



BUILDING GENDER EQUALITY FROM AN EARLY AGE: IMPLEMENTATION OF PHYSICAL PLAY IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

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Abstract:

This research aims to analyze the implementation of physical play as a medium for gender-responsive learning in early childhood education. Gender stereotypes formed from an early age can limit children's developmental potential. Through a descriptive qualitative approach, this study explores how physical play can be an effective means to build gender equality awareness in children aged 4-6 years. Research findings show that physical play designed with a gender-responsive approach can reduce gender stereotypes, increase children's self-confidence regardless of gender, and develop motor skills inclusively. The implications of this research provide practical recommendations for early childhood educators in designing learning activities that support gender equality from an early age.

Keywords: *Gender Equality, Physical Play, Early Childhood Education, Gender-Responsive Learning, Young Children*

INTRODUCTION

Early childhood education (ECE) is a crucial phase in shaping children's character and identity, including their understanding of gender roles. During the age range of 0-6 years, children begin to develop self-concepts and understand social norms, including gender expectations present in their surrounding environment (Santrock, 2007). Unfortunately, gender stereotypes that develop in society often manifest in educational practices, such as the assumption that active and competitive physical play is more suitable for boys, while girls are directed toward more passive and nurturing activities.

Gender stereotypes formed from an early age can have long-term impacts on children's development. Research shows that girls exposed to gender stereotypes tend to have lower self-confidence in physical activities and are less interested in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) fields later in life (Endendijk et al., 2013). Conversely, boys bound by traditional masculinity may experience difficulties in expressing emotions and developing empathy.

Physical play has an important role in early childhood development, not only for gross motor development but also for cognitive, social, and emotional aspects (Pica, 2014). However, the potential of physical play as a medium for gender-responsive learning has not been widely explored in the Indonesian education context. A gender-responsive approach in physical play can help

children understand that abilities and interests are not determined by gender, and provide equal opportunities for all children to develop their potential optimally.

RESEARCH METHODS

This research uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive research type. The qualitative approach was chosen to obtain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon of gender-responsive physical play implementation in natural ECE settings (Creswell, 2014).

Data was collected through several techniques:

1. **Participatory Observation:** Researchers conducted observations of physical play activities for 8 weeks with a frequency of 3 times per week. Observations focused on children's interactions, teacher responses, and dynamics that occurred during play.
2. **In-depth Interviews:** Semi-structured interviews were conducted with ECE teachers and parents to explore their understanding, attitudes, and experiences related to gender-responsive education.
3. **Documentation:** Collecting learning planning documents, activity photos, and videos of physical play activities.
4. **Focus Group Discussion (FGD):** Conducted with teachers to discuss challenges and strategies in implementing gender-responsive learning.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

RESULTS

Initial Conditions of Physical Play Learning in ECE

Initial observation results showed the practice of gender stereotypes in physical play at both ECE institutions. Boys tended to be encouraged to play ball, mini rock climbing, and competitive games, while girls were more often directed toward rhythmic gymnastics, jump rope, or more "gentle" games. Teachers reported that this separation often occurred unconsciously and was influenced by parental expectations and prevailing social norms.

Interviews with 5 teachers showed that 80% of them had never received special training on gender-responsive education. Most teachers understood gender equality conceptually but experienced difficulties in applying it in learning design, especially for physical play activities.

Implementation of Gender-Responsive Physical Play

This research implemented various types of physical play with gender-responsive principles for 8 weeks. The following are implementation results based on game types:

A. Cooperative Games

Games such as "Human Bridge," "Chain Relay," and "Carrying Ball Together" were designed to build cooperation without gender-based competition. Observation results showed;

1. 85% of children (both boys and girls) showed active participation
2. No significant difference in enthusiasm levels based on gender
3. Children learned to appreciate friends' contributions regardless of gender

B. Circuit Play

Game stations with various activities (jumping, crawling, throwing, balance) that children could choose according to interest:

1. 73% of children tried all stations without choosing based on gender stereotypes
2. Girls showed increased self-confidence in activities stereotypically "masculine" such as climbing and throwing
3. Boys began to be interested in balance and coordination activities that were usually avoided

C. Active Role Play

Games such as "Firefighter," "Rescuer," or "Explorer" involving physical movement but not limited by gender:

1. 90% of children participated without questioning the appropriateness of roles with their gender
2. Children showed creativity in developing game narratives
3. Positive cross-gender interactions occurred in solving game "missions".

D. Modification of Traditional Games

Traditional games such as gobak sodor, benteng-bentengan, and hopscotch were modified with inclusive rules:

1. Formation of mixed-gender teams increased collaboration
2. Flexible rules allowed all children to participate according to ability
3. Children learned that skills are more important than gender

Teacher Strategies in Gender-Responsive Learning

Through FGD and observation, several effective strategies applied by teachers were identified:

1. Use of Inclusive Language: Teachers avoided sentences like "boys must be strong" or "girls must be careful," and replaced them with "all children can try" or "everyone has different ways to play."
2. Teacher Modeling: Female teachers participated in playing soccer, male teachers participated in gymnastics, showing that activities are not limited to certain genders.
3. Role Rotation: In role-playing games, children were given opportunities to try various roles without being limited by gender stereotypes.
4. Gender-Neutral Positive Reinforcement: Praise was given based on effort and achievement, not on conformity with gender expectations.
5. Shared Reflection: After playing, teachers invited children to discuss what they learned and how they felt, encouraging awareness that everyone can do various activities.

