Play and gender in Ontario kindergarten classrooms: Implications for literacy learning

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Play and gender in Ontario kindergarten classrooms: Implications for literacy learning

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Abstract

Research has highlighted the importance of early literacy development (Lonigan and Shanahan 2008; Teale, Paciga, and Hoffman 2007). In light of this, there has been a growing concern around boys’ underachievement on language and literacy assessments (Alloway and Gilbert 1997; Gambell and Hunter 1999). Given the recent mandate for play-based learning in Ontario kindergartens (Ontario Ministry of Education 2016), this paper examines children’s literacy integration during play from a gender perspective. An analysis of 380 minutes of children’s play revealed that girls and boys often played separately across the twelve kindergarten classrooms in this study. Importantly, the centres at which girls and boys played offered different literacy support. Our findings showed that gender played a salient role in children’s play choices affecting the types of academic skills children practiced in their play. We conclude by highlighting the importance of gender awareness and sensitivity in policy mandates and teacher practice.

Keywords: early childhood education; gender; literacy; play-based learning
Introduction

The early development of literacy skills is critical to children’s academic learning both in the early years and in later schooling (Elliott and Ollif 2008; van Oers and Duijkers 2013). There has been a growing concern around boys’ reading and writing development with reports showing that boys are underperforming on language and literacy assessments (see Alloway and Gilbert 1997; Gambell and Hunter 1999). In light of such concerns, this paper explores girls’ and boys’ language and literacy engagement during play in twelve Ontario kindergarten classrooms. A recent mandate for play-based learning in kindergarten has been implemented in Ontario (Ontario Ministry of Education 2016). As such, children are to spend much of their days learning academic skills, such as literacy, through play. However, research shows that girls and boys often play separately in the classroom and engage with different play centres and materials (MacNaughton 2000; Martin 2011). In this paper, we explore how gender may influence children’s play choices and the implications for children’s literacy learning in play-based kindergarten classrooms.

Literature review

The gender gap in children’s literacy performance at school

Research has found that developing literacy skills such as oral language, phonological awareness, writing, and print conventions in the early years is important for successful literacy learning in the later years of schooling (Kendeou et al. 2009; Lonigan and Shanahan 2009). Over the past few decades, there has been growing concern that boys are falling behind in school, particularly in their literacy achievement (Alloway et al. 2002; Ready et al. 2005). Reports show that boys are receiving lower scores than girls on literacy assessments and are lagging behind
girls in reading and writing performance at all levels of schooling around the globe (Alloway and Gilbert 1997; Gambell and Hunter 1999). Watson, Kehler, and Martino (2010) highlight results from the 2006 Programme for International Student Assessment where the largest gender gap was found to be in reading, with girls outperforming boys. Skelton and Francis (2011) highlight results from the National Assessment of Education Progress (2010), which show that 28% of eight grade boys achieved proficient or above in reading compared to 37% of girls. In writing, 22% of boys compared to 43% of girls scored proficient and above. While these results are based in the United States, the authors point out that such performances on literacy assessments have been prevalent in other contexts including Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom.

Various theories have been put forward to explain the gender gap in girls’ and boys’ literacy performances. Researchers have attributed gender differences in school performance to biological and cognitive factors, suggesting that the female and the male brain are structured and organised differently (Moir and Jessel 1991; Ridley 1994). Other researchers have pointed to the role-model theory, attributing the gender gap in literacy performance to the lack of male role-models for boys in the early years of schooling (see Alloway et al. 2002; Ready et al. 2005). More recently, Skelton and Francis (2011) argue that such explanations work to essentialise boys and assume gender to be fixed and natural. Instead, Skelton and Francis (2011) posit that gender and literacy are socially constructed, where ‘social constructions of literacy as “feminine” is seen to inhibit boys’ engagement with this subject’ (460).

Researchers highlight that literacy achievement reports are limited and work to create a moral panic around boys’ literacy abilities (Blair and Sanford 2004; Watson, Kehler, and Martino 2010). Indeed, research shows that not all boys are underachieving in their literacy performances at school and that not all boys are at risk. Watson, Kehler, and Martino (2010)
remind us to question ‘which boys and which girls are at greatest risk for failure’ (357)? The intersections of gender, class, and race must be considered when examining school performance. In this view, the gender gap is not innate, but a result of unequal social structures and limited constructions of masculinity (Skelton and Francis 2011).

