



Larremore, A. (2016). *Disrupting gendered pedagogies in the early childhood classroom*. New York: Peter Lang.

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**Reviewed by Deborah Ribera**  
**California State University, Los Angeles**  
**United States**

During her 20-year career as an early childhood educator, April Larremore only ever desired to be a “‘good’ early childhood educator” (p.5). In pursuit of her EdD, however, she was exposed to postmodern theory, which challenged the assumptions she held about herself, her students, and the field of early childhood education (p. 5). In *Disrupting Gendered Pedagogies in the Early Childhood Classroom*, Larremore boldly questions the foundations of early childhood education, problematizing the common-sense acceptance of the field’s developmental model through a critical, postmodern lens. She tests this theoretical knowledge in her own suburban-South kindergarten classroom, altering her pedagogical practices and reflecting on the results through field notes, journal entries, participant observation, and student interviews, all collected over a four-month period.

This book is written for early childhood educators and the author dedicates



an entire chapter (7), “A Letter to Teachers Who Would Be Critical, Disruptive and Transformative,” to speak directly to them. Larremore presents her own journey and experiences to illustrate the fear and uncertainty that comes with occupying a feminist poststructural early childhood teacher role. These challenges are rooted in what Larremore believes is an overdependence on beliefs and pedagogies in early childhood education that are derived from developmental psychology. She draws on MacNaughton (2000), referring to this overdependence as “developmentalism” and identifying numerous assumptions that lay at the heart of it. Larremore works to extract herself from the “grand narrative” of developmentalism by engaging with what she calls critical postmodernism, a theoretical amalgamation of “multiple feminist perspectives, as well as poststructural, critical, and queer theories” that she used to reconceptualize how she interacted with her kindergarten students (p. 7).

The Western notion of the child is a social construction. To question the child identity means to question the normative assumptions we have about what it means to be a child. Larremore, using her new postmodern viewpoint, is questioning everything that we assume is “right” or “inherently true” such as who or what a child is or should be. She notes that early childhood educators routinely study how historical context has affected the conception of the child in the past, but often fail to see how their own present-day conception of the child is also one rooted in culture, values, and contemporary notions of progress. Larremore examines the danger of positioning the conception of “child” as dichotomous to that of “adult.” In this relationship, children are deemed weak, innocent, and unable to make decisions for themselves, putting adults in the position of disciplining, controlling, and/or saving them. Such a dichotomous relationship can manifest as oppressive power and lead to children being marginalized, silenced, and

denied agency simply because of a culturally constructed identity projected onto them by adults. (pp. 29-31). Larremore explores the gendered conditions of childhood, engaging with multiple feminisms that understand gender as a social identity acted out and reinforced by cultural structures as opposed to a fixed trait determined by biological sex. She also considers the sociocultural conditions that make heterosexuality compulsory, resulting in the suppression of all other expressions of sexuality from a young age.

Larremore's choice of method eschews traditional ethnography and employs a multivocal poststructural autoethnographic method to analyze and reflect upon the alternative, disruptive pedagogies she is using in the classroom. In other words, through critical reflections on her body, emotions, and lived experience as an early childhood educator, she explores the various subjectivities she occupies as a female, heterosexual-identifying classroom teacher. These identities are represented through specific voices: the Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) Good Teacher Voice, the Disruptive Teacher Voice, the Sexualized Teacher Voice, and the Mother Voice. The DAP Good Teacher Voice represents adherence to early childhood education knowledge and pedagogy that is rooted in developmental psychology, the current dominant voice in early childhood education and an approved way of learning how to teach and of being a teacher. The Disruptive Teacher Voice represents her poststructural analytical self who strives for agency in the midst of developmentalism. The Sexualized Teacher Voice represents a self ready to take risks in expressing her own sexual identity and desires. This voice disputes the stereotype of the asexual teacher who is forbidden from revealing their own sexuality. The Mother Voice represents the vulnerability and tension that stems from Larremore's subjectivity as a parent, specifically as a mother.

Larremore's re-telling of actual classroom experience through multiple voices is a thoroughly engaging and innovative method that allows her to cogently re-create the inner conflict many teachers feel in the moment of teaching, but are too busy to examine deeply. The autoethnographic element allows the reader to feel just how difficult it is to push the boundaries of normative, common sense perspectives and behaviors. When I felt discomfort in Larremore's feminist poststructural pedagogies, she would soon mirror that discomfort herself. For instance, I found myself feeling uncomfortable when she describes how she intentionally provoked discussion about boyfriends, girlfriends, and romance among her students, posing questions to them such as: "Have you ever kissed a girl?" "Do you kiss your mom?" "Is that yucky?" She contemplates whether or not to show the students her belly button, as pictured in a book she is reading (she does). She self-discloses that she has a boyfriend and allows the children to ask her questions about him. Larremore's DAP Good Teacher voice echoes what many readers might be thinking: "That is so inappropriate." "Maybe I shouldn't have said I had a boyfriend." "I am happy to be through this book." She describes the experience as "difficult" and "unsettling" (p. 91). In this way, the text forces the reader to reflect on the extent to which their own foundational assumptions about "good" early childhood education are based in developmentalism.

Simultaneously though, the reader must also consider the alternative perspectives from the Sexualized Teacher and the Disruptive Teacher, no matter how comfortable or uncomfortable they are with the teaching methods. Upon asking the children questions about kissing, Larremore's Sexualized Teacher Voice admits that she had her first kiss at five and was excited about it. She wonders why we make such actions taboo. The Disruptive Teacher Voice reflects that the

longer the lesson went on, the more at-ease she felt and acknowledges that the more she understands and engages with feminist poststructural theories, the more new spaces are opened up for her students. The Mother Voice wonders about the morality of her questioning. Would she be upset as a mother if her children were taught by their teachers in this way? What would her sisters think about this?

