

Gendered Norms and the Evolution of Early Childhood Education: Historical Influences and Pathways for Change

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ABSTRACT

The field of early childhood education has long been influenced by gendered norms rooted in maternalist discourse, which historically linked childcare to women's innate caregiving abilities. While this association created career opportunities for women, it also perpetuated the essentialization of women's identity and shaped the profession's educational requirements, remuneration, and working conditions. This literature review examines the historical development of gendered norms in early childhood education, the enduring impacts of these norms today, and opportunities for change. Key historical influences—including the Second World War, feminist movements, maternalist ideology, and the work of figures like Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, Friedrich Froebel, Maria Montessori, and G. Stanley Hall—are analyzed to understand how they contributed to the predominantly female composition of the profession in North America. Present-day consequences of this history include inequities in professional recognition, compensation, and working conditions for early childhood educators, with over 96% of the workforce in Canada identifying as women. The review concludes by exploring a vision for the future of early childhood education, emphasizing the importance of fair compensation, professional recognition, and dismantling gendered stereotypes. Based on the findings, it is clear that addressing these systemic issues requires both local and broader societal changes, with a focus on equitable compensation, gender-neutral training, and policies that challenge traditional caregiving roles. Opportunities for local and systemic change are discussed, including reforms to educational requirements, remuneration practices, and working conditions, as well as broader shifts in societal perceptions. This analysis seeks to inform efforts to create a more equitable and inclusive future for the field.

KEYWORDS

Early childhood education; gender; maternalism; equity; remuneration; stereotypes.

INTRODUCTION

The field of early childhood education has deep historical roots in maternalism, with broad links between motherhood and childcare (Ailwood, 2008). While the early childhood education sector created career opportunities for women, these advancements largely began by relying on the idea that women have innate abilities to take care of children (Ailwood, 2008). This history has influenced present-day educational requirements, remuneration, and working conditions for early childhood educators, impacted the recognition of early childhood education as a profession, and supported the essentialization of women's identity in broader society. In this literature review, I will discuss the historical background of gendered norms in early childhood education, present-day impacts, and opportunities for change.

This narrative review was conducted through a narrative synthesis methodology, focusing on studies that address the intersections of gender, motherhood, and early childhood education, as well as the evolution of these concepts in the professional and societal context. The databases PubMed, Google Scholar, and JSTOR were used, with the keywords of "early childhood education," "motherhood," "femininity," and "gender roles". The inclusion criteria focused on studies published in English, within the last thirty years, and relevant to the topics of early childhood education and gendered norms. Exclusion criteria were based on studies that did not directly address these themes and those that were not available in full text.

Historical Background

The history of the gendering of early childhood education is complex and diverse. In this section, I will describe influences from the Second World War, feminist movements, and maternalist discourse that contributed to both opening career paths for women in early childhood and prescribing the profession with gendered qualities. I will then describe how Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, Friedrich Froebel, Maria Montessori, and G. Stanley Hall, all figures in the development of early childhood education, contributed to this discourse. These influences and leaders contributed to the historical development and evolution of the predominantly-female field of early childhood education in North America that exists today.

Post-Second World War Influence

After the Second World War, the number of women in higher education slowly increased as a result of policy changes to the 1944 Education Act, the expansion of universities as a whole, and the demands of the post-war economy in white-collar occupations (Hoskins & Smedley, 2016). While this expansion allowed many women to enter the workforce, women were also limited by gender norms that connected careers in fields such as teaching and nursing with femininity (Hoskins & Smedley). Women who did enter higher education often found that while they could earn advanced degrees, they could not find positions in fields deemed for men (Durst, 2010). Therefore, many women worked in fields designated for women, such as home economics, social work, and early childhood education (Durst, 2010). During this time, childcare was also

made increasingly available to support women's participation in the labour market, creating more jobs in the field (Hoskins & Smedley, 2016).