While assessments show a gender gap in literacy performances at school, it is important to consider the limitations of such assessment reports and investigate how gender and literacy are socially constructed in ways that may limit some boys’ potential for literacy learning.

**Literacy learning through play**

In Canada, play has become a dominant pedagogical practice in kindergarten (Council of Ministers of Education Canada 2012). In Ontario, The Kindergarten Program (OME 2016) mandates play-based learning, which requires teachers to integrate play and academic learning in their classrooms. Indeed, research shows that play can support children’s literacy development (Roskos and Christie 2001; Saracho and Spodek 2006). Pretend play has been found to be particularly important for children’s literacy learning as it supports children’s symbolic development (Smith and Pellegrini 2013; Weisberg et al. 2013). In pretend play, children practice representing one object for another such as pretending that a banana is a telephone or that a doll is a baby. As Vygotsky has theorised, such symbolic representations in play are foundational for learning how to read symbols, such as written symbols, and are therefore important for children’s reading and writing development (Pellegrini 2009).

Pretend play unfolds across various spaces in a classroom environment. For instance, in the dramatic play area, children engage with symbolic representations as they take on different roles, use objects in their play to represent other objects, and carry out storylines (Weisberg et al. 2013). Blocks, as representational objects, also introduce children to symbols and promote
children’s emergent literacy learning (Cohen and Uhry 2007; Hanline, Milton, and Phelps 2010). However, research has found that in the context of play it is critical to provide a literacy-rich play environment for the development of literacy skills (Roskos and Christie 2001; Saracho 2001; Stegelin 2005). While pretend play may set an important foundation for literacy learning, children also require concrete literacy experiences. Makin (2003) found that when literacy materials are made available in children’s play, children’s reading and writing activities increase dramatically, which has been shown to contribute to children’s success in reading and writing. Roskos and Christie (2001) highlight that generic literacy materials (e.g., pencils, markers, and paper) as well as theme related literacy materials (e.g., menus, nametags, and cookbooks for a restaurant-themed setting) are key features of a literacy-rich play environment. This research demonstrates that pretend play alone is not enough for children’s literacy learning. A rich assortment of literacy materials must also be made available during play in order for children to practice concrete reading and writing skills. While pretend play is often supported across the various play centres, a literacy-rich environment is not always made available at all play centres.

**Play and gender**

Research on children’s play shows that girls and boys tend to play separately in the classroom (Blaise 2005; MacNaughton 2000; Martin 2011). Importantly, girls and boys also tend to play in different areas and with different objects. For instance, Paley (1984) found that in kindergarten it is rare to find girls building with blocks. Conversely, boys engage with building activities on a daily basis. Recent studies in various contexts show similar trends where boys tend to play in the blocks area more than girls (MacNaughton 2000; Martin 2011; Thorne 1993). Girls instead tend to play in the dramatic play area, often set up as a home with kitchen sets and dolls, or in drawing areas (Davies 1989; Martin 2011; Paley 1984; Thorne 1993).
While such gender separated play is often perceived as girls and boys having natural and innate preferences, many researchers have highlighted the influence institutions such as the family, popular culture, and schools have on children’s play choices. Thorne (1993) explains that from the moment of birth ‘Parents dress infant girls in pink and boys in blue, give them gender-differentiated names and toys, and expect them to act differently’ (2). The families in O’Brien and Hutson’s (1985) study had sex-typed toys in their homes and parents expected their children to prefer such toys. Pomerleau et al. (1990) show that boys possessed more sports equipment, tools, and vehicles, and girls had more dolls, fictional characters, and children’s furniture in their homes. While the parents in Kane’s (2006) study encouraged gender nonconformity in their children’s play, they supported their daughters’ play with traditionally masculine activities more than their sons’ play with traditionally feminine activities.

