Complying and Resisting: A Qualitative Metasynthesis of the Race and Gender Discourses found in the Play of Young Children

Toni Denese Sturdivant[1]

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[1] Texas A&M University-Commerce, USA. toni.sturdivant@tamuc.edu

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Toni Sturdivant https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5507-8927

ARTICLE INFORMATION

ABSTRACT

The largest early childhood organization in the U.S. has acknowledged work to be done to improve the education of young children in terms of diversity and equity. The purpose of this qualitative metasynthesis is to synthesize the findings of various high-quality studies dealing with issues of race and gender and the play of young children as a way to better understand what messages young children are exposed to, are accepting and are rejecting. The two research questions that guided the study are, given extant research, (a) How is hegemonic intertextuality used in the discourse of children in early childhood classrooms? (b) What hegemonic discourses are present in the speech and actions of young children in early childhood classrooms? Findings show that young children in extant research confirmed hegemonic messages more than any of the other intertextual responses. Implications for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers are discussed.

Introduction

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) is a powerful early childhood organization. with nearly 7,000 NAEYC accredited centers in the U.S., Europe, and Asia giving the organization a great deal of influence on the field of early childhood education (NAEYC). NAEYC (2019) states that high-quality programs are programs that include diversity within the physical environment of the room and consider the cultural backgrounds of the students in the class. Additionally, the organization published an anti-bias curriculum that provides early childhood teachers with examples of activities, conversations, and information about diversity issues from race and ethnicity to gender and differing abilities. (Derman-Sparks & Olsen Edwards, 2010). This acknowledgment of there being bias in our society sheds light on the responsibility of early childhood educators to teach children about biases. While anti-bias curricula is readily available, there is still a lack of its use in early childhood classrooms, even by well meaning teachers (Sturdivant, 2019). This critical issue may not be getting through to practitioners as past research shows that many adults feel uncomfortable talking to young children about these topics (MacNevin & Berman, 2017; Park, 2011). Unfortunately, children are exposed to our society's ills whether these topics are explicitly discussed with them or not. A lack of adult discussion can lead to young children attempting to make sense of inequitable power relations on their own (Doucet & Adair, 2013) using their understandings of the world. Research shows that children internalize and reproduce negative racial messages in environments where adults are silent about diversity (Sturdivant & Alanis, 2020) and operate without such biases in classroom environments in which educators regularly discuss diversity (Sturdivant, 2020).

In order to get a better idea of how young children are attempting to understand our society and its power relations, several researchers have examined the play of young children to see what themes of gender (Madrid, 2013; Wohlwend, 2012b, 2012a), sexuality (Gansen, 2017; Mayeza, 2018), and race (Earick, 2010; MacNevin & Berman, 2017) are present. While each study of this kind provides excellent information about a specific setting, a particular child, or even a school district, it is difficult to examine some of the ways in which children around the world are making sense of hegemonic ideas. The purpose of this qualitative metasynthesis is to examine the findings of various high-quality studies dealing with issues of race and gender and the play of young children as a way to understand better what messages young children are exposed to, what messages they are accepting and which ones they reject. To date, no systematic literature reviews have been completed. With more information about how children are understanding societal discourse, early childhood educators, policymakers, and teacher educators can be more effective in the ways they approach anti-bias education with young children. Early childhood educators can be more informed about topics that children may discuss, thus preparing them to intervene. Policymakers can create standards and expectations that align with the current social knowledge held by children, and teacher educators can provide more informed examples and experiences to their pre-service teachers. This paper will examine the types of discourse present in the play of young children, in existing research, and how the children comply with or resist the discourse.

Definitions

Early childhood spans birth through age eight. However, for the purposes of this qualitative metasynthesis, young children are being defined as children between the ages of two and a half and six. The researcher selected this age range deliberately because it is before children have entered formal schooling and yet are old enough to talk and engage in social play.

Play can be defined as a child-initiated learning experience (Bates, 2002). NAEYC's position statement on developmentally appropriate practice posits that play is "a universal innate, and essential human activity that children engage in for pleasure, enjoyment, and recreation" (NAEYC, 2020, p.37). Because this report only includes data taken from early childhood classrooms, the researcher used an operational definition of play that includes both child-directed and teacher-directed experiences that are designed for pleasure and recreation such as playing in centers or outdoor free play. The data in this

article includes sociodramatic play situations (indoors and outdoors), enjoyable situations occurring in the writing center, and during interactive read-alouds.

