

Children`s social development

Psychology, Child Development



This rationale will discuss the issues around gender and whether or not as parents, teachers or practitioners we influence children into their gender identity or whether it is inherent within our genetic makeup. I will be evaluating the complexities of my role as a practitioner in supporting children`s social development and reflecting upon how I could improve and modify my practice. There are differing views when it comes to defining gender. Some use gender to focus on biological differences such as sex, physical differences or hormones (Guarian 2002: 20).

Others refer to 'gender' as the social constructions of masculinity and femininity (ATL 2004: 9 and Francis et al 2005: 73) meaning boys' and girls' behaviours and attitudes, which are not necessarily fixed by their biological make up. There is therefore a need to realise that 'gender' can be and often is regularly an interchangeable term that can be suited to both of these definitions. Kohlberg (1966) in (Harris and Butterworth 2002) suggests that there are three stages of gender identity beginning around the age of two to three years.

The first stage is Gender Identity, where children become aware of sex. A child will say 'I am a boy' for example but not necessarily know what being a boy means. The second stage is Gender Stability which happens around the ages of three and a half to four and a half years old. In this stage children will develop awareness and understanding of the durability of their own gender and of others, this is generally focused on the physical appearance and a child may think that a person who dresses in typically opposite gender clothing has also changed sex (Emmerich et al 1977 in Harris and Butterworth 2002).

The third of Kohlberg's stages is Gender Consistency. This usually happens around the age of four and a half and upwards and this is when children begin to realise that regardless of their appearance people remain male or female. When looking at gender within education, there is a need to consider what effect it has on a child's achievement. The DfES (2007: 1) states that there is a gender gap within English, Maths and Science from Foundation Stage through to Key Stage Three, where girls are outperforming boys.

The attention on gender and children's achievement has been present both within the media and schools for many years. Recently this emphasis has been geared towards the underachievement of boys. Siraj-Blatchford (2001: 72) in (Sharp et al 2006) states: Recently we have heard a good deal in education debates about (working class) boys' underachievement. The results from the school league- tables suggest some boys do underachieve in basic literacy. This is portrayed by the media as 'failing' and suggests that girls are outperforming boys in education.

It may not necessarily be that boys have a low achievement rate, rather it could be that they are simply not yet reaching their full potential (Warrington et al 2006: 39). I feel therefore the media has over inflated the idea that boys are underachieving. Instead of focusing on the failure, the emphasis on underachievement here should be looking at which boys (or girls) are not reaching their full potential. From my experience I have seen that teachers and practitioners also act in ways that maintain and maybe even extend the gender roles that are taught at home.

It seems they often emphasise gender distinction with labelling that promotes gender stereotyping. It seems that boys do get more attention

than girls, whether it is good or bad, as teachers generally seem to think that because a girl is quiet they do not need their attention. Francis et al (2005: 92) reiterates the idea that boys' underachievement is due to feminisation and female teachers however within my setting there are five male teachers and two male teaching assistants.

I feel that this has a good impact on some of the children. In today's society there is not always a mother and father within the family environment. There is an increase of fathers being absent within the child's life. Having so many male teachers within my setting has encouraged children to see that it is acceptable to participate in what children perceive as stereotypical activities and even enjoy them without being teased by their peers.

Stetsenko et al (2000) states that male and female brains differ from each other suggesting that boys generally excel in spatial tasks such as sport and girls are generally better academically. According to Blum et al, (1989: 16) boys' brains have more cortical areas dedicated to the spatial mechanical functioning and they use on average only half the brain that females use for verbal - emotive functioning which essentially means that females are predominately seen as better talkers and listeners and males are doers.

Having worked for nearly ten years in childcare and education and being a parent myself I have also realised that boys and girls do behave in different ways Mothers and Fathers are responsible for the initial gender socialisation of their children. As suggested by Bowlby (1969) in (Johnston and Nahmad-Williams 2009) family is the first and most important influence on a child's social development. Many of a child's early family experiences shape their initial motivations, values and beliefs.

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Bandura's social learning theory (1963) suggests that boys learn how to behave from observing and imitating masculine behaviours especially from their fathers and girls learn from imitating their mothers. When children imitate same sex behaviours they are rewarded but imitating the opposite sex may result in threat or even punishment (Bandura 1963). This behaviour is mainly displayed by fathers when they come to pick up their sons and find them playing dress up or pushing a pram.

This is a barrier that is still on-going within my setting but only with the fathers. Mothers do not seem to have a problem with this type of behaviour. I explain that the boys are only expressing themselves and generally not acting in a stereotypical way but having fun with the situation whereas when a girl dresses up she tends to pretend to be a mother figure. What the fathers do not tend to see is that although the boy is playing with the pram he is using it in a way that would not usually be displayed by a female.

