

Copyright is owned by the Author of the thesis. Permission is given for a copy to be downloaded by an individual for the purpose of research and private study only. The thesis may not be reproduced elsewhere without the permission of the Author.

# **Teachers' perspectives of gender differences in the social behaviours of preschool children**

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree  
of

Master of Arts  
in  
Education

at Massey University, Manawatū, New Zealand

Jessica Anne Smith

2017

## Abstract

The present research study explored early childhood teachers' perspectives about social behaviours and gender in young children, in particular the way in which children's gender related to teachers' reports of the prevalence of, perspectives about, and strategies used in response to children's social behaviours. The specific social behaviours examined within this study were prosocial behaviours, social leadership, social dominance, and aggressive behaviours. This study was designed within an interpretivist and pragmatic epistemology, and used a mixed methods online survey to investigate teachers' perspectives. The online survey was comprised of four sections: demographics; defining social behaviours and their traits; social behaviour scenarios; and gender and *Te Whāriki*. To allow investigation of differential responses related to gender, two versions of the survey were created where the gender of the child portrayed in the social behaviour scenarios differed across survey versions. The gendered scenarios were used to gather data on whether there was a difference in teachers' perspectives about and the teaching strategies used for children's social behaviours based on the gender of the children involved. The majority of the responses to the survey indicated that the teachers identified there to be little difference in the display of social behaviours in young children based on children's gender. However, the two social behaviours which were reported by the teachers as having the most differences based on gender were social leadership and aggression. The teachers' strategies identified in the findings showed that there was some difference in teaching strategies used based on the children's gender, specifically in the areas of social dominance and aggression. The findings provide a snapshot of the way in which teachers define and interpret social behaviours, and suggest that gender plays a limited, but still potentially significant role in the teaching practices they chose to adopt in a variety of scenarios. The teacher's acknowledged the importance of ensuring gender equity in their practices, but findings suggest that further support may be needed to aid in the delivery of equitable practices.

## Acknowledgements

My sincere thanks and appreciation goes to my research supervisors, Dr Tara McLaughlin and Dr Karyn Aspden. This research would not have been completed if it wasn't for all your support and guidance through the ups and downs of the past year. Your belief and determination in this research project, as well as your belief in me completing to a high standard, was the encouragement that I needed to finish. From now on, whenever I see myself slipping back into writing in casual language, I will think of you both yelling at me through your comments!

Without the permission from the three Kindergarten Associations involved, this research would not have been possible. My sincere thank you goes to the three senior teachers from these Kindergarten Associations that I contacted, who were all extremely helpful and very welcoming of my research project. I would also like send a big thank you to all the teachers who took time out of their busy days to respond to this survey. Their insight and knowledge of preschool children has been invaluable to me.

To the Massey Early Years Research Lab (EYRL): Our monthly meetings to discuss successes, challenges, getting advice from other researchers, and being able to pilot my survey with you all, has been so valuable to me. Thank you for listening to me, as well as providing excellent advice. Especially, a big thank you to Linda Clarke, whom I had the privilege of presenting a poster next to at the NZARE ECE SIG in Wellington last year. Linda has become a great email companion as I have moved into these final stages of finishing this thesis and I am very grateful for her support.

To my family and friends: Without all of you supporting and listening to me, this would not have been achieved! The biggest thank you goes to my mum, Professor Claire McLachlan, who has always been there to listen to me rant, to answer my constant questions, and mainly to be my biggest supporter. I would also like to thank my dad, Dr

Clyde Smith, and my stepdad, Simon Barton, who were huge supporters of me completing this Master's degree. Lastly, a massive thank you to my two children, Millie and Declan; I know that weekends spent at home while I tried to meet my deadlines have not been the most fun, but thank you for your understanding that Mummy has to do her work "on the 'puter."

# Table of Contents

<b>Abstract</b> .....	<b>2</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>Table of Contents</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>List of Tables</b> .....	<b>8</b>
<b>List of Figures</b> .....	<b>9</b>
<b>Chapter One: Introduction</b> .....	<b>10</b>
1.1. Overview .....	10
1.2. Background for the Study .....	10
1.3. Rationale for the Study .....	13
1.4. Research Aims .....	14
1.5. Introduction to Key Terms .....	14
1.6. Summary of Chapters.....	17
<b>Chapter Two: Literature Review</b> .....	<b>19</b>
2.1. Introduction .....	19
2.2. Research Aims .....	19
2.3. Search Strategy .....	20
2.4. Social Competence.....	20
2.4.1. Importance of Social Competence. ....	21
2.4.2. Prosocial Behaviours .....	22
2.4.3. Social Leadership .....	23
2.4.4. Social Dominance .....	25
2.4.5. Aggressive Behaviours.....	26
2.4.6. Teacher Perspectives.....	27
2.4.7. Summary.....	28
2.5. Gender.....	30
2.5.1. Prosocial Behaviours and Child Gender .....	33
2.5.2. Social Leadership and Child Gender .....	34
2.5.3. Social Dominance and Child Gender .....	36