Feminist Movements

Historically, the field of early childhood education has had strong ties to feminist movements for social equality (Aslanian, 2015). To start, tension exists between the feminist fight for equality and the reliance on the idea that women's 'natural' qualities make them fit for professional careers (Aslanian, 2015). As women were perceived as emotional and irrational, they were seen to be unable to make the objective and scientific observations required for other jobs (Ailwood, 2008). Therefore, some feminist movements based their advocacy directly on those gender differences, arguing that women had a distinctive innate capacity for nurture and compassion that could be used to teach and take care of children (Allen, 2006). As a whole, feminist movements in early childhood education opened professional career options for women, which also partially included women of different income levels and racial backgrounds who did not previously have opportunities to enter the workforce, while also reinforcing gender norms (Beatty, 2017).

Maternalism

Throughout history, the relation of attributes of early childhood educators with women can be encompassed under Ailwood's (2008) idea of maternalism. While the definition of maternalism varies, it generally relates to the idea that women naturally hold strengths in motherhood and the care of children (Ailwood). Under maternalism, women are both united and defined by their ability to mother children, and this relationship is seen as essential for society (Aslanian, 2015). As mothers are seen as the most important caregivers of children within this lens, women are positioned to be best suited as caregivers for children (Ailwood). The development of this ideology largely involved male experts and leaders who proposed that mothers were required for child development (Ailwood). One example includes Theodore Roosevelt's address at the National Congress of Mothers in 1905, where he suggested that the most honourable task for a woman was to be mother (Ailwood). In addition, some of this discourse can be attributed to the increasing domesticity of motherhood that occurred throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century (Ailwood). Overall, maternalism is strong in discourse around early childhood educators and has deep historical roots (Ailwood, 2008).

Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746-1827)

An earlier figure in early childhood education was Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, who worked to reform early childhood pedagogy through the beginning of the kindergarten movement (Ailwood, 2008). Pestalozzi's educational philosophy was called Head, Heart and Hand Education, and was focused on intellectual, religious, and practical capabilities (Aslanian, 2015). These capabilities were considered to only be valuable when based in maternal love. Pestalozzi argued that maternal love was the foundation of child development, contributing to the discourse of a woman's innate abilities to work in early learning (Aslanian, 2015).

Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852)

Friedrich Froebel was a German pedagogic philosopher whose work was based in Romanticism, Pestalozzi's educational ideas, and Rousseau's ideologies (Hoskins & Smedley, 2016). Froebel was the first to suggest that early childhood educators should work like mothers with additional training (Ailwood, 2008). To Froebel, a professional early childhood educator embodied characteristics of love and maternalism (Aslanian, 2015).

During the early to mid 1800s, early childhood education was seen as a field that did not require training (Ailwood, 2008). Froebel insisted against this, advocating instead for educational requirements to care for children (Allen, 2006). This fight was considered radical at the time, though his argument was more focused on motherhood and training as a requirement for healthy childhood rather than the liberation of women (Ailwood, 2008). Froebel's focus on the contributions of women as educators when very few professional careers were available for women helped to promote the concept that women could be educators and professionals (Hoskins & Smedley, 2016). These careers were especially appealing to middle class women looking for careers and the status attributed to male professionals, and the Froebel College in England was evidently comprised mainly of middle class women (Hoskins & Smedley, 2016). Overall, Froebel played an important role in assigning value to women's work (Aslanian, 2015) and influenced the turn of Kindergarten teaching into a profession open to women (Allen, 2006). Froebel contributed to discourse surrounding maternalism as he conceptualized the role of an educator closely with motherhood (Beatty, 1995). While his pedagogical ideas addressed both mothers and fathers, he prescribed special significance to the mother as the main caretaker (Aslanian, 2015) and based his pedagogy off of the belief that a good educator should bring forth their natural motherly instincts (Ailwood, 2008). While this attribution may now seem oppressive, these ideas were seen as progressive at the time, as they assigned value to women's work (Aslanian, 2015). Later in Froebel's career, his kindergartens were closed by the Prussian government in 1851 for being atheist and rebellious, which led to the spread of Froebel's methods through the immigration of women who were trained in his approaches (Ailwood). Froebel's link between motherhood and early childhood education persisted as it spread (Ailwood, 2008).

