

Gender Representations in Early Childhood Development: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Selected ECD Rhymes

Richard Muranda¹ Nyevero Maruzani^{2*}

1. Department of Music Business, Musicology and Technology, Midlands State University
P. O. Box 9055 Gweru Zimbabwe

2. Gender Institute, Midlands State University, P.O Box 9055 Gweru Zimbabwe

*E-mail of the corresponding author: nyeveromaruzani@gmail.com

Abstract

Nursery rhymes play an important role in the formal and informal development of toddlers. The rhyme is used to impart values that make the young grow into responsible citizens. In pursuance of international calls to eradicate gender inequality in communities, the study aims at making a gender analysis of selected ECD rhymes. Three popular ECD rhymes were subjected to a three-pronged analytical lens adopted from critical discourse analysis. The rhyme lyrics were analysed in the following ways: (i) analysis of the rhymes as discourse (ii) rhymes as performed language, (iii) description of discourses about the rhyme. Conclusions from the study show that there is a critical role that music plays at ECD level. However, nurturers seem oblivious to the role that rhymes play in perpetuating traditional gender stereotypes that fuel gender inequality in our communities. The analysis of these rhymes may help in making stakeholders aware of the need to come up with gender-neutral rhymes that promote equal opportunities for girls and boys in all spheres of life even as they grow up.

Keywords: femininity, early childhood development, gender socialisation, masculinity, music

DOI: 10.7176/JEP/13-33-07

Publication date: November 30th 2022

1.0 Introduction

The song (rhyme) has grown to be one of the most popular interactive approaches in handling toddlers at ECD level. Music occupies an important role in human history and in human cultures (Aleshinskaya, 2013; Bright Horizons Education Team, 2021). It punctuates various social activities where socially accepted themes are communicated. In children it brings intimacy and close relationships therefore creating a sense of belonging. Observations by Hopster (2020) show that through music toddlers expand their communicative abilities and their imagination. Music enables toddlers to express themselves freely and develop a degree of confidence and creativity as well as academic skills and socially accepted behaviours (Hopster, 2020). Toddlers synthesise musical experiences making it possible for them to understand social relationships and social expectations (Gardiner et al, 1996 and Crowley 1992; Okongo, 2009). In this study attention is given to the analysis of selected ECD rhymes and establish how they contribute in the perpetuation of gender stereotypes.

1.1 Literature review

Music is a socio-cultural construction that affects lives of young and old people (Chau & Raforgiate, 2010). Various studies have shown the contribution of music in Early Childhood Development (ECD) especially on the aspect of cognitive development. The discussion on the Mozart Effect gained traction in previous decades (Hogenes, van Overs & Diekstra, 2014) with research activities concentrated on how listening to music improves cognitive ability in children (Campbell, 2000; Koopman, 2005; Waller, 2007; Chau & Raforgiate, 2010). From the arguments linked to the Mozart Effect several educators underscore the importance of music in education (Hogenes et. al., 2014). Cognitive development is a sensible cause for using rhymes at ECD level. However, the patriarchal ideology has used some rhymes to create mental perceptions on femininity and masculinity to characterise boys' and girls' interactions in their entire life (Kumar, 2015).

Kalssom and Sarwet in their (2015) study looked at identity construction in nursery rhymes and explored how gendered messages unfolded in the selected rhymes. In an almost similar study Nasiruddin (2013) explored the social construction of gender roles in nursery rhymes in Pakistani Society. In the footsteps of these previous researchers Kumar (2015) looked at nursery rhymes as a medium for internalising gender stereotypes. In the study Kumar (2015) argues that girls and boys are placed into stereotypical roles of femininity and masculinity as dictates of the patriarchal ideology. Kumar (2015) argues that rhymes locate boys in the outdoor world while girls are constricted to the domestic sphere. Using the "tabula rasa" analogy Kumar (2015) states that nursery rhymes leave indelible gender impressions that normalise the prevailing gender stereotypes in communities (Kumar 2015). Findings from these studies show how gender stereotypes are conveyed through nursery rhymes. This is a critical bone of contention which makes further studies in the discipline an imperative (Nasiruddin, 2013). From a gender analysis perspective, this study employs critical discourse analysis in the exploration of gender representations depicted in three ECD rhymes.