2.5.4. Aggressive Behaviours and Child Gender.....	37
2.5.5. Teacher Perspectives and Child Gender.....	38
2.5.6. Summary.....	41
2.6. Research Questions.....	42
<b>Chapter Three: Methodology .....</b>	<b>44</b>
3.1. Introduction .....	44
3.2. Epistemology.....	44
3.3. Methodology.....	45
3.4. Methods .....	46
3.5. Survey Design .....	46
3.5.1. Section One: Demographic Questions .....	47
3.5.2. Section Two: Defining Social Behaviours and Their Traits .....	47
3.5.3. Section Three: Social Behaviour Scenarios.....	50
3.5.4. Section Four: Gender and Te Whāriki .....	52
3.6. Survey Participants.....	53
3.7. Dissemination of the Survey .....	53
3.8. Validity.....	54
3.9. Data Analysis .....	54
3.9.1. Quantitative Data Analysis: .....	55
3.9.2. Qualitative Data Analysis:.....	56
3.10. Ethical Considerations.....	57
3.11. Summary .....	58
<b>Chapter Four: Findings .....</b>	<b>59</b>
4.1. Introduction .....	59
4.2. All Survey Respondents.....	60
4.2.1. Describing the Behaviours.....	62
4.2.2. Behaviour Traits.....	67
4.2.3. Gender and Te Whāriki.....	72
4.3. Social Behaviour Scenarios.....	75
4.3.1. Scenario One: Social Dominance Behaviours.....	77

4.3.2. Scenario Two: Prosocial Behaviours.....	79
4.3.3. Scenario Three: Aggression Behaviours .....	81
4.3.4. Scenario Four: Social Leadership Behaviours.....	83
4.4. Summary .....	85
<b>Chapter Five: Discussion and Conclusion .....</b>	<b>86</b>
5.1. Introduction .....	86
5.2. Teacher Descriptions of Social Behaviours .....	87
5.3. Teacher Reports on Prevalence of Social Behaviours in Boys and Girls .....	89
5.4. Teacher Strategies Used to Manage Social Behaviours.....	92
5.5. Gender Influences on Teachers’ Perspectives .....	93
5.6. Gender Influences on Teachers’ Strategies .....	95
5.7. Strength and Limitations.....	96
5.8. Implications and Future Research.....	98
5.9. Conclusion .....	99
<b>References:.....</b>	<b>101</b>
<b>Appendices: .....</b>	<b>107</b>
Appendix A: Survey Version A.....	107
Appendix B: Survey Version B .....	117
Appendix C: Letter to Kindergarten Associations .....	127
Appendix D: Invitation to Participate.....	129
Appendix E: Ethics Approval Letter.....	131
Appendix F: List of Definitions and Examples of Behaviour Classifications.....	132
Appendix G: Full Data Set for Behaviour Traits.....	139



## List of Tables

<b>Table 3.1:</b> Definitions of the Social Behaviours.....	48
<b>Table 3.2:</b> The List of the Social Behaviour Traits.....	49
<b>Table 3.3:</b> Social Behaviour Scenarios from Both Survey Versions.....	51
<b>Table 4.1:</b> Demographic Information All Respondents .....	61
<b>Table 4.2:</b> Prosocial Behaviour Classifications and Example Behaviours.....	63
<b>Table 4.3:</b> Social Leadership Behaviour Classifications and Example Behaviours .....	64
<b>Table 4.4:</b> Social Dominance Behaviour Classifications and Example Behaviours.....	65
<b>Table 4.5:</b> Aggression Behaviour Classifications and Example Behaviours.....	66
<b>Table 4.6:</b> Behaviour Classifications Across All Social Behaviours .....	67
<b>Table 4.7:</b> The Extent to Which Gender Influences Teachers’ Perspectives.....	73
<b>Table 4.8:</b> Demographic Information of Respondents from Each Survey.....	76
<b>Table 4.9:</b> Social Dominance Scenario Behaviour Classifications and Response Rates Across Survey Versions .....	78
<b>Table 4.10:</b> Prosocial Scenario Behaviour Classifications and Response Rates Across Survey Versions.....	80
<b>Table 4.11:</b> Aggression Scenario Behaviour Classifications and Response Rates Across Survey Versions.....	82
<b>Table 4.12:</b> Social Leadership Scenario Behaviour Classifications and Response Rate Across Survey Versions .....	84

## List of Figures

<b>Figure 4.1:</b> Teacher Reports of Behaviour Prevalence by Gender for Prosocial Behaviours .....	68
<b>Figure 4.2:</b> Teacher Reports of Behaviour Prevalence by Gender for Social Leadership Behaviours .....	69
<b>Figure 4.3:</b> Teacher Reports of Behaviour Prevalence by Gender for Social Dominance Behaviours .....	70
<b>Figure 4.4:</b> Teacher Reports of Behaviour Prevalence by Gender for Relational Aggression Behaviours.....	71
<b>Figure 4.5:</b> Teacher Reports of Behaviour Prevalence by Gender for Physical Aggression Behaviours .....	72