



## Birth on the Playground: Boys' Experiences Playing with Gender

by Jenifer Millan

### Abstract

*Using photographic documentation to understand the extraordinary in the ordinary and the experiences of young children in an early childhood education center, I began to wonder how children's interactions define their identity formation. This research looked at how boys reconstruct their identity based on the knowledge gained from those around them. Specifically, the study investigated the ways in which boys explore gender roles in relation to pregnancy and birthing. Using a phenomenological approach, the purpose of this research was to explore the meaning of young children's gender and identity play, and the experiences they take to form their identity in the early childhood setting. During the course of the study I drew meanings from the boys' pretend playing pregnancy and gender role development. From three emerging themes, I came to the conclusion that the boys were not necessarily defining "boy" or "girl", but using their play to make meaning of another individuals' experience as related to gender.*

### Problem/Purpose/Question

Arising from a graduate course entitled *Documenting Young Children's Learning* I was able to realize a challenging task of finding the extraordinary in the ordinary from everyday interactions in a school for young children. A colleague and I set out to achieve this undertaking by exploring many classrooms throughout the school. During our explorations we readily became frustrated because we felt we were having difficulty finding what we thought was an extraordinary moment. Feeling discouraged, we ventured outside and onto a playground and took photographs of children and of the unique interactions we saw. Initially, our documentation did not seem or feel like an extraordinary moment. However, as we carefully reflected through discussions with other educators and colleagues and with each other, the most extraordinary moment began to emerge, a moment that significantly changed our thinking and view of teaching and learning in our everyday environment.

Within this experience we found that the ordinary activity was watching the boys playing on the playground with balls. However, as we got closer to the phenomenon through photographic documentation and observation, a very different experience came into focus. The boys were not only playing with balls, they were in fact playing the act of pregnancy. We began to think about how children's interactions define their identity formation and wondered whether these boys were reconstructing their identity based on the knowledge gained from those around them. Specifically, we wondered whether the boys were exploring gender roles in relation to pregnancy and birthing.

Based on these ideas the purpose of this research study was to explore the meaning of young children's gender and identity play, and to investigate the experiences they take to form their identity in the early childhood setting. We know that experiences inform our view of identity construction. Chick,

Heilman-Houser and Hunter (2002) stated “Gender role is socially constructed in ways that are active and ongoing. Moreover, children do not learn gender appropriate behaviors just by imitating the behaviors of others. They also make choices and demonstrate their own ideas of what it means to be a boy or girl” (p. 149). Thus, we looked at the meanings that can be drawn from the boys’ pretend playing pregnancy and gender role development.

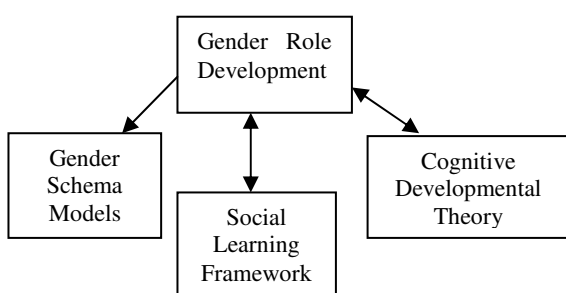
### Literature Review

In this section, literature on cognitive developmental theories, gender stereotypes and role development, play and documentation is examined as a way of underpinning this study. Reviewing the literature aided us in finding meaning in the documented experience and helped to analyze our findings. The literature ultimately helped us shape the way we addressed our fundamental question of how the boys were exploring gender identity formation in relation to gender role and stereotypes.

#### *Cognitive developmental theories*

In order to understand how children develop their ideas regarding the gender roles and gender stereotypes that characterize our culture, we examined literature relating to cognitive developmental theories. Throughout this portion of the literature review the purpose was to examine these theories as they relate to the ways in which children’s ideas of gender roles develop and the ways in which activities and behaviours influence this development.

Three main theories have been proposed in an attempt to best understand how children develop gender stereotypes and come to understand gender roles within society. Levy, Barth and Zimmerman’s (1998) article provides historical background in relation to understanding the documented phenomenon. This information is embedded in the chart below.



