A case study to determine if the construction of gender stereotypes within the home learning environment influence a child’s choice of resources.
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I joined University Centre Doncaster in 2013 from the University of Surrey in order to complete the last two years of the BA in Early Childhood Studies. The reason I transferred was to be closer to family and friends. I have very much enjoyed my studies at UCD and particularly the placement element which has enabled me to put into practice the knowledge I gained from my studies.
Abstract

Today’s society is dominated by stereotypes. The purpose of this study was to examine to what extent the home learning environment had an influence on a child’s choice of resources. Using a range of different methods, the study investigated the home learning environment through questionnaires with parents and consequently followed this on with interviews and observations of the children in question. The findings from this study highlighted the significance the home learning environment has on the construction of gender stereotypes and a child’s choice of resources. One child from reception and both children from year two had no problem with playing with toys from the opposite sex which contradicts pre-existing research that suggested that as children get older this notion of stereotyping is formed (Brown, 1998; Willian et al., 2007). Evidence of social learning theory was apparent as children regularly observe and imitate what they see others doing (Bandura, 1977).
Chapter 1 - Literature Review

1.2 Gender Roles – Historical

Historically gender roles were considerably different to current roles females and males hold today. Women in the 1800s had no right to vote and were expected to stay at home whilst men held the power and ruled in society (Lorber and Farrell, 1991; Bartlett and Burton, 2012). It took numerous years and a lot of pressure in social attitude for women to gain legal fairness in line with men (Bartlett and Burton, 2012). In 1984, the ‘glass ceiling’ was an invisible barrier that restricted women in their progression in society. It was still largely acknowledged that a woman’s place was in the home and that work was a short-term occupation before raising children due to their disposition to nurture that suited them for their sensitive role in the household (Parsons and Bales, 1955). Throughout the 21st century changes in attitudes have enabled women to take up jobs that were not previously acceptable. The demand for highly educated employees and the cultural alterations that have arisen, such as getting married and having children later, have permitted women to take full advantage of higher ventures in human investment (Aina and Cameron, 2011; Bartlett and Burton, 2012).

1.3 Gender Theory

Gender development is an important and critical aspect in a child’s earliest learning experiences. The construction of gender serves as a prominent feature in a child’s life and acts as an important influence on how their life is lead (Narahara, 1998; Greco, 2013). With advanced technology being developed in the 21st century, parents have the opportunity to seek the gender of their child before birth and therefore actively construct the foetus as a gendered identity (Grieshaber, 1998; Browne, 2004; Greco, 2013). According to Connell (1995) within society every day is an ‘arena of gendered politics’ meaning that there is a constant debate around roles and associations of both men and women. Therefore the construction of gender in the womb or soon after birth means vulnerability to specific gender associations, principles and social influences (Connell, 1995; Grieshaber, 1998). The Biosocial approach is an approach where it is believed that together both nature and nurture
play a role in gender development. This theory identified that when a male or female is born, social classification and differential treatment of boys and girls intermingle with biological influences to steer development (Money & Ehrhardt, 1972). Looking from a sociological point of view, gender roles are socially constructed; created by specific environments and dynamics of a particular society (Marsh et al. 2009; Beckett and Taylor, 2010).

Piaget demonstrated that children are active participants in their own development demonstrated as cognitive learning theory (Piaget, 1936). Children have the natural inclination to think categorically therefore forming categories of male and female. Once children receive information that is gender typical each gets placed into the accurate space therefore over time a stereotype is formed which motivates the child in the direction of sex appropriate behaviour not through parental teaching (Martin and Halverson, 1981).

Within society children are surrounded by many significant models ranging from their parents, siblings, friends and teachers at school and these models provide examples to the child in which they observe and imitate which are situated within the micro and exosystem of Bronfenbrenner’s ecological model (Bandura, 1977; Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Bronfenbrenner developed the ecological model and specified that every environmental layer rests upon one another and that the child is influenced by these systems within their everyday life (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Johnson, 2011; Nutkins et al, 2013). The ecological model enables us to understand that children do not develop in isolation, rather in a multifaceted interrelationship with family, the community and global factors where the environment plays a role (Doherty and Hughes, 2009; Howard, 2010). Children become aware of who they are as a person and where to place themselves as a result of engaging with these discourses within the environment (Foucault, 1980; Browne, 2004).

