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Early Childhood Studies Level 5 2019

Gender Inequality in relation to Global Disparities and Unequal Childhoods

We are presenting a redacted version of an assessed piece of work which explores unequal childhoods and global inequalities with specific focus on gender inequality. We recognise the importance of combating these issues within our role as emerging early childhood studies graduates. Research into the area of global inequalities and unequal childhoods is needed in order to answer some of the biggest questions regarding our future (Kaya, 2017). The QAA (2014) adds that research is a vital area of study as it enables us, as practitioners, to provide the best services and find the most appropriate approaches to suit differing contexts. Furthermore, research has enabled the field of early childhood to become a 'site for democracy, sustainability and social justice' (QAA, 2014:8).

Although global inequalities focus predominately on income and poverty, there is much more than just materialistic deprivation worldwide. Internationally there are major disparities including but not limited to health, education, gender and globalisation (Kaya, 2017). We live in an unjust world, in which the rich excel and the poor are stuck in a monotonous cycle of poverty. In 2017, Oxfam stated that 'the world's richest 1% got 82% of the wealth' (Hope, 2018). Arguably, these global inequalities are attributed to external and complex influences such as cultural, social, historical and political factors (Penn, 2005). The United Nations proposed an international approach to combat global inequalities through the creation of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that intend to be achieved by 2030 to promote social justice and equality globally (United Nations Sustainable Development, 2018). Although these goals have good intent, they are not legally binding. However, governments are expected to comply with these goals in order to achieve an equal and sustainable future for all (Boyd, Hirst, Siraj- Blatchford, 2018). SDG 5 is solely dedicated to 'achieving gender equality and empowering all women'. We have chosen to expand upon this specific goal, as it is an ongoing global issue.

It is a general assumption that gender inequality is not a pressing issue within early childhood, yet it is in a child's early years where they learn gendered attitudes and expectations (Plan International, 2017). UNESCO further reinforce that early childhood is a vital time for children to gain the fundamental knowledge and attitudes to combat gender inequality and work towards building a sustainable future (UNESCO, 2018). Following exploration of SDG 5, we decided to create an artefact that reflected the topic of gender inequality. We used a canvas to present the idea of a girl staring into a mirror and seeing a boy's reflection, prompting the thought 'if I were a boy my life could be very different'. Surrounding the mirror reflection, we included a collage of images relating to the difficulties that many women face. Our collage consisted of black and white images to emphasise that these issues are harsh and bleak with a lack of respect shown towards women. Gender inequality is a broad topic, however we have
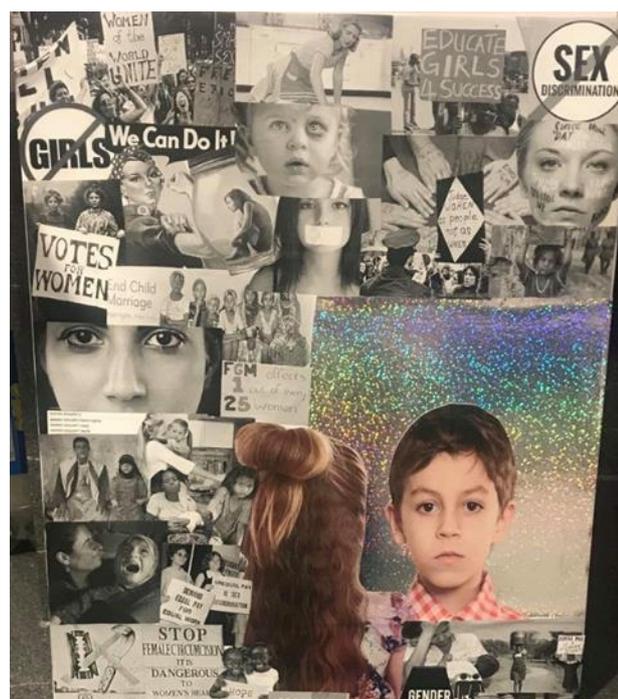
chosen to focus on the aspects of limited education for young girls universally and the highly debated issue of the gender pay gap.

