

Gender Identity

Subjects: Social Issues

Contributor: Michelle Domingues

Gender is learned; it is a social construct. There is a lack of literature connecting children's social identity formation and education for ecological sustainability in early childhood education. This gap in literature can be attributed to a common misconception that young children are not able to understand and express more complex social identity nor identify with ecological and sustainable education principles. However, this inquiry illuminates that from the perspective of Reggio-inspired educators' social constructivist experiences, preprimary age children are in fact competent and capable of socially constructing complex knowledge and of representing their theories on identity and ecology through reuse materials.

Keywords: just sustainability ; REMIDA creative reuse ; persona dolls ; anti bias education ; early childhood education

1. REMIDA Creative Reuse Cultural Education

An alternative educational viewpoint offered through the research in the Municipal Infant-Toddler Centers and Preprimary Schools of Reggio Emilia, Italy comes through an ongoing cultural project in their REMIDA creative recycling center that had been explicitly ascribing high value to the use of waste materials as a part of young children's educational experiences since 1996 ^[1]. The optimistic underlying point of view on reversing environmental degradation through REMIDA pedagogy provides children with opportunities to co-construct complex social identities in Reggio's Municipal Infant/Toddler Centers and Preprimary Schools. The approach involves actively engaging children and educators in hands-on experiences that approach ideas related to environmental and social sustainability work with reuse materials. REMIDA represents a theory that draws from (yet goes beyond) the geographic terrain from which it originates. This theory encompasses an ecological and socially sustainable mindset as well.

2. Persona Dolls

Whitney's ^[2] work on the power of persona dolls describes one of the most amazing anti-bias tools in the early childhood classroom. Persona dolls serve a different purpose from dramatic play dolls in a classroom. When children encounter a classroom persona doll, they are interacting with another member in the classroom. To achieve this, a persona doll is created whose identities remain as constant as those characteristics do for real children in the classroom and whose life experiences unfold just as they do for children in the classroom. These individual and social identities help the children connect with the dolls and make the dolls stories more powerful. This is unlike a dramatic play doll in the classroom whose age, name, family, identity, and gender can change any time a child in the classroom desires to do so.

Storytelling with *persona dolls* (dolls that are given names, family histories, and other traits by educators) "is a powerful tool for teaching classroom and social skills, giving children words for and tools to manage their feelings, developing problem-solving and conflict resolution skills, expanding children's comfort with difference, undoing stereotypes and biased information, and helping children to stand up against bias" ^[2] (p. 233). Inviting educators to share their own stories of working with three-dimensional persona dolls constructed with reuse materials provides insights to better understand Anzaldúa's ^[3] *autohistoria teoría* or how they simultaneously tell the life stories of others.

3. Gender Identity Formation

Gender is a dimension of identity that young children are working hard to understand. It is also a topic that early childhood teachers, supervisors, and families are not always sure how to best address. Gender expression is a larger social justice issue, external influences are already at work inside the preschool classroom, impacting children's interactions and choices for play and exploration. Without adults prompting children to consider perspectives that challenge the status quo, children, left to their own devices, tend to develop notions that conform with stereotypes (Ramsey 2004). If children are regularly exposed to images, actions, people, and words that counter stereotypes—for example through books, photographs, stories, and role models—they are likely to modify and expand on their theories ^[4]. Thus, educators can

offer children different perspectives, including those that counter society's confined constructs, to allow children access to a multiplicity of roles, expressions, and identities ^[5].

Gender identity in early childhood typically develops in stages. Around the age of two, children become conscious of physical differences between boys and girls. Before their third birthday, most children can easily label themselves as either a boy or a girl. By age four, most children have a stable sense of their identity. During early childhood, children learn gender role behavior; however, cross-gender preferences and play are a normal part of gender formation and exploration, regardless of their future gender identity (ies). All children construct a clearer view of themselves and their gender over time. Children who assert a gender-diverse identity know their gender as clearly and consistently as their developmentally matched peers and benefit from the same level of support, love, and social acceptance ^[6].

This research is dedicated to B/border crossers and to Anzaldúa 's ^[7] conceptualization of the geographic and cultural B/borderlands—"as intensely painful yet also potentially transformational spaces where opposites converge, conflict, and transform" and to the image of the child as a global citizen who is capable of understanding and expressing more complex features of social identities. Anzaldúa ^[8] describes gender bending or one whose dress or behavior does not conform to conventional gender roles as another kind of cultural "border crossing". This author is conscientious in how psychic experience of border crossings are expressed as well as mindful of the brutality undocumented immigrants experience from trespassing the social and geographic construct of "Nation States", considering there are estimations that by 2050, there will be 100 million climate refugees globally. Now that I have reviewed the literature, I share the materials and methods for how Logan's persona emerged from a focus group of educators to disrupt the gender binary so rigidly acknowledged in our society.

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