Lastly, while Froebel revolutionized early childhood education with his work and ideologies, his kindergartens would not exist without the support of women (Ailwood, 2008). When Froebel envisioned kindergarten, he proposed it to men, who rejected the pedagogy for being based in play rather than pure academic learning (Allen, 2006). Froebel then turned to women, who supported his ideas with enthusiasm (Allen, 2006). While Froebel idealized maternalism, he also contended that women required an education to care for young children (Ailwood, 2008). Although Froebel was often ridiculed by men for this idea, he continued to focus on the importance of mother-child relationships in his work (Hoskins & Smedley, 2016).

Historical Background: Maria Montessori (1782-1852)

Maria Montessori was a prominent figure in early childhood education (Ailwood, 2008). Montessori was the first Italian woman to graduate as a medical doctor, and her work in early

childhood education was based in scientific research (Brehony, 1994). Montessori contributed to the complexity of relations between women, maternalism, and early childhood education, as while she was a practical feminist who advocated for the liberation of women, her image of an educator could also be considered maternalistic, as it was reflective of a loving, romantic, and gentle mother (Stewart-Steinberg, 2007). Montessori approached maternalism from a spiritual perspective, where all of humanity is interconnected and maternalism is a gift (Aslanian, 2015). Maternalism was not viewed as an exclusively female concept, but rather an instinct found in parents that has a role in protecting children (Aslanian). Montessori approached maternalist views of early learning as recognition of the protective and nurturing qualities of maternal instinct, rather than seeing it as a way of essentializing women (Aslanian, 2015).

For context within Montessori's feminist perspectives, 1907 was the year Montessori opened her first Children's house in San Lorenzo, Rome, a year when the Italian feminist movement was also at a high point (Stewart-Steinberg, 2007). At this time, Montessori also held influence as a well-known pedagogical expert, specifically within the circles of the liberal and radical Roman elite (Foschi, 2008). Italy was experiencing significant change and growth in the image of working women at this time, and Montessori was supportive of this vision (Giardiello, 2014). Within her work, Montessori was a practical feminist who transposed mothers into people with social functions in early childcare (Stewart-Steinberg, 2007). Montessori viewed early childhood education as a way to liberate women from the household, allowing them to work other jobs (Giardiello, 2014). Closer to the end of the nineteenth century, child care became a more formalized area of study alongside its lasting maternal connection (Cunningham, 2000). Overall, Montessori had a significant role in influencing discourse around maternalism in a complex way that both supported maternalism and empowered women.

G. Stanley Hall (1846-1924)

G. Stanley Hall, sometimes referred to as the father of childhood study, reaffirmed the idea that women should be educated for motherhood in the early 1900s (Ailwood, 2008). Hall's contributions to early childhood education and psychology were through the lens of a man, and many of his arguments were based on religion and from a position of authority. Hall ultimately positioned women without children as being unsuitable to work in early learning, supporting ideas around maternalism (Ailwood, 2008).

Present-Day Impacts

The historical influences of the Second World War, feminist movements, maternalist discourse, and leaders' work have spiralled to affect the current field of early childhood education. In Canada, currently over 96% of individuals working in early childhood education are women, and the field remains deeply gendered (Moss, 2006). In the United States, men constitute less than 3% of the early childhood education workforce (Olsson & Martiny, 2018). While changing social norms over the past century have significantly broadened career options for women, certain gendered career choices have persisted, with early childhood education being one of them (Hoskins & Smedley, 2016). In this section, I will describe how historical influences have

impacted the current state of educational requirements, remuneration, and working conditions for educators, recognition as a profession, and the essentialization of women's identity.

