

Inequalities in Education in Relation to Gender

Professor Paul Connolly
Queen's University Belfast

Keynote Address to 'Changing Attitudes 2006: Inclusion Thrives'
Conference Organised by Pre-School Learning Alliance

16-17 March 2006, Milton Keynes, UK

Gender is everywhere ...

“Gender is a major all-determining category of development ... [It] needs to be understood as a way of being, thinking, experiencing and feeling that fundamentally drives and influences development. Children’s gender influences every aspect of their own development, from their values, beliefs, language, emotion, imagination, cognition and style of communication to their involvement in physical activities, use of space and social relationships.”

Glenda Mac Naughton

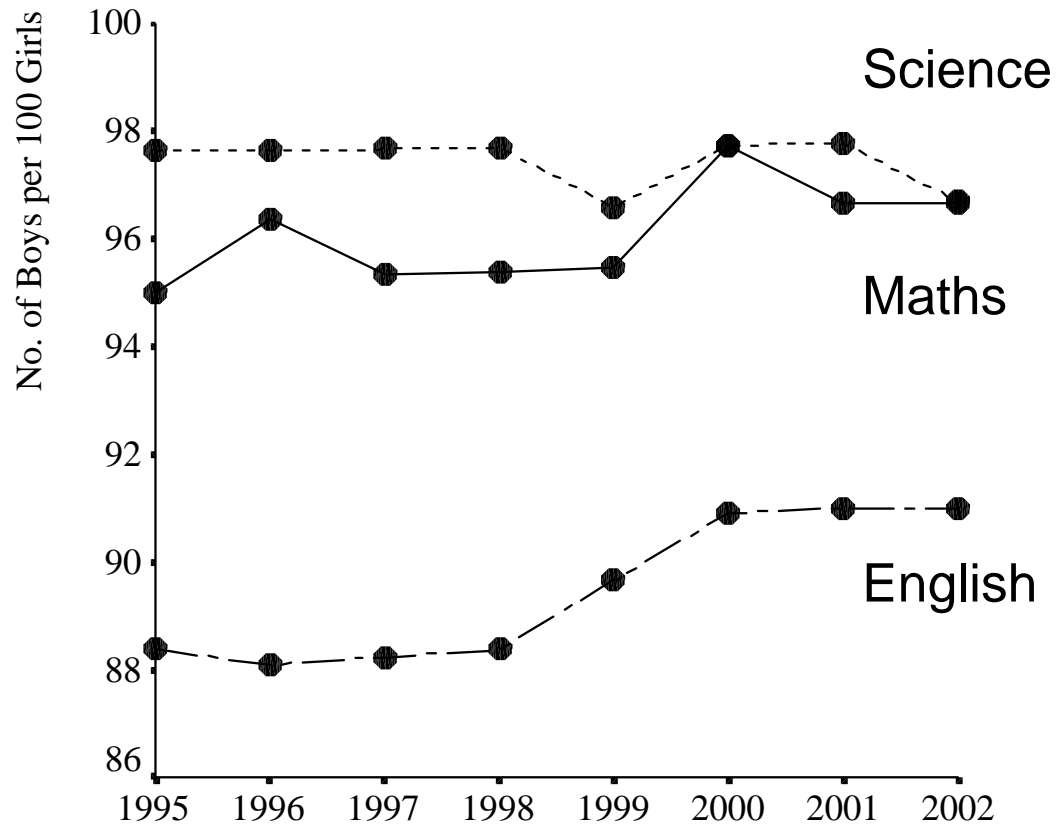
... and yet nowhere

Traditional approaches to individual development planning can actually miss all of this:

- Gather observations of individual children
- Organise the information in relation to child development categories such as: cognitive, physical, emotional and social development
- Plan developmentally appropriate experiences on the basis of this information
- Gather further observations

Within this approach to individualised observations and planning, key patterns of gender differences remain hidden:

- Play choices
- Use of space
- Use of time
- Early educational attainment



Number of Boys Per 100 Girls in England Reaching or Exceeding Expected Standards* in National Curriculum Assessments of 7 Year Olds in English, Mathematics and Science

Outline of the Presentation

1. Understanding gender differences among young children: sex-role socialisation theory and its limitations
2. Looking at gender differently: 'Gender Projects'
3. Addressing gender issues in early years settings

1. Understanding Gender Differences

Sex-Role Socialisation Theory:

- Difference between 'sex' and 'gender'

Masculinity

Femininity

Independent

Dependent

Active

Passive

Strong

Weak

Objective

Subjective

Rational

Irrational

- Emphasis on socialisation of boys and girls

Problems with Sex-Role Socialisation Theory:

- Treats boys and girls as passive
- ‘Gender absolutism’
- Ignores issues of power:
 - Between (and within) groups of boys and girls
 - Institutional nature of gender

2. Looking at Gender Differently: 'Gender Projects'

- a. Emphasis on the active (and unfinished) roles individuals play in constructing their gender identities (i.e. gender as an 'ongoing project')
- b. Gender identities are therefore diverse and context-specific: masculinities and femininities
- c. Three levels:
 - Individual level
 - Cultural/ideological level
 - Structural/institutional level

a. The active role that children play:

Daniel: Miss! Miss! Miss! [*referring to PC*] me and Annette we broke off Stephanie's peg! [*in the cloakroom*]. When we're upstairs [*i.e. for an interview*] we'll tell you!

