**Playing, teaching and caring: Generative productions of gender and pedagogy in/through Early Years assemblages**

Nikki Fairchild

ORCID: 0000-0001-8640-2710

# Abstract

# This chapter develops the notion of posthuman feminist pedagogy to explore gendered productions in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) in England. The current ECEC workforce is predominantly female, seen as deficient in key skills and qualifications, performing a role with young children which has been equated to ‘mothering’. The chapter is divided into two parts; the first part initially explores the development of ECEC professional roles; the second part considers the ways in which gender development for children has been theorised in classrooms and how this may influence views of working with young children. Building on previous work on feminist pedagogy, it discusses how posthuman modes of thinking can provide alternative visions for posthuman feminist pedagogy, which is developed further in the second part of the chapter. By employing the concepts of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s assemblage and Rosi Braidotti’s nomadic theory the chapter suggests a move beyond binarized thinking to a more expansive and generative view of playing, teaching and caring in ECEC. These theorisations are exemplified through two vignettes, which illustrate how material and social relations reveal how gender is produced, enacted and mediated in ECEC classrooms.

# Introduction

## Setting the context

In England, the continuing expansion of neo-liberal thinking is affecting and influencing expectations within Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC). Provision is driven by a statutory curricula framework (DfE, 2017a) which is delivered to children between the ages of birth to five years old. Children from birth to the September after their fourth birthday may attend non-compulsory ECEC where provision is split across a range of diverse settings including private day nurseries, children centres, nurseries attached to schools, and childminders. The required qualification to work in these types of settings is a vocational accreditation which is equivalent to exit-level high school certificates, although academic qualifications have developed to postgraduate level in recent years. Once the child passes the September after their fourth birthday they enter compulsory schooling for the Reception Year which is generally led by qualified teachers who hold either an undergraduate or postgraduate teaching qualification. Debates have been ongoing as to the purpose and function of ECEC particularly where curriculum frameworks promote school readiness, positing early childhood as a preparatory phase for compulsory schooling (DfE, 2017a; Moss, 2013). In addition, there has been deliberation between academics, policy makers and practitioners around the suitability of the workforce (DfE, 2013). These have centred on the gendered nature of ECEC which sees the sector positioned as deficient in key teaching skills performing a role akin to mothering (Ailwood, 2008). Policy makers have attempted to redress this perceived deficiency by trying to engage more men in the workforce under the guise that this will increase the external view of professionalism and provide a less feminised view of teaching (Roberts-Holmes and Brownhill, 2011).

## Chapter development

This chapter is structured in two parts, the first part will chart the development of the ECEC practitioner and will analyse how gendered notions of expected professional roles have developed in England. In this chapter I use the term of practitioner holistically to signify those working in ECEC. At this juncture, I do not separate out those with vocational or academic qualifications as this reinforces some of the dichotomous thinking that surrounds ECEC professionalism. Historical dialogues on gender formation and construction in classrooms will then explain the differing perspectives of sex-role socialisation and post-structural theories of how gender is expressed and mediated. In addition, current views of both the ECEC profession and how gender is circulated in classrooms will be juxtaposed with debates over play-based or more formal aspects of children’s learning. Building on some of the features of feminist pedagogy (hooks, 1994; Lather, 1991; Luke and Gore, 1992) I detail how posthuman thinking can generate new ways to explore gendered engagements in ECEC. Posthumanism allows for a re-viewing of the human subject which decentres agency and subjectivity revealing a different vision of the human within both social and material worlds, and this has been employed both theoretically and empirically in educational research (Taylor and Hughes, 2016).

In the second part of this chapter, I theoretically argue that posthuman feminist pedagogy is rooted in other feminist traditions in learning and teaching such as transgressive schools (hooks, 1994); and feminist pedagogy in neo-liberal universities (Revelles-Benavente and Gonzáles Ramos, 2017). I draw on the work of Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) assemblage and Braidotti’s (2011) nomadic theory to provide alternative visions of posthuman feminist pedagogy which affirms a move beyond binarized choices to an expansive, generative view of playing, teaching and caring in ECEC. The concept of the assemblage denotes the mechanism by which bodies are connected and in relations with each other. These bodies coalesce around an event and what is produced within these constellations is just as important and the individual assemblage components. Braidotti’s (2011) nomadic theory considers how relations between social and material worlds can provide a reimaging of gender and essentialism, without the erasure of locational and historical emancipatory projects for/with women. Posthuman feminist pedagogy is then explored empirically via two vignettes which illustrate how material and social relations reveal how gender is produced, enacted and mediated in ECEC classrooms.