These three frameworks demonstrate how gender role development can be viewed as a multidimensional construct. While the primary premise of each of these frameworks is to emphasize how behaviour and activities influence the formation of gender role, each framework also looks at a different element of this

development in children. For instance, the social learning framework, which has been studied and adapted by various researchers such as Perry and Bussey (1979) and Huston (1983), looks primarily at the ways in which young children’s behaviours and activities influence their gender role formation. In contrast, gender schema models emphasize the ways in which the quality of gender roles, specifically in relation to how well society portrays these gender roles to young children, influences children’s gender role development. Both the social learning framework and the gender schema models framework focus on the behaviours and activities of children and the individuals around them. Finally, there is Kohlberg’s cognitive developmental theory that describes the ways in which children define boy or girl based on the gender stereotypes around them (Levy et al., 1998).

Kohlberg’s (1966) cognitive developmental theory demonstrates that through experiences in school (specifically socialization with others) children develop concepts related to gender and meanings around being a boy or a girl. Children build these understandings based on the definitions developed within society about what being a boy or a girl means and what these roles embody. The ways in which children behave in social situations correlates directly to the theories and definitions they have developed regarding these concepts. Their behaviours may vary depending on the situation or other environmental factors related to the child’s development. Although children will often experiment with many types of behaviours, as they get older their definitions become more rigid and defined (Martin & Ruble, 2004).

These various theories and frameworks show us “that children are actively searching for ways to find meaning and make sense of the social world around them, and they do so by using the gender cues provided by society to help them interpret what they see and hear” (Martin & Ruble, 2004, p. 67). This interpretation and meaning making can come in the form of imaginative play, such as the experience which was documented at an early childhood center. These forms of play and expression ultimately give children a sense of what it is like to experience the phenomenon they are seeing and hearing. Children use what they see, hear, embody and play out to build their definitions of gender and gender roles. The social environment, which consists of the voices, actions, and thoughts of the individuals who surround the children, forms an important element of this construction (Martin & Ruble, 2004).

#### *Gender stereotypes and role development*

Literature highlights that children develop concepts of gender in relation to culture. Our culture depicts

'woman' and 'man' as well as the activities performed by these categories of people within their restricted and defined roles. These depictions do not leave room for the realities and complex nature of the authenticity of life and what it means to live. Through the experiences of others, children begin to develop concepts and ideas of how they should act, the activities they should participate in, and the stereotypes that go along with those specific actions. The literature supports the effort to distinguish the ways in which gender roles are developed and the ways in which children form these ideas (Miller & Church, 2002).

Research suggests that gender and the development of gender roles are the result of an overarching concept that gender norms originate from culture, social cues, and biological dispositions. "Gender develops the human being to be the person he or she is. The concept of gender focuses on the relationships between women's and men's behaviour, and also social ideas of what is 'womanly' and 'manly' (Sandberg & Parmling-Samuelsson, 2005, p. 297). These behaviours and social cues occur in the form of stereotypes, words, and actions in social situations and also within the school context.

Children are constant observers of others in everyday experiences. Although they may not understand the true meaning of stereotypes, they understand the way in which their culture operates (Freeman, 2007). They use this understanding to form their ideas related to gender roles. Children are thus savvy students in the subject of culture and the acquisition of the roles demonstrated in day-to-day life. They immediately pick up on cues and use them to find the meaning of their identity and the roles they hold (Freeman, 2007). Gender stereotypes have the ability to limit the interests and choices that children make for themselves (Trepainier-Street & Romatowski, 1999). Chick et al.'s (2002) study found that "Gender role is socially constructed in ways that are active and ongoing. Moreover, children do not learn gender-appropriate behaviors just by imitating the behaviour of others. They also make choices and demonstrate their own ideas of what it means to be a boy or girl" (p. 149).

Research suggests that gender role development occurs in the early childhood years, and that by age five children already have rigid definitions of what it means to be a boy or a girl (Martin & Ruble, 2004). Acquiring cultural definitions allows children to develop their identity, and this includes gender identity. Rinaldi (2006) stated that "young children are strongly attracted by the ways, the languages (and thus the codes) that our culture has produced, as well as by other people (children and adults)" (p. 67). This quote serves as a reminder of the fact that children are

influenced by those around them. In addition, research suggests that children's "understanding of gender is limited to behaviour and physical appearance" (Miller & Church, 2002, p. 29). Identities are thus defined by how one looks and acts.

