

# Researching Young Boys' Masculinity in School Context

Sarah Nandya Mutiara, Hani Yulindrasari and Vina Adriany

Graduate School of Early childhood education, Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia, Bandung, Indonesia

sarah.nm@student.upi.edu, {haniyulindra, vina}@upi.edu

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Abstract: The term 'boys will be boys' is widely accepted in society as if masculine identity is innate and natural. This paper adopts a social-constructivist approach to gender which view gender identity as a product of culture and nurture. This article assumes that boys construct their masculinity through various modalities including social learning with both adults or peer groups and non-human interactions. This article examines existing literature published between 1980s-2010s about boys and masculinity to develop an understanding of how young boys construct their masculinities, what factors contribute to their masculine identity, and how the research about boys' masculinities was prepared and conducted. The conceptual framework and methodology of each literature are the important parts of the investigation. Most of the literature was developed in non-Indonesian context. This paper will also examine the applicability of the literature in Indonesian context to produce a recommendation of necessary modification for research about boys and masculinity in Indonesia.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Masculinity is commonly related to maleness. In Indonesia, the common belief of masculinity is strongly influence by the notion of Kodrat or innate, predestined, and God-given characteristics of gender (Adriany, 2013). Differences of gender constructions across time and culture, however, show that gender is more a social construction than innate characteristic (Connell, 1996). Gender identity, therefore, is also socially constructed. Children learn about gender from home, school, playground, media, books, songs, and any other medium that interact with them. School is one of important spaces where gender is constructed (Parker, 1997; Adriany, 2013; Connell, 1996).

At school gender stereotypes can be challenged or preserved. Indonesian schools, where kodrat-based gender construction is strongly held, tend to organise students' activities based on gender category. For example, the school would teach boys to play soccer and girls to play volleyball; electronic class for boys and cooking class for girls. In early childhood settings, teachers would tend to give blue, brown, black, or green origami paper to boys and pink to girls. The uniform would be skirt for girls and pants for boys. Schools become the vehicle to internalised gendered social expectations.

This paper focuses on boys' masculinity in early childhood education settings. Research about gender in ECE in Indonesian context is very limited, let alone research about boys' masculinity. This paper aims at reviewing existing literature about young boys' masculinity in school context to provide a reference for research on the topic in Indonesia context. This paper explores how research about boys' masculinity in other countries' school context is conducted? What to consider in researching this topic in Indonesian context?

This paper is organised as follow: first, the paper will clarify the definition of masculinity; second, the link between social construction and masculine identity will be explained; and third, the paper will illuminate two different political focuses of research on masculinity. Based on literature review, this paper argues that contributing to gender equality should be the goal of research of boys' masculinity in school context. The researchers should pay attention to the political impact of the research whether or not it challenges the binary and fixed construction of gender or preserves it.

## 2 DEFINING MASCULINITY

Masculinity is commonly defined as characteristics associated with being a man (Reeser, 2010). The

society will expect boys and men to have masculine characteristics. Masculine characteristics are usually defined as the opposite of feminine characteristics, which are associated with femaleness. Essentialists argue that the characteristics are innate and natural. On the contrary, anthropologist and sociologist argue that gender characteristics, including masculinities, are socially constructed (Connell, 1996). Masculinity and femininity are configurations of stereotypes about men and women. Common stereotypes of men's characteristics are aggressive, tough, strong, rational, active, and rough (Darwin, 1999). Connell (1996) argues that the stereotypes widely known as masculine traits are not monolithic. Masculinity has various patterns across different societies. Indonesian version of masculine characteristics may be different from American characteristics of the masculine. Traditional Indonesian masculine might be inspired by the story of *pewayangan* (traditional puppet show), while in the West might be inspired by stories about cowboys.