# Professional roles for ECEC practitioners

## Women’s work

The prevalence of gender hegemony is reflected in historic and contemporary views of ECEC. This stems from biological perceptions of childhood and socio-cultural understanding of gender roles. Historical discourses have reproduced patriarchal power in ECEC promoting the view of ‘caring (paid and unpaid) as naturally women’s work’ (Roberts-Holmes and Brownhill, 2011: 120). This mirrors the challenge of the wage penalty for mothers attributed to their domestic and childrearing roles (Buding and England, 2001). These notions have ensured that working in ECEC remained primarily female employment as settings were/are perceived as extensions of the home (Ailwood, 2008). The limited value placed on the nature of the work has been replicated in the remuneration structure with Roberts-Homes and Brownhill arguing ‘in a patriarchal society female nursery workers levels of pay can become justifiable and naturalized’ (2011: 120). Interestingly decreasing gendered wage inequality has been a primary focus for European and UK policy makers (European Commission, 2012) but these impacts have yet to be felt in ECEC. The gendered and deficit notions of the status of ECEC and its workforce have persisted today, coupled with the continuing view of the construction of young children as immature where childhood developmental needs are perceived as relatively simple.

## Development of ECEC qualifications

As maternal employment increased in the 1990’s ECEC settings developed two distinct routes, the growth of the voluntary sector and the playgroup (covering birth to three) and the growth of full day care (covering three to five) via nursery schools and private childminders (Pugh, 2010). These age ranges mirrored the outcomes available for children with the discourse of care pervading birth to three early years’ provision and the discourse of school readiness encompassing the three to five sector (Moss, 2013). Interestingly this historical position still reflects the current diversity of the contemporary ECEC sector which is composed of private providers, schools and childminders (Wall *et al.*, 2015). The split in outcomes caused the separation of vocational and academic routes towards qualifications and professional identity. This resulted in those working with older children more likely to hold graduate qualifications (Ranns *et al.,* 2011) even though the requirement to practice remained a vocational accreditation (DfE, 2017a). The caring nature of ECEC work and reinforcement of its gendered low-status revealed most practitioners as working-class women influenced by vocational habitus (Skeggs, 1997). This has also been reflected in a range of ‘hair or care’ discourses surrounding ECEC vocational training which reinforced outcomes for women school leavers with limited qualifications (Vincent and Braun, 2010).

English Government policy has done little to overcome the deficit discourse applied to practitioners. Since 1997 successive policy development reinforced the split system of vocational and academic routes. However, these still did not provide parity with other teaching professionals. It has been argued that the reason for not providing parity was the desire not to over professionalise the highly feminised workforce (Canella, 1997). Policy makers have tried to encourage more men to enter the ECEC workforce by promoting gender diversity and early years teaching as a less feminised career choice (DfE, 2017b). Research has focused on men providing a more balanced view of gender roles (Mulholland and Hansen, 2003) or as role models replacing absent father figures (Skelton, 2002). However, this has been countered by suggestions that hegemonic masculinity is reproduced reinforcing traditional gender roles (Carrington and Skelton, 2003). Therefore, the debates on more men in ECEC are not conclusive with Roberts-Holmes and Brownhill (2011) reiterating that overarching patriarchal discourses see men out of the home as breadwinners which is at odds with the feminised view of ECEC.