Impacts on Educational Requirements, Remuneration, and Working Conditions

Historical links between early childhood educators and maternalism have impacted present day educational requirements, remuneration, and working conditions in the field. First, with the historical view that the work of early childhood educators is based on natural, innate skills, the training of teachers appears to be unnecessary (Moss, 2006). This is reflected in present-day educational requirements, as while educators working with children under five years old are often required to have a university diploma, educators working with children over five years old are required to have a university degree (Moss, 2006). The argument that early childhood education is a 'natural' place for women has also been used to justify low pay and social status for educators (Ailwood, 2008). Regardless of education level or training, early childhood educators are among the lowest paid professionals, and often do not have work benefits (Boyd, 2013). Another influence of present-day low wages is the historical philanthropic nature of early learning, where many women working in early childhood education took on voluntary work, as compensation was considered to come through emotional rewards (Ailwood, 2008). A study in the International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health in 2017 described the health and working conditions of child care workers, noting that over one million women employed in child care are among the lowest wage workers in the U.S. The study highlighted that 42% of participants were classified as at or below poverty, earning less than \$20,000 annually (Linnan et al., 2017). This combination of issues has led to challenges in retention in the early learning sector, further leading to staff shortages (McDonald et al., 2018). While many educators are proud of their work and contributions, challenges associated with low wages, heavy workloads, and lack of career progression opportunities often lead to educators leaving the field (McDonald et al.). This is an issue as a skilled and engaged workforce is essential for the wellbeing of children and broader economic growth (McDonald et al., 2018). This turnover negatively affects the consistency of care for children, which is critical in the early stages of development (Blewitt C et al., 2021). In addition, the undervaluing of early childhood educators impacts the broader education system, as the foundations laid in early childhood education are crucial for later academic success (Hahn & Barnett, 2023). To address these issues, targeted policy changes that provide better compensation, benefits, and professional development opportunities for educators are needed to create a sustainable and effective workforce (Harding et al., 2019).

Impacts on Recognition as a Profession

The attribution of educators' skills and knowledge to natural motherly instincts minimizes the legitimacy of early childhood education as a profession (Ailwood, 2008). In short, the perception of early childhood education work being maternal has created obstacles in supporting the professional status of educators due to how training in early learning appears to only extend the capabilities that women already possess (McDonald et al., 2018). While the movement to

professionalize teaching has been growing since the early 20th century with the argument that early childhood education is a complex field that requires specialised knowledge and skills, the naturalization of early childhood education work has undermined this fight for professional status (Boyd, 2013). In Canada, there has been growing discourse on a merger between early childhood education programs and the public school system, which could significantly change how children's programs are run and impact regulation of pay and educational requirements (Boyd, 2013).

Impacts on the Essentialization of Women's Identity

While the career opportunities for women in early childhood education were linked to social movements for equity supporting women's place in education and the workforce, this direction may have also confined women into gender norms influencing their career options (Ailwood, 2008). It remains deeply entrenched that maternal care is the best form of care for children (Moss, 2006), and that women hold maternal instincts innate to them (Moss, 2006). This can be critiqued as stereotypical and supportive of broader gender roles and norms in society (Staab, 2012). The essentialization of women's identity in early childhood education also has broader impacts in society, such as how mothers who use institutional childcare for their children are often judged to be 'bad' mothers (Ailwood, 2008). This essentialization contributes to a cycle where women are expected to choose careers that align with traditional gender roles, limiting their personal and professional growth (Tabassum & Nayak, 2021). Moreover, the societal emphasis on maternal instincts as an inherent trait of women discourages men from pursuing careers in early childhood education, further reinforcing gendered career paths (McConnon et al., 2022). Such assumptions about women's roles in caregiving also ignore the diverse family structures and dynamics that exist, thereby marginalizing non-traditional caregivers (Pinho & Gaunt, 2024).

Response and Opportunities for Change

Lastly, I will describe my vision for the future of this issue and propose potential ways this issue may be addressed and changed in the future. Within my own vision, I hope for a future where early childhood educators are fairly compensated and supported, early childhood education is recognized as a profession that requires training, and women are empowered to pursue their passions. The highly gendered state of early childhood education as a field is a starting point for critical analysis to explore opportunities for change (McDonald et al., 2018), and over the past 20 years, this change has been a priority as educators have questioned dominant ideologies and educational practices (Cannella, 2000). In this section, I will describe opportunities for local change, system change, and change to educational requirements, remuneration, and working conditions.

