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# **The Formation of Gender Perspectives Among Nursery Class Children**

by

David Woodward MA, DPhil

*Thesis submitted via the Open University's Faculty of Education, for the Degree  
of Master of Philosophy, in February 2002.*

Submission date: 10 May 2002  
Award date: 15 July 2003

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**Statement of acknowledgements and thanks**

I shall maintain throughout this thesis, with a few exceptions, the anonymity of the children, the teachers and the places where I have researched. The exceptions I make are: Dr John Head (King's College, London), Dr Melanie Nind (Open University) and Dr Carrie Paechter (Goldsmiths, London), (without whose critical help this dissertation would not have been possible), and myself. This general anonymity handicaps me in my efforts to acknowledge my appreciation of the abundant assistance and co-operation that I received, especially from the teachers and the children themselves. I nevertheless hope that this statement, without mentioning names, will help to denote my gratitude.

**Abstract**

**The Formation of Gender Perspectives Among Nursery Class Children**

Although there is ample evidence that awareness of gender is well established among older schoolchildren, there is less certainty about younger children. This study is intended to address this deficiency, principally by participant observation of young children in one primary school.

The study, which employed a type of action research, involved working with four nursery staff members, and a total of seventy-eight children (aged three to five) for the equivalent of one day a week, over a period of ten months. The principal aim of the investigation was to enquire into the elements affecting the development of children's gender-stereotyped perspectives. This entailed noting both the verbal and non-verbal behaviour of the children and the influence of external factors, including the media, home background and peers. The study endeavoured to investigate and elucidate gender attitudes, from the children's point of view, while observing their interactions from their own standpoints. Additionally, conversations with parents provided other relevant information.

The researcher and the nursery staff employed a range of strategies, especially adult-child discussions, initially to elicit, and later to endeavour to change, the attitudes of the children. Not all the interventions succeeded, but some did seem to have an effect, with both boys and girls exhibiting some sympathy with the attitudes displayed by the other sex. The study indicates that collaborative procedures can result in children achieving improved scholastic attainment, and self-assurance, while giving staff a better understanding of the children's own perspectives.

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### **Abbreviations**

The initials (am) and (pm) represent respectively the morning and afternoon sessions at Worcester Primary Nursery School (which is a pseudonym) before Easter 1999, while [am] and [pm] represent the morning and afternoon sessions after Easter 1999. The children who were attendant, in both the pre- and post-Easter classes, are represented by the italicisation of the letters am or pm in the brackets following their names, i.e. (*am*), (*pm*), [*am*], or [*pm*].

### **Conventions applied**

I have used three dots to show that a sentence, or part of a sentence, has been omitted in speech or quoted work. I have indicated that more than a sentence in quoted written work or in speech has been missed out with four dots. An unfinished sentence, or hesitation in discourse, is depicted by five dots.

## Chapter 1

### **Introduction**

#### **The principal goal of this investigation**

This inquiry's main goal was an investigation into the elements affecting the growth of gender-stereotyped perspectives inside four nursery classes. This involved deliberating on the past and present home experiences of the children, the influence of classroom teaching and the media, and the changing impacts of companionship groupings on the creation, recreation, and maintenance of gender views. My researches endeavoured to investigate and elucidate gender attitudes, from the children's point of view, while observing their interactions from their own standpoints.

#### **The reason why we should be concerned with gender**

I spent the main part of my teaching career within the primary school sphere, and have very often been curious about the factors that can influence scholastic achievement. I was frequently perplexed as to why so many girls whom I had known, and who had exhibited a great deal of ability in science or mathematics, when in my classes, later failed, in contrast to many boys, to sustain their degree of scholastic enthusiasm in these subjects (patterns also illustrated by David, Weiner & Arnot, 2000). The girls were inclined to choose, at the high school stage, gender-stereotypical options, particularly when entering mixed educational institutions (as also mentioned by Paechter, 1998). The girls failed to progress to university in numbers equivalent to those of the boys, and usually entered gender-stereotypical occupations (a pattern similarly revealed by Riddell & Salisbury, 2000). But, nowadays it is possible that this previous comparative failing of girls is less of an actuality. Should our concern now be expressed for 'Failing Boys' (Epstein, Elwood, Hey & Maw, 1998a)? Certainly it seems, from the current literature, that a more flexible teaching approach is required to help students cope with rapid technical, social, and employment changes, and that our main concern should be focused on 'working-class boys' who

'continue to fail' rather than on social groups such as 'middle-class boys' who 'maintain their educational success' (Lucey & Walkerdine, 2000, p.37).

Furthermore, within this current investigation, I was curious to discover whether my DPhil gender findings, which were made over three years within the same primary school, with mainly seven- and eight-year-olds, could be related to three- and four-year-old children. Until such replication was confirmed, I could not be certain that my earlier findings were applicable beyond the specific age groups that I had studied at that time. I make intermittent references to these earlier research findings, and compare and contrast them, with those arising from the present research, within this present thesis.

#### **The significance of gender issues**

There are many reasons why we should study children's gender attitudes, and the main ones would reflect our wish to discover in which ways early juvenile gender and other behavioural ideas impact on later ones, and how these in turn impact on the characters and opinions of adult people (Chazan, 2000). If even a flimsy connection could be made, then early recognition of elements in a young person's background that produce extreme sex-stereotyping, and often non-supportive and anti-school reactions might indicate the necessity for prompt alleviating measures (Cox, 2000a). We may also see it as important, as seems evident from my research, that we should examine the behaviour of boys and girls for their own benefit, that is, to ascertain the gender characteristics they display in particular settings at specific periods.

It could also be that schooling itself promotes gender attitudes in a less than desirable way (Pilcher, 1999). The gender debate in recent years has often argued that the inequalities observed among adult females and males are, at least partially, the result of injustices instituted and maintained by means of the initial schooling process itself (Cole, 1997).

Stress is now increasingly being placed on teachers to deal with such topics at the nursery stage, rather than within high school educational institutions in which they have, up to now, generally been investigated. Nevertheless, it may still be hard to exactly quantify the activities within the nursery sector that have resulted in unfair gender differences, as my present research indicates.

I have not restricted my research to just the 'isolated' nursery setting, but make very frequent but brief references to influences that affect the children prior to their entry, and also to influential external factors when they were within the nursery environment itself. I found that children came into the nursery classes with fairly firm gender views (as Zemore, Fiske & Kim (2000) found), and distinctive temperaments, and that some who had strong personalities could affect the engendering process within the classroom. I noticed that critical outside family events, e.g. parental depression, separation or child abuse, could markedly alter, either temporarily or on a long term basis, individual conduct and that this in turn could sometimes considerably affect the 'public' behaviour of some of the other children. To some extent not only individual, but also collective behaviour, could change rapidly within a short period of time.

### **Research Questions**

From the broad aim as stated above, the study was maintained, within a type of collaborative research, and using the following research questions:

1. From the abundance of information that we, the nursery staff and myself, acquired, what sorts of child viewpoints might we conceivably formulate?
2. What were the most suitable methods that we might employ in our investigations of gender perspectives?
3. What were the consequences of these investigations on the children's, staff and my own perspectives?

I was also interested, at the same time, in reflecting on more external questions, such as the following:

1. What were the affects of companionship groupings, and particular kinds of family characteristics, on the engendering mechanisms?
2. What were the influences of external media, such as pop music, computer games, videos and television?
3. How did we ourselves influence the development of the children's own gender-categorisations? (Here it must be noted that the nursery teachers could on occasions, expressed or displayed, perhaps unconsciously, 'sexist' demeanour. I avoided, at all times, directly criticising them when this occurred. I tried instead to put forward to them, in a persuasive manner, at later times, alternative non-sexist teaching approaches.)

Throughout the research these questions were used in conjunction with the constant general action research objectives of the nursery staff and myself. These were:

- 1) Our attempts to understand, and analyse, the children's gender attitudes in any situation that arose,
- 2) our efforts to make the children, and ourselves, more aware of gender problems,
- 3) our endeavours to improve the children's self-confidence, their social skills and academic attainments, and
- 4) our attempts to change, or modify, the children's, and our own, gender attitudes, if stereotyped.

#### **The four research nursery classes**

Ideally the sample and setting to be employed in this nursery investigation should be nearly the same as in my original DPhil study, if I was to attempt a degree of replication. In the DPhil investigation the two cohorts were composed of almost equal numbers of boys and girls, who came from the same closely knit upper working class grouping (i.e. 'Social Class

III', Registrar General's classification) and from a similar geographical location. So I returned to the same school, Worcester Primary, where the original study had taken place, to undertake a type of replication study with younger children.

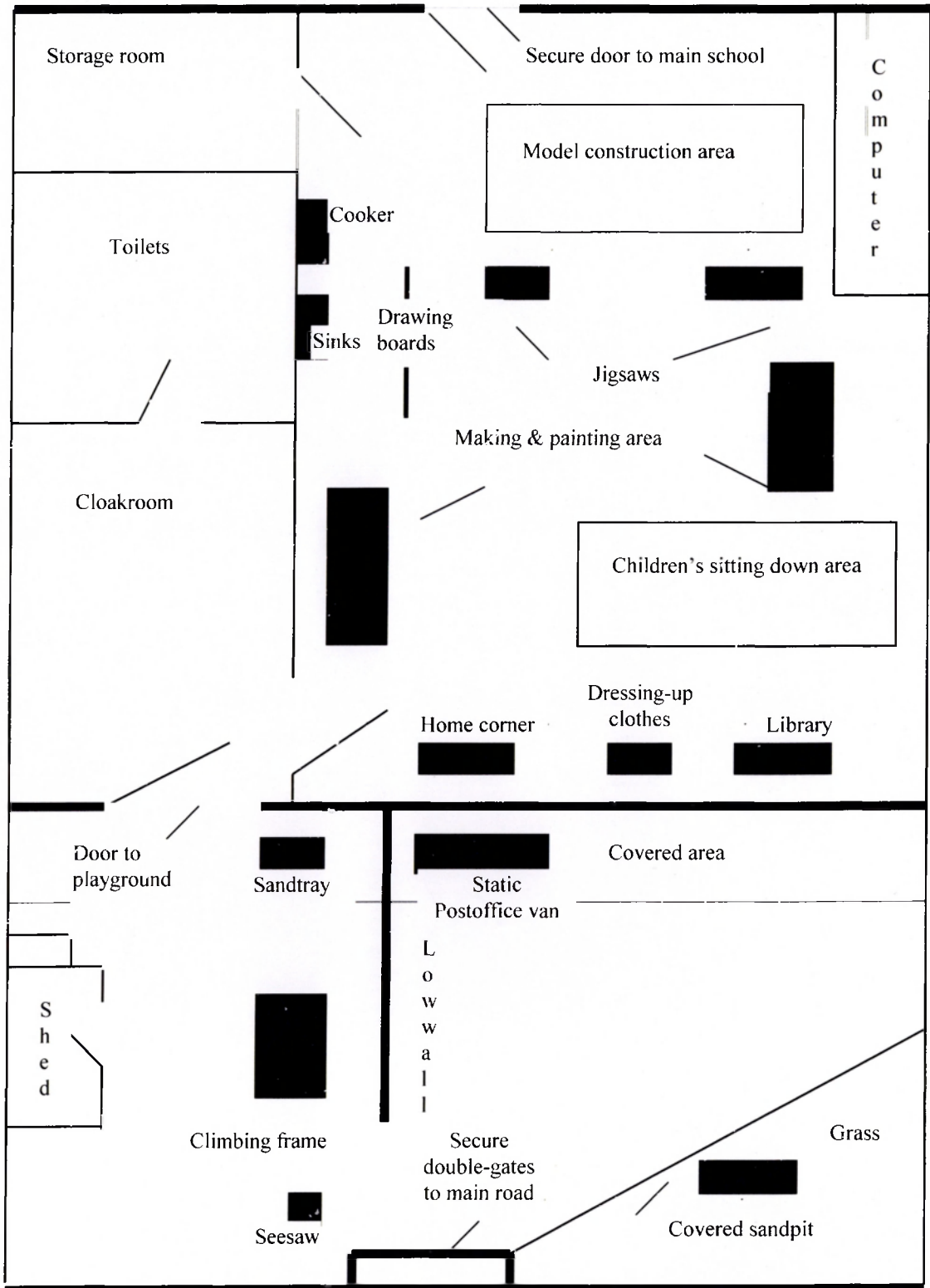
The school is located on a tongue of land on the boundary of the Oxlip Borough of Pembroke, which adjoins onto the Oxlip Borough of Maudlin. Ethnically, the school's parents are predominately white, with at the most five per cent Asian (Indian, Bangladeshi, Pakistani and Hong Kong Chinese), and a smaller percentage of Black-Caribbean. My perception is that racial problems are infrequent within the school setting and outside, but there may be some sporadic name calling. Within the grouping to which most of the parents belong, present, and in some cases past, parental friendships, possibly help towards the parents' and the children's definitions of acceptable gender behaviour.

I collected the majority of the data from October 1998 to July 1999. The research was carried out with one morning (am) and one afternoon (pm) nursery class, prior to Easter 1999, and one morning [am] and one afternoon [pm] class after Easter 1999. The latter two 'new' classes incorporated all the younger children who were present in the earlier pre-Easter 1999 ones. The children concerned were aged between three and five years. Three of the four nursery classes were much the same size. Nevertheless, the pre-Easter 1999 morning session class had a preponderance of girls and older children, while the pre-Easter 1999 afternoon one had a preponderance of boys and younger children (see Tables 1.1 and 1.2; pseudonyms are here employed). There were twenty-six children in each of the two pre-Easter classes; seventeen girls and nine boys in the morning session, and eight girls and eighteen boys in the afternoon session. The post-Easter 1999 morning session was slightly more balanced in terms of sex and age and had eleven boys and fourteen girls, while the post-Easter 1999 afternoon one had a preponderance of boys and older children, thirteen boys and seven girls (see Tables 1.3 and 1.4; pseudonyms are here employed).

There was a significant difference, in terms of gender tolerance among the children, between the pre- and post-Easter classes. The post-Easter ones displayed more non-standard gender behaviour. The dominant overall gender culture of the nursery was distinctly different, in the two periods. This will be discussed in detail, during the course of the dissertation. There was also, within the individual four classes, a marked contrast in ability between the children, regardless of age, and perhaps even more important, as far as the research was concerned, the general dispositional character of the four classes was markedly dissimilar. Morning and afternoon sessions were two and a half hours in length, and the same topics were taught in the afternoons as well as in the mornings. Each session had roughly five parts (see Table 1.5). The Worcester Primary nursery is unusually well furnished with new equipment (see Figure 1.1). 'It's the best equipped nursery I've ever been in,' remarked Mrs Denhart, the new nursery assistant who operated on a full-time basis. Miss Kinsey took the two classes in the nursery, on a part-time basis on Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday while Mrs Gillham, taught there on Thursday and Friday. During the morning sessions there was also a care assistant, Mrs Pope, who was solely responsible for Mark, a boy with Down's Syndrome.

Figure 1.1

A simplified diagram of the layout of the nursery classroom and the outside play area





September 1998 to Easter 1999 - Nursery Class - a.m.

First name	Date of birth	Teachers' comments
Alan	26.08.94	HB: working mother, SB: sociable
<b>Alison</b>	<b>13.07.94</b>	SB: quiet but bright
<b>Clare</b>	<b>08.06.94</b>	HB: 'four older siblings', SB: a quite bright, considerate child
<i>Clive</i>	<i>02.03.95</i>	<i>SB: exhibits cross-gender behaviour</i>
<b>Daisy</b>	<b>23.05.94</b>	SB: very sociable, plays with the boys
Derek	26.05.94	HB: 'parents in the divorce process', working mother SB: behaviour recently affected, a bright child
<b>Edith</b>	<b>09.07.94</b>	HB: 'parents supportive', SB: performs well
<b>Elizabeth</b>	<b>28.07.94</b>	HB: middle child, SB: very sociable, poor linguistic skills
<b>Harriet</b>	<b>19.12.94</b>	SB: affable but quiet
Liam	31.01.94	HB: 'three older sisters', SB: tends to dominate his peer associations
<i>Libby</i>	<i>23.10.94</i>	<i>HB: parents supportive, SB: sociable</i>
Mark	07.05.94	* HB: 'Down's syndrome', SB: 'disruptive'
<b>Mary</b>	<b>01.05.94</b>	HB: non-working mother, SB: affable
<b>Meg</b>	<b>28.06.94</b>	SB: exhibits cross-gender behaviour, 'tends to be bossy'
Neil	01.08.94	SB: very serious but quite sociable
<b>Nicola</b>	<b>14.04.94</b>	SB: poor social relations, isolated, quite bright
<b>Phyllis</b>	<b>14.06.94</b>	SB: affable, an organiser
<b>Polly</b>	<b>16.06.94</b>	SB: quiet, not popular
<b>Rhian</b>	<b>14.06.94</b>	SB: affable
<i>Ruth</i>	<i>22.10.94</i>	<i>HB: no siblings, SB: 'is behaving much more maturely of late'</i>
<b>Stacey</b>	<b>28.05.94</b>	HB: 'mother over possessive', SB: very bright, not very sociable
<b>Sue</b>	<b>22.06.94</b>	SB: popular
<i>Toby</i>	<i>19.11.94</i>	<i>HB: non-working mother, parents supportive, SB: immature</i>
<i>Tom</i>	<i>26.02.95</i>	<i>HB: 'suffers from a genetic illness', stepfather, working mother SB: has difficulty in concentrating, 'disruptive'</i>
Tony	28.02.94	HB: has 'younger brother'
<b>Veronica</b>	<b>13.02.94</b>	HB: 'over protective mother', SB: eager to please

**Key:**

HB: = Behaviour outside school

SB: = Behaviour inside school

Embolden = girls

\* = Special nursery assistant provided

Italics = children who were three years old in September 1998

2 boys + 2 girls = 4 children below four years of age

Class totals: 9 boys + 17 girls = 26 children

Table 1.2

September 1998 to Easter 1999 - Nursery Class - p.m.

First name	Date of birth	Teachers' comments
Alistair	09.07.94	HB: single-parent family, SB: affable
<b>Angela</b>	<b>10.01.94</b>	HB: parents separated, SB: very sociable
<i>Barry</i>	<i>14.02.95</i>	<i>SB: rather isolated, exhibits cross-gender behaviour</i>
Ben	12.05.94	SB: affable but quiet
<b>Carola</b>	<b>13.2.94</b>	HB: 'father dying of bowel cancer', no siblings, SB: behaviour affected, quite bright
Duncan	30.07.94	HB: 'previously subject to abuse', SB: highly aggressive
Gavin	19.03.94	HB: 'home very supportive', two older brothers, SB: sociable,
<i>Gerald</i>	<i>10.02.95</i>	<i>SB: affable but 'immature'</i>
Henry	18.08.94	HB: 'out of control', has a younger brother, SB: difficult
<i>Hugh</i>	<i>1.11.94</i>	<i>HB: 'home very supportive', no siblings, SB: rather isolated, exhibits cross-gender behaviour</i>
<i>Jeremy</i>	<i>27.12.94</i>	<i>HB: 'out of control', 'was a difficult baby' SB: non-communicative, difficult to control</i>
<i>Jim</i>	<i>17.02.95</i>	<i>HB: parents supportive, parents of mixed race</i>
<i>John</i>	<i>11.11.94</i>	<i>HB: was a difficult baby SB: affable but can be difficult</i>
Joseph	01.07.94	SB: reasonably behaved, bright, popular. an organiser
<b>Julia</b>	<b>10.09.94</b>	<i>SB: affable but quiet, rather isolated</i>
<i>Karl</i>	<i>28.10.94</i>	<i>SB: affable</i>
<b>Katherine</b>	<b>22.04.94</b>	HB: 'home very supportive', no siblings, SB: sociable,
<b>Katie</b>	<b>29.12.94</b>	<i>HB: non-working mother SB: confident but switches off</i>
<b>Linda</b>	<b>24.01.94</b>	SB: affable, younger brother
<b>Magdelin</b>	<b>23.09.94</b>	<i>SB: affable but rather non-communicative</i>
<i>Maurice</i>	<i>3.01.95</i>	<i>HB: lives outside the catchment area,</i>
<i>Merlin</i>	<i>01.10.94</i>	<i>HB: working mother, SB: expresses stereotypical views</i>
<b>Molly</b>	<b>22.01.94</b>	HB: 'home very supportive', youngest of a large family, SB: sociable, an exceptionally bright child
<i>Norman</i>	<i>01.09.94</i>	<i>HB: parents supportive, exhibits cross-gender behaviour</i>
Roger	12.03.94	HB: 'difficult', 'was a difficult baby', parents mixed race - supportive, SB: can be disruptive
Roland	27.08.94	HB: 'home supportive', SB: sociable, very talkative

**Key:**

HB: = Behaviour outside school

SB: = Behaviour inside school

Embolden = girls

Italics = children who were three years old in September 1998

10 boys + 3 girls = 13 children below four years of age

Class totals: 18 boys + 8 girls = 26 children

Table 1.3

Easter till the end of summer term 1999 - Nursery Class - a.m.

First name	Date of birth	Teachers' comments
<i>Avril</i>	<i>16.06.95</i>	HB: 'a poor, dirty home', SB: affable but can be disruptive
<i>Bessie</i>	<i>08.07.95</i>	<i>SB: affable, conventionally minded</i>
<i>Charlotte</i>	<i>25.06.95</i>	<i>SB: very affable but dominated by Christine Baker</i>
Christine	05.03.95	HB: parents very supportive, SB: 'extremely obstinate'
<b>Clive</b>	<b>02.03.95</b>	<b>SB: exhibits cross-gender behaviour, now very sociable</b>
<i>Colin</i>	<i>09.08.95</i>	<i>SB: quiet, industrious &amp; concerned</i>
Daniel	02.02.95	SB: domineering & 'disruptive'
<i>Edith</i>	<i>01.07.95</i>	<i>SB: affable &amp; co-operative</i>
<b>Harriet</b>	<b>19.12.94</b>	<b>HB: supportive, SB: affable, quiet, conventional views</b>
<i>Helen</i>	<i>06.06.95</i>	<i>SB: bright, discerning, concerned, quite forceful</i>
Jill	20.03.95	HB: older brother, SB: co-operative
Joan	23.03.95	HB: supportive, SB: clever and very obliging
<i>Laura</i>	<i>09.08.95</i>	<i>SB: very quiet, isolated, timid</i>
<b>Libby</b>	<b>23.10.94</b>	<b>HB: parents supportive, SB: sociable</b>
<i>Marcia</i>	<i>10.06.95</i>	<i>HB: no siblings, SB: quiet, 'a loner'</i>
<b>Mark</b>	<b>07.05.94</b>	<b>* HB: 'Down's syndrome', SB: now more 'disruptive'</b>
<i>May</i>	<i>23.05.95</i>	<i>HB: supportive, SB: affable, bright, conventional views</i>
<i>Mike</i>	<i>30.06.95</i>	<i>SB: quiet &amp; co-operative</i>
Nigel	3.03.95	SB: confident, and very affable
Robert	03.03.95	HB: belligerent parents, SB: aggressive & 'disruptive'
<b>Ruth</b>	<b>22.10.94</b>	<b>HB: no siblings, SB: assertive</b>
<i>Sean</i>	<i>24.05.95</i>	<i>HB: supportive, SB: quiet, conventional views</i>
<i>Terry</i>	<i>08.08.95</i>	<i>SB: quiet &amp; co-operative, conventional views</i>
<b>Toby</b>	<b>19.11.94</b>	<b>HB: non-working mother, parents supportive, SB: affable</b>
<b>Tom</b>	<b>26.02.95</b>	<b>HB: 'suffers from a genetic illness', stepfather, working mother, SB: exhibits cross-gender behaviour</b>

**Key:**

HB: = Behaviour outside school

SB: = Behaviour inside school

Embolden = previous members of the nursery (3 girls and 4 boys)

\* = Special nursery assistant provided

Italics = children who were three years old at Easter 1999

4 boys + 8 girls = 12 children below four years of age

Class totals: 11 boys + 14 girls = 25 children

Table 1.4

Easter till the end of summer term 1999 - Nursery Class - p.m.

First name	Date of birth	Teachers' comments
<i>Brian</i>	<i>1.07.95</i>	<i>HB: supportive, SB: somewhat 'immature', upset easily</i>
<b>Carola</b>	<b>13.2.94</b>	<b>HB: 'father died', SB: now much more happy</b>
<i>Elise</i>	<i>02.08.95</i>	<i>SB: quite bright, self-confident, conventional views</i>
<i>Felicity</i>	<i>17.04.95</i>	<i>HB: confident, bright &amp; assertive towards the boys</i>
<b>Gerald</b>	<b>10.02.95</b>	<b>HB: 3 older brothers, SB: affable &amp; confident</b>
<i>Graham</i>	<i>25.06.95</i>	<i>HB: supportive, SB: quiet but sociable</i>
<b>Hugh</b>	<b>1.11.94</b>	<b>HB: 'home very supportive', no siblings, SB: rather isolated, exhibits cross-gender behaviour</b>
Ian	12.01.95	SB: somewhat over-confident & assertive towards others
<b>Jeremy</b>	<b>27.12.94</b>	<b>HB: now better behaved, SB: much more co-operative</b>
<b>Jim</b>	<b>17.02.95</b>	<b>HB: parents supportive, parents of mixed race</b>
<b>John</b>	<b>11.11.94</b>	<b>HB: was a difficult baby SB: affable but can be difficult</b>
<b>Julia</b>	<b>10.09.94</b>	<b>SB: affable but quiet, now more confident</b>
<b>Karl</b>	<b>28.10.94</b>	<b>SB: sociable, SB: exhibits dominance towards girls</b>
<b>Katie</b>	<b>29.12.94</b>	<b>HB: non-working mother SB: very confident &amp; concerned</b>
<b>Magdelin</b>	<b>23.09.94</b>	<b>SB: sociable and now extremely communicative</b>
<b>Maurice</b>	<b>3.01.95</b>	<b>HB: lives outside the catchment area, SB: affable</b>
<b>Merlin</b>	<b>01.10.94</b>	<b>HB: working mother, SB: expresses stereotypical views</b>
<b>Norman</b>	<b>01.09.94</b>	<b>HB: parents very supportive, now exhibits cross-gender behaviour</b>
<i>Patricia</i>	<i>05.04.95</i>	<i>HB: 'non-supportive', SB: self-confident &amp; always cheerful</i>
<i>Timothy</i>	<i>15.06.95</i>	<i>SB: a very self-confident, domineering, 'naughty boy'</i>

**Key:**

HB: = Behaviour outside school

SB: = Behaviour inside school

Embolden = previous members of the nursery (4 girls and 9 boys)

Italics = children who were three years old at Easter 1999

3 boys + 3 girls = 6 children below four years of age

Class totals: 13 boys + 7 girls = 20 children

**Table 1.5**  
**The main teaching and activity divisions of the research sessions for both of the main teachers**

**Each session being of two and a half hours**

**(Morning session 9.00 -11.30 Afternoon session 12.40 - 3.10)**

No.	Title	Length of time very variable	Explanation	Type of research possible
1.	Showing & explaining the day's work	30 minutes	All the children were seated and the register was called, followed by the children talking about the toys/objects they had brought in, followed by a teacher's explanation of the painting/creating activities for that morning	DW was expected to join the other teachers in their verbal and non-verbal interactions with the children. DW did notice that the boys in all sessions dominated the area at the back of the children's sitting down area where the cushions could be sat on. They actively prevented most of the girls from sitting there (as Burr (1998) also observes).
2.	Indoor activities	50 minutes	Back of the room: computer, jigsaws & construction kits Front of the room: painting, dressing-up, library & home corner	Here DW, either by himself or with other members of staff, had the opportunity to talk to the children. DW observed male and female domination of certain activities and avoidance of others.
3.	Outdoor activities, if raining a video was shown	30 minutes in the cold weather	Two main areas: 1st small climbing frame, balls & sand tray were available 2nd open area where tricycles & scooter were available	Mainly observation - the children were often too intent on the activity they were then pursuing to wish to converse. However, brief conversation was possible while the children were using the sandtray and less so while they were on the climbing frame.
4.	Milk & fruit	20 minutes	All the children were seated quietly while they drank their drink and ate the three pieces of fruit they had chosen	Observation mainly, though odd questions could be put to the children. The majority of the children chose to sit in same sex groupings.
5.	Story	20 minutes	All the children were seated while picture/reading book was read. The boys dominated the rear area as at the beginning of the session.	DW was expected to join the other teachers in their verbal and non-verbal interactions with the children. DW read six stories and questioned the children in his action research role.

**Key:**

DW = David Woodward

**NB:** A great deal of time was involved in preparing the children for the various activities. These included the removal and putting-on of coats, lining up, going to toilets, and coming in from and going out to the playground, etc.

## **Synopsis of the material arrangements within the dissertation**

### **Chapter contents**

The introductory chapter concludes with a brief description of the way in which the different topics have been pursued within the dissertation.

Chapter Two, the Literature Review, propounds the view that gender identity itself is an extremely complex societal construct, and that it is not inborn. It suggests that although children are mainly engendered and socialised by means of social interplay within the home and exchanges within the school with peers and teachers, and by the varieties of media they encounter, that they themselves are also active agents in this process, and that teachers, in their efforts to modify gender-stereotyped views must take this latter factor into consideration.

Chapter Three, the methodology chapter, tackles the problems involved in being collaborative observers, deals with some of the features concerned in the type of action research we employed, and discusses some of the difficulties entailed in building a multi-sided and flexible explanation of young children's often inconsistent gender views. It also discusses the origins of the research material.

Chapter Four depicts the importance of friendship groups in the formation of gender attitudes, and how they affect a child's social and academic success, and some of the problems that can result from a child's failure to integrate with its major peer groups. Some gender and power relation differences between the single-sex friendship groups have also been explored, i.e. boys as compared with girls.

Chapter Five reveals that the children are active agents in their own socialisation, and that the younger infants did not appear to have the same views of society as the older ones did.

It also shows how the staff, and I, tried to reduce the degree of self-interest in our charges, and to motivate the children to recognise and display a wide breadth of feelings, and to show compassion for, and empathy with, others. The chapter also illustrates the evolving and marked behavioural differences between nursery-age girls and boys.

Chapter Six indicates that the children concur in, but were incapable of describing, many of their attitudes to gender differences. It shows the way in which they put other children and grownups into clearly marked gender groupings, with expected demeanour characteristics. I

Chapter Seven shows that the children were born and raised in a very close-knit community, that had strong views on the roles that females and males should play in society. Their gender behaviour, in the morning and afternoon sessions, constantly reflected, to some extent, their home backgrounds and the influence of the media.

Chapter Eight states that in any consideration of the effectiveness of the staff's and my interventions in moderating children's gender conduct, one must recognise the often overwhelming influence of the children's peers. The chapter suggests that, although the nursery education the children received was academically effective and successful, it did, in some circumstances, reinforce the children's sex-stereotypical behaviour.

The dissertation finishes, in chapter nine, with findings and conclusions. It considers the difficulties and the problems in appraising the effectiveness of the actions of the nursery staff, and myself.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature review**

Superficially, this literature review may appear to be somewhat unbalanced in its initial emphasis on pre-nursery and home experiences, e.g. child disability, home child molestation, marital separation, and parental depression, rather than those operating directly within the classroom itself. Nevertheless, I consider that all of these encounters, together and separately, were significant factors in the pre-nursery and presently ongoing engendering processes I observed (Fagot, Rodgers & Leinbach, 2000). This is perhaps illustrated by the fact that certain children, who have been strongly affected by external factors, such as the two extremely aggressive ones (Duncan and Jeremy) and the two boys with 'special needs' (Mark and Tom) seemed to have had, from their initial entry into the nursery, a disproportionately greater influence than others on the 'public' engendering process (Paechter, 1998). The gender sway of three of these boys was further enhanced by their being allocated, for social and/or remedial reasons, five terms in the nursery as against the normal three terms assigned to the other children. Their power to affect gender attitudes (Salmon, 1998) was revealed by the marked change in the display of 'public' behaviour the staff and I observed following the Easter 1999 departure of one of them.

I have organised the chapter below into five parts. The initial section is a broad introduction, the second tackles the effects of the media, the third is concerned with the gender-stereotyping process, the fourth deals with the positive and negative gender effects of schooling, while the fifth considers the children themselves as a dynamic force in the engendering process. This final section questions whether it is feasible for the nursery staff to alter fundamentally the engendering procedure exhibited in the classroom by directing access to, and changing the types of resources available to both sexes. It suggests that it is first necessary for staff, in their endeavours to change attitudes, to focus on the dynamic nature of children's interactions. It further proposes that modifying these should be the



measure of the success, or failure, of teachers' interventionary, or non-interventionary gender policies.

### **Introduction**

I begin this introduction by proposing that there are three principal causal positions for gender differences, which can be labelled respectively as the personal, the social and the biological, but none of these separately completely explains observed gender dissimilarities in character, cognitive abilities, and the growth of gender identity.

I maintain that early socialisation, more than biological endowment, is mainly responsible for the gender differences we observe, and that furthermore children are, to a certain extent, self-socialising. In that children, when they critically perceive, become involved in the world around them, they subsequently evolve or adopt social classifications and adjust themselves to them. Children are thus, to some degree, dynamic agents in shaping their involvements and formulating gender role concepts. I personally favour, so far as a psychological model is concerned, the one known as Object Relations, especially as developed by Chodorow (1978), not least because it tallies with the empirical work of such researchers as Smith and Lloyd (1978). Moreover, the Object Relations theory does not wholly reject the social and biological effects which any model of socialisation includes.

Smith and Lloyd's (1978) research involved observing children being cared for in a child clinic. The researchers observed women being invited to look after an unfamiliar, unknown sex, child. This baby, as it was given to different women at different times, was alternatively described as being a boy or a girl. For, all of these women, it was not easy to determine the sex of the dressed infant. Thus, if the baby screamed, and it was thought, by them, to be male, it was consoled by being bounced, and was conversed with less than if was thought to be female. If the baby screamed and was thought by them to be a female, it

was consoled and stroked, and was permitted to crawl for a lesser distance than a male baby would have been, about the room. It will be noticed, from Smith and Lloyd's investigations, that the significant element is not the actual sex of the infant, but the infant's perceived sex. So, basically, what was being observed here, was a community social action, rather than one that was biologically determined. Chodorow (1978) in *The Reproduction of Mothering* describes treatment in cases of dissimilarity in gender. She states that girl children are socialised by female carers so as to encourage them to become potential mothers. For her, girls generally are permitted less independence, and are encouraged to become a sort of an aide-de-camp to their own mothers, by being shown and given stereotypical domestic and womanly chores to perform (for example cooking and cleansing), and tend to be kept near to their mothers, as company. In such arrangements, daughters are admitted into the concerns of their mothers, with greater amounts of conversation aimed at them, than there is at their brothers. Bower (1998) found that mothers do, consciously or subconsciously, discriminate between daughters and sons in their expectations (Williams, 2000).

Chodorow (1978) suggested that our sexuality and our gender identities are so ingrained that, to comprehend them, one requires psychoanalytic theory. Psychoanalytic theory directs its focus to the psychological dynamics of the family. It states that one requires, in order to comprehend the manner in which our sexual identities are produced, a full depiction of the family's complex framework. The theory is chiefly concerned with the profound discords and emotions that the developing child experiences, in the early years of life. The intensely powerful attachment that occurs between mothers and their children, is the starting point. This situation is so significant because of the lengthy interval during which the offspring of Homo Sapiens are dependent on their parents.

Thus, psychoanalytic theory holds that close social contact with grownups is an essential part of infants' upbringing. Bowlby's (1951) research supported this argument. He discovered that babies required not just warmth and nourishment, but needed to be excited by play, fondling and conversation, as well. Summarising his research, Bowlby (1951) wrote, 'mother love in infancy and childhood is as important for mental health as vitamins and proteins for physical health'. This conclusion has now been widely accepted. One can observe this in the support given to early learning projects. However, the exact account of what precisely occurs inside the adult-child interrelationship is still debatable.

Originally influenced by psychoanalysis, Bowlby soon progressively turned aside from the orthodox Freudian perspective, towards the variant of psychoanalysis referred to as Object Relations theory. Objective Relations Theory is inclined to put larger stress on the significant relations that individuals have with others, and much less stress on the individual in isolated situations. The pivotal issue, in this theory, is perceived to be the dependency of the young child on others. The biological connection between infant and mother is strengthened by the infant's exposure to breast feeding, which is emphasised by Freud. Object Relations theory, although acknowledging the pivotal position of the primary caretaker in supplying protection and care for the young child, believes that any appropriate grownup, woman or man, might equally carry out this task. (I have not concerned myself, because of my psychological stance, with the sociological literature, in this review.)

