A guide to gender equity in early childhood education

By Annie Kelly

Introduction

Gender identity and gender roles are developed very early on in life. Influences from parents, schools, media, games, and toys all influence the way that children establish their understanding of what makes someone a boy or a girl, a woman or a man, male of female. The dominant discourse in the United States and in most places around the world emphasizes the gender binary and gives more power to the male voice.

This structure presents itself even in preschool classrooms and it can be difficult to change these notions when they are formed at such a young age. Many nursery school teachers say that their students do not notice gender and so they do not pay much attention to it either. Others simply think that gender is purely a result of nature, that no matter what, boys will be boys. In my field placement at a preschool outside Philadelphia, the teacher said that girls playing with sticks and boys playing in the house area were idealistic, that she could not influence how they wanted to be. The field of developmental psychology gives merit to this notion. Some teachers, in an effort not to influence the child’s gender development, try to allow their students to develop naturally and independently. This tactic backfires, however, for no choice can be completely free of social influence and teachers often fail to interfere in patterns that lead to the polarization of genders and to sexist behaviors. It is important to recognize the belief system, culture, values, and social framework of each child that contributes to their identity.

Teachers should take a proactive, rather than reactive, approach to gender in the classroom. The goal of this book is to demonstrate some of the theories teachers in early education can use to help students create a positive view of themselves and to find less restrictive definitions of what is feminine and what is masculine.

Brrriiinnnnggg… Brrriiinnnnggg…

The alarm clock rings at 7:00 in the morning to wake Taylor up. Taylor jumps out of bed because every day is an exciting day at Jellyfish Preschool.

I purposefully keep the main character gender-neutral in looks and in name choice. I am drawing inspiration from Swedish storybooks that do not specify the gender of the protagonist and sometimes use a third pronoun to replace he/she. While I will not be doing this because we do not have a well-acknowledged pronoun to use, I will try to exclude naming Taylor as a girl or a boy. Even that categorization can be problematic as it confirms the dichotomy of gender, and when paired with illustrations, often promotes stereotypical patterns and behaviors.

When Taylor arrives at Jellyfish preschool, all the other families greet each other. Taylor’s best friend is waiting on the other side of the door, but first, Teacher Garcia wants to know if Taylor can tell him how many fingers he is holding up.

This page shows for the readers the various forms that families can take, emphasizing that men and women can play many different roles within a family and in relation to the rest of society. Additionally, I adopted the Quaker tradition of using Teacher instead of Mr. or Mrs. to avoid labeling someone based off of his or her looks, although the teacher is male. There are theories that the high number of female teachers in early education has an influence on the development of stereotypical gender roles. Female teachers dominate the field of early education and become an important figure in a child’s development; children fit these figures into gender patterns that they already see. Female teachers can be seen as just doing an extension of their jobs as mothers. Male teachers, on the other hand, can act as a model of a man who is both caring and nurturing, a role that is not very common in our society. It is of course not necessary to be a male teacher in order to have a gender-neutral classroom, but I wanted to try to provide this type of male role model through literature. One way that women can use their gender to their advantage in the classroom is to become familiar with mechanical, mathematical, or scientific activities that they may have little experience with in order to show girls that these are also appropriate activities for them and to support them if they have future interest in these areas.

Taylor joins into the individual activities. It looks like fun! Everyone is building triangles, squares and rectangles out of blocks.

“Good job, Leah! You are so good at that,” Teacher Garcia says.

“Be careful, Jose! Squares have four equal sides.”

“Almost, Jackie. Can you tell me why that is not a triangle?”

“That looks great, George.” On this page, Teacher Garcia gives equal praise and time to all students. The 1992 American Association of University Women report showed that teachers showed much more attention to males than to females in early education. Teachers “typically interact more with male students, whether it is to verbally reprimand them, to answer their questions, to elaborate on their comments, or to help them with schoolwork” (Evans 83). While girls can be more timid, they do not deserve any less care from the teacher. Teachers who give the students the time they need to think, who probe and ask questions, will show them that they are smart and that their thoughts matter.

Even if a teacher gives feedback to the students, often times the type of feedback varies depending on gender. Girls are more often praised for their cooperation and boys for their achievements. Additionally, studies showed that even when boys received negative feedback on their math tests, that feedback reflected their lack of focus rather than their lack of skills. Girls on the other hand, although not receiving as many negative comments, were more likely to internalize their intellectual incompetence (Dweck 1978).

Look at the rectangle Taylor made! What else is the shape of a rectangle?

A mirror?

A door?

A flag?

A ball?

Then Taylor hears Teacher Garcia call, “Kids, it’s story time!” Everyone gathers up close to hear the story. “Today we will be reading *The Unbeatable Squirrel Girl*.”