Discourse according to van Dijk (1997) is a practical, social and cultural phenomenon that is not limited to words, clauses and sentences. It is a sequence of mutually related acts where language users are not only speakers, writers or listeners, in that case they are members of social institutions who wield the ability to construct and display their social roles and identities through the language they use. According to van Dijk (2006) Critical discourse analysis focuses on complex structures of interaction and social practice coupled with their functions in context, society and culture. These interactions as proposed by van Dijk (2006) are intentional, controlled and purposeful with the aim of communicating acts. Butler (2003) in Mai Samir El-Falaky (2015) argues that discourse analysis deals with authentic naturally occurring data where members of social groupings are more than elements of the discourse. To Stubbs (1983) discourse analysis is just concerned with language beyond the boundaries of an utterance. It also shows the interrelationship between language and the society. Critical discourse analysis unpacks the subtle ambiguities that characterise language users and the language they use. This includes any other communicative acts with the implicit/explicit intention of showing the application and purpose of the ambiguous meanings in everyday communication. The alluded lens is used for analytical potency and to add on to literature on musical discourse analysis.

In another way discourse is any communicative act done with or without ambiguities of the language/actions with an implicit/explicit intention of bringing any of the diverse meanings into everyday communication. In a paper on the analysis of music education Talbot (2013) states that language and music are social goods that hold certain significance and enact certain social, cultural and historical activities and realities. These tools of communication impact our identities and relationships which justifies the need to analyse our discourse. When discourse is subjected to critical analysis it is called critical discourse analysis. In this paper Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Discourse Analysis (DA) will be taken as meaning the same thing.

A study done by Aleshinskaya's (2013) study focussed on the components of musical discourse analysis with specific examination of the context of contemporary musical art and the linguistic features specific to different genres of musical discourse. Aleshinskaya's (2013) framework for the analysis of socio-linguistic peculiarities of contemporary musical discourse was guided by works on discourse analysis by Fairclough (2003, 2006) and genre theory by Bhatia, 2004; 2008). Aleshinskaya's (2013) used discourse analysis in a linguistic study on music. Mai Samir El-Falaky (2015) did a critical discourse analysis of Egyptian Mahraganat (Street songs) where the analysis focussed on the representation of women in this new genre of music. In that study Mai Samir El-Falaky (2015) sought to provide a better understanding of how the discourse of songs play a role in constructing gender identities. Among other things the study established that the song portrays the males as good and the females as bad. The song reinforces traditional gender stereotypes therefore contributing in the perpetuation of gender inequalities.

1.2 Theoretical Assumptions and Methodology

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is a type of discourse analytical research which studies the way power, abuse dominance and inequality are enacted, reproduced and resisted in the social and political context (van Dijk, 1991). The key business of discourse analysis is to analyse discourse in its various forms. This includes highly politicised perspectives in explaining existing conventions that reflect power relations and power struggles to the explanations of relationships between language and society (Rodgers, 2005 in Breeze 2011) Critical discourse analysis is part of and is influenced by structures and produced by social interaction. In line with this characteristic of CDA musical discourse therefore opens up various possibilities for multidimensional analysis which can include social linguistic psychological, visual and other musicological aspects. Observations by Aleshinskaya (2013) point to very limited discourse analytical investigations of the use and social aspects of the global language in various genres of musical discourse. Guided by CDA this article makes an analysis of ECD rhymes in order to establish gender identities prevalent in the rhymes.

The study used Critical Discourse Analysis in order to find out the gender representations that prevail in the rhymes. The study adopted a qualitative social analysis in the examination of textual features especially lexical choice and the contextual frame. Three ECD rhymes (Old Mac Donald Had a Farm, and Mary Had a Little Lamb and Five Little Ducks) were subjected to the analysis.

1.3 Discussion

The discussion in this section will be guided by observations made Bradby (2003) that the analysis of discourse in popular music takes a tripartite dimension, i.e., rhymes as discourse, rhyme lyrics as performed language and the description of rhyme discourse.

1.3.1 The rhyme as discourse

The rhyme carries communicative abilities to elements in the discourse. The rhyme enables the members involved to create communication which can imply issues related to current or future realities. The rhyme facilitates two-way communication in the assessment of cognitive development, self-esteem team work, gender relations and many others. The socio-political position of elements determines messages to send or to receive.

The rhyme enables elders and other nurturers to send specific messages and on reception of these messages toddlers respond by developing the implied expectations.

