

## **Exploring Feminist Pedagogy in Curriculum Practices of Early Childhood Education**

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### **Abstract**

This study explains feminist theory and demonstrates what feminist pedagogy can do for early childhood curriculum practice, in which feminists draw attention to the multiple contexts of culture, privilege, politics, and social transformation. Feminist pedagogy involves the intricate relationships of discourses, power, and knowledge in children's schooling. By reading and discussing books that include gender issues, teachers should observe and reconceptualize the various ethnicities, races, classes, and genders of children. Teachers also can recheck the gender equity in their classroom activities. Thus, feminist pedagogy can offer various visions to contextualize gender culture and gender equity issues in early childhood education.

**Key words: feminist pedagogy, discourses, power, knowledge**

# 探究女性主義教學對幼兒教育課程實施 的新觀點

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## 摘要

這個研究討論幾種女性主義的理論和女性主義教學如何實施在幼兒教育的課程上。女性主義者著眼於課程進行中與文化、政治、特權和社會轉變的關連。女性主義教學討論論述、權力、和知識在孩子學習中的複雜關係。藉由閱讀和討論與性別等相關議題，老師們可觀察孩子們的互動，並概念化孩子們在種族、社會階級和性別上的多重表現。因此，女性主義教學能將性別文化和性別平等事件放置於幼兒教育教室中來做為多種觀點的文本，並加以了解孩子們的想法。

**關鍵字:** 女性主義教學、論述、權力、知識

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## Introduction

Identifying the relationship between feminism and early childhood pedagogy poses an interesting problem. Although most people understand that feminism argues the power relationship between women and men (Weedon, 1997) and that the purpose of early childhood education is to improve the lives of children (Cannella, 1997), how one informs the other remains a question.

Myths and misunderstanding surround feminism as a result of the foregoing assumptions. Contemporary feminists, in fact, highlight multiple meanings and realities (Coffey & Delamont, 2000), dealing not only in women's rights in political participation and educational opportunities but also in differentiating gender roles and examining discourse, power, and knowledge in society and schooling.

Throughout history women have assumed more responsibility than men in child-rearing. People continue to believe that because women physically bear children, they must also accept the primary responsibility for feeding, educating, and caring for them (Goldstein, 1993). Women and children are often equated, viewed as similar groups with dysfunctional characteristics, especially in a patriarchal society where men dominate (Cannella, 1997).

Because most early childhood teachers are female, how they make decisions about their curricula or what they believe about the way children construct knowledge cannot be ignored. Beliefs about teaching held by teachers are not independent cognitive constructs about teaching and learning; instead teachers' beliefs derive from implicit systems or theories of practice that shape the way they go about their work (Genishi, Ryan, Ochsner, & Yarnall, 2002). Feminist pedagogy does not include the everyday work of the teacher; it concerns reproducing and transmitting of social values, such as sex roles and gender relations.

Early childhood educators need to understand how children come to perceive race, class, and gender because these factors influence the way children identify themselves. Concerning children's

learning, the purpose of this study is to discuss new visions for early childhood education promoted in feminist pedagogy. Specifically, the following issues are relevant: (a) the education reforms inherent in the three waves of feminism theory, (b) feminist pedagogy in early childhood education, and (c) feminism and reconstructing perspectives in early childhood gender issues.

### **Education Reforms Inherent in Three Waves of Feminist Theory**

#### **Definition of Feminism**

Deriving from the Latin *femina* (woman), the term *feminism* has a long history; it regards primarily “having the quality of females” (Weiner, 1994, p. 51). From the concerns of women's lives to their rights, various theories of feminism have been shaped by various social movements. Haraway (1989) stated that feminist theory and practice “seek to explain and change historical systems of sexual differences, whereby 'men' and 'women' are socially constituted and positioned in relations to hierarchy and antagonism” (p. 20).

Because feminists want to change the social hierarchy involving women and men, the movement naturally relates to education reforms in schools. For this reason, educators have been influenced by three waves of feminist thought.

#### **The Educational Principles in the Three Waves of Feminist Theory**

**Liberal feminist theory.** Originating during the 19<sup>th</sup> century and extending to the 1930s, liberal feminism focused on natural rights, justice, and democracy. Emphasizing the individual, legal, and political rights of women, its tenets focused people's attention on women's rights in marriage, property laws, and increased educational and employment opportunities as well as public participation. Because the movement arose in Europe, most people thought it was innately liberal, white, middle-class, and highly individualistic (Weiner, 1994).