## 2.1 Constructing Boys' Masculine Identity

Gender socialisation starts since a child is in its mother's womb. Modern technology enables parents to know their babies' sex before birth. Consequently, parents tend to prepare name, colour, clothes, and toys according to the baby's sex. Once the baby is born, gender socialisation gets intensified. Before a child reach preschool, the child will have learned a lot about gender through social interactions (Meece, 2002; Connell, 1996). There are three factors contribute to boy's masculine identity formation: socio-biological, parenting, and socio-cultural factors.

Sociobiological experts argue that masculine characteristics are derived from genetic and hormonal composition (Zadugisti, 2009). Testosterone, the male hormone, is believed to be responsible in the manifestation of masculine characteristic in men. A high level of testosterone hypothetically will increase aggressiveness and strength of a man. However, Connell (1996) argues that this is a flaw theory since there is no standard pattern of masculinity resulted from biological factors, such as hormone.

Parenting is also believed to be an important factor of gender learning. The presence of a father is hypothetically important in shaping masculine identity of a boy (Mussen and Distler, 2016). A boy learns how to be a man from his father. A boy will develop a strong masculine identity when he has intense interactions with his father. However, it is

important to take into account what pattern of masculinity modelled by the father. Intense interactions with a father who is abusive may result in toxic masculine identity rather than a strong one. We also have to clearly define what it means by strong masculine identity. To create a more equal society, fathers need to model an egalitarian, caring, and respectful masculinity instead of aggressive, violent, and dominant masculinity.

Every human interacts with other human being and the society he/she lives in. In term of masculine identity development, a boy will catch what the society expects of him. It is common that a child would react and behave as expected since every human being needs to feel accepted. Culture constructs social expectations of gender (Adriany, 2013; Bhana, 2009). There are expectations for a man to behave in certain way and possess certain characteristics. For example, a man is expected to be emotionally strong, that is why people teach boys to hide their true emotion and not to cry.

## 3 RESEARCHING BOYS' MASCULINITY

We identify two political focus of research on boys' masculinities. First, research that preserves gender stereotype and strengthen hegemonic construction of masculinity. This kind of research does not challenge gender stereotype, it strengthened stereotype by proving differences between boys and girls without explaining reasons behind the differences. For example, a research by Pahlevanian and Ahmadizadeh (2014) investigate the relationship between gender and motoric skills. Using statistical analysis, the study concludes that boys have better gross motoric ability, such as jumping, climbing, throwing, and catching than girls. Pahlevanian and Ahmadizadeh (2014) do not unpack the structure that may perpetuate the differences. This kind of research will not contribute to gender equality.

Second, research that deconstructs hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1996). Connell (1996) argues that masculinity is not fixed. It changes overtime and context. According to her, masculinity has multiple patterns and there is hierarchy of power operates between types of masculinity. Connell (1996) unpacks underlying factors of inequality between masculinities and investigates means through which hegemonic masculinity operates at schools. She provides a framework to challenge hegemonic masculinity at schools, since schools plays an

important role in constructing boys' masculinities. Connell also takes into account boys' agency in constructing their masculine identity. Connell gives reference of what to analyse in research about masculinity in school context. She suggests looking into the curriculum, school activities, peer cultures, teachers and parents' attitude toward gender. To create change, drawing from Kindler, Connell suggest focusing on teaching boys about good human relationship, justice, and knowledge. Institutional change is also needed for gender equality, teachers and parents should also involve in challenging the hegemonic gender order.

#### 4 CONCLUSIONS

In gender research, it is important for the researcher to determine their political standpoint before starting the research. Gender research that aims at understanding gender phenomenon to create gender equality should unpack social and power structure that create differences and power imbalance between genders. A research on masculinity should understand how the structure provides more power to certain masculinity but not to others. In the school context, a research on masculinity can be conducted to understand how hegemonic masculinity operates in the school with the purpose of creating a way to challenge hegemonic masculinity for gender equality. Connell's framework is useful in initiating research about boys' masculinity at school in Indonesian context.

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