### **The nature-nurture controversy**

Thus, in the past, parents' rearing methods, were viewed, particularly in the child's early years, as the activating force. There are, however, now clear signs that both the degree and character of parental effects on girls' and boys' upbringing are substantially less important than was hitherto thought by psychologists (Saudino & Plomin, 1997; McDonnell, 2001).

One must recognise here the interchangeable nature of the primary carer-child association. Primary carer nurturing does not just affect the gender and other behavioural actions of the child, but also, the primary carer nurturing is in turn affected by the child's reaction to it. It has been maintained that the handicapped or non-handicapped state, sex, age position, rapport and temperament of siblings affects not only the family roles they play but parental hopes and family harmony (Bower, 1998). I have observed in the past, with older children with matching temperaments, that similar home environments can have quite dissimilar consequences (Golombok (2000) also noted similar occurrences). It is the relative rather than the absolute number of girls' and boys' encounters that influence developmental eventualities according to Rutherford (1998), namely the conditional state that every particular offspring sees itself to be encountering compared to siblings or other family members. There are, of course, also outside effects experienced by older infants, for example those resulting from contact with the school staff, or cohort groups.

A child's inborn disposition at once affects, but is also affected by, her or his social surroundings (Park, Belsky, Putnan & Cynic, 1997). It appears though that it is only when, for example, difficult child temperament is combined with specific habitat situations that such a condition really causes difficulties (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997).

### **Family nurturing difficulties**

Investigations of very young children's gender and other forms of behaviour should start with family rearing practices, for 'mothering' parents (i.e. the 'primary caretaker', who is the consistent carer able to provide reassurance and stability) must be seen as providing the initial crucial catalyst for the subsequent revealing of these. Family nurturing practices are thus inclined to be intensely scrutinised. This is especially the case if either or both parents are depressed because social intercourse within the home is affected by protracted discord and hostility. Such traits as apathy, distress, shared moods with parents, low self-esteem

and societal reticence have all been found to exist often amongst children of emotionally depressed parents (Golombok, 2000).

However, in the case of depression it might, to some extent, be ameliorated if the prevailing household atmosphere is calm and relaxed. Moreover the connection between offspring and parental mental maladies might be produced by different routes, and may be even more complicated. To a certain extent, there are signs that maternal depression is partly influenced by the offspring's personality. Troublesome offspring might add to the background of parental anxiety that will subsequently influence the children themselves (Bandura, 1997). A chain of circumstances is created which sustains the offspring's behavioural traits (Goodman, Emery & Haugaard, 1998).

There is also a linkage between a young child's progress and family guardianship conditions (Golombok, 2000). In stressful unions partners are less apt to supply an environment that is settled for the family (Goodman et al., 1998). The guardians will probably now have differing ideas about the children's nurturing, and they seem not to react to their dependants in such a sensitive way (Sroufe, 1996). Such circumstances as these must critically alter the child's expectations, and also modify the established supportive structures in the home (Davies & Cummings, 1998). Consequently, one might postulate that children become more difficult to handle, more intractable at home, with their own child minder, and also at school (Melby & Conger, 1996). However, some children, given the difficulties of partnership separation, seem to be considerably more exposed to psychological problems such as a significant lessening in scholastic attainment or severe depression than do others (Rutter, Dunn, Plomin, Simonoff, Pickles, Maughan, Ormel, Meyer & Eaves, 1997). Such dissimilarities in susceptibility possibly have their beginnings at an earlier stage in the child's original unsatisfactory attachments to its carers.

Susceptibility might additionally have its origins in the child's inheritance, ensuing from a 'difficult' parental temperament, or from a premature birth (Belsky, 1993).

The main concern has been aroused by those children classified as having difficult temperaments. It has been found that difficult babies can turn into difficult children (Bee, 1998). The degree of aggressive behaviour displayed by a school child is thus possibly influenced by innate factors (Goldsmith, Buss & Lemery, 1997). Difficult temperament and partnership separation do not necessarily create subsequent behaviour difficulties, but instead they might produce vulnerability in the child. It enlarges the chances of behaviour difficulties if there are other deficiencies in the child, or any other problems in the home structure (Rothbart & Bates, 1998). It has been shown that it is not so much the distress and the discord between the parents that appears to be significant, but the level of these that the child really notices (Golombok, 2000).

In childhood, female children have been said to be less in need of a stable background than males (Newberger, 1999). Males are developmentally less mature and as a result may be treated differently (Smith and Lloyd, 1978). Females, in their initial years, have been shown to have a tendency in the presence of a broad diversity of psychological and physical difficulties, to be more recuperative than males (Clare, 2001). (It could be argued here that boys are, for inherent or socialisation reasons (or both), less stable and have a 'requirement' to dissociate themselves from their mothers, for 'to be masculine comes to mean learning to be not-feminine, or not-womanly' (Chodorow, 1978, p. 45).) Daughters whose parents have separated, or are separating, display fewer scholastic difficulties and less increase in non-submissive behaviour and in anxiety than sons do, from similar families.

There is also a strong association between a child's social and academic development and family child mistreatment. Strassberg (1995) proposes that abusing families are trapped in an aggressive vicious circle, where any increase in the bellicosity of either the offspring or a parent is duplicated by the other. Hence a characteristic of such households is often collective incitement, (Newberger, 1999). Such children are liable, in such an environment, where there is meagre affirmative arousal (e.g. of compassion, acclaim, or motivation) to utilise the type of conduct, usually disorderly, that arouses notice. Within such families, guardians may even condone, and derive a certain amount of self-esteem from their children's aggressiveness, if directed at outsiders. Parents, in this way, can communicate to their offspring that particular sorts of aggressiveness are legitimate, and so encourage the sustaining of such conduct. By this means these children would seem to be more likely to replicate displays of aggression in future. It has been demonstrated that almost one-third of mistreated children will probably evolve into mistreating grownups (Emery & Laumann-Billings, 1998).

On entering schooling such children are often viewed and evaluated, to some extent, as aggressive by other boys and girls, and moreover frequently see themselves, also, as aggressive (Price, 1996). These often peer repudiated children are more prone to evaluate other children as aggressive and generally seem to view the nursery as a hostile location (Zakriski & Coie, 1996). Indeed, it may be that their disturbed involvements with other children, and their meagre self-regard affect each of these conditions in a jointly self-multiplying way. Children such as these, with meagre self-respect, are more prone to be reserved and have problems in crystallising adequate societal associations, intensifying, in this way, their want of self-conviction and their feelings of rejection (J. Brown, 1998). Notwithstanding many of the above commentaries, the majority of parents seem to make the best of the child care situation presented to them, and accept, if very reluctantly, their offspring's temperaments, sex and physical status. In most cases they promptly modify

their demeanour, as used with their previous children by employing alternative types of child-handling (Hinshaw, Zupan, Simmel, Nigg & Melnick, 1997). Some parents perhaps connect an opposite significance to such things as their child's avoiding being cuddled. A setting is thus created, whatsoever the explanation for such action might be, where the child's innate temperamental or physical features are not complemented by what the mother has to offer (van den Boom, 1997) and where, hence, 'goodness of fit' is absent (Newberger, 1999). Nevertheless, as Thomas and Chase (1977) state, goodness of fit does not inevitably infer an omission of discord and anxiety, as these are unavoidable elements of the child raising procedure. Still, if they are congruent with the children's abilities the results may be worthwhile.

In summation, there is a strong connection between boys' and girls' behaviour, in the home and at school, their self-perceptions, the family's structure, economic status and nurturing practices, and the physical and mental health of the other family members (Hay, 1997).

#### **The influence of media violence and gender-stereotyping on young children**

A great deal of apprehension apropos the likely consequences of brutality viewed on TV, in videos, in comics or in computer media arises from the above imitation argument (Strassberg, 1995). Seppa (1997) states that over half the of the television programmes in the United States contained repeated acts of non-penalised violence. The level was even greater in children's cartoons. Seppa thought that the violence levels would be considerably greater for every kind of program, if all forms of oral aggressiveness were included.

Moreover, TV is a significant channel which influences children's food and clothing preferences, their cognitive advancement, their views on gender-roles, and boys' views of aggression (McDonnell, 2001). The boys' and girls' openness to television influences provides them with a broader variety of opportunities to investigate a variety of roles than



that displayed in the nursery or the home. Television proclaims to the child what it is like to be a member of one sex or the other within the broader social setting. Children notice before school that men acquire leading roles in such things as TV stories and sport (Whyte, 1998). However, television is only one of many influences. Further, Anderson and his associates (1986, cited in Crook, 1998) found that young children, if they were present in a room with the TV on, actually look at the television for not more than fifty per cent of the time.

The characterisations of females' and males' roles, not only on television but also in children's printed matter, still in most cases, persist in being stereotyped (Gilbert, 1998). The printed word still has a powerful, if declining, influence in our society. Much of the children's information, and personal experience, comes from seeing printed images in story-books, and listening to the printed medium being read by parents and teachers. The printed medium is not a neutral conveyor of information (Kimmel, 2000). Studies have found that school curricular material is still biased in gender, and racial terms. For example, Kortenhuis and Demarest (1993) in their examination of reading schemes, discover gender partiality (Adler, 2000; Coffey & Delamont, 2000).

### **Gender-stereotyping**

#### **Parental gender treatment of offspring**

A person's apparent sex is prominent in our appraisal of any individual. It has a tendency to be the initial particular that parents desire to ascertain concerning a recently born child (Pennington, Gillen & Hill, 1999). The children's subsequent handling is built on which apparent sex it happens to be (Kirby, 1999).

Bower's study (1998) shows that most mothers, of handicapped or non-handicapped children, expect traditional gender role conduct, and at the same time indicates the way in

which mothers perceive the behavioural gender dissimilarities between the sexes (this is supported by the work of researchers such as Leaper, Anderson and Sanders (1998), and Smith and Lloyd (1978)).

Girls and boys are generally encouraged, by parents, to follow dissimilar pastimes, and are provided with dissimilar playthings, with boys being permitted fewer alternatives than girls. Children, inasmuch as they are in a dependent condition, seek approval and affection. They thus come to restate and embrace what they observe, and are instructed to do, by carers. For gender-appropriate actions, the children are rewarded and not punished. Such 'correct' conduct thus, in due time, comes to be a habit. An additional significant slant is that children tend to copy individuals whom they consider to be similar to themselves. They thus tend to copy actions that they perceive same-sex grownups, and same-sex peers, performing. The social learning theorists stress the significance of modelling and imitation, in as much as children acquire new behaviour patterns by copying both their peer groups, and grownups (Bandura, 1997). The infant in its initial intimate relations with primary caretakers, such as the mother, identifies with them. The term 'identify' has a powerful import, and has its origins in psychoanalysis. The word implies the idea that children understand that they may develop to be in some ways similar to some of the grownups they observe. It proceeds farther, however, in proposing that the grownups' customs and tenets are, possibly, internalised and adopted by the children. Basically, the children then act, even when grownups are not there, in accordance with what they would suppose their guardians would require.

Eventually children are confronted with the task of severing the parent-child bond and establishing themselves as independent persons. Males, in our communities, are encouraged to achieve independence, before females. For boys, a problem is that they might achieve their independence so early, that they are unable to cope with it. For girls,

the equivalent hazard is that they might have their independence slowed up, to such a degree, that they will discover it difficult, as grownups, to cope with their situation. For boys, there appears to be a universal concern, that if they have a lengthy, or too intimate, contact with their mothers, they will become effeminate to some extent. Male identity is most precisely defined by its opposite. As Edley and Wetherell (1995, p. 46) state, 'Masculinity is the absence of femininity'.

### **Children's response to gender messages**

One of the first social subdivisions that girls and boys discover and employ, both to other individuals and to themselves, are female/maleness (Ruble & Martin, 1998). Gender identification is an essential facet of a person's self-perception and therefore, it is no surprise that such a classification evolves quite early in their lives (Campbell, 1998). In late babyhood girls and boys can classify visages by sex. Boys and girls orally categorise others and themselves as female or male around the second year (Ruble & Martin, 1998). From the second or third year sex-stereotyping in girls' and boys' selection of playthings is apparent (B. Brown, 1998). By their third year boys and girls favour associating with same-sex companions (Newberger, 1999). Girls and boys, near the age of three or four, start to evolve some fixed generalisations as to what jobs, for example, nurses or physicians do, and what jobs, as for example clothes-washing or vehicle mending are appropriate for women and for men (Ruble & Martin, 1998). Ruble & Martin (1998) reveal that children as young as two years of age are able to gender-label familiar domestic activities, and are aware of, and display gender preferences for, certain jobs that reflect what happens in the adult world. According to Lowe (1998) most children suppose that women's household activities are their main activity. Around the fifth year of age children link particular individual characteristics with girls and women, and others with boys and men, for instance tenderness or sturdiness (B. Brown, 1998). Colley (1998) finds that warmth or

expressiveness is associated with women's tasks, while men display competence, and are seen as more 'instrumental' in theirs (Eagly, Wood & Diekmann, 2000).

The other principal locations inside which a child's gender socialisation occurs are those provided by peers. Benenson, Apostoleris and Parnass (1997) reported that from the age of two years old, a child starts to interrelate less often with adults than with other children. The parental influence on a child's access to peers cannot be underrated (Leve & Fagot, 1995). Parental gender attitudes can both discourage or encourage their offspring to seek opportunities to associate with their same, or different sex, fellows. What is evident is that the systems connecting an offspring's two sorts of affiliations, those with the same or different sex peers and those with parents, can assume a substantial diversity of configurations, many of which might be less significant at some stages than at others.

### **The effects of schooling**

#### **The schooling ambience**

The teachers' teaching style can have unintentional consequences for the development of young children's gender knowledge and identities (Gordon, Holland & Lahelma, 2000). It has been found that nursery staff, overwhelmingly female in number, seem generally to encourage both girls and boys to indulge in more stereotypically neutral or 'feminine' conduct such as playing quietly, moving less, and being more helpful (Tobin, 2000). The children's identification of the female style of behaviour with the desired form of conduct perhaps explains why the girls seem to enjoy the primary school more than the boys, and are better motivated than them there (Sukhnandan, 1999). This possibly counterbalances the fact that the girls receive less of the teachers' attention and fewer of some classroom resources, than the boys (Swann, 1998). Frequently teachers are unaware of this, and when presented with evidence, distrust it (Brody, Fuller, Gosetti, Moscato, Nagel, Pace & Schmuck, 2000).

The 'authoritative' style of teaching with its promotion of socially desirable aspects of behaviour, i.e. being helpful, compassionate and treating all with equal respect, seems to be frequently at variance with the views of some of the more forceful boys, who continue, in such environments, to display stereotypical forceful masculine conduct (Epstein, Elwood, Hey & Maw, 1998b). The boys can be more difficult to handle, less co-operative, and less patient in waiting for their turn, than the girls (Gurian, 2001). The boys' actions seem more likely to alter when other boys indicate acceptance or disdain, while the girls seem more amenable to other girls' encouragement and to encouragement from the teacher (Fagot et al., 2000).

#### **Teachers' discrimination in favour of the boys**

Paechter's (1998) and Gilbert's and Gilbert's (1998) work shows the significance of teacher-labelling and coercion, in pressurising children to conform to gender-stereotyped roles. Consciously or subconsciously, or 'just for the sake of peace', the boys are perhaps treated in some ways more favourably, by female teachers, than are the girls, within the nursery (Pilcher, 1999). (This may, in part, compensate for the alienation the boys may feel, because of the 'feminine nature' of the nursery, and that they may receive more harsh criticism and punishment.) Like some of Clarricoates' (1983) primary teachers, teachers may state that they, in some ways, prefer teaching the boys because they are more active and interesting (Burr, 1998), even if sometimes naughty. Croxford (2000) maintains that teachers, within the mixed classroom, reinforce the cycle of inequality, by placing an inferior communicative and prestige worth on girls' offerings, and that they do not appreciate the girls' special linguistic assets. Teachers may unconsciously employ different questioning techniques with girls and boys. Questions to girls may be less open, and demand a 'yes' or 'no' answer, rather than an expression of an opinion (Coffey & Delamont, 2000). Girls may also contribute less to classroom discussions, in part perhaps because of the teachers' non-verbal behaviour (Paechter, 1998). Even the teachers' choice

of the computer programs, reading matter and construction materials often seems to be done with the boys in mind (Matheson & Dillow, 2000).

The girls may thus feel devalued and oppressed in mixed sex groupings (Fulcher & Scott, 1999). Moreover, teachers often fail to stop, or may even reinforce, male stereotypical behaviour towards the girls (Paechter, 1998). Howe (1997), Connolly (1998), and Salmon (1998) demonstrate male aggressive dominance of particular subjects, for example science, computing and materials considered by the boys to be masculine in character, and the classroom space itself. For example, boys may gain entry into girls' territory, such as the home corner in the nursery, by disruptive behaviour or 'rough and tumble' play (Salmon, 1998), whilst a girl's access to boys' territory, in contrast, may only be gained by showing the boys that she was 'one of them' and being willing to join on their terms (Lowe, 1998). Certain forms of seemingly unattractive male behaviour, from a teacher's or possibly a parent's perspective (for instance assertiveness towards the girls), could be very pleasing to the boys themselves, while not necessarily, under the surface, being actually unattractive to the girls (Davies, 1998). To the boys, indulging in certain activities could possibly boost a feeling of masculinity (i.e. being a 'real boy'), and not to indulge could promote femininity (being a 'real girl') (Lowe, 1998).

Children, during their school encounters, are inclined to associate with similar companions. One can observe that, when presented with an unrestricted selection of playmates, that children, by the age of four, pass seventy-five per cent of their time seeking amusement within single-sex groups. Further, they will, by the age of six and a half years be, for more than nine tenths of the time, in single-sex groups (Newberger, 1999). These single-sex bands form their own codes, which guide their discussions and play patterns. Children soon ascertain what is suitable behaviour, and what views they should hold, from their same-sex peers, and less so from their teachers (Ruble & Martin, 1998). Male compliance will be

shown by collective denunciation of those males perceived to be effeminate, and mutual eagerness to become involved in 'boyish' activities, as, for example, playing football. Boys seeking amusement by playing with female dolls are liable to experience disapproval from their male peers, while the girl who is a tomboy, might obtain some begrudging regard, from both her female colleagues and from the boys. Boys soon internalise the knowledge that they are required to adjust to the practices that other boys approve of. The three attributes of being a 'real boy' seem to involve having good physical attainments (i.e. tough athleticism), a competitively based attitude, and the avoidance of femininity (Head, 1999). These three characteristics are not separate from each other. Girls and boys thus discover it difficult, owing to the marked differences in the behaviour of the two sex groups, to cooperate and communicate with each other. Between the sexes, misinterpretations will be inclined to fortify the social adherence inside each group. Thus, in school, one can observe that gender notions are established, and strengthened, in many diverse ways.

Educational personnel, children's story books, and classroom interactions, can all help to generate very stereotyped models for boys' and girls' perceptions of society, and may be forces that reinforce particular role models for girls and boys (Millard, 1997).

Differentiation by sex is often evident in the teachers' comments. The teachers' remarks, as they read stories, can also be often gender-stereotyped (Salmon, 1998). They frequently reinforce, or even create gender-stereotyping not present in the narratives they are reading (Croxford, 2000). Teachers may fail to encourage the greater integration of girls with boys. Children are more likely to become involved in cross-gender activities, and play, when there is positive intervention from adults either in or out of school, which is frequently an example, in the latter case, of parents' friendships affecting children's (Doyle & Markiewicz, 1996).

### **The child as an active participant**

Boys' and girls' growth of gender and other perceptions is a remarkably dynamic procedure, inasmuch as girls and boys themselves are by no means just being propelled through the circumstances they chance to meet in life (Martin, 2000); although outside help is always needed. At the commencement of life the child's capacity to adjust its conduct to that of a parent or other individual's view is as yet undeveloped. Consequently, whatsoever harmonisation occurs is incipiently reliant upon peer, or grown-up, contacts. Young children's innate skills are greatly enlarged, and amplified, through their ensuing exposure to the specific society of which they are a member. A child, it would seem, within these confines, dynamically moulds and chooses items related to his or her concepts of gender (Reiss, 1998).

This view of child development is in conflict with the indirect interventionist notion that suggests that if teachers just physically instigate suitable classroom settings, then gender inequality will gradually disappear (Brody et al., 2000). That is, equal opportunity of access for both sexes to physical resources will eventually lead towards 'equality of outcomes', i.e. a reduction in gender inequity (Usher, 1996). Hey (1996) suggest that teachers employing an indirect interventionist strategy, in their drive towards gender equality, assume that gender divisions are sustained and produced by a procedure akin to absorption, and that children are not truly dynamic agents in their own gender development. That is, it is claimed that such an indirect interventionist view fails to recognise children's opposition, their instrumentality, and their capacity to comprehend and re-create prevailing explanations from the numerous signals they receive (Reiss, 1998).

Education will be heading in the direction of equality, according to some writers, for example Weedon (1997), only when male and female children are allowed and strongly encouraged by teachers, to freely think and perform similar scholastic activities, in much



the same manner. Through dynamic interventions, teachers may re-build pupils' social concepts and produce larger gender equality, by positively confronting sex-stereotyped attitudes displayed by boys and girls (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998). This may, in its turn, alter the 'local' classroom hierarchical associations between the sexes (Connolly, 1998). Current sex-stereotyped gender associations, may pass away from within society as a whole, only when individuals are not required to contest feminine and masculine manners of existing, and if everyone is able to exist as a female or male in a disparate fashion at dissimilar intervals (Dunne, 1999). Explanations for gender development that embraces simplistic indirect interventionist doctrine cannot, elucidate the wherefores and the ways in which females or males confront, or persist with, conventional gender patterns (Tett, 2000).

### **The child's view**

To discover the way in which children's gender behaviour alters within the classroom, we have thus to consider their views, emotional dispositions, the behavioural structures displayed and the manner in which such diverse facets change with time.

I believe that researchers are required to investigate, at one and the same time, the boys' and girls' perceptions of what is happening, as much as the event itself. This is necessary if one is to comprehend children's data analysing and 'public' gender reaction choices (Lerner, 1996). Identical environmental occurrences might be seen as either harmless or gender threatening by different children, of different sexes, at the same or different ages (Millard, 1997). Each environmental gender facet might also intensely influence the individual's perception of others (Morss, 1996). Thus, children's gender perceptions are affected not just by social clues, i.e. what they hear and see, but by their own emotions and their possible desire to obtain same sex playmates, as well as through their recollections of past matching occurrences.

Rosenthal (1994) holds that teachers' expectations of children are only effective insofar as pupils accept and internalise the values advanced by the teacher. This 'internalisation' cannot be divorced from the children's cultural and social backgrounds (Mortimore & Whitty, 2000). By the time they go into school they already have fairly firm ideas about appropriate 'public' gender behaviour and appearance. Lindon (1998), thought that the most sexist group in infant classes were the children themselves. Hence, both past and present emotional and cognitive facets must be incorporated into any examination of gender upbringing, and in any study of the individual facets of boys' and girls' demeanour.

### Summary

This chapter has propounded the notion that nurture and nature interplay in a diversity of exceptionally complex fashions in child development, and that these cannot be viewed as antagonistic or unconnected influences (Goldsmith et al., 1997). It also advances the argument that gender identity itself is an extremely complex societal construct, and that it is not inborn (Schwalbe & Wolkomir, 2002). Children, it suggests, though they are engendered and socialised by means of social interplay within the home, or within the nursery with peers and nursery staff, and by the assortment of media they encounter, are themselves active agents in this process (Woodhead, Faulkner & Littleton, 1999). Children can be seen as being continuously dynamically involved in deciphering, assessing, choosing, repudiating, modifying and building-up both the societal and non-societal gender facets of their environment, in their attempts to build, for themselves, 'publicly approved' gender roles (Reiss, 1998). Such is the model (exemplified in *Gender Schema Theory*<sup>1</sup>) that underlies the stance from which I begin my examination of infant gender. I believe that teachers, in their efforts to modify gender-stereotyped views, must take this above factor into consideration. I shall for the remainder of the thesis focus on the social, rather than the

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<sup>1</sup> The theory of gender I held and worked with, in this research, is exemplified by aspects of the *Gender Schema Theory*. This theory, while maintaining that children are active learners, suggests that a 'mature' understanding of gender is not a necessary precondition for gender typing. I deal, in chapter 6, at some length with the formation of children's gender perceptions.

biological, which can be justified not only as the social seems more powerful (Smith & Lloyd, 1978) but also because it is more relevant to educationalists. The biology is a 'given', something we need to recognise, but cannot change. By contrast, the social interactions in the nursery or school can be modified and thus hold out the best chance for change, if change is desired.

The importance of the acquisition of gender notions by young children cannot be over-emphasised, for the acquiring of gender personality by females and males in infancy might, within the present fabric of the community, encourage future disparities in adult life (McGurk & Soriano, 1998).

### **Chapter 3**

#### **Methodology**

This chapter is divided into four sections and deals with many of the problems that we, the staff and myself, encountered in our attempts to scrutinise and partially affect some of the factors influencing the development of gender-stereotyped perspectives. The initial section deals with the difficulties concerned in collaborative observation; the second tackles many features of the kind of action research we used, the third deals with the derivations of data; and the last examines the problems encountered in analysing the research material. The teachers and I employed an action research approach, throughout the year. We gathered, reflected, analysed and built on the research data, as it became available. I was aware of other approaches, but felt that this was not only the best method to use, to explore and change our teaching environment, but could also be utilised as means to fully involve all members of the nursery staff. I believe I gave the teachers a 'sense of empowerment' over their research activities (McTaggart, 1994, p.325).

#### **Collaborative observation**

Unlike many ethnographical investigators, for example Wolf (1996a), Fortier (1998), and Barrett (2001), I never encountered, in my nursery research, the inaugural difficulties confronted by them, for example, those concerned with gaining entry. Also I never, within the inquiry, faced the issue of role friction met by Hargreaves (1967). I was of course, not disconnected from the communal existence that occurred inside the nursery, the primary school as a whole, and the wider school neighbourhood community. In some cases, I was on terms of friendship with the ancillary and teaching personnel, and the parents, through decades of association. This had the benefit of my being readily able to acquire information. Yet there was a risk, at the same time, that I myself, as an investigator, could become subjected to pressure to embrace their own viewpoints, perhaps resulting in partiality (Holliday, 2002).

### **Social conventions appertaining to gender**

I, like the majority of parents and staff, appeared to have absorbed and, in my case, to a degree conformed with the approved societal customs relating to children of dissimilar genders and ages. I was under pressure, from parents, staff and the children themselves, to conform to these even though they were markedly dissimilar. In my transactions with the boys, I was expected to be less accommodating and more vigorous than when coping with the girls (Paechter, 1998). Boys and girls, it appears, are socialised into acting, and expecting to be dealt with, dissimilarly, perhaps on account of their 'background expectancies' (Davies, 1982, p 116). After years of scrutiny, I discovered that the children, that I taught and investigated, came from households in which their mothers and fathers seemed to have a dissimilar range of vocabulary, and employed differing nurturing and linguistic policies when communicating with their children (Carli & Bukatko, 2000). Coates (1993) states that children acquire early on, from their parents, the befitting language form to be employed with each sex and by each sex. I was continually conscious that the gender treatment of both the nursery staff and myself, might be strengthening conventional gender-stereotypical representations (Gordon et al., 2000). We constantly tried to handle both girls and boys 'with respect and consideration' (Whyld, 1983, p.59), but slightly dissimilarly (Martínez, 1998).

Similar to Ball (1985), we did not discover gender dissimilarities to be an impediment in our research. However, amongst the children, boys were inclined to be, as a whole, less approachable and harder to operate with, and less loquacious. Happily, we had both influential female and male communicants (as Tobin (2000) had in his research), who tended to be the more capable children. I also was aware that I, as a male teacher, related to boys and girls dissimilarly from my female colleagues (Johnson, 2002), and that my masculinity granted me the benefit of larger public prestige as far as the children, especially the boys, were concerned (Carli & Bukatko, 2000). I endeavoured not to take advantage of

this. I was constantly conscious of, and avoided, the discreditable behaviour that might have followed from this (Gordon et al., 2000).

The position the nursery staff assumed (from my observations) and I took on, and our relationship towards a particular child, was dissimilar in different settings (Brown & Dowling, 1998). The staff appreciated that a youngster's conduct often altered if removed out of sight of its friendship circle. (I gathered this from my informal conversations with the staff. The essence of these conversations was jotted down almost straight away in my notebook.) Our relations with the children were frequently extremely ambiguous, and multi-levelled. Our normal inaugural research and teaching policy, in the direction of either sex, was founded less upon duress than on persuasion. I endeavoured, similarly to Davies, to create a 'we' (Davies, 1982, p.27) association with the children and staff with whom I operated. The children, in our more orthodox teaching position, usually wished to oblige us. I personally gave, here, less preferential treatment to the boys. Nevertheless, the youngsters, of both sexes, willingly asserted themselves, and could indeed vigorously debate, especially in the case of the girls, in single sex groupings. Also, in crucial situations occurred, I altered my adult role quickly, and became more exacting. Occasionally, I was orally very resolute with a few of the boys. I permitted no disagreement, for I was often required to make an instantaneous ruling to safeguard the concerns of others from their companions' verbal and physical onslaughts, for example the girls, or the 'neglected male loners' (Head, 1999). In contrast to the girls, the boys' behaviour if I altered roles changed almost immediately. If I adopted a grown-up teacher role, the boys mostly heeded it in a pacific and deferential fashion (Dittman, 1977).

### **Becoming a superficial child**

In many ways my everyday teaching role disguised my research one. I was, to some extent and for the reasons listed below, in some degree in a similar position to Burgess's

'complete participant': 'The *complete participant* conceals the observer dimension of the role with the result that covert observation is involved ...' (Burgess, 1984, p.80).

I employed, in my normal teaching and investigative transactions with the children, unconsciously or consciously, the role of being a nominal boy or girl, in order to achieve an understanding of their fundamental developmental processes. I, in the part of a credulous novice, asked other children to elucidate for me, to each other, and to members of staff present, what certain gender issues were concerned with, and the feasible measures that might be adopted to surmount difficulties encountered in specific tasks. While giving them my full attention I allowed the children to retain the leadership role. I incrementally and amiably steered them, through easy probing and sustaining of the more rational children's and staff explanations, in the direction of achievable results in, for instance, puzzle and construction work. Yet, the staff and I were still cognisant that we might never be entirely 'one' with the children, granted our dissimilarities of social standing, size, maturity, and gender (Eder & Fingerson, 2002).

To the children I was never the same as them. 'You're no kid!' Roger (pm) remarked. 'You're too big to come in our house,' exclaimed one of the girls as I peered into the small plastic house in the playground. I was, equally, not 'like' their female nursery staff. 'You're a boy,' declared Ruth [am]. It seemed that I had, to them, many of the attributes of an 'honorary' child. I could be ignored or even admonished by them. For example Christine [am], assuming an adult type voice and manner, stated, 'I don't want you talking while we (Charlotte [am] and herself), are playing this game'. Ruth [am] told me to 'go away, Ruth is hiding in the barrel!' 'I know my alphabet, anyway!' stated Liam (am) telling me off. But quite often my attention was welcomed as a play companion, an instructor, a comforter and lauder of the children's achievements. The children, in all the sessions, generally seemed pleased to see me, and I immediately established rapport with them. 'Play with me,' pleaded Karl [pm] clutching my arm and directing me towards the board games. 'Please

play!' begged Libby [am] as she strongly persuaded me to sit next to her to do a peg pattern. I was well aware of the risks of over-familiarity and of attempting to penetrate the children's existence upon coequal conditions (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). I was careful, upon all occasions, to retain a measure of social reserve.

### **The action research objectives**

Within the type of action research attempted, the children, the staff and I were alternatively investigators collecting information, hypothesising, expediting the inquiry procedures, and promoting self-assurance (Atweb, Christensen & Dornan, 1998); for educator-investigations cannot be action research if it is not '*collaborative*' as Kemmis (1988, p.5) asserts. It is co-operative deliberation by collaborators upon procedures to change the manner in which they act. It is research 'with people rather than on people' (Heron & Reason, 2001, p. 179).

When beginning any type of action research, Bryant (1996) echoes Lewin's (1946) conviction that there is a need for collective agreement upon, and pledge to the kinds of modifications that are beneficial even though the circumstances are inadequately recognised at the commencement (Maguire, 2001). Bryant also maintained that action research ought never to be just interested in elucidating situations, or assumption-proving, but ought to be committed as well to betterment of the present conditions (Reason & Bradbury, 2001). At the beginning of our research, the staff appeared enthusiastic and stated that they were more than willing to aid its progress. They all felt, to varying degrees, that females were 'unfairly' treated within our existing society (Morgan, 1999). They fully recognised within the nursery, as I perceived from what they said, the daily power play patterns between the boys and the girls that in many ways mirrored that of society as a whole (Usher, 1996). The staff all held the view that the current nursery gender configurations needed to be modified. Thus the teachers appeared to be anxious that our



collaborative research was successful, and in their endeavours to aid me they often altered the focal point of our endeavours (Davies 1982).

The staff and I met, on a formal basis, prior to the commencement of each half-term, and then fortnightly after that, to consider, and co-ordinate our future group and individual child-teaching strategies. Also many of us, on an informal basis, were continually discussing prior to school, at lunch-time, and following school, and briefly during the sessions themselves, our observations, our choice of topics and equipment, and the gender tactics we could employ. Furthermore, within the sessions, the more 'formal' parts of the nursery timetable, i.e. 'show-and-tell' time, and the story-reading discussions, were conducted on a collective staff child-tutoring basis, while the 'free choice child activities' were often supervised jointly. The staff and I were, within these, not only individually verbally and non-verbally supporting one another, but vigorously sustaining children's empathic gender responses inside the groups we were in, or across the short divide between our differing teaching groups. These frequently fragmented conversations revealed the success of the gender tactics then employed or equally their failure (Berge with Ve, 2000). There were, within our discussions, instants of dazzling enlightenment, but also long periods of tentative questioning, as to how existing procedures could be improved, and new approaches used (P. Woods, 1998). Every one of these interactions enhanced our growing gender awareness and understanding, and with our more formal consultations, aided the formulation of more refined and progressive linguistic approaches. (Although I only wrote down brief notes in the classroom concerning these events I did record them in greater detail later when I arrived home in the evening.)

### **Difficulties involved in adhering to our aims**

I observed, however, our equity objectives were often in conflict with the practicalities of nursery existence. All of us, including the children and myself, had great difficulty in

controlling, in the pre-Easter 1999 period, the behaviour of certain boys such as Duncan (pm). Duncan, who was and is subject to child abuse (this I believed was the true domestic situation judging from the information supplied by the family's social workers, the family's neighbours, his aunt and the nursery staff), responded badly when verbally corrected. Such boys tended to be aggressive towards the girls and male 'loners' and tended to enforce stereotypical gender behaviour (Thrupp, 1999). The nursery staff were, from my observations, reluctant to interfere with this male dominance, as they felt that they often lacked the authority to do so. For the staff and myself the need to retain class control was paramount (Chazan, 2000). The situation was eased after Easter 1999 when some of the more aggressive, older boys left. The aims of our collaborative research were easier to attain then with the two 'new' classes.

Another difficulty was that often although the staff said to me that they supported the research objectives, their actual behaviour was sometimes in conflict with its aims (Brody et al., 2000). They only appeared to become cognisant of this when they noticed my inscribing their remarks, or my own comments on their behaviour, in the notebook. As Friedman (2001) says, action research needs to 'critically inquire' (p. 160) into the performances of separate members of the investigating party if it is to be achieved effectively. The staff and the children in their general class gender discourse could often advance opinions that were conflicting and ambiguous, without, especially in the case of the children, being capable of accounting for them (Huston, 1983). The views of the children were frequently unstable, even within a brief span of time, and might have been features, I thought, not only of the children's often conflicting group of perspectives, but might depict their desire to conform to the then acceptable peer opinion, or indeed an endeavour, by them, to please a particular member of staff. Still, perhaps only with such assertions will the children be able to commence the psychological process of unravelling their perceptual disunity (Golombok & Fivush, 1994).