Liberal feminists claimed that providing equal education for both sexes helps develop potential abilities. In particular, securing equal educational opportunities for women will facilitate progress and

social reform in our society (Weedon, 1997; Weiner, 1994). When females attend school and acquire more knowledge, they are qualified to participate in public affairs.

**Cultural feminist theory.** The second wave of feminism, occurring in the late 1960s concomitant with the Civil Rights and anti-Vietnam war movements, focused on the differences and the inequalities between the genders. Cultural feminists defined society in terms of a sex or class system, and it promoted a feminist revolution; these ideas came to be known as “radical feminism.” For example, the concept of “patriarchy” originally meant father's rule, but for cultural feminists, the notion patriarchy was altered to describe the hegemony of men over women (Grumet & McCoy, 2000; Weedon, 1997). Feminine qualities, such as caring, nurturing, and interdependence, were identified as sources of both pride and strength for women and affirmed by cultural feminists. Because women have particular experiences and capabilities, they differ from men and have a separate cultural and ethical heritage.

Cultural feminists, therefore, attribute to girls learning styles different from those of boys. Requiring curriculum and teaching strategies suited specifically for girls allows them to maximize their differences. When teachers value and recognize girls differently in the curriculum and in pedagogy, female students gain stature in the classroom.

**Poststructural feminist theory.** Feminist poststructuralism comes from theories of poststructuralism and postmodernism, used to describe the mechanisms of power and how meaning and power are organized, enacted, and opposed in our society (Ochsner, 1999, p. 28). Poststructuralism becomes feminist when matters of gender or inequitable relationships of power between males and females are made a central concern (Coffey & Delamont, 2000; MacNaughton, 2005, Weedon, 1997), emphasizing new ways of seeing and knowing in the traditional male-dominated society.

Davies (2003) stated, “Poststructuralist theory provides a radical

framework for understanding the relation between persons and their social world and for conceptualizing social change” (Introduction, p. xii). She also asserted that the individual is not so much a social construction that results in some quite unchanging outcomes as one who is constituted and reconstituted through a variety of discursive practices. From the perspectives of feminist poststructuralism, gender is a collective phenomenon, an aspect of both social relations and personal life. Both female and male students are multiply located and variously positioned in the classroom, and both female and male students are human beings who should experience the same opportunities to engage in new power relations and contradictions.

### **Feminist Pedagogy in Early Childhood Education**

#### **What is Feminist Pedagogy?**

Feminist scholarship and empirical work have been essential in shaping our understandings of education and teaching. From the feminist perspective, gender is theorized as learned, influenced by society, changing over time, and varying considerably in different cultures (Kamler, 2000; Weiner, 1994). Because high quality education results from specific curriculum policy emerging at specific times for specific groups of children, feminist educators like to contextualize the multiple contexts of the economic, social, and cultural dimensions of the particular school (Biklen & Pollard, 2000).

The most important concerns among those who practice feminist pedagogy include first, the way teachers treat boys and girls. Connolly (1998) stated in *Racism, Gender Identities, and Young Children* that primary school teachers are more likely to assign art projects to girls and computer projects or carpentry tasks to boys (p.74); furthermore, teachers often apply gender stereotypes when they plan class activities instead of deep inquiry when making curriculum decisions.

Second, researchers of feminist pedagogy have linked feminist practices with teaching. Biklen and Pollard (2002) held that “central issues included the division of power and authority in the classroom,

the idea that girls are multiply constituted, and the struggle to make the classroom a feminist space” (p. 736). The vocabulary of voice and silence denote the manner in which female and male students participate in class discussion. For example, Brown (2002) argued that generally girls choose silence in class because they believe silence is a good way to avoid trouble from the teacher and their male peers.

Third, the issue of power and authority, differently defined in various cultural groups (Biklen & Pollard, 2002), also appears in feminist pedagogy, for example, the knowledge needed for empowering minority female students in schools.

As I see it, feminist pedagogy relates the vision of feminist practice with teaching, so feminist pedagogy could be considered in terms of the various feminist theories.

