How can early childhood practitioners, in seeking to challenge patriarchal gender relations, promote gender equity through practice?

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'*As educators we have the responsibility to ensure that gender equity is not merely an attractively wrapped but ultimately empty box*' (Browne, 2004, p158.)

Childhood 'is defined not only by biology, but also by a particular society at a particular time in a particular way which represents the view that society has of childhood' (Hayes 2002, p21). Arguably the same can be said for gender. Gender is allocated at birth in accordance with the biological sex of a child and is then shaped and reinforced according to what is deemed appropriate by society. From the moment of birth (and now due to amniocentesis, often before birth) the process of gender socialisation begins as children are placed firmly either in the boys' blue camp or the girls' pink camp, in a world that values and privileges boys over girls. 'Is it a boy or is it a child' is something one often hears said (somewhat in jest) at the birth of a child. The process of socialisation perpetuates stereotypes of masculinity and femininity and limits children's experiences, thus determining the extent to which children's individual innate biological capacities are given space for development.

This essay explores how early childhood practitioners can promote gender equity by challenging patriarchal gender relations. Such practice mediates limitations imposed on children as a result of hegemonic masculinity and gender stereotyping and in so doing moves us towards an equal society. Beginning with an overview of gender inequality, this essay

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briefly discusses gender norms before moving on to discuss gender identity acquisition and the subtle nature of gender socialisation. The review analyses the liberal feminist influenced gender equity strategies that have traditionally been implemented in early-years settings and critiques the success of such strategies. Feminist post-structural discourse analysis is explored as a tool for critiquing and developing strategies to challenge patriarchal gender relations, following which specific practical recommendations are suggested.

We live in a patriarchal society that values men over women and thus discriminates against women. O'Connor (2000) notes that women hold only fifteen to twenty five per cent of management positions in Ireland, with only a fraction of these being positions of senior management. Furthermore, in order to secure these positions in the first place women need to be more qualified than men in order to 'compensate' for their gender. Having secured these positions women are then paid less than their male counterparts for doing the same work (ibid). The *Irish Times* (2nd March 2012) notes that women earn on average 17% less than men. While these inequalities in outcome are easy to see, it is more difficult to recognise the gendered power relations which occur in our lives on a daily basis.

Hegemonic masculinity demands that men be strong, forceful, active and the breadwinners in a family, while women are seen as passive, caring, supportive wives and good mothers. We see therefore that not only does society value men over women, but it values a particular type of man (hegemonic masculinity) and a particular type of woman (emphasised femininity) and holds these models as the 'norm'. In the past, a biological reductionist view of gender prevailed whereby the characteristics of masculinity and femininity were believed to be purely biologically based, universal, unmodifiable and inevitable and therefore 'normal'. It was for this reason that women were thought to be unable to be educated, as to do so was to go against their biological ability:

[Y]oung ladies were gynaecologically and psychologically unfit for higher education: dominated by her ovaries, a woman's place was in the home as wife and mother. Over-exercise of the brain would divert energy from the womb and lead to sterility and hysteria. (Porter, 1999, pp.356-57)

Children can differentiate between females and males from a very young age. Rubel and Martin (1998) note that infants as young as nine months can categorise men and women,

seemingly using hair length as the main source of differentiation. Between the age of two and three children achieve a basic sex role identity, although an understanding of the stability and constancy of their sex comes a little later (Kohlberg, 1966). As a child learns to distinguish her own and others gender she also identifies specific (stereotypical) characteristics and behaviours with a particular gender. Levy and Fivush (1993) note that by two years of age children associate certain tasks and possessions with men and women, such as hoovers with women and cars with men. At this young age children engage in *transductive reasoning* (Piaget, 1930) which may contribute to the extent to which young children categorise and use stereotypes; e.g. 'My Mommy's a teacher so all women are teachers', or 'My Daddy has short hair so all men have short hair'. For young children who are offered alternative examples of masculinity and femininity however, transductive reasoning may support the development of less gendered stereotypes; e.g. 'My Daddy is a nurse so all men are nurses'. It is not simply transductive reasoning that accounts for the development of gender-role stereotypes in the early years. Gender-role stereotypes and the paradigm of hegemonic masculinity are transferred to children through the socialisation process.