We thought, in some instances, the children's views were fairly rational, granted particular situations. The children's opinions, I thought, were not basically as elementary as may sometimes initially seem to be, to some grownups. The language the children employed with grownups and, among themselves, we observed, did not necessarily communicate the identical import to the grownup collaborators, or to the other infants (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). The staff and I were thus, as was Shotter (1998), cognisant of the difficulties concerned with explaining the children's view of reality. Occasionally, this resulted in our misunderstanding of the children's actions via the expressions they used. Nevertheless, children's views, even if sometimes incompatible and incoherent, were very significant in our research. They assisted us in elucidating the presumptions that we made. This aided our planning strategy and revealed the frailties and capacities of our then tactics. It defined our level of impartiality and what we comprehended concerning a particular setting. It provided us with a procedure for appraising the association, if any, between the gender views maintained by the children as a group, and the often differing or conflicting ones maintained by a particular child.

However, increased child understanding or sensitivity never inevitably ushered in enduring alterations in their attitudes. The endeavours of the nursery staff and myself, especially in the pre-Easter 1999 period, contained many instants of very active and passive opposition from girls and boys, even when we progressed slowly, so that the children could assimilate some new ideas (Berge with Ve, 2000). Our actions may have produced changes in the children's comprehensions, but there were often only tiny indications of any alteration within the ways children displayed their 'public' gender.

Our intercessions were, however, always less concerned with altering views, although these did sometimes happen, than in persuading the children, the staff and myself to be more aware (Burgess, 1985). Hopefully, following our interventions, the children were now more

capable of arguing the justification for non-conventional gender views. For a period, especially after Easter 1999, it was possible 'publicly' for the girls to empathise with male circumstances and, the boys to empathise with female roles.

### **The problems concerned in clearly defining our action research**

I had, before I started the collaborative research, a clear theoretical idea as to how I wished to carry it out. This was based on Lewin's (1946) four stages: planning, acting, observing, and reflecting. Such stages, to him, advanced in a spiral of phases, each of which involved assessments. His deliberate superimposing of reflection and action was aimed at allowing people the chance of adapting their action blueprints as they glean information from their encounters; the action research schedule should be amenable, vigorous and adjustable, as it is never possible to predict all that needs to be achieved, he concedes, on account of the complications of real societal circumstances (Holliday, 2002). I found that though I was always conscious of Lewin's four stages and applied them in my assessment of our actions, that there were no clear defined planned cycles within our research. It often seemed to be driven by a sort of serendipity as Peter Woods (1998) also discovered in his ethnographical researches. Nevertheless, receptiveness to this, so that we would be capable of being able to comprehend interesting occurrences, required that the staff and I readied ourselves beforehand (as advocated by Steinberg & Kincheloe (1998)). I found that action research was less frequently concerned with 'problem-solving' than 'problem-posing' as recognised by Kemmis (1988, p.21). We were, within the investigation, constantly hunting as much for pertinent questions to ask, as for good intriguing answers (Heron & Reason, 2001).

We were certainly altered through the collaborative research that we conducted. The bulk of the dissertation is involved with this rebuilding of our collective 'social reality' (Birksted, 1976, p.67) to embody the notions we debated, and our developing sensitivity. The opinions the children asserted were never inert. The staff and I appreciated that

children were 'active agents' (Denscombe, 1983, p.115), in their own social constructions of gender.

The staff and I never concentrated, within our one year inquiry structure, upon fixed settings, but focused our concentration upon the 'processes and their ... underlying rationale' (Birksted, p.67). Moreover, though much of the emphasis in our research was on how children, as individuals, perceive particular gender situations, the staff and I did, nevertheless, recognise the vital importance of a multi-level interconnected view of the place of a child in its social setting, which involved the effects of one condition on others.

### **My original intended action research plan**

My original intended action research incorporated the following:

- a) an appraisal of the gender situation (in terms of the children's, the staff's and my own values and goals),
- b) an assessment of the development of the interventions,
- c) an appraisal of the various action phases undertaken,
- d) an evaluation of the results of these actions (again in terms of the children's, the staff's and my own values and goals), and my feeding back of this information into the second session cycle.

### **The research stages**

The brief outline below, of the phases that took place within our small action research cycles, was broadly based on Lewin's (1946) work.

### **Setting the scene**

Within the ethnological conventions, theorisation always appears later than depiction. My nursery reconnaissance, without intervention in any situation, had to occur initially, or else

an entirely atypical occurrence might be selected by the staff, or myself for examination, and the richness and 'strangeness' of the original situation might be lost (Patel et al., 1996). I was broadly involved, when generally observing, in reflectively considering how the children, between themselves, and how the staff, in their interplay with children, were employing gender as a classification. When considering the staff actions, I was interested to see which facets of their everyday routines furnished import to girls' and boys' perceptions of others and themselves, as gendered entities (Francis, 1998). I tried also to appraise the psychological costs and advantages of being a female or male child, and what different interpretations they could give rise to (Brody et al., 2000). We gathered a large amount of useful information, and some understanding of the children's world of reality, in the pre-Easter session; this provided the basis for the post-Easter research. The main differences between the first and second sessions were that the staff and I were much more interventionist in the second and our relationship with the children was much more collaborative (Woods, 1986).

#### **A consideration of the accumulated data**

The staff and I constantly, formally and informally, deliberated upon the gender material amassed. This was based, not only on our records relating to the social and academic development of each individual child, but on our general, overall, impression of how children behaved within either small, large mixed or single-sex groupings. (This was aided by my succinct summarisations based on the observations I had made.) Occasionally, this ended in our modifying our thoughts upon a specific problem (Mertens, 1998) and our building more or changing conjectures. It created the foundation for a fresh qualified action inquiry blueprint. This optimistically retained the know-how of earlier phases, and by broadening them, granted us extra understanding.

### **Sensitive interventions**

Our intercessions with the children were frequently identical to our information assembling procedures. The debate on the positions of parents inside the home, for instance, not merely included the consideration by the children, the staff, and myself of the 'justice' of paternal and maternal roles, but also ended, in the gathering of an extensive quantity of gender material.

Granted our gender objectives, we tried to vigilantly question, and debate gender-associated topics as they emerged within our nursery discussions. This was done in order to persuade the children to be more aware of the interactions they were involved in, and thus help them elucidate more fully their own views of the gendered communities within which they lived. This type of approach, we felt, might permit the children to perceive individuals' differing roles and reactions within differing circumstances (Smedley, 1996). Only by completely investigating alternative roles could they adequately comprehend the most suitable ones for themselves in the activities within which they were involved.

As the action inquiry developed through our informal and formal consultation processes, the phrasing, configuration, and kinds of words employed by both the staff, the children and myself altered. At the beginning of the research period, for instance, if queried concerning a specific occurrence, the children would hesitate and often provide merely short, wholly pictorial responses. The more capable children, by Easter, 1999, however, not merely enthusiastically and continually offered elaborate substitute elucidations, employing a large diversity of words in extended sentences, with a variety of conditional sub-clauses for an event, but even guessed at the conceivable outcomes that might come about from an event occurring. The children's prolonged discussions were never just reflections upon a specific facet of conduct, but constituted elements of their enlightening experience (Zuber-Skerritt, 1996). Another gauge, maybe, of the efficiency of our interventionist procedure

throughout the research period was the growing 'richness' of detail the children were supplying, and the increasing level of elegance the children displayed in scrutinising circumstances in their quest for rational conjectures. Such constant enlightening processes ended in the children, the staff, and myself achieving a larger comprehension of fundamental societal processes.

### **Observation**

My constant scrutiny had the aim of endeavouring to corroborate the results of our crucial appraisals. These were quite tentatively drawn up, in advance, to provide a solid basis on which to reflect. I trust that such reconnoitring was thoughtful, tactful, pliable, progressive, and responsive. It was not possible, prior to my pondering the inaugural step, to fathom beforehand every one of the constraints we would experience (Mertens, 1998).

### **Assessment**

I tried, within the final stage of the cycle, to encompass the attitudes of the different staff and children in the nursery arena. I endeavoured to unravel their dilemmas and the settings in which they arose. This frequently resulted in the building of conjectures that were simpler to examine, or in the generation of a set of fresh directional objectives; or in the re-explanation of the initial conjectures of the hypotheses (Shotter, 1998). Such contemplation had an assessment aspect. I expected, through deliberating upon our intercessions, to be capable of appraising the importance of the limitations and obstructions that we encountered. Like Bronwyn Davies (1982), I repeatedly re-read my notes, trying to relate and integrate the children's gender ideas. My re-reading not only assisted me in this, but also formed the foundation for the next series of questions that I wished to investigate. These were partially aimed at persuading the children and staff to explain and elaborate on what they meant by their previous answers.



None of my own action plans were fixed. Moreover, the staff themselves provided a very active input in the collaborative action research we undertook. Our reflections often indicated to us the manner in which we should further explore a particular problem. We were assisted in this by our discourses with our child collaborators. Our reflections allowed the staff and me to arrive at a new understanding of their social world (McTaggart, 1994). It formed the basis for a new modified action research strategy, that hopefully preserved the capabilities of preceding stages, and extended them outwards giving me greater comprehension.

To recap, our action research objectives were:

- 1) Our attempts to understand and analyse the children's, and own gender attitudes in any situation that arose,
- 2) Our efforts to make the children, and ourselves more aware of gender problems,
- 3) Our endeavours to improve the children's and our own self-confidence, the children's self-esteem, their social skills and their academic attainments, and
- 4) our attempts to change or modify the children's, and our own gender attitudes, if stereotyped.

At the beginning of the action research I considered what investigative techniques were available and, of those, which ones were feasible.

### **A many-sided path to investigating**

To avoid, in part, the problems of research methods affecting results, the staff and I embraced a many exploratory processes approach (Anderson, 1998). Also not every procedure, mentioned below, functioned within every setting, or yielded every piece of information that we needed (Eder & Fingerson, 2002). Often, we used other procedures, partially to discover good queries that we might use to make the material clearer, and also

to amass fresh material. Every method used, for example, non-collaborative and collaborative observations, had their specific applications. These came to be, as did the story and discussion questioning, as a result of our collective debating, gradually more centrally directed and sophisticated, as the exploration proceeded. We also felt it hazardous to universalise from, and to depend upon, meagre pieces of data built up from only a few research methods.

Below, I have itemised the principal sources of information. I will then proceed subsequently, within the dissertation, to discuss the material principally upon a topic footing rather than according to source.

### **The main inquiry methods**

The main procedures of inquiry were:

- a) collaborative observation in the nursery, playground, outside school, sometimes in the children's residences, and at some social occasions,
- b) scrutiny, without becoming too intimately immersed, in the above,
- c) staff-parent and researcher-parent conversations,
- d) observation and analysis of specific children's work in such activities as story discussions, construction of models, outside play, and computing,
- e) children's discussions,
- f) staff and child conversations,
- g) researcher and child discussions,
- h) child and child conversations (some taped),
- i) staff-researcher conversations, and
- j) a study of the school's educational printed matter.

(Many of the above events I recorded in note form while they were taking place.)

### **Participant observations**

Participatory and non-participatory observations of nursery children had limitations and benefits. It was often protracted, and dealt with just a restricted range of children's demeanours (Foster, 1996). Also if the staff and I wished to observe normal individual conduct among many children collectively, we found it exceptionally tricky and complicated. The influence of observational effect should also be allowed for when the children noticed that they were being scrutinised, they occasionally acted in an other than their usual way. They sometimes expressed 'socially desirable' gender statements, and behaved differently (as Foster (1996) remarked on in his article).

I was aware that my own behaviour was being monitored by the staff and the children (Warren & Hackney, 2000). The latter spoke to their parents and siblings, from the comments I later received about my activities. On one occasion I asked Joseph (pm) what he had been doing that afternoon. He replied, 'watching you!' 'Oh!, ..... why did you do that?' 'You were fascinating!' he replied. The staff and children occasionally appeared disturbed by my writing things down in my note book. For example, Katie [pm] asked, 'What are you writing there?', indicating the notebook. When children did ask what I had written I read to them the comments I had made (Foster, 1996). I had constantly a notebook at hand. I tried to be unobtrusive and recorded observations in the gaps between activities or when the teachers were involved in other things. The teachers, never objected to my note taking, but I noticed that they were often disturbed if I did so while they were talking directly to the children. My brief classroom notes were reflected on and typed-up in the evenings and discussed with the teachers at a later date. I avoided at all times directly criticising them when discussing what had occurred in the classroom. I tried, instead, to put forward in a persuasive manner, alternative teaching approaches. I made a conscious effort never to undermine the confidence of the children or of the staff.

### **Parental accounts**

Parents' gender accounts were acquired by my own direct often very brief informal conversations with parents, or by my visits to their homes. These supplied parents' own views of their child's behaviour, thus possibly granting me extra understanding, and often confirmed the views expressed in the staff conversations which I overheard. (I recognise here the problems of staff reinterpretation.)

Parents possessed the greatest personal understanding of their offspring, and can supply gender behavioural outlines over a prolonged period. In addition, parents had the chance to scrutinise their children within a broader spread of ordinary conditions, and could describe, in this way, what was normal. Nonetheless, the dilemma always was to what extent did parents' accounts express the peculiarities of the parents to an excessive extent, and if their reports were acceptably impartial (Warren & Hackney, 2000).

### **Group discussions**

In the final appraisal of the research our general discussions, in small and large child groups, would appear to have been one of the most effective means by which we, the nursery staff and I, jointly or individually, modified or altered children's opinions. There were significant moments when we were influential emissaries of transformation in expanding and developing children's gender perceptions. We tried, after our often animated discussions, e.g. as to the kind of verbal approaches and equipment that we could use, within the computer, craft, storybook, indoor and outdoor play activities, to persuade the children to disassemble apparently normal conventional behavioural ideas about gender roles. We endeavoured to make the children attentive judges of every interaction they encountered (Berry, 1998). This was because we believed, that if we were to progress away from the gender duality, chances should be grasped in such discussions, to illustrate and examine alternative roles.

We attempted to dynamically interact with the children, within their everyday instructional routines; and to change the stereotyping impact of the majority of their homes, and the prevailing nursery peer-group socialisation activities. We strove to render the present concepts of feminine and masculine immaterial. For example, we frequently engaged in discussions concerning the dissimilarities between males and the dissimilarities between females together with the activities that both sexes do together, instead of just concentrating on dissimilarities between males and females (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998).

The primary aims, in our continual informal and formal evaluation of our discussions, were to assess the effects, on the children, of their listening to other children's and staff's comments, their debates with each other. We wanted to appraise how these inspired them to deliberate upon and discuss the notions debated (Atweb et al., 1998), and to formulate new plans for effecting change. Our general applauding of children's more non-conventional rejoinders to gender issues may have caused such items to appear more normal, when examined by the children. We did not linger for too long, hoping for children to assimilate non-gender-stereotyped signals from the world around them. We thus tried to make the children at least more generally aware, and then perhaps ultimately to change or modify their attitudes, if stereotyped. I feel that the evidence I collected, discussed in the remaining part of the thesis, supported the need to do this.

Jonathan Brown (1998) thinks children are a great deal more forthcoming in collective discourses, and that it is simpler to modify, inside such an arrangement, the group and individual nature, form and configuration of language, and conduct. We quickly detected, nevertheless, that such discourses were inclined to be controlled by a minority of the more forceful or articulate children (as Collins (1996) also found). There was, even with our collective staff encouragement, little contribution from those children on the margins of the peer groupings. We were, as was Morgan (2002), concerned with such children's opinions so we talked with them privately, especially in the pre-Easter 1999 period, in pairs, or

individually out of earshot of their often more verbally aggressive, conventionally gender minded peers.

### **Story reading**

In the storybooks I chose, or directed the staff's attention towards, only a few were concerned with females and males acting in a non-conventional manner, which contradicted customary gender stereotypes (see Appendix 1). The staff and children found some of these 'newer versions' of traditional type fairy tales unreal or 'rather artificial' (Gaine & George, 1999, p.86). Bettelheim (1976), Walkerdine (1984), Davies (1989), and McDonnell (2001) warn against the overuse of non-traditional stories on account of the fact that they may turn children away from reflecting on different gender situations, by conflicting with children's prevailing ideas and their apprehensive endeavours to show to society the 'correct' configuration of gender conduct. A number of the children brought into the classroom many of their own storybooks, which they, and their parents, wanted to be read and discussed. A significant element of the inquiry was founded upon these.

The story reading periods were very interactive. The teacher, whilst reading a narrative, would occasionally pause and ask the children to give a brief recap of the story so far, to try to anticipate the next series of events, and give an appraisal of the arguments put forward by other children, or by characters in the story. During these discussions, the other members of the nursery staff present, and myself, would frequently be seated facing the reader, and would actively support the collective discursive process. Within our joint discussions with the children, we discovered, even if somewhat fleetingly, that it was possible to affect the opinions expressed by the children, that it was feasible to encourage the girls to empathise with the current males' condition, and to encourage the boys to sympathise with females' societal roles. For example, in responses that arose from the reading of *Piggybook* (Browne, 1986) the boys did identify the justice of fairly sharing

nursery materials with females, and the unjustness of the current allotment of family assignments.

The more pensive, constantly sophisticated story and discussion analysing process, emerging from our unceasing conferring and used by us particularly after Easter 1999, appeared to have a direct tempering consequence upon the children's stereotypical opinions, and yielded comparatively lasting shifts in the children's rejoinders. In the post-Easter discussions, following our consulting, we were able to consolidate the information we had acquired from our activities with the pre-Easter classes. Within the post-Easter classes a greater diversity of traditional gendered stories were employed by the staff, across a lengthier, more constant duration, and on a great deal more intentional footing, but with the staff and I consistently questioning traditional gender assumptions. We found, like Rest & Narvaez (1991), that the post-Easter 1999 more assiduous story analysing procedure, as compared with the pre-Easter more infrequent process, was more influential in causing the children to be more cognisant, and in tempering instead of strengthening, stereotypical opinions, and did bring about less stereotyped repercussions.

The rejoinders the post-Easter children provided, possibly as a consequence of such a process, adhered to the overall motif and form of rejoinders of the story-analysing activities overall, instead of being immediately connected to the narration of a particular story. Nonetheless, a number of narratives, for example *The Paper Bag Princess* (Munsch & Marchenko, 1980), read in the pre-Easter period, continued to have unusual repercussions upon the instantaneous and lasting opinions stated by some of the children as I constantly discovered when reconsidering my notes. In contrast others, for example *Prince Cinders* (Cole, 1987), appeared to have, I recorded, scant observable long-term consequences. One of the rather wayward, and unintentional, results of the reading and discussion of *The Paper Bag Princess*, a non-standard gender type narrative, with the pre-Easter afternoon

class, was that, instead of changing gender-stereotyped opinions, it seemed to a certain extent to have strengthened them (see also Gaine & George, 1999). As Rosenthal (1994) had, we found that increasing child understanding or consciousness, need not inevitably result in changes within children's perceptions. We discovered, with the pre-Easter afternoon session, that it can even authenticate, in certain examples, present examples of stereotyped views (Delamont, 1996). The children, after the interventions, might be expressing the same stereotyped views, but hopefully, now, might be more able to plead the case for or against that opinion.

Within the story evaluations, the children, the staff, and I were as much involved, with viewing and discussing illustrations and pictorial representations, as the reading aloud of the text. We found that visual depictions in themselves had an extremely strong impact. The import of the pictures was possibly influenced through the prevailing views and 'images' in the subconscious minds of the children, the staff, and myself. The majority of the stories read and evaluated by the four classes incorporated a large quota of pictorial representations.

### **Tape-recordings**

The environments where the tape-recordings occurred, in the small storage room, or in the empty nursery during the outside play sections, and thus out of earshot of the other children, were not 'naturalistic'. We found that if we attempted taped interviews, in normal classroom times, the noise level was often too great (Pollard, 1997). I abandoned taped recordings after Christmas 1998, following discussions with other members of staff, partly because we thought that many of the children had become 'bored' with this activity, partly because we felt we had now sufficient data, and partly also because I, myself, now wished to observe outside play activities in greater detail.<sup>2</sup> We employed, during the pre-Christmas

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<sup>2</sup> The tapes were played back to the children and staff after the recording session.



session, the help of child interviewers, partly, founded upon the notion that other children would proffer more sensitive data to them than to us, their teachers (Atweb et al., 1998). The principal objective of such semi-private taping periods was that of inspiring the children to query the prevailing configuration of social conduct, and reveal their own 'private' views. Optimistically, these periods made the boys more cognisant and encouraged the girls' self-assurance. The tape-recorded responses provided some intriguing, but sometimes some seemingly contradictory data; the post-Christmas discussion work was done, in part, to resolve this.

### **Computer activities**

On entry to the nursery I observed that the computer activities were male dominated. This is in keeping with Moir & Moir's (1998) findings. The program selected by the staff was chosen with the boys in mind. Both the boys and the girls regarded computing as a 'boyish' activity. I did interpose occasionally, especially after Easter, 1999, and directed the girls and boys to operate the machine in single-sex groupings. The objective of this was to stop the male control that we had detected in previous attempted mixed-sex groupings.

All of the software required children to tackle some kind of problem. I was concerned with perceiving the way in which females and males would undertake these kinds of applications as a shared task, inside their single-sex groupings. I expected that the scrutiny of such activities would grant us many insights into the way in which erudition was socially constructed.

### **Analysis and difficulties**

Throughout this ethnographic research I attempted to create a continuous pattern of practical and hypothetical connections, endeavouring to form an integrated matrix of gender knowledge (Hart, 1998). However, our practical research often produced data that

was contradictory, confusing, ambiguous, and difficult to interpret. The children's use of language, and their interpretation of events, was sometimes extremely puzzling to us, as adults (Epstein, 1998). In some cases I anticipated a certain response, and was very surprised by the reply I actually received. For example, after mentioning various outside jobs adult females could do, e.g. becoming a builder, fire officer, doctor, engineer, dentist, etc., I asked Magdelin (*pm*) what she would like to be when she grew up. Her answer was 'Tall!'. The nursery staff themselves often had similar difficulties. For example, 'Was it a strange cat that came into your house, Jill [*am*]?' suggested Miss Kinsey. 'No it was a nice cat,' Jill responded misunderstanding the word 'strange'. Mrs. Gillham explained, 'you need bright eyes Phyllis to spot where the Easter bunnies have left the eggs.' 'But I've only got blue eyes,' queried Phyllis (*am*). Similarly, it was frequently quite difficult to distinguish between the different elements affecting a child's response to a specific concern, and what was characteristic behaviour at different nursery periods. Nevertheless, children can display an unexpected level of sensitivity to social codes, and can create emphatic differentiation between fantasy and reality, and can travel deftly between them within their games, as did similarly aged girls in Furth and Kane's (1992) research. For example, 'Dinosaurs are toys, worms are real,' explained Katie [*pm*] as she and Elise [*pm*] talked to, and sorted the toy dinosaurs by colour, type and size. 'They're not real dinosaurs - they're pretend', remarked Elise. We gained, within our investigations, a number of equivalent and intriguing perceptions into how young children may cross over between reality and make-believe within their descriptions of, for example, their potential tomorrows. Interestingly, the girls' 'publicly' vocalised job ambitions were frequently less hopeful, and more realistic, than those of the boys (as found by Gillborn & Youdell, 2000). This might be the consequences of the girls recognising, even at such a youthful age, the inconceivability of gratifying every one of their fantasies (Francis, 1998).

Hence our reconnoitring of the research setting followed a somewhat faltering interval of conceptualisation, appraisal and distinguishing of the gender issues that we wanted to study. I appreciate here that a great deal of my conclusions, through their very character, might be somewhat conjectural (Hammersley, 1995). Nonetheless, I still agree with Glaser and Strauss (1967), in their assertion that theory must be strongly 'grounded' (p.1) in the research material, and that the emphasis ought to be more upon discovering fresh discoveries than upon testing proven explanations when one is reflecting on the material (Strauss & Corbin, 1994; Flick, 1998). 'Substantive' theory might come to be 'formal' theory eventually, as confirmation from other substantive examples is 'compared and examined for common elements' (Woods, 1986, p.147). Our investigations were less concerned with attempting to relate our conclusions to, or bettering our comprehension and information of, or duplicating investigations revealed in the literature (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994), than being an endeavour to understand the manner in which the children equated, comprehended, and perceived their own reality (Holstein & Gubrium, 1994). This entailed, more particularly, our attempting to persuade the children to be more cognisant (Atweb, et al., 1998), and then finally attempting to redraw or alter their views, if stereotyped.

Nevertheless, in my evaluation of the research results (following my reconsideration of my observation notes) I did confirm many of the findings of similar gender studies reported in the literature. Like Bronwyn Davies (1982), we endeavoured to relate our accounts of children's behaviour to their point of view: '...to explain children's behaviour one has to use their views' (Birksted, 1976, p.64). In our ethnographic approach, we aimed: 'to uncover [*the children's*] beliefs, values, perspectives, [*and*] motivations, and how all these things develop or change over time or from situation to situation' (Woods, 1986, p.4); to study: 'the totality of ... [*any*] phenomena in great depth and in its natural setting, to

understand ... [*any phenomenon*] from the point of view of those involved' (DE304 Block 8, 1979, p.9).

### **Selectivity of the material employed**

Many comments from the 'less able' children were unintelligible to both the other children, the staff, and myself. Within the sifting of material, there was thus a factor of selectivity with a few of the children, who asserted more intricate and various opinions, being possibly over-represented. Such opinions, we thought, offer a grasp of the young children's cognitive processes. The inference of this would appear to be that the ensuing treatise does not confer a comprehensive representation of all the children's attitudes. The oral and non-oral conduct within the nursery, and when in the playground, of Mark, and the other less academic children, nevertheless, seemed to show (I noted) that they condoned the present principal gender attitudes of their companions. Moreover, many of the less verbal children were capable, to a certain extent, of adding to, even if they might never directly lead conversations.

### **The necessity to continually change and adjust my data examination**

I constantly looked for general gender categories and sought their tangible indications (Verma & Mallick, 1999). This was done in a way that I hope mirrored the forms of opinions and degrees of opinions, inside diverse sectors and at various periods, of the dissimilar 'players' scrutinised (Johnson, 2002). These players were the children, their parents, the nursery staff, and of course myself as the teacher-investigator. This was done in order to create an intelligible depiction from which I might build up explanations of the way in which males and females, individually and together, perceived society.

As the research proceeded (after referring to and reflecting on my notes), I appreciated that further information was needed, and that the initial analysis needed to be adjusted, and

changed, significantly. I employed an equivalent technique to Lacey's (1979) 'spiral of understanding' (p.179), i.e. one in which insights are enhanced through 'moving backwards and forwards between observations and analysis and understanding' (p.179). I hoped that this would result in a theoretical explanation of a more convincing completeness (Hart, 1998). I believe that my substantiation of the material by reference to different sources, and its extreme abundance, has assisted in the triangulation procedure, i.e. the triangulation of material accumulated along with individuals' opinions (Atkinson & Coffey, 2002). I realised that the more I was capable of connecting our observations to cross citations, the stronger the final analysis would be. Still, though the material was gathered from a rather broad sphere, it, nevertheless, was shaped through the chances that offered themselves to me.

I have tried, within this study, to employ material solely where it is to uphold a specific point, or is pertinent to the specific theme that I am contemplating at a particular moment. I have also endeavoured to furnish some appraisal of the efficiency of some of the different kinds of interventions attempted. Nevertheless, from here on, the majority of the remainder of the dissertation is mainly concerned with my attempts to progressively create an adaptable many-sided representational viewpoint of young children's gender development. The writing-up of the dissertation, as a consequence of this thematic compacting and child-focusing, reads like an observational study of the children's reactions to the factors affecting their 'public' and 'private' gender behaviour. Furthermore, within this summarisation of the research, great emphasis has been placed on most children's need to conform to the prevailing views of the groups in which they were located, especially those that existed within peer groupings. The chronicling of the import of this latter factor gave rise to some of the thesis's most important conclusions. Nevertheless, the significance of other influences, besides those resulting from peer pressure, is also fully mentioned, for the dissertation advances the opinion that the family, the media, and the staff's collaborative

teaching style, to varying degrees, also contributed towards the children's gender training, and that between all the influences, shared effects prevail (B. Brown, 1998). The evaluation of the fleeting and more constant usefulness of the interventions and inquiry procedures that the staff and I used, to induce both sexes to temper their views, if stereotyped, and to be more generally cognisant, could not be divorced from this. I found that the most significant feature of my inquiry writing-up turned out to be the reporting and analysis of the observational data, and I have thus focused on this, accordingly. There is, hence, relatively much less material dealing with aspects of our underlying progressive collaboration than I would have liked, although this is mentioned in the sections that relate to the book, and other discussions, and 'Mr Henry's hut' (referred to later on in chapter 8).

### **Summary**

This chapter indicates the problems involved in being collaborative observers, and discusses some of the difficulties entailed in building a multi-sided and flexible explanation of young children's often inconstant gender views. It also discusses the origins of the research material.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Friendship**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter depicts the importance of friendship groups in the formation of gender attitudes and in a young child's social and academic success, and some of the problems that can result from a child's failure to integrate with its major peer groups. Some gender and power relation differences between the single-sex friendship groups have also been explored, i.e. boys as compared with girls.

#### **Child developmental tendencies**

The staff and I observed and noted that children, from their first entry into the nursery, are able simultaneously, to pay attention to both play companions and playthings. The children not only exhibited, but verbally expressed, a desire to be with other children (Jamieson, 1998). Being with friends gave the children a feeling of security, in familiar or strange environments, or when a stranger such as myself was present (as Price's (1996) work also reveals). 'I've got no-one to sit next to. I'm lonely', shrieked Daniel [am] on one occasion. Within a stable friendship setting as compared with a non-friend one, the nursery children, especially the girls, displayed consideration and tenderness towards each other, and backed-up their playmates in quarrels with other children, and shared things with them (Howes (1996) validated this in other situations).

However, the staff and I noticed that there existed more collaborative, rather than parallel or solitary play amongst four-year-olds when compared with three-year-olds. The four-year-old children displayed more systematic interaction with one another (as Fonzi, Schneider, Tani & Tomada (1997) also found). We observed and recorded, at this age, the growth of verbal techniques, and the ability to join in symbolic play. This, in our view, progressively altered the character of their cohort engagements. The children could then

specify the configuration of their pastimes and could bargain more easily with each other on their rules. They could then express understanding and could transmit information concerning their endeavours to each other. They indicated to one another new approaches to make-believing, and tried to amplify one another's familiarity with things (Denham, 1998). This, we thought, was a crucial component of the children's expanding cognitive adroitness (Eder & Fingerson, 2002). Within peer groupings, boys and girls appeared to assist in the socialisation of each other (Eagly et al., 2000).

### **The linkage between family and peer system**

Nonetheless, we noticed and remarked on, in our staff discussions, the connection between the degree to which young children were accepted, disregarded or rebuffed by peers, and maternal gregariousness (Doyle & Markiewicz, 1996). Mothers, such as Molly's (pm), Joseph's (pm), Charlotte's [am], and Elise's [pm], who seemed to be rich in gregariousness, as quantified by their association with neighbours (as Field (1995) similarly observes), were less liable to have rejected offspring than non-gregarious mothers such as Nicola's (am) and Jeremy's (pm). There existed also more collaborative play amongst those who had been, or were, in some sort of child caring unit as compared with those who were not (Silberfeld & Robinson (1998) likewise detected this). For example Katherine's (pm) close friend was Joseph (pm), probably because Katherine spent the mornings being cared for by Joseph's mother. This seems to indicate that, to some degree, the children learnt how to play with one another.

Different types of parental nurturing perhaps may serve to mould the children's characters, and establish how they act towards peers, and later the positions they will achieve in cohort clusters (Patterson, 1996). Some writers, for example Shaffer (1999), state that the character of the children-parents partnership is a dependable harbinger of the children's subsequent cohort involvement. If this is so, then it is conceivably founded on the



assurance, or lack of assurance, that the children gain out of a stable, or unstable, original bonding (Carlson & Sroufe, 1995). The assurance gained, or not gained, will then be extended to other areas (Kerns, 1996). The home environment may affect peer relationships (Kerns, Cole & Andrews, 1998), but equally, a youngster's exclusion or approval by peers will be reflected in that youngster's home behaviour. There is thus a feedback effect of one area on the other (Price, 1996).

### **Rejected, neglected and popular children**

#### **Aggressive-rejected children**

In the nursery, repudiated children such as Jeremy (*pm*) and Duncan (*pm*), we noted, were excluded by the majority of the other children as a result of their hostile behaviour (Aboud & Mendelson, 1996). They, in their inaugural advances to others, especially to the girls and male 'neglected loners', behaved in a sociably inappropriate antagonistic way, engaging in non-reciprocal actions, and partaking in conspicuous antics, for example over-activity in both boys' cases, and a loquacious manner in Duncan's. They were thus perhaps unequipped to collaborate and share with others. They might, as a result of such continual rejection, be unable to evolve societal involvement expertise (Cox, 2000b).

However, notwithstanding this, the rejected children, we noticed, still tried to participate in collective activities. Such children, Zakriski and Coie (1996) reported, have a tendency to possess grandiose notions of the degree to which they are approved of, by their peers, which is a misrepresentation that definitely helps to protect these children in preparation for hurtful rebuttals, later in life. Duncan, for example, was very often proclaiming his great strength and fearlessness to other children and adults. However, such repudiated children, we thought, may to a certain extent view themselves in an unfavourable social light, as a result of their exclusion (Cox, 2000b). These children probably have a dissimilar mental representation of any given situation when compared with accepted children

(Bandura, 1997). For instance, Duncan seemed to realise that some of the other children were afraid of, or disliked him, and was not surprised, that if he had to sit down during the drink and fruit consuming period first, that no one would voluntarily sit next to him. If someone did sit next to him, he looked around, quickly and searchingly, to see if this was because no other seats were vacant. His background of being physically and verbally abused probably caused him to suspect any show of consideration by others (Price, 1996).

Such children as Duncan may not, as a result, be disposed to inject the necessary exertion into academic attainment endeavours, as valued by the more stable children (Smith, Bowers, Binney & Cowie, 1999). For example, we noted that Duncan avoided board games, jigsaws, and co-operative construction work favoured by the more able boys and most of the girls. This type of avoidance may contribute, in the long term, towards Duncan's academic under-achievement. Just before the end of the Spring term 1999, Mrs Gillham and I observed Duncan, after being persuaded by Mrs Denhart, attempting to complete a simple animal jigsaw puzzle. This was the first time we had observed him doing this type of activity. Duncan had great difficulty in solving it. Previously, that morning, Mark (*am*) had completed the same puzzle with great ease. Was Duncan's poor performance due to lack of practice, lack of application or a mixture of the two?

Rebuffed by their normal cohort group, such boys as Duncan often join delinquent clusters. Here they discover prompt approval of their forceful conduct (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998). In the nursery, Jeremy (*pm*) also presented behavioural problems. His language was immature. He did not make eye contact, in the usual manner, with adults and peers. He did not display or react to fondness, as did most of the other children. Jeremy's inattentive, hyperactive behaviour, when the class was seated during story-telling, was copied by other boys, e.g. Duncan, Henry, John, if the staff and I were not vigilant. These boys tended to be together in an often aggressive grouping in the voluntary activities they pursued together,

inside and outside the classroom. This grouping, we observed, then aided each other's unsociable and gender enforcing actions. The other children were rather afraid of their collective and individual behaviour. We were constantly vigilant in protecting the other children from their aggression. However, Jeremy's behaviour improved remarkably after Easter 1999 with the departure of Duncan and the other older boys. He was still difficult to handle, as far as the staff were concerned, but his social relationships with the other children were much improved.

### **Neglected children**

The peer neglected children such as Nicola (*am*), Hugh (*pm*), Julia (*pm*), and to some extent Stacey (*am*) and Tom (*am*), were, from our observations, not liked. They seldom displayed aggressiveness towards others, or contended for attention. These children appeared awkward in cohort interplay. They had a tendency to pass longer periods with bigger groups and to eschew paired gatherings. Perhaps as a result of their reserved nature they generally amused themselves by themselves. They might, consequently, turn out to be lonesome, diffident, and forlorn mainly on account of their being disregarded (Collins, 1996). Nicola rarely spoke. She did not join in when the other children repeated the teachers' words or actions, or sang. She sat in a cheerless manner, but watched what was happening intensely (Newcomb and Bagwell (1996) illustrate similar behaviour). She did activities by herself, and stood watching the others when out at play. She told us she wanted to play with the others. Peer rejection can possibly affect behaviour, school attendance, and present and future school academic performance (Newcomb & Bagwell, 1996). Mrs Gillham told us, at a meeting, that Nicola's mother had said that after Nicola had been off ill, that she had sobbed on returning to the nursery, 'Why bother going (*to nursery*); I have no friends'. However, towards the end of December 1998, the staff and I did notice a marked change in Nicola's behaviour, as a result possibly of our interventions, for she was now, in the singing lesson, joining in with other children, and was willing to be

directed by us to play with the others. The neglected children, as compared to the aggressive-rejected children, frequently revealed few signs that they were in danger of becoming antisocial. However, they may be a vulnerable grouping, affected as they were by apprehension, reticence, and nervousness (Burks, Dodge & Price, 1995).