### *Play*

The importance of play lies within the actions and activities in which children engage, such as the phenomenon of the five-year old kindergarten boys on the playground discussed in this research article. Throughout this section, the concept of play is used to describe the ways in which children find meaning in the world around them and the ways in which they develop ideas about gender roles.

In the elementary classroom play is typically characterized as something that children participate in while outside on the playground. Although play is often seen as unimportant to children's learning, many early childhood educators believe differently. "Play is the way that children learn and what they play they learn" (Chick et al., 2002, p. 149). "[I]t is through imaginative play that children begin to explore and understand gender roles" (Chick et al., 2002, p. 149). My own observations regarding the ways in which children begin to socially construct their meaning of gender suggest that play has a major role in this construction (Chick et al., 2002).

According to Miller and Church (2002), it is common for children (ages five and six) to experiment with gender roles during play. "Children will try out different roles to see what it feels like to be a boy or a girl, and to expand the traditional definitions of male and female" (Miller & Church, 2002, p. 30). This statement clearly describes the process that both girls and boys are undergoing during their pre-kindergarten and kindergarten years. However, Miller and Church (2002) also made the claim that because these children are working on developing a strong sense of self, their developmental state indicates this as typical. Children's play should therefore not be restricted to what is considered gender appropriate or typical with the roles that society defines.

Although it is typical for children to experiment and play with gender roles in their early childhood years, research shows that "boys who engage in 'girls games' are more likely to be criticized by parents, teachers and peers than are girls who enjoy activities and materials that are labeled as 'for boys'" (Freeman, 2007, p. 358). Within this mode of thinking, art, dramatic play, and musical activities are typical for girls, while blocks, trucks, and outdoor play are typical for boys (Freeman, 2007). Trepainier-Street and Romatowski (1999) emphasized that during the early childhood years the formation of

gender takes place through the sorting of information obtained through cultural practices. Thus, criticizing boys' play can result in the development of gender stereotypic thinking. This disapproval ultimately limits how children make the choices about what they play and the interests they wish to pursue.

### **Documentation**

This final section of the literature review relates to the ways in which documentation can be used to understand the experiences of young children within the early childhood setting. Documentation helps adults find meaning in the actions and activities that children engage in on a daily basis. Through this meaning making process teachers can use their knowledge to inform practice and expand their theories regarding their interactions with children (Parnell, 2005).

Documentation and phenomenological data collection and analysis processes allowed us to reflect on various types of playground play and give meaning to the phenomena of gender role development as we saw it unfolding for the boys. Hultgren (1995) stated that "phenomenology becomes a way of letting something be shared that can never be totally articulated, and that the phenomenon is understood as that which shows itself from itself, the background upon which all our understanding takes place" (p. 373). Based on this statement I began to see documentation as a process that allows teachers and researchers to understand the learning processes of children. During the processes of reflection and interpretation of documented events it is important to know that teachers and researchers come to a new understanding of their teaching and learning as well. Documentation is also a useful tool for assessment and research, which will ultimately help teachers develop theories, curriculum and new pedagogy (Guidici, Rinaldi, & Krechevsky, 2001).

I was struck by the implications of phenomenology and documentation as it related to our captured events on the playground. Based on Guidici et al.'s (2001) writings, I realized that having full understandings of the environmental context, what seems ordinary and process based can be seen as extraordinary. According to Hultgren (1995), "if there is anything truly extraordinary in my teaching it is found in its ordinariness" (p. 386). This led to the question of what it means to find the extraordinary in the ordinary. In order to make meaning of one's experience, the school context must be redefined.

Within a phenomenological approach, the context is expanded to include the physical, cultural and social environments, which are all parts in which children construct meaning about the roles related to gender

and identity formation. Paying attention to all parts of a child's daily life enables teaching and learning to take on new meanings. Children feel valued and respected. Over time as adults become more attentive to the context of the environment, the initially invisible experiences of children's learning become palpable. Teaching and learning are normally internal experiences consisting of emotional and physical feelings such as curiosity, individuality, and belonging. Again, documentation allows us to make meaning of these experiences because "the individual and the context thus take on substance. They define each other and give each other identity" (Guidici et al., 2001, p. 58). Through reflection concerning the extraordinary in the ordinary everyday moments of documented experiences, Guidici et al.'s (2001) idea serves as a guide to understanding the way in which the environmental context interacts with specific moments in time. The research in this article is based on an investigation of these specific moments for the boys in relation to the question of what influences their gender role formation.

