

Gender Identity Formation and Early Childhood Education

Lori A. Smolleck * and Melissa R. Dunne

Bucknell University, 470 Olin Science Building, Lewisburg, PA

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*For Correspondence

Lori A. Smolleck, Ph.D. at Bucknell University 470
Olin Science Building Lewisburg, PA 17837; Tel:
570-577-3458

E-mail: lsmollec@bucknell.edu

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research was to utilize a case study approach, lesson study and text analysis to explore the development of identity and social interactions within a second grade classroom ^[1]. Specifically, gender was at the foundation of this study. Moreover, the research explored the extent to which stereotype flexibility is evident or possible. The researchers examined both qualitative and quantitative data sources to identify the most common convictions and stereotypes regarding gender that students hold, and how teachers may attempt to discuss and counteract limiting beliefs. The researchers will use specific data from the study to provide concrete examples and suggestions for planning and implementing lessons that include stereotype flexibility and acceptance with students.

INTRODUCTION AND RATIONALE

The purpose of this research was to explore the development of identity and social interactions within a second grade classroom. Specifically, gender was at the foundation of this study. “No one is immune. Sex role socialization and its effects are pervasive. Gender training has been variously described as “ubiquitous” ^[2], “omnirelevant”, and “primary” ^[3,4]. It may also be inevitable. No child seems to avoid what Zella Luria referred to as the “gender curriculum” ^[5]. In fact, typically by age three, gender awareness is fervently present, however it is likely that gender stereotypes can be malleable with adult input ^[5]. As such this study specifically investigated the way a second-grade teacher implemented lessons associated with gender stereotypes within the regular curriculum, in an attempt to begin important discussions and thoughtfulness related to sex-role stereotypes.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To create an identity for oneself is to position oneself in the world around them; to find a place where one seems to “fit” in our communities, families and vastly complex social system. Our identities are constantly evolving as people; both adults and children grow and change with time and new experiences, and their identities are “constructed through the intersection of multiple dimensions” ^[6]. For instance, any single person’s identity is influenced by a multitude of factors, including race, ethnicity, religion, sex, sexuality, gender, family life, community involvement, social class, language, physical and mental ability, health, agency, perceived power and ability, and education. The researchers were recently told by an elementary student that she identifies as “a tomboy who is darker than both of [her] parents”. However, this identity is transient and may change over time. It is generally believed that individuals have complete agency to choose their own identities, especially in a democratic country like the United States where people may love whomever they choose, worship in a churches of their choosing, and speak freely. These individual freedoms may make it seem as if our identities can be molded entirely on our own, but due to ways in which a liberal society may still ostracize, exclude and physically harm people deemed different, especially in terms of gender, individuals are limited in choosing their identities under circumstances beyond their control ^[7].

Social and cultural norms dictate what normal and acceptable behavior is, and individuals must then decide to conform to these norms to a certain degree or not. Since “gender development occurs in relation to someone or something else” studies

have shown that children learn from a young age to internalize gender stereotypes that they are exposed to at home, in the media, and from teachers and peers at school ^[8]. It is difficult to pinpoint which influence may be strongest for young children, but in a study of Australian four- and five-year olds, male and female children were able to watch television clips and surmise that men would perform stereotypically masculine activities such as fixing cars, fighting fires, driving trucks and even becoming doctors, while most children guessed that women would be the ones to sew, become nurses, cook dinner and wash dishes ^[9]. Both male and female children seemed to hold a more rigid view of masculinity, for they answered more often that men should complete the stereotypically masculine tasks, not both sexes. For the stereotypically female tasks, more children answered that either women or both sexes might complete the tasks. When asked about their own abilities to perform each of these tasks when they grew up if they so desired, four-year-old children of both sexes saw themselves as competent in both gendered sets of tasks, but five-year-old females expressed doubt that they would be able to perform the more stereotypically masculine tasks if they wanted to. This research suggests that young children already hold strong ideas about what masculinity and femininity entail by the time they enter kindergarten. Five-year-old females have already received messages as to which parts of society their sex is excluded from, as “these participants felt that some masculine activities were not likely to be within their competence”. Identity formation is thereby limited in children, as they learn to navigate “oppressive and exclusionary systems of gender” ^[7].