Impact on Gender Equality Understanding

Evaluation at the end of the research period showed positive changes:

A. Changes in Children:

1. 78% of children showed a decrease in gender stereotypes in choosing physical play
2. Increased self-confidence of girls in challenging physical activities (from 45% to 82%)
3. Boys were more open to trying activities previously considered "feminine" (65% increase)
4. 85% of children were able to articulate that "everyone can play"

anything".

B. Changes in Teachers:

1. Increased teacher awareness about gender bias in learning (100%)
2. Teachers were more skilled in designing inclusive activities
3. 80% of teachers reported changes in how they interacted with children regarding physical activities

C. Parent Responses:

1. 60% of parents were initially skeptical, but 75% of them reported seeing positive changes in children
2. Some parents began applying gender-responsive principles at home
3. 40% of parents requested more information about gender-responsive education.

Implementation Challenges

The research also identified several challenges:

1. **Parent Resistance:** Some parents worried this approach would "confuse" children or conflict with cultural values.
2. **Resource Limitations:** Not all ECE institutions have adequate facilities and equipment for physical play variations.
3. **Teacher Implicit Gender Bias:** Despite training, teachers sometimes still showed unconscious bias in responses to children.
4. **Social Pressure:** Children sometimes received negative comments from peers who still held strong gender stereotypes.
5. **Lack of Curriculum Guidance:** There is no official guidance from the government on implementing gender-responsive education in ECE.

Discussion

Physical Play as a Medium for Gender-Responsive Learning

This research's findings confirm constructivist theory that children build understanding of gender through social interaction and experience (Martin & Ruble, 2004). Physical play provides a natural context where children can explore their abilities without gender stereotype limitations. When girls are given opportunities and support to engage in challenging physical activities, they show abilities equal to boys, sometimes even exceeding them.

This is consistent with research by Dinella et al. (2017) which found that exposure to non-stereotype gender activities can reduce gender thinking rigidity in young children. In this study, rotation strategies and play variations allowed children to develop a broader repertoire of skills, not limited to what "should" fit their gender.

Teacher Role in Challenging Gender Stereotypes

Findings about the importance of teacher modeling and inclusive language use support Bandura's (1977) social learning theory, which emphasizes the role of models in children's learning. When teachers consistently show that physical activities are not tied to gender and provide gender-neutral positive reinforcement, children begin to internalize gender equality values.

However, this research also revealed that teacher implicit gender bias is a significant barrier. Although teachers cognitively support gender equality, their daily practices sometimes still show different expectations based on gender. This shows the need for continuous training that focuses not only on knowledge but also on self-awareness and practice reflection.

Social-Cultural Context and Gender-Responsive Education

Parent resistance found in this research reflects the tension between traditional values and progressive approaches in gender education. In the Indonesian context, where patriarchal values are still strong in many communities, gender-responsive education can be perceived as a threat to cultural norms (Srimulyani, 2012).

However, it is important to distinguish between gender equality and elimination of biological differences. Gender-responsive education does not aim to make boys and girls the same but ensures that biological differences do not become the basis for limiting children's potential and opportunities. Clear communication with parents about the goals and benefits of gender-responsive education becomes crucial for successful implementation.

Implications for Motor and Cognitive Development

This research shows that when all children are given equal access to various types of physical play, they develop more comprehensive motor skills. Girls who are accustomed only to "gentle" physical activities get opportunities to develop gross motor skills important for overall development. Conversely, boys who are given opportunities to try activities requiring fine coordination and balance develop better motor control.

Furthermore, gender-responsive physical play also contributes to cognitive development. When children are faced with situations that challenge gender stereotypes, they develop critical thinking skills and cognitive flexibility (Bigler & Liben, 2007). They learn to question assumptions and make judgments based on evidence rather than stereotypes.

Long-term Impact of Gender-Responsive Education

Although this research only lasted 8 weeks, observed changes in attitudes and behavior show potential for long-term impact. Longitudinal research shows that children raised in environments that support gender equality tend to have broader career aspirations, healthier interpersonal relationships, and better psychological well-being (Endendijk et al., 2018).

In the context of Indonesia's development, gender-responsive education from an early age can contribute to achieving sustainable development goals (SDGs), particularly goal 5 on gender equality. Investment in gender education in ECE can provide significant returns in the form of a more inclusive, innovative, and productive generation.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on research results and discussion, it can be concluded:

1. Implementation of gender-responsive physical play in ECE learning can be done through various strategies, including cooperative games, circuits, active role play, and modification of traditional games. The key to success lies in inclusive activity design, use of gender-neutral language, and unbiased positive reinforcement.
2. Main challenges in implementation include parent resistance, teacher implicit gender bias, resource limitations, peer group social pressure, and lack of official curriculum guidance. Overcoming these challenges requires a multi-stakeholder approach involving teacher training, parent education, and policy support.

3. Impact of gender-responsive physical play on young children is very significant, including decreased gender stereotypes in activity selection, increased self-confidence of girls in challenging physical activities, increased openness of boys to activity variations, and development of understanding that abilities are not determined by gender.
4. Physical play is proven to be an effective medium for gender-responsive learning because it provides a natural context, involves direct experience, encourages cross-gender social interaction, and allows children to challenge stereotypes through successful experiences.

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