When I compared the above two groups with those children who were accepted by their peers, I noted that, from the commencement of the research, the latter showed adept functioning in collective interactions and in the direction of public exchanges (Bukowski, Newcomb & Hartup, 1996). To staff and myself it seemed, particularly from our exchanges with Nicola and Duncan, that socially approved children frequently interpret collective exchanges and a display of cross-gender behaviour very dissimilarly and more reasonably than do rejected children (Price, 1996). This may cause these children to be sought after. They may then, as a result, become more affable and gregarious characters, proficient at interrelating both in collective and paired situations, which further improves their popularity. They can, as a result, take command in undertakings free from excessive aggressiveness (Rubin, Bukowski & Parker, 1998).

### **Sex segregated groups**

#### **Introduction**

Perceiving what playthings girls and boys amuse themselves with, and finding out if other individuals are females or males, are perhaps the initial stages in the lengthy course of gender-role discovery. The staff and I found, like Ruble and Martin (1998), that young children were capable of using information relating to another individual's gender to generate assumptions concerning a person's characteristics, predilections and competence. It seemed an improvised occurrence and was not readily altered by grownups' suggestions. It is of course possible, assuming lower feminine activity, aggression and strength levels, that young females and males get involved in forms of pastimes, and select playthings, that

depict their own particular inclinations (Moller & Serbin, 1996). We observed that both nursery boys and girls seemed, as a result, to choose playthings, and same sex companions, that accommodate themselves most suitably to such behavioural dispositions. It was thus perhaps not strange that single-sex female and single-sex male groups had a tendency to evolve quite distinct forms of engagement. Another reason ought not to be excluded, that is that innate character traits, of a sex-related character, might explain different plaything predilections.

Once a new-entry child joined a particular friendship group, he or she tended to adopt that group's general gender attitudes. Intriguingly, Mrs Gillham and Mrs Denhart noticed, with the three-year-olds, that the grouping of girls as compared with the boys seemed to occur earlier, and to be more stable and constant (consistent with Brown (1995)). In the teachers' investigations, following one of our discussions, of three-year-old infant play groups in free activities, well over half were groupings of the same sex, and by four-years of age that percentage had increased. I have observed in the past, in my previous DPhil research, that by the time the children reach seven or eight, cross-gender friendships were virtually non-existent.

### **Male playmate groups**

There appeared to be marked disparities between boys' and girls' infant friendship groups. Their members possessed very dissimilar modes of communicating with each other even at this early age (Carli & Bukatko, 2000). The boys' groups displayed clear, stable and hierarchical organisational structure. Here status seemed to be an important factor.

A male infants' position in the power structure, among other children, tended not to be connected to positive relationship from or to other children, or to social approval, but by the force that could be applied. Certain older infant boys, such as Duncan (pm), or Liam

(am), we noted, appeared to be more capable than others at maintaining their demands to longed-for items, e.g. a tricycle or computer time, and areas inside the classroom and outside (Gillborn and Youdell (2000) also remarked on this type of behaviour). Duncan and his associates achieved this by either scowling at the other children, or by other forms of intimidation or by merely grabbing the thing away, or the equivalent. Nursery girls, while deferring to males, also were themselves absorbed in control relationships within their own sex groupings.

Children at the base of the hierarchy, e.g. Hugh (*pm*), Carola (*pm*), Nicola (*am*) and Toby (*am*), seemed to miss out to everybody while those superior in the power structure, e.g. Liam (*am*), Meg (*am*), and Duncan (*pm*) appeared to come off better over almost every other child. However, Liam, though he bullied both girls and boys, was willing, once he had gained control of some item or space, to share it with others, unlike Duncan, for example. The staff and I were actively aware of this situation and tried to intervene when we observed any open display of force. However, quietly and relentlessly the power struggle went on (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998). Amongst older junior school children, I found, however, that popularity and power structures were connected.

The infant boys, we observed, did very little consulting, and appeared always impatient to finish any task as soon as possible. The boys were reluctant to help, or to request assistance, and certainly not from the girls. The boys were also averse, even when working with friends, to co-operate and share their work and findings (consistent with Epstein et al., 1998b). The boys' groups were more restrictive in their choice of members and activities than the girls' groups. The girls' play groups were more willing to accept the male 'neglected loners' such as Hugh [*pm*]. The boys were inclined to proclaim their successes to those around them (Campbell, 1998). Boys' groups tended more frequently to exhibit all sorts of self-aggrandising behaviour, e.g. bragging, interjecting, arguing overbearingly with

pushy and coercive behaviour. The boys were prepared to 'cheat' in this showing-off process. Duncan (pm), Mrs Denhart and I observed, often roughly seized another boy's or girl's model with the words 'I made that' and then later presented it to the class, at the 'show-and-tell' time, as his own. The original creators appeared to be too frightened to complain. (The staff and I were well aware of such situations and intervened when we observed them.) Some boys, when displaying to others their proficiency in puzzle solving, would partially undo and then complete a puzzle a girl had just done. For example, Mrs Gillham and Mrs Denhart noticed Neil (am) regularly employed, even after being told not to, a deception strategy to complete an alphabet puzzle. That is, he took and placed the pieces from a completed one in four ordered parallel lines on either side of the jigsaw, and then to an invited audience exhibited his remarkable speed at completing it!

The boys appeared generally more bent on forcing their delineation of a problem, and its elucidation, on their male group members. The emphasis was more noticeably on power controlling, verbal non-submission, warnings, and ordering (Carli & Bukatko, 2000). This was always evident in the infant boys' behaviour (even after our interventions) while outside on the climbing frame, or when riding the tricycles. Maccoby (1990) states that this is a restrictive or constricting style, in that it is inclined to thwart group interplay. It may cause the group members to retreat, so lessening the interplay, or causing it to cease altogether.

### **Female playmate groups**

On the other hand, the girl groups social structures exhibited more of a co-operative style (Duffield, 2000). Such a style comprised such actions as female members indicating agreement, and putting forward recommendations in a pleasant manner. This was evident in the infant girls' activities in the home corner, or when using the sandtray outside in the yard, where the making of imaginary cakes required the co-operation of three or four girls.

While watching five girls mixing the ingredients for an imaginary birthday cake in the home corner, Mrs Gillham and I were impressed by Clare's (am) ability not only to list all the possible ingredients needed, the order in which these should be added, and how the cake should be baked and iced, but by her inclusion of the other girls in the cooking process. Afterwards they began the cooking process again with Phyllis (am) taking the leading role. Such girls appeared to place a high value on establishing and preserving close emotional affiliations, founded on fairness and equality. This involved the girls in devising tactics to avoid openly challenging other girls' ideas. In an attempt to persuade all the members to agree with the predominant view of the group, there was much negotiation, turn-taking, verbal and non-verbal acknowledgement of other girls' contributions, expressions of agreement and support of other girls' contributions (Carli & Bukatko, 2000). Every one of these actions served to sustain the uninterrupted interplay in the groups, and encouraged a larger affinity and parity in their friendships. In their activities the girls were more inclined to share explanations with the members of their groups (Yelland, 1998). They made more citations for need to share in their play activities. Felicity [pm] remarked, 'We have to share.' 'You have to share it (a pretend large cake)', stated Libby [am] authoritatively. We observed and noted, in simple dice board games, involving the matching of the number of dots on the face of a dice with the numeral on a board, the girls, in contrast to the boys, assisted each other and suggested the correct answer to the less able or younger players. The girls appeared to take it in turns to win. All the girls seemed to try to come to the winning line at the same time. The winning girls' margin over the other girls, in all sessions, as Sutherland and Hoyles (1988) noted in their work, was significantly less than that of the boys.

The girls, as Cook and Finlayson (1999) revealed in their book, indulged in pastimes which were quieter, more co-operative, and involved less visible dominance-related interactions, with fewer fixed rules, in comparison to the boys. Their friendships were intensive rather



than extensive, and appeared 'closer' (i.e. more intimate) than those of the boys (MacDonald, 1998). It seems that as a result of the differing nurturing process, young males, from two years onwards, generally speak less concerning emotions than young females (Kimmel, 2000). Between infant girl companions', self-disclosure, i.e. telling each other 'secrets like mums do', as Patricia [pm] remarked, was critical, as it seemed to bind the girls closer together emotionally (Williams, 2000). For example Mrs Denhart and I observed four girls outside the nursery, in the play area and inside the new plastic small house. Molly (pm), seeing me walking in their direction, forcefully shouted to me waving her arm, 'only women are allowed in our house!' 'Boys, (pointing at me), are not allowed to listen to our secrets. No peeking either!'. 'What secrets are you talking about, Molly?' I asked. Molly replied, 'you wouldn't understand, you're too old and anyway you're a boy'.

#### **Male dominance of mixed-sex groups**

The staff and I observed, as did Gilbert and Gilbert (1998), that within cross-gender play friendships the boys tended to dominate the girls. For example, Joseph (pm) was assertive in his relationship to Katherine (pm), and tended to order her about, e.g. 'bring me that man', 'pick that up'. Katherine seemed to enjoy the role Joseph gave her. Similarly, in the morning session, Liam (am) dominated the girls, making them into his assistants, e.g. Daisy (am) and Alison (am). Joseph informed Mrs Denhart and myself one evening, in front of his and Katherine's mothers, and Katherine herself, that he treated Katherine as he did because, as he put it, 'I'm going to marry Katherine, and that's how men treat their wives'. The mothers chuckled, Mrs Denhart smiled and Katherine beamed. Here the children, and possibly the mothers and Mrs Denhart, seemed to recognise and to have accepted traditional male and female roles. (Mrs Denhart's gender reaction here, perhaps illustrates the often unconscious ambiguity in attitude that the other members of staff, and I, occasionally displayed.) Interestingly, Joseph soon after this stopped playing with and talking to Katherine in class following averse comments questioning, in effect, his

manliness by Duncan (pm), e.g. 'you (Joseph) play with girls!'. (Thrupp (1999) notes the influence of male peer pressure on cross-gender friendships.)

The girls, who played in mixed groups, the staff and I observed, were often willing to submit to the frequently outrageous claims and requests of the boys. Daisy (am), when building a model with Alan (am) and Toby (am), not only employed conciliatory techniques in her discourse to bring her and the boys' ideas together, but credited the boys with her own ideas in an attempt to prolong their interest. Equally, while Katie [pm] and Jim [pm] were constructing a farm together for over half an hour, Katie prolonged this by allowing Jim to say that her original chosen white horse (Jim had originally chosen the red one) was his now.

The events described above illustrate the force that boys might impose upon girls when they wish to co-operate with boys, and they also depict the girls' gender acquiescence that was often so evident in the nursery (B. Brown, 1998). Nevertheless, we did find that male and female groups could fabricate models side by side in the construction zone. However, their activities there were seldom co-operative and were most frequently parallel.

A fundamental problem with mixed-sex groups was due to the boys' frequent disregard for the friendship interaction conventions used by the girls in their single-sex groups (Glick & Hilt, 2000). The girls tried to continue to apply, in mixed sex groups, the less physically assertive (i.e. persuasive) techniques employed by them in their conflict control within girl-only groups (Carli & Bukatko, 2000). For example, 'All of us will be friends now. Not shout! Don't shout!', counselled Sue (am), when Alan (am) had been first excluded and then was invited by a group of girls to join their model making activities.

However, the girls found their persuasive approach frequently ignored and thus ineffective in influencing the male members of their groups. This explained why most of the older four-year-old girls, in the pre-Easter 1999 period, except Katherine, Daisy, and Alison normally avoided working with boys. Engaging in cross-gender activities was a positive characteristic for some girls, but not for others. Some girls were unacceptable to the boys, for example neglected girls such as Nicola (am). My observations are supported by the work of others, for example, Moller and Serbin (1996), Millard (1997), and Yelland (1998).

### **Male attempted domination**

In their general activities the infant male groups often employed collective power relationships (if allowed by adults) to dominate individual or groups of females (both girls and adult staff) and less dominant males when they were incapable of commanding separately (Burr, 1998). Most of the girls, contingent on the level of intimidation, would after a short time accede to the persistent commands or appeals of the more dominant boys.

Very occasionally, in the 'show-and-tell' and story-telling periods, when the children were seated on the floor, the boys, as a group, would endeavour to obtain, if permitted, influence over the female teacher who was in charge of that discussion by placing her, and the other female teachers present, including occasionally myself, in the role of a 'girl' and replying correspondingly. 'I see lots of very silly monkeys looking at me', (i.e. referring to the boys), said Mrs Denhart mischievously. 'We're not silly monkeys, you and the girlies all are!' retorted Tony (am) firmly. 'Oh no we're not', responded Miss Kinsey limply, some of the girls joined in the banter with her. 'Oh yes you sissies all are', reiterated the boys. On another occasion before Christmas 1998 Tom (am) deliberately exhibited a 'feminine' doll. Liam (am) sniggered and intoned 'Boys don't have fun with them'. Mrs Denhart hearing this interjected, 'Yes, Tom can. Everyone can have fun with one'. 'Yuk! Girlies' stuff!'

responded Liam after protracted coercive sniggering with Tony (am) in Tom's direction 'Only sissy boys play with them!'. 'I've seen you at home playing with your action man Tony. Isn't that a doll?' inquired Miss Kinsey attempting to gain control of the situation. 'No way! Only girlies have stupid dollies. You're all girlies, only girlies have stupid dollies!'. Such behavioural episodes were interpreted by the girls from what they said, as natural conduct for males, or in the case of female nursery staff, as 'amusing' incidents or possibly they were not noticed, or understood by them as notable examples of sexist power interactions (Harne, 2000). There seemed to be an implied acknowledgement by the children and perhaps unconscious acceptance by the staff, on occasions, of the correctness of masculine control of verbal expression and territory. Walkerdine (1987), Jamieson (1998), and Paechter (1998) allude to similar cases to those mentioned above.

Nevertheless, the girls would occasionally combine, even in the pre-Easter period, as a group, to stop an individual, more socially isolated boy, such as Mark (am), invading their activity. They would physically push them away. Mark in retaliation for the girls pushing and smacking him often hurt the girls, e.g. he badly scratched Polly (am). The girls then demanded justice, e.g. 'please Mrs Gillham, Mark has been naughty'. They then waited as a group to see that Mark was admonished. Further, sometimes, with for example the construction materials, the less compliant girls employed their greater haggling and verbal proficiency to acquire what they needed from the boys. Even the most docile girls seldom conformed with supplications from the boys instantaneously. After Easter 1999, Mrs Denhart and I observed in the playground Jim [pm] stopping from pedalling his bicycle and telling Katie [pm] to get off the passenger seat at the back. After about three minutes, Katie eventually complied.

Outside in the playground after Easter 1999 it was interesting to observe the younger male newcomers trying to exert their dominance over the older girls. To my surprise they were

unsuccessful! For example, Ruth [*am*] asserted herself firmly against one of the new boys, Terry [*am*], Felicity [*pm*] silently confronted Brian [*pm*] over the use of a tricycle and was successful, while Timothy [*pm*] tried to take the tricycle that Katie [*pm*] was riding, 'My bike, you hear?' Katie just ignored him. However, the male newcomers even after a number of defeats with the older females, did successfully dominate the younger girls.

Children, the staff and I noted appeared to display cognisance of the power affiliations that existed amongst women and men. In their home engendering processes the children seemed to have acquired information concerning the comparative amount of leverage involved in the adoption of male and female roles, while within the nursery arena, where their adult educators were women, influence was seen to be, to a degree, under masculine leverage.

### **Summary**

The need for friends was evident in the children's comments. The sustaining of their friendships was perceived by the children themselves as one of the most important parts of their social life. They had a continual desire to belong, and to be with others. This involved complying with the views of their same-sex friends. If the children did not conform in public, they risked being ostracised and becoming 'loners'. This conformity perhaps resulted in less public individuality, more friendship group-based attitudes and the growth of a distinctly dissimilar child perspective of how girls and boys were expected to behave. This group conformity might lead to the acceptance, by the majority of girls, of a more passive role in society: the greater valuing, by them, of male achievements and objectives when compared with female ones (Paechter, 1998).

Hierarchical adult/child involvement seems not as effective as more egalitarian peer interrelationships in the learning of societal objectives such as how to share, calculating

leadership attributes, assess 'gender rules' and how to deal with peer pressure and animosity (Eder & Fingerson, 2002).

## Chapter 5

### **The children's viewpoint**

The majority of children, the staff and I believed from our observations, acted on the assumption, until the close of their third year of age, that there was just a single existing reality, i.e. the one that conformed with their view of their previous experiences. They consequently perhaps believed that other children would act in the manner they would themselves (Wainryb & Ford, 1998). The way in which the three-year-old children, as compared with four-year-olds, dealt with abstract ideas, appeared, to us, to be different. Nevertheless, when we asked three- and four-year-olds how they and their parents felt about various things, e.g. foods, drinks, colours, shapes, forms of gender behaviour, and TV programmes, they still intuitively accredited similar feelings, to their parents, as they themselves had.

### **Children's 'theory of mind'**

It was generally only at the beginning of their fourth year that perhaps children begin to conjecture that other individual's emotions, values, gender notions, and perceptions might not be the same as their own (Denham, 1998). When, for example, Alan (*am*), aged four years, noticed that I was looking for my pencil beneath the table, he possibly comprehended, as I assumed from my conversation with him afterwards, that I was functioning in that fashion not on account of the fact the pencil was actually there, but as a result of my belief that the pencil was there. However, Clive (*am*), a three-year-old appeared to believe that the pencil was certainly there. In addition, the children aged four, and some aged three, possibly appreciated, to a certain extent in some rudimentary fashion, that tenets alter. For example when a snowman story was being read, in early December 1998, Katherine (*pm*), aged four, stated that the last time it snowed she believed that snow was cotton-wool, but that she now no longer believed this. Some of the boys laughed but other children aged four, e.g. Joseph (*pm*) agreed that they had thought as she had when

younger. The staff and I observed that young children could differentiate an entity from a belief regarding that entity and distinguish actuality from internal thoughts. Children seemed to recognise that models and pictures differed from actual reality (Gelman & Gottfried, 1996). For instance Harriet [*am*], aged four, showed Mrs Denhart and myself a model of an ice-lolly she had just constructed. I asked her if she could change its colour and its imaginary flavour. She replied that she could. 'Will it melt?' and 'Can you eat it?' I asked. 'No', came the reply. 'Can you put in your pocket?' Mrs Denhart inquired. 'Yes .....

Harriet started to say but then realised she did not have a pocket in her dress. What appeared to change at around the age of four was that the children now seemed to comprehend the representational facets of mental procedures, namely that what one contained in one's head was but a simulation of actuality and not actuality itself (Hay & Demetriou, 1998).

The theory of mind appears to be marked by both temperamental and affective characteristics. It became evident when the children were questioned about other persons' reactions, following the reading to them by the teachers of narratives concerning animals or persons, who have different earlier hopes and experienced different results (Rogoff, 1998). For example, the children were able to differentiate, during a story read by Mrs Gillham, between a mother owl's expectations and those of her chicks, when the latter became lost. It seems that it is this capacity to psychologically depict other individuals' cognitive dispositions, and the children perceiving these as the bedrock for stable measurements in their interactions with other individuals, that rests at the core of this development (Rogoff, 1998). A mechanism for comprehending social demeanour is in this way perhaps created. The children were possibly empowered by this to account for noticeable occurrences, i.e. the owls' endeavours, through hypothesising invisible elements, e.g. their wishes, views, etc. (Denham, 1998). Nevertheless, the staff and I noticed that it was not until their fourth year, that the children seemed to discover how these concepts were linked with actual



reality. That is, how specific encounters engendered specific views and perceptions, and how these mental conditions consequently brought about specific actions.

### **The development of children's morality**

The 'authoritative' teaching methods employed by Miss Kinsey, Mrs Gillham, Mrs Denhart, Mrs Pope, and myself were perhaps influential because they not merely presented the children with precise details as to what was required, but likewise encouraged collective decision making (Denham, 1998). In this manner, implied acknowledgement was possibly conveyed that the children had their own requirements and desires. We, in our debating with the children, used their current activities and concerns as examples that tied in with our instructions and pleas. We found that we were capable of exciting the children's interest, and arousing them to exemplify, adjust, amplify, debate, and effect their fellows' opinions. We accorded our pupils space to investigate, and even the freedom to make small indiscretions (Kochanska, 1997). We believed such a process not merely provided the children, especially the girls, with a much enhanced self-assurance, and reinforced the ties of confidence amongst us, but additionally made us more wholly conscious of any deficiencies in the children's and our own general understanding. The children, as in other effective schools, got large amounts of praise for fulfilling required objectives, or for high attainments (Arnold, McWilliams & Arnold, 1998). We constantly praised children publicly, between ourselves, for example 'look at Duncan (pm) Mr Woodward, he's sitting up so well!' exclaimed Mrs Denhart, on one occasion.

The effective purpose of such encounters was to raise the infant boys' and girls' cognisance of their involvement. The non-threatening altercations perhaps helped the children in emphasising their autonomy. Hence, in such an atmosphere, 'Please Colin [am], would you put away the playthings?' is decidedly a query and not merely a roundabout order. Such a request, whilst exacting agreement, offers the pupil the option to adopt or not adopt the

teacher's instruction and thus strengthens its feeling of independence. Such tactics possibly were more apt to produce acquiescence than more coercive measures (Golombok, 2000). Negative commands, e.g. admonishments, animosity, physical intercession, and warnings may lead to disobedience, according to Kochanska (1997). Moreover, where a child such as Duncan (pm), or Jeremy (pm), saw their 'correct' conduct to be prompted exclusively by outside forces (for example by being disciplined in a very authoritarian manner), they were possibly not inclined to be 'good' if that outside force was missing later on. The staff and I observed, after school, that once Duncan's, Jeremy's and Robert's [am] parents' backs were turned and they were preoccupied in conversation with other parents, the boys soon ignored their previous parental warnings, and misbehaved. It seemed that the reasoning methods, as against others, may make it easier for the children to disassociate the explanation from its initial originator, the teacher or parent. The message thus memorised was perhaps free from connections with the initiating events, and internalisation was perhaps in this way cultivated (Kochanska, 1997).

It appeared that child co-operation was most readily secured if it occurred in an atmosphere of co-operative collaboration. We noticed that punishing children, such as Felicity [pm] for fondling playthings was less successful than giving them a rationale. Felicity displayed a great reluctance to place the teddy she was cuddling in the home box until informed that she needed both her hands to help the teacher with the craft work. I observed and recorded that often the temperamental vigour with which we spoke rather than the substance of our reasoning was a significant factor in raising the children's awareness (Denham, 1998). Specific events, it seems, are marked with emotional tags. Some researchers believe that these tags provide a decisive factor influencing the manner under which behaviour traits are acquired (Denham, 1998). It is perhaps this process that foreshadows and aids girls' and boys' ensuing sociable demeanour when they are with non-familiar associates (Thompson, 1998).

### **Internalisation of social norms**

Piaget (1932) thought children of this age are moral absolutists. The staff and I observed and noted that once the nursery infants learnt behavioural guidelines they seemed to deem them as unalterable, absolute, incontrovertible, and inviolable (Newberger, 1999).

The children helped to enforce social rules, proposed by the staff, amongst themselves. For example Karl [*pm*] informed Patricia [*pm*], a new child, of the nursery rule 'you're not allowed on the wall!'. Ruth [*am*] enforced a teacher toy use rule by replacing a doll, one of the newcomers was playing with, back on the shelf. The children could, from our observations, become irritated by other children's non-compliance with rules, for example Derek (*am*) reacting to Tom's (*am*) cough, 'Hand over your mouth when you cough, Tom, as Miss Kinsey says', and Rhian's (*am*) comment, 'Sit down Tom, now!'. The children repeated the nursery staff's commands, e.g. 'It is time to put the things away now', or between themselves, 'That was done beautifully', 'You did that beautifully,' 'Lovely work', or 'he's trying so hard' were often expressed imitated comments to a child who had done something well. The children frequently enforced lining-up procedures with verbal comments and some pushing, for example when Felicity [*pm*] pushed in to be next to Elise [*pm*]. Even Mark [*am*] 'shushed' the other children to be quiet, when the teacher indicated the need for this by placing a finger in front of her mouth.

The children's rationalisations often alluded not just to their own wants, but gave clear indications of some knowledge of communal guidelines (Zeman & Shipman, 1997). If challenged as to whether hurting another youngster was bad or good, the third year children usually comprehended the socially appropriate response (Newberger, 1999). The children appeared to appraise misdoing or propriety generally on the results of the deeds, rather than on the intention of the individual performing the act (Emler, 1998). Liam's (*am*) model of a farm incorporated a prison. When asked by Miss Kinsey why this was so, Liam replied that

a man had gone to jail because 'He had broke a window, he had broke the rules'. 'Should he go to prison if he broke it accidentally?' inquired Miss Kinsey. 'Yes,' replied Liam. 'If he meant to break the window, what should happen then?' questioned Mrs Denhart. 'He should go to prison longer!' responded Liam. The children seemed to agree and several nodded their heads. The children seemed to believe that having in mind a large harm was more evil than having in mind a smaller one (Lapsley, 1996). This latter point is illustrated by the children saying that if one was 'playing and something got broke' it was not evil. For example, after the reading of a story Maurice [*pm*] stated that the puppies were not naughty when they tore up the basket because they were playing. 'If you did that, Maurice, when you were playing, would that be naughty?' I asked. 'No, I wouldn't mean it,' replied Maurice. However, the children's views were never consistent. The physical consequences of a child's action could sometimes outweigh the child's intentions. (The inconsistency here seems to be in accord with the children being at a Piagetian pre-operational stage (Bee, 2000).) This was especially the case if the consequences of the action were substantial. For example, Ruth [*am*] thought that to knock one glass of water over was 'bad', but to knock seven glasses of water over was 'very naughty'. I asked Ruth whether knocking over one of glass of water because one was angry was worse than knocking over seven with one's arm accidentally. The latter was far worse. 'I would never do that', was Ruth's immediate response. To Ruth the consequences, in this case, seemed to outweigh the intention. When Mrs Denhart emphasised the 'accidental' nature of the problem Ruth said, 'my mummy will not be so mad at me', reflecting 'an attitude of subjective responsibility' (Emler, 1998, p.299).

The nursery infants appeared to recognise that particular criteria of conduct were expected of them, and that they would be punished if they did not comply with their teachers' or parents' wishes. The foundation for the construction of ethical behaviour was in this way possibly established. Nevertheless, the children seemed not always capable of scrutinising

or accounting for their own reactions, but seemed to have grasped the idea that behaviour was managed through societal guidelines. They, as a result, from our observations, not only appeared actively to seek out and built groups of guidelines, but demonstrated a marked preference for them.

### **Social protocols**

The children, in their debating of an issue, frequently asked us to articulate guidelines in a quite precise manner. 'Do you mean trousers or bottom?' asked Katie [pm] when Mrs Denhart had warned one of the boys 'you must go down the slide on your bottom not your front'. The children thus perhaps learnt about societal codes within the school environment. At home, the parental requirements about TV watching, bedtime, excursions, and mealtimes gave an abundance of openings for the children to discover, and absorb, what was considered to be suitable conduct. Some parents, with disobedient children, especially boys such as Robert [am], complained bitterly to us about their children's non-compliance with rules.

Suitable child conduct was possibly further picked up by children in activities involving turn-allocating, sharing, examples of fairness and ownership whilst at play with brothers and/or sisters, and peers at school. For example, in the post-Easter 1999 period, in a dice race game, the children had to move the different coloured toy snails along a track. Four boys, Ian [pm], Gerald [pm], Jim [pm], and Merlin [pm] said they wished to play and each chose a coloured snail. They then, in turn, tossed the coloured dice. On each of the dices sides was a coloured dot when the blue dot came up the blue snail when forward one square.

Unfortunately, Ian, whatever the colour that came up, insisted on moving his own snail, and then asserted that it was now his turn again with which the other children vocally

disagreed. I intervened and told Ian that each boy must have a turn in sequence, and move a snail along, regardless of whether it was his or not, when one of the four colours came up. The boys, especially Ian, appeared to have great difficulty in accepting this rule. However, to my surprise, about forty minutes later during Mrs Denhart's re-reading of *The Paper Bag Princess* story (Munsch & Marchenko, 1980), when she asked, 'what does being kind mean' Ian put up his hand and answer, 'Taking turns in the snail game, giving others a chance'. 'Yes, its his turn then mine', added Gerald. The above incident does appear to demonstrate the benefits of adult interventions in explaining social rules (B. Brown, 1998).

When taking part in domestic and nursery discussions there were other behavioural ideas that could be picked up by the children. Children, for example, may discover guidelines for bargaining. That is, they may cultivated the use of rational debate, and ascertained that disagreement could not be expressed generally by just uttering the word 'no'. This was evident in conflicts arising during model making. Mrs Gillham and I were impressed by how Alan (am), and the girls' group led by the persuasive Sue (am), settled their dispute over limited resources by become a single working group. The complex negotiations took nearly ten minutes. Children also learned, we noted, how to call for aid from a member of staff in an altercation with another child that they felt they were not winning, and they also evolved strategies for evading staff guidelines, or devising excuses, (especially the girls), for not keeping to them.

It was possible that lasting behavioural habits were instilled in the children by daily, routine, parental and staff explanatory directives (Luster & McAdoo, 1996). Children discovered how to universalise principles that they then could employ during later events. Such explanatory directives possibly affected not just current submission but subsequent child self-restraint and internalisation (Kochanska, 1997).

### **The development of empathy**

The ability to empathise, that is the emotional attentiveness that a person displays to the emotions exhibited by another individual, appears to be exhibited quite early in life (Denham, 1998). The staff and I observed and noted that children noticed, and were frequently disturbed, by other children's or grownups' sufferings or unhappiness. The children seemed to manifest sufficient comprehension of the feelings of others so as to react in a considerate and sustaining manner. They, especially the girls, often volunteered to assist distressed children by attempting to console them, and by proffering them playthings (Eisenberg and Fabes, 1998) also remarked on this type of behaviour in their article).

We noticed however, that boys seldom proffered aid, in the pre-Easter 1999 period, when another child was suffering (even when we suggested they should do so). The boys, when Mrs Pope queried them about this, stated in effect that their not giving help was due to the fact that a woman was present (i.e. the teacher) and that it was up to her, as woman and as, in effect, a mother figure, and not to them, as males, to extend assistance (Gilroy, 1999). Here one had a definite indication that the expression of empathy relied possibly as much on a child's perception of the complete setting as on his or her inner compassionate attitudes. The boys, equally, appeared less willing, or perhaps felt that they were not expected to share emotions or things with others. 'Who's going to save some of their (Easter) eggs for their mummies?' enquired Mrs Gillham. None of the boys raised their hands, but most of the girls did. Nevertheless, after Easter 1999, perhaps as a result of the changed gender ambience, some of the boys did display consideration, in their play activities, by helping or inviting other unhappy boys to join them. Daniel [am] proudly informed Mrs Pope, in the outside play area, that he had especially kept and given to Mark the tricycle with no pedals. Mark could not operate effectively the pedals on the other

tricycles. Similarly, Timothy [pm] displayed sympathy towards an unhappy Brian [pm] by constructing for him a 'batrocket'. 'I made it 'cos you're sad', said Timothy.

Children did occasionally allude to altruistic reasons. They showed this by their actions and psychological depictions. For instance, one of Stacey's (am) models of a farm incorporated boats and a diver, reflecting the recent flooding displayed on the *News*. When asked by Miss Kinsey why the farm incorporated these things, Stacey replied that "'cos me, dad, (and the) diver are going to save the drowning people'. The children's depictions often pointed out the requirements of others while their actions were, to a certain extent, adjusted to others (Denham, 1998). 'Katie is good! Katie helps people. Katie likes people!', murmured Katie [pm], to herself, as she was sorting out and talking to the farm animals. Additionally, the children came to be able to rationalise their sociable activities (Denham, 1998). 'We're helping Mrs Pope help Mark,' stated Meg (am). Some of the girls, mainly in the pre-Easter 1999 period, constantly anticipated Mark's needs. They seemed aware that he was different to the others. Some exhibited empathy, for example by helpful comments, and putting his shoes back on when he had kicked them off. Mrs Gillham, Miss Kinsey, Mrs Denhart and I observed Daisy (am), or Meg (am), and sometimes Clare (am), sitting very frequently parallel to Mark, and prepared to help Mrs Pope by physically holding him in position. However, none of the boys offered or attempted to help female adults in such an endeavour, in the pre-Easter 1999 period. Here, perhaps, the girls were assuming their expected future 'mothering roles'. To the girls, possibly, the 'meaning of femininity entails the provision of service, ... to men' (V. Foster, 1996, p.48 quoted in Lowe, 1998). Among the girls and boys there were significant variations in their indications of altruistic functioning, and in the degree to which they empathised with others. It might be that the level of oral debate, in the story-reading period, and instigated by the nursery staff and myself, concerning others' needs and emotions, helped to inform the children of the importance of trying to help other children (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1998).



The staff and I expended a great deal of effort in trying to persuade the children that they should try to behave as reasonably useful, altruistic, unselfish, and non-sexist human beings. The children were often informed by the staff that that they were 'gentle' or 'unselfish' or 'useful', words that to me seemed to characterise female conduct. This certainly helped the girls, at least, to internalise these features as characteristics of their personalities, and consequently, with this, they may in the future, try to keep up a good public image. Even Duncan (pm), the most difficult child for the staff to control, could express the desired characteristics. Duncan greeted me with the following comments while sitting up very straight, 'I'm sitting still. I'm a good boy. I was a good boy all yesterday'. Another example, after Easter 1999, in the outside play area is when Mrs Pope warmly thanked Robert [am] for giving Mark [am] the tricycle without pedals, Robert informed the other staff, including myself, of the praise he had just received. On another occasion Maurice [pm] made a model of Batman and Robin and showed it to Miss Kinsey. 'No guns!' stated Maurice categorically. 'Good boy Maurice', lauded Miss Kinsey. Maurice proudly replied, 'Batman only helps people'. The smaller the amount of references to societal standards that a teacher or parent regularly uses, the less inclined it seems the child will be to display comparatively complex conduct when involved with others (Rosenthal, 1994).

### **Action research**

I have noticed, in my gender investigations with older children, that explaining the justification for consideration or for kindness towards both females and males, rather than just stating it, enlarged the probability that a pupil would express more sympathetic opinions. This was especially the case when the justifications revolved around the emotions of other individuals within a storytelling setting. Bandura (1997), in his investigations of the notion of self-efficacy, has indicated that modifying children's opinions concerning

their capacity to do something, has a larger effect on their demeanour than simply rewarding them for implementing that demeanour.

I did attempt with the infants, in the pre-Christmas 1998 period, some action research on altruism. I read and discussed, on three successive days, three books to the morning session children and staff present, emphasising in my questioning, concepts of altruism and equality of the sexes (see Appendix 1). Prior to this, I tried to assess, in my questioning of children in both sessions, some idea of the levels of these. During the reading of the such stories as *Piggybook* (Browne, 1986), I asked the children about being kind, helping mummy and daddy, sharing things with friends, siblings, and members of the opposite sex. I employed here the types of phrases that the nursery class staff used in their interplay with the children. For example, 'Was it lucky that he/she was so kind? What do you think then? Not a good friend! Not a kind friend? That would be unkind. She should have .. for him! Was that kind? He was kind sharing his .. with her. What could have happened? We have to let other people, girls and boys/mums and dads have turns! Isn't it a shame?', etc. Mrs Denhart then read the same stories, in her 'normal' style, to the afternoon sessions. Mrs Denhart's approach to the stories was not, as far as I can tell, affected by mine; she was busy, while I was reading to the children, listing and sorting the Christmas Fair things in the stockroom. I then, immediately, asked both groups to respond to questions that I had asked before reading the stories. The morning session children gave more altruistic responses. I was not sure if this was just an imitation of the type of the answers given during my reading, whether it resulted from the different age, gender and dispositional distributions of the two sessions, or whether a lasting effect had been achieved. I had found, in my previous DPhil research, that a continuous as against a one-off approach to book review discussions, was the most effective means of modifying children's gender attitudes.