From a young age, children are also inundated with toy advertisements that separate girls and boys. According to Wohlwend (2009), popular culture ‘communicate[s] gendered expectations about what children should buy, how they should play, and who they should be’ (57). Kline (1993) found that toy companies tend to construct girls and boys as two distinct groups as girls and boys are often shown playing separately in toy advertisements. Also, the types of toys that are targeted towards girls and boys differ. Blakemore and Centers (2005) found that girls’ toys are associated with ‘physical attractiveness, nurturance, and domestic skills, while boys’ toys are associated with competition, excitement, and violence’ (619). Similarly, Francis (2010) found that ‘Boys’ toys concentrated on technology and action, and girls’ on care and stereotypically feminine interests’ (325). Consequently, as Kahlenberg and Hein (2010) argue, children are ‘enculturated to develop a preference for toys that are designed, packaged, and marketed to correspond with their masculine or feminine identities’ (830). While children may
not necessarily passively accept these messages, they come to learn which toys and types of play are socially appropriate for their sex and gender (Francis 1998; Thorne 1993).

By the time children enter kindergarten, they have established an understanding of socially acceptable gender roles and norms. The daily processes of schooling often work to reinforce dominant beliefs around sex and gender. Thorne (1993) found that gender is the social category that is the most highlighted throughout the school day. She points to classroom and cafeteria announcements that open with ‘boys and girls’ communicating to students that there are only two ways of being: girl or boy. Research has also found classroom seating arrangements and line-up procedures to be gendered leading to the construction of girls and boys as different and oppositional in the school context (Liu 2006, Renold 2006; Thorne 1993). Moreover, teachers’ gender perceptions also affect how they interact and intervene in their students’ play. For instance, Mweru (2012) found that teachers encouraged ‘children to select gender-appropriate play materials and use play materials in a gender-appropriate manner significantly more than selecting cross-gender or gender-neutral play materials’ (15).

Such gender perceptions and practices may have important implications for children’s literacy learning in the kindergarten classroom as some play centres may not be seen as accessible to all children. Moreover, as the different spaces in classroom play environments often offer different academic affordances (Wood 2009), not all centres may provide the necessary support for children to practice concrete literacy skills in their play. In light of the reported gender differences on literacy performances at school, it becomes important to examine how the mandate for play-based learning may affect children’s literacy integration during classroom play.

Method

Data sources
This paper is part of a larger project that explored the development of literacy skills in twelve play-based kindergarten classrooms in Ontario. A minimum of 10 hours of observational data were collected in each classroom during both teacher directed literacy instruction and periods of play. This paper focuses solely on the video recordings of children’s play periods across the twelve kindergarten classrooms resulting in the analysis of 422 videos (380 minutes).

**Participants**

The classrooms in this study were selected from two school districts based on geographical location and willingness to participate. The teachers who consented to participate in this study had diverse years of teaching experience that ranged from three to twenty-six years. All of the teachers were women. Each classroom had between 25 and 30 four- and five-year-old students. Those students from whom active parental consent and student assent were received were invited to participate. Ethical approval was granted by the university and the school districts.

**Data analysis**

The data analysis involved a multi-step process, beginning with coding the gender configuration of children’s play in each video. This process revealed two groups of videos: 297 videos that depicted same gender play (251 minutes) and 125 videos (129 minutes) that depicted mixed gender play. Out of the 297 videos depicting same gender play, 153 videos (124 minutes) showed girls-only play and 144 videos (127 minutes) showed boys-only play. We then coded each group of videos focusing on the spaces in which the children played and the types of language and/or literacy skills that children integrated in their play. A thematic analysis was then carried out within each group of videos, compiling the codes to uncover larger themes on play-based learning and language and/or literacy activities in relation to gender. For instance, a group
of codes included children writing captions, drawing shapes, and tracing letters were coded as ‘writing’. Another group of codes which included children sounding out letters, naming letters, and pointing in books was coded as ‘reading’. A third group of codes included the dramatic play center, the writing center, and the blocks center was coded as ‘space’. This process revealed a consistent pattern within each of the three groups of videos in relation to gender, space, and literacy. In light of the comparative nature of the analysis, percentages were also calculated to provide supporting evidence.

