"THEY ARE JUST FIVE-YEAR-OLD BOYS": EXAMINING THE ROLE OF CHILDHOOD INNOCENCE IN THE EARLY NORMALIZATION OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE

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ABSTRACT The purpose of this article is to examine how the discourse of childhood innocence masks the ways in which sexual violence by boys against girls is perpetrated in kindergarten. Findings from a year-long ethnographic study conducted in two Canadian kindergarten classrooms show that narrow understandings of gender and sexuality in childhood obscure schools' responses to problematic gendered behaviors enacted by certain boys. The author contends that in failing to attend to gender and sexuality with young children, kindergarten education may contribute profoundly to the early normalization of sexual violence. The article concludes with a discussion on the role that kindergarten education can play in countering sexual violence inside and outside of schools.

« CE NE SONT QUE DES GARÇONS DE CINQ ANS » : EXAMINER LE RÔLE DE L'INNOCENCE ENFANTINE DANS LA NORMALISATION PRÉCOCE DE LA VIOLENCE SEXUELLE

RÉSUMÉ. Cet article examine comment le discours sur l'innocence enfantine masque comment la violence sexuelle commise par des garçons contre des filles est perpétrée à la maternelle. Les résultats d'une étude ethnographique d'un an menée dans deux classes de maternelle canadiennes montrent qu'un manque de compréhension du genre et de la sexualité chez les enfants obscurcissent les réponses des écoles aux comportements problématiques adoptés par certains garçons. L'auteur soutient qu'en négligeant d'aborder les questions de genre et de sexualité avec les jeunes enfants, l'éducation à la maternelle peut contribuer de manière significative à la normalisation précoce de la violence sexuelle. L'article discute le rôle que l'éducation à la maternelle peut jouer dans la lutte contre la violence sexuelle.

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Kindergarten teacher, Mrs. T, and early childhood educator, Mrs. P, have lined up the kindergarteners after their gym period. The line comes to a halt as Mrs. T attends to misbehavior at the front of the line. At the back of the line, Safa exclaims, "Stop!" and moves her body forward as Rahim touches her buttocks. Safa exclaims, "Stop touching me!" as Rahim touches her buttocks again. Safa looks back at Mrs. P and tells her that Rahim touched her buttocks. Mrs. P states, "Rahim, no touching!", reminding Rahim of the school's no-touching rule. Rahim looks at Mrs. P, acknowledging her demand, but proceeds to touch Safa's buttocks again when Mrs. P looks away. Safa exclaims, "Stop it!" and reports to Mrs. P that Rahim touched her buttocks yet again. Mrs. P tells Rahim to join her at the back of the line, scolding him for breaking the no-touching rule as the line begins to move again, making its way back to classroom. (Field notes, Prioletta 2018).

Sexual violence against girls and women is an urgent public health issue (Dartnall & Jewkes, 2013; UNESCO, 2016a). Schools are prominent sites in which sexual violence against girls occurs (Bhana, 2013; Leach et al., 2014; Leach & Mitchell, 2006). Despite this, research around sexual violence against girls in early learning contexts is growing but remains limited. In this article, I examine how the discourse of childhood innocence obscures occurrences of sexual violence in kindergarten and plays a critical role in its early normalization. Drawing on feminist theorizations, I outline how the image of the innocent child denies gender and sexuality in young children's lives and renders invisible the unequal gendered power relations that facilitate acts of sexual violence by boys against girls. Findings from this study illustrate that because acts of sexual violence in kindergarten went unrecognized as such by schools, they could only be responded to in limited ways. Consequently, kindergarten girls' daily experiences of sexual violence went unaddressed. The purpose of this article is to critically interrogate the role of kindergarten education in the perpetuation and normalization of sexual violence, and to consider the ways in which it can combat sexual violence inside and outside of schools.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This article draws on a critical feminist theoretical lens informed by feminist standpoint theory. According to Smith (1987, 2006), the examination of social life from a feminist standpoint begins in the actualities of women's everyday lives to better understand the dominant social relations and structures that maintain and legitimize their social positions as subordinate. Smith (1987, 2006) explains that a feminist standpoint has been mobilized to give voice to women and girls in societies

governed by patriarchal ideologies, particularly in the construction of knowledge. As Harding (2004) has shown, feminist standpoint theory places those who are marginalized and oppressed, such as women and girls, in a position to illuminate problematic social patterns that may otherwise remain invisible. She contends that, "the experiences of oppressed groups can become an important source of critical insight" (p. 7). According to Harding (2004), feminist standpoint theory was developed to remedy the inadequacy of androcentric, racist, Eurocentric, and heterosexist frameworks that have deeply shaped scientific research. Research from a feminist standpoint begins in women's lived realities, their experiences, and their activities. Grounding research in the lived realities and experiences of oppressed groups helps to shed light on the dominant ideologies and logics that maintain the invisibility and the existence of systems of oppression.

