

# The effect of gender in play



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# **The Effect of Gender in Play on Academic Attitudes Within Year 1**

## **PROJECT DESCRIPTION**

This project will seek to examine how often traditional gender roles are expressed by children in Year 1 during play, and how these roles may relate to pupils perceptions of and attitudes towards academic subject areas. Data for the project will be gathered by observing a Year 1 class during play periods, and asking children to mark eight subject areas regarding gender appropriateness. The research will examine whether there is a correlation between gender-related play and perception of gender-appropriateness of academic subjects .

## **RATIONALE**

Play is an important area in which to consider gender influences. Whilst many schools have worked hard to eliminate gender favouring in class and encourage pupils in whatever areas they show promise, if such openness as regards to gender-appropriate behaviour is not also present during play, it is likely that traditional gender roles will continue to limit both boys' and girls' academic opportunities. Recent literature has highlighted how gender roles influence children's success, particularly in specific subject matters. For example, little girls are reported to be discouraged from leadership roles and mathematics, and steered towards English and helping or nurturing roles (). Little boys are reported to be encouraged in sport, maths and science, but discouraged in English, art, and other "feminine" subjects (). It is also important to note if attitudes that certain subjects or behaviour are present in younger children. Much research studies pupils's attitudes and subject

choices in later years, but the children's attitudes are already being formed at Year 1 and even before, and much of that is during play.

### **AIMS**

To determine the frequency of traditionally gender appropriate, inappropriate and neutral behaviours girls and boys express during play periods at school.

To determine the academic areas girls and boys perceive as appropriate for only one gender, and those perceived as appropriate for either gender.

To examine the relationship, if any, between gender-specific behaviour in play and pupils' attitudes towards specific academic subjects.

### **OBJECTIVES**

The main objectives of this research are to document whether there is a relationship between children's expressions of gender during play and their perceptions of academic subjects. If so, schools attempting to encourage to excel in all subjects will have to consider ways to break down gender perceptions during play, in addition to addressing situations in the classroom.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Literature documents that gender roles are learned from birth through modelling, reinforcement, and repetition of action (Pidgeon 1994, Epstein 1997, Hawkesworth 1997), and play has a major role in how young children construct gender (Thorne, 1993; Pidgeon 1994; Chick, Heilman-Houser and Hunter 2002). Boys are pressured into football and fighting types of play,

even though many report privately that they would rather be playing at something else (Gordon 1998, Renold 2000, Skelton 2001, Walker 2001). Girls tend to be occupied with their appearances and less likely to engage in activities that might detract from them (Renold 2000). Boys receive positive reinforcement for rowdiness, and rough play, whilst girls receive negative response for such behaviours. Girls are praised by teachers and peers for being nice and helpful in play or playing passively and cooperatively; boys who play in such a manner are typically asked if something is wrong, such as whether they are feeling ill (Rabrenovic and Roskos 2001; Reay 2001; Chick, Heilman-Houser and Hunter 2002). Boys are given trucks, sports equipment and building toys, girls are given dolls and play pots, pans and vacuum cleaners (Buzhigeeva 2004). By the early primary years, children's play behaviours already include many gender-based characteristics and girls and boys will often self-segregate along gender lines (Ashley 2003, Buzhigeeva 2004).

Stereotypically, girls and boys also prefer and excel at different subject matters in school (Warrington and Younger 2001, Buzhigeeva 2004). Boys were found to be encouraged in mathematics, science and physical education, but were called derogatory names and in other ways censured by their peers for excelling in more traditionally female subjects (Reay 2001). In comparison, one reason typically given for girls entering single-sex schools is that female pupils in such environments are more likely to study and succeed in traditionally male subjects such as hard science and mathematics (Stables 1990, Parker and Rennie 2002). Girls were also found to avoid active involvement in areas where boys tried to dominate (Walkerdine 1998). Evans

(1998) asserts that the gender messages repeatedly sent to children from their environment, including play, steers them towards certain roles and therefore certain academic areas. There has been little research on the effect of gender in play on attitudes towards academic subjects.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

This research will employ two methods of data gathering: observation and questionnaire. This data will be analysed quantitatively for each child and a number assigned to how traditionally gender-appropriate his or her behaviour and subject perceptions are. Specific examples may be included in data reporting as support material.

## **RESEARCH DESIGN**

This research will be conducted by observing at least three times a Year 1 class during play periods. Data will likely be recorded through note-taking, although video-taping of the play periods may also be employed. After these observations are complete, notes and/or videos will be coded and analysed quantitatively. Coding will consist of a 1 (plus one) for a traditionally gender-appropriate behaviour, a 0 (zero) for a neutral behaviour a -1 (minus one) for a traditionally gender-inappropriate behaviour.

The same class will be given a simple questionnaire with eight questions. For each question, pupils will be given a subject area and asked to mark it as a girls only subject area, a boys only subject area, or an either boys or girls subject area. The eight subjects included will be taken from the subject areas given as components of the National Curriculum for Key Stage 1: English, mathematics, science, history, geography, music, art, and physical

education. The researcher will code this data in a manner similar to the play period observations, with a 1 (plus one) for a traditionally gender-appropriate behaviour, a 0 (zero) for a neutral behaviour a -1 (minus one) for a traditionally gender-inappropriate behaviour. English, music and art being considered traditionally feminine, mathematics, science and physical education being considered traditionally masculine, and history and geography being considered neutral. Scores from the two questions will then be averaged to form one score.

These two scores will be compared to determine whether gender expressions at play effect children's attitudes towards academic subjects.

#### **DESCRIPTION OF PROPOSED PROJECT**

This research will take place at a suburban school in the UK. One Year 1 class of less than thirty pupils will be used to collect data. As this research seeks to consider the effect of gender during play and on academic subject choice, to encourage more thought and study of the subject, a small scale project such as this is worthwhile. It is also within the time and resource limits of the researcher.

#### **ETHICAL ISSUES**

One ethical issue is the size of the study. Obviously, the data gathered will be from a small population, and therefore findings will seek to encourage additional research rather than make empirically based conclusions.

It is important for play observations to be made without the researcher having predetermined ideas of the children's perceptions; otherwise the researcher might look for correlation rather than recording data. Therefore,

play observations will be recorded and coded before the questionnaire was undertaken.

Also, there is some arbitrariness in what is a masculine or feminine behaviour. There could similarly be some debate as to gender division of academic areas. This has been addressed to some extent by taking notes and then coding them (rather than just making hash marks of the number of times behaviours occur, for example) and the neutral coding category. Subject gender divisions have also been taken from established literature, as to what is traditionally masculine and what is traditionally feminine.

#### **TIME SCALE**

January - contact schools, secure class for observation, complete more detailed literature review.

February - conduct play observations, code play observations, give questionnaires, code questionnaires

March - write up results, proofread dissertation.

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