

Gender Stereotypes and Elementary School Teachers

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Abstract: In this study we explored the perception of gender stereotypes among elementary school teachers. Respondents (280 teachers) answered questions about their perception of the suitable behaviour according to the gender. Significant interactions emerge between teachers' and pupils' gender. The primary purpose of this paper was to find out on how teachers' stereotypes affect their behavior towards elementary school-children. Results of the research were generally consistent with gender role stereotypes.

Keywords: gender, children, teachers, stereotypes.

Introduction

Schools are considered public places. However, within the public sphere of school there also lies a very private domain. Staying neutral seems to be the most common attitude adopted by teachers when confronted with gender-challenging behavior. Is it really so? Do teachers realize their gender stereotype attitude? These were the questions in the focus of our research. Stereotypes are "overgeneralized beliefs about people based on their membership in one of many social categories" (Anselmi – Law, 1998). Gender stereotypes vary on four dimensions: traits, role behaviors, physical characteristics, and occupations (Deaux, 1985). For example, whereas men are more likely to be perceived as aggressive and competitive, women are more likely to be viewed as passive and cooperative. Traditional gender stereotypes are most representative of the dominant (white, middle-class) culture. H. Landrine (1985) asserts that although race and social class may not be mentioned when inquiring about gender stereotypes, most people will make assumptions about these categories. Her research suggests that when race and social classes are specified, different gender stereotypes emerge. Physical characteristics and occupations have also been considered consistent or inconsistent with masculine or feminine roles. Behavior is strongly influenced by gender roles when cultures endorse gender stereotypes and form firm expectations based on those stereotypes (Eagly, 1987). It is generally accepted that stereotype knowledge is acquired early in childhood, is highly overlearned, and is relatively resistant to change (Devine, 1989; Wilson et al., 2000).

By the age of three, children readily distinguish between males and females, and associate certain objects (e.g. trucks) more strongly with one gender (boys) than with the other. At the same time, with the development, children typically show a strong increase in gender stereotype flexibility and recognition that the gender stereotype can be inaccurate (Serbin – Sprafkin, 1986). For instance, older children admit that although trucks are more commonly associated with boys, girls can play with trucks as well. Thus, to the degree that stereotype knowledge can influence spontaneous behavior (Strack – Deutsch, 2004) the emergence of spontaneous discriminatory behavior in childhood may resemble the developmental course of stereotype knowledge acquisition. In other words, even when children have acquired the mental flexibility to reject a social stereotype, this newly acquired flexibility may leave behavioral manifestations of automatically activated stereotypes unaffected (Greenwald et al., 2003). Children learn these role expectations that may lead to the gender gap not only from their parents but from various forms of media, such as television cartoons and educational textbooks (Brownlow – Durham, 1997). Textbook images may depict a "hidden curriculum" of what is considered a perfect society, and this may have an effect on children's academic and career interests (Potter – Rosser, 1992; Powell – Garcia, 1985; Shepardson – Pizzini, 1992). Ironically, although textbooks are considered vehicles for learning, they may actually hinder success in half of the student population.

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Additionally, research has shown a strong gender gap in the interest in school subjects. Researchers have found that between the ages of 9 and 13 a crucial change occurs in the attitudes of female students toward science. Girls at the age of 9 still desire active participation in scientific observations but by the age of 13 they report a significantly decreased desire for such experiences (Kahle – Lakes, 1983; Potter – Rosser, 1992). By the high school age, male students express greater interest in math and science fields than their female counterparts by enrolling in more math and science courses (Kahle – Lakes, 1983; Potter – Rosser, 1992; Smith, 1992). These findings support the idea that the gender gap in math and science does not fully materialize until upper-level grades, indicating that male and female students may be “taught” which academic pursuits are appropriate for them as they grow older (Bleeker – Jacobs, 2004).

