

The Gender Agenda- Boys and Literacy in the Early Years

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How is boys' engagement in mark making and emergent writing influenced by the learning context and by male adult role models?

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BA Childhood Practice

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Programme Learning Outcomes Statement

This report focuses upon the following Programme Learning Outcomes:

2.1 Value and demonstrate a commitment to inclusion, diversity, social justice, anti-discrimination, and protecting and caring for children.

3.1 Have a broad and balanced knowledge and understanding of children and childhoods which underpins their practice and is used to inform their leadership of others.

3.9 Have the knowledge and understanding needed to support evidence informed practice.

4.3 Coordinate and lead the provision of balanced and flexible programmes that support play and learning opportunities and encourage children to be healthy, active and achieving.

1.0 Introduction

I have been in post as a Senior Early Years Worker in a Local Authority Nursery School for 3 years. During term time the establishment caters for a maximum of 60 children, aged 3 to 5 years, in each 2.5 hour morning or afternoon session. Staff comprise: Headteacher, Senior Early Years Worker, 3 full time Early Years Workers, 3 part-time Early Years Workers, part-time Classroom Assistant, part-time Clerical Assistant and part-time Janitor/Cleaner.

2.0 Rationale

The Local Authority currently undertakes a screening programme (Appendix 2) for all pre-school and Primary 1 children to highlight those children at risk of experiencing early literacy difficulties.

Since the programme began three years ago, within our establishment, despite their gross motor skills being markedly better developed than girls, boys have consistently scored lower across assessment indicators relating to writing, drawing and fine motor skills development.

Historically, observations, assessment and audits of provision within the establishment have highlighted that writing and mark making materials are used less frequently, for shorter periods and with less dexterity by boys than by girls, but have provided few clear answers as to why this is the case. This evidence indicates a clear and pressing need to take action to provide a literacy learning environment which is truly inclusive and promotes best outcomes for all children.

This report discusses an action research project which aims to research and understand a range of factors which may impact upon the development of emergent writing skills in boys in the early years.

3.0 Review of the Literature

3.1 Developing a contextual understanding of ‘literacy’ and ‘gender’

Initially, the literature search aimed to derive an understanding of the terms ‘literacy’ and ‘gender’ appropriate within the context of this project, with a view to providing a foundation from which to investigate a range of factors influencing boys’ engagement in mark making and emergent writing opportunities.

3.2 The importance of a literate society

“Literacy is the flexible and sustainable mastery of a repertoire of practices with the texts of traditional and new communications technologies via spoken language, print, and multimedia.”

Luke, Freebody & Land (2000:20)

The capacity to comprehend and construct text has long been regarded as an indicator of educational ability and politically and culturally is seen as essential for success within an increasingly information driven society.

Findings from a range of international studies (Scottish Government Attainment and Leaver Destinations (2010), Northern Ireland Assembly, Research and Library Service (2001), Department of Children, Schools and Families (2009), Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training, Australia (2002)) attest that boys’ attainment in early literacy is poorer than that of girls and that this gap widens as children progress through the education system. Reasons for such differences are multiple and complex and as Younger et al (1999) identify, must be evaluated against corresponding variables of race, culture and socio-economic status, as well as gender.

3.3 Nature versus nurture: Biological and Social Constructivist Theories of Gender

The literature review investigated theory underpinning development of gender identity and highlighted that perspectives of ‘gender’ involve a range of factors.

Gender may be analysed within a framework of biological developmental, evolutionary psychology and neuroscientific theories (Biddulph (1998), Kindlon & Thompson (1999),

Gurian (2002)). Such theories suggest gender behaviours are biologically driven, largely innate, and have significant impact upon social communication and preferences for particular learning contexts and experiences.

Many researchers supporting this view of gender suggest that the structure of the brain is highly significant in understanding how boys and girls learn and develop differently. Moir and Jessel (1998) and Biddulph (1997) state that differences in language and communication skills between males and females may be attributed to gendered variations in neural connection between the left and right hemispheres of the brain. The development of language and communication skills and their relationship to the ability to use first and second order symbols in play and representation has strong correlation with the development of early writing skills.

However, Head (1999) and Gilbert and Gilbert (1998) suggest brain development involves a more complex interrelationship, where all cognitive function involves connected sets of neurons across the whole brain, as opposed to specific hemispheres for particular functions. The practising of behaviours further impacts upon how the structure of the brain develops. Similarly, Fausto-Sterling (1992) suggests that stereotypical gendered play experiences may result in learned ability and subsequently play a significant role in the acquisition of specific capacities in the left and right hemisphere.

This view supports social constructivist theories of gender identity development which propose that much of young children's understanding of their gender develops as a result of societal and environmental reinforcement of gender role behaviours and the imitation of same sex role models (Butler (1990); MacInnes (1998); Shelton et al (2006)).

Maynard (2002) states that the choices parents make for their children- for example, names, clothing, toys and hobbies- profoundly influence children's understandings of their gender role within their culture and society. Maynard (2002) further suggests that adults interpret and respond to children's behaviours in different ways according to the child's gender. These complex and subtle interactions deeply influence how children relate to others, speak and think, thus affecting cultural attitudes to literacy and in turn, how boys and girls literacy skills develop. Baxter (2001) suggests that at the point of starting school, children have already

learned how to communicate, read and write in different ways, according to whether they are male or female.