Documentation "is a substantial part of the goal that has always characterized our experience: the search for meaning – to find the meaning of school, or rather, to construct the meaning of school, as a place that plays an active role in the children's search for meaning and our own search for meaning (and shared meanings)" (Guidici et al., 2001, p. 79). Meaning develops into a "moving and poetic sense that only a poetic, metaphorical and analogical language can construct in its holistic fullness" (Rinaldi, 2006, p. 101).

When documentation is viewed as a research methodology it serves the purposes of many groups of people, including teachers, parents, students, and the community. Initially teachers "gather people's experiences because they allow us to become more experienced ourselves" (Hultgren, 1995, p. 384). Documentation thus "allows teachers to better understand children, to evaluate their own work, and to exchange ideas with other educators" (Cadwell, 1997, p. 6). In addition, documentation provides teachers with a way to "carefully listen, observe, and document children's work and the growth of community in their classroom" (Yu, 2008, p. 129). Careful use of this process enables others to understand what happens in their classroom while demonstrating that teachers are committed to professional growth and reflection of practice, using documentation as "crucial in the planning of future activities" (Yu, 2008, p. 128). In relation to this article, documenting this particular experience with the boys made me wonder whether the teachers would use these moments in their classroom to open dialogue relating to gender and the roles that boys and girls play in school and the outside community. This

could happen through asking children questions about the various things girls and boys do. This could result in opening children's thinking and minds to the stereotypes and images they perceive in our society as well as providing a place to hold a discussion concerning these topics.

Through opening up the early childhood classroom discourse, documentation provides a way to allow children to begin to revisit their experiences, "To provide children with a way to reflect and interpret their experiences, to evoke memories, to create a sense of history, and to communicate ideas to others (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1993, p. 264). As students revisit and interpret their experiences, documentation demonstrates to children that "their efforts, intentions, and ideas are taken seriously" (Yu, 2008, p. 127). When children view documentation panels (a series of photos from a documented experience) in their classrooms they develop a sense of justice and being in the world and culture they live in. The documentation panels subconsciously encourage the children to approach their interactions with work and play responsibly and with care. In this way, they begin to develop their individual identity.

"Documentation is fundamental to the education and knowledge building process" (Giudici et al., 2001, p. 158) within a teacher's practice and curriculum development, and therefore it is also related to the way we look at and understand students. "At the moment of documentation (observation and interpretation), the element of assessment enters the picture immediately, that is, in the context and during the time in which the experience (activity) takes place" (Giudici et al., 2001, p. 85). Although this statement could be related to formal assessment, the bigger picture relates to giving teachers a full understanding of students' likes, dislikes, social growth and identity formation. It also relates to the formulation of this research study.

The complex nature of children's interactions in work and play gives validity to the way in which documentation "seems to be essential for metacognitive processes and for the understanding of children" (Rinaldi, 2006, p. 68). Documentation is not about trying to receive products from research. Instead, it involves clearly looking for the mental paths of children in order to follow and give meaning to their development as individuals. For educators, documentation is thus a dialectic process, "based on affective bonds and also poetic; it not only accompanies the knowledge-building process but in a certain sense impregnates it" (Rinaldi, 2006, p. 70).

The complexity of documentation lies in the way teachers use this research methodology. It serves "to illuminate the thinking, a change in thinking that

occurred, what was learned or not learned, the evolution of behavior, questioning, maturity, responses and opinions" (Wurm, 2005, p. 99). The documentation process used in this research was in keeping with Wurm's (2005) suggestions.

The literature concerning cognitive development, gender role development, play and Reggio-stylized documentation supported the initial project of finding the extraordinary in the ordinary. The literature provides insight into the exploration of gender role development in early childhood through play. The methodological approaches used in this research study are discussed below.

### Methodology

Observing the dimensions and phenomena of children's play on the playground of an early childhood education center was supported through phenomenological methods. Documentation was conducted through the use of a digital camera as well as field notes that were recorded in a documentation journal. These methods were used to find the phenomenon of the extraordinary in the ordinary within children's play and actions on the playground of an early childhood center.