**The view of liberal feminist educators.** The goal of liberal feminism functioning within the current educational system is to effect change quickly. Some liberal feminists concern themselves with educational equality for females in curriculum, teacher expectations, and testing.

Liberal feminists view knowledge dissemination as the solution to gender inequality. As more educational opportunities for boys and girls are provided, they gain more abilities to succeed in their lives. Hence, according to the approach of liberal feminist pedagogy, an early childhood teacher will focus her or his concern on equal educational opportunities. For example, by arranging the block area and home corner side by side, the teacher can provide girls and boys equal opportunities to use to these learning centers and to play together (MacNaughton, 1997b).

Liberal feminists focus on schools and sex-role socialization and demand gender- equity in the curriculum for boys and girls. The liberal feminist aims to create a fair relationship between males and females; however, even if the curriculum is the same for both sexes within early childhood classrooms, children's experiences with the

curriculum may be quite different and inequitable.

**The view of cultural feminist educators.** Cultural feminist pedagogy “concerns... fundamental criticisms of the male domination of society and nature of school knowledge” (Weiner, 1997, p.68). Thus, practitioners of cultural feminist pedagogy critique 'male' school subjects and examine the patriarchal processes of schooling and power relations between sexes in the classroom. The relationships between domination and subordination as well as oppression and empowerment are connected to cultural feminist thinking. By facilitating female students' emerging consciousness of themselves as female, cultural feminist educators want to create opportunities for both girls and boys to recognize and value “female ways,” for example, by discussing or celebrating International Women's Day (March 8) and honoring important women in the children's lives and those who made important contributions to all of our lives. An early childhood educator with cultural feminist perspectives might include a variety of props to encourage boys in the home corner and girls play in the block area.

Another strategy is called “feminization,” which involves girls visiting and playing in the block area to make it more “girl friendly.” Culture feminist educators can put dolls, domestic toys, or cooking utensils in the block area (Ochsner, 1999, p. 26).

The third strategy is to attract both girls and boys to engage in feminine and masculine activities together. By placing a woodworking table and tools in the home corner, boys might be drawn to this center to make furniture or home repairs; however, MacNaughton (1997a) concluded from her research that children of one gender lack interest in the qualities of the other gender. I observed four- to six-year-old children at the Kent Child Development Center during spring 2004, and I discovered that even though the teacher tried to put the boys' toys into the home corner, boys were still interested in playing with their male peers. They imitated adult males by staying in the kitchen using the play



microwave to cook fast food and discussed how to play football. Girls by contrast held “mom and child care” dramatic plays, pretended to cook, and played shopping games.

By valuing and celebrating women's differences and women's ways of knowing, cultural feminist educators advocate for male and female dualism to switch to female/male.

Ochsner (1999) argued that by recognizing gender differences in children, cultural feminism is consistent with the way sexism and gender bias could be confronted in schools (p. 27).

**The view of poststructural feminist educators.** Weedon (1997) claimed that poststructural feminism entails a way of producing knowledge that uses poststructural theories of language, discourse, and subjectivity to understand how power is exercised through discourse.

In *Shaping Early Childhood* MacNaughton (2003) stated that feminist poststructuralists share beliefs about how people learn through linking discourse, power, and subjectivity. Language is the key to creating meaning as socially constructed individuals. Discourse refers to a grid of power, knowledge, and subjectivity relations. Subjectivity refers to an individual's conscious and unconscious thought and understanding one's relation to the world. The two genders provide a range of subjectivities, allowing individuals to be positioned in a variety of ways. Power relations exist within fields of knowledge or “regimes of truth,” which produce and exercise particular forms of power relations.

From these connections, one child could learn and reflect upon her or his gender, racial, and cultural background. Because these are very complicated relationships, I will explain them more clearly in terms of Foucault's theory of “discourse, subjectivity, and power.”

**How do I learn gender roles from discourse?** For example, as a female, I might emphasize very traditional feminine ways of looking, thinking, and acting in my social world. Feminist poststructuralists believe that people learn through our discourses to

make sense of identity and reconstruct our understanding about the ways to play gender, race, class and so on.