Children look to the people around them, in particular their parents, for cues in how to behave appropriately in terms of their gender role and more often than not society is quick to guide them towards the stereotypes of masculinity and femininity as deemed appropriate by dominant discourse. Stockard (1999) notes that boy's play is rougher than girls play, it tends to take up more space and involves displays of dominance. As gender identification and the corresponding stereotypical behaviours and characteristics become established in early childhood, young children begin to show a preference in socialising with same-gender children and sex segregation develops. Maccoby and Jacklin (1987) reported that pre-school children were three times more likely to interact with same-sex peers than with other-sex peers. Such segregation highlights girls and boys already established tendencies in play and toy choice (Fabes, Hanish and Martin, 2003), thus widening the divide between what is acceptable behaviour for a boy or a girl and strengthening the segregation. By six-and-a-half years of age children are eleven times more likely to engage with same-sex peers than other-sex peers (Maccoby and Jacklin, 1987). Research has highlighted that boys experience more pressure to conform to masculine stereotypes than girls do to feminine stereotypes (Stockard, 1999). As the masculine stereotype is hegemonic masculinity, boys play is predominantly

patriarchal in nature. This creates a need for practitioners to challenge such behaviour in order to promote gender equity within an early years environment.

Cunneen (2003, p.63) notes that 'the attitudes of parents and practitioners are extraordinarily influential in the development of sex stereotypical behaviour.' As practitioners therefore, we must be aware and cognisant of the messages, both overt and hidden, that we give children. While many parents believe that they do not treat their daughters any differently than they treat their sons, this is usually not the case. A study by Smith and Lloyd (1978) found that mothers encouraged a baby they believed to be male to engage in gross motor skills activity more so than a baby they believed to be female. The fact that parents are often unable to recognise the discrepancy in the manner in which they interact with male and female children results in difficulties in challenging such behaviour and highlights the often invisible nature of patriarchal gender relations and their development. This 'invisibility' is evident in a study by MacNaughton (1997a) in which a participant in the study (who was an early years practitioner) felt that the child development observations she had conducted did not highlight any issues regarding gender power relations. However, following extensive reflections and discussions on gender equity, using feminist post-structural discourse analysis, the participant felt that the gendered power relations within the group of children became so obvious that she was surprised she had not noticed them previously.

Traditional methods used to promote gender equity within early-years settings stemmed from a liberal feminist perspective. This could be attributed to the prevalence in early childhood literature of liberal feminist approaches to gender equity (as noted by MacNaughton, 1998). Liberal feminists subscribe to the belief that women do not enjoy the same opportunities in many areas of life, such as education, employment and the family, that men enjoy, therefore their approach to promoting equality focuses on encouraging girls to engage in activities that may traditionally be seen as masculine (such as playing with construction materials) in order to broaden their future opportunities (ibid). Arguably, this perspective does not recognise the limits gender stereotypes places on boys as well as girls. It also suggests that the responsibility for change lies with the girls.

In a case study on children's block play, MacNaughton explores the liberal feminist strategies used traditionally to challenge patriarchal gender relations, which were categorised as

feminisation, separatism, fusion, and policing (MacNaughton, 1997b). *Feminisation* involved placing materials traditionally associated with girls in an area traditionally seen as male. An example of this could be introducing feminine furnishings or dolls into the block area. The thinking behind this method is that girls will be more likely to enter such a 'masculine' area as it will now also contain materials which interest them. Having entered the area girls may be more likely to engage with the 'masculine' materials in their play. MacNaughton (1997b) found that this strategy was generally unsuccessful as the boys tended to simply remove the 'feminine' materials from the area. *Separatism* entails allowing access separately to the boys and girls to particular materials, e.g. introducing an allocated time for girls to use materials considered more 'masculine' such as Lego. Two failings of this approach were observed. Firstly, boys tend to disrupt this play intentionally and secondly, once girls-only time comes to an end, children tend to revert to their usual gender relations. *Fusion* involves combining areas considered masculine and feminine together in order to achieve a gender-neutral play-space. Once more MacNaughton (1997b) highlights the shortcomings of this approach, noting that the manner in which boys played in such a space excluded girls and both sexes continued to play in a way that maintained gender stereotypes. Finally, *policing* involves continuous observation by the practitioner of children's play in order to intervene in situations where boy's behaviour is dominating or excluding girls. MacNaughton (1997b) notes that this approach did not facilitate the girls to engage more often with materials seen as 'masculine' and was a considerable strain on the time of the practitioner.