## Conflict between perceptions of ECEC work and value placed on children’s education

The development of the ECEC practitioner reinforces binary thinking; for example, the split between vocational and academic training notes the distinction between the theory/practice binary. In addition, the deficit model of the workforce reinforces gendered perceptions and the lack of value placed on caring for young children. This has been problematized by Lenz Taguchi who noted that power relations may promote ‘academic knowledge (that is predominantly theoretical and masculine), is more highly valued than (motherly feminine) pre-school-practices’ (2007: 279). Furthermore, Canella (1997) has argued that the professionalization of education (and ECEC) has resulted in patriarchal power over both women and children due to the regulatory discourses surrounding practitioners. These notions of regulation increased in England as provision of Government funding saw the implementation of measures designed to monitor and sanction ECEC providers if key indicators were not met (Ofsted, 2015). All these debates point to the neo-liberal dichotomy that ECEC work is not valued, yet society is dependent on young children as educated potential future workers. These wider discussions can be linked to theorisations of the different ways gender is expressed in ECEC classrooms particularly as the drive to employ more men is prominent in policy (DfE, 2017b).

# Gendered debates in classrooms

## Sex-role socialization and post-structural debates

The development of gender in young children has been extended from the views of sex-role socialization (MacNaughton, 2006). This is premised by the notion that children play out gender based on their biological differences which reinforce and categorise gender roles (Davies, 2003). These heteronormative positions drive children to think and act in gendered ways where societies need for acceptable gender roles permeates ECEC classrooms (Blaise, 2006; Davies, 2003). Blaise (2006) notes how children self-police expected gendered norms and are quick to correct those who stray from heteronormative expectations. In addition, the work of feminist post-structuralists has highlighted a different view of gender as socially and culturally constructed being mediated by circulating gendered discourses. These views are a means to challenge and critique sex-socialisation theory and its associated stereotypical views, and to explore gender as relational and interdependent (Walkerdine, 1997). Children can construct and position themselves within masculine and feminine discourses available as part of wider social and cultural practices. The dynamic interplay between fluid gender performances can be influenced by wider societal discourses which can reproduce heteronormativity (MacNaughton, 2006). Although children can be active agents in the construction of their gendered positions the influence of practitioners can challenge or reinforce these expected norms (Chapman, 2016). This becomes doubled by the feminised nature of the workforce which is already under pressure from patriarchal domestic assumptions. Both sex-role socialization and post-structural debates have provided important ways to theorise gendered positions in classrooms. More recently scholars have looked to posthumanism to explore how material and human worlds are co-implicated in these debates.

## Gendered childhoods and posthumanism

Posthuman theorising is being applied to productions of gender in ECEC to mobilise generative new ways to explore young children’s enactment of gender. This work has developed from 2010, which was coupled with the wider emergence of new material feminisms (see Coole and Frost, 2010). These theoretical applications note the involvement of the non-human in exploring and producing gendered subjectivities. Osgood argues that posthuman theories ‘offer opportunities to think differently about young children and their enactments, performances and resistances in early childhood; (2014: 197). Some examples of ECEC posthuman gendered engagements include Renold and Mellor (2013), who consider subversive acts of gendered play with a range of objects where heteronormativity is either expressed or transgressed. The work of Jones (2013) reveals how clothing and role play disrupt and influence performative notions of gender. Similarly, Osgood and Scarlet/Guigni (2015) detail how gendered performances can be disrupted where clothing (a tutu) can enfold outdoor space challenging traditional readings of gender. Finally, Lyttleton-Smith (2017) analyses how resources in the ECEC classroom ‘home-corner’ intra-act with children and can break apart heteronormative narratives as objects and children flow between different performances of masculine and feminine.

