

Classroom practices and gender roles in primary school

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Gender identities in primary school

This article considers the construction of gender identities in Maltese primary schools. It is based on small scale illuminative observation in two classrooms in two schools. The observation sessions, five in each school and each of an hour and a half duration were held over a period of one week, from 29th November till 6th December 1990.

The sessions were carried out in two primary state schools in different areas of Malta and are named here as School A and School B. The age group chosen was in both cases six year olds, that is Year 2 classes. Classroom A (in school A) had a total of 23 pupils of which fifteen (15) were boys and eight (8) girls. In Classroom B (school B) the pupils numbered 24, with thirteen boys (13) and eleven (11) girls. Both Miss A and Miss B were female and middle-aged. Whilst Miss A was a qualified teacher Miss B was at the time a part-time instructress.

Notwithstanding the fact that the research was carried out in two different schools, the findings were very similar. This suggests that there is a certain pattern of behaviour which characterises many (see also Darmanin's article in this volume), if not all, Maltese primary state schools.

Serbin (1984, p.273) finds that

In every classroom there is an unofficial curriculum, a part of the learning experience that is determined by the teacher's attitudes and behaviour rather than by a formal syllabus. In regard to sex-typing, much of this unofficial curriculum is 'hidden'; teachers themselves are often unaware of their own expectations and behaviours that effectively sustain and reinforce conformity to sex role-stereotypes.

In other words, as Clarricoates (1987) states, the hidden curriculum does what the official curriculum is presumably not supposed to do: it differentiates on the basis of sex. In our observations, we tried to enter the field with as

open a mind as possible, though focusing our attention on the hidden curriculum. As will be demonstrated below teachers often adapted curriculum content to fit the agenda set by the hidden curriculum. We have used thick description throughout, so as to allow readers to make their own case.

Language use

One aspect of the hidden curriculum is that of sex differences in the use of language, that is, in the verbal interaction between teachers and pupils. An issue that arises from language/gender research regards the distribution of the talking time allowed to students: whether it is equitably distributed among the students and whether gender factors (among others) play a role in the distribution.

In accordance with Dale Spender (1983), we found that in these mixed-sex classes, the boys talked more, they interrupted more, they defined the topic more, and the girls supported them, so that there was a distinct male domination in the classroom as regards:

a. **pupil - pupil interaction:** In School B, we found that, during classwork, boys communicated with their classmates, of both sexes, twice as frequently as the girls did. Most of the girls engaged themselves totally-and silently-in the work they were assigned.

b. **pupil - teacher interaction:** In School B we found that during the five observation sessions the boys intervened for a total of 27 times by putting questions-academic or otherwise- to the teacher, often leaving their places to do so. On the other hand, the girls maintained their verbal contact with the teacher to the minimum, intervening, in fact, for 13 times only.

c. **teacher - pupil interaction:** In both school, we found that consciously or not, the teacher elicited more verbal participation on the part of the male pupils than of the female. In fact, the teacher usually directed most of her questions to the boys and in more than one instance turned

to the girls only after the former failed to produce the right answer.

Miss B: *Ha nara min jaf igħidli din għalfejn marru Betlem San Guzepp u l-Madonna? Peter*

Peter: *Għax kien se jitwieled Ġesu'.*

Miss B: *Mhux eżatt vera li Ġesu' twieled Betlem imma mhux għalhekk marru... ħa nara... Jason.*

Jason: *Marru jsibu fejn joqogħdu.*

Miss B: *Le, le dik ġrat wara...u eġja għidnieha l-bierah din! Ħa nara xi ħadd ieħor... Maria.*

Maria: *Għax riedu jkunu jafu kemm hemm nies.*

Miss B: *Brava! Marru Betlem biex jinkitbu, sewwa?*

(Religion lesson, 29/11/90, 08.30-09.15)

In another case, before interrogating the pupils, Miss B warned them to raise their hands so as to maintain order. A girl who defied the teacher's orders was subdued and scolded, and her answer, albeit correct, was left unacknowledged:

Miss B: *U fejn qiegħduh il-Bambin?*

Anna: (answer without being asked to) *Go maxtura.*

Miss B: *Darb'ohra għolli jdejk!... u min ġie jarah lil Ġesu'?*

(Religion lesson, 29/11/90, 08.30-09.15)

However, a boy who behaved likewise not only was not reprimanded, his answer earned him the term "bravu":

Miss B: *X'qalilhom sid il-lukanda?*

Carl: (answer without being asked to) *Li ma kellux post.*

Miss B: *Bravu...il-lukanda kienet mimlija.*

(Religion lesson, 29/11/90, 08.30-09.15)