1.3.2. Rhyme lyrics as performed language

Rhymes are drama sessions where the stage includes the toddlers cognitive and social environment. In the drama toddlers and nurturers are the actors. In the rhyme “Old MacDonald Had a Farm”. The ownership of the farm is acted out by Old MacDonald and it conveys the gender stereotype that ownership of the means of production is a preserve for males. The Marxist feminist theorists argue that the capitalist economic system is the root of gender inequality. The ownership of the means of productions determines the relations of production in a capitalist system. Those who own resources (the haves) oppress and exploit those who do not own resources (the have nots). The lyrics do not mention his family and wife but social context imply that he owns these resources to look after his wife and family. The ownership of resources come with stature, dignity and authority. So these attributes remain a preserve for man and the rhyme lyrics and reinforces these gender stereotypes thereby perpetuating gender inequalities. Old MacDonald is patriarchy in action and all those who use the lyrics of the song are acting out in a patriarchal belief. Patriarchy makes less mention of women in the public sphere and the lyrics of this rhyme is acting that out. As given by van Dijk (1996) the functions of this is to communicate to boys that they need to work hard and own meaningful resources. Oakley (1991) in Haralambos and Holborn (2013) argues that through role modelling boys grow with an orientation to work hard and own resources.

In the rhyme “Mary had a little Lamb” The rhyme texts act out typical gender stereotypes of femininity. Mary loved the little lamb so much and she did a lot of good things to the lamb. One day it followed her to school. Despite that the little lamb was not allowed at school the teacher did not take Mary for a disciplinary hearing. Instead the teacher explained to the class why the lamb loved Mary so much. The teacher also portrayed some care through the text of the rhyme. She did not want to hurt Mary’s feelings. Mary is acting out canalisation. According to Oakley (1991) in Haralambos and Holborn (2007) canalisation is where gender socialisation takes place through the use of toys and objects. The feminine attributes of Mary are coming out through her interaction with her pet/the lamb. Caring and love influence women’s positioning in society. For the sake of love and care the majority of unpaid care workers are women. Even when they get into different work contexts they remain confined to occupations related to care work. The teacher in the rhyme ‘Mary Had a Little Lamb’ is a befitting example to the above referred notion. Teaching infants is care work in education that is why some of the common schools prefer females to men to preside over ECD and infant classes.

The words of the rhyme “Five Little Ducks” point at women’s place as in the home. The five little ducks appear with mother duck cheerfully going out. At the river the mother waits by the river bank to allow the little ducks to swim play and have fun. On the first day mother duck returns with only four little ducks. This happens until all the little ducks disappear. Again the concept of the female/mother duck having to do care work comes out. The mother duck comes out alone to the forest with the little ducks. As all the ducklings are gone father duck calls and all the little ducks come swimming back. At the time all the little ducks disappear the father duck is not there. The gender stereotype coming out here is that discipline and order can be properly managed from the voice of the father. In this case father duck is accorded prominence in the family. The other stereotype is the dependence of females (mother duck) on males in some societies. For mother duck to get her ducklings back father duck had to intervene. These stereotypes would directly influence girls to think that they need men around them in order to lead successful families. This may also sway girls not to work hard in academic work or in business. That in turn contributes to females’ socio-economic dependence on males. These gendered ideologies impose on boys’ and girls’ understanding of self and the other gender.

1.3.3 Description of rhyme discourse

The description of rhyme discourse further adds to the dynamic meanings that can be exposed by CDA. The discourse in these rhymes takes place in the natural everyday settings. The actors and the themes that are used in the lyrics all make reference to the realities that the young interact with on a daily basis. This helps the toddlers to link the world of fantasy to the realities in their everyday lives. While operating in a supposedly fair environment the rhymes may perpetuate gender stereotypes that fuel gender inequalities. This is how complex the root of gender inequality stands to be.

1.4 Conclusions

The study made an analysis of the gender representations in ECD rhymes using CDA as the analytical tool. Gender socialisation takes place through the song text and watching videos of selected ECD rhymes. The importance of rhymes at ECD cannot be over emphasised. However, nurturers seem oblivious of the hidden prevailing traditional gender stereotypes that support the patriarchal ideology. Females continue to be depicted as dependant on males thereby promoting the unequal cognition of femininity and masculinity in the toddlers minds. The use of CDA helped the study unpack these explicit and implicit gender ideologies that prevail in ECD rhymes. The of these gender connotations at ECD level needs urgent attention for failure to do so is a recipe will contribute to rhetoric in the pursuit of gender equality in our communities will.