Even the language that children have available to define themselves in terms of gender is extremely limiting, as it fits a rigid, binary construct of gender that forces children to choose to either be a “she” or a “he”. Almost all children are given a biologically assigned gender at birth, even if they are born intersex. Because we still live in a society where transgender, gender nonconforming and intersex people are often not granted the rights that they deserve, identity formation can be a very painful process for children who identify outside of the rigid constructs that we have of sex and gender in our society, particularly when our language may exclude them from belonging to a recognized, accepted social group (i.e. “typical” boys and girls) ^[10].

Significantly, in our current society, no child is immune to what Zella Luria termed the “gender curriculum”, which implicitly teaches and reinforces sex-role socialization ^[5]. Adults impose gender on children before they are even born, as they anxiously ask expecting parents which sex their baby will be, and present them with pink clothes for baby girls and blue clothes for baby boys. Adults will also pick up gendered toys when playing with male and female infants, and often feel uncomfortable with knowing how to address babies if the sex is not immediately discernable. This has strong implications for teachers and parents, who must become aware of gender stereotypes that they have internalized and fight against these biases, and strong implications for children and students, who must be taught to recognize and actively counter the negative attention that gender nonconformity receives in our world. Examples of gender stereotypes that children internalize before and shortly after entering school include the fact that being a girl or a boy comes with a checklist of things one must do “right”, and completing these items makes it more likely that a child will be treated favorably by peers. For instance, a young male child loves to wear pink and carry purses, but the night before beginning kindergarten, he switches his pink crocs out for blue cross, explicating to his parents that he will probably not get teased if he wears blue ^[7].

In the United States, female students throughout their K-12 careers are rewarded much more for preferring “masculine” activities and content areas such as math, science and sports than boys are for liking anything deemed feminine ^[11]. In other behavioral case studies, female children in a Swedish pre-school were rewarded and praised more for behaving obediently, while boys’ resistance and independence were more readily accepted by caregivers ^[8]. Young female children learn that the way to exert power over other children in a situation of conflict is to take on the role of “little mother” or “little teacher”, admonishing others in a strict tone, while young males are expected to “assert themselves through physicality and aggression” ^[12]. This is an important stereotype for teachers and administrators to consider critically; boys and girls are often not treated differently when it comes to disciplinary processes, but infractions should be treated equally, regardless of whether male or female perpetrators and participants were acting “appropriately” according to what is expected from their gender. What is known from this research is that gender stereotyping and expectations of conformity are limiting and psychologically damaging to all students. In order to create a more equitable, inclusive and just world, it is absolutely necessary to challenge stereotypes on both sides of the gender binary and recognize identities that fall outside of the binary ^[10,11].

METHODOLOGY

This research examined the extent to which second graders have internalized gender stereotypes, and how they have shaped their own identities around these stereotypes. Both qualitative and quantitative data sources were gathered from eighteen second-grade students during an observational case study, lesson study and text analysis ^[1]. The research identifies the most common convictions and stereotypes regarding gender that the students held, and how the teacher attempted to discuss and counteract limiting beliefs.

This research was conducted in one second-grade classroom in a public school in central Pennsylvania. The observational case study and lesson study took place over the course of four months in early 2015. The researchers were able to work closely with students during this time and establish close relationships, which allowed for positive and safe spaces for sharing thoughts and beliefs.

The inspiration for this study was a result of overhearing a dispute amongst students that one male child’s uncle could not

possibly use perfume, because that is a “girl thing” and that would be “gross.” A few female students reacted strongly by saying “Ew!” when the male student made his original claim, and he later tried to validate his claim by saying “I think there is another word for it.” The researchers intervened at this point to ask if the male student was perhaps referring to cologne, which is generally known as the “boy version of perfume”, and the students seemed to accept that this could be true; it would be acceptable for the boy’s uncle to own such a product.

At the time, we were intrigued by the vehemence with which the girls were defending that perfume “could only be used by women.” We wanted to explain that it did not really matter if the boy’s uncle wanted to use perfume—is it so wrong that people of any gender might want to smell good, and prefer a “feminine” scent over a “masculine” one? At this time, we lacked the instructional time and preparation to fully address why individuals should not narrowly define or reject others due to their gendered preferences. Hence, we as researchers became very interested in how malleable gender stereotyping is in young children, and wanted to open children’s minds to the notion of people not strictly conforming to gender stereotypes.