Results

Gender separated play in kindergarten classrooms

As observed in prior research, the children who participated in this study tended to play separately based on gender across the twelve classrooms. In 70% of the videos, girls and boys played separately. Importantly, the analysis revealed that girls and boys also tended to play at different centres of the play environment.

The play environments in each of the twelve classrooms comprised several consistent play centres. These included the art/writing centre, the blocks centre, the dramatic play centre, the reading corner, the science centre, the math centre, the sensory play centre, and games. At the art/writing centre, various literacy materials such as letter magnets, small whiteboards, pencils, markers, crayons, paper, and paint were made available. The blocks centre included blocks, vehicles, construction tools, figurines, and plastic figures (e.g., dinosaurs). The dramatic play centre consisted of kitchen sets, dolls, and dress up clothes, and often included generic literacy materials such as books, crayons, markers, and paper. The dramatic play centre was sometimes transformed into other settings such as a veterinary clinic, a flower shop, a post office, a grocery store, and an airport. Theme specific materials such as menus, nametags, order forms, and animal
books were also available at the dramatic play centres. The reading corner had books near a sitting area either at the carpet or at a table. The science centre was set up to reflect current inquiries. Objects such as rocks, material for creating a terrarium, material for learning about the lifecycle of a chicken, and containers of ice were made available. At the math centre, materials such as hundreds chart, manipulatives, and measuring tapes were included. When engaged in sensory play, the students played at the sandbox, with Playdoh, or with shaving cream. The children also engaged in various structured games such as Mouse Trap, a Pop-Up Pirate Game, card matching games, math games, and word games on the iPad.

*Girls-only play*

The analysis revealed a total of 153 videos across the twelve classrooms that depict play involving only girls. Most of the girls-only play took place at the art/writing centre and at the dramatic play centre. In 44% of the videos of girls-only play, girls played at the art/writing centre and in 24% of the videos girls played at the dramatic play centre. The remaining 32% of the videos showed girls playing at either the blocks centre, the reading corner, the science centre, engaged in sensory play, or engaged in games (See Figure 1). Girls were not observed playing at the math centre. The centres at which the majority of the girls-only play took place, the art/writing and the dramatic play centres, were set up to support concrete literacy experiences. As outlined above, literacy materials were available at both of these centres, which allowed children to use them in their play. For instance, when playing at the art/writing centre, children made cards, drew, painted, and wrote descriptions of their artwork. At the dramatic play centre, children engaged in socio-dramatic play such as playing house and restaurant, tending to sick animals at the veterinary clinic, purchasing flowers at the flower shop, and sending letters at the post office, all of which often included a writing and/or reading component in their play.
Boys-only play

The analysis revealed a total of 144 videos across the twelve classrooms that depict play involving only boys. Most of the boys-only play took place at the blocks centre. In 59% of the videos of boys-only play, boys played at the blocks centre. In 41% of the videos boys played either at the art/writing centre, the dramatic play centre, the math centre, the reading corner, the science centre, engaged in sensory play, or engaged in games (See Figure 2). The centre at which most of the boys-only play took place, the blocks centre, was often not set up to support concrete literacy experiences such as reading and writing. At this centre, children were observed practicing their oral language skills as they negotiated storylines and character roles, resolved peer conflicts, and described their structures to peers and educators. At this centre, children were also observed building structures using blocks and engaging in pretend play with peers using the figurines and plastic dinosaurs.

Gender separated play: Implications for literacy learning

Pretend play is important for literacy development as it allows children to practice symbolic representations in their play, which is important for later learning how to read and write. However, it does not necessarily support concrete reading and writing experiences, which are necessary for meeting policy mandated academic standards in kindergarten. The analysis revealed that girls tended to engage in concrete literacy activities (i.e., reading and writing) in their play twice as much as boys. In 62% of the videos of girls-only play, girls integrated reading and/or writing activities in their play (See Figure 3). For instance, a typical play scenario among the girls is reflected in class 3 where five girls drew and traced letters at the art/writing centre.
The centre included baskets of markers, paper, small whiteboards, and letter stencils. One girl sounded out the letters she traced while her peer helped her spell the word. She stated, ‘What’s next…Katie?’ Her peer stated, ‘A-T-I-E…I.’ Both girls then looked for the letter I on the letter stencil. In class 6, five girls played at the dramatic play area, which was set up as a veterinary clinic. The space included medical equipment, labelled bins for this medical equipment, a list of the days of the week posted on the wall, paper and pencils in a basket by the phone and cash register, a mind map listing words around ‘pet shop’, and a bin of books. The girls wrote down messages at reception, discussed the medical equipment, looked through a book about animals to better help them, and discussed their findings from the book before vaccinating a horse.