# ECEC pedagogy

## Play based vs. formalised pedagogy

ECEC pedagogy has emerged from the disciplines of developmental psychology and neuroscience, with pedagogy being described as the interactive processes between the practitioner and child in the learning environment (Wall *et al.*, 2015). Lenz Taguchi (2007) suggests the Cartesian separation of mind and body in pedagogy can be played out in the binarized view of child-centred play (feminine) versus adult directed learning (masculine) which could be linked to normative gender assumptions. Teaching in ECEC has a legacy of play-based, child-centred pedagogies which form the foundations of engaging in playing, teaching and caring for/with young children. These have developed from earlier pioneers (such as Susan Issacs and Maria Montessori) and still represent an intrinsic part of contemporary pedagogy and practice (Brooker *et al.*, 2014). Play is also reflected in the English Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) curriculum which notes how ‘planned, purposeful play’ (DfE, 2017a: 9) should be delivered as a mix of adult-led and child-initiated activity. These views reveal the inherent tensions of a child-centred approach where children’s agency can be undermined by the influence of adults on play outcomes (Wood, 2013). However, recent policy direction has seen a trend for a more formal pedagogic strategy, framed as preparation for transitions to compulsory schooling (DfE, 2017a). The move to a more adult-led pedagogy, coupled with proposals for baseline assessments on school entry, sees concerns raised about the outcomes based datafication of ECEC (Roberts-Holmes and Bradbury, 2016), where test results become a predictor for future attainment leaving little room for acknowledging wider pedagogical interactions.

## An ECEC feminist pedagogy

The tensions between ECEC pedagogical expectations can provide sites where feminist pedagogy can challenge and disrupt policy and practice grand narratives (Lather, 1991; Luke and Gore, 1992). A feminist pedagogy can be employed to rethink gendered subjectivities and situated knowledges (Haraway, 1988) which can provide emancipatory and transformative potentials for women (hooks, 1994). However, it is important to note that pedagogy is never a neutral process and the act of emancipation can be contested as it is bound up in conflicting power relations and intersections which are not always transformative for all (Langford, 2010). The fluid positions of a play-based, child-centred, and adult-led pedagogy are cognisant with fluctuating pedagogical power relations. These can produce situations where more formal academic knowledges are valued over relational experiences (Burman, 2008; Osgood, 2014). However, it should be acknowledged that academic knowledge and scholarship on gender inequalities have provided opportunities for wider emancipatory projects (see Davies, 2003; Blaise, 2006; MacNaughton, 2006; Paechter, 2007).

# Posthuman feminist pedagogy

## Theorising a posthuman feminist pedagogy

Building on the theorisation of feminist pedagogy and the tensions in its enactment (Lather, 1991; Luke and Gore, 1992; hooks, 1994) allows a move beyond the humanist pedagogical project. The posthuman turn in education is not about discarding past contributions which have bought about important changes to democratic and emancipatory projects. As Carlson notes posthuman education might ‘carve out a third space of critique and reconstruction’ (2015: x). It is within these spaces that new pedagogies can be explored and imagined which reveal radical and experimental connections between humans and non-humans (Snaza and Weaver 2015: 10). These views are echoed by Braidotti (2011) who proposed nomadic theory to explore the material and discursive nature of subjectivity which is distributed across both human and non-human relationality. These relations can be conceptualised as part of an assemblage (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987) within which human and other non-human bodies (material, social or abstract entities) connect together. These productive responses to human and non-human connections chart what happens when bodies interact and can provide alternative visions of a posthuman feminist pedagogy.

Posthuman theorising moves away from the nature: culture dualisms that are offered from anthropocentric understandings of human interactions. Braidotti (2011) has employed a monist worldview to move beyond binaries and essentialist understandings of woman. She argues the only way to move beyond the dualist subject of woman is to dissolve the structures which support hegemonic phallocentrism to provide an ‘affirmative or transformative vision of woman’ (Braidotti, 2011: 30). A posthuman feminist pedagogy acknowledges feminist histories and politics of location, paying attention to situatedness and power fluctuations within and through assemblages. These connections produce new ways to reimage gendered pedagogical interactions. Furthermore, these transformations can ‘empower creative *[gendered]* alternatives’ (Braidotti, 2011: 33) where flows push gendered bodies to the limits, blurring physical boundaries during constant encounters with bodies. Methodologically the nomadic subject is part of the challenge to essentialism and othering which undoes ‘the dominant model of subjectivity’ (Braidotti, 2011: 34) displacing it with an emergent process. Ethically this displacement is neither linear or sequential but a transformative flow as assemblages provide new potentials for co-related bodies. In this chapter the concept of the nomadic subject is activated in the vignettes below which explore gendered classroom relations.