Like Dweck et. al. (1978), we found that while the **amount** of positive and negative

feedback directed at the children was virtually equivalent for the two sexes, there were striking differences in its **quality**. In both schools, a substantial proportion of the criticism and negative feedback directed towards boys referred to non-intellectual aspects of their work, including conduct, neatness and handwriting:

Miss A gives out a handout with an exercise to be worked out for classwork. While the children are writing:

Miss A: *Christopher, oqgħod minuta kwiet...*

(Maltese lesson, 06/12/90, 10.30-12.00)

Miss B: (to Michael) *Mhux ħazin is-sentences, imma ktibt vera maħmuġ.*

(Schoolwork correction, 29/11/90, 13.00-14.30)

The girls, on the other hand, received relatively little criticism for non-intellectual matters, so that the proportion of all negative evaluation related to the intellectual quality of their work was extremely high:

Miss A: *... il-girls iktar qed jiktbu pulit...*

(Maltese lesson, 06/12/90, 10.30-12.00)

Miss B: (to Romina) *iva kif spellejtha ħazin? Qiegħda miktuba fuq il-blackboard!*

(Schoolwork correction, 29/11/90, 13.00-14.30)

Thus girls are evidently neater, better behaved and more likely to work hard in order to do well and please their teacher. In other words, it appears to be the girls' greater compliance to the demands of elementary school that results in their failure to develop the achievement orientations necessary to succeed later on in the really challenging areas.

Discipline and Control

In accordance with Clarricoates (1987), we found that in situations of disciplinary procedure, teachers consistently and unconsciously denigrate women and emphasise the assumed superiority of men. The various adjectives Miss B (female, middle-aged) used when admonishing her pupils have sex-related qualities. When the boys got out of hand, they were regarded as "cowboy" or "imqareb"; for girls the

adjectives were "baby" or "fitta":

Miss B: Aqrali dik is-sentenza, Jason.

Jason: (long pause)... ma nafx.

Miss B: Le, ma tafx? Imma biex tagħmilha ta' cowboy taf, hux?

(Reading lesson, 06/12/90, 11.00-12.30)

Sara comes to Miss B crying.

Sara: (sobbing) Miss, Jason waqqagħni!

Miss B: Ajma kemm hu mqareb dak it-tifel!.. Ha nara x'għandek.. u le, m'għandek xejn, kemm int baby. Mur xarrabha ftit.

(Recess, 29/11/90, 10.30-11.00)

Karen: Miss. ara Jason u Alex x'inhuma jagħmlu!

Miss B: Oqgħod kwieta u kompli aħdem, Karen.. kemm int fitta.

(Schoolwork activity, 06/12/90, 11.00-12.30)

It is obvious that the terms applied to boys imply positive masculine behaviour whereas the categories applied to girls are more derogatory. Hence, these common adjectives used by teachers contribute to social categorizing, a value-laden dichotomy, marking off males as superior and females as inferior.

Teachers have been found to apply harsher disciplinary procedures in respect of male pupils, evidently viewing boys as being more problematic, less compliant and thus, less manageable than girls. Miss B followed suit: disciplinary measures applied to girls consisted mainly in verbal tellings-off, whereas boys were subjected to solitary confinement (sent behind a door; sent facing a wall in a corner of the room) and exile (sent to another teacher's classroom). This differential treatment on Miss B's part actually works in favour of boys to the detriment of the girls. By receiving 'softer' treatment, girls are being socialised to "narcissism", "passivity" or what Serbin (1984) calls "dependent behaviour", which only serves to bolster up men's feeling of power and authority. As Pivnick (1974, p.159) cited in Clarricoates, 1987) finds

"It is possible that by using a harsher tone for controlling the behaviour of boys than for girls, the

teachers actually foster in boys the independent and defiant spirit which is considered 'masculine' in our culture... At the same time, the 'femininity' which the teacher reinforced in girls may foster the narcissism and passivity which results in lack of motivations and achievement."

Classroom Dynamics

Classroom dynamics-the relationships between teacher and pupils, teaching styles and attitudes- are a significant part of the hidden curriculum, carrying many assumptions intuited and felt by all concerned. Classroom dynamics are particularly affected by the characteristics of the learning group. Research has shown that in mixed-sex situations, many of the implicit messages reaching the children are of a sexist nature, concerning the relative importance of men and women in society. A typical situation illustrating this point occurred in Classroom A:

Miss A: tells the story relating Mary's visit to Elizabeth. Then she tells them that they are going to draw.

Miss A: Min hu bravu se jipprova jaqra dak li nikteb fuq il-blackboard. Paul, ejja hawn...