-Insert Figure 3 here-

Boys also engaged in concrete reading and/or writing activities when playing at these two centres. For instance, in class 4, the art/writing centre was set up with small whiteboards, worksheets, stencils, and markers. Boys playing together at the art/writing centre drew and traced shapes on the whiteboard and practiced writing their names. In class 6, boys playing together at the veterinary clinic in the dramatic play centre practiced their writing skills as they wrote down phone messages on the notepad. However, as boys were less likely to play at the art/writing and the dramatic play centres, boys were observed integrating concrete reading and/or writing activities in their play in only 31% of the videos of boys-only play (See Figure 4). This percentage reflects under a third of the boys-only play videos.

-Insert Figure 4 here-

While boys’ integration of concrete literacy activities in play typically took place at the art/writing centre and at the dramatic play centre, there were two exceptions at the blocks centre. In class 5, the teacher created a building permit for children to fill out during their construction
play. The observational data showed boys filling out their building permits at the carpet as they built their structures integrating reading and writing in their play. In class 12, the teacher taped words onto the blocks to encourage children to practice identifying rhyming words in their play. The observational data showed boys matching words while playing with the blocks, thus practicing a foundational reading and writing skill in their play. These findings suggest that the play environment was a salient factor in supporting children’s concrete literacy integration during play.

Indeed, as boys typically played at the blocks centre where writing and reading materials were usually not available, the video data showed that boys mostly integrated oral language in their play. In 74% of the videos of boys-only play, boys were observed integrating their oral language skills in their play. For instance, in class 7, three boys played together with the Legos. The boys built structures around a large train track that they built using the Legos. One boy flew a blue Lego piece with a figurine attached to it stating, ‘Through the ice’ while the two other boys negotiated adding Legos to the sides of the base to create walls for their structures. Such play supports children’s oral language development and, according to Hanline et al. (2010), may also support emergent literacy learning as ‘blocks are representational and serve as an introduction to symbols’ (1006). However, such play did not provide children with opportunities for concrete reading and writing experiences.

Overall, the analysis revealed that girls and boys typically played separately and at different centres. Importantly, the centres at which girls and boys played did not equally support concrete literacy experiences in play. Girls were more likely to engage in concrete reading and writing activities as the centres at which they played provided ready access to literacy materials, which they integrated in their play. The findings suggest that the centres at which girls and boys
played influenced whether or not the children integrated concrete literacy activities in their play. The play environment therefore plays a salient role in children’s literacy learning during play.

**Girls and boys playing together**

While the video data across the twelve kindergarten classrooms revealed a pattern of gender separated play, girls and boys were also observed playing together. In 30% of the videos across the twelve classrooms girls and boys played together. The analysis revealed that girls and boys played together mostly at the art/writing centre, at the blocks centre, and at the dramatic play centre. That is, 35% of mixed gender play took place at the art/writing centre, 24% of mixed gender play took place at the blocks centre, and 20% of mixed gender play showed girls and boys playing together at the dramatic play centre. In 21% of the videos, girls and boys played together either at the sensory play centre, the science centre, the reading corner, or engaged in games (See Figure 5).