Lack of education is a key limitation for women. UNESCO (2016, p.8) state that 'education is about more than just literacy and numeracy. It is also about citizenry. Education must fully assume its essential role in helping people to forge more just, peaceful and tolerant societies'. Gull-Tarar and Pulla (2014) assert that although half of the population within Pakistan are women, they are denied equal opportunities in many aspects of their life. Implying that within Pakistani society women are deemed as second-class citizens. Malala Yousafzai, a Pakistani 15-year-old school girl, defied societal norms when she became an advocate for girls' education and refused to be silenced. In 2012 she survived an assassination by the Taliban whilst she was traveling home from school. This incident became global news and she gained worldwide recognition, which resulted in a political uprising within Pakistan and internationally (Edwards, 2015). Thus, reflecting the critical role children can have within politics if their voice is heard. Article 12 of the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) further reinforces the importance of recognising a child's voice. They propose that a child should be able to express their own views and opinions freely in all matters affecting them (Lundy, 2007). Article 12 of the UNCRC is legally binding and must be adhered to, if Article 12 is followed in society we will produce a positive global ethos and promote mutual respect (Lundy, 2007). Griffin (2008) highlights that children must have the right to autonomy, in order to form their own opinions and make their own decisions, allowing them to take control of their own lives. This concept emphasises that all early years practitioners must encourage children to express themselves and adopt an inclusive practice (Lundy, 2007).

Furthermore, educating girls will have economic benefits, by creating more women in the workforce it has the potential to 'add up to $12 trillion USD to global growth' (Malala.org, 2018). Women within the workplace can face much discrimination, for example it is argued that there is a gender pay gap and lower prosperity for women. Annese (2016) highlights that society within the UK has caused a 13.9% pay gap between male and females, therefore from September to December women are 'in effect working for nothing'. This unjust pay gap results in society viewing men and women as different instead of equal citizens. Gendered stereotypes may cause a woman to develop a negative self-image which can limit their ambition to succeed (Henderson, 2013). Women may feel less valued and inferior to men if they are being paid less for doing the same work. Additionally, even in female dominated job sectors, for example education and caregiving, it can be argued that it is the male workers who are more likely to be promoted into senior positions (Henderson, 2013).

The issue of the gender pay gap can be applied to Maslow's theory of hierarchy of needs (Maslow,1943). Maslow proposes a pyramid of five stages of needs which must be achieved for an individual to develop to their full potential. He argues that you cannot ascend to the next stage without accomplishing the previous one. Maslow's theory begins with basic needs such as physiological and safety, and then advances to belongingness and love, followed by esteem needs and finally reaching self-actualization (McLeod, 2016). Gender inequality can have a detrimental effect upon Maslow's hierarchy of needs within both childhood and adulthood. For example, girls/ women who are deemed inferior to boys/ men, may not develop a positive self-esteem and as a direct result will not be motivated to reach self-actualization. However, we must look at Maslow's theory critically as it can be argued that it is too simplistic and does not take into account external influential factors on an individual's development (Cianci and Gambrel, 2003). It also does not consider the uniqueness of an individual as it is based on expected societal norms and can be viewed as too rigid (Hofstede,1984).

Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory can be applied to the issue of gender inequality as it reinforces that an individual's beliefs are deeply influenced by their communities, society and culture (Hayes, O'Toole and Halpenny, 2017). For example, in Nigeria there is a common belief that women are inferior to men and have no right to education (Falae, 2018). In 2014, a radical terrorist group carried out an attack in which they kidnapped 200 innocent young girls for attending a school based on western values and education (BBC, 2017). Thus, highlighting the lack of value placed on girls' education and rights. Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory further emphasises that an individual's identity and beliefs are 'bounded by context culture and history' (Darling, 2007 p.204). This poses the question, 'are the SDGs realistic and appropriate to differing contexts?' It is argued that they adopt an ethnocentric approach and by trying to enforce western perspectives, this can cause resistance and resentment which in this case, resulted in an abduction.

In relation to early childhood, Bronfenbrenner's ecological model supports the idea that it is the child's society and the people, ideas and objects within it that forms the basis of their learning and development (Hayes, O'Toole and Halpenny, 2017). Society often limits children (Henderson, 2013). This is because within society, gendered attitudes have been created and enforced and it is our job as practitioners to consider these attitudes and prevent them from limiting children's opportunities (Griffin, 2008). In relation to gender inequality, it is crucial that parents and practitioners avoid using sex discrimination and related jargon as it is within a child's early years that they discover themselves and their role in the world, and this will not occur if the child is trapped in a 'social vacuum' (Browne, 2004). Therefore, as aspiring early years practitioners it is our duty to promote equality, eliminate stereotypes and discrimination, and help to create respectful and inclusive members of society (Henderson, 2013). The Benchmark Statement of Early Childhood Studies reinforces that early childhood practitioners must 'recognise and challenge inequalities in society, and embrace an anti-bias approach' (QAA, 2014:11). This can be achieved by encouraging children to express their opinions and have a voice, therefore early childhood practitioners are advocates for babies and young children (Lundy, 2007). However, we cannot use Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory to solely assess the factors affecting an individual's learning and development. This is because Bronfenbrenner views the individual as passive in their environment and does not take into consideration how they impact upon their environment (Eriksson, Ghazinour and Hammarström, 2017). Thus emphasising that every child's experiences within childhood differ and some may be more susceptible to gendered attitudes depending on their societal context.