The phenomenological methods used in the study promoted a critical philosophy of action, which, according to Van Manen (1990), "deepens thought and therefore radicalizes thinking and the acting that flows from it" (p. 154). The descriptive and interpretive methods used to interpret the extraordinary moment on the early childhood playground helped to develop what Van Manen (1990) termed "pedagogic thoughtfulness" when thinking about the teaching and learning of young children.

The methods involved in the documentation process included the use of a digital camera and a journal where notes of observed experiences and children's dialogue during the documented moment were recorded. The journal was also a place where meaning was made of the interactions among the children in the photos through reflections with other educators and the field notes gathered. The journal also included questions and wonderings in relation to how children form identity and think about gender roles, as well as thoughts about the values found in the school environment.

### Context

In the early childhood setting where the documented activity appeared there had been four teachers who had previously been pregnant or were pregnant at the time. Although these teachers were not directly

working with the boys, the likelihood is high that the boys at this school were exposed to pregnancy. The informal interviewing of the boys' teachers revealed that the first boy, characterized as the leader, was an only child. The second boy had a younger sibling, while the third had a mother who had recently experienced a miscarriage. Pseudonyms have been used throughout this paper in order to maintain an anonymous relationship with the school and those participating in the research study.

The philosophies and curriculum of the early childhood environment are greatly focused on the child's learning process. Through daily questioning, play, experimentation with materials and ideas, exploration of the community and culture as well as what is inside the school, children develop important critical thinking skills necessary to their growth and development. These activities are greatly supported by the classroom environment where children experience small-group interaction, social learning, and constructive play.

The relationship between teacher and child involves a close bond of trust, respect and affection. This bond was apparent in this particular university lab-school. As teachers build this bond with children, they are able to see the ways in which the curriculum can be individualized to meet each child's specific needs. Children are assessed using documentation and the curriculum is focused on maintaining human diversity and social justice as the main theoretical underpinnings of the school.

This particular educational context is a place of teacher research. It is thus easily accessible to the layers of research endeavours put forth in the graduate programs, including my own role as a doctoral student. My role in this research is that of a doctoral researcher working alongside many researchers at the graduate level. As a learner, I seek out modes of research that exhibit the experiences we have and the meaning we make of them (Van Manen, 1990) as a way to reconceptualize the mainstream narratives in early childhood education (Kessler, 1991).

### **Data analysis**

Following the initial data collection, my documentation partner and I went through each of the photos and informally discussed each one in order to try to find meaning within the image. To gain additional insights into our data collection, we also compiled our photos into a presentation that was shown to our colleagues. Presenting the research enabled us to receive feedback regarding our initial thoughts and ideas related to our documentation. This feedback included our audience's questions regarding

the documentation as well as insight into missing pieces of the narrative, specifically focusing on areas where more or less information needed to be given. As we recorded their questions and discussions in our journal, we reflected back to them by addressing their responses individually and bringing our thoughts and ideas back to each other. We then continued to work together to develop a final written narrative. We showed our final presentation to our colleagues via PowerPoint and documentation poster panel presentations. This arduous process of re-examining and re-looking (Van Manen, 1990) produced richly described results and analysis in the research.

### **Results and Analysis**

Analyzing the findings included reviewing the recorded data within my documentation field notes, as well as looking through my photos and observing the interactions of the children on the playground of an early childhood center. To find meaning in my documentation I met with my documentation partner to look at the sets of photos she took as well as the photos I took. Her photos showed that she had been able to capture different elements of the phenomenon than those captured by my photos. My photos were taken from a distance, while hers tended to be close-ups of the children. Her position provided her with the element and privilege of being able to hear a few of the words and phrases that the boys were saying.

As we reviewed our photos, we began to develop and write questions in our journals such as:

- Why were the boys role-playing pregnancy?
- Were they re-enacting something that they had seen in their daily lives?
- What does this tell us about their gender role development?
- Are they reconstructing their identity through playing with big ideas such as pregnancy?

We then brought these questions to our colleagues and my advising professor to ask their thoughts concerning the phenomenon, observations and documentation that we collected. Based on these discussions we concluded that the boys were beginning to explore the meaning of pregnancy, gender roles and identity formation.