Bandura who developed Social Learning Theory believed that children acquire what is considered gender suitable behaviour as a result of socialisation (Bandura, 1977; Marsh et al. 2009). We acquire behaviour by simply observing others, with research stating that children selectively imitate their same sex parent being their first significant first hand role model with boys specifically wanting to be like their same
Social Learning Theory states that the reason boys and girls act differently is due to being treated in a different way by their parents and others, with parents regularly teaching their children gender roles through interacting in a different manner with boys than girls (Marini, 1990; McIlveen and Gross, 1997; Brannon, 2005; Wells, 2009). Gender role socialisation reiterates and adopts the assumption that children learn what is gender appropriate by observing, imitating and ultimately internalising particular attitudes and behaviours by using other males and females as role models, with parents in particular being considered as one of the most significant sites where this gets done (Ickes, 1993; Anderson and Taylor, 2008).

It is important to recognise that all adults operate with stereotypes, hold deep-rooted ideas about gender and what constitutes suitable behaviour with children picking up upon both positive and negative attitudes and behaviours (Brown, 1998; Willian et al. 2007). We are in a constant process of constructing and amending our thinking of whom we are as well as our place in the world (Wharton, 2005; Browne, 2010). Foucault explored the differences between discourse, power and knowledge in the early years. Discourses are influential and act as lenses determining what you see, do and can often distort what you understand (Foucault, 1980). The term discourse refers to the ideas, notions and beliefs that become recognised as information or an acknowledged worldview, also referring to the emotional, social and institutional outlines and practices that we use to generate significance in our lives (Foucault; 1980; Bilton et al, 1996; Naughton and Williams, 2009).

1.4 Learning Gender Roles

It is important to identify the differences between ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ that are used to classify and identify everyone in society. Sex is down to our biological make up, something that categorises us as either male or female which includes biological variances in either our chromosomes, physical sexual features and hormones. Gender however refers to the social construction of being feminine or masculine, what we believe males and females should be like in terms of appearance, behaviour and attitudes in society (Browne, 2004; Marsh et al. 2009).
Environmental factors offer powerful support for gender role development. A child is exposed to numerous factors within the home learning environment which offers insightful openings to witness males and females behaving in gender-stereotypical ways (Broody, 1999; Berk, 2006). Gender identity which is learnt by the age of three. Gender stability which is grasped by the age of four and gender constancy the understanding that the child knows that despite a boy wearing a dress, his biological sex will remain the same (Minns, 1991; Eliot, 1999; Bee, 2000; Browne, 2004; MacIntyre, 2007). Although children identify themselves and others by either male or female, they cannot truly rely on obvious physical differences and instead know what the signifiers of gender are such as; hair length (Browne, 2004; MacIntyre, 2007).

It is not surprising to learn that parents treat boys and girls differently, with mothers smiling more at their little girls and fathers reinforcing the notion of ‘aggression’ by engaging them more in what we call ‘rough and tumble play’ (Broody, 1999; Eliot, 1999). Many parents believe that their little girls and boys need different stimulation, they need to be taught in a different way, controlled differently and given different levels of protection in order to avoid bullying (Rivers and Barnett, 2013). Children’s activities displayed within the home learning environment eminent between boys and girls prepare them for future roles with parents often regularly discouraging children to play with toys of the opposite sex (Sharpe, 1994a; Wood, 2002). According to Vygotsky imitation and instruction are vital components in order to aid a child’s development (Vygotsky, 1961). Globally, both boys and girls like to play with different toys and interact in different activities, commonly girls with toys such as dolls and boys with toys such as cars. A typical sociological explanation for this is that parents and peers encourage children to play with the socially ‘acceptable’ toys that fit in with society (Maccoby, 1998; Kanazawa, 2008). Parents more than often tend to be more dynamically involved with children of the same sex reinforcing this idea of gender identification and appropriate activities when toddlers discover whether they are male or female.