It is vital that children learn and understand their role within their environment and as a result, Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) was introduced as a core area within the early childhood sector. Boyd, Hirst, and McNeill (2017) illustrate that the socio-cultural pillar must be met in order to achieve ESD. The key themes presented within this pillar are democracy, social justice, social stereotypes, human rights, cultural diversity and equality. Arguably, these are the fundamental principles underlaying the SDGs. It is vital that a child understands their social cultural context, as it is within early years that misconceptions can have an impact on children's ability to understand complex issues in adulthood (Boyd, Hirst and Siraji-Blatchford, 2017). Therefore, society must avoid the construction of expected norms and gendered attitudes. This is achievable through ESD from the early years as it promotes more sustainable attitudes surrounding culture and society, thus creating inclusive, respectful and competent citizens (Boyd, Hirst, and McNeill, 2017). Vygotsky's social constructivist theory proposes that we learn through social interactions and we form attitudes based on these interactions (Smidt, 2009). Vygotsky stressed that children learn in social environments, yet their social conditions are ever changing (Marginson and Dang, 2017). This is important and must be taken into consideration as social conditions will vary globally.

This further reinforces the importance of early years practitioners adopting an inclusive practice as children are most impressionable during their early years. Children are likely to carry their learnt attitudes and ideas of their role in the world into adulthood with them (Marginson and Dang, 2017). Perhaps one of the biggest critiques of this theory is that Vygotsky looks at children collectively and disregards the importance of the individual child and their unique learning and development process (Smidt, 2009).

In order to abolish gendered attitudes and social stigmas, we must aim to achieve equal rights for all. One of the most influential advocates within the field of feminism is Kimberly Crenshaw, who strives for social justice through the key concept of intersectionality. Intersectionality is a theory which aspires to achieve equality and social justice worldwide. Konstantoni,et al. (2014, p.3) define intersectionality as 'the interaction between gender, race and other categories of difference'. As early years practitioners, it is necessary to use intersectionality within our environments and convey it through our teachings in order to effectively explore and understand children's identities and global inequalities (Griffin, 2008). We must recognise children as active participants within their environment (QAA, 2014) and regard them as experts in their own lives. Konstantoni,et al. (2014, p.7) highlights 'the importance of locality, mobility, time, place and space for understanding childhood intersecting identities and inequalities'. Similarly, the Benchmark Statement emphasises that the child is placed in an ecological context, one in which time and geographical space has a major influence as well as the social factors stemming from family, communities and children's' services (QAA, 2014). One of the major benefits of intersectionality is that it is built upon the feminist theory and it goes further to combat all social stereotypes (not just gender) and eliminate social inequalities internationally (Konstantoni,et al., 2014).

It is clear from our analysis that gender inequality is an ongoing battle which will not be eliminated overnight as women have been fighting for equal rights for over a century. In order for the SDGs to be achieved, the importance of gender equality must be recognised. This will foster global citizenship through valuing universal human rights, democracy, non-discrimination and diversity which will all contribute to a sustainable future (UNESCO, 2016). However, we must question whether the fundamental principles of SDGs are realistic and achievable in such a short period of time. Furthermore, it can be argued that the United Nations have established a very ethnocentric goal as it is based solely on a western perspective. In relation to the controversial issue of gender inequality, beliefs vary over a range of countries due to religion and culture. Globally, humans rely heavily on cultural beliefs and morality and therefore this will vary in different contexts (Walsh, 2015). Therefore, we cannot force our western beliefs on every country across the world, as what we might think is right, may not always be right for everyone. Thus, highlighting that the best approach to implement the SDGs is to work alongside the population, not intrude and impose upon them (Edwards, 2015).

In conclusion, after researching the contemporary issue of gender inequality we feel that individually we have developed our knowledge and understanding of global inequalities and unequal childhoods. This will be beneficial for us in our future roles as early years practitioners as it enables us both to become 'effective advocates for babies, young children and their families' (QAA, 2014:5). We are now more aware of the severity of inequalities and the importance of promoting inclusion and diversity within the field of early childhood. Thus, allowing us to 'provide children with the best care and education from birth' (QAA, 2014:5). Additionally, from a research perspective it is obvious that constant research must be carried out in the complex and diverse field of early childhood. This enables practitioners to provide the highest level of service, as they are producing new research approaches to suit the new demands of the population in differing contexts (QAA, 2014).

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