Even before a child is born and when parents know the sex of their child there is a tendency to buy and receive toys and clothes in either pink for a girl or blue for a boy. This is reinforced when the child is born and the hospital attaches either a blue or a pink wristband depending on the sex of the child. Research shows differences in the ways that boys and girls are treated by caregivers from the moment of birth. According to Archer and Lloyd (1982) baby boys are handled less gently by their caregivers being bounced and roughoused, whereas baby girls are generally talked and sung to.

It is suggested by Gervai et al (1995) and Woods et al (2001) that fathers more than mothers encourage "gender-appropriate" behaviour, and they

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place more pressure to achieve on sons than on daughters. In the early years parents are more likely to undertake activities such as drawing, reading books and singing with girls than boys (Siraj-Blatchford and Sammons 2004). I feel that only having a son I cannot make a fully informed judgement on this statement however I do feel that within my setting I allow girls to engage in rough and tumble play as much as the boys do.

I feel that this is an important part of their social development. I also encourage all children to participate in more creative activities such as painting, cooking and making things. Through the growing process of a child, the toys that are given to them begin to define whether or not they are going to be typically and strongly masculine or feminine. Girls will generally play with dolls while boys choose cars and trucks (Kanazawa 2008) which suggests that maybe boys' and girls' toy preferences may have a biological origin.

Studies with Vervet monkeys in 2002 showed the same sex typical preference as humans yet there was no influence from humans and they had not seen the toys before. What was even more remarkable was that the monkeys knew how to play with the toys in the same way a child would. Kanazawa (2008) states: It is becoming less and less likely that "gender socialisation" is the reason why boys and girls prefer different toys, and more and more likely that there are some genetic, hormonal, and other biological reasons for the observed sex differences in toy preference.

The media also plays a role in gender socialisation and impacts on children's play from an early age (Burke 2006). Parents of a girl would be more likely to put on programmes such as " My Little Pony" and ' Dora the Explorer',
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whereas parents of a boy might show their child ' Bob the Builder' or ' Postman Pat'. When a child is sitting in front of the television, they often see commercials with ladies either cooking or shopping and men working, driving or lifting. I feel that this portrays a universal image of what society thinks is right for males and females to do.

Discussions with children have led me to believe that within their family environment it seems to be that mothers are now working longer hours than was the norm and fathers are spending more and more time taking care of their children and also carrying out tasks typically known as female roles by preparing food and going shopping. Through observation in my setting this seems to be the case. Sweden is unique in the value it places on gender equality (Berk 2006).

They state that both genders are equal in the workforce, childcare and the home environment and men and women have the same rights including paternity leave and pay. According to several indicators the Swedish family model is very successful (Berk 2006). I feel that the United Kingdom is working towards the same model but because of all the old traditions that man has continued over the decades in the U. K. I feel that as a society we are less likely to let go and that it is up to the individual to form their own gender identity.

Experience with children, wider reading and lectures in college have led me to develop the opinion that there are numerous influences on children regarding their gender identity and that there is a need for staff to be appropriately trained to enable them to meet the needs of both boys and girls. I feel that practitioners can be gender biased and may be likely to

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make general assumptions regarding gender issues. These assumptions would be stereotypes in themselves even though they are required to treat each child as an individual (Bignold 2006).

Having this knowledge has helped me to develop my setting by having exciting resources which engage and motivate both individuals and gender groups. I feel this can have a positive impact on what children choose to take part in and help children step away from what they have been told is right for boys and girls. The design and layout of my setting is very important. It creates an environment where children can decide what and who they wish to play with by offering complete freedom of choice as far as toys and activities are concerned.

This encourages a non-stereotypical environment in which boys and girls can interact comfortably and self-assuredly. It seems that nurseries, schools and the media are putting one gender against the other when it comes to academic levels. This has only highlighted an equality issue with regards to the differing achievement between genders. I feel that this emphasis needs to move away from comparing achievements according to gender but to focus on which children are underachieving in terms of both attainment and reaching their full potential.

I feel that in order for me as a practitioner to achieve gender equality within my setting I need to make myself and my colleagues aware of any preconceptions I or they may hold. It is also vital that I create an environment and ethos where gender is not an issue. Children regardless of their gender are to be viewed and treated as individuals and given equal opportunities and experiences. Where the opportunities to access all areas of

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the curriculum are the same and gender stereotypes are challenged and deconstructed, it will become possible to move away from comparing gender gaps and focus on individual achievements instead. .