PC: What peg?

Daniel: Annette saw it wobbling and Annette broke it off! [*Annette walks over to the table and remains standing*]. Annette, didn't me and you break off that peg?

Annette: [*nods and smiles before calmly putting her work on the table*]

Paul: And me!

Annette: [*Shakes head*]

Paul: Yeah! I did didn't I Daniel?

Daniel: [*no response*]

Paul: Come and sit here Annette [*pulling back the chair next to him for her to sit on*]

Annette: [*walks over and sits next to Paul*]

Continued ...

a. The active role that children play:

... *Continued*

Daniel: [*to Paul and Annette*] Are you two going to have sex? [...] He pinches your bum!

PC: Who pinches your bum?

Daniel: Paul!

PC: You've just said they're going to have sex - who do you mean?

Daniel: Yeah them two are going to have sex! [*pointing to Paul and Annette*]

Paul: No! Them two! [*pointing to Annette and another boy sat at the table*]

Daniel: No! Her and him [*pointing to Annette and then PC*] are going to have sex!

Annette: Nnoooo!

b. Different Forms of Gender Identities (social class):

“What would you like to be when you grow up?”	
<i>Working Class Boys</i>	<i>Middle Class Boys</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">•‘Professional skateboarder’•‘Doctor’•‘Jet pilot’•‘Footballer’•‘Racing car man’•‘Scientist’•‘TV presenter’•‘Artist’•‘A person who finds dinosaur bones and fossils’•‘Sea-diver’•‘Policeman’	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•‘Build houses’•‘Fix cars’•‘Footballer’•‘Kill rats and get a gun’•‘Work with my daddy’•‘Make stuff with wood’•‘Join the army’•‘Fireman’•‘Clean carpets’•‘Just go to work’

Working Class boys:

Interviewer: In school what about sums, do you like doing sums?

Adrian: No

Tommy: No

Interviewer: Why?

Adrian: Because too boring

Interviewer: What makes it boring?

Adrian: Because you have to, like/

Tommy: /You have to, you have to think about it and write the number
– a hundred plus a thousand and all

Adrian: I know

Interviewer: And do you find it hard or easy?

Adrian: Hard

Tommy: Hard

Continued ...

... Continued

Interviewer: What about reading, do you like reading?

Jamie: No

Cameron: No

Interviewer: No? Why not?

Cameron: I don't

Jamie: It's wick! It takes my memory away

Middle class boys:

Interviewer: Do you think it's important to go to school?

Stephen: Yeah, it's really important.

Interviewer: Why?

Stephen: Because if you didn't go to school you wouldn't learn anything.

Robert: And because you wouldn't even know what maths is!

Stephen: Yeah and you wouldn't even learn to read or anything/

Robert: /And you couldn't even say the alphabet

Stephen: No, or you couldn't say numbers.

Interviewer: Is that important? Why does it matter?

Stephen: Because it's very, very good to go to school because you learn a whole lot of things.

Robert: When you grew up you wouldn't be smart or anything.

Interviewer: What would happen then? If you didn't go to school at all what do you think would happen?

Robert: Well, you would get very, not smart and then you wouldn't know anything

Comparing the middle class and working class boys:

<i>Working Class Boys</i>	<i>Middle Class Boys</i>
Externally-expressed forms of masculinity	Internally-expressed forms of masculinity
Emphasis on strength and physical prowess	Emphasis on demonstration of specialist knowledge and technical skills

Health warning!

Need to avoid replacing one set of stereotypes with another! The above are only broad tendencies found in one study – much variation within each category.

b. Different forms of gender identities ('race'):

Example 1

Debbie: You know Stella she's my sister/

Kylie: /She's African Caribbean!/
/

Debbie: /And she's still my sister!

PC: She's your sister? What do you mean she's African Caribbean?

Kylie: She's a Paki!

Debbie: [angrily] No she's not a Paki! She's a normal girl!

[...]

PC: What do you mean she's a normal girl Debbie?

Debbie: You know how she's a normal girl like that - just got African Caribbean on her.