In this article, I account for the intersections of gender and generation in mobilizing a feminist standpoint (Alanen, 1998; Mayall, 2002; Wyness, 2019). The social construction of childhood as a time of innocence has long kept younger members of society in subordinate positions, characterizing them as naïve and unknowing (Cannella, 1997; Robinson, 2013). Farmer and Cepin (2015) argued that such adult-centred conceptualizations of youth have left children's views and experiences largely neglected in education. In the context of early childhood education, as I will show, adult-centered conceptions of kindergarten as the optimal and pleasurable context for children's growth and learning remain dominant (e.g., Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016), muddying the extent to which problematic social patterns can be perpetuated in this context. A feminist standpoint lens allows for an examination of kindergarten education from the vantage point of girls, as both girls and as children, in a context largely governed by adults and patriarchal ideologies (Burman, 2017; Mayall, 2002). Such a lens is significant as it challenges the dominant assumption of a universal childhood that has been perpetuated through child development theories and that maintains the white, able-bodied, middle-class, heterosexual, masculine child at the centre of childhood experiences (Blaise et al., 2019; Burman, 2017). For this study, I applied feminist standpoint theory to illuminate girls' actualities in kindergarten and to debunk the authority of childhood innocence, a discourse whose effect has been to make occurrences of sexual violence in kindergarten invisible—as the research in this article shows.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Sexual Violence In and Around Schools

Sexual violence against girls and women remains pervasive around the world (Dartnall & Jewkes, 2013; UNESCO, 2016a). It is an urgent public health concern that cuts across class, race, age, ethnicity, and ability (Bhana, 2013; Leach et al., 2014). Sexual violence comprises a spectrum of unwanted sexual acts: sexual assault, which includes non-consensual sexual touching and rape; sexual harassment; indecent exposure of sexual body parts; and stalking, among others (MCCSS, 2021; Shakeshaft, 2002; WHO, 2002). Sexual violence can be experienced by anyone. Patriarchal power structures facilitate acts of sexual violence that include but also go beyond the male perpetrator / female victim binary to involve sexual assault and harassment against boys and men, by girls / women against girls / women, and sexual violence within LGBTQ+ communities (Jere, 2015; Meyer, 2008, 2009). However, girls and women remain among the groups who are more likely to experience sexual violence and do so most often by boys and men (Dartnall & Jewkes, 2013; Leach, 2015; Pinheiro, 2006).

A wide variety of social factors contribute to sexual violence against girls and women. Gender scholars have shown how traditional attitudes, roles, and norms around gender and gender relations, underpinned by inequalities of power, function to legitimize sexual violence against girls and women (Connell, 1995; Connell & Pearse, 2015; Flood, 2007). In western societies, male violence is a normalized expression of masculinity learned in childhood (Connell, 2005). Specifically, heteronormativity pressures boys and men to perform a masculinity predicated on sexual aggression and the objectification of girls and women (Hird & Jackson, 2001; Kupers, 2005; Tolman et al., 2003). Importantly, however, as Connell (1995) has contended, masculinity is not singular, and these expressions of masculinity are not innate. Instead, male violence is legitimized and normalized within the social, cultural, and political contexts in which one lives.

Sexual violence against girls and women prevails across many sites, including domestic spaces, workplaces, online, and city streets, to name a few. Schools are among these salient sites (Bhana, 2013; Leach et al., 2014; Leach & Mitchell, 2006; Pinheiro, 2006). In K-12 settings around the globe, girls experience unwanted touching, grabbing, and pinching of sexual body parts, unwanted kissing, sexual comments and jokes, pulling of clothes off or down, peeping, and rape, among other types of sexual violence, largely by male teachers and male peers (Forber-Pratt & Espelage,

2018; Heslop et al., 2015; Santos et al., 2019). In the Canadian context, a 2019 CBC report by Taylor et al. (2019, November 8) showed that fifteen percent of female students reported having experienced sexual assault at school. A quarter of those students reported experiencing inappropriate sexual behavior before Grade 7.