Though her method provided intriguing and original insights into what it is like for teachers to occupy a role and apply a pedagogy outside the norms of developmentalism, it also raised some concerns for me. The topic of potential risk—particularly regarding the actual outcomes of the project—is an important one that deserves more space in the book. Larremore spends much time describing, through theory, how much damage can be done when teachers, parents, and society in general promote heterosexuality as the only "normal" sexuality. This practice, called heteronormativity, can be done in multiple ways: assuming that children are and will always be heterosexual, continuously operating from a heterosexual frame of reference, and reinforcing the gender stereotypes that accompany common conceptions of heterosexuality (while marginalizing or even rejecting those that do not). Larremore, however, curiously fails to apply her theoretical beliefs to her pedagogical interventions. It is not until two-thirds through the book that Larremore discloses a key fact: according to Texas state law, educational materials created for children 18 and under that mention homosexuality must state that it is an unacceptable lifestyle and criminal offense. As a result, she "avoided using words such as 'gay,' 'lesbian,' and 'sex'" with her students and "shifted talk with students who brought up the word 'gay' in whole group discussion to private conversation" (p. 80). Unfortunately, the book lacks narrative examples or student interview data about any such situation, making it

difficult to draw inferences about the effect these (in)actions could have had on her students. From the outset then, the context of this project led Larremore to intentionally emphasize heteronormative conceptions of love, romance, and sexuality to the exclusion of non-normative ones. Acknowledging these limitations at the outset of the book would have allowed the author to focus her thesis and theoretical framework, creating more room for the exploration of what she did do, even if it was within the boundaries of heteronormativity.

What is concerning on an ethical level, however, is that it becomes clear that the centering of heteronormativity was not only due to Texas state law, but to Larremore's own intentionality (or lack thereof). Larremore ends the book by recounting the story of Robert, who routinely talks to the whole class about “the need to call all of his many girlfriends when he got in from school” (p. 121). Larremore gamely indulges Robert in his discussion of girlfriends, giving him the space to speak and encouraging him with questions. Her Mother Voice wonders how Robert knows so much about boyfriends and girlfriends and dating. Who did he learn this from? Her Sexualized Teacher Voice admits that she secretly enjoys it when Robert talks about his many girlfriends because it opens up the space for her to “talk about my phone conversations and dates with my own boyfriend” (p. 122). Her DAP Good Teacher Voice wonders if his parents know about these girlfriends, as well as what other teachers and administrators would think if they heard this conversation. Her Disruptive Teacher Voice sums up her dilemma:

Rather than promote multiple ways of being gendered, I find myself relying on the heterosexual matrix to govern how my students should be in a relationship with each other as well as those in the world around them. (p. 122).

Robert's narrative is a decidedly sad way to conclude, as the reader is left feeling that this well-intentioned project contributed to the personal and professional growth of the author while hindering, and perhaps even hurting, the growth of the students. Citing Burt, Gelnaw, & Lesser (2010), Larremore acknowledges that, “When young children in early childhood classrooms never hear words or see visual images that emulate their families or themselves in positive ways, they are being harmed” (p. 82). Admitting the potential for harm with these children, she states that “in my efforts to disrupt gender stereotypes and open up new spaces for gender possibilities, I reinscribed the original assumptions about identity, gender, and sexuality that I was trying to move my students away from” (p. 83). Larremore's honesty is respectable. She admits that, “my actions served to limit my students' thinking on gender and sexuality” and attributes this to her own “tensions and perceived risks associated with my student's access to sexual knowledge” (p. 79). However in her letter to early childhood teachers (Chapter 7), Larremore claims that by becoming a critically disruptive teacher “the children in your classroom will benefit in ways we have not even begun to imagine” (p. 106). Unfortunately, these benefits are not established by her project, but the potential for harm is.

In addition to the above ethical issues, this book also suffers from structural issues. Larremore's application of complex postmodern theoretical concepts to early childhood education lacks a clear focus, spanning from Foucault to Butler. Her attempt to draw from multiple theorists and theoretical elements will likely confuse and perhaps lose many readers. Further, the protracted theoretical section delays the most interesting element of the book: the classroom study. As a result, Larremore's innovative analysis is far too brief.

Ultimately, Larremore suggests the adoption of a "postdevelopmental" mindset in which early childhood teachers conceptualize gender as a social, historical, cultural, and political construction and recognize "that young children take an active part in their gender construction" (p. 108). By reflecting on the multiple subjectivities readers occupy as early childhood educators, teachers, and adults and providing explanations of postmodern theoretical materials that can be used to challenge the foundational assumptions of the field of early childhood education, this book can serve as a primer on how to pursue that mindset. Additional reading would be essential, however, and the reader will find excellent resources for further study in the bibliography.

Given that recent political shifts have cast uncertainty on gender discrimination laws (Stack, 2017) and that Title IX locates many of these laws directly in the school site, this book's topic of gendered pedagogies is timely and culturally relevant. Therefore, despite my significant criticisms of this book on the basis of structure and ethics, I find it to be an important contribution to early childhood education. It is sure to start much needed conversations around the way in which gender and sexuality affects the classroom practices of early childhood educators and will hopefully inspire other researchers to explore related themes. It should be read, but the efforts depicted should not be replicated without serious attention to potential risks.

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## About the Reviewer

**Deborah Ribera** is an Assistant Professor with the School-Based Family Counseling Program in the department of Special Education and Counseling at California State University, Los Angeles. She obtained a Ph.D. in American Culture Studies from Bowling Green State University and is a licensed Marriage and Family Therapist and credentialed School Counselor.




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