If women and men demonstrate differences, those differences fit gender stereotype expectations. The stereotype threat may be one potential mechanism for reducing women’s performance and interest in math and science areas. Stereotype threat is a well documented phenomenon by which individuals, fearful of confirming a negative stereotype about their group, display decreased performance on a task relevant to negative stereotype (Steele – Aronson, 1995). But are the teachers aware of their gender stereotyped behavior? Do they accept gender nonconforming behavior? Research data from Greek primary teachers show that, even at the primary school level, teachers occasionally observe and identify children’s behavior that does not conform to stereotypical expectations. Reporting gender nonconforming behavior is more prevalent in non-heterosexual populations, and many lesbian, gay and bisexual people affirm that their perceptions of being different, as well as acting differently from their peers or family members, had already developed from an early point in their lives, and even in their teen or pre-teen years (Gerouki, 2010). That is why, we were interested in examining whether Slovak teachers treated boys and girls with the same respect and supported every child to express ideas and participate fully.

Methodology

The study is quantitative in its approach and was undertaken among elementary school teachers in Bratislava district. Of the 280 teachers, 17 were males and 263 were females. Questionnaire research was considered an appropriate form of data collection to explore teachers’ gender stereotyped behavior. The questionnaire was developed by the researcher and contained 25 items that covered the following categories: (a) teachers’ opinions about aggressive behavior, assertivity, dominance and creativity; (b) teachers’ behavior related to nonconformal gender approaches. Respondents were asked to rate each item on a Likert-type scale from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree) along with four ordinal-polytomous questions which provided the teachers with an opportunity to express their preferences for toys and colors suitable for children according to gender. The 25 items of the questionnaire appeared in a random order, not according to the category. Respondents were assured in the introduction of the questionnaire that their responses would be kept confidential.

Results

The results of our study suggest that the idea of gender equality is still far from a solved issue in Slovakia. 14.5% of teachers admitted a different approach to children depending on gender and 27.5% of them claimed to keep dividing children into gender groups, which can be one of the worst ways how to implement some inappropriate ideas about genders.

In gender literature physical aggression and assertiveness is understood as a typical feature of boys. Aggression is directed against someone or something and assertiveness could be defined as being self-confident. Already at an early age boys show more physical aggression, such as hitting or kicking, than girls. This difference continues throughout childhood and into adulthood. Boys also show higher levels of assertiveness than girls, though the difference is not as great as for physical aggression.

Gender differences like these have been identified in several studies of girls and boys in numerous countries (e.g., Cook – Cook, 2008). In our research 72.5% of respondents expressed more aggressive behavior among boys comparing to girls. Interestingly, 77.5% of our respondents did not agree that assertiveness is typical attribute for the behavior of boys. According to our results even the assessment of verbal aggressivity was not typical of girls, which is a completely different view than we expected. 85% of our respondents expressed the opinion about verbal aggressivity as an untypical attribute for girls.

Some researches suggest richer vocabulary of girls at elementary schools. For example, girls tend to produce words at an earlier age, have larger vocabulary, and show a higher level of language complexity beginning in early childhood (Cook – Cook, 2008). However, our respondents did not confirm this idea. 72.5% of teachers did not agree that boys do not possess as rich vocabulary as girls do.

62.5% of our respondents thought that boys more often use vulgar words in comparison with girls. The belief that women's language is more polite and more refined is widespread and has been prevailing for many centuries (Coates, 1992). Many cultures all over the world not only condemn the use of linguistic taboos in general, but also condemn the use of vulgar language by women, and its use by men in front of women. In fact, some people, such as the Amerindians, Polynesians, and Japanese, swear very little, or not at all (Crystal, 1997).

47.5 % of the respondents thought that girls are more submissive than boys, 50% did not agree that boys are more individual than girls. However, girls are more likely to seek and to receive help than boys, and some studies indicate that girls are more easily influenced than boys (Cook – Cook, 2008).

Another point where boys are generally viewed as different from girls is creativity. Researches show that this is probably one of the gender stereotypes. Several studies examined gender differences in four cultures: the United States, Germany, Australia, and India. This study showed that in the United States, boys scored higher on originality than girls, while girls scored higher in figural elaboration. In all other samples, except those collected from India, gender differences were non-significant. In India, boys scored significantly higher than girls in figural originality. This study also involved a comparison of changes in performance between the third and the fourth grade, on figural, verbal, and total measures. The data showed that the United States sample showed more often a gain from the third grade to the fourth grade, while the reverse was the case for the sample from the other countries in the study, suggesting the importance of cultural factors (Sulaiman, 2009). Similarly 75% of our respondents did not agree with the idea about more creative abilities of boys.