Research on sexual violence in early learning is growing but remains limited. According to Bhana (2013), toxic masculine expressions that underpin sexual violence are present early on in schooling. She highlighted that children as young as six years old may experience gender violence and/or perpetrate such violence. Huuki and Renold (2016) also revealed occurrences of sexual violence among six-year-old children on a preschool playground. Drawing on feminist post-human theorizations, the authors showed how three six-year-old boys wielded power from their playground's socio-material-historical-affective forces and took turns kissing or demanding a kiss from a girl classmate. Such feminist research illuminates how sexual violence occurs in the early years of schooling. However, sexual violence at all levels is largely unidentified and remains underreported and under-researched (Jere, 2015).

As noted in a UNESCO (2016b) report, the extent to which sexual violence in schools occurs may be underreported because many acts of sexual violence, such as unwanted touching of sexual body parts between peers, have become normalized gendered behaviors in schools and are thus not always recognized as sexual violence by students and staff. Moma (2015) has reminded us, however, that the schooling context is gendered and shapes students' experiences in gendered ways. She explains that "schools themselves are not isolated sites, but sites located within communities of social and cultural practices, traditions and norms" (p. 49). School contexts are thus laden with ideologies and gendered hierarchies that legitimize sexual violence against girls and women.

School-based violence is also largely understood through the concept of bullying (Leach, 2015; Leach et al., 2014; Leach & Mitchell, 2006). However, scholars have argued that bullying discourses perpetuate gender-neutral notions of violence that focus on individuals' developmental and psychological traits, rather than on the unequal gendered power relations that underlie acts of violence (Carlson, 2014; Ringrose & Renold, 2010). Such a focus on the individual functions to naturalize gender and mask performances of hegemonic masculinity (Carlson, 2014). As Leach et al. (2014) have argued, many incidents that are considered bullying in schools are actually acts of gender and sexual violence. A limited understanding of gender and sexual violence in schools has led to narrow conceptualizations of such violence that tend to include only severe assaults, such as rape,

leaving many other acts of sexual violence unrecognized (Leach, 2015). Consequently, anti-violence policies and interventions in schools may not adequately address sexual violence (Leach & Mitchell, 2006).

In this article, I examine how the discourse of childhood innocence further obscures school-based sexual violence and silences its occurrences in early learning contexts. I argue that not seeing and not addressing sexual violence in the early years of schooling profoundly contributes to its normalization and perpetuation inside and outside of schools. The purpose of this article is not to position boys as natural predators and girls as victims, but to shed light on the ways in which dominant conceptions of children as unknowing and childhood as a time of innocence may function to mask the early normalization of problematic gender constructions and relations that are harmful to all.

Childhood Innocence

Childhood innocence is a hegemonic discourse rooted in western conceptualizations of childhood (Bhana, 2009; Cannella, 1997; Robinson, 2013). It permeates the social and political fabric of society, profoundly governing children as well as adults (Bhana, 2007; Cannella, 1997; Robinson, 2013). Robinson (2013) has explained that "children are not inherently innocent and unknowledgeable" (p. 13). Instead, as Epstein and Johnson (1998) posited, the notion of innocence is something that has been imposed on children; it is not a natural component of childhood. Ariès (1962) argued that while a seemingly natural part of human development, childhood is a socially constructed concept. He contended that the concept of childhood was developed slowly roughly between the 15th and 18th centuries in Europe (Prout & James, 1997); "in medieval society the idea of childhood did not exist" (Ariès, 1962, p. 125).

Cannella (1997) traced the construction of childhood to the rise of positivist science and the belief in Cartesian dualism during the enlightenment and modern periods. She explained that the search for universal truths, the notion of progress and individuality, and the dichotomous systems of representation supported by the Christian church during these periods created fertile ground for the construction of childhood as a distinct and oppositional category to adulthood. She noted that the rise of age groupings in schools reinforced this distinction, further establishing an adult-child dichotomy. Cannella (1997) has underscored that such dualistic thinking has created a hierarchy that positions younger members of society as inferior to older members. Such positioning has produced unequal power relations between adults and children that mimic the patriarchal power relations between men and women, where

the domination of children by adults is legitimized through the guise of "protecting" children who are seen as unable to make rational decisions. As Cannella (1997) stated, "children are described today as innocent, weak, needy, lacking (in skills or knowledge), immature, fearful, savage, vulnerable, undefined, or open-ended, as opposed to adults who are intelligent, strong, competent, mature, civilized, and in control" (p. 34).