Methods and Materials

In order to integrate the research findings of multiple studies involving young children's play and hegemony, the researcher used a qualitative metasynthesis approach (Sandelowski & Barroso, 2007). Qualitative metasynthesis involves researchers summarizing the findings of different studies, collating them, and then integrating the themes found across the studies (Brown & Lan, 2014, p. 25). The goal of a qualitative metasynthesis is to come to a new understanding or to gain new knowledge about a given topic (Hannes, 2011; Sandelowski & Barroso, 2007).

The present study involved analyzing qualitative studies that explored how young children handled racial and gendered discourse during center or school-based play, using a lens of intertextuality. Because the initial studies were conducted in various countries the name of the settings differ, but all served young children in buildings that were not homes. Blackledge (2012) defines intertextuality as discourse that, in some way, responds to extant discourse. The two research questions that guided the study are given extant research (a) How is hegemonic intertextuality used in the discourse of children in early childhood classrooms? (b) What hegemonic discourses are present in the speech and actions of young children in early childhood classrooms?

Data Collection

In conducting a research synthesis, it is paramount to collect the highest number of relevant studies as possible (Sandelowski & Barroso, 2007). In order to systematically collect articles, the researcher followed a multiple-step process. After determining the topic of young children and hegemonic discourse, the researcher brainstormed relevant keywords and topics. This brainstorming process included reading articles on the topic to help develop a list of keywords. After the list was completed, the researcher met with a university research librarian to develop the algorithm to search various databases and to determine which database(s) to use. We searched ERIC using EBSCOhost, using the following search: early childhood OR childcare OR kindergarten OR pre-kindergarten OR young children OR preschool children AND (feminism OR gender issues OR gender discrimination OR sexual identity OR sex stereotypes OR gender discourses OR gender differences) OR (race OR race issues OR racial stereotypes OR culture OR divers* OR multicultural OR critical race theory) AND play. We also limited the search to only peer-reviewed studies in academic journals published from 2008 until 2019. This search generated 586 articles.

The author then read the titles and abstracts of the 586 articles to do a preliminary elimination based on the previously determined exclusion criteria. The studies needed to have taken place in a center-based setting. Any study that took place in a home, lab or some other setting was excluded. At least some of the participants needed to be children between the ages of two and six. For example some studies had adult and child participants, while others simply focused on adults. The latter would not be included. The studies had to be empirical research, rather than reviews and discussions of other's work and the study needed to address the research questions regarding hegemonic discourse in some way, such as through race, or gender but not necessarily both. After this exclusion process, 31 articles remained. The author read these 31 studies in detail using the same exclusion criteria as above and was further restricted by adding the researcher's ability to access the reports online given the current subscriptions of the university's library. After this step, 13 articles remained.

Sampling

The 13 studies represent a wide range of participants, including parents, teachers, and children. Settings included child care centers, kindergartens, and nurseries. Various forms of play were represented, including spontaneous sociodramatic play, art, and guided play. For the purposes of this

study, only the data that pertained to the child participants were used. Table 1 provides a summary of the participants and settings included in the synthesis.

Table 1
Participants. Settings and Data Collection Methods

	Sample		Setting	Data Collection Methods
	n	age		
Wohlwend (2012)	21	5 and 6 y/o	Kindergarten, USA	Field notes, audio. video
Wohlwend (2012b)	21	5 and 6 y/o	Kindergarten, USA	video, children's drawings, audio
Mayeza (2018)	40	6 and 7 y/o	Primary School, South Africa	field notes, interview transcripts
Rosen (2017)	80	2 through 4 y/o	Nursery, UK	notes, field notes, and video
MacNevin & Berman (2017)	12	2 through 5 y/o	Preschool/Kinder, Canada	interviews, observations, Toronto Early learning document
Earick (2010)	4	6 y/o	3 Schools, USA	Teacher logs
Wohlwend (2009)	21	5 and 6 y/o	Kindergarten, USA	video, field notes, observations, and participation
Madrid (2013)	14	4 y/o	Preschool, USA	field notes, video, audio, formal and informal adult interviews
Huuki & Renold (2016)	4	6 y/o	Preschool, Finland	Video
Jesuvadian & Wright (2011)	24	4 to 6 y/o	Childcare center, Singapore	semi-structured interviews with persona dolls
Lee, Ramsey, & Sweeney (2008)	13	5 to 6 y/o	Kindergarten, USA	Observations and field notes
Gansen (2017)	116	3 to 5 y/o	3 preschools, USA	Observations and field notes
Earles (2017)	114	4 to 6y/o	10 preschools, USA	observations