References

- Aleshinskaya, E. (2013) Key Components of Musical Discourse Analysis. *Research in Language*, 11(4) 423-444.
- Bradby, B. (2003) "Discourse analysis." In D. Horn, D. Laing, P. Oliver & P. Wicke (Eds.), *Continuum Encyclopaedia of popular music of the world (67-70)*. London: Continuum.
- Breeze, R. (2011) Critical Discourse Analysis and Its Critics. *Pragmatics*, 21(4) 493-525. DOI: 10.2478/rela-2013-0007 [Accessed 2 March 2021]
- Bright Horizons Education Team (2021) Children and Music: Benefits of Music in Child Development. Available online at: <https://www.brighthorizons.com/family-resources/music-and-children-rhythm-meets-child-development> [Accessed 21 February 2021]
- Chau, C. & Riforgiate, T. (2010) The influence of Music on the Development of Children. A Senior Project Submitted in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Bachelor of Science Degree in Child Development. College of Liberal Arts, California Polytechnic State University San Louis Obispo.
- Campbell, D. G. (2000) *The Mozart effect for children*. New York: William Morrow.
- Crowley, T. (1992) *An introduction to historical linguistics*, 2nd Ed. Auckland: Oxford University Press.
- Fairclough, N. (2003) *Analysis Discourse: Textual analysis for Social Research*. New York: Routledge.
- Fairclough, N. (2006) *Language and Globalization*. London: Routledge.
- Gardiner, M.F., Fox, A., Knowles, F. & Jeffrey D. (1996) Learning improved by arts training. *Nature* 381 May. 284-284.
- Haralambos, M. and Holborn, M. (2013) *Sociology, Themes and Perspectives*. London: Harper Collins.
- Hopster (2020) The importance of Music in Early Childhood Development. Available online at: <https://hopstertv.medium.com/the-importance-of-music-in-early-childhood-development-6684c6e7702c> [Accessed on 19 February 2021]
- Koopman, C. (2005) Music makes smart? About the justification of music education. *Learning Music. Handbook for elementary and special education*. Assen: Van Gorcum.
- Mai Samir El- Falaky (2015) The Representation of Women in Street Songs: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Egyptian Mahraganatin. *Advances in Language and Literary Studies*, 6 (5),1-8.
- Nasiruddin, Q. (2013) Nursery Rhymes and the Social Construction of Gender Roles. *Journal of Educational and Social Research* 3 (4), 77-84.
- Okongo, B.C.O. (2009) Promoting Child Development Through Music: A comparison of Preschool Teachers' Perspectives in Kenya and United States. A Thesis Submitted to the Department of Curriculum and Instruction and the Faculty of the Graduate School of Wichita State University in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Education.
- Waller, G.D. (2007) The impact of music education on academic achievement, attendance rate, and student conduct on the 2006 senior class in one Southeast Virginia Public School division. Blacksburg: Unpublished doctoral dissertation.
- Hogenes, M., van Oers, B. & Diekstra, R.W. (2014) The Impact of Music on Child Functioning. *The European Journal of Social & Behavioural Sciences*,135,1507-1526
- Kumar, S. S. (2019) Nursery Rhymes: A Medium to Internalise Gender Stereotypes. *International Journal of English Language, Literature in Humanities* 7 (6), 301-308. Available online at: <https://ijellh.com/OJS/index.php/OJS/article/view/8700> [Accessed on 19 February 2021]
- Stubbs, M. (1983) *Discourse Analysis*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Talbot, B.C. (2013) Discourse Analysis as Potential for Re-Visioning Music Education. In *Action, Criticism and Theory for Music Education*, 12(1) 47-63.
- van Dijk, T. A. (1991) *Racism and the Press*. London and New York: Routledge.
- van Dijk, T. A. (1996) Discourse, Power and Access. In Carmen Rosa and Malcolm Coulthard (Eds.), *Texts and Practices*. (pp. 84-103). London: Routledge
- van Dijk, T. (1997) 'The Study of Discourse.' In van Dijk, Teun (Ed.) *Discourse as Structure and Process, Discourse Studies: A Multidisciplinary Introduction*. Vol. 1
- van Dijk, T.A. (2006) *Principles of Critical Discourse Analysis*. Amsterdam. University of Amsterdam.