Underlying each of the above methods was an effort to ensure that girls are given the same opportunities as boys to engage with all materials. This does not take into account girls interests and preferences in play. In other words, they did not provide the girls or the boys with alternative models of femininity or masculinity. MacNaughton (1998) emphasizes the role feminist post-structural discourse analysis plays in allowing us to critique strategies used to challenge patriarchal gender relations. Discourse refers to the categories we use to understand social life, the social practices (through which we give meaning to our lives) that arise from these categories, and the emotional investment we make in these social practices (ibid). Post-structuralism views discourse as the interaction that occurs between language, meaning, the individual and society (ibid). Discourse influences what we regard as 'normal' and so while the dominant discourses on gender dictate what is considered 'normal' in terms

of sex-role behaviour, less dominant discourses become marginalised and are often less accepted. Foucault (1980) highlights the manner in which dominant discourses determine what is considered 'truth' and emphasizes the subjective nature of truth. It is worth noting at this juncture the manner in which dominant discourses have led to heterosexuality being regarded as normal while homosexuality was, up to very recently, considered 'abnormal' and 'unnatural' and is still considered thus in many parts of the world, contingent on the dominant discourses within a particular society.

Discourses which are given credence through institutions (educational, political etc.) gain power and become dominant. Certain dominant discourses allow particular groups of people to exercise power in a manner that benefits them (ibid), for example, hegemonic masculinity empowers men to earn more money than women, and enables little boys to control the block area in pre-school. Therefore, in order to challenge the hegemonic paradigm and patriarchal gender relations we need to pick apart and analyse the discourses which foster such values and beliefs. MacNaughton (1998) identifies six inter-related processes which, combined, provide the basis for such analyses. Identifying how we categorise people is the first step in this process. The second step is identifying the social practices through which meaning is given to these categories, for example one might consider a good father to be someone who cares for his children by providing for them. The third step in analysing discourse is becoming aware of the emotional investment we make in particular categories, for example, if someone believed that homosexuality was wrong and had shunned a homosexual daughter as a consequence of that belief, then they would have a significant emotional investment in hegemonic masculinity. The forth step is identifying the discourses which are formed by our categories, practices and emotional investments, following which we must recognise the institutional basis for such discourses. The final step in this process is identifying the power relations between, and effects of different discourses.

Certain dominant discourses have created paradigms of the 'right' way to be male or female. MacNaughton (1998) argues that this creates a gender order which places more value on men than it does on women. However, if there was no one correct way to be male or female, but multiple acceptable variations, then inequality would cease to exist. Therefore our task as early years educators is to offer children multiple models of masculinity and femininity which can be imitated and recreated through play, thus becoming internalised. In order to do

this effectually, practitioners need to engage in discourse analysis as described earlier in order to make visible the 'invisible' gender power relations at play within their setting and highlight their own biases, expectations and beliefs regarding sex-role behaviour. This is the basis for feminist post-structualist strategies in promoting gender equity within the early years sector.

Having examined the rhetoric of feminist post-structural anti-bias practice in the early years sector we must now look at its implementation in practice. It is important to note that it is not enough for practitioners to implement the following strategies without engaging in feminist discourse analysis and gender-focused child observations; failing to do so results in one remaining blind to gender power relations, gender norms and other such issues (such as one's own biases) which undermine gender equity. If one remains blind to gender power relations then any strategies implemented to challenge patriarchal gender relations and to promote gender equity are likely to be unsuccessful. The diversity and equality guidelines for childcare providers (Office of the Minister for Children, 2006) highlight the difficulty in seeing sexism in children's behaviour and notes the importance of using systemic observations to evaluate gender bias.