Note. y/o= year olds.

Data Analysis

The researcher analyzed the data, both deductively and inductively. The deductive analysis consisted of Imported Concept (Sandelowski & Barroso, 2007), in which ideas drawn from the

discussion of power and discourse found in Blackledge (2012) were used to group and describe the discussions and actions of the participants. For example, Blackledge (2012) draws from Bakhtin and Holquist (1981) work on discourse in literature by stating "discourse bears the traces of the voices of others, is shaped by them, responds to them, contradicts them or confirms them, in one way or another evaluates them" (p. 619). The researcher adopted the concepts of responding, contradicting, or confirming into codes that were used to categorize the types of speech and behaviors of the children in each study. For example, if a child said something that confirmed hegemonic masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) such as "girls are stupid," the researcher would code the statement as confirming. If a student responded to this child by saying, "it doesn't matter if you're a girl or a boy, everyone can be smart," the researcher would code this as contradicting. Statements that neither confirmed nor contradicted a prevailing social attitude, but mentioned them were coded as responding. An example of a statement like this is when a boy was playing with a doll, and a fellow student asked him if he liked being a lady (Wohlwend, 2012b).

Following this step, the author conducted an inductive analysis which enacted reciprocal translation in order to integrate the findings. Reciprocal translation is "constant comparisons of intra-study conceptual syntheses" (Sandelowski & Barraso, 2007, p.204). These comparisons helped to isolate the various broad discourses that were present in the children's play across the studies. This analysis was two-tiered. The first tier included only listing the hegemonic discourses found within each piece of the text that had already been marked as including intertextuality. For example, in Jesuvadian & Wright (2011), a child declared that a doll could make more friends if she were White. The researcher initially labeled this as "whiteness as pretty." After all of the discourses found within each study had been labeled, the researcher then looked at the specific labels and developed broader codes that captured multiple labels. The doll statement was eventually coded under lightness as preferable.

The studies were coded using a spreadsheet app on a project management website, in which studies were first labeled as including examples of discourse that confirmed, responded to, or contradicted (Blackledge, 2012) hegemony and then a preliminary title of the discourse was given. After all of the studies had undergone the first round of coding, the researcher looked at the preliminary codes (discourses round one) and created broader secondary codes to group the studies. The studies were then sorted by the final codes (final discourses). Table 2 shows the studies and their codes.

Table 2
Metasynthesis Studies and Codes

Article	Intertextuality	Discourses Round 1	Final Discourses
Wohlwend (2012)	R, Contr, C	Gender as static	GS
Wohlwend (2012b)	R, Contr	Gender as static	GS
Mayeza (2018)	R, Contr, C	masculinity/ femininity binary; heteronormativity	GS, HetNorm
Rosen (2017)	C	Blackness as criminal	DB
MacNevin & Berman (2017)	C	Whiteness as preferable; darkness as criminal	DB, LP
Earick (2010)	R, Contr, C	Blackness as bad; whiteness as pretty	DB, LP
Wohlwend (2009)	Contr	Femininity as weak	EF
Madrid (2013)	R, Contr, C	Femininity as niceness, weakness	EF

Huuki & Renold (2016)	C	Masculinity as power; femininity as weakness	EF, ToxicMasc
Jesuvadian & Wright (2011)	C	Whiteness as pretty	LP
Lee, Ramsey, & Sweeney (2008)	C, Contra	Light skin desirable	LP
Gansen (2017)	R, Contr, C	heteronormativity	HetNorm, ToxicMasc
Earles (2017)	C, R	heteronormativity, masculinity as meanness, femininity as beauty, gender as static	HetNorm, GS, EF, ToxicMasc,