In appraising the effectiveness of an action research process in modifying gender attitudes, the staff and I confronted the dilemma of how to distinguish between the children's often brief declaration of a specific view, within a particular book discussion such as that on *Princess Smartypants* (Cole, 1986), and their more constant underlying expression of a particular opinion. However, we did feel that, to some degree, we did persuade the majority of the children in all sessions, in our general discussion work with them to be, at least temporarily, more 'self-aware' (Lowe, 1998). Our stimulating of and responding positively to, for example, children's gender queries not only assisted our assessing and blueprinting of our developing gender equality activities, but also perhaps encouraged the children to express their 'private' gender preferences. Following such revelations, we were then often capable of applying the derived disclosures to formulate the suitable methods of inquiry needed to surmount the children's, and our own notional problems (Kemmis & Wilkinson, 1998). Always our constant endeavour was to persuade the children to empathise more with others, and to alter or moderate their views, if stereotyped (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998).

However, we always noticed and recorded that displaying consideration for others, or actually assisting others to do so, was the most effective means to encourage altruism. For example, if we wished the children to put away the play equipment, the best way of doing this was to start performing the task ourselves, and then ask the children to assist us. We noticed that even Jeremy (*pm*) imitated the helpful actions of others without being told specifically to assist. We discovered that urging children to be unselfish did not always help. Demonstrating to them the benefits of altruism did help them to be kinder, and this was then reflected in the approaches they made to others. This is illustrated by the marked change in Jeremy's [*pm*] sociability, after the end of the Spring term 1999; at that point Duncan (*pm*) and the older aggressive boys had left the nursery. Jeremy had thus now, in the nursery, an opportunity to make new friends especially with Katie [*pm*]. Katie made continuous overtures in establishing her new friendship with Jeremy, e.g. she brought

scooters, at the beginning of outside playtime, for Jeremy to ride on. Katie tried but was often rejected initially, when she endeavoured to hold hands with him, but she persisted in this activity. Eventually Jeremy, when he noticed Katie's fond looks, conformed with 'good' forms of behaviour, e.g. sitting up straight attentively in a crossed legged position during the 'show-and-tell' time. Katie frequently expressed apprehensive concern for Jeremy's welfare. For example, 'Are you going to tell Jeremy's dad that he is naughty?' she anxiously inquired of Miss Kinsey. Katie told me confidentially, in June 1999, seemingly seeking my approval, that Jeremy was 'her boy friend'. Hearing this, Jeremy smiled sheepishly, and agreed. Possibly as a result of this thoughtful attention and 'love' given by Katie, Jeremy's behaviour and use of language were much improved. He was now more sociable, and he now also displayed less gender-stereotyped behaviour. For example, in the home corner after Easter 1999 Jeremy, with Patricia [pm], prepared a pretend meal for me. Why had not Katie and Jeremy shown this different type of behaviour prior to Easter 1999? Was it solely because of dominant anti-cross gender activities of the then controlling male group? Judging by the amount of nursery cross-gender behaviour exhibited by, for example, Norman [pm] after this date, the staff and I thought that this must be the case.

We believed that we were required to consider our own demeanour first when our objective was to persuade children to display voluntary concern for others. However, it was noticeable that, within the classroom throughout the research period, the girls did most of the clearing away; perhaps because tidying-up within the home was identified, by both infant boys and girls, as a woman's task (Francis, 1998), or perhaps because the boys' parents did not expect their male offspring to do it. 'No, boys don't dust in the house, girls do!' explained Norman [pm].

### **The children were not self-centred**

Some of the above work illustrates the fact that children of this age could not always be categorised as self-centred. Young children such as Carola (*pm*), maybe because of her parents' depression in the pre-Christmas 1998 period, could occasionally display a singular comprehension of another individual's mental states, even when their own competence to function adequately was restricted. The children's information, however, was not as elaborate as I had found with older children, and had a tendency to be restricted to states that were functioning at that time, to the rejection of persistent, inactive traits.

Nowadays the notion that children who are younger than seven are incapable of reflecting on any viewpoint other than their own, has perhaps generally been disproved (Bee, 2000).

### **Self-esteem**

Self-esteem concerns people's sense of their own adequacy and value (Head, 1999). The encouragement of this in girls has often been put forward as one of the school's principal 'equal opportunity' objectives (Swan, 1998). However, self-esteem is not just a consequence of institutionalised education. Prior to commencing the home-to-school change, boys and girls have perhaps differing levels of self-assurance and definite gender convictions that will influence their reactions to school itself. This possibly explains why, as a rule, a 'supportive' home environment can be so effective at establishing a good groundwork for later education prior to school entry. This appears to be less to do with the particular information that children pick up and a great deal more to do with self-regard, that children can form in positively fulfilling assignments with their enthusiastic parents (Eccles, Freedman-Doan, Frome, Jacobs & Yoon, 2000). Harter (1998) reported that the most significant result of self-regard is its effect on the person's broad affective frame of mind. For it is this that, subsequently, affects the degree of curiosity and stimulation in age-appropriate undertakings (Kerns, 1996).

Children like Christine and Liam, with backgrounds of family encouragement, may make good progress. Favourable encounters in the past might make it less arduous for such children to deal with later difficulties. It could be argued here that achieving children, such as these, through their own reactions produced more advantageous home conditions.

Children like Jeremy, on the other hand, who have struggled unsuccessfully with difficulties, especially in the pre-Easter 1999 period, could be less assured in dealing with fresh anxieties. Such children will possibly be less inclined to do future school homework, or continue in educational institutions, and may be more prone to be school absentees, etc. According to Bandura (1997), young males with poor self-regard are generally educationally less successful, less enterprising and less accommodating than other young males.

### **Relative norms**

I have noticed, as did Harter (1998), that boys and girls were not generally influenced by relative norms, with other individuals of their own sex, until the unexpectedly belated age of seven or eight years. Miss Kinsey and Mrs Gillham observed that in puzzle solving, if invited to appraise their own attainments, the children could seldom discern how others of their own sex had fared in doing the task, but could express another's view (e.g. the teacher's) on their own performance, and a stereotypical, possibly flawed, view of the performance of a member of the opposite sex.

Nonetheless, the four-year-old children, from our observations, held unambiguous assumptions of their own adroitness, in a limited variety of mental, social, and physical activities (Harter, 1990). Even the younger three-year-old children seemed to have evolved a rudimentary cognisance of their own adroitness. They were able to classify themselves, and to define themselves, in different ways. Not merely did they inform us as to whether they were a boy or a girl, but also whether they were proficient at counting, drawing,

painting, hopping, balancing on one leg, throwing a ball, finding solutions to puzzles, and even social activities. For example, 'I'm no good at going to the toilet!' stated Ruth (*am*). 'I'm no good at drawing pigs', exclaimed Julia (*pm*), although she could draw other animals. Terry [*am*] was good at painting but no good at puzzles. Avril [*am*] stated that she was good at building houses and farms, but 'not good at football' or 'the computer'.

Some children possessed (to a certain extent, if the variations are quite obvious and tangible) the ability for ranking themselves against others of their own sex. 'I'm better than you', declared Clare (*am*) to Sue (*am*) showing off her balancing skills. Nevertheless, any type of social comparing, in self-appraisal, does not appear to be of great importance, or even common. Initially the makeup of the young children's persona is intimately contingent on the manner in which other persons respond to it.

#### **Female and male performance in 'gender tagged' activities**

The findings of a succession of investigations carried out by Harter (1998) show that boys' and girls' self-regard can differ greatly from one activity to another. Molly (*pm*), was unique in that she declared, in more general non-gender terms, that she was the 'best drawer' and painter, and best solver of jigsaw puzzles in the class, which was true. Miss Kinsey asked her about using the computer, playing football, and imaginary cooking in the home corner. She said she did not like the computer or football because they were 'boyish' and 'boring'. When the teachers asked the girls to do a 'boyish' activity they frequently employed the word 'yuk' to avoid having to do it. Browne and Ross (1991) state that this is possibly 'a way of opting out, as the same girls became quite enthusiastic when given time, space and encouragement' (p.42).

Molly did not express any opinion on how well she would cope with 'boyish' activities, but thought that they were 'harder'. Helen [*am*] perhaps reflecting her mother's view stated,

'I'm good at womanish things!'. Most of the girls tended to regard those activities which they considered as 'boyish' in nature, e.g. football and computing, as 'difficult', whereas those the girls considered as 'girlish' in nature, e.g. domestic activities in the home corner and puzzles they deemed as being relatively 'easy' and 'nice'. Mrs Gillham, following one of our meetings, asked the girls why they thought that they were not as good as the boys in 'boyish' activities. Their replies seemed to indicate that they believed the boys to be better at them (Hannover, 2000).

The nursery boys, on the other hand, seemed to believe that their poor performance on puzzle work was due to their lack of interest, or lack of effort, rather than shortage of ability. All the boys thought they were good on the computer, including Mark [am], according to Mrs Pope. The boys, we noted, were inclined to overrate their own performances in most 'boyish' and 'girlish' activities' (Sukhnandan, 1999). All the children seemed to assert that boys should outperform girls in 'boyish' activities. The boys frequently declared that 'boyish' ones were harder than 'girlish' ones and vigorously maintained that boys, in general, could, if they wished, outperform the girls in both of them. Here the boys were perhaps proclaiming an illusory view of reality, in my personal opinion 'in order to maintain not only the symbolic boundaries of categories male and females, but their exclusiveness ...' (Davies, 1989, p.20). The boys' opinions appeared not to be affected by our pointing out that a number of the girls were generally better than them.

Bleach (1998) suggests that boys and girls re-formed gender concepts, so that the concept of the pertinent conduct for each sex, is transformed into the pertinent educational subject (Gillborn & Youdell, 2000). This reflection of gender attributes into academic subjects may explain, in part, why girls and boys believe they fail or succeed in a specific subject (Arnot, David & Weiner, 1999). Hargreaves' (1983) 'wiggly wire' experiment, mentioned in



Salmon (1998), shows that girls do not perform well when they are informed that their mechanical skills are being tested, but do better when told that their needlework skills are being assessed. The boys' results are the opposite of the girls', i.e. the boys perform better when they are told that their mechanical skills are being tested rather than their needlework ones.

Possibly, once a subject acquires a masculine image, participation in it by boys will be expected to enhance their masculinity, and participation by girls may seem to reduce their femininity.

#### **Some girls displayed a helpless demeanour**

Browne and Ross (1991) show girls as young as four 'adopting a helpless demeanour' (p.44). I discovered, at the commencement of working with both nursery sessions, that girls, rather than boys, were more inclined to exhibit a 'helpless' pattern of achievement-related behaviour and belief (Murphy & Elwood, 1998). The girls appeared to be more teacher dependent and demanded a greater level of our instructions, when tackling unfamiliar activities (Gillborn & Youdell, 2000). They wanted us to be present when they started, and until they became proficient in doing them, and hated making mistakes. Our teaching aim was always to maintain and build up the girls' self-assurance (Glick & Hilt, 2000). The boys, in comparison with the girls, habitually display a much more positive image of themselves in their activities (Yelland, 1998). They were eager to show their models to everybody within the classroom. However, the girls while keen to do so, required constant reassurance with regard to their own models. The boys seemed to be more annoyed than upset by difficulties and failures. The girls were less willing to risk failure (Noble & Bradford, 2000). For example, when Laura's [am] and Bessie's [am] castle, incorporating an orderly colour pattern of building blocks, fell over they were distressed. The boys, on the other hand, were less concerned with any colour order in their

building. They tried to make the castle as high as possible (Sukhnandan, 1999). 'It's higher, Clive [am]'. 'We're making a high one,' deliriously laughed Tom [am]. The two boys then after adding three more layers both deliberately pushed it over. This seemed from their delighted reactions to be the ultimate goal of their construction activity. They appeared to gain great satisfaction from the destruction of about ten minutes work whereas the girls had not!

Nevertheless, the girls, on the whole, performed as well as or better than the boys in model making, general board games, and riding the tricycles. Murphy and Elwood (1998) suggest that the expectations of males and females, rather than their actual performances, are of critical importance. Boys expect more success than girls (Covington, 1998). We noted that after initial success at a new activity which we had introduced them to, the children, and especially the girls, became more enthusiastic at doing it. For instance, the boys were initially more confident in the use of the computer, but as the girls by themselves, after some days, gained experience and assurance, their overall performance was significantly higher than that of the boys. The girls then possibly selected this activity, when the boys were told they were not to use the computer, because they liked it, and thus became even better at it. We observed and noted that in such a single-sex grouping, with practice, diligent hard work and teacher help, the girls were on the whole more successful, in terms of fulfilling the set task and in the employment of a greater variety of social skills, than the boys. Within such a setting, in contrast to a mixed-sex one, they were able to learn co-operatively and use their consensus skills. Here their self-esteem could not be threatened by males, and they assumed the leadership roles usually monopolised by the boys in mixed groups. The girls working in such single-sex environments gained in self-confidence, and with their increasing academic and social success became even more self-assured. Allowing girls just to copy male behaviour does not seem to be the answer, for not only does it militate against female togetherness, but it possibly reinforces the competitive

nature of the schooling process itself. This may, in the past, have reinforced girls' learned patterns of helplessness (Brody et al., 2000).

This feeling of 'helplessness' (Dweck & Leggett, 1988, p.256) could be a large element in the infant girls' activity selections. The girls' dependency may have given teachers, in general, the impression that boys were more capable, and thus possibly in some way merit more attention. Through the socialisation process, it appears that girls' acquired attributes that prevented them from seizing the possible chances available to them in schooling, especially in the secondary educational sector. Their dependency was possibly built into their pattern of social training and reinforced by the type of conduct expected of them (Quiery, 1998). Girls' relative under-achievement at the secondary level, it was asserted, flowed from the manner of masculine and feminine personality acquisition, and in female 'powerlessness' in the face of male domination of society (Paechter, 1998). Still, it is possible that changes in female social and economic status and the relative academic failure of girls, in the past, in the secondary sector, is today less of a reality (Arnot et al., 1999). Recently, the degree of academic success of the girls at A level and GCSE has altered dramatically (Plummer, 2000). Lately, the focus of attention has dramatically changed from that of under-achievement by girls 'to the underachieving boys and the overachieving girls' (Grant, 1994, p.46; Scott, 2000).

### **Summary**

This chapter shows how children are active agents in their own socialisation (Martin, 2000), and that the younger infants did not appear to have the same experience of living in society as the older ones did. Within the 'authoritative' climate created by the staff and myself, the children had abundant chances to scrutinise other individuals' temperamental versatility, and to satisfy their own temperamental requirements. We tried to reduce extreme self-interest in our charges, and motivated the children to recognise, sample, and

display a wide breadth of feelings, and display compassion for, and empathy with, others. However, the chapter does also illustrate the evolving marked behavioural differences between young girls and boys.

## Chapter 6

### **The sex-stereotyping process**

#### **Introduction**

When one encounters a person, their gender, combined with their race, appearance, and age, is one of the principal means by which one classifies them (Eagly et al., 2000). Like temperament it is an essential feature of personality, and can have momentous repercussions. Individuals, from the start, react dissimilarly when they meet females and males, and may feel awkward, confused or threatened when addressing someone whose sex they are uncertain of. The displays of gender variations are built on the way in which every community classifies the roles appropriate to each gender.

#### **The development of gender notions**

Children's gender perceptions, that is, the recognition that individuals are either female or male, make their initial appearance after the first year of life. However these perceptions do not finish developing until a few years later. This is, to a certain extent, a result of three distinct features, each of which appears at a separate period. The earliest to emerge, according to Frey & Ruble (1992) is gender distinctiveness, namely the capacity properly to designate others, and self, as female or male. Girls and boys, prior to one and a half years of age, perceive certain of the features that distinguish the genders, particularly clothing and coiffure (Ruble & Martin, 1998). Similarly, in our investigations, the children identified gender by hair length rather than by clothing, as most of the girls were wearing trousers. 'Girls have longer hair, they are smaller,' stated Toby [*am*]. On a multi-cultural jigsaw of eight figures, four young women and four young men, three of the men had longer hair than the women, the man with the short hair had on an Afghan type robe, and three of the women wore baggy trouser suits. On the bottom of the figures written in joined-up writing, were their anglicised short names, e.g. Jo, Jill, Pat, Pam, Rose, Fred, Ted, Pete, and Tom. We could read these but the children could not. All the children when

asked stated that the three men with long hair were women, while the man with short hair 'wearing a dress' was a man. The three women with short hair wearing baggy trouser suits were men also they said. All the children but one ignored the facial features, e.g. long eyelashes and fuller red lips. Interestingly Katie [pm] was the only child who, before deciding whether a jigsaw figure was a male or a female, looked at other facial features besides the hair, e.g. 'lipstick, reddish cheeks'.

It seems that, children, directly this differentiation procedure beginnings to occur, start to display inclinations for gender-stereotyped endeavours, or for the companionship of the same sex (Martin, 2000). This process then perhaps acts as a type of enticement to the child for more data-gathering. Ruble & Martin (1998) maintain that young children are skilled gender interpreters of their own and other children's gender behaviour. We noticed and recorded that the children were constantly ascertaining such things as what children of their own gender were amusing themselves with, and what their same-gender fellows did or did not enjoy doing. Children, especially the younger ones in our research, appeared continually to be searching for indications from us, and also, more especially, their peers that they were acting in an appropriate gender manner. They seemed to audit the ways in which the staff and myself, and peers responded to their behavioural patterns, and seemed anxiously to be pondering upon how they should act to be appropriately gendered, when such indications were not forthcoming. Miss Kinsey, Mrs Denhart and Mrs Gillham observed, furthermore, that many of the children, in their verbal statements, derived great happiness by proudly proclaiming themselves as conventionally female or male, and delighting in engaging in associations, and social routines, that maintain such classifications. Nevertheless, mere classifying did not indicate full-blown comprehending. The children's gender notions experience additional enhancement, becoming progressively more intricate during the early school period. There is more to comprehending gender than perfect recognition.

The second stage is gender stability. This involves the youngster understanding that an individual's sex continues, unchanging, all through that person's life. We noted that most of the three-year-old children were incapable of furnishing the right rejoinders when we made inquiries about such topics as 'When you are an adult will you be a father or a mother?', or 'When you were a tiny baby, were you a small boy or a small girl?' For example they could say, as Timothy [pm] did, 'I be a mummy when I grow up', or as Toby (am) stated, 'She grows-up to be a daddy cat'. However, most of the four-year-old children knew the answers. Children's statements varied, but the girls appeared more certain of sex-constancy. Not until six or seven is the third stage, gender consistency, reached (Glick & Hilt, 2000). This involves the recognition that femaleness and maleness do not alter, regardless of changes in physical appearance that customarily aid recognition. In other words, a girl remains a young female even if she dons masculine apparel and crops her hair, or males do not change into females by putting on female clothing, or by having longer hair. Amongst the children, only Molly (pm) maintained that a child's sex did not change when it changed its appearance, and that her sex was a permanent feature of her own life. Also, Libby [am] seeing Tom [am] deliberately putting on a lady police officer's hat exclaimed, 'he's a lady'. Tom took off the hat and then put it back on again. 'He thinks he's a lady', continued Libby. 'Tom looks like a lady', said Ruth [am]. 'He is a lady now', called out Libby.

### **Appearance**

It seemed rather strange to us that four-year-old children who comprehended that they would remain the same sex all through their lives could nevertheless be bewildered regarding the impact of alterations in appearance, or clothes, on gender. Nonetheless, the pictorial physical appearance of adults appeared significant to the children in their gender identification process from the picture work Mrs Gillham and Mrs Denhart carried out and from the children's comments on *The Paper Bag Princess* (Munsch & Marchenko, 1980)

and *Princess Smartypants* (Cole, 1986) stories. None of the children liked the princesses' appearances, or the ways they behaved, in these non-traditional fairy narratives. In some cases the children were extremely disgusted, asserting, when they viewed some of the pictures, that the princesses were, in effect, filthy and repulsive. *The Paper Bag Princess* story had, from the children's comments sometime after its reading, a lasting effect upon their opinions, and seemed to reinforce some gender stereotypical views.

The children appeared to assume that males and females would normally be dressed in distinctive clothing (Ruble & Martin, 1998). Changes in females' appearances seemed to affect their perceptions of gender constancy more than alterations in males' appearance. Although nearly all the girls in the nursery wore trousers, they still firmly connected dresses with female attire. It is perhaps understandable, in the case of the girls, why female changes in dress altered their perception of female gender constancy. In all sessions, from their comments, it seemed that the majority of the gifts the girls received for Christmases and birthdays were mainly clothing items. We found and noted that the girls spent much time discussing clothing items, and also seemed more judgmental of female dress. The parents, from what they said, borrowed, and the girls wore, each other's clothing, more than the boys. In addition, popular youth culture, seems to affect them almost as much as is the case with teenage girls (McDonnell, 2001). This was evident in their Christmas present wishes, and expectations of getting clothing items. These were influenced, from what they said, by advertisements for clothing accessories, for example those for Barbie dolls, and by the television appearance of 'pop groups'. The boys seemed to be less influenced by clothing. Their Christmas wishes and expectations were dominated by toys, bicycles and computers.

The children appeared to have a fairly set idea of women's and girls' intellectual capacities, as Polly (am) remarked, 'mum's beautiful, dad's smart'. Browne and Ross (1991) assert



that children less than five years of age have already a view of the technical and scientific abilities of women. 'Woman can't fly aeroplanes', exclaimed Norman [pm]. From our questioning, the children, in the nursery, thought scientific jobs were mainly done by men. Kohlberg (1966) maintains that young children regard males as taller, and generally bigger, and therefore more intelligent. Daisy (am) expressed the view that her father was taller than Mrs Larkin, a very tall school crossing officer. Daisy's father was in fact smaller. 'Daddy animals are bigger than mummy animals, baby animals are smaller than mummy animals', stated Katie [pm]. Further, in the traditional fairy-story *Goldilocks*, read by Mrs Gillham to the children, the children perceived, from the accompanying picture, that 'the big bear is daddy, the middle-size bear is mummy, and the tiny bear is baby' (Edith (am)). The children argued, in a story discussion with Mrs Gillham, Mrs Denhart, Mrs Pope and myself, that the words such as 'gentle', 'quiet' and 'beautiful', should be used for a female character. Against this, they maintained that words such as 'handsome' and 'strong' should only really be used to describe a male character; and that males and females did different things in society.

Men are regarded by most infant girls and boys as being less concerned with their appearances, more brainy, knowledgeable, and stronger and braver (Salmon, 1998). When, for example, Clare (am) and Rhian (am) retold the *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* fairy tale to Mrs Denhart and myself, after the reading and discussion of the *Prince Cinders* (Cole, 1987) story, which is a non-standard gender type fairy tale, they still very firmly and passionately stated that the prince had to be strong, brave and handsome, that 'normal' princesses like *Snow White* were 'scary', and 'weaker than the prince'. Clare maintained that a 'real princess' like Snow White was 'waiting for him (the prince) to come along' to rescue her. Ruth (am) added that a prince, rather than a princess, must have a sword. 'The princess will marry the prince "cos he is big, strong, brave in fighting dragons'. The princess was the opposite, she 'is not strong, not really brave, tinier, princesses don't fight

anyway!'. 'I'm like a boy, I'm very brave. I know a lot. I'm going into the dark forest', pronounced Helen [am] after Easter 1999 when we again looked at the pictures in the *Prince Cinders* (Cole, 1987) story. The girls also revealed, in their comments, their preference for female babies and their own intellectual inferiority, as compared to boys. Angela (pm) observed, 'I wouldn't like a boy baby, he'll be too bright and difficult!'. The other girls nodded in agreement 'I don't want boy babies because they would be too rough! I only want girls', added Linda (pm). In the post-Easter session Bessie [am] remarked 'I'm going to get married and have three children ..... three girls'. 'Why no boys?' Mrs Denhart asked. 'No boys, boys are too clever!' replied Bessie.

### **Gender role comprehension**

Children, even prior to the age of two, have some understanding of gender role stereotypes (Signorella, Bigler & Liben, 1993). Ruble & Martin (1998) reveal that children as young as two-years-old play with gender-appropriate toys and display gender-appropriate behaviour preferences. Similarly O'Brien (1992) states that three-year-olds show gender preferences for certain objects, long before they could explain the reasons for their choice. Duveen and Shields (1984, cited in Duveen & Lloyd, 1986) suggest that children use a system of gender ideas as a means of coming to terms with, and bringing together, other aspects of their social world. Only much later can children start to explain the basis of their gender choice, and attempt to codify these explanations of gender into a fuller explanation of the adult world. Their gender functional information is then perhaps built up through the growth of generalisations and perceptions as to how females, and males, are presumed to act, and what actions children, as boys or girls, ought to pursue. For example, Mrs Gillham asked May [am], an achieving girl, 'why don't you want to play with the trains, May?'. She replied, 'No, boys play with them, trains mean boys. I like babies, babies mean dolls'. According to Martin (2000) even very attractive playthings lose their appeal, to one sex or the other, if they are thought to be labelled as belonging to the opposite sex.

We found and noted that there were marked gender guidelines concerning conduct that children thought of as unequivocal prerequisites. Both infant boys and girls, when questioned, were inclined to believe unfavourable things concerning the opposite sex, but agreeable things concerning themselves. Toby [*am*] stated that 'Boys are better than girls'. The boys tended to regard the girls as a negative reference group (Glick & Hilt, 2000). In story time Mrs Denhart unintentionally said, 'Good girl, Joseph (*pm*)'. (Here again it must be noted that the nursery teachers could on occasions, express or display, perhaps unconsciously, 'sexist' demeanour.) The class exploded in uproarious laughter. Joseph, nearly in tears, shrieked, 'I'm not a stupid girlie!'. However, two of the girls with marked cross-gender interests, e.g. Clare (*am*) and Felicity [*pm*] also identified boys as being better. The rest of the girls did not, 'boys are badder than girls', remarked Polly (*am*).

### **Nursery pastimes**

Playthings that excited their imaginations were highly appreciated by the children. These included such toys as puppets, toy vehicles, nurse's equipment, dressing-up apparel, and dolls and other figurines that were featured in familiar stories. The children plainly, from their facial expressions, derived immense pleasure from these, and frequently performed involved, if rather repetitive, narratives. Interestingly, most of the girls, especially Carola (*pm*) in the pre-Christmas period, prior to her father's death, maintained daily contact by making imaginary telephone calls to their mothers, telling them that they were all right. We did not observe the boys doing this. The children, from our observations of their behaviour, imagined their playthings as having different psychological conditions, and in this way, a strong fantasy was perhaps created. This fantasy play was an indispensable asset if children were to be capable of discovering how other individuals operated (Silberfeld & Robinson, 1998).

When outside, with other children, the children played 'bus driver and passengers', 'doctor and patients', 'cowboys and Indians', 'mums and dads', 'monsters' and many other comparable games. They, in addition, took turns in switching parts portrayed, and games in this way came to be feasible. In some of these, a participant took cover and the others searched, or one ran off and the others pursued. The freedom to act out roles, play and handle objects, make-believing with them, all appeared to be significant elements in the children's sociable and cognitive evolution (Piaget, 1962). By imagining that they were another individual, portraying various make-believe parts, children got increasingly cognisant of how these items might be experienced or appear to another individual, and thus their self-centred manner towards society decreased. Their societal functioning, moreover, was coming to be more diversified and attuned to the characters of their friends.

### **Plaything predilection**

Gender differences in plaything preferences amongst the children, seemed to be very ingrained. Children, in all nursery sessions, we noticed and recorded, were well aware of what were suitable gender toys for boy and girls. We observed that the girls had a tendency to amuse themselves in the home corner with household materials, making imaginary cakes, washing and ironing, sewing, bathing the 'baby', soft toys, dolls, and strung beads. This area was occupied solely by the girls in the pre-Easter period. The boys' activities were generally more active; they amused themselves with toy carpentry implements, fire engines, cars, self-made objects such as toy weapons, Batman items (e.g. batrockets were very popular), dressing-up clothes, the computer, and blocks. We observed, within the classroom in the pre-Easter 1999 period, that amongst the boys only Tom openly played with 'female' dolls. However, to my surprise, two of the three year old boys wished to have a Barbie doll for Christmas (Clive (*am*) and Barry (*pm*)) and stated this wish publicly. We found and noted, however, that an open display of interest by a boy in the classroom in action men, or model men was all right, but an interest in 'female' dolls was not.

Where identical, or similar, resources were used by both girls and boys, these were frequently utilised for dissimilar purposes. For example, with the construction materials the boys tended to make weapons, e.g. swords, guns, tanks, daggers, or aggressive objects, e.g. snakes (John [*pm*]), robots, giants. However, the boys though they were repeatedly told by the staff that these types of objects, especially weapons, were not suitable for the nursery (thus perhaps further emphasising the feminine nature of the nursery environment (Lucey & Walkerdine, 2000)), continued to construct them. Some boys changed the title of the weapon they had made, to one more acceptable to the staff, in the 'show-and-tell' time, e.g. a gun might be called a type of robot, a sword a type of roborocket, etc. We noted that even the younger three-year-old male infants were inclined to select 'male' playthings.

The girls tended to make with construction materials items such as 'homes, farms, pussycats, and beautiful baby elephants', as Veronica (*am*), informed us. Browne and Ross (1991) state that children have 'firm ideas about how resources were to be used by each gender' (p.40). With lego, for instance, girls are expected to make a house, while boys are expected to make a gun, or a vehicle. In all sessions, the girls' groups free choice drawing work, on the upright drawing boards, reflected their interest in domestic topics.

As far as the dressing-up clothes were concerned, the boys tended to adopt, when wearing them, extremely 'masculine' aggressive or authoritarian roles. They pretended to be monsters (e.g. Jeremy (*pm*)), giants (e.g. Duncan (*pm*)), tigers (e.g. Liam (*am*)), lions, bears, batmen, space astronauts (e.g. Roger (*pm*)), firemen (e.g. Nigel [*am*]), policemen, aviators, warlocks, and princes (e.g., Toby [*am*]). The girls dressed up as nurses, 'pussycats', (Mary (*am*) a 'pussycat' called Samuel), princesses (e.g., Marcia [*am*]) or themselves (i.e. ordinary children). The boys, in their costumes, roamed around aggressively while the girls, after putting on their costumes, quietly got on with other activities. The same children tended to dress up in the same type of clothes, when these

were available. Interestingly, both Clare (am) and Felicity [pm] dressed up as female fire and police officers, and they both had rather more 'boyish' interests. Such children, with cross-gender inclinations (not transsexual ones), have perhaps more flexible gender stereotypes. However those boys (for example Hugh (pm), Clive (am) and Barry (pm) in the pre-Easter 1999 period) who might prefer doing 'girlish' activities occasionally, could not do so openly. (The contrast between girls' ostensible freedom to play 'boyish' games, and the constraints on boys doing 'girlish' things will be dealt with in greater detail later, in chapter 8.) With the dressing-up clothes, the girls need not take on a role. They could dress-up as themselves or as an adult female. The boys, however, did not give themselves this opportunity but had to assume a role.

In the pre-Easter 1999 period, we observed and noted, immediately after the 'showing and explaining' time in the afternoon, the older boys Duncan, Henry, and Roger rushed to occupy the seats near the computer. (We did try to limit this and encourage other children, especially the girls, to become more involved.) In the morning there was no immediate rush by the boys, but the girls, apart from Clare and Meg, were still reluctant to use it, until we requested them to do so. The children's parents, from their remarks, seemed prejudiced against their daughters using the computer. For example Sue's mother (am) forcefully remarked to me, 'It's a waste of time for her (i.e. her daughter Sue), to play computer games'. However, their attitudes to their male offspring was different. For example, Roger, almost every afternoon, brought in a computer program box he wished to show to the other children, and the staff, during the 'show-and-tell' time. When displaying it he proudly boasted to them of his great ability in playing the new game. As soon as Roger put his hand up Mrs Denhart and I heard some girls mumble 'he's brought the computer (box) in again, yug'. Kirkwood (1998), states that boys, as compared with girls, have generally greater access to computers within the home and while inside the school. Salmon (1998) shows male domination of mixed-sex computer periods.

Outside, the small climbing frame, in the pre-Easter 1999 period, was used by equal numbers of girls and boys. The boys adopted belligerent roles, e.g. dinosaurs (Duncan (pm)), lions, and giants, while the girls took on more passive roles, e.g. 'pussy-cats', nurses, being little girls, and princesses. The children's activities often involved the boys chasing the girls while making the appropriate animal noises or guttural sounds, pretending they were robbers. The girls screamed in 'delighted' terror. 'I'm a robber,' cried Gavin (pm) when catching one of the them. The girls, from their giggling, and happy expression afterwards, seemed to enjoy this experience. They might protest about certain negative aspects of the boys' behaviour, but possibly secretly derived pleasure from them, for example, the mere fact that they were noticed and pursued, by the boys. To the girls, such as Daisy (am) and Katherine (pm), who played with the boys, the boys' behaviour was associated with fun and excitement, that added to their attractiveness, while the qualities connected with girls were perhaps rather as Daisy said, 'boring'. Maybe, like some of Clarricoates' (1983) teachers, they preferred it because the boys were more active, and interesting (Pilcher, 1999), even if naughty.

The girls, the boys, the parents and sometimes the staff, rather than really condemning 'male behaviour' seemed to think it was normal (Lowe, 1998). The girls seemed to regard their play activities as in some ways inferior to that of boys'. 'We get to play nice pussycats, the boys get to play exciting things', remarked Charlotte [am] about the types of role play exhibited by girls and boys, on the climbing frame. The children's chase games, on the climbing frame, perhaps foretold the future strong sexual dimension in inter-gender play which is visible in secondary education. Like Thorne (1993), the staff and I noticed that cross-gender chases 'were less physically rough than chasing among boys' (p.70). However none of the children, especially the girls, enjoyed Duncan's (pm) aggressive behaviour as a dinosaur. 'He's the baddest one', as Katherine stated. The girls occasionally attracted the boys' attention, while seated, in the 'show-and-tell' time, by tapping them on

the back, and then complaining to a teacher if the 'wrong' boys reacted. Katherine did not mind Joseph (pm) tickling her, but strongly objected when Roger (pm) tried to do this. Similarly Julia [pm] did not mind Jim [pm] holding hands with her, but rejected Hugh [pm] when he tried to do the same thing. Still Julia [pm] did very occasionally play with Hugh, e.g. 'I'm helping Hugh make a railway'.

### **Gender memories**

When rules are crystallised in the child's mind, they might have an influence on how gender-connected knowledge is memorised. Mrs Gillham, Mrs Denhart and Miss Kinsey found, after investigation, that children's memories were gender selective. When presented with images of gender-inconstant or gender-constant endeavours, for example a girl in a spaceship or a girl playing with a doll, and a boy playing with a car and a boy playing with a doll, boys and girls were more capable of recalling, the next day, the traditional gender images. Moreover, the children frequently misrepresented what they had seen, by altering the sex of the performer concerned, if it contradicted their own gender-expectant images (Zemore et al., 2000). Hence the girls' and boys' memories were self-adjusted in an attempt to alter them, so that they were the same as the gender generalisations that they had evolved (Newberger, 1999). However, if the staff varied the short verbal message given when showing the pictures, either emphasising certain aspects, or just asking them to look without comment, they found that this might aid or hinder the children's memory of the gender-inconstant images. Like McFarlane (1986), the staff discovered that a 'caption can change the whole meaning of a picture' (p.14). I suggested this type of work, to the staff, to see if the descriptions varied between the sexes, and in an attempt to challenge children's current gender perspectives, and help them to see alternative viewpoints. Eisenstadt and Braun (1990) stated that when they undertook such an exercise their aim was 'not to change people's minds, but to make them aware of other possibilities' (p.2).



Generally, a gender-connected type of recollection seems to function in children's minds. So utterances and images socially classified as 'boyish' are memorised more easily by young males than by young females, while those socially classified as 'girlish' are recalled more easily by young females (Welsh-Ross & Schmidt, 1996). Nevertheless, it is not until boys and girls are older, that they become knowingly cognisant that some playthings are considered by others as more suitable for one gender than the other (Birch, 1997). It seems that gender behaviour comes before gender comprehension.