Such theories prompt a need to examine the roles and expectations of adults in facilitating and supporting learning, whether parent or practitioner.

3.4 Acquisition of language and communication skills

“There are definitely more boys than girls with a variety of language difficulties... language impairment is higher among boys than among girls, a ratio anywhere from 2:1 to 3:1. The incidence of autism is also higher, four times more common in boys than girls.” <http://www.hanen.org/>

Johnson (2008) discusses the role of parents in promoting early language, communication and literacy and suggests the impact of social and cultural expectations influences different early parenting behaviours which serve to promote the development of these skills in girls more than boys. Warrington et al (2006), Booth (2002) and Prendiville and Toye (2007)) highlight the benefits of drama activities in improving such skills in boys, particularly in the aspects of speaking and listening. Alloway et al (2002) support this view and further highlight the significance of motivation in effective learning, suggesting that boys are more eager to engage in literacy experiences which offer opportunities for ‘performance’.

Research also highlights that role play is the most commonly adopted activity of social engagement for young children (Corsaro (1997)) and provides opportunities to practice and improve linguistic capabilities (Andreson (2005); Bergen (2002)).

3.5 The role of learning contexts and experiences in promoting motivation and engagement

Alloway et al (2002) discuss gender preferences in learning contexts, highlighting a tendency for boys to lack motivation to engage in conventional literacy activities and suggesting an inclination towards literacy opportunities within real life contexts and experiences. This sentiment is echoed by O’Brien and Neal (2007) who found boys engagement increased when they had opportunities to write about subjects of particular relevance to them, or about which they possessed ‘expert’ knowledge or opinion. Borradaile (2006), Bilton (2002) and Education Scotland (2011) highlight the potential of outdoor learning contexts to increase

motivation, provide real life contexts for learning and improve physical and cognitive development.

3.6 Impact of adult role models

Booth (2002) and Alloway et al (2002) investigate the concept of ‘maleness’ and highlight the significance of male adult role models for boys in developing self-identity. The literature review progressed to examine the issue of feminisation of the early years and education workforce, highlighting that male practitioners and teachers have historically been underrepresented within the early years and Primary sectors. Scottish Government statistics (2008) provide compelling evidence of this, with males comprising 2.7% and 7.9% of the total workforce respectively.

3.7 Key points

The literature review highlights the following key points:

- Literacy is of importance within societal, economic and political contexts. Culturally, within the UK, being literate implies being educated.
- A wide range of statistical evidence, both nationally and internationally provides validity to the argument that boys underachieve in areas of literacy.
- The nature/ nurture debate is significant in considering a definition of gender and is underpinned by theories of biological development and social constructivism. Research into infant brain development provides evidence to support both sides of this debate.
- Early language development is crucial to the development of literacy skills and early parenting behaviours may promote these skills more in girls than in boys. Statistics indicate significantly higher numbers of boys experience language and communication difficulties.
- Learning environment, context and experience are of particular importance in promoting motivation and engagement. Evidence suggests that outdoor environments, role play contexts and activities which are meaningful and relate to real experiences may be of particular benefit in promoting boys involvement. Research sub questions 1, 2 and 3 examine this point further.
- Development of gender identity in young children occurs in part due to the imitation of same sex adult role models. The current early years workforce is predominantly female with males being significantly underrepresented. Research sub question 4 examines this point further.

4.0 Research question and subsidiary questions

On-going observation and assessment within the nursery had highlighted that boys' progress in mark making and emergent writing had been hampered not by their physical skills but by reluctance to represent their thoughts and ideas through this media. Research undertaken through the literature review prompted an exploration of how different learning contexts and experiences might improve boys' motivation and engagement in opportunities for writing.

The literature review also stressed the links between language development, cognitive development and representation through drawing and writing and I was keen to investigate whether stories and drama could be used effectively to support development of these skills in boys.

I was also intrigued by research regarding the development of gender identity in children and the impact of feminisation of the workforce. As the nursery was due to have a block visit from a male teacher within the authority early years team, I thought this might provide an opportunity to investigate these aspects further through examining the impact of male role models upon boys' learning.

The literature review therefore underpins the Research Proposal (Appendix 1) and the following research questions:

Main question-

How is boys' engagement in mark making and emergent writing influenced by the learning context and by male adult role models?

Sub questions-

1. What aspects of boys' engagement in mark making and emergent writing are observable in the setting?
2. What learning contexts promote observable engagement of boys in mark making and emergent writing?
3. What activities promote observable engagement of boys in mark making and emergent writing?
4. What is the impact of male adult role models in promoting boys engagement in mark making and emergent writing?

5.0 Investigative Design

5.1 Ethics

The research project meets the requirements of University of Dundee Research Ethics Code of Practice. Further information relating to ethical considerations of recruitment and consent, confidentiality and data protection, debriefing and dissemination is provided at Appendix 1 (Research Proposal and Ethics Form).

5.2 Approach

The project was undertaken within a small scale, short term programme of action research, intended to examine factors influencing boys' engagement in opportunities for mark making and emergent writing.

The selection of an action research approach reflected the need to undertake inquiry which sought the participation of children, parents and staff, in order to enhance understanding and improve practice within the setting.

5.3 Methodology and data gathering techniques

Research design assumed a mixed methodology and aimed to provide a balance between the collection of qualitative data which enabled participants to share personal experiences and opinions and quantitative data which provided objective, measurable and independent results.