Note. R= responding; Contr= contradicting; C= confirming; GS= gender static; HetNorm= heteronormativity; DB= darkness as bad; LP= lightness as preferable; ToxicMas= toxic masculinity; EF= exaggerated femininity

Themes

After analyzing all of the data deductively and inductively, developing broad codes and then sorting the data by codes, the researcher grouped the codes into four major themes that answered the research question: Children Policing Other Children, Children as Resistors, Passive Compliance and Innocently Questioning. The findings section below includes a detailed description and examples of each of the four themes.

Findings

The findings are based on the two research questions: given extant research (a) How is hegemonic intertextuality used in the discourse of children in early childhood classrooms? (b) What hegemonic discourses are present in the speech and actions of young children in early childhood classrooms? Children contradicted, responded to, and confirmed several hegemonic discourses (Blackledge, 2012). The most common form of intertextuality was confirming. That is, of all the child dialogue reported in the thirteen studies, children were more likely to confirm hegemonic discourse than to contradict or simply respond. Contradicting hegemonic discourses was more frequent than merely responding. Those discourses found were toxic masculinity, heteronormativity, gender as static, exaggerated femininity, lightness as preferable, and darkness as bad. These discourses emerged within four main themes: Children Policing Other Children, Passive Compliance, Children as Resistors, and Innocently Questioning.

Children Policing Other Children

There were times within three of the 13 articles, (Gansen, 2017; Mayeza, 2018; K. E. Wohlwend, 2012a) in which children policed the behaviors of other children. The researcher coded instances in which children verbally expressed disapproval of another child's actions or words as children policing other children. For instance, Wohlwend (2012a) detailed boys enrolled in a US kindergarten class who enjoyed playing with dolls. At one point, Zach was playing with a visually male doll but was pretending it was a mom. Gavin, another student, expressed his disapproval.

Gavin: That's not a girl; it's a boy.
Zach: But it can be a girl or a boy
Gavin: I call it a boy (Wohlwend, 2012a, p. 17)

This example details a milder form of policing, in which Gavin simply made it clear that he was not in agreement with Zach about the ability of visually "male" dolls to be either boys or girls. However, there were times reported when children were much more forceful in their policing. For example, Gansen (2017) described the following wedding dramatic play episode in a preschool in the United States:

Bailey: Where's my wedding girl, Marie?

David: You wanna marry Marie?
Bailey: Yeah
David: Girls, can't marry girls! Eww!
Baily: I'm waiting on my wedding girl.
Emmet: Girls can't marry girls!
Bailey: Girls can marry girls!
Emmett: [whispering] homosexual [then laughed]. (p. 266)

In this excerpt, two separate four-year-old boys, David and Emmett, attempted to police Bailey's pretend play of same-sex marriage. David explicitly showed disgust with the idea by saying "eww," and Emmett insulted Bailey by whispering "homosexual" and laughing. This example makes it clear that children in this preschool class not only understood heteronormativity but also had the vocabulary to describe the situation. This use of what some might think would be adult vocabulary to describe this topic was not isolated. Mayeza (2018) described an early childhood classroom in South Africa where a boy stated that boys that play with girl toys, in this case, a dollhouse, "will become gay" (p. 595) after his classmate attempted to show the researcher the features of the dollhouse in their classroom.

Passive Compliance

Instances where children policed other children, provided explicit examples of the idea of confirming discourse (Blackledge, 2012) but more often than not, children confirmed societal discourse through passive compliance. Eight of the thirteen articles, (Earick, 2010; Earles, 2017; Gansen, 2017; Huuki & Renold, 2016; Jesuvadian & Wright, 2011; MacNevin & Berman, 2017; Mayeza, 2018; Rosen, 2017), provided examples of passive compliance. One example is in Jesuvadian and Wright (2011), a study conducted in a Singapore childcare center. One researcher mentioned to the children that an Indian doll did not have any friends and asked the children if they could help her make friends. After some conversation about her traditional clothing, a student mentioned that her face was "all brown and dark brown" (p. 282). An Indian student responded to this statement by saying she thinks "she should be White also" (p. 282). These two preschool children contended that this doll did not have any friends simply because she had dark skin and, if she were White, she would have friends. This excerpt shows children confirming the lightness as preferable discourse, but they were not doing this by policing another child but by simply feeling (or knowing) that that is the way things are.