However, for young females, acquiring same-gender recreational ideas is a slower and a less robust procedure, according to Bauer (1993). There appeared to be, for boys, a closer association between gender objects and preferences, than for girls. I discovered, in my previous research on Christmas present lists, that the playthings desired revealed a distinct gender influence, e.g. fewer young males than young females desired 'opposite sex' articles. This was a possible sign of more distinct gender configuration in males' early upbringing. Whether this is owing to a social desirability element, as some have hypothesised, in that feminine features are less admired, and young females are consequently subject to less stress to adapt to social generalisations than young males, is unclear. Some of the more able four-year-olds, the staff and I found, certainly linked clear characteristics with women or men, for example strength, violence, and aggressiveness with men, and a forgiving and an understanding nature, tenderness, and frailty with females (Kimmel, 2000). For example, 'Mums are gorgeous. Dads are brainy', remarked Tony (am) or 'Daddies are hardies and mummies are softies', as Julia [pm] exclaimed.

### **Masculine roles perceived as better**

I found, with older and younger children, that the attributes accredited to the females were less greatly prized than were masculine characteristics; for example, as Bessie [am] said,

'My mum says men are clever and women are glamorous', or as Liam (am) remarked, 'Dads are strong, mums are weak, ..... my mum's a 'chatterbox''.

Girls, even at three or four years of age, observed that the masculine role was perceived more favourably in society, and probably strove, like Meg (am) and Felicity [pm], to acquire some of the prized masculine attributes in their attempted cross-gender activities. The children, in effect, appeared to perceive that it was not as good to be tender, discreet, tranquil and affectionate as to be vigorous, rational, positive, and autonomous. In the song *On the buses* it was suggested by Norman (pm), perhaps following the standard lyric of a song *On The Buses*, on a tape, that 'mums go chatter, chatter, chatter'; 'granddads', according to Linda (pm), 'go fast asleep'; while according to Katherine (pm) 'dads', (being authoritarian), shout sternly 'stop that noise'. Neil (am) suggested, after the song was finished, that 'dads are reading the newspaper all day long while mums just knit, wash, chatter and watch telly'. Further, the nursery infants seemed to see the mother's role as being wider than that of the father. More children differed on what 'mums' were, or ought to be like, than on what 'dads' were, or must be like. This might have occurred as a result of children observing fathers in less varied roles than those in which they observed mothers. The girls, in all sessions, declared that their mothers within the home had a harder life performing most of the domestic labour, while most fathers sat around and watched 'foota' (football) on television. The children in all sessions defined boys' expected and future behaviour, as adults, more narrowly than that of the girls'. In our 'traditional' culture, as in most, the masculine role is still seen as less versatile than the feminine one (Campbell, 1998).

In our investigations of young children's notions concerning how women and men ought to act, and comparisons with what girls and boys ought to be like, we discovered equivalent kinds of findings. Children allotted a large number of playthings, jobs, endeavours and

even colours, to their stereotyped views of gender. In a morning session, after Derek (am) had explained his rules for a two-dice game to me, he divided the six coloured counters into three 'boy ones', red, blue, and pink and three 'girl ones', yellow, green and orange. I was given those 'suitable' for a girl! Derek seemed, from our conversations, to have associated staff within the nursery with the "girls' and responded accordingly' (Lowe, 1998, p.219). The children linked various things and jobs with females and males (Csikszentmihalyi & Schneider, 2000). They, for example, associated car repairing and trucks with males, and nourishment and cooking utensils or vacuum cleaners with females. The appearance of a person in a picture might be important in initially deciding the sex of an individual, but the function performed by that individual was often as significant as well. For example, on initially seeing a puzzle, the children thought that the persons delivering the mail or stopping the traffic must be men, 'a postman' or 'a policeman', while the person, with very short hair, pushing the child in the buggy must be a lady.

However, not only children, but also adults' selections of activities, are not free from societal influences. Everyone of us is affected by the notions that each of us has concerning the 'correct' occupations for our gender, and by our conjectures and visualisations of ourselves. A man could elect to become a nursery teacher or a beautician, but this choice may not conform with perceived male gender stereotypes in our society (Yelland & Grieshaber, 1998), and might in this way clash with a man's own ideas about himself. Lewis (1990) alludes to this as the categorical self, on account of the fact that whenever the person attains self-cognisance the procedure of classifying the self entails putting oneself in a complete sequence of classifications.

### **Gender comprehending**

Brown (1995) reported that young girls and boys, in the second year, who are not yet adept at labelling gender-stereotyped roles, pass almost half their time in mixed-sex groups.

However, boys and girls who are adept at designating the sexes, pass eighty per cent of their time in matching-sex groups (Powlishta, 1995). Birch (1997) stated that girls and boys need just gender identity for their knowledge and play predilections to be affected. For example, 'Boys' do that', observed Patricia [pm], pointing at the computer, or 'that's girlish', stated Daniel [am] referring to activities in the home corner.

### **Children are active players**

Children were always keen to categorise the data they discovered in their environment (Zemore et al., 2000). Their gender classification seemed to be saturated with data that was applicable to their daily activities, incorporating such external indicators as clothes and hair length (Fagot et al., 2000).

The staff and I noticed children dynamically hunting for codes concerning the manner in which females and males are supposed to act (Martin, 2000). They were looking, like Derek (am) with his gender colour scheme, for procedures, for orderliness that assisted them to give meaning to their involvements; to 'getting gender right' (Yelland & Grieshaber, 1998, p.3). For the children, rule learning appeared not a thoughtless enterprise. It entailed the children in dynamically construing the meaning that grownups, such as teachers, were endeavouring to impart (Reiss, 1998). The fact that children often invoked the word 'why?', if told by the teacher, parent or myself to do something, in itself implied that children were not satisfied by just complying with instructions, at their face value. They were constantly urging, arguing, and dynamically questioning their teachers, parents or myself to amplify explanations for specific rules, in their endeavour to find the intrinsic elements that united every instruction to some type of social import.

## **Pressures to conform to stereotyped behaviour**

### **Introduction**

Parental handling of a child, from the start, is affected by the offspring's sex. They see their young female and male offspring as being distinctly different (Fagot et al., 2000), and parents do generally advocate traditional gender roles for their children (Kimmel, 2000). However, if their offspring had a reduced physical or mental competence, the situation could be different. Much of the information listed below came from informal conversations with the staff, especially Mrs Pope and Mrs Woolf. (I recognise here that such second-hand information must be viewed critically.)

### **Gender and incapacity**

The two children in the nursery with an incapacity, i.e. Tom (*am*), and Mark (*am*), illustrated conflicting parental aspirations. Tom was not expected to live to attain adulthood. He had an inherited disease that had killed his two older sisters in infancy. His parents and childminder, Mrs Woolf, focused their attention more on his medical problems, and his immediate happiness, instead of on gender or on the prospects of his obtaining future work. Tom, as a result, was not discouraged, but encouraged, to display non-traditional views, e.g. playing with dolls and wearing female attire, if he obtained any pleasure from so doing (Kittay, 1999). In contrast to Tom's parents, Mark's stressed their partiality for male conduct. They persisted in motivating Mark to engage in 'boyish' activities, and encouraged him to become extremely dirty by exploring, digging, collecting things and generally 'mucking around' in the garden. They also encouraged him to use the family's rather 'hazardous' climbing frame, to swim, 'to stand up for himself', to be aggressive towards girls, and generally, to be 'a real boy'. They appeared, from what I was told, to find solace in Mark's 'boyishness', and the fact that he displayed, in their eyes, characteristic masculine demeanour. They seemed to be worried that Mark would suffer public rejection, not only because of his Down's Syndrome, but because of his gender

views, as well. For his parents, it seems that the idea of future outside work, and social independence for him, was strongly associated with maleness.

Gender worries can occur for both parents, especially fathers (Trautner & Eckes, 2000), with or without disabled children. However, this may only be the case after severe medical problems are dealt with, as was the case with Tom. In Bower's study (1998), mothers with handicapped offspring, did discriminate between daughters and sons in their expectations. These mothers, moreover, had greater hopes of future work for their sons, who had either a cerebral or a physical incapacity and loftier hopes of future independence.

#### **Differing sex handling of girls and boys by parents and external carers**

Every socialising effect undoubtedly assumed a role in causing a young child to be cognisant that gender variations were important. They also possibly influenced children to adjust their behaviour to whichever generalisations were prevalent in any setting, and on any occasion.

Soon after birth, boys and girls discover that each parent has principal characteristic duties, e.g. mother that of feeder, and father that of games companion (Grieshaber, 1998). Lamb and Oppenheim (1989) reported, unsurprisingly, that if children are apprehensive, they will generally shift their attention to their mother. However, girls and boys are more inclined to shift their attention to father, if they desire amusement (Fagot et al., 2000). 'Dads are fun', as Ian [pm] remarked. A great number of investigations have indicated that fathers, in comparison to mothers, tend to use physical, rather than oral, methods of child engagement (Golombok, 2000). From my own observations, and from the children's comments, fathers' variety of cherished capers with sons generally involved chasing, tickling, bouncing and pitching the offspring in the air, and rough-and-tumble games. Fathers seemed to have a tendency to make less use of playthings throughout play, and were more impetuous

(Walker, Messinger, Fogel & Karns, 1992). On the other hand, mothers utilised, with both sexes, a way of interrelating that was substantially less energetic or physical (Golombok, 2000).

Parental differentiated handling of young daughters and young sons may have produced the situations where young girls appeared more obedient than boys (Millard, 1997). However, here again I cannot discount the innate effects of heredity. Parents function as instructors that help their children to adapt to the expectations of the community, concerning the conduct of the sexes. However, the actual part played in activating gender-applicable recreational functioning by grownups' socialising methods and hopes for their children's futures, is still controversial. Nevertheless, Frome and Eccles (1998) found, to a certain extent, that sons' and daughters' hopes for the future reflected the differentiated expectations of their parents. I observed and noted, like these researchers, that parents, for example, demanded less from young females in arithmetic than from young males, but inversely so in the case of reading (Hannover, 2000). I have noticed that school female staff also often impart the same goals by showing that they had lower hopes for the future for females, when compared with males, in attainments on mathematical assignments (see also Delamont, 1996). (This is another example of perhaps subconscious sexist attitudes affecting teaching behaviour.) This can result in the belief that boys, to do well, need to make smaller exertions in this subject, whilst the inadequacies of girls are exaggerated (Brody et al., 2000). The community's views on the acceptance and enforcement of particular gender behavioural patterns, can have substantial social and academic significance (Eccles et al., 2000).

There are indications that children, whose parents, such as Christine's, are less constant in encouraging gender-typed play behaviour, or plaything selections, discover precise gender classifications later than young children whose parents are more concerned with the

gender-suitability of offspring's play (Quiery, 1998). This is a finding that is certainly in line with the forecasts of social-learning theoreticians.

### **Non-standard families**

Non-standard family studies have revealed that, in environments with a large diversity of societal arrangements, mentally sound dispositions can unfold. It appears that no one particular standard is absolutely fundamental for a child's welfare (Golombok, 2000).

Some previous investigations indicate that families like Alistair's (pm), where the father is absent have important harmful connotations for young sons' gender function development, because young sons miss chances for matching-sex identification, and copying (Clare, 2001). Huston (1983) indicates that this is the position, in certain respects. He cites such effects, as far as sons are concerned, as less stereotyped selection of recreational items, and diminished aggression. Shaffer (1999) agrees, but says that the all-inclusive differences are inclined to be of slight actual significance.

Similarly, Golombok (2000) suggests that little disparity has been found between boys and girls of heterosexual parents, and girls and boys raised in lesbian or gay homes. It seems, from the children's viewpoints, that a home can assume numerous constructs and yet operate as a safe foundation for sound upbringing (Patterson, 1995). Gender function development, equally, is an exceptionally hardy occurrence that is not readily cast off line by unusual social conditions.

### **Biological effects**

It cannot be questioned that there are socialisation influences forcing family adjustments to society's standards, as to what is suitable conduct for each gender (Fagot et al., 2000). Here the problem emerges as to how biological effects interplay with social influences, and what the remit of each is. The type, and amount, of innate elements involved in sex-connected



mental variations, remains contentious. The most usual elements listed for disparities are physical and mental dependency, mathematical aptitude, spatial techniques, verbal aptitude and aggressiveness (Goldsmith et al., 1997). On all criteria, however, there is much overlapping between the scores of females and males. There are plenty of males proficient at verbal reasoning, and plenty of females proficient in spatial perception. Also, the specific amount of the disparity is generally tiny, and has been declining during the last few years (McGuinness, 1998). Maccoby and Jacklin (1974) examined over two thousand investigations, and they found that of the above ingredients, just aggressiveness can be considered as drawing some investigative backing for innate sex linking (Burr, 1998).

### **Aggressiveness**

In modern times, social gender stereotypes have been liable to a great deal of alteration. Nevertheless, the infant girls, the staff and I observed and noted, showed or depicted themselves to be obedient, apprehensive, compliant, and inactive, whilst the boys showed, or depicted themselves, as overbearing, forceful, assured and energetic.

Frequently, this lesser amount of aggression in girls, as compared with boys, has been employed as evidence for the influence of biological elements. Boys, as a whole, in the nursery significantly, and continuously, outdid the girls in forceful behaviour. This showed itself in rough-and-tumble play, in recreational fighting, and in physical and verbal aggressiveness (Newberger, 1999). Theory is, however, by no means undivided; whilst a number of investigations have not found a sex dissimilarity between boys and girls, others have succeeded in doing so (Burr, 1998). According to White & Kowalski (1994) gender dissimilarities might be related to the manner in which aggressiveness is defined. If it is differently described then dissimilarities, even if still apparent, are a great deal diminished. The dissimilarity pertains less to verbal, than to physical, aggressiveness. The staff and I observed that aggression appeared, in girls, as alienation and communal exclusion. Teasing

was a powerful strategy in girls' groups. Taunting was less evident amongst the boys in all sessions. In boys, aggression was more straightforwardly exhibited as defiance. There was, I noticed, an inclination, as boys and girls become older, for aggressiveness to come to be progressively exhibited more in a verbal, rather than a physical, configuration. Perhaps young females are not less frequently 'difficult', and young males are not less frequently 'easy' in character, although that is what our traditional stereotypes might cause us to assume. Even where the aggression disparities appear initially quite unmistakable, the absolute dimensions of the disparity are very tiny (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998). The female and male groupings overlap. Even if the disparity in aggressiveness appears to have biological origins, parental handling must still, to some extent, amplify the biological disparity.

### **Societal factors**

Every community classifies gender functions in its own fashion, and socialises girls and boys in a fashion appropriate to itself. To be considered is the argument, that in our 'conventional' culture, aggressiveness is less readily accepted if displayed by females rather than by males (Williams, 2000). I observed and noted that infant boys realise that certain kinds of wrongdoing, such as impenitence, or fits of temper, were not penalised strongly or were acceptable. Parents, from my observations, appeared to be more severe on bad behaviour by their daughters, rather than by their sons. The infant girls seemed to have learnt to suppress aggressive reactions due to grownups reacting very dissimilarly to them. Girls possibly even learnt to internalise their reactions. Boys, in many ways, were thus treated more favourably by their mothers. Many authors, for example Matheson and Dillow (2000), hold that adults give more attention, i.e. praise or punishment, to boys than girls. The infant girls' failure to retaliate against infant male aggression says much about their acceptance of the traditional female role, and their feeling that they were above physical

force (Jamieson, 1998). The girls appeared to have learnt, and accepted, their present and future positions in society (Turner & Gervail, 1995).

The parents generally expected male offspring to be less nurturing and more active, while females were generally expected to be less forceful and lively (Noble & Bradford, 2000). After school it was interesting to observe, through a window, how boys and girls were treated, and behaved. The girls often asked their mother, imploringly, if another girl could come around to play. The boys usually ran off and played with their friends while the girls clutched tightly the hand of their collector, and the girls then stood still, patiently waiting, while the adults, mainly female, talked at length together. The parents seemed to expect such male behaviour, and did not actively condemn the boys. The girls, if they attempted to stray away, were severely verbally admonished. Girls were generally taken out, and allowed out to play less than boys, by their parents, especially fathers. Girls, I found from my previous surveys were expected to spend more time at home than their brothers, 'keeping mum company' or 'helping mum'; 'to become more dependent than their male counterparts' (Bower, 1998, p.37).

The 'protected' status of girls perhaps reflects the fact that adult females traditionally have experienced less social and economic autonomy than their male counterparts. Even today, adult females, although their societal position has become considerably better, are still greatly reliant on others, when for example they come to be mothers. Such reliance on others, especially on men financially, must be latently transmitted to their offspring. It sends strong signals to the children, especially to girls, who implicitly mould themselves to the roles portrayed by their mothers. The prospects for an individual's autonomy, in practically all communities, are inclined to be affected by its sexual dependency (Reinharz & Chase, 2002).

The way in which parents reacted to the child's aggressiveness possibly served to mould it. I have found in my before - and after school - observations, my observations of some of my friends' young children, and visits to seven of the children's homes, i.e. Meg, Norman, Molly, Clive, Christine, Charlotte and Clare, that parents generally tended to expect their boys to be positive towards others, and participate in physical pastimes. There was a stress from parents, especially fathers (and especially Clive's father) for their sons, to take up more 'boyish' views and conduct (as mentioned in Terry & Terry, 1998). Parents, it seems, generally expect their sons to be much more confident, independent, daring, and courageous (Kimmel, 2000).

Many fathers, especially Meg's, I observed, appeared to be particularly less troubled by 'tomboyish' conduct in their girls than they were in 'girlish' conduct in their boys, and a lot less inclined to display censure of 'tomboyish' conduct in their girls (Bower (1998) also found this). Meg's father was concerned about the 'effeminate' behaviour of Meg's two older brothers. I observed that it was justifiable for daughters to display their dependency by weeping, but this was definitely not the case for sons. If they persisted in weeping beyond babyhood, boys were certainly derided, and admonished not only by their fathers but by their peers as well. It seems that fathers, with children as old as one year, forbid or penalise cross-gender behaviour in their girls less than in their boys (Leve & Fagot, 1997). As a result perhaps, as the staff and I observed, fewer boys than girls displayed cross-gender inclinations in conduct and plaything selections in the pre-Easter 1999 period. For a girl such as Meg to be a tomboy, on some occasions, is all right as far as parents are concerned (Jamieson, 1998). For Meg, though it was a matter of degree, and was usually limited to a specific activity such as football. The above paragraphs suggests that male stereotypical aggressiveness may not be wholly caused by nature.

### **Boys and girls expected to be treated differently**

Gender labelling seems to affect all aspects of the children's present and possible future social lives. The infants appear to place male and female into distinct categories, with specific predictable behavioural patterns. They anticipated these to conform to an accepted dress and behaviour code (Ruble & Martin, 1998). They expected boys and girls to behave, and to be treated, in dissimilar ways. This was revealed in the discussions, after Easter 1999, during and following the reading of the *Presents from Gran* (Mark, 1988) story.

In the 'mums and dads' games, it was evident that the girls in their adult form expected to be 'mums', and their male partner would usually be the main breadwinner. This need to prepare themselves for their future adult roles might be an element in the children's behaviour (Lowe, 1998). Joan [am] maintained that it was 'good being a girl 'cos she (when she was an adult) could have babies'. Polly (am), Rhian (am), Sue (am) and Clare (am) also wanted babies. Clare wanted six babies, but Rhian wanted fifteen. 'Who will provide the money you need for their upkeep?' Mrs Denhart questioned. 'Mum will give us the money', asserted Polly. 'What about a husband, or a man to support you?' I queried. 'We don't need a man', stated Clare. In the nursery a number of the children came from, in effect, single parent families or families where a different 'daddy' frequently was present. The person referred to as 'daddy' was not always the child's natural father. For example, Katherine (pm), in March 1999, informed us that her mummy was marrying her 'new daddy'.

### **Summary**

The staff and I observed and noted that infant girls and boys often reacted very dissimilarly to similar events, perhaps because, for males and females, different gender connotations appertain to them. This may have arisen from their differing home, school or prenatal

exposures. Both environmental and biological causes appear to be engaged in creating the gender disparities one observes (Yelland & Grieshaber, 1998).

## Chapter 7

### **Home and nursery**

This chapter reveals, that before they enter and whilst within the nursery, children were subjected to powerful media and parental gender influences, that supplied information that affected the gender preferences' children expressed within the classroom.

### **Pre-nursery and ongoing family difficulties**

According to Luster and McAdoo (1996) the children's internalisation of the teaching staff's social and gender objectives can never be separated from the children's past and present societal and cultural settings. A need for a knowledge and understanding of the latter is illustrated by the fact that certain disruptive children, in the nursery, had a disproportionately greater influence on the 'public' engendering procedure than others (Paechter, 1998). The gender formation power of these children (Salmon, 1998) was revealed by the marked change in the display of 'public' behaviour, the staff and I observed, following the Easter 1999 departure of some of them.

### **Home and nursery**

The 'supportive' style of nursery teaching that so impressed me with its promotion of socially desirable aspects of behaviour, as I saw them, i.e. being helpful, compassionate and treating all with equal respect, seemed to be frequently at variance with the views of some of the more forceful and aggressive infant boys, in the pre-Easter 1999 period. However, most of the rest of the children, especially the girls in this period, appeared to enjoy the nursery, were keen to come into it, and were happy with the way the nursery staff treated them. The parents and staff, from what they said, were anxious that the children should be happy there, and that the children should 'settle in well' into the educational system (Ladd & Kochenderfer, 1996). Some of the working mothers also had a financial incentive, for their children, when not in school, were being cared for by a paid child-

minder such as Mrs Woolf. Mrs Woolf was the nursery's main child-minder taking Merlin, Angela, and Barry, in the morning session, and Alan, Tom, and Derek in the afternoon, on a regular basis. Miss Kinsey and I were on friendly terms with Mrs Woolf, having taught her children many years before. She, as a result, freely provided information regarding her permanent and occasional charges. Much of the material below is based on my informal conversations with her, with other occasional child-minders such as Christine's mother, the staff, my visits to some of the children's homes and the children themselves.

In all but a minority of the homes, I gathered, the children were continually being supplied with knowledge useful to their being raised and living in the community, by merely being near their mother, by speaking, unceasing querying and debating with her, and through partaking in daily undertakings such as housework, visiting and shopping (M. Woods, 1998). (Here again I recognise that all second-hand information must be viewed critically. The constant problem was to what extent were individual's descriptions an exaggerated representation of their own children's circumstances, or an attempt, by them, to impress their audience, and whether, as a result, their accounts could be considered acceptably unbiased (Warren & Hackney, 2000).) The variety of child/adult encounters in the homes were considerably broader than those provided by the nursery (Rogoff, 1998). Home learning was based on a foundation of a constant procedure of shared adaptation. The 'mothering parent' facilitated instructional opportunities, and achieved this in settings of stimulating and enthusiastic social interplay. The children, with their emerging mental abilities, during everyday home existence, were hence presented with every chance to come to be aware of the manner in which the community defined utilisation of, for example, numeracy (van Doornick, Caldwell, Wright & Frankenberg, 1981). In the preponderance of infants' households there were a small number of siblings and there was, consequently, reduced competition for maternal attention. Thus possibly considerably more face-to-face adult/child exchanges occurred there than in the nursery. Thus the immediate family



environments held out the possibility of giving the children plenty of intelligible and stimulating data, and exciting their inquisitiveness by giving them the means to gain responses to that inquisitiveness. This immensely desirable situation would have been extremely difficult to obtain, even within such an effective a nursery as that of Worcester's<sup>3</sup>, for the latter always gave precedence to its own collective endeavours (Salmon, 1998). However, the events in the home and the Worcester nursery environment were not divorced from each other. There was constant follow-up of nursery topics within the home by the more responsive parents such as those of Stacey (am) and Christine [am]. The staff spent much time discussing with them their children's difficulties and abilities. Some parents, such as those of Molly (pm), Joseph (pm), Stacey, and Christine, seemed to provide their offspring not only with perhaps a very educational and stimulating environment by inviting peer companions around to their homes to play with their offspring, but also furnished them with 'learning' materials almost identical to those used in the nursery.

### **The significance of antisocial home factors**

On entry to the nursery, I discovered, in the afternoon session, that parentally abused children such as Jeremy (pm) and Duncan (pm) displayed more aggressiveness towards other boys and girls, and, especially in the case of Duncan, enforced sex-stereotypical behaviour. Duncan, I was told by Mrs Gillham in October 1998, had been very recently adopted by his mother's parents, because he had been 'subject to child abuse by his mother and her boy friend'. Both Duncan and Jeremy<sup>3</sup> presented grave teaching problems. Some of the afternoon session children mentioned Duncan's behaviour as one of the things they did not like about the nursery. Such children as Duncan and Jeremy, who were appraised as aggressive by other boys and girls, moreover saw themselves, also, as aggressive.

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<sup>3</sup>Jeremy (pm) and Duncan (pm) were, I was informed by the teachers, on the local social services 'at risk' register.

The staff and I observed also a possible linkage, within the nursery, between a child's social and academic progress and family mental health and matrimonial conditions. This was especially the case if social intercourse inside the home was affected by protracted discord and hostility, as with Derek's (am) family. A chain of circumstances was created which sustained Derek's behavioural traits (Golombok, 2000). Here it was informative to observe the marked change in Derek's behaviour, from very secure affability before the family troubles, to a state of bewildered sexist antagonism during the altercation period, and after his parents' separation.

Mrs Woolf reported to us about her concern regarding the unsettled climate that now existed in Derek's home. According to Mrs Woolf, in their increasingly stressful marital union, Derek's parents had growing differences about his nurturing, and they seemed not to react to Derek in such a responsive way. (This was partially confirmed by the conversation I overheard, between Derek's mother, Miss Kinsey and Mrs Denhart.) When conflict arose between his parents, Derek was immediately placed with a child minder, Mrs Woolf. Previously Derek had been cared for by his father, who had done shift work. Derek's mother had a full-time job outside the home. Things in Derek's (am) household, (his father was no longer there), had greatly deteriorated, in terms of physical welfare, by the 4 March 1999, according to Mrs Woolf. Derek had come to her on the previous Saturday afternoon complaining that his mother had given him nothing to eat that day!

Problems arising in the family environment were constant elements affecting children's behaviour, and had tremendous significance for their own and others' social, academic and gender development (Cox, 2000a).

### **Nursery role-playing, a rehearsal for adult life**

It was intriguing to observe that many of the children's play activities within the nursery setting mirrored aspects of the broader adult social arena (Howes & Matheson, 1992) and also, from the children's viewpoint, possibly reflected their assessment of the comparative influence of women and men within society. Perhaps children's nursery pastimes were also motivated by their need to strengthen and rehearse their possible future roles as grownups (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998). This was especially evident within the home corner activities (Walkerdine et al., 1989). The girls always seemed most comfortable here, for within it, they could adopt the roles and protocols they had observed outside the school (McKie, Bowlby & Gregory, 1999).

### **Portrayal of adult roles**

In all the morning and the afternoon nursery sessions, the children's parents were portrayed in traditional domestic roles in the children's conversations with us, and also between the children themselves, in their pictures and in their dramatic work in the home corner, and outside by the sandtray. From our questioning, it is clear that the children were aware of the many roles being assumed by their parents and siblings within the home, and that within their classification of these the dominant definer was gender. For example, Toby [*am*], informed Mrs Pope that fathers fixed things, washed cars, and mowed the lawns, while mothers cleaned the home, washed, ironed, cooked and generally looked after their offspring. Every other nursery child perceived mothers as being the main carers, whether they laboured inside or outside the household. 'Dad's watching the television and mum is doing the cooking', remarked Molly (pm) while drawing. Jill [*am*] drew a picture of her mother and father, 'mum's tidying and dad's eating. I'm helping my mum. My horrible brother is watching television'. In Harriet's [*am*] family picture, her father's face occupied most of the space. Her father looked unhappy while the others had U-shaped smiling

mouths. 'Why is dad so sad?' I inquired. 'Cos he's told mum to clear-up, he doesn't like a dirty house!'

The children were also well aware of which outside paid jobs were 'suitable' for women and men (Noble & Bradford, 2000). Physically arduous or risky jobs tended to be selected by the children for men, and caring jobs for women. This was confirmed by the discussion work we carried out, and by our playground observations. For example: 'There's no womany robbers!' called Alan (am) to Daisy (am). In the morning, during the class showing time, Derek (am) argued that ladies should not be dressed in police uniforms, and that PC. Francis, who had come in to talk to them, 'was not a real police officer'. Neil (am) agreed. Derek stated that 'real police officers are men'. The boys, more than the girls, seemed more interested in investigating the framework of publicly approved conduct. The household jobs allocated to sons, from Miss Kinsey's questioning, were akin to those performed by their fathers. The boys might 'openly' say, for instance, that they aided their 'daddies' in cleaning the family motorcar, clearing up the garden, and assisting on the margins of dinner arranging, i.e. by laying the table, but certainly not in undertaking the main inside domestic jobs. The majority of the boys, from what they said, when at home, seemed happiest when improving the expertise they believed they would be required to have as grownups. That is, for, a future possibly outside the household, and out of doors jobs. The home activities the girls were involved with were equipping them, in their own eyes, for their potential adult female function as a mother and carer. The girls, to some extent from what they said and I observed, were in the home environment looking after siblings, assisting with household cleaning, and looking after pets.

### **Role playing in the home corner**

After Easter 1999, the staff and I observed that Magdelin [*pm*] had become an enthusiastic partaker in the home corner. When there she exclaimed on one occasion 'I'm the mummy,

and that's my family', pointing to the other girls and boys. She appeared in the home corner, in the part of 'mummy', to be the supervisor of other girls' and, to a smaller degree, of boys' endeavours. She conveyed loud, vigorous, definite commands concerning what activities there should be and who was to participate in them. For example, 'Stop doing that!' (i.e. eating the food), 'You can't eat yet until I get the things out', she said assertively to Norman [pm] and Maurice [pm]. These boys who now often played there, exercised no real influence upon the course of events. They, so as to be able to partake in her suggested activities, had to be compliant with Magdelin's dictates. Walkerdine and her colleagues (1989) suggest that females assume, in the Wendy house, the influential part of mother, and can employ hegemony openly. Magdelin seemed, from what she said, to be trying to imitate the roles she had observed in her own household, and have them affirmed inside the nursery environment (Carli & Bukatko, 2000).

The family males though recognised by Magdelin were frequently omitted from her home corner activities. When Miss Kinsey or Mrs Denhart asked Magdelin where the males in the family were, if there were no boys present in the home corner, she stated that they were doing outside jobs, or that her husband was at work. On one occasion Magdelin told the boys, who were present there, that they were dogs and that they should 'go out!'. When the boys had departed, Magdelin continued, 'we'll (the girls) make the tea now, the dogs are so naughty!'. Mrs Gillham and Mrs Denhart observed and remarked on, on another occasion more forceful male visitors, i.e. Karl [pm] and John [pm], insisting on assuming the role of domineering husbands within the home corner. Magdelin tried to regain control by stating, to the other children and to them that her husband and his friend were at work, and that Karl was 'only her brother' and John her 'baby'. 'Dad', corrected Karl, at which John sighing wearily sat down (possibly imitating his father) and remarked, 'I'm also a daddy, I've just been to work. Magdelin (pointing at Magdelin) is the mum ..... I want my grub!'. The staff and I observed that when such disagreeable circumstances arose Magdelin either

ignored them and pretended to 'tidy-up the house', or gave up and left for another area of the classroom. Francis (1998) observes that girls can, in single-sex play acting groupings, take on 'high status' roles and exert some authority, but they are less able to do so in mixed-sex drama groups. (We did encourage the boys to make full use of the home corner but other activities, i.e. the computer and construction toys, were generally of more interest to them.)

Within the home corner, as time went on, Magdelin, came to be more inclined to permit the more frequently visiting boys a chance to assume a broader range of caring functions, such as feeding and washing their dolls. Nevertheless, Magdelin still stayed solidly in command, and she here, by acquiring the situation of influence in these interactions, was capable of retaining her unaffected understanding of gender roles. Magdelin, it was intriguing to observe, beyond the home corner, was inclined to work peacefully, with a few companions, and was not as dominant.

#### **Nursery imitation of the female 'caring' function**

If schooling activities are perceived by the girls, their parents and perhaps, on occasions unconsciously, by teachers themselves, as a rehearsal for grown-up role functioning, then self selection or staff allocation to girls of the caring function in the nursery is equally, again equipping them for a grown-up existence occupied in deference to men (Macrae & Maguire, 2000).

We observed that the girls sometimes adopted, on their own initiative the general 'mothering' role as was exemplified by their, pre-Easter 1999, looking after of Mark (*am*). Its importance was illuminated by Miss Kinsey's somewhat contradictory disappointment, expressed after Easter 1999, that, on the one hand that the incoming girls were not exercising this function with Mark, but on the other that Mark was not becoming more

independent. (Although the staff supported equal opportunity procedures contradictory behaviour on their part was often evident.) The level of the girls' adoption of the carer function in the nursery was mixed, and declined significantly after Easter 1999, perhaps because of Mark's increased age seniority relative to the newcomers, or perhaps because of his heightened disruptive behaviour (Roberts & Mather, 1995). Other members of staff, including myself, were shown the file that Mrs Pope kept about him, from which it appeared that his behaviour seemed to be deteriorating after Easter 1999. He seemed to be more frequently engaged in throwing equipment around the room, hitting other children, especially the girls, and taking his clothing off. There was little verbal contact between Mark and his peers, and he did not use recognisable words or phrases in his limited exchanges. 'The new children do not know how to deal with him', remarked Miss Kinsey at one of our meetings.

The teachers constantly praised, encouraged and prized independent responsible attitudes displayed by all the boys, including Mark. Their attainment, from the start of a boy's entry into the nursery was expected, and appeared more highly valued for them than for the girls. (Here again we have another example of staff contradictory behaviour.)

### **Children's perceptions of male and female parental roles**

Both girls and boys, such as Stacey (am), Mary (am), Toby [am], Katie [pm], and Joseph (pm), whose mothers did not work beyond the household, seemed to possess more stereotypical notions as to how young females ought to behave, and what things they should receive as presents, as against the views of Liam (am), Alan (am), Tom [am], Derek (am), Merlin [pm], Katherine (pm), Angela (pm), and Barry (pm), whose mothers had outside jobs. When we consider the beginnings of the child's gender-role processes, this is quite reasonable. Probably children are discovering how females behave, partially from studying their mothers' behaviour. The alteration in the apportioning of household work, as

a result of the mother's outside work, might modify the child's perception of the gender role models each parent supplies to the offspring. Nevertheless, from the questions asked by Mrs Gillham, Miss Kinsey and myself it still remains clear, at least in the Worcester Primary catchment area, that working mothers performed considerably more of household tasks than did the fathers.

However, merely living in a home environment such as Christine's [am], that was sympathetic to the idea of equal opportunities (I gain this information from my many visits), did not necessarily affect the children's stereotyped occupational choices, or their definitions of 'work'. Merlin [pm] declared that 'daddy works but mummy doesn't', even though his mother was out working full-time at that time. Magdelin [pm] thought that women's outside work was 'not proper work'. Some of the children thought that women's domestic work was not work 'like daddies'. This was revealed in the post-Easter 1999 staff-pupil discussions during and following the reading of the *Alex's Bed* (Dickinson, 1980) story. I asked Alan (am) to draw a picture of his father. This he did. 'What is your father doing?', 'He's sitting on the settee', 'Why?', 'He's watching television', 'What's on television?', 'Football', 'Where's mum?', 'She is out in the kitchen doing the washing-up', 'Why isn't dad helping her?', 'Oh he's too lazy', 'Why is he lazy?', 'He's had a hard day', 'Hasn't mum had a hard day?', 'No', 'Why?', 'She doesn't work hard'.

Mrs Pope and I observed Liam (am) drawing on a drawing board. I asked him who he was drawing. He replied 'mum having fun', 'When does she have fun, Liam?', 'When she is looking after me, that's fun'. This perhaps illustrates the children's representation of motherhood as a vocation, and therefore not onerous compared to hard 'paid' outside work that fathers have to do as a duty. The children tended to see women in terms of their 'family' status, and not in career terms. Williams (2000) reveals that for females who care for their children, there is less of an absolute boundary between their unpaid or paid labour



and their leisure pursuits, and that these tend to be defined with reference to the needs of the family, and to males.