### **Photography and storyline**

The pictures scattered throughout this section constitute the final documentation for this study. On July 14, 2009, the boys were first documented pretend-playing pregnancy. Walking across the playground, Sam (names have been changed) initiated

the exploration by inserting a small ball inside of his shirt to represent a woman's chest and a large ball to represent pregnancy. Sam, taking uneasy and wobbly steps up the play structure, called out "Hey guys, come play with me." As his friends noticed the replication of pregnancy, they soon joined in the fun, with excited shouts of recognition toward Sam's physical representation as well as the activity that was to take place.



Upon noticing Sam's physical appearance, George ran after a ball and shoved it up his shirt. He laughed loudly to himself, motioning and calling out to his friends so they could see what he was doing. Holding his imitation belly, George quickly ran over to the play structure, following close behind Sam up to the top. It was there that Sam and George decided to play out the birthing process. The two boys sat in waiting at the top of the play structure for the birth that would take place in a few moments.

Sam and George realized that it was time. They called out to two other friends, Henry and Nick, to assist them with the birthing process. It seems they must have realized it takes more than one person to deliver a baby. Henry and Nick rushed up the play structure in a hurry, bringing another ball just in case, because as they say 'you never know what materials you may need to give birth'. As the leader, Sam assumed the role of person in labour and Henry quietly observed. He gently placed his ear on Sam's belly, in an effort to listen and observe the process that was taking place.



The four boys then danced through the act of birth in a carefully choreographed process. George soon realized that his belly was in the way and removed the ball for easier access to the individual, Sam, in labour.

He assisted Sam with removing, or birthing, the ball from his shirt. As joy overtook George's face, he yells, "It's here!" and held up the ball for everyone to see that the baby was born. At this time, the boys were demonstrating excitement through their laughter as they climbed down the play structure to head back to class because recess was over.



The pregnancy process was not over and the boys were at it again the next day on the playground. Sam and Henry recruited a new member, Austin, into their pregnancy play. As soon as the boys entered the playground they ran for the balls and stuck them immediately under their shirts once they grabbed them off the ground. They ran around the playground, standing like pregnant people with their hands on their backs and on their bellies.



### *Moment of capturing the extraordinary*

I initially struggled to find a direction for the assigned documentation project and I was standing on the playground of the early childhood education center feeling frustrated and defeated in my efforts to find the extraordinary in the ordinary. Through my moments of frustration I overheard multiple children laughing and running around the play structure next to me. It was then that I saw my extraordinary moment and switched on my camera in excitement. I could not believe that I was watching four boys begin to pretend act-out pregnancy. My mind was racing and I wondered where they had gotten this idea and what had provoked them to act it out.

Capturing the moment was difficult because I was relatively far away from the play structure. My documentation partner was closer to the structure and could hear more of the boys' conversation. I worked

to shoot as many photos as I could possibly capture in the short amount of time that the activity took place. I felt that this was an extraordinary moment because the boys were being captured in an authentic moment that could never be caught again. It was enthralling to watch them carefully and meticulously act out the process of being pregnant and giving birth, and I felt as though I had truly captured an extraordinary moment.

### *Themes emerge from data sets*

During the multiple reflections on the documentation of the boys role-playing the act of being pregnant and pregnancy, three emerging themes were found in their play. First, it is possible that were simply imitating what they saw around them. For example, my notes state that Sam ran with one hand under the ball and one hand on the small of his back. This fullness and meaning within the documented experience makes sense in light of the fact that four teachers in the school have recently been or were currently pregnant, although these teachers were not the boys' current or past teachers. These educators were simply in classes next to or around the children. Additionally, one of the boys' mothers had experienced a miscarriage early in her pregnancy. Discussions with the boys' teachers revealed that the boy who could be termed the leader of the group was an only child and had not been extensively exposed to pregnancy. The boys could therefore easily have constructed their play based on what they saw around them and the relationships they have with pregnant individuals.

A second theme that emerged from the documentation was that this construction of play could be to find meaning and empathy regarding what it is like to be pregnant and give birth. My written observations of the birthing process exemplify this theme. The boys helped pregnant Sam through the labour and birthing process, coaching through language such as "you can do it" and "we're almost there". Within this meaning making, it is possible to assume that the boys were wrestling with their own concepts of pregnancy through role-play.