Growing older with siblings of the opposite sex can have little influence on older siblings regarding gender stereotyping with many holding less gender-stereotyped
attitudes (Stoneman et al. 1986; McHale et al. 2003; Cowie, 2012). Social exchanges among children are a key area where gender role development takes place (Maccoby, 1988). Children have been shown to actively construct gender identities through interactions with their peers. Friendship patterns and peer pressure influence gender stereotypes with boys in particular teasing those who show feminine traits (Thorne, 1993; Morrow, 2006). By the age of six and seven children more often than not separate into gendered groupings for play (Music, 2011; Cowie, 2012). During the primary school years, there is a clear difference in the play of boys and girls. Boys tend to engage in rough and rumble play in large groups and girls place a bigger emphasis on smaller intimate groups (Leman and Tenenbaum, 2011). Whilst young children engage in play with children of either sex, positive reinforcement from their same gendered peers for engaging in appropriate gender typed activities have been found to be a much stronger reinforcement than that from adults (Maccoby, 1988; Martin, 1989; Katz and Walsh, 1991). A child’s interactions with peers of their own age is an extremely substantial socialisation factor, with direct feedback from friends over making up the rules of games or engaging in particular activities children move towards a further understanding of themselves (Handel, 1988; Aina and Cameron, 2011).
1.5 Media

We are absorbed in a media and consumer culture from cradle to grave with the media being a form of teaching that demonstrates us how to look, behave, be popular and conform to norms and values (Kellner, 1995; Aina and Cameron, 2011). The media plays a significant role in the construction of gender and it is largely impossible to avoid any sort of popular culture and advertising (Gauntlett, 2002). In the present-day western world young children are constantly surrounded by marketable goods that are made and advertised specifically for them (Nayak and Kehily, 2008). Advertising is a key influence and uses its power to display stereotypical roles, often presenting men and boys in active professional roles. Whereas women and girls are shown as passive observers with the expectation to look pretty (Ferguson, 1995; McNair et al. 2001). In numerous European countries, television advertising to children is controlled or even forbidden (Derman-Sparks, 2001). Many people acknowledge that there should be restrictions on the consumption of many things, i.e. sugar and salt, however an issue addressed with the current cohort is that screen time is something which is not considered or thought of as a consumption (Sigman, 2007). An issue which is highlighted today is that children now spend more time viewing television than they spend in school. On average a six year old child would have already watched nearly one full year of their lives watching television, with other ‘screen time’ appliances, i.e. IPads, generating much higher figures (Sigman, 2007; Ward, 2013).
Chapter 3 – Research Findings

3.1 Parental Attitudes

Two closed questions focused on this area within the tabled chart of the questionnaire:

Q8: Girls can play football
Q9: Boys can go to Ballet

Identified from these two questions it was acknowledged that 100% of the sample, men (3) and women (4), strongly agreed that girls can play football and boys can go to ballet. This was supported by a response within the questionnaire from the parent of Child A in reception that identified

   Boys were more interested in dolls and pushchairs than girls. Only worry is school age would it cause bullying?

By analysing observations on child A and B, it is evident to see that they are faced with teasing from their peers which in turn resulted in them straying away from the activities deemed ‘inappropriate’. This result is contrary to the suggestion that parents would be more protective of children’s choices because of possible bullying (Rivers and Barnett, 2013).

Parents provided insightful comments regarding their views on the construction of gender and a child’s choice of toys and activities allowing the researcher to identify whether the construction of gender stereotypes within the home learning environment influences the choice of resources. A picture was shown to all parents within the questionnaire with Child D’s father expressing he has no issue with his son playing with dolls and Child B’s parents who talk about their son within this study stating:

   Mum: Children need to play with whatever makes them happy.
Dad: It is obviously leading you to suggest he will turn out gay…. Both gay people and heterosexuals are capable of making caring loving dads, it makes no difference in my mind.