-Insert Figure 5 here-

The analysis of mixed gender play videos revealed that a gender pattern was also present when girls and boys played together. As the analysis of the videos of gender separated play showed, boys predominantly occupied the blocks centre. This continued to be the case even in instances of mixed gender play. In 73% of the videos of mixed gender play at the blocks centre, boys outnumbered girls. For instance, videos of mixed gender play in class 10 showed that boys outnumbered girls by at least double at the blocks centre. Indeed, in one video there were ten boys and one girl playing with blocks. Similar to patterns outlined in the previous section, girls typically outnumbered boys when playing together at the art/writing centre and at the dramatic play centre. In 62% of the videos of mixed gender play at the art/writing centre and in 74% of the videos of mixed gender play at the dramatic play centre, girls outnumbered boys. For instance,
videos of mixed gender play at the art/writing centre in class 11 showed girls outnumbering boys by at least double. Similarly, videos of mixed gender play at the flower shop in class 12 showed a consistent ratio of three girls and one boy. These observations suggest that an important relationship exists between gender and the spaces of a play environment. Findings across the videos of both gender separated play and mixed gender play reveal that girls tended to gravitate towards the art/writing centre and the dramatic play centre in their play, while boys tended to gravitate towards the blocks centre in their play.

**Mixed gender play: Implications for literacy learning**

As outlined above, the spaces at which children play have important implications on the types of skills they practice in their play. The spaces where girls tended to outnumber boys in the mixed gender play videos were more likely to support concrete literacy experiences. At the art/writing centre in class 3, for instance, four girls and two boys drew on blank sheets of paper, which included baskets of markers and pencil crayons. In class 10, two girls and one boy practiced writing, drawing, and reading the letter stickers at the art/writing centre, which included paper, markers, and letter stickers.

Similarly, at the dramatic play area in class 9, three girls and one boy played in the kitchen area preparing and serving food. The space included kitchen furniture, a table with food and menus set out, and a bin of crayons with blank sheets of paper at the sink counter. On the wall hung a larger menu with prices for each item and taped to the fridge was a piece of paper with the word hotel and a phone number written across it, both written by a student. Two girls and the one boy read their make-believe iPads at the kitchen table. One of the girls then went to the sink and prepared the food. The girl then served the other girl and boy sitting at the table reading the menu. At the sink, another girl created another menu using crayons and paper. The
girl serving the food later sat at the table, read the menu, and placed her order. While in these examples boys engaged in concrete literacy activities, there was consistently a greater number of girls in these spaces and engaged in reading and writing activities.

As outlined above, the video data showed that boys tended to play at the blocks centre. For instance, in class 5, six boys and one girl played with the Legos on the carpet. The children discussed and selected the different pieces for their structures and negotiated who could take part in building the structures. Similarly, at the blocks centre in class 8, six boys and one girl played with the links, Legos, and plastic animals. The children built various vehicles and discussed what they built. One boy connected some links together and stated, ‘Pretend this is the boat’ as he held up the links to show the girl. While the children engaged in rich discussions, practicing their oral language skills and symbolic representations, there were no opportunities for integrating concrete reading and writing activities.

The analysis of the video data of mixed gender play revealed findings consistent with those in the first section. As these examples illustrate, girls and boys tended to dominate particular play centres even when playing together and the play centres at which girls tended to play allowed for more opportunities to practice concrete literacy skills in their play. These findings show how gender influences children’s play choices, which has implications on children’s academic learning in kindergarten.

**Discussion**

*Interpreting the gender gap in children’s literacy integration in play*

Research shows that children must negotiate complex social expectations around sex and gender in their play (Blaise 2005; MacNaughton 2000). As some play centres are marked as feminine or masculine (Martin 2011), children are aware at which centres it is acceptable or not
to play based on their sex and gender. Consequently, girls and boys often gravitate towards different toys and separate play spaces because they find pleasure in ‘getting it right’ (MacNaughton 2006, 131) and in being perceived as socially competent in public spaces (Francis 1998). Importantly, our study found that such gender separated play affected whether or not children had ready access to opportunities to integrate concrete literacy activities in their play.