**How do I learn about myself from my discourse and subjectivity?** *Subjectivity* is a term used to refer to a biased way of seeing the world. Feminist poststructuralists believe that “we cannot see ourselves or think about ourselves outside of discourse that exists when we come into the world” (MacNaughton, 2003, p. 83). I can discover ways that I and others think, speak, and act in particular ways, creating social templates, which I can use to reconstruct myself in ways that are consistent with them—as a child, as a girl, or as a boy. What factors influence my choice? Power more or less dictates my choice.

**How do I learn about myself from my discourse and power?** Power entails the ability to force others do things that benefit the individual in power. Some discourse is more powerful than others because it has the support of powerful institutions and people, who benefit from particular ways of thinking, feeling, and acting. I am a person who lives in a society, and I am influenced by the media, culture, politics, and economics. My environment influences what I think about being a female in the world. I have my own concept of my identity; however, I resist what I see and what I experience when I don't like the power change my decision.

### **Reconstructing Early Childhood Gender Issues**

#### **Books about the Way Children Learn Gender**

Early childhood educators may find the following books helpful in understanding the ways children construct their gender roles; these works are highly valuable in terms of the authors' contributions to the feminist perspective. They also provide information useful to those desiring to reconstruct viewpoints held by early childhood educators with regard to feminist pedagogy as well as gender identity construction by children.

In *Gender Play: Girls and Boys in School* Thorne (1995) reported that gender is socially constructed (p. 3). She compared the

concept of “gender development” and “gender socialization” to see how gender is constructed through power relations. The purpose of this book is to bring children from the margins and into the center of sociological and feminist thought. Thorne asserted that children's social construction of gender is an active and ongoing process in which they engage actively and collaboratively in their everyday lives.

To develop a social studies curriculum that reflects the experiences of five- and six- year-old children of differing ethnicities, races, classes, and genders, Connolly (1998) conducted observations at an urban, multi-ethnic school and its community, publishing his results in *Racism, Gender Identities, and Young Children*. Hearing the voices of parents, teachers, and male and female children in dialogue, the reader can detect the influence of a poststructural theory of inquiry at work in the relationship among discourse, power, and the subjective.

In *Gender in Early Childhood* Yelland (1998) described how children construct their own gender in the contexts of their family, community, and school. The author explored “the ways in which young children look themselves and are viewed by others in terms of their gender identities as individuals and as members of society” (p. 1). The author also included a variety of topics covering the ways children represent and resist their gender identities in their life experiences.

In *Intersections: Feminisms/Early Childhoods* Hauser and Jipson (1998) presented dialogue among early childhood educators who identify themselves as feminists. In order to consider the identity of feminist early childhood educators, the authors divided the book into three parts. The first includes “a conversation about the intersections of feminism and early childhood,” in which historical events in early childhood education are viewed from feminist perspectives (Hauser & Marrero, 1998). The second section is devoted to “a conversation about curriculum and pedagogy,” covering early

childhood practice and feminist pedagogy in early childhood settings. The final section contains a discussion of some significant issues from the feminist point of view: the roles and representations of women and children, an analysis of the economic and cross-cultural realities of child care, and consideration of public policy. I have derived my understanding of the relationship between early childhood education and feminist pedagogy from this work.

According to Davies' (2003) *Frogs and Snails and Feminist Tales*, children learn the way of maleness and femaleness through storytelling. This study provides a glimpse into the gendered world of childhood and new insights into the social construction of gender, showing what happens when children are able to access different discourses and take up a variety of masculine and feminine positions.

In *Gender Equity in the Early Years* Browne (2004) emphasizes the term *gender equity*, favoring it over *equal opportunities*, but he focused on the importance of treating children and others fairly by considering differences. The author convinces the reader that gender is inextricably linked to all aspects of children's race, ethnicity, social class, language background, and disability. This work is very helpful to the readers seeking to understand how children construct their gender identities.

In *Shards of Glass* Davies (2005) studied the way gender is constituted from a poststructuralist perspective, using the language of ethnomethodology to frame the analysis. The author put herself and her subjects on equal footing; she wrote: "Only at the time of writing up my conversations with those children did I discover that I was part of a research community that was growing up elsewhere" (p. xix). Her technique allows the reader to accompany her and to listen to the children's voices.