The enlightenment and modernist periods also gave rise to child development theories (Cannella, 1997; Gabriel, 2014). These theories rely on the belief that children follow a so-called natural and predetermined developmental path through various stages at particular ages (Blaise, 2005; MacNaughton, 2000). Cannella (1997) has argued that through this lens, childhood is positioned as merely a time of apprenticeship for adulthood. Children are reduced to their biology, positioned as human "becomings" rather than as human "beings" (Bhana, 2003; Lee, 2001; Thorne, 1993). As Bhana (2003) stated, "The child is regarded as an incomplete version of the adult without the ability to make sense of the world" (p. 43). Child development theories have played an important role in justifying childhood as a distinct and oppositional category to adulthood, and in upholding the hegemonic discourse of childhood innocence and thus the unequal power relations between adults and children (Cannella, 1997).

Importantly, childhood innocence is laden with White supremacist and classist ideals that disproportionally benefit White middle-class children. Black children, for instance, are more likely to be subject to adultification and thus more likely to be disciplined within legal systems and schools (Epstein et al., 2017; Garlen, 2019). Moreover, Giroux (1998) showed that state-run welfare programs, seemingly aimed at protecting the innocence of children, function to limit poor and non-White children's access to important resources. Childhood innocence also functions to absolve White middle-class children of their active involvement in racist and classist interactions with peers (Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001).

The image of the innocent child operates to regulate and deny children's access to knowledge around gender and sexuality, which is deemed "*adults-only* knowledge" (Robinson, 2013, p. 8). Such refusal of information, however, may function to render children vulnerable, rather than protect them, as they are denied critical knowledge about their identities, health and safety. For instance, Dyer (2017) has argued that childhood innocence limits children's curiosities and inquiries around gender and sexuality and functions to disproportionally harm queer children. As young children are aware of the dominant scripts of their cultural and social contexts, they may construct their understandings of gender and sexuality through discourses that naturalize the gender binary and heterosexuality (Blaise,

2005; Osgood & Robinson, 2017). Consequently, queer possibilities may be thwarted in early childhood, if not altogether denied, perpetuating limiting, and often problematic, constructions of femininity, masculinity and gender relations for all children.

Positioning younger members of society as immature and unknowing deeply undermines children's social and cultural realities and silences how gender and sexuality shape and are shaped by children (Bhana, 2003, 2007; Osgood & Robinson, 2017). Wyness (2019) has argued that while biological differences may exist between children and adults, these differences "need to be separated from the cultural components of childhood" (p. 21). Such insight is important in a culture and society that legitimizes sexual violence as an expression of masculinity and a source of male power.

Gender and Sexuality in Childhood

As noted above, the discourse of childhood innocence has had harmful implications for the recognition of gender, sexuality, and gendered power dynamics in young children's lives. Feminist scholars contend, however, that young children are active social agents who produce and reproduce norms and expectations around gender and sexuality (Bhana, 2003, 2007; Blaise, 2005; Davies, 1989; Robinson, 2013; Thorne, 1993). Osgood and Robinson (2017) have explained that children are :

> key agents in the construction of their own gender and sexual subjectivities, as well as in the regulation and policing of gender and sexuality norms in other children (and adults). We know that young children from very early ages begin to explore gendered and sexual identities from the narratives or cultural stories they are told by their families, educators, peers, and the media about what it means to be a girl or a boy. (p. 36)

Despite such theorizations, adults, including teachers, tend to maintain the perception that children are "too young to know" about gender and sexuality and about gendered power dynamics (Bhana, 2003; Blaise, 2005; MacNaughton, 2000; Prioletta, 2020a; Renold, 2002). Consequently, gender and sexual behaviors and expressions are often attributed exclusively to biology and to passive sex-role socialization, rather than to children's knowledge of and active role in the social construction of gender and sexuality (Blaise, 2005). In the context of sexual violence, such perceptions are dangerous, as harmful behaviors tend to be viewed as natural and thus unchangeable, limiting adults' attempts to intervene. This is highly problematic, as adherence to the gender binary and normative gender expressions is particularly strong at the kindergarten level, where young children strive to be seen as knowledgable about what

it means to be a girl or a boy as they transition to a new, and public, social institution (Banse et al., 2010; MacNaughton, 2006; West & Zimmerman, 1987).