The gathering of qualitative data was undertaken predominantly through a case study, involving observation and evaluation of planned learning experiences for a small group of children. This approach accords with Hatch's view (1995:125) that,

“The best contexts for research that takes seriously the study of childhood as a social construct are settings in which naturally occurring social behaviour is observed in natural surroundings.”

Quantitative data was gathered by means of audits of engagement within the writing area; parental questionnaires; staff questionnaires and extrapolation of statistical information in liaison with the Speech and Language Therapist.

In providing an appropriate balance of both types of data, it was considered that validity and reliability of evidence would be improved. Mukherji and Albon (2010) state that the use of multiple research methods enables triangulation of research data, through utilising advantages of each method to compensate for disadvantages of another.

Though it was a significant concern that the use of a number of techniques and participation of many groups would present challenge in analysing data, I considered such an approach necessary in order to increase validity through revealing shared viewpoints (Kasunic (2005)).

To attempt to minimise these potential difficulties, I used questionnaire design which incorporated fixed choice compliance surveys using a Likert scale. I hoped this would be effective both in enabling collection of quantitative data from a range of stakeholder groups within a short time frame and in facilitating ease of collation of responses.

It was important to me, both as a researcher and as a practitioner, that the project would be of some value to the children involved and selection of children for the case study therefore aimed to support a number of children potentially at risk of experiencing early literacy difficulties. This was undertaken in consultation with the staff team and selection criteria utilised a range of tracking and assessment information. Mukherji and Albon (2010: 39) refer to this approach as an issue of 'beneficence' in research ethics and principles.

The case study group was mixed gender and involved 10 children from each session. A smaller group size would have been preferable, however as the majority of case study work was to be completed outdoors, this group size was necessary in order to maintain appropriate adult: child ratios within the building. Narrative observation of the case study group was selected as an appropriate data gathering technique to enable comparative information to be gathered in order to provide credibility in evaluating the impact of the project.

5.4 Derivation of answers to sub-questions

Answers to sub questions 1 and 4 were broadly derived through the collection of data from audits of engagement. These involved time sampling observations of the writing area over a 3 week period and were used to analyse the impact of adult presence upon involvement levels and type of activity observed.

Answers to sub questions 2 and 3 were mainly derived through the case study. Associated planning, observations and evaluations were used to analyse the impact of an outdoors learning context on boys' involvement levels and the effect of a selected text and process drama techniques upon boys' engagement with structured, meaningful writing tasks.

Further data collection for sub question 1 involved a parental questionnaire designed to collect information regarding parents understanding of speech and language development. This was distributed to a randomly selected sample of parents of 20 children. Discussion with the Speech and Language Therapist regarding relevant statistical information was also utilised to gather data relating to sub question 1. Finally, on-going review of children's drawings was undertaken to enable consistency in assessment throughout the case study.

Further data collection for sub question 2 was undertaken through a staff questionnaire designed to gather information regarding perceptions of the impact of gender upon learning and literacy skills development. A total of 5 staff questionnaires were distributed, representing all practitioners currently in permanent employment within the setting.

Further data collection for sub question 3 involved a parental questionnaire designed to gather data relating to adult role models in the home and highlight any correlation between positive male role models and boys' engagement in writing experiences. This was distributed to a randomly selected sample of parents of 20 boys. In addition, I planned to interview a small sample of male employees to ascertain opinions and attitudes and consultation with children within case study groups was planned to collect data relating to thoughts and views about writing.

6.0 Implementation

6.1 The case study

The case study group visited local forest space over a 3 week period and throughout this period the text “Stick Man” (Donaldson 2008) was used as a stimulus for planned process drama and to support structured writing activities.



Introducing the group to the selected text



Developing fine motor skills through planned activities

The text was selected as themes explored linked well to learning within a natural, outdoors environment and I considered the use of a male central character to be crucial in helping boys identify personally with the story and therefore promote their engagement in the planned drama and structured writing activities. It was hoped that high quality illustrations and use of rhyming text would promote increased cognitive understanding through providing additional support to visual and auditory learners and that this would support confidence in recall and improve engagement in the associated structured writing tasks.

A range of process drama techniques such as role play, freeze frame and hot seating were planned to encourage language and communication skills and promote textual understanding. These activities were also utilised to provide meaningful contexts for structured writing tasks.



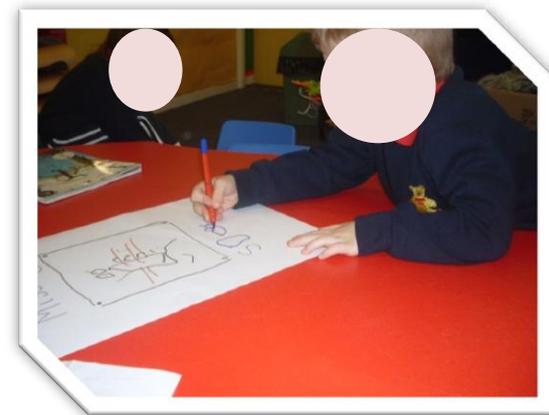
Supporting textual understanding through process drama techniques



Providing 'real life' contexts to initiate structured writing



Promoting motivation and engagement



Meaningful structured writing tasks

Recording was undertaken through narrative observation. Children were involved through mind-mapping at planning stage and recording and evaluating through a scrapbook.