### **Reconceptualizing Early Childhood Gender Issues**

In recent years early childhood educators have challenged various notions of difference, identity, culture, intellect, and economy as well as the re-conceptualization of the children's

learning. Educators and researchers have been required to rethink the perspectives of teachers who work with children (Cannella, 1997). To realize the needs of multivoices, complex identities, and social justice in early childhood education has become an important concern for curriculum specialists (Grieshaber & Cannella, 2001).

From my observation, reconceptualist movements are entwined with feminist pedagogy and young children's experience with their gender performances. Reconceptualists reflect how children's development, student–teacher relations, and the purposes of curriculum. Paulo Freire (1971) stated that critical pedagogy is a means to argue the universal claims of truth, the historical and political circumstance of neocolonialism and imperialism (Weiler, 1991). Like Freire reconceptualists and feminists promote social justice and revolution.

**Knowledge, universal truth, and social regulation.**

Reconceptualists examine culture, privilege, politics, and changing conditions in the lives of young children, their families, and communities, criticizing adults who use standards to assess, for example, developmental delay in children, and motivating educators to debate the appropriateness of “discussing individuals and groups in terms of both ages and stages, lack of maturity, or experiences in relation to progress” (Cannella, 1997, p.52).

Reconceptualists believe that child development is actually a covert method for social control and regulation (Grieshaber & Cannella, 2001; Cannella, 1997; Goldstein, 1993). Children's development, their gender roles, and gender identity are more complex than their motor development; in fact, their thinking cannot be measured without opportunities to observe children and listen to their discourse with peers, teachers, and parents (Montgomery, 2005).

The concept of maturity serves as an example of a developmental construction used to regulate children. Through adults' continued surveillance, children are admitted to kindergarten or held in preschool, judged in need of intervention. The Western-determined

developmental knowledge forces many teachers and parents to assess their children's growth (or delay). Unfortunately, parents and teachers frequently ignore the child's ethnic and cultural background as well as the child's environment, instead favoring the knowledge of developmental psychology. Cannella (1997) criticized developmental psychology as a kind of knowledge used for both physical and intellectual imperialism (p. 61).

### **Mother Deprivation and Attachment in Reconceptualist Movements**

John Bowlby conducted research on the situation of orphaned children after World War II, hypothesizing that if the mother did not provide the care needed, the child could suffer partial deprivation. He ignored the conditions of war, economy, and society (Cannella, 1997, p.72). Bowlby failed to consider the absence of fathers as another possible cause of the child's emotional and physical problems. Parents, family members, and community members could also influence children's growth.

In a word, reconceptualists provide an academic space for early childhood educators to inquire about children's life experiences, women's roles as mothers, teachers, and parents, as well as the relationships between mother and children and between teacher and students. Reconceptualists discuss knowledge, truth, privilege, regulation, and hierarchy, all the important concepts in feminist pedagogy.

With technological changes in our society and various influences in people's lives in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, educators should realize that the ways children learn are far different than in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the postmodern era, the difference between children and adults is culturally constructed, not natural (MacNaughton, 2003). For the child whose background is characterized by diversity, many truths are available for that child to use in constructing her or his own meaningful learning (Browne, 2004; Coffey & Delamont, 2000; Grieshaber, & Ryan, 2005). Hence, educators should recognize that

relationships between children and adults involve the context of discourse by each side. Children could present resistance and representation in their thinking according to their own meanings.

### **Feminist Influence on Early Childhood Gender Studies**

**An ethic of care and women's ways of knowing.** Confucius (551–479 B.C.E.) said, 子曰: 惟女子與小人難養也! 近則忿, 遠則怨。 [“Women and people with bad morals are very hard to deal with. If you are friendly with them, they get out of hand, and if you keep your distance, they resent it”]. Assuming the feminist position and viewpoint, one would hardly compare with women's behaviors and their ways of thinking with those of people of low social status. To my mind, Confucius did not understand women's knowledge even though he is regarded as the greatest educator in Asian culture.

Goldstein (1997) reported that feminist pedagogy establishes on an ethic of care associated with women and their ways of knowing. Feminist pedagogy can provide a new vision of early childhood education and actively values the knowledge embodied in personal experience (p. 11).