Walkerdine (1990), for instance, highlighted how an incident of sexual harassment in a nursery school by two four-year-old boys against their female teacher was left unaddressed. She explained that the teacher rationalized the boys' sexist comments as harmless by attributing the problematic comments to the boys' immaturity and unknowingness. However, Blaise (2005) showed that in early learning settings, boys wield power by expressing hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity in western societies emphasizes physical strength and toughness, values violence, and relies on the subordination of others and the sexualization of girls and women (Connell, 1995; Kimmel, 1997; Moma, 2015). Young boys may thus maintain positions of power in early learning settings by drawing on and actively mobilizing misogynistic narratives and unequal gendered power relations. These findings point to the need for greater awareness of and intervention against sexual violence in kindergarten.

THE PRESENT STUDY

Methodology

This article derives from my doctoral study that examined the hidden gendered effects of play in kindergarten (Prioletta, 2020b). Drawing on Smith (1987, 2006), I implemented a year-long institutional ethnography in two kindergarten classrooms in a Canadian urban center. Institutional ethnography is a research methodolody informed by feminist standpoint theory that was developed to uncover how institutional structures and systems facilitate women's marginalization and subordinaton by beginning the inquiry of study in their daily experiences (Smith, 1987, 2006). As such, this study began in children's daily lives in kindergarten to trace how ruling relations—the dominant structures and systems that govern people's everyday lives in an institution such as policy mandates for play-based learning and "no-touching" policies and the ideologies that inform them—shape and coordinate the mundane practices of early learning. The overarching research aim was to explore whether and how a curricular shift to a play-based kindergarten program facilitated, or not, the early institutionalization of gender-based violence. The aim in this article is to examine specifically how sexual violence was perpetrated in kindergarten in and out of play.

Feminist standpoint theory holds that knowledge is situated and that truth is partial (Smith, 1987). My social-historical-political location thus

influences this research. As a first-generation, heterosexual, ciswoman born in Canada, raised in an Italian immigrant family and a deeply patriarchal community, my involvement in this research is also a political one. Having regularly witnessed and experienced sexual violence in school and on the way to school throughout my childhood, I am profoundly invested in illuminating girls' experiences of sexual violence in childhood.

I also came to this research having taught kindergarten myself and thus deliberate effort was required to maintain my role as a researcher to ensure that the students did not view me as another educator in their classroom. I thus avoided intervening in certain activities, academic work, and peer conflicts during my field work. My aim was to cultivate the role of a free ethnographic agent and the status of an "unusual adult" who "is seriously interested in understanding how the social world looks from children's perspective but without making a dubious attempt to be a child" (Christensen, 2004, p. 174). I undertook this role with what Mukherji and Albon (2010) describe as an attitude of "not knowing" (p. 76). The unusual, unknowing adult differs from the role of a teacher, as it positions the students as the ultimate knowers who need to teach the adult about daily life in kindergarten.

Data Collection Methods

This article draws on data collected throughout the entire school day three to four days a week. The data were collected through participant observation in and out of play periods. Following Buch and Staller (2007), participant observation was implemented to gain first-hand experience of and insight into the participants' daily practices. Observations and informal conversations between myself and the participants were recorded through thick verbatim description in field notes as well as video recordings. Field notes gathered over 85 days and 72 video transcripts were analyzed for this study.

Site Selection and Ethics Approval

Prior to data collection, ethics approval was obtained from the university and school districts. Informed consent was also obtained from educators and students' parents as well as assent from students. The schools were selected through convenience sampling. One school was located by my workplace at the time of the study and the other school was located in the community in which I was living. Both schools were recommended by colleagues because of their willingness to support research in education. The names used in this article are pseudonyms.

Participants

The schools were located in different districts. One school was in a predominantly White upper-class area of the city. The class had twenty-two students between four and six years old. Most of the students were five years old during my fieldwork. Eleven students identified as girls and eleven as boys. Most of the students were White. However, there was some racial and ethnic diversity in this classroom, with a few students from various Asian backgrounds and one Black student. The students were from affluent families who could afford the costly yearly tuition and fees. The second school was in a more culturally, racially, linguistically, and socio-economically diverse area of the city. The class had twenty-nine students between three and six years old. Most of the students were four and five years old during my fieldwork. Fifteen students identified as girls and fourteen as boys. There were students of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds in this classroom, including African, Indian, Syrian, and Ukrainian. Many of the students spoke a different language at home than the language of instruction at school. The students' families were of diverse socio-economic backgrounds, with several students from working-class families. In both classrooms, there was some racial and ethnic diversity among the educators and pre-service educators present during my fieldwork, though they were mostly White. They all identified as women except for one man.