As mentioned, one of the most important ways a practitioner can challenge patriarchal power relations is to provide children with alternative examples of masculinity and femininity in order to remove the polarity of gender. MacNaughton (1998) notes that the roots of inequality lie in the categorisation of males and females within the current patriarchal gender order, and that once we embrace and normalise alternative ways of being feminine or masculine, sexist gender relations will disappear. One approach to achieving this aim is to include activities such as sewing and woodwork in the curriculum. These activities are enjoyed by boys and girls of pre-school age and their inclusion allows children to engage in activities which challenge traditional gender-role behaviour. Inviting professionals who do not conform to traditional gender-norm professions (such as male nurses or female fire-fighters) to visit the pre-school is another method to provide children with alternative examples of masculinity and femininity. Such visits inspire discussions on gender stereotypes and practitioners can use such spontaneous conversations to highlight the differences between girls and also the differences between boys. This can also serve to highlight to children the many similarities between boys and girls.

Practitioners also need to consider the messages that children are receiving through the books, stories, songs, and posters available within a setting. Do the 'hidden' messages within such material reinforce gender stereotypes or challenge them? Settings should include books and stories whose characters and storylines do not conform to gender stereotypes. The language used by practitioners must also be considered for subtexts. Are girls praised for neat work or are boys noted for their bravery? Instead practitioners must look for opportunities to comment on and reinforce non-stereotypical sex-role behaviour, for example if a boy is playing with a doll one might comment on how gentle a father he is.

Having come to recognise patriarchal power relations, practitioners must challenge such behaviour by supporting children to see how their actions can prevent other children from fulfilling their potential. Sensitivity and good communication skills are needed in order to facilitate children to gain an understanding of the perspective of another child. Using 'non-violent communication' (Rosenberg, 2005) increases the likelihood of success as it prevents children from feeling criticized and thus removes the need for a child to defend his (patriarchal) actions thus allows him to appreciate the perspective of another child more readily.

The above-mentioned strategies highlight the active nature of a practitioner's role in re-constructing children's gendering, however, it is through reflection, observation and discourse analysis, carried out using a feminist perspective, that practical strategies to promote gender equity can hope to be implemented successfully and are not merely an 'attractively wrapped but empty box' (Browne, 2004, p158). Personal reflection on one's own beliefs, values and bias is critical in developing practice which promotes gender equity. Derman-Sparks and Edwards (2010, p22) note that 'ultimately the most important thing we bring to our teaching is who we are.'

This review essay has looked at strategies for challenging patriarchal power relations and found that strategies employed to promote gender equity in early years settings have evolved from those based on liberal feminism, to an approach based on feminist post-structuralism. Arguably the liberal feminist strategies used in the past to promote gender equity were not successful because the theory upon which they were based was too simplistic in its

understanding of the manner in which gender identity is constructed. These strategies do not heighten a practitioner's awareness of gender power relations nor do they provide alternative models of masculinity or femininity, while gender remains a dichotomous 'either/or' rather than a spectrum of possibilities. Feminist post-structutalist approaches, in particular discourse analysis, provides a process through which one can turn one's gaze to a feminist perspective, thus making visible (and therefore allowing us to challenge) patriarchal power relations, while providing children with a miscellany of ways to be masculine or feminine.

The first step on the journey to gender equity, however, is becoming open to the possibility that patriarchal gender relations (and the consequential limits imposed on children's development and opportunities) exist within early years settings in the first place. If one is unwilling to accept this possibility then they are unlikely to engage in the process to unveil it. Robinson (1992, cited in MacNaughton1997a, p324) notes that 'teachers will often resist acknowledging the influence of gender on children's learning.' Once visible, the key to challenging patriarchal gender relations and thus creating equality is to make redundant gender order by removing the confines of what are deemed acceptable expressions of masculinity and femininity.

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