As a result, we obtained other research to substantiate our idea that a lesson study with second graders might be effective; while gender stereotype knowledge is already quite strong at age five ^[9] and becomes more extensive with age, stereotype flexibility, or the ability to challenge these stereotypes, also increases with age ^[7]. Elementary teacher Maree Bednar taught a series of four lessons on gender diversity, nonconformity and unwritten gender rules with her third-grade students, concluding by the end of her study that elementary children are ready for curricula that challenges our current social order and brings social justice for gender nonconforming people to the forefront. Additionally, “children need safe spaces and activities where they can discuss and challenge stereotypical gender boundaries through reading”. This opens a forum for students to learn and discuss that gender expression does not need to fit a strict dichotomy without having to bring in personal experiences if they do not feel comfortable doing so. As researchers, we wanted to teach a lesson on gender diversity and nonconformity using literature and play to engage children and have discussions that could easily be related back to reality. The format of the lesson study is outlined below.

Day 1 of the Lesson Study: Procedures

At the start of the lesson study, the researchers presented students with an activity without an initial rationale. The students were each handed a sheet of construction paper pre-folded into six boxes, and were instructed to draw twelve different people, one in each of the boxes on either side of the paper. The twelve people they drew are listed as follows: a police officer, a doctor, a scientist, a nurse, a dancer, a teacher, a coach, a store clerk, a librarian, an ice cream vendor, a basketball player and a soccer player. The researchers walked amongst the students as they completed this activity, available to answer any questions and begin taking note of the sexes of the people that the children were drawing for the people in each profession. The purpose of this activity was to determine if students commonly held any strong assumptions about which sex should or do hold each profession. Once the students completed their drawings, they gathered on the carpet, where the researcher read aloud *Max* by Rachel Isadora. This is a picture book about a young boy who begins attending his sister’s dance class on his way to baseball practice on Saturday mornings, and he is self-conscious about his enjoyment of the dance class. He does not want his friends to know where he is before baseball, even though his work in ballet class is improving his abilities in baseball. However, Max finds ways to take pride in his enjoyment of both activities, and his friends accept his new hobby as well. At the conclusion of the read-aloud, the teacher and students had a conversation about why Max felt the reservations that he did regarding dance class, and then the researchers showed the students a brief self-created powerpoint presentation entitled “People Doing Things They Love.” In this powerpoint, images were shown of people happily engaged in professions not typically associated with their biologically assigned gender, such as female pilots, male nurses, male and female dancers, female soccer players, male and female scientists, and male and female teachers, mainly to impress upon students that individuals are able to choose to be whomever they want to be. A discussion was then held after the viewing of this powerpoint, to discuss with students how they felt about the images, and whether or not they thought that the images accurately represented the majority of people that they knew. People in our society are often gender nonconforming in at least one way, and we wanted the children to recognize this about themselves, their friends and families ^[7].

Day 2 of the Lesson Study: Procedures

The next day of the lesson study began with the game “Four Corners,” a modified version from the game typically played in summer camps, playgrounds or in classrooms simply for fun. In this version of Four Corners, one student was blindfolded in the center of the room. The four corners of the classroom had been labeled Corner 1, Corner 2, Corner 3 and Corner 4. For each round of the game, the researchers designated that each corner represented a certain activity. For instance, in the first round of the game, Corner 1 represented soccer, Corner 2 represented dance, Corner 3 represented cooking, and Corner 4 represented drawing. Other than the one student blindfolded, all of the other students migrated towards corners of their own choosing. Each student was instructed to go to the corner that represented his or her favorite activity out of the four choices. The students walked as silently as possible to their chosen corners as the blindfolded student in the center of the room counted slowly from one to fifteen. When the fifteen seconds were up, the blindfolded student in the center of the room called out one of the corners (1, 2, 3 or 4) and all of the students standing at that corner were required to return to their seats. A new round then began with the students remaining. The researchers designated new activities for each of the four corners (the second round included tennis, reading, swimming and basketball), and the remaining students migrated towards their favorite activities/corners again. The blindfolded student called out a corner after counting to fifteen, and the whole process repeated itself once more.

The researchers allowed the students to play four rounds in the interest of time, and for each round, the researchers created a bar graph with the activities from each of the corners labeled on the x-axis. The researchers tallied how many female students and how many male students preferred each activity (based on how many boys/girls went to each corner). At the conclusion of the game, the researchers gathered students together on the carpet to discuss what students had noticed about the activity. Did there seem to be many boys or many girls clustered around one corner at a particular time, or did the interests of the class seem varied and diverse, regardless of gender?