Data Analysis

Data analysis for this article followed a two-step process. First, to make visible how the institutional structures and systems of kindergarten education shape children's everyday experiences at school , I explicated the daily social and material organization and practices of the kindergarten settings. This involved mapping out and linking together data collected through observations, interviews, and education texts to uncover the effects of kindergarten policies and processes (Deveau, 2009). This process revealed how the kindergarten context created fertile ground for boys' domination of learning spaces through acts of sexual violence. Second, following Leavy and Harris (2019), I carried out the systematic process of coding accounts of sexual violence in field notes and video transcriptions. Accounts of sexual violence included observations of unwanted sexual acts. In these kindergarten settings, these acts consisted of non-consensual sexual touching and kissing between students and indecent exposure of sexual body parts by students. The codes were then categorized to identify broader themes in school responses to these acts of sexual violence. The analysis revealed that a dominant theme of childhood innocence underpinned school responses to acts of sexual violence.

FINDINGS

In this section, I outline the observed acts of sexual violence in the two kindergarten settings and school responses to them. Acts of sexual violence included indecent exposure of sexual body parts by boys and sexual assault through unwanted sexual touching and kissing by boys against girls. I show how the discourse of childhood innocence limited the ways in which schools perceived and responded to these acts. Consequently, girls' daily experiences of sexual violence were left unaddressed.

Indecent Exposure

Indecent exposure is a type of sexual violence that involves deliberately exposing one's genitals in a public space where the perpetrator intends to be seen (Shakeshaft, 2002; Trent University, nd; University of Ottawa, nd). According to Riordan (1999), indecent exposure by men is considered dangerous to women as it is seen as an act that can lead to more serious sexual offenses, contributing to women's overall fear of male violence. Pain (1991) has reminded us that such fear limits women's lives as it restricts the spaces in which they feel safe. In the kindergarten context, practices of indecent exposure allowed boys to wield power over kindergarten spaces as they marked their territory, sometimes quite literally, as a "boy's" space. These acts kept girls at the margins of kindergarten spaces, signaling to girls that girls do not belong in these spaces and that their learning environment could be violated at any given time.

Practices of indecent exposure unfolded in several ways. At times, the practice involved an individual boy taking his penis out and publicly exposing his genitalia to classmates nearby. Other times, it involved a group of boys collaborating in the act. A reoccurring practice included a group of boys taking their penises out and running around the classroom or the school yard. In addition to exposing their penises, these boys also urinated in garbage cans. Sometimes, the boys also used their penises to engage in games of sword fighting. While young children may expose their genitalia as part of their sexual explorations, the behaviors observed in this study reflected practices of competition and domination. The boys were disciplined for these behaviors by being sent to the principal's office with their parents being informed of the incidences. The boys were also asked by their educator to reflect through drawings on where it is appropriate to expose their penis and where it is not.

While practices of genitalia exposure did not go unnoticed by educators, school responses failed to consider them as acts of sexual violence and to engage meaningfully with students in conversations around gender and sexuality. Instead, responses to these acts relied on the image of the

innocent child in their rationalization of these behaviors. One of the teachers explained that she has observed practices of indecent exposure by boys in her kindergarten classroom for several years. When she first noticed the behavior, she sought support from the school specialist. However, the specialist reassured her that these behaviors are "normal for young boys." She explained that the boys are "just playing around" and "just being five-year-old boys." Moreover, as the boys involved were the same age, the specialist reassured the teacher that these practices were not concerning since there was no power imbalance *between the boys* [my emphasis].

As I outlined in the previous section, the discourse of childhood innocence positions children as incomplete beings who are too young and too naïve to know about gender, sexuality and gendered power dynamics. Drawing on the image of the innocent child, in tandem with the biological determinist narrative of "boys will be boys", the school specialist legitimized these acts of indecent exposure as playful and natural for young boys—simply a part of a temporary phase in their development. Such assumptions suggest that these acts are biologically determined and, thus, out of the boys' control. These assumptions also suggest that the boys were unaware of the gendered implications of these acts. How the boys mobilized broader cultural sexist tools to actively express and legitimize their masculinity and their gendered position of power in the classroom went unrecognized. Thus, while attention was paid to power dynamics between the boys in relation to age, the role that these acts of genitalia exposure played in the reinforcement of unequal gendered power relations went unnoticed.