(Refer to Appendix 3)

6.2 Audits of engagement

During the same period, I undertook audits of the writing area through time sampling observations to investigate and analyse the impact of adult presence upon children's involvement levels and their use of the area and resources. Leuven's involvement scale was utilised to provide consistency in assessing children's engagement and categories of mark

making, drawing only, drawing and writing and writing only were used to accurately define writing behaviours observed.

(Refer to Appendix 4)

6.3 Additional data gathering

Parental questionnaire 1 (Appendix 5) was issued to parents who attended a Literacy Workshop within the nursery. This facilitated a 100% return rate, however difficulty was encountered as parents chose to complete the questionnaire at the time rather than at home and this led to parents consulting each other as to the most 'appropriate' response, resulting in some corruption of data.

Consequently, parental questionnaire 2 (Appendix 6) was issued to parents as they collected children at the end of the session. This resulted in a less favourable return rate of approximately 45%, however reliability of data gathered was much improved.

Staff questionnaires (Appendix 7) were issued to all staff present at a weekly planning meeting. Staff were informed they could complete at a time of their choosing, however all staff elected to complete individually and return at that time.

Unfortunately, planned interviews with male employees were not undertaken as due to the very small number of males employed in early years and primary settings within the local authority, I could not guarantee that participant anonymity could be protected.

7.0 Findings

7.1 Deriving answers to sub-questions 1 and 4

Answers to these questions were primarily derived from the audits of engagement in opportunities for mark making and emergent writing. Audit 1 was undertaken when no adult was present in the writing area, Audit 2 with an adult female present and Audit 3 with an adult male present.

The audits were an effective data gathering tool as audit design clearly indicated involvement levels and demonstrated the range of behaviours observed at the writing area over a period of time.

Figure 1 provides a comparison of boys' engagement in various activities across all three audits. This demonstrates that most mark making, drawing and writing activity was observed when an adult male was present.



Figure 1- Boys' Observed Activities

In comparison, Figure 2 shows that adult presence has less influence on girls' choice of activities at the writing area.

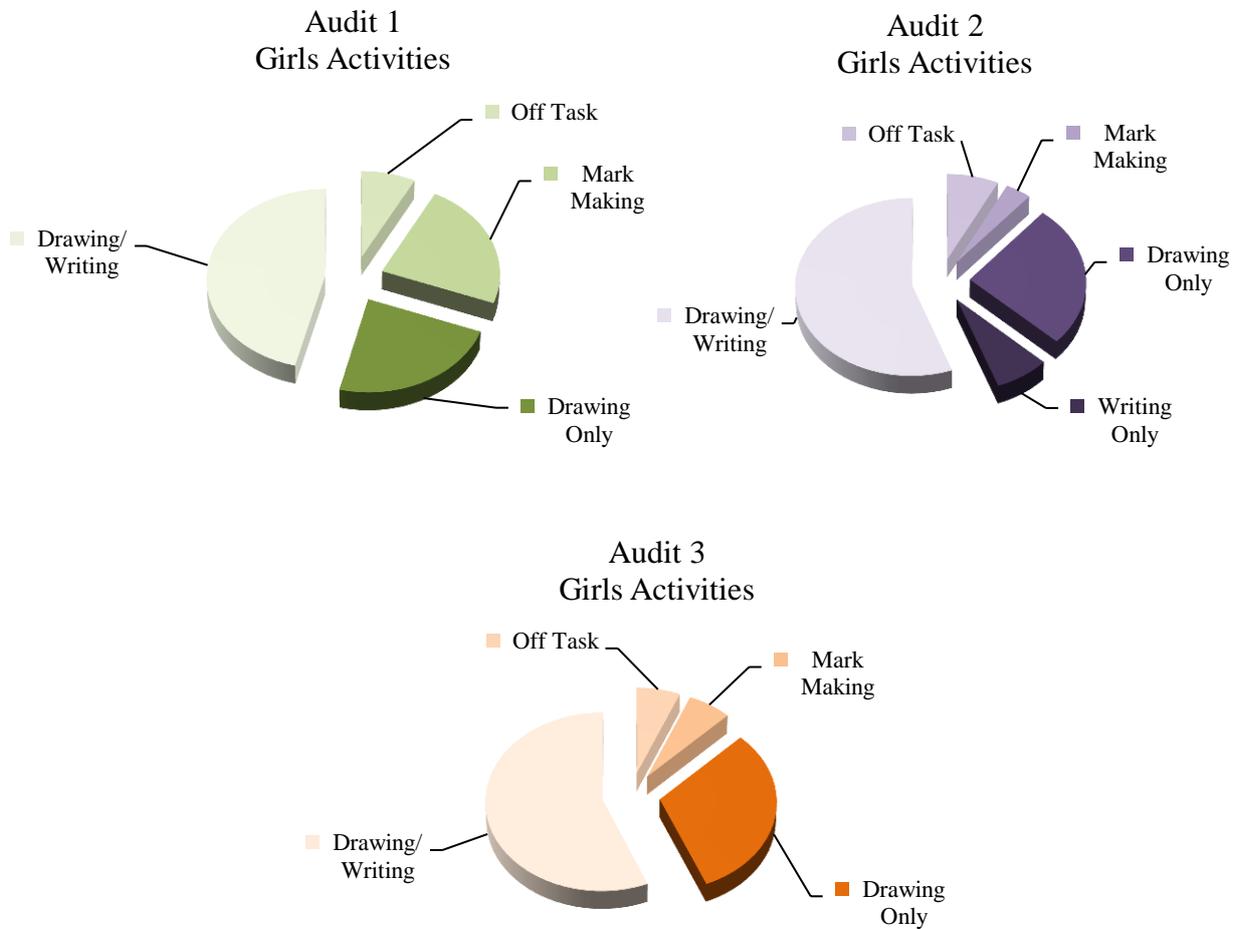
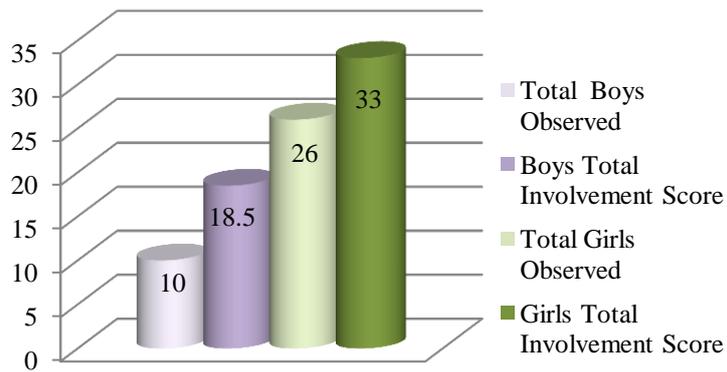
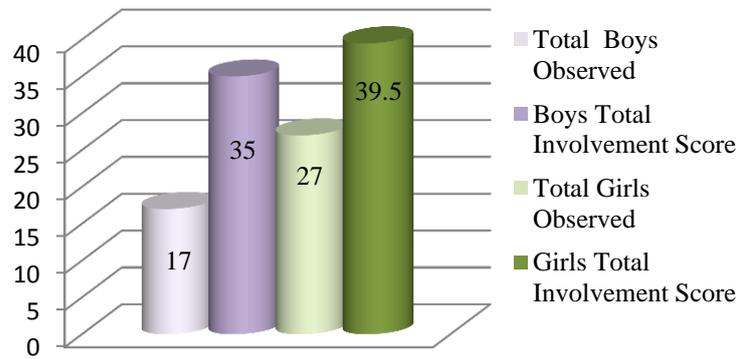