## Enacting a posthuman feminist pedagogy

The following vignettes present data from my doctoral inquiry into the ways in which ECEC practitioners and children interact with the non-human environment, and how their gendered subjectivities are distributed across human and non-human productions and relations (Fairchild, 2017).

### Vignette 1 – Rose

The first vignette occurs in a preschool which is open to children between the age ranges of two and a half and five years old. In this excerpt one of the practitioners (Rose) is sitting at the table with a girl and a boy who are playing with paper and hair accessories:

Rose is sitting at a table with a girl who has some light purple paper and pink and purple hair clips/hair bands and accessories. The girl is making a ‘pass-the-parcel’ for a role play game and places one of the hair clips between each layer. Rose and the girl work together to fold, stick and build up the layers. The girl tapes a hairband on the side as a decoration. She is intent at pulling and holding the tape and building up the relevant layers. A boy sits down at the table and places one of the metal hair clips in his hair, there is a small mirror on the table and Rose places a clip in her hair and they (she and the boy) take turns to look at their hair with the clips in. The boy uses the mirror to add another clip to the other side of his hair and Rose helps the boy to use further hair clips. Rose brings the tablet over to take a picture of him, she then moves away…the boy continues to use the hair clips and the mirror.

This excerpt notes the affective nature of the hair clips and accessories and how they are part of the gendering process where the respective table becomes a gendered site within the assemblage. Mikuska (2018) argues that affective embodied emotionality should be acknowledged otherwise the embodied nature of human action can be lost. Rose is bound up in these affective embodied responses as she supports the play of the girl and the boy who are both performing more feminised roles (wrapping presents for role play and dressing hair). In addition, MacNaughton (2006) has theorised how socio-cultural discursive constructions of gender can occur with objects. In this excerpt the material production of gendered subjectivities is focussed on non-human objects (table, hair clips and accessories, and a mirror) and human (Rose, a boy, and a girl) relations as gender circulates through and across bodies. Lyttleton-Smith explores how block play can provide ‘liminal space’ where ‘continuous (re)configurations of gendering relations of power that affect…boy-bodies and girl-bodies entangled within’ (2017: 9). These similar relations are present in the above excerpt as the boy uses hair clips and a mirror. The consequence of these actions could reveal a blurring of the boundaries of the heterosexual matrix (Butler, 1990) between normative masculine and feminine understandings of dressing hair.

### Vignette 2 - Hannah

The second vignette is based in a reception classroom in an all-girls private school, there were six girls in the class with an age range between four and five years old. On my second visit to the school Hannah (the practitioner) had staged a hairdresser’s salon. An area of the classroom had been set up as a salon with real resources such as towels, hairdryer, a piece of shower hose with an attaching shower head, hairbrushes, and accessories:

Hannah sits on the chair and the girls put a towel around her neck and start to brush her hair. There are three girls attending to her and putting hair bands in her hair. One girl discusses money with Hannah ‘If I have 5 coins what is one more than 5?’ they count the coins together to get the answer. Hannah talks to the other three girls about only using small amounts of water. One girl had used the sponge on Hannah’s hair without wringing it out, Hannah asked her to wring it out before she used it again. The two girls continued to put parts of Hannah’s hair into ponytails and one girl is working with the money. Hannah asks, ‘If I have 6 coins and take one away how many are left?’ again they discuss this.

In the salon one girl has the clipboard and is writing appointments. Hannah is reading a magazine with another girl brushing her hair. In the magazine there is a photo of the Eiffel Tower, they talk about going on holidays and Hannah mentions Paris. ‘Can you remember your French – you have been learning it for 2 years! In French how do you say my hair and eyes are brown? (*Mes cheveux et mes yeux sont bruns!*)’, one of the girls said to Hannah ‘Oh you look fabulous!’

Two girls bring baby dolls into to the salon, the girl with the clipboard says, ‘No babies in the hairdressers today, we only have space for one baby!’ As Hannah takes the hair clips/decorations out of her hair the two girls play with babies in the ‘*crèche’* part of the salon.

