ENCYCLOPEDIA on Early Childhood Development

The Role of Schools in the Early Socialization of Gender Differences

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Introduction

The question of how gender differences across domains (e.g., traits, behaviours, abilities) arise is a central topic of investigation in psychology. Experts agree that nature (i.e., biology) and nurture (i.e., environment) act together in reciprocally causal, interactive ways to produce gender differences.[1] The experiences afforded to girls and boys within schools are known to affect gender differentiation both directly, by providing differential skill practice and reinforcement,[2] and indirectly, by providing input that leads children to actively socialize themselves along gender-differentiated pathways.[3]

Subject

Schools are major contexts for gender socialization, due to both the large amount of time that school-aged children spend in these settings and the variety of important socialization agents present in the context (e.g., teachers, peers, media/technology).[4] For nearly all psychological

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traits on which young boys and girls differ (e.g., language ability, play preferences), the distribution of the two groups' performance or ability in these areas is overlapping. Schools, then, have the potential to magnify or diminish gender differences by providing environments that promote within-gender similarity and between-gender differences, or the inverse (within-gender variability and between group similarity).

Problems

Schools affect gender differentiation via the influence of teachers, peers, and policies. Teachers and peers directly influence gender differentiation by providing boys and girls with different learning opportunities and feedback. Teachers and peers are also sources of learning about gender. Teachers present curricular materials that contain gender stereotypic behaviour, and peers exhibit gender stereotypic attitudes and behaviour. Children internalize gender stereotypes and prejudices, which in turn guide their own preferences and behaviours.[1]

Research Context

Psychologists have documented the ways in which schooling contributes to gender differences via (a) interviews with school staff and students, (b) naturalistic observations of teachers and students, and (c) experimental studies of classroom conditions. Observational studies allow researchers to examine gender differences, attitudes, and behaviours across a range of school types. Experimental studies allow for the identification of school-related causes of gender differences.

Key Research Questions and Recent Research Results

How do teachers contribute to gender differences?

Many educators endorse cultural gender stereotypes (e.g., math is easier for boys than girls) and prejudices (show preferences for same-gender individuals).[5] These biases can be explicit (e.g., consciously endorsed) or implicit (unconsciously held), and they influence teachers' classroom behaviours.

Teachers' gender stereotypes and prejudices shape their classroom behaviour in at least three ways. First, teachers often model gender stereotypic behaviour. Female teachers, for example, often exhibit "math phobic" behaviours.[6] Second, teachers often exhibit differential expectations for males and females (e.g., creating "dress-up" and "construction" centers and accepting—even

facilitating—gender-differentiated use).[7] Third, teachers facilitate children's gender biases by marking gender as important by using it to label and organize students.[8] In one study, teachers were asked to use gender to label children and to organize classroom activities by, for example, greeting children with "Good morning, boys and girls" and asking children to line up by gender. Other teachers ignored students' gender. Young children whose teachers labeled and used gender showed higher levels of gender stereotyping than their peers.[9] Preschool teachers' labeling and use of gender increases their pupils' gender stereotyping and avoidance of cross-gender playmates.[10]

How do peers contribute to gender differences?

Like teachers, peers contribute to the socialization of gender differences via multiple pathways. Upon entering school, children encounter large numbers of peers, many of whom model traditional gender behaviour, producing and reinforcing the content of gender stereotypes.

In addition, schools are characterized by gender segregation. When many peers are available, children tend to select same-sex playmates.[11] Children's gender segregation, in turn, affects their play experiences, leading them to spend more time in stereotypic play.[12] Furthermore, gender segregation predicts children's future conformity to gender stereotypes. After observing preschoolers for six months, researchers found that, as the amount of time that children played with same-sex peers increased, children's own behaviour became more gender stereotypic.[12]

Peers also contribute to gender differentiation by teaching their classmates stereotypes (e.g., "Short hair is for boys not girls") and punishing them for failing to conform to stereotypes via verbal harassment and physical aggression.[7] Importantly, intervention programs can teach young children to recognize and challenge their peers' sexist remarks (e.g., "You can't say girls can't play!").[13] In later grades, peers' gender stereotypes about abilities in various subjects influence students ' academic self-concept and performance. For example, high school girls in peer groups that believe that math is a "male domain" have a lower math self-concept than girls in a more egalitarian peer group.[14]

How do school policies contribute to gender differences?

Beyond individual behaviours and practices in the classroom, official school policies shape gender expression and behaviour as well. In the United States, for example, education policy makers at both the federal and state levels have made official statements recognizing the

existence of only “two genders” and restricting schools in discussing, promoting, or acknowledging gender identities that do not fit within this paradigm.[15,16] These policies have raised concerns about the wellbeing and mental health for gender non-conforming youth, especially children and teens who identify as transgender.[17]

Research Gaps

Many of the socialization processes that lead to gender differentiated outcomes, including gender segregation, are not well understood. In addition, more work is needed to identify effective means to prevent and minimize gender biased attitudes and behaviour. Future research is also needed to document the experiences of children who do not conform to traditional gender roles (e.g., children with same-sex parents or who identify as transgender). Especially considering the increase in policies and proclamations mandating a binary approach to gender identity in the U.S., Canada, and other countries, researchers should continue to measure the effects on not only gender stereotyping in youth broadly but also the specific well-being of children in school whose behaviour, identity, and appearance do not conform with stereotypes.[17]

Conclusions

Schools are important contexts for the socialization of young children’s gender attitudes and behaviour. Teachers and classmates shape children’s gender attitudes and, in turn, gender differences in cognition and behaviour. Unfortunately, teachers receive relatively little training in recognizing and combating gender stereotypes and prejudices—their own and others—and, as a consequence, teachers often model, expect, reinforce, and lay the foundation for gender differentiation among their pupils. Thus, most schools create and maintain—rather than counteract—traditional gender stereotypes, biases, and differences.[14] However, educators who adopt a commitment to gender egalitarianism and thus promote cross-gender interaction, expose pupils to counter-stereotypic models, and discuss and teach challenges to gender stereotyping and harassment optimize their pupils’ developmental outcomes.

Implications for Parent, Services, and Policy

Educators and policymakers should be aware of the impact that early gender-stereotyped pathways have on the shaping of students’ attitudes towards specific subjects, for example, STEM.[18] Teachers need training to recognize their own explicit and implicit biases and how these biases affect their classroom behaviours. Additionally, teachers should receive explicit training in

confronting children's biases, so that they reduce peer policing of gender normativity.[19] For example, teacher-directed interventions that give children opportunities to play with other-gender peers have been shown to improve the quality of cross-gender friendships.[20] Parents should seek educational settings for their students that are gender integrated and that make use of curricula that directly teach about, and challenge, gender bias and inequality.[21]

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