Figure 2- Girls' Observed Activities

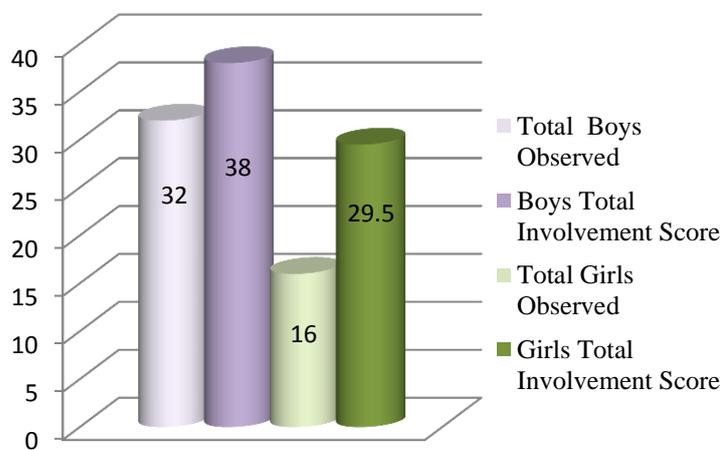
Figure 3 provides a comparison of access of resources and involvement levels across the three audits.



Audit 1 - No Adult Present



Audit 2- Adult female present



Audit 3- Adult male present

Figure 3- Access of Resources Summary

Figure 3 demonstrates that when an adult male was present the number of boys observed increased significantly- almost double that observed when an adult female was present and more than three times when no adult present. However, it is notable that the number of girls observed decreased significantly from both Audits 1 and 2.

Additionally, boys mean involvement score reduced to its lowest level (1.19) when an adult male was present and was highest when an adult female was present (2.06).

Information gathered from the staff questionnaire, highlighted in Figure 4, supported the findings of Audit 2, with an average of staff responses suggesting that at the writing area boys were most likely to be involved in construction type activities and girls in drawing activities.