Examining acts of indecent exposure by boys from a girl's standpoint illuminates how kindergarten can be a place in which domination by boys is expected and accepted, making it an educational context that is unsafe and not accessible and inclusive to all children. The discomfort expressed by girls, verbally (telling the teacher or researcher of the incident and /or asking the boys to stop) and physically (turning away during these acts and /or quickly moving away from the boys to a hidden part of the space), illustrates that these acts by boys affect girls' feelings of safety and security in kindergarten spaces. The schools' limited response to the gendered implications of these acts suggests that the acts are acceptable, thus affording boys as a group greater power. Such responses may function to further legitimize boys' entitlement and dominance over the learning environment as well as future occurrences of sexual violence.

Non-Consensual Sexual Touching and Kissing

As evidenced in the opening account of this article, acts of sexual assault by boys against girls were also observed in this study. Sexual assault is a type of sexual violence that involves non-consensual sexual contact. Acts of sexual assault can range from unwanted sexual touching or kissing to forced sexual intercourse (Shakeshaft, 2002; Trent University, nd; University of Ottawa, nd). In this study, acts of sexual assault limited girls' ability to participate safely in different learning spaces and, consequently, affected their access to equal educational opportunities. Observed acts of sexual assault included boys touching girls' buttocks and boys kissing girls without their consent. Younger girls of color were more likely to experience sexual assault. As my doctoral study revealed (Prioletta, 2020b), these girls were positioned at the bottom of the social hierarchy within their peer groups, both as children of color and as younger students, where skin color and age were important markers of status and social stratification among the children in these classrooms. When incidences of sexual assault occurred, girls verbally signaled that the act was unwanted by saying "no" or "stop it" and /or physically responded by turning away or pushing the boy away. However, the act often persisted.

The account below illustrates how boys enacted sexual assault against girls through non-consensual kissing. During this play period, a group of girls was interrupted by a boy in their class who performed repeated acts of unwanted kissing. The boy repeatedly attempted to kiss one of the girls despite clear indication by the girl, and her friends, that the kissing was unwanted:

> Three girls are in the dramatic play center playing with a blanket. Max goes to the center. He leans in and kisses Benita on the face. Benita pulls away, but Max tries again. Benita pulls away and says, "No," but Max kisses her again. Benita says, "Stop it!" and goes under the blanket with her friends. Max attempts to go under the blanket too, but the girls don't let him. [...] Max and the girls tug at the blanket until Michelle takes the blanket and gives it to Benita. Michelle says to Max, "You are bad behavior, Max. Be nice." The girls return under the blanket. Max leaves the space and wanders around the room. He returns and attempts to kiss Benita again. An educator walks by and says, "No touching." Max leaves the space. (Prioletta, 2020b, p. 154)

Examining this play episode from the standpoint of girls' actualities illustrates how kindergarten is a patriarchal context in which girls must face and resist subjugation by boys on a daily basis. Acts of sexual assault occurred regularly in kindergarten, but they were not always observed by educators. When educators did observe boys non-consensually touching or kissing girls, as shown above, they responded by reminding the children

of the school's no-touching rule. However, the no-touching rule was imposed daily to all acts of touching, including consensual hugging and handholding between friends, who typically identified with the same gender. The educators thus responded to consensual hugs and handholding between friends in the same way as they did to acts of sexual assault. Such a response indicates to students that all acts of touching are the same. Responding in this way suggests that gender and sexuality and gendered power relations are irrelevant to or non-existent in young children's lives. These assumptions silence, and leave unaddressed, the very real ways that girls experience sexual violence in kindergarten.

Moreover, responding to all acts of touching in the same way fails to adequately address the importance of consent and of respecting boundaries. In the interaction above, for instance, no conversation was had on how the boy's act is different from consensual kissing. The absence of such discussions suggests that children are perceived to be too young to address these topics or have these conversations. However, this communicates to children that non-consensual sexual touching, like consensual touching, is acceptable, but simply not allowed in school contexts. Consequently, the no-touching rule alone, while perhaps well-intended, may function to perpetuate sexual violence. That is, the regular occurrences of sexual assault by boys against girls, and the limited ways in which schools respond, work to normalize these behaviors early on as acceptable expressions of masculinity. Doing so legitimizes from a young age boys' authority and accumulated entitlement over girls' bodies. Importantly, then, the discourse of childhood innocence perpetuates missed opportunities for the critical discussions needed to transform the hegemonic images of masculinity that maintain the toxic gender relations underpinning sexual violence against girls and women.

