

Sustainable Society 2020: Early Childhood Education

Aref A. abou-ali and Armeen R. Bameen
Abadan University of Medical Sciences, Iran

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 roles socialization and its effects are pervasive. Gender training has been variously described as "ubiquitous", "omni-relevant", and "primary". It may also be inevitable. No child seems to avoid what Zella Luria referred to as the "gender curriculum". In fact, typically by age three, gender awareness is fervently present, however it is likely that gender stereotypes can be malleable with adult input. 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.

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". 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 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.

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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 many sources to internalize gender stereotypes that they are exposed to at home, in the media, and from teachers and peers at school. It is difficult to pinpoint which influence may be strongest for young children, but 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. 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 the set tasks when they grew up if they so desired, four-year-old children of both sexes saw themselves as competent in both gendered set 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”. 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 be either 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 trans gender, 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). Significantly, in our current society, no child is immune to what Zella Luri termed the “gender curriculum”, which implicitly teaches and reinforces sex-roles socialization. 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

This abstract is partially presented at the International Conference on Sustainable Society during March 17-18, 2020 in Berlin, Germany

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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.