 Literature lacks strong female characters in both quality and quantity. There are over twice as many children’s books with male protagonists than there are with female protagonists, and this inequality has been ever more obvious in recent years (Chemaly). The female characters that are present tend to play a back seat in the story, acting as passive or dependent and set in weak or stereotypical roles. Girl characters still often need the assistance of boys to help them solve the dilemma (Evans 85). *The Unbeatable Squirrel Girl* is a comic that has a strong female character, who is not portrayed in a sexualized manner (as many women in comics are), and is a good example of someone is both smart (she attends college while outwitting her enemies) and fierce. Reading literature should only have a positive effect on a child’s self image.

Despite the fact that characters are so often men, literature in early education can sometimes be exclusive to boys. In order to draw boys more into the activity, it helps to allow them to enter on their own terms. Using comic books and stories about super heroes can give them the opportunity to do that.

Squirrel Girl is so smart, fast, and so cool that at playtime, everyone wants to be her. They climb up ladder to the monkey bars and scamper across like a squirrel.

Everyone is playing along, but Leah and Jackie have to play on the swings because there is never any space on the monkey bars.

Luckily, Teacher Garcia is there to save the day. “Leah, Jackie, would you like to play on the monkey bars too?” he asks, and he brings them over to make sure the other kids made space for them.

Not only do boys tend to demand more attention, as mentioned earlier, but they also tend to dominate the physical space, even playing on the bigger playground equipment (Evans 83). A teacher might think that two girls playing on the swings is a normal occurrence, but this assumption might stop a teacher from stopping boys from taking over more space than girls. The girls might be uncomfortable playing where all the boys are, do not want to ask to have a turn, or maybe just like the swings. Either way, the teacher has the power that sometimes the students do not think they have to change the structure.

When Leah goes, she is the fastest kid in her class, and even beats Taylor in a race to cross the monkey bars.

Taylor is sad that that Leah won and stands alone on the side. Teacher Garcia goes over and asks, “Would you like to play with the dolls with me?”It signals to the student that it is okay to interact with a space if the teacher enters it with him or her.

Taylor is happy playing with Teacher Garcia and the dolls. No one can win or lose in that activity. Taylor creates a whole town of people.

Taylor starts to play with the dolls when Johnny comes over.

“Ewwwww…You put girl clothes on that guy! You can’t do that!” Johnny says.

“Says who?” Taylor answers.

“Everyone. You can’t put pink on boys,” replies Johnny.

“So only girls can wear pink?” Teacher Garcia asks.

“Yeah. My dad says that we have to buy all pink clothes for my baby sister.”“Then can only boys can wear blue? What about Jackie? She’s wearing blue”

“Well she *can* but she’s still wearing a boy color.”

“What about the other colors? Yellow? Red? Who can wear them?”

“Hmmm, I don’t know. I guess anyone. I don’t know; that’s just how it is.”

“Do you think that’s right? Do you think people should be able to choose what they want to wear?” asks Teacher Garcia.

Taylor pipes in, “I hate it when my dad picks out my clothes for me.”

“Oh, I hate that too,” says Johnny. “I everyone should be able to pick their own clothes.”

It can be easier for girls to cross gender expectations than for boys without social repercussions. When Naima Brown interviewed six-year-old students in a classroom about ever wanting to be a different gender, the responses were very different. Girls giggled, looked at each other, and responded “maybe,” whereas boys avoided eye contact with each other and adamantly rejected the notion (64). When boys act in feminine ways, they are often designated with queer labels, thus reaffirming the gender binary and emphasizing the differences between the sexes instead of the similarities. Teachers award more praise to children who engage in stereotypical play, and teachers and parents tend to be more concerned when boys do not show as much interest in interacting with other boys or in “masculine” activities. Teachers should facilitate activities based on interest, not gender, and should praise non-stereotypical play. When gender expectations are met, many educators fail to intervene because they fail to see the social dynamic that gender identity is a part of.

Even at a young age, students should participate in facilitated open dialogue about gender issues. Children are subjected to social discourses, but they also have their own agency and should have the opportunity to work through their understanding of social identity. Asking the students their own opinions and listening to what they have to say is a great source of information. As in this case, outside influences shape their opinions, and asking them questions is a way to place them within a social and cultural context. Teachers should take their students’ queries seriously, and stop confirming gender categorization. Questions can be bounced back on the students to challenge them. Teachers can also involve parents in discussions about gender awareness. Parents who are involved are more likely to continue work with gender equity in the home. It’s almost 12:00, and soon the day will be over and it will be time for lunch. Taylor is tired but had so much fun at school today and learned a lot and thinks that everyone else did too.

Taylor goes home, eager to play like Squirrel Girl, make shapes out of blocks, and choose new clothes for tomorrow.

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