The staff and I noted that the majority of older infants were more capable than the younger ones of expressing fairly precisely their views on some aspects of gender, and the effect that such views had on their own gender behaviour. The older infants described gender roles in a restrictive manner. They asserted, for example, that boys were less considerate than girls, that boys had shorter hair, and that girls were less robust and courageous than boys. All the children 'publicly' asserted that males and females must support these views. Elise [pm] explained, 'I didn't cry, I'm like a boy .... I'm out of pain now', pointing to her plaster. On another occasion, following one of our staff discussions, Mrs Gillham asked, 'If you are scared of spiders put your hand up', none of the boys put up their hands, but most of the girls did. Robert [am] then tormented Harriet [am], by pretending to be a spider with his fingers and making her squirm. (The teachers were aware of such 'sexist behaviour' but often only intervened when it caused discernible distress.) When Hugh [pm] stated that 'I like spiders'. I asked, 'Does mum like spiders?' 'No,' replied Hugh. 'Does your dad like spiders?' 'Yes,' retorted Hugh. 'Do girls like spiders?' 'No,' responded Hugh. 'Do boys like spiders?' 'Yes,' replied Hugh. All the names suggested by both girls and boys for spiders, worms, slugs and teddy bears were male.

Most of the children, including the boys, brought in one of their teddies to show the class when asked by the staff. All the children identified their 'teddies' as having the 'required' male characteristics, and thus the boys saw them as 'legitimate' playthings. 'He's brave (the teddy-bear), wants to go down,' said Carola [pm] to herself as she repeatedly slide her teddy-bear down the slide. Mike [am] was rather upset when his 'teddy' was given a female name by Mrs Gillham. When the children were asked by Mrs Gillham to make some female teddies, by placing a skirt on a bear's body, Mrs Gillham and Mrs Denhart

noticed that the boys referred to the female bears they had created as 'Lady Super Bears', and gave the female bear masculine characteristics. Most of the children, especially in the pre-Easter 1999 period contended that females ought not to exhibit 'male' characteristics, and males ought not to display conventional 'female' attributes. (The teachers, in the class discussion, generally maintained that boys and girls could behave in non-traditional ways.) These views seemed to have been further instilled in them by their partaking, before and within the nursery, within an assortment of exchanges that embraced the prevailing gender views.

#### **The influence of media on children in the pre-nursery and nursery periods**

Before entry to the nursery, various forms of media, whether they were interactive media, such as CD-ROM games and computers or more fixed media, for example video, and TV, were perhaps significant in influencing children's perceptions of gender-roles (McDonnell, 2001). The gender representations they presented could often be extremely sex-stereotyped, and portrayed male participants, especially in sport, in dominant positions (Whyte, 1998). This may have shaped the range of feasible roles accessible to pre-nursery males and females. In Miss Kinsey's pre-nursery 'agreed' home visits she noticed that the television set was on, and often left full on, or the sound just turned down during her stay.

Miss Kinsey, Mrs Gillham and Mrs Denhart, when calling on a family, conversed with the mother, in all cases, concerning a normal day in the home with their offspring. While doing this, the teachers seized the opportunity to assess the types of equipment available to the child, and the sort of relationship the mother had with their offspring, e.g. the type of maternal reactions to the child during the visit. They then recorded affirmative or negative comments for every one of a string of particular queries concerning the home, e.g. the number of times they were told by a mother that she read to her child during the week, the number of times they were told that the child left the house each week for shopping,

visiting, etc., and so on. This judgmental approach did seem to reflect the social class origins of the family, from my perusal of the teachers' records.

### **Within the nursery**

From their discussions with the children, Mrs Gillham and Mrs Denhart deduced that they spent perhaps as much as two to four hours each day watching television. This was more time, in some cases, than they spent in the nursery itself. Certainly, some of the time, whilst the TV was on, the staff and I were told by the children, they were doing other things, e.g. speaking to their playmates, siblings or mother, or amusing themselves with playthings. The infant boys, when Mrs Gillham and Mrs Denhart asked them to describe the programs they had seen, recounted the gory details of some cartoon (e.g. Tom and Jerry) that they had viewed that morning, or on the day before. The infant girls may have seen the same cartoons but were not so interested in recounting their details to the teachers; they often seemed disturbed by them. I have observed boys, within their homes and in the nursery, dramatising and portraying the violent, and often sexist roles, from preferred TV cartoons and sports' programs. Many of the more concerned nursery parents I was told, and observed, showed their offspring old or repeat episodes of *Sesame Street* rather than let them watch violent sexist cartoons.

The media proclaims to the child what it is to be like to be a member of one sex or the other, within the broader social setting (Huston & Wright, 1998). Within the nursery the influence of television was extremely evident in the comments the children made. They, especially Katie [*pm*], often mentioned TV cartoon happenings as 'real' events. Their divisions between fantasy and reality was often blurred. When asked by Miss Kinsey how they could travel to school, the children suggested such things as flying on an eagle's back, being brought in a batmobile, and on the back of an ostrich.

### **Concluding remarks**

It seems that home experiences were often perceived by most of the children, and most of their parents, as a rehearsal for grown-up role functioning. Moreover, the allocation to girls of the caring function was possibly equipping them for a grown-up existence lived in deference to, and submission to, men (Kittay, 1999). Even perhaps before they started nursery, the girls' very act of identifying with a particular feminine style of behaviour, and the avoidance of certain activities could probably already have condemned them to a specific life pattern (Yelland, 1998). The acceptance of the gender concomitants that went with being a 'real girl' may account for girls turning away, in the past, in mixed secondary schools from subjects associated with boys, and their relative under-performance as compared with girls in single-sex schools (Reed, 1998). Their lower self-esteem, and confidence, in the face of almost continuous male attempted, and real, domination of the mixed schooling system (Salmon, 1998), may also have been a consequence of this. The girls learn fairly early, as Turner & Gervail (1995) suggest, that they occupy a distinctly different place in society, from that of boys.

### **Summary**

The children were born and raised in a very close-knit community that had strong views on the roles' females and males should play in society (Pilcher, 1999). Their gender behaviour in the morning and afternoon sessions constantly reflected, to some extent, their home background and the influence of the media.

## **Chapter 8**

### **Other factors influencing the effectiveness of staff's interventions**

The children, by the time they enter the nursery, already had fairly firm ideas about appropriate gender behaviour and appearance (Zemore et al., 2000). Within the nursery itself, these gender stereotyped views were reinforced by the activities they undertook, their companions' views, and often, perhaps unfortunately, by teachers themselves (Pilcher, 1999).

### **Peer Pressure**

Peer demands in particular are important. They start early, are occasionally acrimonious and extend all through the child's early years and on into puberty (Noble & Bradford, 2000). They are more influential for social harmonisation, than staff expectations. The nursery staff and I observed and noted that children often exhibited less concern for the demeanour of opposite-sex peers, or grownups, than for matching-sex persons. Fagot (1985) reported, while scrutinising a playgroup incorporating second year children, that gender-diversified demeanour was not shown by the staff supervising the children. Nevertheless, the teachers' role was taken over by the children, who tried, like the children in my research, especially in the pre-Easter 1999 period, to alter the behaviour of any of their associates demonstrating gender-unsuitable conduct, by adverse reactions of one type or another. The significance for Fagot's (1985) children was especially obvious in the example of infant males. Fagot's work shows how 'reinforcement and modeling contribute importantly to gender development' (Fagot et al., 2000, p.69).

### **Transition from home to nursery**

Peer interplay, within the nursery environment, was perhaps more successful than child-parent interplay alone within the home, in the promotion of social and possibly academic skills, for peer interaction was based more on a horizontal age, knowledge, comprehension and power relationship (Hartup, 1996). Nevertheless, it could also promote not only

favourable, but also distinctly unfavourable, 'public' attitudes to certain kinds of gender behaviour (Levy, Taylor & Gelman, 1995).

Even though young children were subjected, within the home environment, to social pressures to submit to the gender stereotypes built through the prevailing practices of the community, these stresses were perhaps not so evident as in the nursery. Children, when they entered into the latter, were open to an even broader range of ideas and roles. From the staff and my observations, it appeared, from newcomers' initial reactions, that this might have been, in some cases, the first time that gender conformity became a really significant feature in their lives. This 'conditioning' process, at home and within school, however appears less powerful for young females than for young males, according to Jordan (1995).

On entry the newcomers, before interacting with their new companions, appeared to examine firstly their new setting. They perhaps elucidated to themselves the experiences they observed, and made them more understandable, in gender terms (Martin, 2000). This was done mostly subconsciously, and was rarely expressed openly. Their subconscious evaluation was in a continuously refashioning mode. Every one of their continuous, and often anxious observations, helped them to facilitate the composition of a suitable rejoinder when questioned (Kemmis, 1997). The newcomers soon came to be adept at interpreting the import of a diversity of often complex and 'Byzantine' nursery involvements. They assessed their new companions' reactions and the information they provided as to the socially 'correct' forms of male and female behaviour. 'Only girls hold hands, Barry ((pm), a newcomer)!' snarled Duncan (pm). 'I'm not a girl!' pleaded Barry. We noticed that there were indications that the nature of girl's or boy's initial association with other children was expressed by the character, and in the furtherance of, their own self-perception (Howes, 1996). It was interesting to see, in the afternoon session, John (pm), an unruly newcomer aged three, keenly watching and then making overtures to the aggressive Duncan and his

associates, whilst Hugh (*pm*) and Julia (*pm*), two very quiet three-year-old newcomers, similarly carefully scrutinised the other children before making contact with quiet girls like Angela and Linda.

The newcomers' initial 'public' gender acquiescence, especially among the boys, could either conflict intensely with their existing 'private' views, (these were often evident in our one-to-one conversations with them), or strengthened the stance they had already built for themselves (Eckes & Trautner, 2000). The societal repercussions of accepting particularly strong gender roles were now very obvious to them (Thrupp, 1999). Carola (*pm*), (a newcomer), put on a police tabard and policeman's hat. Jeremy (*pm*) and Roger (*pm*) forcefully informed her that she had the wrong hat on, and that only boys were allowed to wear that hat! Duncan (*pm*) then roughly seized the hat Carola was wearing and ran and returned with a lady police officer's hat, and menacingly told her to wear it!

The children were now in some cases, e.g. Norman (*pm*), required to replace themselves socially, in gender terms, so as to be able to procure the approval of their new companions. The query emerges, as to whether children, in general, were involved in investigating situations to clarify both the community's and their own gender roles, or were the children just subscribing to gender roles as they were exhibited to them. From my investigations, it would appear that children's 'public' gender perceptions possibly arose as a result of both the experiences they were open to, and the roles they had previously encountered (Reiss, 1998). The staff and I observed that children could have both a public gender view, that was declared in the restricted peer atmosphere of the nursery in the pre-Easter 1999 period, whilst retaining a private one that they could possibly exhibit in a more friendly home environment. The children's gender views were sometimes contradictory, and this was especially seen in the more liberal peer milieu displayed in the nursery after Easter, 1999. Nevertheless, even initially I noticed, a few newcomers such as Tom (*am*), firmly

displaying 'openly' distinct non-conventional gender roles. These children could, only to a very limited degree, debate these in terms of control relationships and freedom to possibly assume other roles.

What definitely altered, we noted comparing the incoming three-year-olds and four-year-olds, was the framework and character of sociable demeanour. This alteration had a great deal to do, we believed, with the increasingly refined mental abilities of older infants. After entering the nursery, the newcomers quickly showed a marked growth in their competence to convey knowledge, and understanding, of other children. They, simultaneously, came to be skilled in assessing other children's objectives, reasons and temperamental conditions (Bukowski & Sippola, 1996). They were possibly aided in this by their developing social concepts. These were devices that permitted them to acquire a meaningful feel for their encounters with other individuals.

Miss Kinsey thought that the newcomers probably made internal images of the children with whom they interrelated, of themselves, and of their involvements that ensued with other children. These appeared, to her, to become more sophisticated with increase in age. Certainly, the four-year-olds expressed more refined reasonings when discussing their relationships (Newcomb & Bagwell, 1995). Here again the stress to adjust to particular conventional gender categories seemed to be less stringent for girls than for boys. For example, the boys seemed to identify the social convention that females should have long hair, and males should have short hair, more firmly and rigidly than the girls. When Mrs Gillham said, following one of our discussions, 'If you have long hair you can line-up', the girls did not immediately respond until Mrs Gillham asked a couple of the girls directly if they had long hair. Then Mrs Gillham asked, 'If you have short hair you may line up', most of the boys lined up immediately. When Mrs Gillham, on another day, pursuing Mrs Denhart's suggestion, changed the wording to 'if you have short hair you can line-up', most



of the boys immediately lined-up. Neil (am) remarked to Mrs Pope, and myself, while drawing, that his mother had 'blue eyes, and long curly hair', and was 'less strong' and 'brave' than 'his dad'. Boys seem to be under more social pressure to 'express' and conform to conventional stereotypes. Conventional girl behaviour was less centred on toughness, domination of others and of their own internal selves (James, 2000), but this in its turn is also a stereotype

Most children, it seemed, reiterated social placements, they had observed, that furnished them with the most social success. These might be copied from peers, the staff, the media, and family members (Tobin, 2000). Children sometimes alluded to an influential personage, real or imaginary (Taylor, Cartwright & Carlson, 1993), or a parent, as an exemplar for such behaviour.

### **Antagonistic peer pressure**

We noted, in the pre-Easter period, that children, such as Tom (am), when their aspirations were not the same as the prevailing feminine or masculine ones, had to labour incessantly against persistent child discord, to justify themselves to the other children. Even though the staff and I constantly discussed, and actively supported them, when they discussed and tried out different types of gender roles, most boys, except Tom, found it hard to assume 'openly' the standpoint of being a member of the opposite sex, and comprehend the possibilities this would make accessible to them (Morgan, 2002). (The staff and myself, discussed gender in this way instead of discussing exchanging places or apparel, as the children seemed to connect easier with dissimilarities between 'boyish' and 'girlish' activities, than with mental or innate bodily disparities between boys and girls.) A few of the girls stated, that if they were able they would appreciate doing most 'boyish' activities, even if this was only for a short time. Meg (am) wished to 'score for England'. (Meg played football with her older brothers.) Clare (am), on the other hand, stated that she

wanted to be 'boss of the computer'. (The computer, when in 'open' use, was effectively controlled by the boys throughout the research period.) She also stated that in the home corner she would 'tell all the other kids what to do' and be the 'top kid'. However, this could only occur she said if no boys were present.

Nevertheless, every one of the girls stated that they did not want to be a boy, and did not wish, in either the pre- or post-Easter period, to adopt the aggressive behavioural stance of the boys. All the girls were glad that they were girls, while a few of the boys (discussed below, in for example, the section entitled 'The feasibility of cross-role behaviour for males') seemed to treat our asking 'openly' the question of whether or not they would enjoying doing 'girlish' activities, as something akin to a threat to their own psychological persona (Jamieson, 1998). This emphasises the requirement that for any advancement in gender equity to take place, i.e. for both girls and boys to be able to articulate or adopt alternate gender roles, a reduction in peer, especially male, hostility, was necessary. The pre-Easter nursery situation for girls is, perhaps, reflected in adult existence where the limits and dogma encircling a female's pertinent endeavours and roles and her position have proved to be, according to Foster (1996), even more immune to modification than that of the male employment structures.

**The conflict between the children's publicly expressed and their privately held views**

However, the staff and I observed and remarked on after Easter 1999 an open display of cross-gender behaviour in the home corner by many of the boys. On one occasion Mrs Denhart and I observed Norman [*pm*] dressing and undressing the female dolls, and then pushing them around the classroom in a pram. 'What's the name of your favourite doll, Norman?' I inquired. 'Christine,' answered Norman. 'Why do you call your baby Christine?' Mrs Denhart asked. 'I just like the name', replied Norman. 'She keeps wriggling about and getting out of bed', continued Norman. Jim [*pm*] then held up a large

female doll for our inspection and said, 'It's my friend!', while Maurice [pm] was pretending to cook a dinner which he then insisted, after it was cooked, that I sat down and ate. In another instance Miss Kinsey and Mrs Denhart noticed Clive [am] exhibiting cross-gender behaviour by saying, 'You can be the baby Tom I'll be the mummy'. Tom [am] was in the home corner wearing, as usual, a lady police officers' hat, while clasping Clive's hand. After summer half term Mrs Gillham and I observed four boys, led by Tom, making pretend cakes in the home corner of 'Mr Henry's hut'. On another occasion I noticed Norman pretending to lay the table, and he remarked 'people are coming to my party. It's my birthday party. I'm the mura and Ian [pm] is the dad' Even outside in the play area such cross-gender behaviour continued. Three of the boys, Norman, Jim, and Gerald [pm] went outside holding dolls and placing them each in prams. Two of the boys had a female doll, while Gerald called his 'Charlie'. The period after Easter 1999 was the first time the staff and I had seen such 'open' cross-gender behaviour in the nursery. What were the causes? Was it because the boys were now able to engage in such activities 'openly' without facing the vocal and physical disapproval of older boys such as Duncan (pm)? Or were the staff, who now taught within a calmer setting, more concerned with, and encouraging of, alternative role play? Was it reduced peer pressure, greater teacher involvement or a blending of both?

The staff and I believed that the children were capable of suppressing their own 'private' ideas or deliberately deceiving, so as to present the 'right' public image to their peers and to adults. When Mrs Denhart or Miss Kinsey asked them at what time they went to bed, the children tended to imply that their bedtime was 6.00 pm, but when they asked them about the evening television programmes they watched these often included ones on later at night for example, *Coronation Street*, *Emmerdale*, *Brookside* and *EastEnders*. The children gave initially the socially acceptable answer, as perhaps instructed by their parents. On one occasion I observed Felicity [pm], throwing pretend food at a group of growling boys

crawling on the floor in 'Mr Henry's hut'. She was told off by Mrs Denhart. In justification Felicity firstly said that Magdelin [pm] had told her to do so, and then that the boys were 'annoying them'. I, having observed the whole incident, saw that the food throwing was part of the game the girls and boys were playing. The boys were dogs being fed by the mother, Magdelin and her daughter, Felicity. Felicity did not advance this 'true' explanation, but gave, in her eyes, a more 'acceptable' one. Mrs Denhart, being exasperated by the 'rough and tumble' play, expelled both the boys and the girls from the area!

The children, when told to do activities by the staff and myself, could procrastinate, or avoid, doing things they were not interested in, or could pretend not to be able to do them (Burr, 1998). For example Christine [am], very quickly completed a jigsaw when told that she could not sit down with the others, ready to go outside, until she did so. They could also project the views they thought we wished to hear. Most of the children were judicious enough to suppress their own opinions. For example, when transport was being discussed, besides cars, trains and aeroplanes being mentioned the children suggested giraffes, frogs and butterflies. This seemed to annoy Miss Kinsey, 'Do you really think you could ride to school on an ostrich Katie [pm]?' Katie was undeterred, 'I saw it on the box (television)!' 'Really?' questioned Miss Kinsey sharply. The children then gave more acceptable answers, e.g. bicycles, motorbikes, vans, bus, etc. When Miss Kinsey employed the terms more or less, e.g. 'Have you more or fewer legs than a cow, a hen, or a sheep?', some of the children initially insisted on giving unreal animals, e.g. *Winnie the Pooh*, or non-farm animals, e.g. crocodiles. The staff tended to ridicule, among themselves, nonsensical answers.

On another occasion when the children were being asked to name some pets by Miss Kinsey only Katie again came up with an unacceptable one. 'My giraffe is my pet'. Katie

was cuddling a small toy giraffe. Miss Kinsey, rather irritated, asked Katie, 'Have you seen people walking down the road leading a giraffe?' Katie, undaunted, replied 'I see lots of people with giraffes'. Miss Kinsey drew in a breath, and ignored this, and directed her questioning to the 'sensible children' in the class. They, carefully, gave more 'acceptable' answers. The staff may persuade the children to give 'acceptable' answers but this sometimes did not affect, we found, the children's underlying opinions. 'All spiders have eight legs'; the children agreed but were not certain. 'How many legs have I given the spider?' asked Mrs Gillham. The children in turn repeated the number 'eight'. However, I observed that most of the children constructed spiders with more or fewer legs than eight. Later, when asked by Mrs Denhart how many legs a spider had, few of the children initially replied 'eight', e.g. 'Six!' stated Harriet [am] emphatically.

### **The feasibility of cross-role behaviour for males**

Such home and school encounters, as those mentioned in previous chapters, may make children perceive the socially unattractive nature of feminine, as against masculine, behaviour. Males such as Robert [am] thought that in as much as they were males, they were better than girls in many activities that the latter carry out as well, for example colouring and sketching. Joseph (pm) stated that he was 'glad I'm not a girlie' and that he would not wish to perform 'girlie' activities since they could be so 'yukky'. Joseph further asserted when Mrs Gillham asked him if any of the girls, in the nursery, were better than him that, 'I'm better than all the girls!'.

None of the boys, save Tom (am), and Joseph (pm) in the pre-Easter 1999 group, would publicly place themselves in a girl's role position. Joseph was capable of thinking of himself in a female's position, and could clearly conjecture up the their types of undertakings even though he himself rejected 'open' participation in 'girlish' activities. Boys appeared less able to investigate opposite-sex roles, perhaps because of male peer-

pressure (Morgan, 2002). Most of the children were biased, especially the boys in the pre-Easter 1999 period, against any sort of cross-sex ventures such as girls using the computer, or boys playing with the 'effeminate' dolls (Fagot et al., 2000). For example, when Hugh (*pm*) picked up a doll, it was roughly taken off him and tossed into the corner by the relatively much older Duncan. On the last day of the Easter term, I observed Norman (*pm*) by himself in the home corner. This area, together with the dressing up section, on this day was not in use as there was to be a parents' meeting there immediately after school.

Norman was looking furtively around. Being rather curious, I watched him. Underneath the table he was dressing and undressing a female doll. He appeared not to be aware of my interest but only kept looking around to see if any other children, especially the boys, had noticed what he was doing. According to his mother he played with female dolls, openly, at home. Even such young children can adjust their 'gender position when they are in the presence and absence of adults; and ... when in the presence of peers' (Yelland & Grieshaber, 1998, p.3).

On another occasion, during a teacher lead story discussion, Roland (*pm*) remarked, 'Girls are nurses, boys are doctors!'. Then Joseph (*pm*) whispered to me that 'boys could be nurses as well'. 'Why do you say that?' I murmured. 'Because my mum told me,' replied Joseph, confidentially. Joseph's mother had been a nurse. The most interesting thing here was that Joseph whispered the information to me, instead of expressing his opinion openly. This revealed that, though Joseph thought that males could be nurses, he also believed that this was inappropriate gender behaviour in the eyes of the other children, especially the boys, who were present.

In the pre-Easter 1999 period, only one boy, Tom (*am*), would play, openly with or handle the doll 'babies', kept in the home corner. He never appeared to be in any way put off by the intimidation he encountered and persisted in wearing female accessories, e.g. hats and

handbags. Moreover, this type of effeminate behaviour was intensified by Tom, after Easter 1999. Tom then clearly felt entirely assured in placing himself towards the feminine extremity of the gender continuum. After Easter Mrs Pope and I noticed that Tom [am] was wearing, over his right shoulder a large ladies' handbag. Tom noticed our attention and remarked: 'I'm a lady'. Mrs Pope stated that Tom, a very large, tall boy, had tried the previous day to wear a dress but had found that he could not put it on, because it was too small.

Nevertheless, though the girls were less reluctant to partake, and found it less hard to place themselves as a male in 'boyish' more socially valued activities, they encountered major difficulties if they tried. On the last day of the Easter term 1999 Roger (pm) brought in from home his pocket game computer, on which he played a racing car game. Angela (pm) tried to look at what was happening on the small computer screen. She was prevented from doing so by the group of boys, 'it's a boy's game, you're a girl!' remarked Roger. Roger then observed that 'girls can't do it anyway! It's too difficult (for them), it's only for boys.' I asked Angela and Molly (pm), whether they wished to play the game (I intended to intervene and ask Roger to let them play). 'No,' came the reply in both cases. 'We only wish to watch,' came Molly's reply. 'Why?' Mrs Denhart asked. 'It's for boys, anyway I like looking!' came Molly's response.

### **Male dominance among young children**

Certain areas of the nursery were distinctly gender based during the 'indoor free choice activity period', especially in the afternoons, in the pre-Christmas 1999 period. The staff and I observed, though we did directly intervene, on occasions, as mentioned later in this chapter, that within free choice active time a particular section of the boys monopolised the computer, and that girls would not enter boy-dominated sectors. On the other hand we noted that the girls tended to monopolise the less physically dynamic 'girlish' activities

such as those involved with solving of some sorts of puzzles, and those in the home corner. The boys took up, as a whole, much more space than the girls, when engaging in their activities (Jamieson, 1998). They occupied the more spacious 'public' front areas of the classroom, especially in the 'children's sitting down area'. The girls were restricted in their use of a wide range of resources, by the presence of the boys, and by the children's identification of some activities such as the computer as 'boyish' (Head, 1999).

The older boys, such as Duncan (pm), asserted control over various areas, with remarks between themselves, and to the girls, like 'Shuv off'. The more dominant, and in most cases, older boys also restricted not only the gender activities, but also the use other 'weaker', chiefly younger, boys could make of resources. I overheard Toby (am) telling Mrs Denhart that 'They won't share!' (referring to dominant boys such as Liam (am) who would not share use of the scooters in the playground). Mrs Denhart said confidentially to me, when I recounted what I had observed, that enforcing sharing was almost impossible in both sessions as the dominant boys, such as Jeremy, completely ignored her, and that she was not prepared to have altercation with them over this. (Retaining effective class control for all the teachers was of primary importance.)

In the outside play area, after Easter 1999, even with greater direct teacher intervention, the girls sometimes beheld male control of territory and staff time. On one occasion after Easter 1999 Julia [pm] and Patricia [pm] informed me that the climbing frame was for both boys and girls. However, soon after these girls had asserted this, Mrs Denhart and I noticed on the climbing frame the boys attempting and then eventually succeeding in forcing the girls to depart. 'I'm a baddie, I do mean things', stated Ian [pm] to the girls. 'There is fire down below, there!' pointing at the end of the slide, called out Ian attempting to scare the girls away. 'I'm the King of the castle,' stated Merlin [pm]. 'So am I,' said Ian. Felicity [pm] was the only girl who attempted forcefully on this occasion to use the frame, but even



she gave up later. However, after the boys had lost interest, and departed, some girls returned. The girls on the climbing frame then repeatedly chanted, 'We're the King of the castle, get down you dirty rascal'. They refused to sing, when I suggested it, that they were 'Queens of the castle'. Felicity implied to me that as Kings they were able to prevent the boys gaining access, i.e. a King has physical power, a Queen does not. Epstein (1998) suggests that females by assuming the role of powerful personages can increase their authority. Mrs Gillham, on the other hand, when I described what I had observed, suggested that the reason they sang as they did was because it incorporated the same words as in the traditional rhyme.

### **Mixed sex groupings**

The staff and I observed and noted, in the pre-Easter 1999 period, that the girls' behaviour, in a mixed-sex setting, was in marked contrast to their behaviour in single-sex groups. Here they spoke less freely. In a mixed-sex situation the girls had to be encouraged, by non-verbal and direct questioning, to give a comment. They took longer to respond to a question than did the boys. Salmon (1998) feels, that to build up girls' self-confidence, it is better to teach them in single-sex groups. Swan (1998) claims that for girls, single-sex grouping can foster greater academic achievement and reinforce self-confidence. Here they can learn co-operatively, their self-esteem will not be threatened by males, and they can assume the class leadership roles usually monopolised by the boys in mixed teaching groups (Howe, 1997). They can, in such an environment, be taught on criteria that are excluded within the existing educational set-up, and consequently have a more positive concept of themselves (Brody et al., 2000).

The girls were more able to engage in such cross-gender activities, e.g. cross-dressing, using the construction materials, or the computer in the morning session, when there were fewer, and generally less aggressive, boys present. To me the mixed-sex nursery seemed to

be, especially in the afternoon, in the pre-Easter 1999 period, in many ways as male dominated physically, pedagogically and linguistically as the rest of the primary school system (Connolly, 1998), or the mixed-sex secondary school complex (Paechter, 1998). This dominance results in reduced female opportunities. However, I have discovered that single-sex group working can lead to greater amplification of the distinctions between the sexes (Matthews, 1998), though, in the case of the girls, it did perhaps give them a much more positive self-image (Brody et al., 2000). It was noticeable, in the pre-Easter 1999 period, that girls and boys, by the age of four were exhibiting adult male and female behavioural patterns towards each other.

#### **Nursery staff's discrimination in favour of the boys**

From the above work it would seem that boys and girls were always under extremely strong social pressures, both before and within the nursery environment, to conform to certain forms of gender behaviour. The nursery staff and I, especially in the before Easter 1999 period, when male peer pressure was very strong, had great difficulty in moderating gender stereotypical conduct.

I noticed immediately, when I entered the nursery in October 1998, that the boys were more difficult to handle, less co-operative, and less patient in waiting for their turn, than the girls. The nursery staff all recognised this situation, especially Miss Kinsey, who often stated that it was often hard, for a mainly feminised occupation, like nursery teaching, to deal with the interests and requirements of young males (as also mentioned by Head, 1999). The girls seemed to enjoy the nursery more than the boys, and appeared better motivated than them (Tobin, 2000). This counterbalances the fact that the girls received less of the staff's attention, and fewer of some classroom resources, than the boys, which the staff themselves recognised.

Consciously or subconsciously, or just for the sake of peace, as the staff themselves suggested, the boys were treated more favourably than the girls, within the nursery. Male pupil demand for attention, accompanied by overt disobedience, is an issue throughout schooling (Coffey & Delamont, 2000). Like some of Clarricoates' (1983) teachers, Miss Kinsey and Mrs Gillham stated to me on occasions that they in some ways preferred teaching the boys because they were more active and interesting (as also mentioned by Elwood & Comber, 1996), even if naughty. 'Girls can be so tedious!' remarked Mrs Gillham. Moreover, the girls seemed to perceive that the boys' value system was occasionally more highly valued by the nursery staff (a pattern also illustrated by Moir & Moir, 1998). Miss Kinsey and Mrs Gillham employed, unconsciously, from what they said, different questioning techniques with girls and boys. Here and below are some examples of staff contradictory behaviour, that is, though they expressed a desire to promote sexual equality their behaviour often produced an opposite outcome.

Girls frequently feel devalued and oppressed in mixed sex groupings (Fulcher & Scott, 1999). This was perhaps illustrated by the unintentional effective denigration of the girls, by the nursery staff sometimes moving the naughtier boys away from other boys into the grouping of girls (Sukhnandan, 1999). For example, 'Because you're so naughty Robert', [am], 'you will have to sit in future with the girls, if you misbehave, who are, Mr Woodward, (looking in my direction for support), sitting so beautifully', warned Miss Kinsey.

The nursery staff's teaching style can have unintentional consequences for the development of children's gender knowledge and identities (B. Brown, 1998). On my initial entry into the nursery, differentiation by sex was evident in the staff's, especially Miss Kinsey's, comments. The children sometimes lined up by sexes, for Miss Kinsey, in the pre-Christmas 1999 period. The staff, from time to time, encouraged and enforced different

patterns of behaviour between the sexes, for example enforcing greater female modesty, e.g. Mrs Pope ordered, 'pull down your dress Joan [am]'. Staff distinctly discouraged amorous relationships between pairs of boys, less so between girls and boys, and hardly at all between girls, revealing here, possibly unconsciously, a public homophobic attitude towards the boys while perhaps seeing the girls' behaviour in a non-sexual or sexually passive way (Pilcher, 1999). When the children were lining up, the staff, especially Mrs Denhart, told the boys, rather than the girls, who were kissing, 'to line up properly'. When Mrs Denhart saw Robert [am] kissing Clive [am] she facially registered great displeasure. Mrs Gillham announced to the class that these boys were being 'especially silly'. In an afternoon session she ignored Brian [pm] and Elise [pm] who were cuddling, instigated by Elise. The children soon learnt the correct forms of 'acceptable' behaviour, and helped to enforce it. Ben (pm) saw Katherine (pm) holding hands with Barry (pm), and remarked on it to Miss Kinsey. Katherine quickly removed her hand. She then held hands with Angela (pm) instead.

The nursery staff's comments, as they read stories, were often gender-stereotyped, especially in the pre-Christmas 1999 period. They frequently reinforced, or created stereotypes not present in the narratives they were reading. Mrs Gillham casually remarked on a space family story (reflecting the current news about John Glen's space journey) that the father and his sons went off into space because the mother and the daughters had to stay behind and clear-up the breakfast things! However, Mrs Gillham immediately realised the gender significance of what she had just said by her instantaneous hesitation and stuttering, and her looking uneasily in my direction. Similarly, in the story *Mr Snow*, Miss Kinsey reinforced the sex-stereotypical choices mentioned in the story.

Even the staff's choice of topics and physical characteristics of some of the materials utilised in the pre-Christmas period, seemed to favour the boys. For example their choice

of computer programs seemed to be done with the boys in mind (Coffey & Delamont, 2000). 'The boys will enjoy that (the computer program)', said Miss Kinsey when showing me a game. There was only one staff-chosen program used on the nursery computer in the pre-Christmas 1998 period. I thought that this program, entitled *The Little Monster at School*, had particular appeal for the boys. The same older boys, in the afternoon session, e.g. Duncan (pm) and Roger (pm), played it over and over again. Miss Kinsey and Mrs Gillham observed that the only girl to regularly approach the computer, in this period, was Katie (pm), usually carrying a doll. She was then forcefully excluded from the group by the boys. She was never allowed to closely see the screen. After Christmas 1998 *The Tortoise and Hare* program was used. The boys did not like this as much as the *Monster* one, so the girls had greater access to it, but only after the other boys who wished to use it had had a go! In like manner the type of some construction units chosen by the staff, e.g. railway or motorways building units, or even possibly the tangible characteristics of wooden and plastic construction units themselves, or jigsaws, perhaps, had innately masculine, or favoured sex-stereotypical characteristics. I noticed that one two part jigsaw appeared to be particularly gender-stereotyped. In it the king had to be joined to his palace, the princess had to be connected to her dressing maids, the Indian brave to his weapons and his tent, the mother to the child's buggy, the doctor (male) to the hospital ward, the nurse (female) to the bandaged man, the female teacher to the little children, etc.

I observed and noted, especially in the pre-Easter 1999 period, that the staff also often reinforced, or failed to stop, gender-stereotypical behaviour (Kimmel, 2000). The staff failed consistently to reprimand the boys for their assertive behaviour towards the girls, their domination of the computer, construction resources and playground tricycles, and to address the boys' reluctance to do the puzzles or play in the home corner. The teachers' failure, in the pre-Easter period, seemed to reflect the overwhelming effect of gender-enforcing influences, i.e. peer pressure.

### **The consequences of the stereotyping process**

As a result of boys', and to a lesser extent staff's actions, girls and less dominant boys perhaps forfeited major developmental chances. All children, I maintained in our staff discussions, required accessibility to every possible resource that aids every facet of their educational enlightenment, an argument with which the staff agreed. To all the children, the home corner, together with the various construction activities, and the computer, separately and jointly furnished, in their own fashion, a significant component in attaining an equipoised nursery curriculum (B. Brown, 1998). The staff and I concluded that only when boys and girls, in the nursery, were supplied with the same genuine chances to use activity areas and resources in the same way as the opposite sex did, would disparities in the utilisation of materials tend to evaporate. The disagreement between the staff and myself was over how this desirable objective was to be achieved.

### **Staff interventions**

The nursery staff, and I, had a formal meeting, prior to the commencement of summer half-term 1999, with two LEA advisers. Children, the advisers argued, would behave in a more or less gender-stereotyped fashion, when current environmental signals strengthen or weaken conventional gender-role attitudes. Children, within the nursery, the advisers seemed to imply, comprehended the way in which to behave, and visualise gender chiefly by assimilating the signals vested in the layout, formulation, and designating of the resources within the activity areas (Tett, 2000). The advisers suggested that by judicious physical alterations the staff could promote neutral gender-stereotyped functioning and thus empower boys and girls to discover, and then to behave, in a non-gender-stereotyped fashion (Kittay, 1999).

### **Mr Henry's hut**

So within the nursery, after half-term, the staff, strongly influenced by the arguments advanced by the advisers, set up the new region, 'Mr Henry's hut'. This new region involved eliminating the 'visible' obstacles between the previous separated areas of the home corner, the dressing-up, the library and the sitting down sectors; thus making one large unobstructed space at the front of the nursery classroom. The staff tried to change the nature of the activities that took place there by introducing plants, plant pots, gardening equipment and large wooden construction blocks, as well as retaining the previous home corner equipment. They thought that mixing-up 'girlish' and 'boyish' resources would be sufficient, in itself, to motivate both sexes towards using the new region. The staff hoped that this would also diminish gender-separate actions inside it. They anticipated that its 'newness' would indicate to the children an activity region (which was gender impartially labelled) that both sexes would view as equally applicable to themselves. The staff expressed the hope that by this pioneering change they would alter the gender behaviour of the children, and thus give both girls and boys equal access to educational materials. The staff then told the children repeatedly that this new region was to be called 'Mr Henry's gardening hut'.