An interesting result was discovered when teachers should have written which colours are appropriate for children's clothes according to the gender. The least suitable colour for the boys' clothes is pink colour (47.5%) according to teachers while most of the respondents agreed (73%) that all colours are suitable for girls. Probably, the reason for not accepting pink colour as suitable for boys' clothes is the homophobic stereotype about its preference among gays. Interestingly, there is not known a stereotype associated with the colour not suitable for girls. It suggests a more homophobic social attitude of the Slovak society toward men.

Discussion

Our research suggests that children in Slovak elementary schools are under strong social gender pressure. The most obvious it was with colours and toys appropriate for children. Apart from peer pressure there is also the social pressure visible, for example, in the catalogues of toys where specific toys are showed as appropriate for boys or girls. Even though the teachers showed a big tolerance in case of using untypical toys according to the gender (76.47% would not notice similar activities) our research shows strong influence of social pressure in identification with socially appropriate toys. In

our opinion teachers should try to express more tolerant ideas which could help children who are under strong critics of their classmates. Teachers should not show their preferences when children play with toys not typical for the gender. And children should have possibility to choose toys according to their interests without fear of social reaction of their classmates and teachers. Here we can see the task for teachers to accept differences among children.

Every person brought up in a community must implement some values and patterns of behavior. As the results of our research suggest Slovak teachers show gender stereotype behavior as well. We believe that education of Slovak teachers in this area is not sufficient and the current state should be improved. On the other hand, the majority of our respondents were interested in our research and its results. A similar research was conducted at high schools in Bratislava in 2003. The results of the research also confirmed several stereotypical attitudes in connection with gender. Teachers (men) insisted on keeping the male gender roles and women on keeping the female gender roles. Men (teachers) more than their colleagues (women) agreed with the statements about better logical thinking of boys. They also thought that boys are better leaders. Opening windows, manipulation with technical devices were mostly considered as boys' tasks. On the other hand, tidying up the classroom, watering flowers were considered to be girls' tasks. Teachers (women) agreed with statements about gender roles of girls. For instance, they considered swearing of girls less acceptable than swearing of boys. And they considered girls to be generally more disciplined than boys. If it was necessary to collect money or to fulfil some responsible tasks they preferred girls (Cviková – Juráňová, 2003).

We believe that the results of our research showing some aspects of gender stereotypical behavior among teachers reflect of the whole society. However, teachers as experts should realize first what is dangerous in gender stereotypes and bias.

Conclusions

The aim of the study was to investigate teachers' practice in teaching for gender equality. The findings of this study raise important questions regarding the state of gender equality in elementary schools in Bratislava district. The findings lead to the conclusion that gender equality still remains an opened area. Unfortunately, we were unable to compare our research with similar studies from elementary schools in Slovakia. What is more, the findings have revealed that some of the teachers lacked a clear understanding of what teaching for gender equality means and continued to reinforce gender stereotypes unintentionally.

We believe that it is a part of the school mission to provide an environment where all pupils feel respected. In this point of view, it should be possible also for the educational community to reach out to the families and bring new ideas and views to the area of gender equality or gender nonconformity. For this reason, teachers should be encouraged to reflect their own bias and ideology critically and, moreover, to question their classroom practice. The data from this work indicate that even during elementary school years teachers are aware of pupils' behavior that challenges gender assumptions. In the light of this, exposing elementary children to gender equality activities may help them form attitudes of respect towards others and gender acceptance.

The responsibility thus lies mostly with teachers who must, on the one hand, understand all aspects of gender stereotypes and, on the other hand, take this understanding into consideration when planning education process. From these reasons we recommend that teacher education should make gender equity the central objective in teacher training. Therefore, teachers should re-conceptualize the notion of teaching for gender equality. Teachers should be also informed about existing policies and have opportunities to develop or take part in school policies for gender pedagogy. During their professional lives, teachers meet a wide range of children with different socio-cultural and economic backgrounds. However, as professionals, they should be able to reconstruct their assumptions and stereotypes and come up with new ideas and views.

Literature

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