PC: But Indian people are normal aren't they? Debbie?

Debbie: No - not like Indian people!

Continued ...

...Continued

PC: But Indian people are normal as well aren't they?

Debbie: Indian people are normal

Kylie: She's a Paki!

Debbie: No she's AIN'T a Paki!

PC: Do you think it's nice saying "Paki" Kylie?

Kylie: [shakes head]

PC: So why do you say it then?

Kylie: I don't know!

PC: If you were an Indian would you like to be called a Paki?

Kylie: No

PC: No? Why not?

Debbie: [shouts at Kylie] So why do you call other people Pakis?

Example 2

Daniel: I don't like 'em. [Asian girls]

PC: Why don't you like 'em?

Daniel: Because they're tigers! [laughs]

PC: They're tigers?

Daniel: Yeah! They've got a mask on their face like a tiger!

Paul: Daniel, if there, if you go out with one of them – you know what will happen? You know what, what they'll do?

Daniel: What?

Paul: Bite ya!

Stephen: Eat you!

Daniel: Bite your bum off!

Example 3

PC: So I'm just trying to figure out who plays [football] - so Prajay plays does he?

Paul: Yeah

PC: [...] What about, er, Ajay and Malde [both in a parallel class]

Daniel: Urrr no!

Paul: Nah!

Daniel: They're rubbish!

Jordan: They're always playing crap games!

PC: Why are they rubbish though Daniel?

Daniel: Because they're Paaa-kis!/
/

Stephen: /No, no no! Because they can't run fast! [...]

Paul: Because they're small! [laughs]

Stephen: No! [...] Cos, cos they're Pakis and Pakis can't run fast!

PC: Why? Why aren't they the same as everybody else?

Daniel: Don't know!

Stephen: Cos ...

Continued...

... Continued

PC: Well they are aren't they?

Stephen: [Shouting frustratedly] Cos they're slow and everything!

Jordan: An' they want to be on your side cos you're fast ain't it Stephen?

PC: [...] But you let Prajay play - is he slow?

Paul: No!

Stephen: He's quite fast!

PC: Yeah but he's Indian?

Stephen: Yeah, so, he ain't got a dot on his head!

Jordan: His mum has!

PC: Yeah but Ajay hasn't got a dot on his head!

Stephen: Yes he has!

Daniel: No he hasn't!

Stephen: He's got a black one so there!

3. Addressing Gender Issues in the Early Years

- Need for a developmental framework that recognises:
 - the importance of broader social structures and relationships
 - The diversity of young children's experiences and emerging identities
- Lev Vygotsky and process of 'internalisation'

“Every function in the child’s cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level; first, between people (interpsychological), and then inside the child (intrapsychological). This applies equally to voluntary attention, to logical memory, and to the formation of concepts. All the higher functions originate as actual relations between human individuals.”

Lev Vygotsky

The general implications of this:

- No simple, fixed and universal stages of development (either generally or specifically in relation to gender)
- The importance of social context and significant others
- The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD):
“the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers.”

Lev Vygotsky

The implications of this for dealing with gender issues in early years settings:

- There is no ‘blue print’ or one way of doing things
- The influence of gender on young children’s identities, behaviour and relationships will vary from one context to the next
- Two key guiding principles:
 - Need to develop initiatives that ‘begin with where the children are at’
 - Need to focus not just on individual children’s attitudes and behaviour but also the broader social contexts within which they are located (see earlier: cultural/ideological and structural/institutional levels)

Working within the ‘Critical Gender Zone’:

“the distance between what a child has already come to internalise in terms of their current experiences of gender relations and the degree to which they are able to reflect upon and deconstruct these with the help of others”

(See Connolly, 2004: 231)

... and practically:

Begin with careful observations:

- What are the dominant forms of masculinity and femininity found amongst the children in your own setting?
- What role does the setting itself play in reproducing these (the physical environment; resources and materials; adult behaviour)
- How do these dominant forms of identity reflect the broader environment within which the setting is located (i.e. the home and local neighbourhood)

Strategies at different levels:

- Use of stories, circle time, informal chats to encourage young children to reflect upon what it means for them to be ‘a boy’ or ‘a girl’ and to encourage them to broaden their interests/activities
- Adaptation of the layout and use of the setting itself to challenge existing gender stereotypes and patterns of behaviour (posters and displays, use of and access to resources and materials)
- And parents and the local community ...

In all of this:

- Begin with where the children ‘are at’ and use actual experiences and events to explore gender issues ‘naturally’
- Respect the children and encourage them to broaden their experiences and identities rather than to challenge or deny their existing identities
- Learn from other initiatives
- Be patient and don’t give up!

For more information see: www.paulconnolly.net