



Fostering Social Justice Praxis for Critical Consciousness in Early Childhood

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Abstract

This paper explores the implications of integrating young children into activities that dismantle social constructions of gender and race within the Japanese context. Taking a sociological and anthropological approach, I introduce data from ethnographic fieldwork in settings of early childhood education in international schools and within Japanese households in Tokyo, showing what results from exploring critical race and gender in early childhood. Based on two pillars – representation and critical praxis – I conceptualize a framework of social justice education (SJE), which I apply in the activities led with children aged 4 to 7.

Psychological research shows that as early as the age of two and three, children recognize themselves as separate individuals from others and start building a sense of self. They start expressing and situating themselves through relational experiences with family members, and then into expanding environments. My observations also highlight how this awareness leads to children's sense of belonging or sense of exclusion, and how they fit into the social spaces in which they grow.

My fieldwork shows the extent to which collective and multi-contextual efforts are necessary to introduce a world in which children feel represented. At the same time, I argue efforts at representation are not enough to prepare youngsters to act in the case of discrimination, which I show ethnographically can be detrimental to their imaginative ambitions. Here critical praxis proves to be a significant tool for building the agency to resist/combat imposed normative discursive practices that form the core of limiting children's imagination and identity.

Keywords: critical pedagogy, critical race and gender, DEIJB, representation, social justice education