Rosen (2017) provides another example from a study in a nursery in the UK, reporting the following exchange:

Gerome (White child): Peter's a baddie.
Rosen: Is he?
Gerome: And I'm a goodie.
Rosen: [nodded.] Why is Peter a baddie?
Gerome: Because he's going to jail. (p. 186).

Rosen (2017) stated that the only children ever referred to as baddies were the Black children in the classroom. This matter-of-fact statement of this Black child being a "baddie" and that he was destined for jail provides an example of a child passively complying with the idea of darkness being bad. This child, Gerome, accepted this discourse as fact.

Children also complied with discourse relating to femininity and masculinity. Huuki and Renold (2016) described an outdoor play scene in a preschool in Finland; three boys and one girl engaged in a game they coined as crushing. According to Huuki and Renold (2016), the boys would pile on top of the girl and forcibly kiss her. At one point, the researchers asked one of the boys why the girl was always on the bottom, and he replied, "because she is so wonderful" (Huuki & Renold, 2016, p. 757). This idea that this little girl is "wonderful" confirms a discourse of exaggerated femininity where a girl or woman is regarded as being nice and pretty and subservient to maleness. Also, this idea that the boys had the right to pile on top of this girl and forcibly kiss her confirms discourse related to toxic masculinity. The children reacted in this way, not to resist someone or something or even to police anyone, but simply because they see it as the way things are.

Children as Resistors

Just as some children policed the behaviors of their peers and others acting in ways that showed an ingrained understanding of discourse, some children actively resisted the promotion of negative discourse. This resistance was found in the dialogue between children, children and researchers, and children and teachers. Eight of the 13 studies (Earick, 2010; Gansen, 2017; Lee, Ramsey, & Sweeney, 2008; Madrid, 2013; Mayeza, 2018; K. Wohlwend, 2009; K. E. Wohlwend, 2012a, 2012b) provided instances in which children resisted hegemony. In the excerpt above from Gansen (2017), Bailey resisted the policing of her boy peers by not backing down from their insistence that girls cannot marry girls. Earick (2010) shows an example of a child in a US kindergarten expressing resistance to his teacher:

I am sad, and the sadness makes me not want to play or work with anyone; look at our classroom; nothing here looks like me! All those books in our library and the only pictures of kids like me are bad, are Black Knights! (p. 135)

This statement was spoken by a Black child that had recently stopped playing with his best friend, a White boy, because the White child insisted that he play the Black Knight during their knight sociodramatic play since he was Black. This example shows that this five-year-old boy had internalized the "darkness as bad" discourse but also noticed that people like him were not positively represented in the classroom. In addition, that suggestion that he play the Black Knight because he was Black provides evidence that young children are aware of race and ethnicity and make decisions based on it.

Children also resisted negative racial discourse in more indirect ways. Lee, Ramsey, and Sweeney (2008) detailed an experience in a US preschool classroom where students were introduced to flesh-toned crayons. A four-year-old named Silas told another friend that he was going to use a specific shade of brown. His friend replied, "It looks like cocoa...beautiful" (p. 71). Although this was purely a positive example, the researcher felt that acknowledging the beauty of a deep brown skin color is an act of resistance, because the prevailing societal view is that lightness is preferred.

Innocently Questioning

There were instances in two separate reports of the same ethnography where a child needed clarification for another classmate's actions. These questions were not meant to be forms of policing but were genuine curiosities expressed that arose due to a child resisting the discourse of gender being static. The first example occurred in Wohlwend (2012b) when a kindergarten boy was playing with a Disney princess doll, and another boy walked over and asked: "Do you like to be the lady?" (p. 602). Though this was just a question, it shows that the child was actively trying to reconcile his prior knowledge and what was presently happening by asking a question. Thus, it shows an awareness of gender expectations and cross-gender play. Wohlwend (2012a) describes a similar situation where two boys were playing with girl dolls, and a boy came over and asked: "Are you guys, girls?" (p. 13). Again, this genuine question shows an awareness that something different was occurring than what the child would expect. Anticipating particular gendered behavior comes from an awareness of discourse related to gender and play.