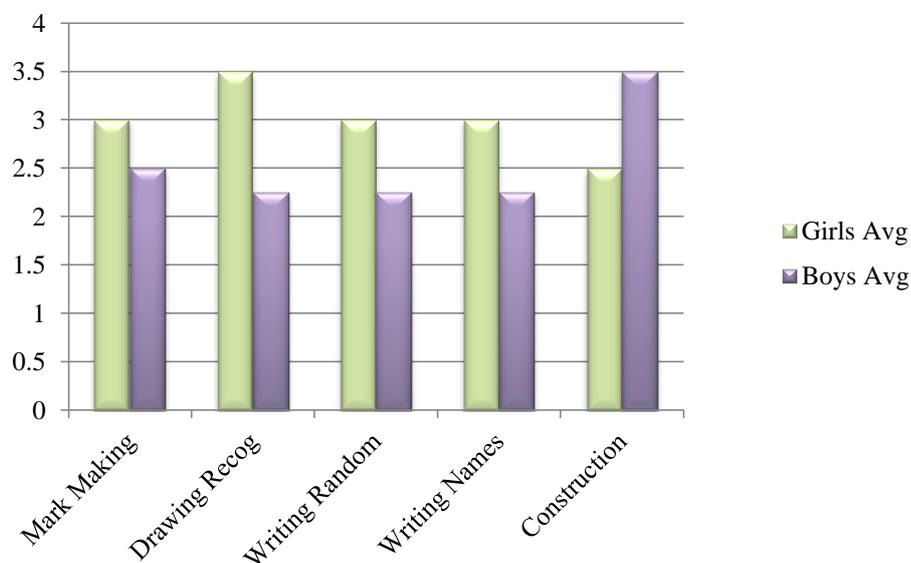


Figure 4- Staff Questionnaire Responses-Writing Area

Findings from parental questionnaire 2

Responses gathered from parental questionnaire 2 demonstrated that most parents felt that their mother had been the person who had given them most help in learning to read and write. Boys whose fathers were involved in daily care tasks were more likely to be able to draw a recognisable figure than where only the mother was involved.

Boys whose fathers read books or stories to them were more likely to be able to draw a recognisable figure than those where only the mother read to them.

There was little measurable difference within the sample between the drawing and writing skills of boys whose fathers played games involving letters and numbers and those who did not.

Findings from statistical information

Statistical information was sought from the Speech and Language Therapist and this indicated that within the local health authority, currently four times as many boys as girls are referred to the Speech and Language Department for all types of difficulty (articulation, social communication, expressive language).

I had hoped that the data collected through parental questionnaire 1 would support these statistics, however for reasons previously discussed some corruption of data occurred and the majority of parental responses indicated that both speech sounds development and language development were in advance of developmental norms, regardless of whether the child was male or female. All parental responses therefore demonstrated a lack of awareness of the appropriate stage of speech and language development for their child's age.

7.2 Deriving answers to sub-questions 2 and 3

Answers to these questions were primarily derived from the case study. Observations suggested that the use of a natural outdoors environment was effective in promoting high involvement levels for all children and listening skills, focus and attention were improved.

The male central character within the selected text was extremely effective in engaging boys with the story and associated drama and writing tasks. Responsiveness to children's ideas and making a 'Stick Man' was an essential component in helping boys to engage through encouraging a personal connection to the story. This was evidenced by boys' recall of the story being better than that of girls after a 2 month period.

The use of process drama activities supported cognitive understanding and was effective in promoting deeper engagement with the characters and events in the text for all children.

Generally, girls engaged better than boys in drama activities which involved language and communication skills, with boys engaging better than girls in activities which involved physical movement and spatial awareness.

Boys' involvement levels in associated structured writing tasks were observed to be significantly higher than that of girls. Review of boys' work undertaken through structured writing tasks within the project demonstrated improvement in comparison with baseline examples of work. For some boys there was considerable improvement. However, reviews of boys' work undertaken through unrelated structured writing tasks throughout the same period demonstrated little or no improvement in comparison with baseline examples of work.

Findings from staff questionnaire

All staff were in agreement that gender influences motivation, attention and concentration in learning experiences and that gender also affects language and communication skills and emotional and social skills. In all of these areas, staff indicated that girls generally outperform boys.

All staff were in agreement that gender influences children's choice of activities and Figures 5 and 6 illustrate staff views. However not all felt that their planning or choice of resources reflected gendered preferences.