WORKING TOWARDS SEXUAL VIOLENCE PREVENTION IN KINDERGARTEN EDUCATION

As the image of the innocent child remains hegemonic, younger members of society continue to be positioned as unknowing and naïve about gender, sexuality, and gendered power relations. An important step in sexual violence prevention requires attention to Bhana's (2007) urgent call to rework the harmful narratives that degender and desexualize younger members of society. To do so necessitates, in part, breaking the hegemonic hold that child development ideologies have on understandings of young children. A broader conceptualization of children and childhood is required in early childhood education, including in education policy, in teacher education programs, and in education research.

Feminist theorizations of childhood have been important in dismantling the image of the innocent child. These theories make visible children's active roles in the construction of femininities and masculinities and in "being", rather than "becoming", sexual agents (Blaise, 2005; Osgood & Robinson, 2017; Robinson, 2013). Feminist post-structuralism, and queer theory in particular, maintain that children are key agents in the construction and regulation of their own and others' gender and sexual identities and expressions (Blaise, 2005; Osgood & Robinson, 2017; Robinson, 2013). Such conceptualizations position children as active contributors to society who are not simply shaped by society's gender regimes, but who also shape and re-shape them. Seeing children in this way makes it possible for education stakeholders to view problematic gender expressions in kindergarten as more than biology and innocence and, thus, as behaviors that require early intervention. Sexuality education in kindergarten is one important way that schools can intervene.

Implementing sexuality education that promotes children's healthy development of gender and sexuality is a pressing need in kindergarten education. However, sexuality education in kindergarten is still not a widely accepted practice. Drawing on a UNAIDS (2004) report, Bhana (2007) highlighted that addressing problematic gendered and sexual behaviors early on is more effective than trying to change them once they have become ingrained. As Alloway (1995) contended, it is important that early learning curricula explicitly attends to gender and sexuality to problematize and counter dominant gender norms and to expose children to alternate ways of expressing their gender and sexual subjectivities. As Robinson and Davies (2017) further explain:

> Children are often building their own knowledge around sexuality from the bits and pieces of information they get from others. Much of this knowledge is based on misinformation and stereotypes that they can carry through into their adolescence and early adulthood. (p. 236)

Research shows that sexuality education in kindergarten may empower children to explore healthier ways of expressing their gender and sexuality and encourage them to challenge problematic heteronormative scripts (Robinson, 2013; Robinson & Davies, 2017). Specifically, working towards sexual violence prevention necessitates nurturing positive masculinities.

Kindergarten education can play a pivotal role in social change around gender and sexual inequalities by countering hegemonic images of masculinity as inherently heterosexual, dominating, and violent. Connell (1995) has reminded us that there is not a singular masculinity and that what is considered hegemonic is not static. Positive masculinity instead

encourages masculine expressions that go beyond problematic heteronormative images of masculinity to promote masculinities that do not rely on the subjugation and subordination of others (Badaszewski, 2014). Instead, it is made acceptable for boys to demonstrate compassion and empathy and to form healthy relationships with others. Effective sexuality education must go beyond the dualistic and heteronormative imaginary of gender and sexuality to promote more fluid gender identities and expressions (e.g., Warin & Adriany, 2017; Warin & Price, 2020). While sexuality education in Canadian kindergartens is growing, it remains limited. Indeed, at the time of this study, sexuality education was not available at the kindergarten level and the province of Ontario's new 2015 sex education curriculum was repealed for grades 1-8 due to parental protests (Bialystok, 2019). More research involving provinces/territories that offer sexuality education at kindergarten level is needed to examine how such education can provide important opportunities for young children to engage with gender and sexuality in positive, critical, and healthy ways.

CONCLUSION

Sexual violence is a pervasive and persisting issue around the globe, and schools are critical sites in which it is enacted. Occurrences in schools, however, remain underestimated as many acts of sexual violence have become normalized expressions of gender and sexuality. Importantly, the image of the innocent child further obscures the prevalence of sexual violence in schools and its occurrences in early learning contexts. As I have shown in this article, however, acts of sexual violence are perpetrated early; as early as the kindergarten level. I argue that in not seeing these incidences as acts of sexual violence, and thus not intervening, kindergarten education plays a critical role in perpetuating the patriarchal cycle of the subjugation and subordination of girls and women.

Disrupting the image of the innocent child entails promoting an image of children as gendered and sexual social agents who actively produce and reproduce norms and expectations around gender and sexuality. Such disruption would be an important step in illuminating the need for explicitly addressing gender and sexuality in early learning curricula. Children might then be re-positioned as vital social agents in breaking the patriarchal cycle that nurtures sexual violence; indeed, as critical agents of social change.

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