Following the game, the researchers kept students on the carpet for a read aloud of *Amazing Grace* by Mary Hoffman, a girl who is limited by her classmates when she is told that she cannot audition for the part of Peter Pan in the school play because she is black and a girl, and Peter Pan typically has neither of those characteristics. However, she does not let the narrow-minded attitudes of her classmates deter her, and she overcomes this challenge to become the best Peter Pan the school has seen yet. The researchers had a discussion with students following the read aloud, to ask what they thought of the actions of Grace's classmates and how they affected Grace. Much of the discussion centered on being an individual and learning to question why we deem the things that others do as weird, strange, unconventional, or outright not okay sometimes. Why do we think and do these things? Do they sometimes cause us to say mean and hurtful things to others, Why/Why not? Who are we to judge others for their preferences, likes, dislikes, and ways of identifying themselves?

FINDINGS

Beginning with the picture drawing activity, the children's behavior fairly accurately matched predicted outcomes present in prior research, in that most of them did draw men for the stereotypically male-dominated professions (i.e. police officers, coaches, basketball players, doctors, to name a few), and drew women for the stereotypically female-dominated professions (i.e. teachers, dancers, nurses, librarians). Notably, 100% of the eighteen students drew a male police officer, while three of these students chose to draw both a male and female police officer. Seventeen out of eighteen students (94.4%) drew the teacher as female, fifteen (83.3%) drew a female dancer, and twelve students (66.6%) drew a female nurse. Thirteen students (72.2%) drew a male doctor, and eleven students (61.1%) drew male scientists. Eight (44.4%) of these scientist drawings looked remarkably like a young version of Albert Einstein, featuring crazy hair and bubbling test tubes. This picture evidence reinforces the notion that stereotypes truly do have pervasive, substantial and often subconscious effects on young minds^[9].

The researchers paid careful attention to the actions of students during the drawing activity; noteworthy conversations took place amongst peers that also demonstrated student convictions regarding gender stereotypes and gender-appropriate behavior. One male student turned to the female child sitting next to him at one point and happily chattered: "If it is a dancer, I obviously have to draw a girl," and went back to his drawing without waiting for a response. Another student could be heard saying "Well, my brother had a man teacher once, but I never have," and there was also a proliferate use of pink colored pencil in the drawings of the dancers. Student drawings unsurprisingly represented, in visual form, the various defensive conversations that the researchers heard around the classroom regarding things boys and girls can and cannot do, which include (but are not limited to) the dispute regarding men's perfume and whether or not boys should use the purple soft balls during recess. However, students became more receptive to stereotype flexibility as the lesson study progressed. As evidenced by their responses to the Max read aloud and discussion, the powerpoint presentation, the Four Corners activity, and the *Amazing Grace* read aloud and discussion.

Following the read aloud of Max, students without hesitation concluded that "Max probably did not want to join his sister's dance class at first because he thought it was too girly-girl." However, a number of students were also genuinely beaming at the conclusion of the story, when Max triumphantly twirls in dance class and then successfully makes it to the field just in time to play an amazing game of baseball. They ultimately concluded that "everybody is unique," and one student remarked that she was "glad that nobody made fun of Max. It is okay to like whatever you want to like."

From the data collected during the Four Corners game, it was determined that there were no significant inclinations amongst the male and female students to choose typically gendered activities, such as boys preferring more active activities such as sports, and girls preferring more passive activities like reading. Rather, the interest in all the optional activities was varied amongst males and females.

The read aloud of *Amazing Grace* was a satisfying end to the lesson study, as students empathized with Grace when her classmates told her that she could not achieve her aspirations due to conditions outside her control. They rooted for Grace, and though Grace was also treated unfairly due to her sex, they were particularly affronted that Grace was told she could not do something due to her race. Racial stereotypes and racial injustice are also extremely important topics that we believe young children are also ready to discuss and combat in elementary school, but the time afforded in this lesson study did not allow for a truly comprehensive unit on racial stereotypes. We as researchers and educators wish that it had, for the children were very eager to discuss these issues.

Though teachers should keep in mind that a much longer and more comprehensive unit on gender diversity, gender nonconformity and social justice is most likely extremely necessary to combat the socially enforced gender stereotypes that

children have been internalizing since birth, we believe the materials used in this lesson study may provide a wonderful starting place for any teachers looking to implement these concepts in their curriculum.