Our data showed that literacy materials were made available at the art/writing centre and at the dramatic play area, centres at which boys were less like to play. Research has found that both these centres are considered feminine spaces (Alloway 1995; Danby 1998; Paley 1984). Also, literacy itself is perceived to be a feminine subject (Skelton and Francis 2011) and thus spaces that include literacy materials may be associated with femininity. Girls may play at these centres to display their femininity and to be considered as socially competent, while boys may avoid them for the same reasons, or rather to display their masculinity. Research has found that an adherence to gender roles and norms is most rigorous in the early years as children begin to construct and establish their gender identities (Danby 1998; Francis 1998; Paechter 2007; Thorne 1993). Francis (1998) found that children take a gender position through ‘outward shows of stereotypical masculinity or femininity and coercing their peers to do the same in an attempt to create a firmer gender identity’ (10). The spaces and materials with which children play are key resources for the construction and expression of their gender (West and Zimmerman 1987). When supporting literacy learning in the classroom, it is thus also important to consider the role of gender in children’s play.

**Gender sensitive practices for play-based learning**

Policy mandates set the tone for what is considered good teaching practice in early years education. In countries around the world, play-based learning is understood to be the ideal
pedagogical approach in kindergarten (Baker 2014; Pan and Li 2012). However, play-based learning is treated as a gender-neutral pedagogy, which works to silence the gender issues that arise in children’s play. Consequently, how gender may influence children’s choices and experiences during play is typically not seen nor addressed in the classroom (Martin 2011). Not addressing the complex gender dynamics in children’s play, however, may perpetuate the misconception that girls and boys naturally prefer playing with different toys and within different spaces. The notion that girls and boys are then naturally suited for and proficient at different skills, such as literacy, is normalised early on in the schooling process.

Importantly, our study showed that girls and boys also challenged gender expectations in their play. Indeed, boys were observed playing at the art/writing centre and at the dramatic play centre. In these instances, becoming involved in children’s play can be a useful way for teachers to provide support to those children who are crossing the gender boundaries and encourage alternative ways to be a girl or a boy. The presence of a teacher can help to ensure that the boys, for instance, can take full advantage of the literacy materials made available at the art/writing centre and dramatic play centre. However, as these instances are not always present and as teachers are not always readily available to intervene in children’s play, it is important to ensure that opportunities for concrete literacy experiences are made available across all the centres, particularly at those centres that are perceived as masculine and where boys may play more frequently. Doing so may then also work to destabilise rigid gender expectations, opening up possibilities for both girls and boys to explore and integrate various skills in their play.

Limitations

While gender is discussed as a binary in this paper, we understand gender to exist along a spectrum of ways of being, fluctuating across time and space. However, many forces work to
maintain gender as a binary. Given that, the objective of this paper was to investigate how the children in this study organised themselves in play according to dominant gender constructions and how such gender configurations within a play-based learning context may affect children’s literacy integration during play. Examining how children actively contest the gender binary in their play and the effects these contestations may have on their literacy integration in play was beyond the scope of this study, however important to consider when observing and supporting children’s play and learning.

**Conclusion**

Our analysis of videos of children’s play across twelve kindergarten classrooms found a prevalence of gender separated play. In this paper, we have outlined how gender separated play has important implications for children’s literacy learning in kindergarten. Given recent mandates for play-based learning in kindergarten, children are expected to learn essential academic skills through play. However, this task is complicated as children cannot equally access and engage with the same play centres based on their gender. As the play centres are often set up to support different skills, girls and boys are then not necessarily practicing the same academic skills mandated by education policy.

Our data showed that the art/writing and dramatic play centres were typically set up to support concrete literacy experiences as various reading and writing resources were made available to children at these centres. However, our analysis revealed that boys were less likely to play at these centres and thus less likely to integrate concrete reading and writing activities in their play. In this paper, we highlight the importance of gender awareness and sensitivity in policy mandates and classroom practices. While research has empirically validated the role of play in supporting children’s literacy development (Roskos and Christie 2001; Saracho and
Spodek 2006), teachers require adequate resources and support for enacting play-based learning in their classrooms in ways that do not produce and perpetuate gender inequalities in kindergarten.

References


Francis, B. 1998. *Power Plays: Primary School Children’s Constructions of Gender, Power,*


**Figure titles**

*Figure 1.* The centres at which girls-only play was observed.

*Figure 2.* The centres at which boys-only play was observed.

*Figure 3.* Girls' play-literacy integration.

*Figure 4.* Boys' play-literacy integration.

*Figure 5.* The centres at which girls and boys were observed playing together.