

Rigid thinking

Is your nursery space working for or against gender diversity? *Dr Jen Lyttleton-Smith* examines why promoting gender diversity and avoiding stereotypical roles is important when working with young children, and how settings can change their practice and environment for the better

The recent BBC series *No More Boys and Girls* has brought the gender debate to the public eye, and alongside the current visibility of transgender identities within childhood (see ‘Fluid thinking’ by Caroline Vollans, www.nurseryworld.co.uk), there is an explosion of interest in gender and early childhood. With this increased public awareness, many parents and educators are seeking further guidance on how they can support diversity of gender expression for all children regardless of gender or sex.

To date, gender equality in education has been framed almost entirely in terms of exam results and explained largely by ‘natural differences’ in boys’ and girls’ abilities and interests, veering boys towards science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subjects and girls towards the humanities.

In recent years, however, gender and childhood researchers have challenged the notion that there is anything natural about the gender roles that children adopt from a very young age. According to their research findings, gender roles are imposed on children from birth, both in the home and within education settings.

Many children, and adults, find traditional gender expectations restrictive or even damaging, so it is a social responsibility to support gender diversity for all people. Aside from this broader social responsibility, early years practitioners hold a formal responsibility to support gender diversity in the nursery.

GENDER DIVERSITY

For early years professionals to tackle gender stereotypes, they will need to consider the key concepts of ‘gender diversity’ (the freedom to express and explore experiences regardless of gender) and ‘gender rigidity’ (activities and expressions



that are guided by traditional gender roles according to sex).

Supporting gender diversity might require them to reflect on their views (see box, overleaf), as well as their behaviour within the setting. Many educators make significant efforts to avoid stereotyping in their language and treat children as individuals, not just ‘boys’ and ‘girls’ – for example, ensuring that references to jobs or carers are not stereotypical and having mixed groups for activities. And such actions are strongly supported by research. However, another – and easy – way to make a big impact on supporting diversity in the early years is through careful planning of the nursery environment.

The dominant educational theories applied today in the UK, including those of Piaget and Montessori as well as the Reggio Emilia approach, agree that the nursery environment is of critical importance to a child’s

Adults will often subconsciously direct caring, shopping, home and family themes at girls

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learning, yet its impact on a child’s social development is often overlooked in early years policy and practice guidance.

In fact, the nursery room itself and the resources within it are one of the primary sources of gender roles that children engage with – indeed, children usually have more direct interaction with the environment itself than with the adults who work in it.

There are two key elements to consider: the obvious one is the type and style of toys and play structures that are provided (see case study, overleaf). The less obvious, but equally important, element is how these resources are arranged and positioned within the nursery room.

The way that children play with and around nursery resources exert a big influence on how they experience and express gender. Room layout and the arrangement of resources can lead to gendered associations that prompt

POINTS OF VIEW

Gender and sex

Many people still hold the view that gender is synonymous with sex – in other words, if you are born with female genitals, you will naturally express a ‘feminine’ gender, complete with traditionally female interests and abilities.

They often look to neuroscience to support the idea that female and male brains are physically different. One of the main problems with this view is that, despite the headlines, there is more neuroscientific evidence to refute this view than there is to support it (Fine 2010). Furthermore, all the observed differences are tiny compared

with the differences between people of the same sex.

Also, because the brain from birth changes physically in reaction to social and physical environments, it is extremely difficult to identify which differences can be attributed to sex, and which to the different ways that people interact with male and female babies – which, research shows, is very different (Beal 1994).

Another way of seeing gender is as ‘socially constructed’, based on social inequalities. In other words, feminine gender expression is a product of social expectations for female people. This perspective is overwhelmingly

supported within social research which has repeatedly evidenced how experiences, environments and social cultures have a significant impact on gender expression.

Equal but different

Some educators may interpret ‘gender diversity’ as ‘equal but different’ and argue that it is possible to allow boys and girls to learn different skills in different ways, and for each to be valued equally.

In practice, this equal value is unachievable along traditional gender lines, as the caring, family-orientated female is less valued in society than the practical, public-orientated

male. Furthermore, even if equal respect and regard were achieved, restrictions would still be placed on children’s identities, abilities and aspirations in ways that make them unhappy and unfulfilled in childhood and adulthood.

‘Equal but different’ does not work. We must support all children as unique individuals regardless of gender or any other physical characteristic. Differences in ability and interest are far greater between individual children than they are between boys and girls as homogenous groups, and gender rigidity conceals these individual differences in damaging ways.

stereotypes and limit play – a problem that is often exacerbated by nursery rules. Through the nursery room itself, children can unwittingly absorb gender-rigid messages about who they could or should be as boys and girls, devaluing any efforts by the teachers to encourage gender diversity. However, by making simple changes to the way that the nursery room and resources are arranged, educators can combat gender rigidity and so ‘passively’ support gender diversity.

CASE STUDY

The following is a real-life case study drawn from research.

Role-play area

A role-play area is arranged in a quiet and cosy corner, obscured from the rest of the classroom. It is filled with lots of resources, including: a kitchen and dining area with doz-

ens of utensils; a hairdressing salon with accessories; a dressing-up box; a large doll’s house with figures and furniture; baby dolls and clothes; and a shop that changes between greengrocer and flower shop. The dressing-up box contains six ‘princess dresses’, a car outfit and a police helmet. Many of the resources are in pastel colours or of natural wood.