(Religion lesson, 06/12/90, 08.30-09.15)

Miss A used the masculine form "bravu", which seems to suggest that only the boys were intelligent. Therefore, in this way, lessons are learned about status and worth; about what is appropriate for the two sexes to say, think or do.

Traditionally, men have been seen as constituting the 'stronger sex' in special relation to the physical dimension. In School B we found that this ideology persists. Miss B apparently considered girls as being suitable for carrying out mainly 'light' duties and errands, those that required, in other words, no particular physical effort whatsoever, such as delivering notes and collecting and distributing copybooks. On the other hand, tasks that called for stronger physical capacities, such as rubbing the blackboard, bringing down a chart from the wall (both of which involved climbing on a chair) and carrying a chair along a certain distance were immediately and unhesitatingly assigned to the male pupils:

Introduction are made.

Headteacher: Hawn siggu fejn toqgħod it-teacher?

Miss B: Li hawn baxxi wisq għaliha.

Headteacher: Naħseb għandi wieħed fl-office.

Miss B: Nibgħat xi boy bravu biex igibu?

(After morning assembly, 29/11/90, 08.30)

This confidence in the greater strength of the male constitution also manifested itself when a member of both sexes in Classroom B was involved in a slight mishap. When a boy fell off his chair, landing rather nastily on the floor, the teacher showed minimal concern; a girl who was allegedly brought down during recess received the teacher's attention and care:

Miss B:...ha nara x'għandek... u le, m'għandek xejn, kemm int baby. Mur xarrabha ftit.

(Recess, 29/11/90, 10.30-11.00)

Research carried out by Holly (1985) has determined that there is an overall domination of the classroom situation by the male sex. Accordingly, in Classroom B, boys certainly had supremacy over classroom space, authorizing themselves to frequently leave their places for various reasons—often of a non-academic nature (to chat or tease friends). On the contrary, the girls preferred to restrict themselves to the space occupied by their desks, deserting their territory only when they deemed it necessary (to sharpen pencil; to collect drawing book from shelf; to throw rubbish in bin). In accordance with Scott (1980) in Classroom B we found that the boys were the chief source of mischief. They tended to make more noise and disturbance whereas the girls were shyer, quieter and more docile:

Stephen, at the back of the classroom, calls out to Peter, seated quite far away from him

(Maths lesson, 19/11/90, 09.15-10.00)

Maria and Alison whisper to each other behind Miss B's back, only when she is not looking.

(Maths lesson, 19/11/90, 09.15-10.00)

In Classroom A the boys participated actively in the lesson, while the girls listened passively. Girls' feminine traits, such as timidity, mean that take less part during the classroom

activities. In fact in a group of three boys and one girl, it was a boy who was constantly suggesting which colours to use when drawing. The boy seemed more confident while the girl seemed to comply more.

It has been suggested that the sex difference in children's behaviour may not be 'real' at all, and it may reflect no more than the attempts of both sexes to present themselves in a socially desirable light (Dweck and Licht, 1987). That is, girls may be responding in a way that makes them appear modest because modesty is in line with society's stereotype of what females should be like. Boys, in turn, may be responding in a highly confident manner because self-confidence is consistent with society's masculine stereotype. In fact, we were particularly struck by the fact that neither Miss A nor Miss B tried to inhibit deviant behaviour on the part of the male pupils, even when this was to the annoyance of other pupils:

In a corner of the classroom, James and Simon are making a lot of noise pushing their tables while Janet is talking.

Miss A: Janet, be quiet.

(English lesson, 29/11/90, 10.30-2.00)

Jason and Alex are seated near each other, making loud noises, clearly disturbing nearby pupils. Miss B does not react.

(Schoolwork activity, 06/12/09, 11.00-12.00)

Apparently, they consider these boisterous, rowdy and aggressive patterns of behaviour manifested by the boys as 'natural' prerogatives of the male personality, features which must be accepted rather than confronted or changed.

Hence, the societal myths of stereotypes and the teachers' own cultural expectations influence their ideology regarding sex roles, what girls and boys should be 'naturally' like and treated. However, the effect of reacting likewise to the 'natural' difference in boys' and girls' behaviour may be to **exaggerate**, reinforce, encourage or maintain whatever sex differences there **actually are** in this area. According to Browne and France (1985) this happens in most classrooms largely because such establishments tend to uphold society's perceived norm of behaviour, and so help to perpetuate the sexist stereotyping and

discriminatory practices children experience from birth.

