy and helpless without men in many such stories. Children’s literature has evolved beyond these stereotypes (Burton, 2020) and teachers need to critically evaluate the traditional stories that they select and make necessary adjustments with gender equity in mind.

Challenging Gender Certainties for Social Change

Before attempting to effect social change, we needed to examine our own “troubled knowledge” (Jansen, 2009, p. 278), which shapes our actions in the learning environment. We need to become conscientised (Freire, 2000) regarding our personal gender certainties. To develop greater conscientisation, we engaged in dialogue on targeted gender concerns. The collaborative dialogue also enabled our group to reflect on our inner selves and the gender inequity we have personally experienced. For instance, one participant mentioned:

Due to the fact that I am a woman, it is taken for granted that all forms of housework and chores fall on my lap. I feel that I get treated very differently in that regard, also the fact that I’m a woman and in my relationship it is taken for granted that I should not speak my mind and just listen to what the man says, men seem to get intimidated by a self-reliant and independent women. (RB5)

Arising from the activities, we were also able to reflect on how gender expectations impacted on the personal lives of the participants. Participant 2 mentioned:

In aspects of my family life, power dynamics are often experienced through gender roles. I am limited in terms of going out and socialising but my brother on the other hand is much more free.

Emanating from the discussion and reflections on classroom practice, we reported an increased awareness that impacted on our professional roles. For instance, Research Participant 1 noted that:

By doing critical reflection, a teacher is able to better herself. It allows teachers to move from experience into understanding. When a teacher is aware, she can make the necessary changes to ensure the learning is appropriate and includes all children.

Thus, in this ECCE study, our new awareness of gender stereotyping and exclusion was significant. Evidently, it is inner awareness and transformation that is a catalyst for outward changes in the early learning environment. Confirming this, a research participant mentioned:

I feel that before bringing about changes in the world or even expecting change from others, you need to bring about change within yourself and your own thinking. (RB2)

Therefore, to effect positive change in society, this study argues for a change in individual awareness first. We needed to challenge our own troubled knowledge by questioning our current ways of thinking regarding gender certainties in the early learning environment. This conscientisation is a rudimentary building block for change because it is only through inner transformation that we can effect outer change. Dominant ideologies are implicitly carried down from experiences that shape our thoughts and actions (Brown & Sekimoto, 2017).

Guided by critical pedagogy and the principles of PALAR, participants shared their photographs and captions that served as a visual representation of their lived experiences (Wood, 2020). Through collaborative dialogical reflection and action (Pouwels, 2019), the ALS aimed to transform the learning environment by attempting to create a less stereotyped and more gender inclusive space for the children. Certainties regarding gender binary, heterosexuality, and stereotyped gender roles were challenged. Underpinned by a critical pedagogy, PALAR aims not just to create a more equitable learning space but also aims to improve the lives of children with positive effects on society as a whole. Thus, in keeping with the goals of PALAR design, this research aims for praxis—a process of collaborative dialogical reflection and action that transcends the learning environment—resulting in transformation of the lives of the participants, the children, the principal researcher, and a possible wider transformation of society.

Cycle 1 of the study revealed that the ALS perpetuated certainties regarding gender binary in their learning environments. The expectation for children to fit into a gender category would exclude and silence children who saw themselves as non-binary (Morgenroth et al., 2020). Following the action and reflection, ALS members were conscientised to understand that not all learners need fit into a particular gender category. In Cycle 2, the ALS decided to design classroom posters that would challenge gender as a binary.

Cycle 1 also revealed heterosexuality as a dominant ideology in the learning environment. The ALS members were reluctant to address sexuality because it was seen as an inappropriate topic for discussion at this age, whereas discussions on family structure were seen as a safe means of addressing heterosexuality. Participants suggested the use of a family wall to include all children, even those with an irregular family structure. Further research needs to be done in this area given that children in this age group are not devoid of sexuality. They do play games involving kissing and very often enact spousal roles implying that their sexuality should not be silenced (Liang & Cohrsen, 2020).

The first cycle aligned with an earlier study by Dickins (2014), which indicated that play areas and toys were gendered. This limited the range of opportunities available to children. Boys would shy away from the dolls and girls were reluctant to play with the cars and blocks. This could have a lasting impact on the lives of both girls and boys given that it could impact on their choice of subjects to study and the work they do in adulthood. Should these stereotypes continue, it would also have a lasting negative

impact for future generations. The use of traditional stories was also found to reinforce certain gender traits—similar to statements by Burton (2020). For example, helpless females who were valued for their superficial beauty and male heroes who were strong with physical prowess maintained a normative view of masculinity and femininity. This research suggests some interventions for teachers to challenge gender stereotyping actively and to create more gender inclusive learning spaces. The collaborative dialogical action of the ALS enabled a deeper and more meaningful learning with far-reaching effects (Pouwels, 2019). This sustainable learning ensured that the ALS and the children would benefit from a more gender equitable and less restrictive learning environment.

Concluding Remarks

Our study aimed to challenge gender certainties in the early learning environment. The first research objective aimed to ascertain the current situation regarding gender exclusion and gender stereotyping. This informed Cycle 1, which revealed that participants' dominant ideologies about gender needed to be challenged. Data revealed that participants required clarity on gender binary heterosexuality as a dominant ideology and gender stereotyping. The second research objective aimed to transform the learning environment by addressing these concerns. The study reports on the learnings of a single ALS who developed their agency and voice to address problems relevant to their unique contexts. Using a PALAR design, this study therefore represents the unique collaborative learnings of a particular group who were mobilised to foster positive change in their learning environment. Should this study be repeated, similar results are not likely to be produced because it was based on the contextual needs of this group only. Nonetheless, the study does make a valuable contribution given that similar centres could use this research design to mobilise teachers to create more socially just ECCE environments. Society has, to date, been negatively impacted by gender inequality, stereotyping, patriarchy, gender-based violence, and homophobia. If these stereotypes are challenged in the early years, society stands to gain much.

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