The final theme demonstrated through my documentation and research, involved the boys dealing with their own concept of gender and identity. The boys are of an age where it is developmentally typical to be developing a sense of identity in relation to gender (Martin & Ruble, 2004). Children commonly act out many activities that are directly related to their gender or actions that would be considered a "girl activity" or "boy activity." However, these boys were doing the inverse by participating in what would typically be seen as a girl activity within the category of family or household roles. This element of role experimentation gives

meaning to what it means to be a boy or a girl and the roles supported by society and the stereotypes in our culture.

The review of the documented experience made it clear that the boys were not only pretending to be pregnant, but were also imitating the developmental attributes of what it means to be a pregnant female (for example putting two balls in the shirt, one for the pregnant stomach and one for the chest). Additionally, their play was calculated and felt almost choreographed. Within the group, there was a leader who walked them through the dance of birth and allowed the others to follow. Based on this documentation and Chick et al.'s (2002) research I come to the conclusion that the boys were not necessarily defining "boy" or "girl," but instead were using their play to make meaning of another individual's experience as related to gender.

### *Reflection on the Phenomenon*

My documentation partner and I really struggled during the process of developing themes from the documentation. As we began to talk through our photos and field notes, we brought the discussion back to our colleagues who brought up the idea of moving toward the topic of gender identity. At this point out thinking regarding the data began to diverge.

I returned to my journal and wrote "I felt excited and motivated about moving our data and results toward the topic of gender identity". As I continued to examine the captured moments I really felt as though the boys were experimenting with this concept within their cognitive development. My partner had opposing views. She simply wanted to focus on the activity and the belief that these boys were just being "kids". I could not understand why she was opposed to the idea that the boys were exploring gender identity and why she continuously argued with me in relation to the topic. The constant disagreement left me feeling frustrated, moving away from the euphoric feeling I experienced as we captured the extraordinary moment. Through discussion with my advising professor, we achieved common ground and our final presentation contains questions and ideas related to both gender identity and the general concept of children's actions or, as my research partner would say, that "they were just being kids."

I found it interesting that as an educator of young children my documentation partner had such a high level of discomfort with big ideas related to gender development. As I reflect on the experience, I wonder what this discomfort was about and why she was, as so many people are, uncomfortable with any discussion out of the norm for gender. In my



reflections of these discussions I come back to Nieto (1996) and the ideas of silence and marginalization. The lack of willingness for research and conversation of the topic results in the play of young children being oppressed by dominant thoughts and behaviours.

### Conclusions

The examination of literature and the documented experience presented in this article show that it is important to give children experiences in which they can develop non-stereotypic views in relation to gender. This can occur through curricular activities and programs within the school environment that promote a gender-equitable view of society and the world in relation to gender and the roles that individuals hold (Trepanier-Street & Romatowski, 1999).

Research from Freeman (2007) supports the curricular model of using children's literature to promote an early childhood environment free of gender stereotypes. It is important to be conscious of the ways in which children are influenced to make decisions. Children should also be encouraged to make choices that are stereotype free (Freeman, 2007). Reading books that are free of gender bias can help to actively challenge the stereotypes perceived in society and culture. Additionally, teachers and other adults need to be conscious of the actions and language they use around children (Chick et al., 2002) and choose gender neutral language that does not support social stereotypes.

Miller and Church (2002) noted that it is important to have conversations with children related to gender issues inside and outside of the classroom. These

conversations can stem from books related to gender stereotypes, comments that have come from children in the classroom and from bringing in guest speakers to talk about careers. These individuals should have occupations that are not viewed as stereotypic to their specific gender.

Exposing children to ideas that build a gender-equitable view of the world and the culture they live in allows children to explore activities and toys in the classroom and playground that may previously have been avoided. Children should be given the opportunity to develop free of bias and exposure to thinking that gives them a limited view of the world. Instead, they should be able to explore various possibilities, as in the exploration of pregnancy on the playground in this early childhood center discussed in this article. Teachers and adults need to promote courageous conversations when it comes to gender stereotypes in order to challenge the ways in which children view the world (Derman-Sparks, 1989). If I were the classroom teacher documenting these experiences, I would have taken them directly back to the classroom to discuss what I saw and ask more questions regarding the experience. It is through these conversations and the freedom in children's active learning and play that children will ultimately begin to have a more stereotype-free view of the activities they participate in and the roles they develop over time.