Children are not allowed to wear the dressing-up clothes outside in case they get messy.

Small-world

Across the classroom, in an open, highly visible space, we find the small-world area. This is a clear, uncluttered space, with its neat, hidden storage containing: cars and other vehicles; a fire station; a wooden railway and trains; extra-large Lego bricks; a garage; an assortment of wooden blocks and geometric

shapes; basic mathematics materials; and a small doll’s house with figures and furniture. All the resources are in primary, bright or metallic colours, or are made of natural wood.

Gender divide

Conscious of gender issues, the teachers in this classroom are careful not to lead children to play activities based on gender. At the start of the school year featured in the research, there were no gender divisions in use of these spaces. At the end of the school year, the role-play area was used almost exclusively by girls and the small-world area by boys. During the year, the children had somehow learnt to favour these spaces.

Analysis

Despite the best efforts of teachers, gender rigidity is passively prompted in the case study classroom simply through the design, arrangement and styling of the space itself, and the objects it contains.

The role-play area is a highly feminine gender-rigid space that associates home and family activities with caring roles (dolls), beauty (hair salon and domination of dressing-up by princess dresses) and shopping. These activities are linked by proximity – the placement of objects together – which suggests that interest in one means interest in others nearby, and actively prompts children to link these activities together in play narratives. ➤



Are your resources juxtaposed in ways that encourage gender division?

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A UNIQUE CHILD INCLUSION

Where the activities, toys and even colours in a space are so overwhelmingly feminised by traditional female or male gender roles, they become a powerful support for gender rigidity. As a space, it attracts children who may hold one of these interests and suggests others based upon it, producing a microcosm of traditional gender division of interest. Over the school year, girls and boys learn these associations and the skills they encourage, and conform to the expectations they create.

Furthermore, classroom rules can reinforce these associations – for example, not allowing children in dressing-up outfits to venture outside for active play. As this is almost always girls dressed in the highly popular princess dresses, girls are frequently stopped from enjoying active play outside.

In the small-world area, association by proximity means that vehicles (trains and cars), heroes (fire station), building (Lego and blocks) and mathematics (mathematics materials and geometric shapes) are all linked together, creating an association between these interests that a single doll's house cannot counter (it is rarely used). The masculine gender rigidity implied by the small-world area is so strong, and interacts coherently with social messages about gender from media and advertising, that by the end of the year, boys playing in the area are observed sending girls away from the space, telling them to go and play elsewhere.

A compounding problem here



is that movement between the two spaces is actively discouraged in the name of keeping classroom objects organised. While this is not a strict rule, teachers are often observed asking children to go and put dolls back in the home corner or to play with them there, rather than 'getting in the way' of other types of play in the small-world area.

PRACTICE POINTS

Are these things happening in your classroom? Here are some points to consider:

- Where do children spend the most time in your nursery during free play?
- Have you observed gendered preferences for these spaces? If so, what do you think is encouraging these preferences?
- What objects have proximity to each other and do they imply gender rigidity, as in the case study? Are stereotypically

In the case study, eventually the areas had become so gender-defined that boys were ushering girls away from the small-world space

gendered toys positioned next to each other or arranged by theme? If so, can you change this?

- Consider the styling of the commonly used toys in your classroom. What colours are they and what activities do they suggest? Can you use gendered toys to disrupt gender rigidity (see below)?
- Think about the rules you impose on the objects or space of your classroom, such as the 'no dressing-up outside' rule. Do these rules unnecessarily disadvantage boys or girls, or enforce gendered associations?

IN CONCLUSION

What the research suggests is that through arranging the nursery room differently, the stereotypical associations of feminine and masculine activities can be easily disrupted and challenged daily with little ongoing effort from teachers. If cars and Lego bricks are located next to dolls, children of both genders are more likely to mix these play activities than with the play shop across the other side of the classroom.

If you have the budget for it, you can buy new toys that exploit 'gender attraction' to encourage gender diversity, such as emergency vehicles with female drivers, or prince outfits for dressing-up that are just as attractive and decorated as princess dresses. Through exploring these options, teachers can further relieve children of damaging gendered associations and leading activities in play that limit their potential as children and as the adults they will become. ■

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NW SHOW: MASTERCLASSES

Join us at next year's NW Show in London to learn more about the research that is challenging gender stereotypes and its implications for early years practice.

'Boys' learning: rethinking gender and early years practice' on 3 February will:

- assess current thinking about boys' learning and development
- give an overview of recent research into gender
- revisit the principles of the

EYFS and the Unique Child ● provide best-practice advice on helping boys', and girls', to flourish.

Also relevant to the gender debate is our 2 February masterclass 'How children learn: inspiring, supporting, teaching', in which Dr Maggie Aderin-Pocock will be explaining how she battled both social and gender stereotypes to become a space scientist – and champion for girls moving into the areas of science,

technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM).

Effra Nursery School staff from Brixton will also be talking about their adventures in STEM, and Professor Julie Fisher will round off the morning with a detailed look at the role of the early years professional in teaching young children and supporting their learning.

To view the full masterclass and seminar programme over our two-day event, visit: www.nurseryworldshow.com