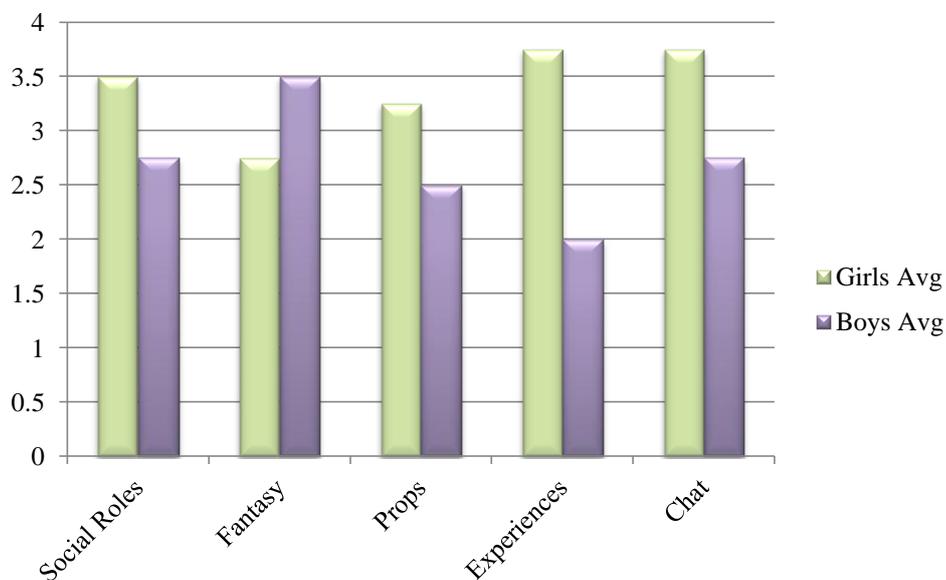


Figure 5- Staff Questionnaire Responses-Role Play

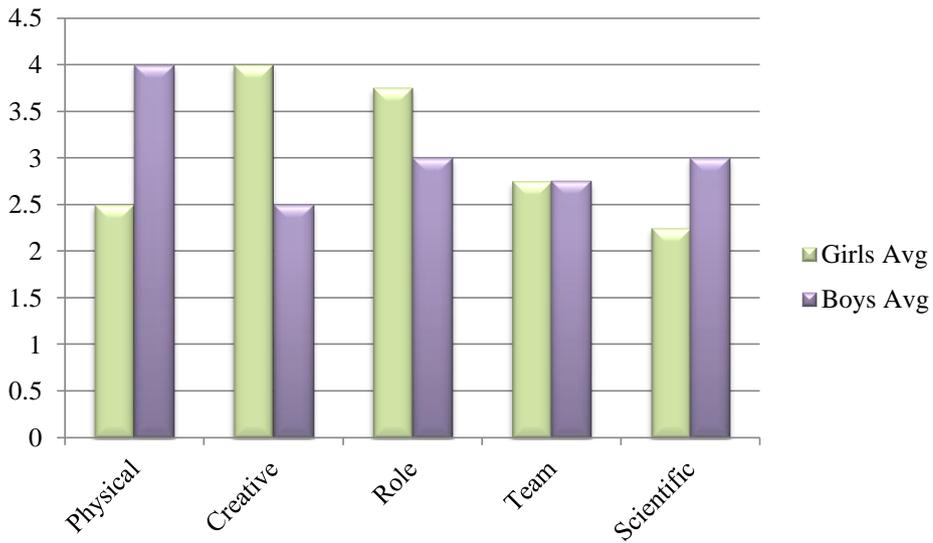


Figure 6- Staff Questionnaire Responses-Outdoor Play

Staff questionnaires highlighted a trend towards supporting social constructivist theories of gender identity development, as illustrated in Figure 7.

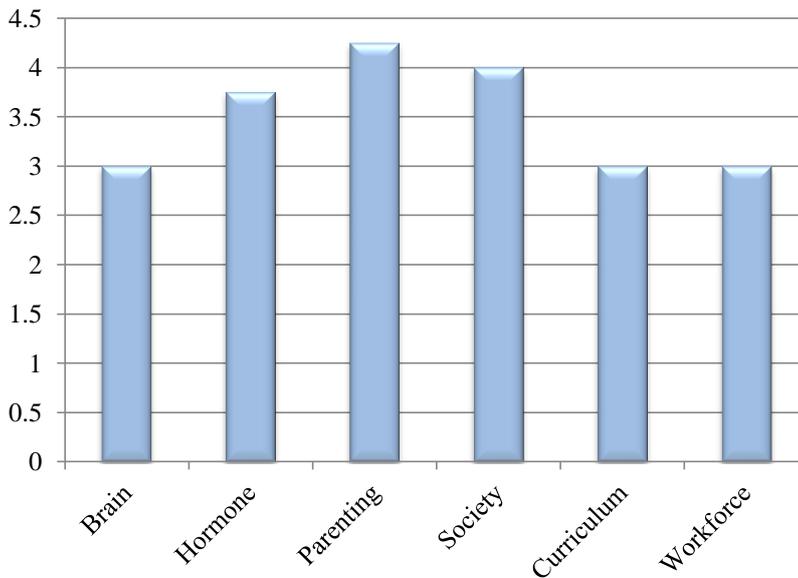


Figure 7- Staff Questionnaire Responses

7.3 Key Points

- Adult male role models in nursery can increase boys' use of resources but are not necessarily key to improving involvement levels.
- The strongest indicator of boys' writing skills development was evident where the father was regularly involved in daily care routines and reading stories.
- Engagement and motivation are key and the use of an outdoor environment can enhance these factors.
- Boys' motivation and engagement were improved where writing tasks were meaningful to them and they felt these served an important purpose.

8.0 Discussion

8.1 Influence of the learning context

The learning environment is an essential factor to consider in motivating boys in mark making and writing and results from the staff questionnaire indicate that staff perceptions impact significantly upon the learning environment in terms of types of opportunity offered and behaviours and skills expected from different genders.

Project findings support the suggestion from the literature review that the use of a natural outdoor environment is effective in promoting motivation and improving cognitive development. During planned activities in local forest space, boys' involvement levels were generally high and this resulted in improvements in listening skills, focus and attention. This also impacted positively upon cognitive skills and textual understanding of the story. This was evidenced by recall of character, setting and plot and later served to support motivation and engagement in structured learning opportunities.

The literature review suggested that role play and drama activities may promote language and communication skills in boys and further enhance motivation and this view was also reflected by the project findings. The use of a storyline approach worked well when combined with process drama techniques, for example, role play and freeze frame, and questioning based on Bloom's taxonomy. These techniques promoted deeper understanding, higher order thinking skills and helped extend language and vocabulary which later supported boys in the structured writing tasks.

The literature review highlighted the importance of providing literacy opportunities for boys which are of particular relevance to their experiences. This view was strongly supported by the research findings. Boys' motivation to write increased greatly when structured writing tasks were meaningful and they felt it had an important purpose, for example, in helping to find the missing character in the story. They were also able to recall the task and purpose a significant period later.

Validity was improved by the use of clearly defined frameworks such as Bloom's taxonomy and instructional strategies such as process drama techniques, thus enabling greater focus to be achieved in narrative observations and facilitating accurate evaluations.