Child C’s mother shows conflicting attitudes stating that if her child was engaging with female type provision all the time she would encourage him to be involved in other activities.

I have no problem with a boy playing with dolls - I think if he only played with dolls and did nothing else I would find myself trying to encourage him to do other activities.

It is evident that parents within this study do not treat their children differently and in fact allow their children to be exposed and play with what would be deemed as gender stereotypical resources. This challenges pre-existing research that emphasises fathers treat their sons differently due to enforcing them in rough and tumble play (Broody, 1999; Eliot, 1999).

Despite parents within this study having no problem with the idea of their child engaging with gender stereotypical toys, it is evident from the interviews and observations that reception children tend to stray towards the gender stereotypical toys and activities displayed within the classroom. These findings have enabled the researcher to challenge earlier research which suggests that boys only like to play with cars and girls only like to play with dolls (Maccoby, 1998; Kanazawa, 2008).

Studying the questionnaires, Child A and C both received a tablet as their main Christmas present. By analysing each questionnaire, the researcher was surprised to see that every child is exposed to less than two hours of technology per day.

Fresh air and imagination only.

However what is important to identify is that Child D’s father expresses that
My child’s first preference would be electronic games playing on tablet and games if given the chance…I’m from a gaming generation and find personal enjoyment and therefore allow the opportunity.

This comment reaffirms social learning theory where child D observes her father playing on these games and therefore wanting to do the same (Bandura, 1977). Parental attitudes in particular of C and D’s use and exposure to technology and the constraints they are faced with at home, was made evident from the observations because these two children demonstrated restricted movement around the classroom and an obsession with the Ipads and computers.

Identified within the questionnaires and observations it is clear to see that Child B observes his father within the home learning environment which is also expressed within the interviews.

He sees me go out on mine most days and begs to come with me.

What the researcher found interesting to identify is that both child A and child D’s desired career path is down to observing and following in the footsteps of their parents which reaffirms social learning theory (Bandura, 1977).
3.2 Peer Contribution

The findings established within this study have revealed many different occurrences where peers have had an influence on a child’s actions in particular within reception with child A and B. Analysing the questionnaire, child B’s mother and father provided insightful comments regarding their sons behaviour within the home learning environment.

**Child B’s Mother:** *Both kids play in my heels and that is ok by me because not only are they having fun, they love me and want to be grown up too.*

**Child B’s Father:** *My son plays with dolls, clothes, shoes, kitchen sets etc but also loves being in the garage hammering and sawing.*

Reinforcing this, the first activity evident within the observations that child B chose were the bricks where he wanted to build a home for mummies and daddies. This activity however was short lived with his peer Child M discouraging child B to engage with this provision.

**Child M:** “What have you built J?”

**Child B:** “I’ve built a house for the mums and dads”

**Child M:** “Why have you built that? That’s a girls game! I’m going to build a construction site do you want to help?”

**Child B:** “Yeah okay”.

Identified within the observational findings, when child B is on his own he interacts with the practitioner.

**Child B:** “Do you like sewing P?”

P: “Sometimes I do, do you like to sew J?”

**Child J:** “Yeah I really like it I think it is fun and interesting”
The researcher who was an active participant within the observations noticed that when child B was not engaging with other children this notion of ‘inappropriate’ play was detected (Thorne, 1993; Morrow, 2006). Following on from this, the researcher was able to distinguish other areas where peer pressure was evident and had an influence on a child’s gender development. Child A has a very strong opinion on gender and holds deep-rooted ideas.

*I play football at home with my friend but only because I’ve got a princess football that’s why.*

Her strong opinion was reiterated during the course of the interview and this statement provided the researcher with essential information showing that the child confidently believes the only reason she can play football is because the ball is pink which is deemed stereotypically female also with the reinforcement from her friend which supports the work by (Maccoby, 1998; Kanazawa, 2008).