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century few educator–researchers have conducted studies of children's gender education. In fact, most early childhood teachers ignore the reality that young children live in a gender world and they actively construct their gender roles; therefore, few early childhood teachers believe that they have gender issues in their classroom (MacNaughton, 1996; Mahoney, 1996; Ropers-Huilman, 1997). Research in gender identity or gender roles in early childhood education are most often related with women's studies, sociology, psychology, or gay and lesbian family studies in early childhood settings (Bailey, 2002; Grieshaber & Cannella, 2001; Ochsner, 1999).

**Representing and theoretically conceptualizing young children through gender.** Researchers assume that children's gender identity and gender roles resemble the way adults build their gender world and the way children observe it and imitate it. Every child has her or his own characteristics, peer interaction experiences, and

environments; so Biklen and Pollard (2002) stated that a significant issue in the study of gender in the classroom derives from the way young people are represented and theoretically conceptualized. How is gender represented? People represent gender as a system of relations and make meaning of their sex and of the other sex (p.724). Being males or females, children are positioned within a set of written and unwritten rules or regulations produced in language that becomes normative either in particular settings or across settings.

Biklen and Pollard (2002) also pointed out an increase in the use of qualitative methods to study gender and education. For example, Genishi et al. (2002) conducted collaborative ethnographic research, using the interview, video tape, and classroom observation. Researchers confront issues connected to particular problems, for example, what affects the learning of mathematics will be discussed more than the intersection of biology and social expectations (Walkerdine, 1998, p. 24).

**Gender inequity issues in early childhood classroom.** In the current era, gender is represented and framed in various contexts. The conceptualizations of gender have become increasingly complex because researchers need to understand the various meanings of gender in contemporary society. Many researchers want to identify and examine sexism and other matters of gender inequity.

For example, beginning in the 1970s Sadker and Sadker conducted more than 25 years of research on sex bias in schools and classrooms (Bailey, 2002). The Sadkers centered their attention on teacher–student interaction and found that teachers' gender biases were powerful and pervasive.

In comparing gender equity from the cultural feminist approach and the feminist poststructuralist approach, the former, exemplified by the cultural feminist approach, such as that of Goldstein (1994) and Noddings (1984), has emphasized love, caring, and concern for the spirit of early childhood curricula. In the postmodern era, Grieshaber and Cannella (2001) stated that feminist



poststructuralists oppose a basic gendered way of knowing. They declared: “Rather than one gender identity, individuals including teachers and children perform a number of gender ways of knowing and being that depends on the social context and the meanings circulating within a set of social relationships” (p. 26).

Feminist poststructuralist perspectives try to locate more meaningful and relevant theoretical bases to generate better ways of understanding how power, knowledge, and discourse regulate the gendered social order of the early childhood classroom. To rethink gender equity strategies in the classroom, educators must realize the importance of gender identities in early childhood curriculum as well as the hidden curriculum (Hughes & MacNaughton, 2001).

### **Conclusion**

Feminism provides a framework to discuss the early childhood teachers' professional development and to contrast historical timelines to see how women take responsibility for feeding and educating children. Traditionally, research has shown that the availability of teaching jobs to female teachers represented a turning point after which women could share the public sphere with men; however, from the patriarchal viewpoint, even though female teachers became professional persons who contribute to their society, they are still compared with women who stay home and care for their family. Society is changing quickly, and the modern life challenges everyone; but most people still believe that teaching is the best suited to women, not men, because female teachers supposed know how to educate children in school and in the family.

Feminist pedagogy provides opportunities for teachers to rethink their knowledge, their curriculum decision-making, and their classroom management. Besides, the most important part is to think about the way educators transform culture for young people. Everyone understands that the daily work of the classroom teacher cannot be separated from the reproduction, transmission, and control of knowledge. However, “postmodernists argue that there are no

universal truths to be discovered because all human investigators are grounded in human society and can only produce partial, local, and historically specific insights” (Coffey & Delamont, 2000, p. 8). Teachers must identify what is valuable knowledge for their students. Who, what, where, and why does one need to know it? Documenting gender bias and establishing some kind of alternative nonbiased in our curriculum is essential because gender identity and gender roles at this juncture in history could become the basis for diversity dialogues between different people and in a variety of contexts.

Feminism can provide the framework for us to analyze old knowledge and to discuss the source of new knowledge in early childhood education. In the future research, the study would compare and discuss the curricula practices of early childhood gender education that nexus with liberal feminist theory, cultural feminist theory and poststructural theory.

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