LEISURE ACTIVITIES

Leisure activities that pupils engage in at school are very definitely affected by sex-role stereotypes. This applies particularly to the school playground which is usually a typical example of the sexual division of space, or of sex-specific territories.

During recess, both in School A and in School B, the play-ground was dominated by boys, while the girls congregated around the edges or in secluded corners. Sex-stereotyping was also evident in the play preferences of the boys rushed out of the classroom and indulged in energetic, boisterous games, whereas the girls participated in quiet activities, preferring to sit on a low wall playing "mother" with their dolls. This might be influenced by the uniform girls and boys have to wear. The fact that girls must wear skirts may be more restrictive and inhibiting than wearing trousers, as boys do.

A CRITICAL INCIDENT

One of the primary goals of an infant school is to encourage children to explore new roles. Children are at school to learn to do new things, to be exposed to new experiences, new toys, new behaviours and new activities, which they have not yet had the impulse or opportunity to explore. Unfortunately, these ideals are far from being fulfilled in our classroom where clear-cut roles boys and girls should occupy are firmly established. This claim can be illustrated by significant episodes concerning two particular leisure activities:

A Religion lesson

After saying the Hail Mary, the teacher explained the meaning of "Sliem għalik Marija bil-grazzja mimlija, il-Mulej miegħek". The teacher explained that Mary was a very good girl who used to help her mum in the housework and she always obeyed. Then, one day, an angel appeared to her. After the explanation, the teacher chose Clint and Natasha as the angel and Mary respectively to act this little scene:

Teacher (to Natasha): Ina, ibda taparsi qed tnaddaf il-mejda.

Natasha did as she was told. When it was over, the teacher chose another girl to re-enact the same scene.

(School A, 20/11/90, 8.30-10.00a.m.)

It is true that the Old and New Testaments are of a patriarchal nature, but did the teacher have to carry this idea to the extreme by asking the girl acting the part of Mary to clean the table? Yet, it is known to all that 'Mater Admirabilis' depicts Mary praying or studying when the angel appeared.

Christmas play

For this play, the teacher chose a girl as Mary, a boy as St. Joseph, another as the angel, 3 boys as the three Kings, another 4 boys to represent the shepherds and a girl to carry the baby Jesus to Mary. The rest of the children formed a choir.

(School A, 6/12/90, 1.30-2.30pm)

It can be noted that the teacher chose a girl to carry baby Jesus whereas the boys besides outnumbering the girls in the play, were allocated more interesting roles.

Religion Lesson

The class was preparing for the Christmas concert to be held two days later.

Teacher: Tgħallimtha tiegħek, Susan?

Susan: (nods).

Teacher: Fejn hu San Ġuzepp? Andrea...fejn hu? Ma giex illum?

Pupil: Ma jiflañx, Miss.

Teacher: U hej, issa x'se nagħmlu? Pitgħada l-play, ta!

Pupil: Aghżel xi hadd ieñor.

Teacher: Lil min tridni nagħżel? Hadd mill-boys ma jaf jaqra daqs Andrea. Ma tiftakarx kemm domna l-aħħar darba biex insibu San Ġuzepp tajjeb? Heqq, ikollna ngibu tifel mill-klassi ta' Mrs. C.

(School B, 6/12/90, 8.30-10,00am)

Miss B felt that none of the boys was suitable for the role, But instead of resorting to a member

of the opposite sex-who could have been easily disguised-she preferred to include a boy from another class. Evidently, Miss B thought that a girl occupying a male role was inconceivable.

The Manifest Curriculum

Within the primary school, it is assumed that girls and boys learn the same subjects. However, the manifest curriculum is continuously making implicit distinctions between boys and girls, especially through the materials being used. Learning materials often pass on sex-stereotyped messages which construct a gender identity in favour of males and which continue to reinforce inequality between the sexes.

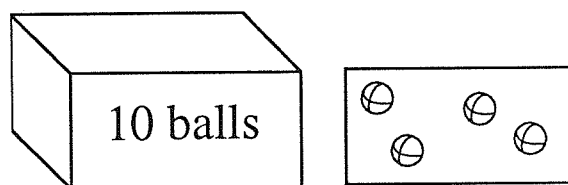
Alleen Pace Nilsen (cited in Spender 1980) coined the phrase "the cult of the apron" to describe the depiction of women in learning materials. We found that the books and materials used within our schools abound in crude and inaccurate images of women, which only serve to 'indoctrinate' children in sexual inequality. Whereas men are frequently portrayed outside the home, in the 'real' world, women are portrayed almost exclusively in the home, in a passive role. In fact, references to females in Classroom A were few. Picture and example representations of women and girls included a woman cooking, a girl helping her mother or simply doing uninteresting things. The chart the teacher referred to during the English lesson contained the message that Jane, a girl, plays with a doll, while Peter, a boy, goes to school. These pictures and examples are more sex-biased than the real world. The world depicted was that of males who were active, dominant and involved in interesting activities whereas females were shown almost entirely in domestic roles, without initiative, passive and afraid. The implicit message for children is that female aspirations for the future should be modest and service-oriented (Meighan, 1986).