Discussion

Across thirteen studies, which occurred in various parts of the world, researchers consistently reported that young children have an awareness of hegemonic discourse. This awareness was conveyed through contradicting, confirming, and responding (Blackledge, 2012) to various discourse such as toxic masculinity, darkness as bad, exaggerated feminism, and heteronormativity. Children grappled with this discourse by policing other children, resisting, asking questions, and complying with the discourse through their words and actions. Children were more likely to confirm hegemonic discourse, and this was overwhelmingly done through merely complying. This passive resistance or the seamless integration of hegemonic discourse within children's play and speech shows the salience of these ideas.

In most instances, children were not trying to prove a point or correct anyone but had already internalized these notions at their young age. Furthermore, some children that actively resisted were made fun of and laughed at by their peers. This policing of other children for not complying with expectations shows the power hierarchy found within such discourse and the children's understanding of power. The policing shows an awareness that children were not merely acting strangely but that they were "wrong" and that their behaviors needed to be corrected. In contrast, the presence of the innocent questioning theme shows the opportunity for learning that can occur with these young children. While some children seem to have wholly internalized messages, others are clearly still trying to figure things out. This state of trying to make sense of the world provides an ideal environment for intervention through anti-bias curriculums. Early childhood educators have an opportunity to challenge hegemonic messages with which children are grappling and to step in to mitigate potential damage done by hegemonic comments and actions occurring between peers.

Limitations and Recommendations

This meta-synthesis was completed by one researcher, limited to a single database, and answered two specific questions. It is possible that a search across multiple databases and that included other methods of article retrieval could have uncovered more information about children's discourse. However, with 586 results generated within a single database, the researcher and the research librarian that was consulted found it reasonable to limit the search to ERIC, the most relevant database given the topic.

It is also possible that other studies that did not focus on discourse, play, race, or gender, may have had findings that answered the research question. However, the study had to be limited by specific parameters for plausibility. Limiting the search to peer-reviewed work could have limited the data set, but this is commonly done for quality purposes (Brown & Lan, 2014).

Implications

This meta-synthesis uncovered clear examples of young children's awareness of hegemonic discourse. Future research could seek to determine adult responses to such discourse being reproduced in play. Additionally, empirical data of specific educational practices that reduce the production of such discourse would help to influence best practices for practitioners. Finally, quantitative researchers could create a treatment consisting of activities related to gender and race and compare the use of discourse around the topics with a control group to help to verify the adult's role in the process of handling hegemonic messaging.

Early childhood policymakers should first examine existing policies to determine if hegemony is addressed. Next policymakers should use existing research to determine if current policies adequately address current findings. Finally, if necessary, new policies should be created to align with existing research. For example, if current policies simply address the physical environments and calls for the inclusion of diverse materials, but do not mention conversions or lessons around diversity, as current research offers as important as well.

Early childhood practitioners should not shy away from talking to their students about issues such as race or gender. Research supports that these are two issue that young children are interested in, make decisions based on and talk to each other about. Much work has already been done to help early childhood educators implement anti-bias work in their classroom. Early childhood practitioners should seek out this work and use it to improve their professional practice. Additionally, early childhood practitioners should acknowledge that not all play is innocent and should play a more active role in children's play to help to mitigate some of the effects of children reproducing hegemonic messages.

Conclusion

This meta-synthesis provides evidence of the necessity of early childhood educators to intervene and play an active role in the ways that children internalize messages, by providing counter-discourse and teaching children to resist hegemonic discourse, such as what is championed in anti-bias

curricula. Having evidence that throughout various early childhood settings, there is persistent engagement with hegemonic discourse by young children implies a need to explicitly address what is going on in the world with preschoolers. Despite adult feelings that children are unaware of the world, this meta-synthesis shows that children are very much aware of what is going on and have been accepting ideas as they are presented more often than resisting or questioning them.

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