Local Change

Locally, there are opportunities to make changes within larger systems of power, where early childhood educators themselves can work toward re-envisioning the field (Moss, 2006). For example, local initiatives could focus on offering gender-sensitive professional development

programs and creating gender-mixed training opportunities that challenge traditional stereotypes in the field. Through local and political commitment to addressing gender norms in the the field, such as creating gender-mixed training, there are opportunities to challenge the status quo (Moss, 2006). Additionally, local communities can advocate for the allocation of more resources to educate women and girls on their potential within the early childhood education sector, helping to diversify and enrich the workforce (McDonald et al., 2018). From a broader view, early childhood education can also be a space to enact change through education itself, by teaching children in inclusive ways that recognize all children as capable (Hyland, 2010). Practicing culturally relevant pedagogy, which incorporates discussions of diversity and inclusion, can further support the development of an equitable early learning environment that reflects and celebrates varied experiences (Hyland, 2010).

System Change

While local actions are important, change at a larger scale is also necessary, especially given how the structure and conditions of a field are often determined at a national level through public policy (Moss, 2006). The currently decreasing workforce of women interested in working in early childhood education for low levels of pay may be an opportunity to destabilize existing systems of gender norms and increase political attention toward the field (Moss). The link between women's work and early childhood education does not necessarily need to be split, but rather changed to provide fair compensation and recognition for women working in the field (Newberry & Marpinjun, 2018). There is a need for systems research into the gendered approaches of teaching embedded within early childhood education itself, and to critically engage in understanding how maternalism currently influences the field (McDonald et al., 2018). However, while it is important to base change off of rigorous analysis, this should not slow down tangible change (Moss, 2006). At a global level, women's education has also been made a priority, as women are underrepresented in many other careers and educational paths (McDonald et al.). Community support for this issue could also be widened through increased public awareness (McDonald et al., 2018).

Change to Educational Requirements, Remuneration, and Working Conditions

The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development has acknowledged the growing importance for quality early childhood education, which depends on adequate training for educators and working conditions that promote retainment of a strong workforce (Lubeck, 2001). Given current labour supply shortages, change toward more supportive work environments is critical (McDonald et al., 2018). As early childhood education has become increasingly high profile on the policy agenda of national and international organizations as an approach to addressing social issues, there is an opportunity to push for change to educational requirements, pay, and working conditions in the field (Moss, 2006). These changes can include increased training opportunities for educators, increased pay and work benefits, more flexible and supportive working conditions, and higher staff to child ratios. As repeated attempts for

change have been met with resistance, there is a need for continued assertions from unions, employers, advocacy groups, and families (McDonald et al., 2018).

Conclusion

The gendered norms within early childhood education that exist today can be attributed to various historical influences, such as the Second World War, feminist movements, and maternalist discourse, and the work of figures in the field such as Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, Friedrich Froebel, Maria Montessori, and G. Stanley Hall. While early childhood education created career opportunities for women, it also linked the field with motherly instincts through the contention that women are best suited for roles as educators due to their maternal nature (Ailwood, 2008). Historical influences have impacted the current state of the field, shown through heavy gender imbalance, inadequate remuneration, low recognition as a profession, and more broadly, the essentialization of women's identity. These issues may be addressed through various local initiatives, advocacy for system-level change, and shifts to improve pay and working conditions. In addition, promoting diverse leadership within the field and challenging stereotypes can help reshape perceptions of the profession (Lawson et al., 2022). Improvement could also come from encouraging the inclusion of men and individuals from underrepresented groups (Croft et al., 2015), which would help diversify perspectives and experiences in the field. Furthermore, ongoing professional development and a clear career pathway with opportunities for advancement are necessary to retain talented educators and elevate the field's status (Ghamrawi & Abu-Tineh, 2023). Overall, this issue is important as a skilled and engaged workforce is essential to supporting the wellbeing of children, and this begins with creating equitable work environments for all early childhood educators.

Conflicts of Interest

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