From the second excerpt it would be easy to suggest the girls and Hannah are playing out heteronormative assumptions of femininity. The role plays with hairdressers and babies replicating the multiple classed and gendered encounters for working-class women as employees and middle-class women as customers (Skeggs, 1997). Interestingly this is juxtaposed by the middle-class expectations of the career paths for alumni of the private school which split between wives/mothers and career-oriented women. These discourses have also been played out in ECEC practice where hairdressers salons become the focus for heteronormative play (Hyvönen, 2008) which can be reinscribed by practitioner’s perceptions of, and positioning towards, normative gendered play (Chapman, 2016). This excerpt acknowledges some of the challenges of planned purposeful play (Wood, 2013). It could be an example of the way in which child-centred pedagogy becomes a means by which female ECEC practitioners reproduce and enact expected gendered subjectivities in classrooms (Canella, 1997), which are also manifested as the school is single-sex. A potential disruption to these expected gendered subjectivities could link to policy drivers to employ more male practitioners in ECEC settings and schools, however caution should be applied to this assertion as it could also reinforce normative gender roles (Carrington and Skelton, 2003).

When engaging with posthuman feminist pedagogy it is important to move beyond the psychological and essentialist views of children’s gender development, and to employ a more post developmental logic through which gender is being enacted (Blaise, 2006; Burman, 2008). For example, moving beyond discursive readings of gender to focus on bodies within the assemblage explores how human and non-human bodies become reordered to reveal child: practitioner gendered power relations (Blaise, 2013). The water in this excerpt momentarily reveals how power flows through the girls as the practitioner is a customer in the salon. Even though the curriculum, money, maths and French reverse the power flows and try to cement Hannah as practitioner, the water becomes the point through which power oscillates. An alternative reading of this excerpt reflects the historically limited career roles for women linking to the deficient, gendered notions of ECEC practitioners with vocational routes to ‘hair or care’ courses (Vincent and Braun, 2010). It should be noted that posthuman theorising in not necessarily an emancipatory process. When bodies connect and collide in assemblages the result can be a sedimentation of normative assumptions or the release of new potentials, in this case they can reinforce expected gendered norms present in wider society. This reading highlights how posthumanist theorising does not always provide an alternative to gender hegemony and shows the importance of acknowledging the historical positioning of women (Braidotti, 2011) which can temporarily enforce binary gendered identities.

# Conclusions

This chapter explores how developmental and social-constructions of gender can reveal the influence of patriarchal and heteronormative discourses to provide certain gendered positions for practitioners and children. This is linked to the positioning of the predominantly marketized feminised ECEC workforce as deficient, in a caring role, with limited status and low pay. Policy has done little to counter this positioning and has in fact reinforced stereotypical views of practitioners further binarizing the split between vocational and academic pathways to professionalism. These gendered debates have continued into classrooms where pedagogies and interactions can reinforce the dominant heterosexual matrix (see also: Amade-Escot; Verscheure and Debars, this book). Policy and curricula reforms have caused tensions between playful, child-centred pedagogy and testing and accountability which monitors children’s educational outcomes. Research has noted the ways in which practitioners can have more fluid pedagogical strategies. However, these classroom tensions reflect the dilemmas and challenges of adopting a feminist pedagogical approach of emancipation and transformation, when critiques note that not all feel emancipated or transformed.

By enacting a posthuman feminist pedagogy it is possible to work in the third space which acknowledges current and historical gendered positioning but moves beyond the discourses of sex-role socialisation and post-structural socio-cultural constructions of ECEC gendered practitioners and childhoods. Braidotti (2011) and Deleuze and Guattari (1987) provide theorisations to acknowledge the importance of human and non-human bodily connections and the responses which are produced. The two vignettes presented detail how the non-human material world provides the starting point for gender and power relations to flow within and between human and non-human bodies. The interaction of the material objects and relations are momentary and complex revealing how gender is produced, enacted and mediated in ECEC classrooms. These relational moments link to previous iterations of feminist learning and teaching discussed in the introduction and can move beyond binary views of playing and teaching as situated material feminist posthuman pedagogical experiences are explored. Here different gendered distributed subjectivities are taken up as connections are made, dropped and remade in a continuous cycle, and employing a posthuman feminist pedagogy provides generative new ways to view the production of gender in ECEC.

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