CONCLUSION

Children learn gender roles and expectations at a very young age (as early as 18 months) and once learned, “stereotypes can become expectations that influence how we see and judge others, making it easy to perpetuate sexism” [5]. For example if we view males as different as females, we will likely expect them to behave differently and therefore treat them differently, which in turn may create a situation where males and females begin to actually behave differently (1996). As a result, gender stereotypes create narrow-minded perceptions of who or what students might identify.

Although parents have the biggest influence on a child’s gender identity, they do not represent the only influence. Teachers, the community in which one lives, the media and the environment also play important roles for the development of identity and stereotyped beliefs. Teachers, parents/guardians, and the greater community must strive to create family and school partnerships, safe spaces for classroom discussions, lessons, strategies and techniques that address gender issues and to teach about gender equity and identity formation.

Gender stereotyping becomes further internalized as children age; however renegotiating these stereotypes also becomes more probable. Hence, at all ages, open dialogue is extremely important, as well as providing examples of people who successfully defy gender norms. Ignoring the notion of gender issues and perpetuates stereotypes, therefore conversations and experiences that require students to think more thoughtfully about their own choices and beliefs are of the utmost importance: this issue cannot simply be ignored [7]. “A gender flexible child seems the most promising option. Flexibility involves choosing activities on the basis of individual likes and skills rather than being bogged down by gender stereotypes” [5].

SUMMARY

The purpose of this research study was to further explore the development of identity and social interactions within a second grade classroom, with a specific focus on gender. Moreover, the research explores the extent to which stereotype flexibility is evident or possible with second graders. Goals of the study include demonstrating to children that gender nonconformity is extremely common, and being oneself is to be encouraged over conforming to rigid, societal gender norms. This study is also an effort to heighten awareness for educators to bring topics such as gender nonconformity into their classrooms, because young children are ready to engage in curriculum that brings social justice for gender nonconforming people to the forefront, particularly through reading. Ignoring or not speaking about these issues, which many students grapple with, “can be just as damaging as negative attention to gender nonconformity” [7].

The lessons completed with the second grade students in this study demonstrate the readiness of students to engage in conversations that challenge the stereotypes that they have already learned. They are eager to discuss these issues, and they need safe spaces to question stereotypical, gendered messages that they have been internalizing since birth. Second graders quickly recognized that “everybody is unique”, and “it is okay to like whatever you want to like”. Despite their initial, staunch defenses of perfume being only for girls, and immediate assumptions that Max probably did not want to go to dance class because it was “too girly-girl”, gender stereotypes became more flexible as the lessons and discussions progressed. This research presents a need for parents and educators to continue to develop stereotype flexibility and acceptance of all types of people with their children and students.

IMPLICATIONS

Research suggests that many children “rely less on sex-role stereotypes if their mothers have been employed outside the home (e.g., Katz, Tuck, Rolfe, & Adair), if they are girls rather than boys (Huston, Katz & Boswell), if parents discourage sex-typed activities (Lytton & Romney), and if they do not watch television too much (Signorella, Bigler, & Liben)” [5]. Hence, more research with a broader focus on community, family and schools is important. Another area that warrants more investigation is parental involvement. For example, investigating what children play with, what they see in the world around them, and what their parents encourage or discourage is of paramount importance.

In relation to policy, professional development for educators at all grade levels is vital, especially considering the findings of this research. Because beliefs related to gender-role stereotypes are malleable with appropriate instruction and/or interventions, especially in the early grades, workshops, classes and conferences related to how educators can assist in addressing these issues within their regular curriculum are of special importance. Furthermore, engaging the community, parents and children in these efforts is critical for ownership and a sense of validation for their own learning and understanding gender roles if the adult world around the children reflected the same values. It is common for children to “perceive similarities among persons categorized under one label and to magnify differences between people with differing category labels. It then becomes easier to evaluate individuals in a group other than your own in a more negative fashion” [5].

Implications for practice include having teachers first be mindful of the ways in which they themselves may be subconsciously

perpetuating limiting gender stereotypes or norms within their classrooms. Having reflected on their own potential biases, teachers then need to begin to implement interventions that best fit the child, adapting instruction and working to negate stereotyped behavior he or she hears being articulated or reinforced in the classroom. "Silence can be just as damaging as negative attention to gender nonconformity" [7].

In the end, our main goal as educators and researchers should be to have children realize and think critically about the stances they develop and the remarks they make to one another in regards to gender stereotypes. Through the use of the practices and interventions mentioned and outlined above, this goal can become attainable.

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