8.2 Influence of male adult role models

The literature review noted the significance of male adult role models for boys in developing self-identity and highlighted the underrepresentation of males within the early years workforce. The research findings supported this view to some extent, highlighting that boys are more likely to engage in writing and drawing activities where an adult male is present, though this does not necessarily increase involvement levels. Boys also reported they liked having a male to work with and talk to.

The literature review also stressed the influence of societal and environmental reinforcement of gender role behaviours and how imitation of same sex role models is important in gender identity development. The research findings indicate that the impact of adult male role models within the home is significant, particularly where males are regularly involved in daily caring routines. The data collection instruments did not adequately address reasons for this, however the literature review suggests fathers' involvement in daily care tasks increases emotional security and provides more opportunities to talk, listen and interact. It should also be considered that these boys may make better progress due to their fathers' desire to see their child succeed.

The use of audit and observation using time sampling and Leuven's Involvement Scale was an effective tool in ensuring validity by providing structure to observation and assessment.

9.0 Implications

Dissemination of the research project was undertaken through presentation to the establishment staff team and to BA Childhood Practice students at University of the West of Scotland (Appendix 8). Discussions and feedback from both presentations have been influential in structuring my understanding of the wider implications of the research.

9.1 Implications for parents and carers

The project findings supported the key points from the literature review in suggesting some parents and carers may need more support in understanding the stages of early speech, language and communication development and how this links to the development of literacy skills. There was also strong correlation between data gathered through the project and statistics researched through the literature review which indicated significantly higher numbers of boys experience language and communication difficulties.

Research undertaken through the project highlighted the need to consider how parents, particularly fathers, can be supported to better understand their influence as a gender role model for their child. These findings are reinforced by the literature review which noted that gender identity development in young children occurs in part as a result of the imitation of same sex adult role models.

9.2 Implications for the early years workforce

Project findings indicate a need for practitioners to consider whether they are currently adequately equipped to recognise the influence of gender upon learning and development. Within the confines of the dissemination activity undertaken, both practitioners and students felt this may not currently be the case. The literature review highlights a thorough understanding of the nature/ nurture debate as being essential in understanding the impact of gender and this raises the question of whether student education and professional development opportunities should increase study of how gender identity develops, how and why gendered play preferences arise and how this impacts on children's learning and development.

The literature review noted that learning environment, context and experience are of particular importance in promoting motivation and engagement. In this respect, practitioners and students were also challenged to consider the question of whether a predominantly female workforce possesses the capacity to plan learning environments, contexts and experiences which support boys and girls equally. If not, this begs the question, should more males be actively encouraged into early years roles?

9.3 Implications for policy makers

The literature review examined the issue of feminisation of the early years and primary education workforce and the project findings highlighted the positive impact of a male adult role model upon boys within the early years environment. Promoting the employment of more males in the early years workforce is a question for policy makers and suggests a need to consider current barriers. Scottish Government research (2011) refers to underrepresentation of men in this sector as occupational segregation and reports reasons given by men for lack of participation as being low status of the work and lack of promotion prospects.

In considering the encouragement of more males into early years roles it is also essential to evaluate the specific benefits and potential disadvantages of doing so. Achieving a more equal balance of males and females in the workforce has the potential to provide opportunities for children to interact with both genders and to provide more same sex role models for boys within the setting. However, bearing in mind the audit findings, it is also essential to consider whether positive discrimination against girls is ever acceptable in aiming to raise boys' attainment and if the introduction of more males would impact negatively upon boys' involvement levels.

10.0 Conclusions

The skills I have developed throughout my studies in the BA Childhood Practice programme have enabled me to competently plan and undertake a research project involving a programme of extensive reading, action research and professional reflection. Further reading and research enabled me to effectively plan and lead provision of a range of play and learning opportunities aimed at improving boys' engagement in opportunities for drawing and writing.

I consider that the project demonstrated my ability to skilfully and confidently raise the profile of the gender agenda- in relation to the development of emergent writing skills in boys- and feel a sense of professional and personal gratification that this has facilitated a discussion of the social construct of gender identity and its impact upon children's learning and achievement, both within my workplace and across a wider early years forum.

Reflection throughout the project has led me to consider the position of power held by the researcher, and indeed, would cause me to take differing decisions in future. My inexperience in this area was revealed through my choice to distribute parental questionnaires after having presented a literacy workshop and this possibly contributed to the corruption of data as parents attempted to provide responses which would meet with my 'approval'.

Potential areas of interest for further professional reading and research would be to continue to extend my knowledge of how gender identity develops, including a study of gendered play experiences chosen by children in nursery and at home. This would help to support planning and provision of play and learning experiences which are truly inclusive. The impact of language and communication and their links to symbolic play and emergent writing is a further area for exploration and could be utilised to support parents to extend their understanding of how to support their child in early literacy opportunities. I found professional reading regarding the impact of brain development and hormones to be both thought provoking and stimulating and plan to continue to develop my knowledge in this area through further reading.

I consider this research project to be a celebration of the qualities, skills and knowledge I have gained as an early years professional through my studies on the BA Childhood Practice programme and hope it serves as recognition of the many children whose curiosity and creativity have inspired me throughout my own learning journey.

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12.0 Appendices

- Appendix 1 1a Project Proposal
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