Analysing the observation of Child D, the researcher was able to identify that there was evidence of peer pressure within the classroom. Child D was engaging with Child F where both decided to use an app on the iPad to create a story. Child D explains to her peer what the app involves and following on from this uses her voice to create the story.

*Child D: (for the male character) “I am going to do the cooking and I’m going to make pasta”.*

*Child F: “He can’t do the cooking”*

*Child D: “he can!”*

*Child F: “Oh okay”*

Similarly, Child C is in the process of playing on the computer when child K comes over to observe what he is engaging with. Child C is challenged by his peer regarding the colour of the ball he has picked, however contests this and chooses to ignore his opinion.
Child K: “What are you on?”

Child C: “I’m on this game called Kodable

Child K: Why have you chosen the pink ball?”

Child C: “I don’t know really, it doesn’t matter what colour you pick though”

Child K: “hahaha that’s silly!”

Child C: “oh well I don’t care”

Following the analysis of the interviews and observations it is evident that despite child A holding gender stereotypical beliefs, she recognises that both men and women can do the same jobs. However it is reinforced by child J that women cannot ‘fix things’ and therefore Child A agrees which supports the work of Maccoby (1998). By analysing questionnaires, interviews and observations Child A and B reaffirm social learning theory by showing that children do in fact observe and listen to other people (Bandura, 1977). However, Child C and D in year two challenge what social learning theory reinforces by showing that despite being visible to thought-provoking opinions, their views and beliefs matter the most. The researcher is therefore able to confirm findings by Broody (1999) and Berk (2006) which reinforces that a child’s social contexts provide insightful opportunities to identify stereotypical gendered ways and therefore copy.
3.3 Siblings

It has been identified from analysing the interviews and questionnaires that all children apart from child A have younger siblings, with the researcher immersing themselves into the setting finding out that they are all female.

An open ended question was asked in regards to whether parents thought their child’s siblings had an effect on the child in question.

Q2: Do your child’s siblings have an effect on the way they behave/actions?

Each parent gave the researcher imperative information displaying that their children get on well with each other, often engaging in play together.

Child C’s Mother: Yes…together he is more competitive and boisterous but will play more “girly” type games with her with no problem such as with cuddly toys.

Child D’s Father: Yes, however my child’s sibling is of the same sex and therefore I don’t believe there is a massive effect in terms of gender effect.

Supporting these findings, Child B who is a boy is asked in the interviews whether he likes to play with dollies with him then expressing that he does.

“Sometimes because they are nice to play with, my sister likes them”

The findings established within the questionnaires and interviews presents the researcher with key information on the role the children’s siblings have on their brothers and sisters in terms of gender. It is clear to see that each child happily engages with their siblings and their toys, enlisted from parental observations. All children display gender stereotypical behaviour, with child C in particular showing
boisterous behaviour when with his sister which supports previous arguments (Bartlett and Burton, 2012)

3.4 Age

Reception aged children within this study found it strange to be asked questions about whether boys can play with dollies and if girls can be superheroes. Child A whom is female makes it clear that boys do not like them with Child B reinforcing that girls cannot be superheroes.

Child B: No…..Because they are boys dressing up things.

Year two children however challenge their beliefs and had no issue confirming that children can play with whatever toy and activity they chose.

Child D: Because boys can play with dollies because my cousin who is 14 years old and he still likes babies.

Identified from this is that children aged four and five feel that girls cannot play with boy’s toys and vice versa. With year two children aged six and seven acknowledging that there is no issue with interaction with any type of activity or toy. What was interesting to pinpoint is that child B happily plays with his sister and her toys however as shown expresses to the researcher that playing with girls toys is not allowed, presenting conflicting attitudes. This imperative finding displayed combats research which expresses it should be flipped, that older children should have the issue due to having the understanding of what is gender appropriate (Martin and Halverson, 1981; Bee, 2000).

