
Book Reviews

Children at Play: Learning Gender in the Early Years

Barbara Martin

Sterling, VA: Trentham Books, 2011. 146 pp. \$34.95 paper. ISBN: 9781858564845

Barbara Martin believes gender is socially constructed, and her objective in writing this book is to help others understand gender development through a feminist poststructuralist lens. The research she conducted for the book includes a two-year ethnographic study of three- to four-year-old children from an inner-city London primary school where many of the children came from culturally and linguistically diverse, low-income households.

The result is a rich report constructed from watching and listening to children as they learn how to interact, compromise, and negotiate with others and seek to demonstrate their knowledge to her. The book's six chapters present the specific ways children learn and reinforce gender roles during play, and she organizes them around three major themes: space, power, and knowledge; apprenticeship participation; and gender borderwork.

Martin studied where children played and what happened in their play

to develop explanations for why they made choices and how they learned to value their choices. She observed that children use power, space, activities, and resources to learn from their social situations and that these discourses—or ways of making meaning—are strong influences on gendered behavior. Indoors and out, children use body postures, actions, speech, and knowledge to interact and negotiate their roles, relationships, and power to move from being peripheral observers to becoming legitimate members in a community of practice. Martin provides extracts from her fieldwork that includes quotes of children's conversations, drawings of classroom and play-space maps, and direct observations to highlight this transition and to validate her findings.

The author discounts biological perceptions and gender dualism because, she claims, they do not embody the full individuality of a child. She invites the reader to examine children's thinking and actions to understand how gender learning takes place, encouraging us to avoid stereotypical gender choices for children and to help them explore their environment and the choices they make. Because power influences exist throughout the play environment, she believes adults need to allow

children opportunities to expand gender perceptions and behavior,

We follow the words of the children as they interact and share their views. This opportunity provides a wealth of information about how the children interpret their experiences and act upon them and how they interact with their peers. Martin encourages readers to look at children's play as a vehicle where dialogue and behavior have critical roles. We are able to see how ethnicity, class, and cultural differences relate to gender development and how children use play objects and technologies in gendered play. The detailed reporting and the accompanying narrative focus the reader's attention on how children position themselves in frameworks that contribute to their gender development. She encourages us to view skeptically the notion that interests and behaviors are purely organic.

Educators and administrators of children's programs as well as parents can benefit from the range and quality of the author's research and reporting. She enriches the book by including children's drawings, pointing to further reading, suggesting ways to promote gender equity, summarizing key points from the research, and providing a glossary. She supports each point with examples from her field notes. The book reflects scholarship at its height, where Martin's findings and the findings of others intertwine to create a picture of all she has learned about gender development and how she believes equity and social justice can be promoted through play.

—Kathleen E. Fite, *Texas State University-San Marcos, San Marcos, TX*

Handbook of Children and the Media

Dorothy G. Singer and Jerome L. Singer, eds.
Los Angeles, CA: Sage Publications, 2012.
Tables, charts, indexes. 803 pp. \$150.00
cloth. ISBN: 978141298249

"Sir, is this your bag?" The TSA agent looked serious. "Yes," I responded, surprised. As a frequent traveler, I have become adapt at moving smoothly through airport screening lines. Why was my laptop-free bag being searched? She reached in my bag and pulled out the second edition of Singer and Singer's *Handbook of Children and the Media*. To my amazement, she dropped the heavy 803-page hardcover onto a stainless steel examination table and began carefully swiping the inside pages for explosive residue. She told me the thick hardcover was blocking the x-ray machine's view of my bag's contents.

This raises some questions. If a hardcover book is an outlier for our national airport security system, are the ideas it contains—frozen in ink and on paper—equally as troublesome? Or does this heavy book achieve its intellectually heavy goal "to review, through the contributions of research experts, the past and potential future impact of the electronic media on growing children" (p. 3). The answer is yes to both questions.

The book meets its goal in part due to the skill, experience, and deep scholarly connections of the editors—Jerome and Dorothy Singer, the Yale-based husband-and-wife team who have been conducting and reviewing research on children's television since 1961, when former Federal Communications Commission chair-