### Referencing Format

Millan, J. (2012). Birth on the playground: Boys experiences playing with gender. *Indo-Pacific Journal of Phenomenology*, 12 (Special Edition, May: *Early Childhood Education and Phenomenology*), 11 pp. doi: 10.2989/IPJP.2012.12.1.6.1114

### About the Author



Jenifer Millan received a BS in Human Development and Family Sciences and a Master's of Arts in Teaching. She is currently a graduate student at Portland State University working on her doctorate in Educational Leadership with a specialization in Curriculum and Instruction focusing on Early Childhood Education. Jenifer's areas of interest include early childhood and elementary curriculum design, arts and play based education, and phenomenological research.

E-mail address: millanj@pdx.edu

## References

- Cadwell, L. (1997). *Bringing Reggio Emilia home: An innovative approach to early childhood education*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Chick, K., Heilman-Houser, R., & Hunter, M. (2002). The impact of child care on gender role development and gender stereotypes. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 29(3), 149-154.
- Derman-Sparks, L. (1989). *Anti-bias curriculum: tools for empowering young children*. Washington, D.C.: National Association for the Education of Young Children.
- Edwards, C., Gandini, L., & Forman, G. (1993). *The hundred languages of children: The Reggio Emilia approach to early childhood education*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing Corporation.
- Freeman, N. (2007). Preschoolers' perceptions of gender appropriate toys and their parents' beliefs about genderized behaviors: Miscommunication, mixed messages, or hidden truths? *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 34(5), 357-366.
- Giudici, C., Rinaldi, C., & Krechevsky, M. (Eds). (2001). *Making learning visible: Children as individual and group learners*. Reggio Emilia, Italy: Reggio Children.
- Hultgren, F. (1995). The phenomenology of "doing" phenomenology: The experience of teaching and learning together. *Human Studies*, 18(4), 371-388.
- Huston, A. H. (1983). Sex typing. In E. M. Hetherington (Vol. Ed.) & P. H. Mussen (Series Ed.), *Handbook of child psychology: Socialization, personality, and social development* (pp. 338-441). New York: Wiley.
- Kessler, S. A. (1991). Alternative perspectives on early childhood education. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 6, 183-197.
- Kohlberg, L. (1966). A cognitive developmental analysis of children's sex role concepts and attitudes. In E. E. Maccoby (Ed.), *The development of sex differences* (pp. 82-173). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Levy, G., Barth, J., & Zimmerman, B. (1998). Associations among cognitive and behavior aspects of preschoolers' gender role development. *Journal of Genetic Psychology*, 159(1), 121-126.
- Martin, C., & Ruble, D. (2004). Children's search for gender cues. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 13(2), 67-70.
- Miller, S., & Church, E. (2002). I'm a boy and you're a girl! *Early Childhood Today*, 17(2), 29-31.
- Nieto, S. (1996). *Affirming diversity: The sociopolitical context of multicultural education*. White Plains, NY: Longman Publishers.
- Parnell, W. (2005). Teacher learning: Documentation, collaboration, and reflection. *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 67(05), 186A. (UMI No. 3218144).
- Perry, D., & Bussey, K. (1979). The social learning theory of sex differences: Imitation is alive and well. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 37(10), 1699-1712.
- Rinaldi, C. (2006). *In Dialogue with Reggio Emilia: Listening, researching and learning*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Sandberg, A., & Pramling-Samuelsson, I. (2005). An interview study of gender differences in preschool teachers' attitudes toward children's play. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 32(5), 297-305.
- Trepanier-Street, M., & Romatowski, J. (1999). The influence of children's literature on gender role perceptions: A reexamination. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 26(3), 155-159.

Van Manen, M. (1990). *Researching lived experience: Human science for an action sensitive pedagogy*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Wurm, J. (2005). *Working the Reggio way: A beginner's guide for American teachers*. St. Paul, MN: Redleaf Press.

Yu, G. (2008). Documentation: ideas and applications from the Reggio Emilia approach. *Teaching Artists Journal*, 6(2), 126-134.

---