Within this study the researcher was interested to identify how children would describe a boy and a girl and see if they thought they were different from one another. Reception children were interviewed first identifying that boys and girls are different with year two children reaffirming. What was identified is that all children (100%) described boys and girls merely by either their hair length or clothing.
Child A (female): How would you describe a boy: Urm they wear shorts and a shirt
How would you describe a girl: They wear dresses
Are boys different from girls? Yes: Because they’ve not got any hair

Child C (Male): How would you describe a boy: Doesn’t wear a dress
How would you describe a girl: Does wear a dress
Are boys different from girls? Yes: Boys normally don’t have any hair

At the end of the interviews children were asked to choose from a range of pictures as to whom would do what. What was interesting to identify is that Child A in reception specifically choose men to do the stereotypical male jobs and women to do the stereotypical female jobs with child B identifying in some questions that they can do either. However year two, child C and D somewhat oppose this by stating that men and women can do any job.
Chapter 4 – Conclusions and Recommendations

4.1 Conclusion

Numerous hypotheses were made concerning the present study in order to help answer the overall main question. To answer the first question initially devised by the researcher: Whether the home learning environment is the main influential factor in the construction of gender stereotypes. Bronfenbrenner’s ecological model explores the different factors that contribute towards a child’s development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Overall, outcomes of the present comparative case study reinforces the ecological model indicating that numerous influences are involved in the construction of gender stereotypes, not exclusively the parents and the home learning environment that was initially identified within the literature review, but a result of both collectively along with peer contribution shown within the microsystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Devising personal opinions and predictions before the study was conducted the researcher was surprised to be faced with many contradictions. Previous and current research distinguished within the literature search exhibit the vast control parents have and their impact on constructing their children to fit in with society (Money and Ehrhardt, 1972). However this particular study identifies how parents challenge this statement and how relaxed they are in regards to their child’s choice of resources. The key findings found within this study was the major impact that peers had on children, parental attitudes and the challenges that were identified regarding the age differences acknowledged (Martin and Halverson, 1981; Bee, 2000). The results in this particular study acknowledge that children will always pick up upon gender, the differences and the reinforcements they are faced with within the home learning environment. What the researcher did pick up upon is the forces that do influence children to form gender stereotypical views that being within the classroom environment. This is made evident after thorough analysis of questionnaires, interviews and observations enabling the researcher to gain a true picture of the children in question. To answer the second research question: If the social construction of gender has an impact on a child’s choice of resources. Child B in
particular shows that within the home learning environment any toy or activity is deemed appropriate to play with in the eyes of his parents which is evidenced through playing with his sister. However when he chooses to play with gendered toys within the classroom, is discouraged and bought away from the situation.

To answer the third research question: If gender-influenced behaviour is evident within the classroom. It has been acknowledged through extensive analysis that peers influence behaviour within the classroom environment. The researcher has been made visible to many different opinions and evidence displayed within this study to successfully compare children and age to answer the research question. Children within this study have no issue with what they are playing with, it isn’t until peer pressure is exposed that children use other resources this therefore relates to nurture, how they are created by the society that they live in (Marini, 1990; Marsh et al. 2009). What has been identified is that children are always and are continuously going to be exposed to gender stereotypical beliefs throughout life. However what has been uncovered within this study, is where the real issue lies which is within the school environment.
4.2 Recommendations

- The researcher conducted observations on one day, therefore in future practice would conduct a number of observations over a longer period of time in order to recognise if there were any reoccurring themes, gain a better understanding and to reinforce the validity of the research.

- Within this study the researcher used only children and parents to answer the research question in which they thought would be enough to gain a picture of how gender stereotypes are constructed. However obtaining information from this study, it is evident that the construction of gender within the classroom is a major influence. Therefore in future practice the researcher would use practitioners also in order to gain knowledge from a professional point of view and to identify if gender stereotyping is confronted.

- Parental attitudes within this study have been thoroughly positive. It has been identified that the school provides children with plenty of gender appropriate provision however there seems to be a lack of recognition and discipline to stop gender stereotyping within the classroom environment. The researcher would recommend to implement taught sessions to practitioners to then pass on to children on a weekly or monthly basis designed as awareness sessions in order for gender stereotyping to be somewhat challenged.
Reference List