However, the failure of their policy was soon clearly seen, and discussed by the staff and myself, when the more conventionally engendered and forceful boys commandeered the resources and space, in the new play area. We observed that the few males, who had previously monopolised construction materials activities and the computer, were now smart enough to persist in achieving gender dominance in the same fashion as they had at the commencement of the staff's interventions, but in a different location. The staff, from what they said and my observations, seemed rather bewildered by the boys' and girls' disinclination to amuse themselves more collectively in the new joined-up region. Interplay between the sexes became, in fact, more limited, as compared with that that existed

immediately before perhaps because of the removal of the previous, unmistakable, gender activity boundaries (McKie et al., 1999). Moreover, the children did not blend 'boyish' and 'girlish' materials within the new region.

The children picked up the latest title, 'Mr Henry's hut' swiftly. However, the staff's objective of re-titling the areas was to inhibit children gender-labelling the new sector. Such a thing did not take place, for the girls and boys re-created activities inside 'Mr Henry's hut', employing their usual home corner and construction zone scenarios. Thus, for example, from the children's comments, the kitchen zone in Mr Henry's hut had never changed from that of being the home corner, but was now regrettably squeezed, by male dominance, into a more restricted area! Most of the girls reacted when in Mr Henry's hut sector, as they invariably did when previously confronted by the boys in the separated areas, by being more tightly grouped, by shunning activities there and departing, thus avoiding any possible conflict with the boys, but this time to an even more restricted area than previously, at the back of the classroom. Some girls, such as Magdelin [*pm*] and Felicity [*pm*], did attempt to repel the boys, within the new region, by declaring that part of it was still really the home corner!

The staff noticed but failed to take effective constant affirmative action when the boys kept the girls from large parts of this newly designated sector through coercive methods, by for example tossing 'girlish' objects such as dolls and kitchen utensils, away from them. An example of this was when Clive [*am*], after stating 'I'm making a breakfast, my woman's too lazy' threw a doll out of the area exclaiming 'it's for girls!'. Mrs Gillham and I were somewhat surprised by Clive's action here as he usually displayed, in the past, non-conventional cross-gender behaviour. This is an example of children's occasional exhibiting inconstancy in behaviour. Mrs Gillham said that she was very pleased that I had observed Clive's lamentable action. She, however, did not rebuke Clive. Tom [*am*],



displaying his usual non-traditional gender behaviour, then gently picked up the doll and returned to its previous position saying to Clive, 'Dolls are for boys and girls, Clive!'. When it was noticed by the staff, such behaviour frequently resulted in the expulsion of both the disruptive boys, and any girls there present, from the area. For example, Miss Kinsey told all the children to leave Mr Henry's hut. However, when Miss Kinsey repeated her request she unintentionally employed the words 'from the home corner'!

The boys had, in effect, secured this new region as their own, and the girls had thus procured less rather than greater entry to different activities by the staff's advisors innovation. The staff's original equity objectives had plainly not been accomplished. The existing gender-stereotyped associations had not been disturbed by the staff's indirect interventionist strategy, but had been reinforced. Chances of employing forceful means of sustaining children with non-standard views had also been missed by the staff, while the gender utilisation of existing materials had not changed (B. Brown, 1998). Mac Naughton (1998), who investigated the effects of using an indirect interventionist approach towards attaining greater equity between the sexes, similarly shows some such practical limitations. The nursery staff's experimental changes in the activity areas illustrate some of the typical problems of employing such an approach towards trying to encourage gender equality (Usher, 1996). For this staff experiment shows that young children may, either very forcefully or more subtly, repel one's attempts to re-educate them in gender attitudes (Whyte, 1998). Within the nursery set-up it appears that it is first necessary to try to eliminate some of the vestiges of the social exposures that exist, that permit children to constantly recreate gender positions (Kittay, 1999). It seems that staff must energetically get involved in understanding the interplay with and between girls and boys, recognise their own stereotypical opinions, and firmly rebut what the children may have previously ascertained concerning the proper manner to be either feminine or masculine (Brody et al., 2000).

### **The limitations on the effectiveness of teachers' gender interventions**

Nobody disputes the crucial part that feelings play in the guidance of both collective and singular gender behaviours. By their actual character, domestic or classroom encounters, especially with peers, can affect such relationships. Dramatic encounters, such as those mentioned in this study, within the family or classroom environment can have considerable repercussions for children's emotional, academic and gender development. Adverse or advantageous home conditions reflected into the nursery can radically influence the 'public' gender behaviours of not only of the children directly involved but those of their fellow pupils. This, in turn, must affect the amount of influence that the staff and I had, and our efforts to change patterns of behaviour must be viewed and weighed against this hostile or favourable background.

### **Summary**

In any consideration of the effectiveness of the staff's, my own, and our collaborative interventions in moderating children's gender conduct, one must recognise the often overwhelming influence of the children's peers. I conclude this chapter by suggesting that, though the nursery education the children received was academically effective and successful, it did, in some circumstances, reinforce the children's sex-stereotypical behaviour.

## Chapter 9

### **Conclusions**

I observed and recorded, having constantly a notebook at hand, that the children did not enter the nursery as 'genderless' entities but arrived from family environments where they had already been socialised into particular forms of gender behaviour (Zemore et al., 2000). The co-operative gender investigations, of the staff and myself, could not be divorced from this and from, within the nursery itself, the constant effects of camaraderie groupings upon the children's 'continued construction of social reality' (Birksted, 1976, p.67). This final chapter reflects on this. It also considers the problems concerned in the appraising of the consequences of some of our intercessions, and the issues entailed in our trying to alter, or moderate, basal children's gender views.

Perhaps, as my reflections on the pre-and post Easter 1999 nursery sessions illustrate, education is not a unidirectional procedure. Every assembly of children carries with them, it seems to me, from their previous companionship groupings, for example pre-school play groups, and from their family surroundings, a particular structure of gender opinions. The interaction of these with the actions of the staff and fellow pupils could have caused a particular parochial nursery gender culture to evolve. One perhaps can no longer accept the view that the family, the school or the peer group is the only agency engaged in the gender training procedure. For between them all, shared effects prevail (Trautner & Eckes, 2000). I have, throughout this thesis, maintained my belief that early socialisation, more than biological endowment, is chiefly responsible for the gender distinctions the staff and I beheld, and that moreover children are, to a certain degree, self-socialising. This was reinforced by the evidence I gathered. I have consequently concentrated on the social, instead of the biological aspects. This may be justified as well, as Smith and Lloyd (1978) indicated, not just because the social aspect appears more potent, but inasmuch as

educational and social interactions may be adjusted and hence afford the most promising opportunity for alteration, if alteration is wanted.

### **Shared effects**

Each feature of a child's gender growth is generated in many ways, and we have a great deal to discover concerning such connections. Within the joint guardian family structure (recognising that up to 20% of families are possibly headed by a single mother and 10% by fathers), a child's functioning is influenced by, and affects, the mother and the father (Bandura, 1997). This again is influenced and affected likewise through the ties between the parents (Parke & Buriel, 1998). This consequently affects, and is influenced by, the character of their nurturing endeavours. Both parents and offspring are mentally altered as a result of such social exchanges. Such consequences are cumulative and, in this way, their enduring outcomes are the result of numerous intertwining effects. This may have been revealed dramatically through my research, and other studies dealing with the manner in which matrimonial discord overflows into the fathers' and mothers' handling of their offspring.

Parental affection is an important factor in the manner in which a child relates to other children of both sexes. If parents are adaptable to, and concerned with the social and gender endeavours of their offspring, then, hopefully, their children will evolve tolerant attitudes, mental assurance and the required relational techniques that will aid it in gaining public approval. However, when inappropriate discipline and gender-stereotyped opinions are imposed, and with inordinate restraints, it may produce child aggression and intolerance of gender deviations. Again, home habitat elements and the child's innate components do not act separately, but may interplay in diverse ways. If a child has a placid temperament it is perhaps more probable that the guardian would establish an affectionate and sustaining

partnership with it. Consequently, such a collaboration may then have turned out to be a safeguarding element (Golombok, 2000).

The connections between family and schooling may be seen most plainly within the joint effects that boys' and girls' home and academic involvement have upon one another. The character of the links could have considerable purport for the growth of children's self-esteem, for their academic advancement, and their receptivity to educational and gender ideas (Pettit, Bates & Dodge, 1997). Social and educational achievement is connected to parental values and hopes for their daughters' and sons' social and scholastic attainment (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998). Children's failures or achievements at school might in turn inspire parents to give less or more heed to their offspring's gender and scholastic activities, the determinant link could proceed in either direction.

The manner in which the above are attained may arise from numerous parenting methods. These include parental encouragement or discouragement of certain forms of gender behaviour, of verbal usage, and numeracy and literacy, particularly at the before-schooling stage (Yelland & Grieshaber, 1998). Later parental measures, with different supervision tactics for boys and girls, may be very important (Bower, 1998). These comprise such things as assisting their sons and daughters in coping with schooling difficulties, organising excursions to sports events, dancing classes, libraries, unofficial and official contacts with school staff, aid in selection of school programs, dynamic participation in homework, and home visits to, and by, peers of the same or different sex (Steinberg, 1996). Perhaps all these are a more useful indicator of the way in which socially, and academically, boys and girls will be successful within an educational institution, rather than what precisely takes place within the institution itself (van Doornick et al., 1981). The connection between schooling and home, whatever that might be, is a stable one (Steinberg, 1996).

### **The influence of peer groups**

Before and after entering the schooling system, children become involved in a maze of interactions with peers, mainly of the same sex, every one of which operate in an interrelated way. What arises in one peer association may have implications for the character of other involvements. Whether a youngster is rejected or accepted by its peer group may have considerable purport for that child's current, and future, social and academic welfare (Patterson, 1996).

Their maintenance of their companionships was seen by the children themselves, as I constantly discovered when reconsidering my notes, as a significant component of their societal existence. The children appeared to have a constant longing to belong, and to be with others (Ladd, Kochenderfer & Coleman, 1997), which entailed conforming with the opinions of their like-sex companions. Such compliance ended, from our observations, in greater camaraderie and fellowship-founded views, less open singularity, and the development of a clearly different youngster's viewpoint of how the two sexes were required to act.

The children seemed constantly aware not just of the responses of their own sex, but of the opposite one also, to their behaviour, within every activity they performed. The gender element, from the remarks we recorded, was significant within the two sexes' accomplishment, assessment, and choice of different work and tended to be more critical within a mixed, as compared with a single-sex, environment. Differentiation by sex was often evident in the children's comments, and was visible in a number of the children's activities. This latter was shown (even after our encouragement of non-stereotyped behaviour) as I noted, in the pre-Easter 1999 period, by the type of dressing-up clothes the children chose, the non-use of the home corner by the boys, the roles played out on the small climbing frame, the things made with the construction toys, the girls doing the bulk

of the clearing-up and tidying, the children's choices of and non-choices of future adult jobs, their selection of toys for Christmas, their description of the TV programmes, and roles played by their 'mummies' and 'daddies' in the home, etc.

Gender-stereotyped attitudes, expressed by the media, the parents, other children and, sometimes, the nursery staff, as I mention frequently within this thesis, seemed to strengthen, and contribute, towards the boys' and girls' notions that males were more worthy than females. As I have stated earlier, although the staff said to me that they supported the research objectives, their actual behaviour was sometimes in conflict with its aims (Brody et al., 2000). They only appeared to become cognisant of this when they noticed my inscribing their remarks, or my own comments on their behaviour, in my notebook. Yet, I am sure that I, on a number of occasions, was unconsciously guilty of, if not 'sexist' conduct perhaps, at least, of unfeeling behaviour.

The quality of being female appeared to be valued less by the staff, and many of the children, than the quality of being male, and certain kinds of femininity, i.e. compliance, and masculinity, i.e. dominance, seemed to be valued over all other kinds of femininity and masculinity (Salmon, 1998). Collective compliance might result in the larger appreciating by boys and girls of masculine aims and accomplishments, and the acceptance, by girls, of a more submissive part within the nursery. Two of the principal findings of our investigations were that the two sexes mentioned girls less, and seemed to appraise the girls' attainments as inferior.

The children helped to enforce social and gender rules. The staff and I fabricated the nursery actualities for the children, but as Davies has said, the teaching staff might elucidate the regulations for nursery conduct, but the total comprehension is something grownups could never give. 'Friends are the source of meaning and therefore the source of

identity' (Davies, 1982, p.70; Harris, 1998). The gender pattern as exhibited initially in the pre-Christmas 1998 nursery research (even after all our effort to promote a more equitable atmosphere) was definitely an extremely patriarchal one.

All the above resulted in my appreciating that the conduct of any particular boy or girl was only accorded gender significance through the interrelationships in which the individuals were rooted, and that the various settings in which they interrelated. These two elements, group relationships and setting, could mould the path of children's character growth, and perhaps the kind of persons they eventually came to be, when they left the nursery. Here, though, the staff and I observed the adaptability and flexibility of many children. They could rapidly change the pattern of their gender behaviour to fit different circumstances. For children, to be socially approved, they had the urgent need, either in or without the nursery, within different issue, age, and sex environments to 'get it (gender behaviour) all right', as Joseph (pm) observed.

The children, in their endeavouring to harmonise, appeared to perceive this consistent re-accommodation and reassessment procedure as vital in their understanding of, and preparation for, their anticipated 'grownup' positions. I believe that such events are ably depicted through the portrayal of Norman's conduct throughout this dissertation. As the nursery research progressed, the significance of social context, and group interaction, especially after Easter 1999, became all too evident to us. The children seemed to perceive, to some degree, that, as with prevailing fashionable cultural caprices, gender codes could be constantly changing, and can be 'fluid' (Thorne, 1993, p.159) and parochial (Parker, 1997).

I feel that if one wishes to produce greater equality, ones' endeavours should be aimed not at detached children or particular associations, but primarily at the nursery environment as



a whole (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998). For this to occur, we need to find out the gender differences from one period to another in group gender behaviour, and in individual boy's and girl's conduct within certain settings. I feel that it is the endeavour, inside the present patriarchal gender pattern, to classify ourselves as being feminine and masculine that appears to be the real difficulty. I believe that in our existing world gender disparities occur due to the overwhelming notions concerning the most fitting manner to be either feminine or masculine (Connolly, 1998). Current and past social attitudes bring about gender patterns in which certain notions are perceived to be more correct, and superior than others (Paechter, 1998). The adoption of the gender obligations that goes with existing as a 'true female' might explain why females avoided, previously, within mixed secondary educational institutions, topics 'connected' with males, and their comparative under-achievement as against females within single-sex institutions (Gaine & George, 1999). The girls' inferior assurance and self-regard, when confronted with continuous masculine-directed and actual control of the mixed educational complexes (Colley, 1998) might likewise have been a result of this.

### **Children are agents in their own socialisation**

It is now hard, as a result of my research and others, to maintain the idea of young children as unassertive receivers of other individuals' actions, and that they are not dynamically analysing, clarifying, and choosing between the gender items of data they receive. They audit their own and others' conduct and they can, by their self-appraisal, construe what particular gender behaviour will be of benefit reiterating, and should be included, as a continuing component of their own and others' actions. The evaluation of the fleeting and more constant usefulness of the interventions and inquiry procedures (which usually aided child non-sexist conduct) that the staff and I used, could not be divorced from the children's constant active reorganisation of their gender opinions. As delineated within this document, the children's conduct, basically seems to favour the contention for a restricted

sort of cognitive developmental model, where: 'The child is an active participant in the process of development' (Bee, 1995, p.21). It would be erroneous to consider outside gender pressures as the sole developmental influence. A child's own emotions and awareness, concerning endeavours in which he or she was involved, should be allowed for. The child affected, and was affected by, its own environment within school and without.

### **Good teaching practices**

The nursery classroom is perhaps the initial formal schooling situation in which children gain knowledge with respect to the general societal gender environment. The teaching instructional technique exhibited there could have fortuitous results for the progress of children's gender identities and, enlightenment (Gordon et al., 2000). The different uses, by teachers, of words, and grouping of similar words, of matching materials, and selection of narratives could result in critical dissimilarities in gender designations, in various nursery groupings. Different child handling might influence not just children gender opinions, but their degrees of assurance also, perhaps the girls unfavourably and the boys favourably, or inversely.

Our gender interventions are perhaps most successful when they are tempered, used with discernment, and based on shared adjustment, instead of upon discord. Within these we must try to be cognisant of our own beliefs and gender roles, and always strive to consider these carefully. Teachers generally, I feel, must attempt to cleanse their conduct, their language and their provision and use of educational resources, from conventional gender-role stereotypes, and constantly confront gender-stereotyped attitudes, and laud gender variance if they wish to empower females, and alter their social standing. This will entail examining what alternatives are accessible to the children to locate themselves diversely from the prevailing mode of being feminine or masculine, and examining how, and if, they are assisting children to place themselves appropriately, in a more unconventional gender

pattern. As I mentioned before, within our own classroom situation I avoided, at all times, directly criticising the nursery teachers when discussing what had occurred in the classroom, for example when they expressed or displayed, perhaps unconsciously, 'sexist' demeanour. I tried instead to put forward, in a persuasive manner, at a later time, alternative non-sexist teaching approaches.

The staff and I endeavoured, in our intercessions, to encourage the children to place themselves in the position of others, in particular circumstances, and to commiserate with others. Employed in a collaborative manner, such interventions, we thought, were more inclined to aid the internalisation of moral and less stereotypical gender beliefs. We aimed to give the children greater awareness and encouraged them to consider the difficulties they would be inclined to face in their forthcoming lives (Punch, 1998).

I, myself, attempted, with the children in all sessions to partake within the nursery discourses on a close coequal bases (Wolf, 1996b). Similar to Vygotsky (1978), I saw that: 'What a child can do with assistance today she will be able to do by herself tomorrow' (Vygotsky, 1978, p.87). I endeavoured to identify my gender prejudices and their sway upon my instructional opinions. I tried to evolve instructional tactics to confront this. I tried to draw away and contemplate what I was accomplishing in a disengaged manner. I had always to be very circumspect, in the event to avoid the children becoming too reliant upon me. I desired the contribution of suggestions to originate from them, instead of from me.

The older children, as a result of our intercessions, seemed to become, to some extent, cognisant of the possibilities that different roles could be assumed by females and males. There seems to be a connection between early acquiescence, through such a collaborative teaching approach, and subsequent moral development, as far as the children are

concerned. Kochanska (1997) suggests that the degree of children's acquiescence to social training pressures foreshadows the subsequent growth of conscience.

Throughout the investigative period, we endeavoured to observe the ideal non-sexist ways outlined above, but we discovered that the fundamental underlying sexism was immense, as Burr (1998) asserts. It is easy to perceive, with the advantage of reflection, that the instructional and developmental activities practised by the staff, and perhaps unwittingly by myself, in some cases, sometimes strengthened rather than weaken gender-stereotyped associations between the girls and boys. To use Spender's (1982, p.56) concept, 'embedded sexism' was sexism within the instructing staff, also.

Nevertheless, I know that, within our nursery, the staff's and my own behaviour towards the children was often, markedly different, and was distinctly different from that employed in the children's homes. A remarkable feature of the investigations was that I, as a male, was confronting gender in a manner that, occasionally the nursery's women staff were not. I often intentionally supported the girls, whilst the nursery's female instructors were sometimes inclined, often unintentionally, to strengthen conventional gender positions.

The staff and the children in their general class gender discourse could often advance opinions that were conflicting and ambiguous, without, especially in the case of the children, being capable of accounting for them (Huston, 1983). Also, the staff's good 'liberal feminist indirect interventionist educational practices' did not, by themselves, produce larger gender equity between the girls and boys (Usher, 1996). This was shown by the post Easter 1999 Mr Henry's hut experiment, with its changes in the designation of and provision of differing materials. In this experimentation, the children of both sexes did not tend to alter with whom they played, change their underlying activities, or the ways they amused themselves, when engaged in activities. What seems to have altered was not the

way they were boys or girls, but the location in which they were boys or girls. It appears that the conventionally gendered males who monopolised construction materials activities and the computer, were smart enough to persist in accomplishing gender, in the same fashion as they had at the commencement of the teachers' interventions, but in a different location.

### **Group activities**

The staff and I thought that collective discussions, and group working, were the most efficient procedures for teaching children, as we believed that they accentuated the chances for them to strengthen and gain gregarious and scholastic proficiency. Our research has perhaps shown that children, operating together can, in some cases, generate unquestionably, mental achievements not possible for a child working on its own, and that such co-operative working helped in the growth of children's valuing, not just of other children's, but of their own views as well.

### **Story analysis discourses**

Our story reading and discussing periods, initially, would seem to have been one of the most effective means in assessing, and moderating children's gender opinions.

Story debriefing and feedback supplied us with a mechanism for gaining a comprehensive view of the way in which the children's broad narrative deliberation procedures were progressing. It provided us with a technique for appraising the association, if any, between the gender notions possessed by the children as a group, and the often conflicting or dissimilar ones possessed by a particular child. (Such notions were frequently volatile and equivocal.) The examination of the story discussion activities instigated as many queries as it solved. A number of the story evaluations needed textual examination (Tobin, 2000). Our ensuing wide-ranging activities, with the children, tried to make clear some of this

confusion. I think that much of our research has unveiled many levels of ambiguities, disparities, and comprehension.

The story analysis discourses cannot be seen separately from the other interventionist activities we employed. These latter often gave the setting and ways of comprehending and appraising the modification when, and if, it happened. Not any single research mechanism, in addition, functioned, in every circumstance or, provided every item of material we desired (Eder & Fingerson, 2002). They each contributed to the entirety of our information, and our comprehension. More significantly, they in addition presented 'good' queries to be enquired into, and animated the exploration to discover dissimilar procedures to resolve such queries.

#### **The problems encountered in mixed-gender work**

We noticed that, particularly within the pre-Christmas 1998 period, the two sexes, freed from our strong intervention actions, were, apart from a very few and the 'male neglected ones', constantly extremely unwilling to co-operate. This was partly because the methods of command and control characteristics used by the two sexes, were plainly unlike. The females were inclined to be collaborative whilst the males tended to be combative, in fashion. The girls' first objective always seemed to be that of forming concordant relations. The social procedures, to the boys, seemed to be less significant than the final completion of the assignment.

The girls, especially in the pre-Easter period, appeared to find scholastic failings, within a mixed-gender setting stressful (even after our active interventions on their behalf), and it hindered their education. Within mixed-sex groups, from our observations, the boys immediately, and then constantly, endeavoured to enact their dominance. Howe (1997), Connolly (1998), and Salmon (1998) demonstrate male aggressive dominance of particular

subjects, for example science, computing and materials, considered by the boys to be masculine in character. We observed that boys also usually possessed more self-confidence in their handling of such subjects.

### **Female self-assurance**

Our research also disclosed that girls who were members of the main female groupings, had generally inferior self-regard, and lower self-assurance, than the boys who were members of the principal male groupings. These boys, in contrast to the girls, regularly exhibited a substantially greater emphatic representation of themselves within their spoken comments (Murphy & Elwood, 1998), whilst the bulk of the girls was inclined to ascribe, orally, their own deficiencies in endowment for their scholastic failings.

The girls, originally within the investigation, exhibited less confidence than the boys, if faced with unaccustomed assignments within either single-sex or mixed environments (Gillborn & Youdell, 2000). We felt that the answer to this dilemma, in the event that that any exists, was not to deal with them in an equivalent manner as the males, as such an action might just strengthen the females' assurance problems. We tried to provide the girls with emphatic appropriate feminine role exemplars, to empower them to drop gender-stereotyped demeanour.

We endeavoured, in the presence of male ascendancy, in the pre-Easter 1999 period, to provide them with moral fortitude, instead of inviting them to display physical belligerence (Glick & Hilt, 2000). Via fashioning, essentially, a gender distortion, we attempted to re-forge the usual gender arrangements of intercourse within the nursery. Swann (1998) indicates investigations in which enhanced equity has occurred, whilst Gilbert and Gilbert (1998) assert that this is advantageous.

We found that one approach to lessening the 'everyday' difficulties of girls' self-assurance, was to provide them with access to specific computer programs, particular kinds of game or puzzle, or construction resources, prior to the boys. That is, making the girls the experts, and then, only afterwards, permitting the girls to aid the boys in utilising them. After Easter 1999, individual girls, after instruction, were asked to demonstrate to and assist other children. The now proficient girls, from our observations, however still seemed to have less influence than less skilled boys. Still, even if our interventions were sensitively fabricated, we always needed to be alert to the dangers of dealing with particular females on the grounds of gender-stereotypes. I constantly believed that it was vital to lessen girls' reliance upon the staff, and fortify their degree of assurance. We noted, if collaborative expertise was to be encouraged within either mixed-sex or boy single-sex gatherings, that there was a constant requirement for us to be near at hand overseeing the boys.

### **Single-sex groupings**

My principal objective in putting girls within single-sex girl groups, for example when using the computer, was to increase female self-satisfaction, thwart male ascendancy, permit the girls more liberty to evolve and state their own points of view, and thus become less unsure (Gaine & George, 1999).

We found that, within a single-sex setting, where their self-regard was not endangered by boys, with application and industrious effort, and with staff and my assistance, and granted time, they were generally more effective. The girls appeared more successful than the boys in the sense of using a greater diversity of social abilities and even in accomplishing the given assignment. The girls, in such an environment, had greater degrees of self-regard, and self-assurance, and with their greater scholastic and societal achievements came to be additionally self-confident (Gaine & George, 1999). This female self-confidence, in a mostly single-sex setting, is illustrated by the description given of Magdelin [pm]



commanding behaviour in the home corner after Easter 1999, and how this was threatened by the staff's desire to integrate this traditional 'girls' only area' into the greater boy and girl region entitled 'Mr Henry's hut'. We endeavoured, inasmuch as the boys were affected, in single-sex gatherings, to promote a better collaborative style, to conquer their learnt individualistic male combativeness, and improve the self-regard of the less confident members.

I feel that we may have been effective in encouraging females to display greater assurance especially in the post Easter period. We provided them with more self-respect, through appreciating their desires as much, or possibly more than those of males (B. Brown, 1998). Nevertheless, this entailed continuous emphatic partiality in the females' direction. There was a continual struggle against changing their masterful positions by males, especially in the pre-Easter 1999 period.

### **The bounds of our influence**

It was very hard to ascertain the level to which I influenced the opinions that the staff, and the children, put forward. It was also often difficult to decipher accurately the data the children gave. Likewise, there was the query as to the soundness of the facts we obtained from them. It was hard though to detach children's own notions, from those of their companionship groupings, or their parents. Still, I discerned, from my amiable relationships, outside the nursery, with many of the parents, that a number of the ideas stated mirrored the opinions of their parents; such as Christine's notions on the advantageous characteristics of a prospective bridegroom, and what family life should be like. Children's opinions could furnish us with intriguing perceptions into grownups' opinions (Cassel, Roebers & Bjorklund, 1996). I always questioned myself as to whether their parents were acting as the children stated they were (Cassel et al., 1996), and whether

the children in their attempt to satisfy the staff, companions or myself, were trying to provide an obliging view, instead of their own.

In assessing the usefulness of our interventions, in trying to moderate gender opinions, we were always faced with the problem of how to differentiate among the children's (particularly the boys) frequently short assertions of a particular opinion, and their more unchanging statement of a specific opinion. We recognised that within 'public' or 'private' settings children, like adults, could steadfastly maintain two stable but opposing opinions concurrently, one in reference to themselves, the other relating to their world view as a whole. Still, with the after-Easter classes, we did find that we were able to expand their consciousness, and alter children's opinions over a longer period, when we tried this carefully and constantly. Gender-stereotyped opinions, it seems, may not be constantly enduring.

The teachers and I used an action research approach, throughout the year. We collected, reflected, scrutinised and built on the investigational data, as it became available. I was conscious of different methods, but believed that this was not only the best technique to employ, to explore and alter our instructional circumstances, but could, as well, be used as a method for fully involving all members of the nursery staff. Nevertheless, I always recognised that my research position had its limitations. Although my presence was generally welcomed by the staff, the parents and the children, I was still, at all times, a 'classroom guest'. Thus, if I wished to actively intervene in gender matters, rather than just be an observer, I had to gain, at least the passive consent of both parents and children. Within the nursery I had to fit in, accept the customary code of staff behaviour, and use the accepted teaching language. I only exercised authority over the children, through the powers directly delegated to me by the staff, and indirectly, by the parents and the children themselves. Consequently, much of my teaching influence was founded on simple

persuasive techniques (much as Thorne (1993) discovered during her research). So, though I observed 'sexist' incidents by the staff, the parents and the children, I could not always directly intervene, as I mentioned earlier.

I always endeavoured, in the nursery, to excite the consciousness of both staff and children, through motivating them to transmit, share views, investigate, elaborate circumstances, support and dispute, appraise, pay attention to, liken and differentiate, scrutinise, and make clear their opinions (Parker, 1997). I feel that our investigations have caused the staff and myself to be more conscious, more empathic with, and understanding of, children's discernment of gender. I believe that we, at least, have come to be fairly aware of the difficulties encountered by children in sustaining oneness, regardless of the contrasting representation they get via their restricted views of cognition. This was often larger than some of the other school personnel were cognisant of. I did, however, occasionally ponder if we had taken advantage of our relations with the children, any more than the other staff had. Assuredly, our concern for their concept-procedures, as unveiled by their non-verbal and verbal conduct, was profound.

#### **A measure of our success**

The staff and I have, throughout the research period, acquired greater comprehension of the difficulties concerned, and possibly, eventually, my activities might have had significant repercussions upon them all. Maybe another gauge of the usefulness of the interventions employed (particularly after Easter 1999) was the greater level of abundance of information the children created throughout the rest of the summer term. The more capable children, from our observations (mentioned especially in chapter 5), not merely enthusiastically, and continually, offered elaborate substitute elucidations, employing a large diversity of words in extended sentences, with a variety of conditional sub-clauses for an event, but even guessed at the conceivable outcomes that might come about from an event occurring (as in

the owl story discussion, referred to in chapter 5). The children's prolonged discussions seemed, to us, never just reflections upon a specific facet of conduct, but constituted elements of their enlightening experience (Zuber-Skerritt, 1996).

It is, possibly, solely at the time they attain the nursery entry age, that children are able, via certain kinds of staff-encouraged co-operative investigations, to begin to query, and comprehend, the consequences of their gender opinions. Within the somewhat open setting of the nursery, we were sometimes given accounts by the children, in a refined and fairly rational manner, that somewhat amazed adult visitors, for example explanations of matrimonial unfaithfulness and family arguments (as seen also by Campbell & Muncer, 1998). I frequently was astonished at the way in which the children, from their restricted understanding, scrutinised utterances, words, imaginary predicaments portrayed to them, and their display of an amazing level of consciousness of the complex character of societies' customs and regulations (see also Furth & Kane, 1992).

The children displayed great finesse and inquisitive rigour in scrutinising engendered circumstances in their quest for rational justifications, prior to including them into their own gender rules. A great deal of this dissertation has tackled this, and our endeavours to moderate or alter the children's opinions, if stereotyped, and to discover a solution to the first of the 'co-operative' research queries: 'From the abundance of information that we, the nursery staff and myself, acquired, what sorts of child viewpoints might we conceivably formulate?' We had to discover, in such an endeavour, more refined and focused inquiry techniques. Our investigations were, partially, concerned with the creation, appraisal, utilisation, and constant betterment of these. This was suggested by the second 'co-operative' research query: 'What were the most suitable methods that we might employ in our investigations of gender perspectives?' We were, as I stated previously, very general in our utilisation of research procedures. We were constantly endeavouring to obtain fresh

research material, and fresh approaches to observing, focusing, contrasting and questioning particular pieces of data, for increasingly accurate and orderly assembles of inferences, for rigorous means of hypothesising, for descriptions that were appropriate to other appropriate situations, as we wished to enhance equitable, and produce favourable, situations for every child (Hart, 1998).

I constantly and painstakingly observed how language was employed in our pupil/pupil, and staff/pupil exchanges, together with my own researcher/pupil and researcher/staff interplay, and was always alert for interesting data. I tried to discern if my findings were in accordance with the conclusions in the literature and more critically, if such descriptions were agreeable to the producers and subjects of a great deal of my investigations, i.e. the nursery staff (Holliday, 2002). The reactions of these showed how successful we were, in this respect, while exposing the effectiveness and frailties of a particular kind of inquiry method, i.e. the use of non-conventional narratives, in its attempts to achieve fresh understandings, conceptual insights and change views.

I tried to combine and connect up informational items, and attempted to show the character of the connections and their combined gender influence upon children's involvement. My intention has been that this dissertation represents this accumulative procedure in a clear manner, and puts forward intriguing suggestions and novel ways of scrutinising research material. I hope it can expand other researchers' investigations, or in some measure change them, by my attempting to blend their research with mine. Nevertheless, I could never presuppose that we had discovered the perfect investigative approaches. My general analysis and conjecturing, were always solidly founded on the research material (Pollard, 1997). I was fully conscious of the source readings (Hart, 1998), but constrained my conjecturing to that unveiled through the children's perceptions and my understanding of

their actions. I endeavoured to fix the emphasis less upon testing out conventional explanations than upon uncovering fresh narrations (Tierney & Dilley, 2002).

It would be ingenuous to suppose that the intercessions we tried, might have changed the fundamental societal and cultural order, by themselves. Still, we, the staff and myself, discovered in the four classes, in the restrictions exacted through the boys' and girls' wish to harmonise with conventionally approved gender behaviour (Trautner & Eckes, 2000), especially in the pre-Easter 1999 period, that the bulk of the children were nevertheless dynamically, continually, and sometimes, apprehensively, deliberating on, and trying to ascertain, as individuals, and as an assembly, the appropriate forms of gender functioning. The staff and the children, in the kind of co-operative investigations tried, were my companions, my co-workers, my teachers, my faultfinders, my assistant explorers (Heron & Reason, 2001), and, when some of the children left for 'rising 5' classes, I experienced an emphatic affective deprivation.

### **Methodology**

The methodology, as employed within our nursery investigation, was different in that it did not just include an important debate on the conduct of those children who were at the companionship edges, compared to those at the focus of peer gatherings, but it was more additionally child-focused, in a number ways, than some other investigations. The staff's and children's contributions were immense. The staff dynamically directed, scrutinised and led a great deal of the investigating. This is not to say that essential 'focal' and 'background' theories (Phillips & Pugh, 1994, pp. 57-58), were changed as a consequence of the investigations, but rather that children's configuration of insights could at this time be seen possibly from other angles. It might be intriguing to discover, in later research, whether any of our, possibly original, conclusions are proved, and likewise whether the opinions stated by children in subsequent periods are divergent from those in our research,

or may be entirely akin, and mirror the changeable character of feminine and masculine positions in the community (McGurk & Soriano, 1998). Though our research was confined, in its extent, and was concerned mainly with just four nursery classes, in a restricted age range, within one specific educational establishment, and referred to only certain features of children's lives, I feel, nevertheless, that a number of our conclusions have a broader importance in that they might have deepened comprehension within the gender field.

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**Appendix**

**List of children's books used in the action research**

**Traditional**

Browne, Anthony (1979). Bear Hunt, Hamish Hamilton Ltd.

Gretz, Susanna, & Sage, Alison (1987). Teddybears take the train, Scholastic Children's Books.

Hargreaves, Roger (1971). Mr Snow, Fabbi & Partners Ltd.

Mark, Jan (1988). Presents from Gran, J. Sainsbury plc.

Sutton, Eve (1973). My cat likes to hide in boxes, Hamish Hamilton Children's Books.

**Non-traditional**

Browne, Anthony (1986). Piggybook, Julia MacRae Books, Franklin Watts.

Cole, Babette (1986). Princess Smartypants, Hamish Hamilton, Children's Books.

Cole, Babette (1987). Prince Cinders, Heinemann, London.

Dickinson, Mary (1980). Alex's Bed, Andre Deutsch Limited, London.

Munsch, R. and Marchenko, M. (1980). The Paper Bag Princess, Toronto: Annick Press Ltd.