Moreover, a common feature about working people with Class A was that job names which can be sexually neutral were assumed to refer only to men. So when reference was made to a postman, a farmer, the pronoun 'he' was used. This usage gives a distorted picture of real-life for it is now the experience of many of our children that even women can be 'postwomen', 'policewomen', 'bank manager', 'doctor' and so forth.

The content of the mathematics curriculum is also being geared to boys. In Class A. Mathematics charts contained toys which appeal

more to the boys, like a car and a kite. Again, the pictures which Miss A put on the flannel graph included marbles, balls, etc. - and she called out the boys to work out these sums. Miss A actually emphasized this: "Se mmorru nixtru xi fiaga li jhobbu l-boys l-iktar".

The teacher puts the following pictures on the flannel graph.



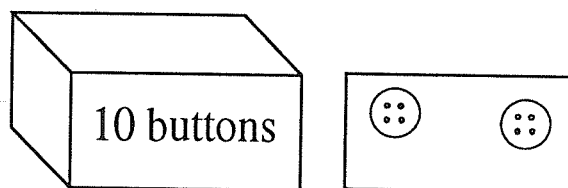
Teacher: Mario kemm għandna balls hawnhekk?

Mario: 10 u 4.

Teacher: How many altogether?

Mario: 14.

Teacher: Bravu. Issa waħida għall-girls. Se mmorru għand tal-buttuni.



Teacher: Anne, how many buttons altogether?

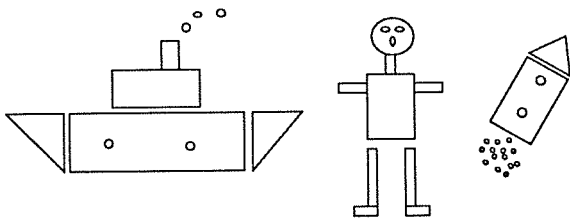
Anne: 12.

Teacher: Good.

(School A, 29/11/90, 8.30-10.00am)

As can be noticed, the one example for which the teacher called out a girl included buttons.

Similarly, in Class B, during a mathematics test, an exercise concerning the counting and identification of shapes involved figures traditionally related to boys: a ship, a rocket and a man.



(School B, 6/12/90, 8.30-10.00am)

At this point, it is important to consider the implications of the impressions girls get of the 'mathematical' world. The world of maths is being seen as male and this notion will be reinforced in later years in several textbooks by the number of questions revolving around men and boys.

Within the classroom teachers unknowingly tend to define certain activities which are presumed to be appropriate for girls and boys. This occurred in Classroom B. When it came to the music lesson, the teacher allocated certain pieces of a rhyme to the sex she believed it was more appropriate for-naturally according to her sex-role ideology- so that, where balls and boats were involved, it applied to boys: where dolls and prams were involved, it applied to girls.

Teacher produces chart on words of a song are printed:

I bounce the ball	-4
I rock the doll	-4
I sail the boat	-4
I push the pram	-4

Teacher: Issa ha nkantaw is-song li tghallimma l-ahhar darba, u se naghmlu hekk...il-boys se jkantaw tal-"ball" u mbaghad il-girls jkantaw tad-"doll", fhimtu? Imbaghad jergghu il-boys "I sail the boat" u fl-ahhar il-girls "I push the pram", all right?

(School B, 4/12/90, 2.00-2.30pm)

This is a supreme example of sexist attitude which discriminates between girls and boys, telling them exactly what they should be interested in. The outcome can be the establishment of a self-fulfilling prophecy. As Clarricoates (1987) suggests, it would seem that teacher geared the subject content of lessons in favour of the boys because of the problem they have in controlling them as was earlier noted. However, this was done at the expense of the girls, who were being totally isolated from the curriculum content.

CONCLUSION

Apparently, therefore, educational institutions are agents through which sexism is fostered and developed, agents through which the sexes are made unequal. It occurs at every level of experiences within schools. As long as schools persist with these differential practices, sexism will be maintained and reinforced: the power differences of the sexes are perpetuated. And as Spender (1983) declares: "any education system which continues to base its theory and practice on the belief that males are the paradigmatic human beings is to be condemned".

Acknowledgements

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