

Factors such as ethnicity, economic status and gender can affect educational outcomes (Hughes, 1991). The 1944 Education Act promotes equality for children in school. In spite of this, it has been suggested that girls persistently tend to have different educational outcomes from boys (Hughes, 1991). There are many complex explanations linked not only to the educational process throughout history but additionally to social influence. The way in which children create their gender roles has an impact on the way they identify themselves and others. Stereotyping can impact on the way practitioners view children and can lead to discriminatory practice. It is vital to consider the hidden curriculum for unintentional signs of discrimination. Knowledge of legislation and initiatives that protect children's rights to an education irrespective of difference is of significance. As is the ways in which practitioners can promote equality. Through the use of key texts and the theories of experts it is possible to comprehend the impact that gender can have on learning and development.

In the nineteenth century characteristics such as class, race and gender were detrimental factors which decided the form of education a child received. Hughes (1991) suggests this is due to the educator's role being to ensure each individual would be equipped to fulfil their predetermined role. Early attempts at access to education for all were frowned upon by those in power, fearing that the 'the masses would get ideas above their station' (Hughes, 1991, P.9). Schooling for girls was seen in relation to their domestic role. It was also considered that girls needed to conserve their energy for childrearing rather than mental activity (Hughes, 1991). Upper-class males attended private and independent schools, where they were moulded to become the elite. Their sisters however, though still received an education, were taught at home. Society's views on education differed for boys and girls at all social levels (Hughes, 1991). According to Charles (2002) the education system was designed to prepare children for adult life, which was gender as well as class segregated. The 1944 Education Act was centred on equality of opportunity. This involved for the first time, compulsory education for all that was free until the age of fourteen. However, inequality referred heavily to class disadvantage (Charles, 2002). The curriculum became gendered with the view that girls would concentrate on the 'domestic subjects' while boys would practice the 'technical subjects' (Charles, 2002). However, there has been much debate as to the reason for suggested differences in educational outcomes relating to gender.

Yeo and Lovell (1998) suggest that females attain better outcomes in primary education, with emphasis in literacy and language. They state that research conducted in the 1990's suggests girls are motivated, ambitious and interested in long term education. In contrast boys were seen as low in motivation, self-esteem and concentration. One suggested explanation being the introduction of

equal opportunity initiatives to encourage girls to pursue subjects previously associated as 'male dominated'. Practitioners were also encouraged to increase awareness of methods to enhance girl's interest in education. According to Yeo and Lovell (1998) these changes were directly influenced by the transformation in the labour market, from being male dominated to increasingly more equal. As a consequence, it seems that boys are now underachieving in school. However, Skelton and Francis (2003) suggest the cause for this apparent difference in attainment is not straightforward. According to Charles there is evidence to suggest that this is not a new theory. Relating back to the 11+ exam, in which girls needed a higher score than boys to gain entry into grammar school. Skelton and Francis (2003) suggest that the view that 'boys are underachieving' is now being challenged. They suggest the gap between boys and girls in standards of literacy, English and modern languages remains large. Nevertheless, SAT's (Standardised Assessment Tests) results show that boys and girls are showing increased performance on a yearly basis (Skelton and Francis, 2003). However, it is not only a case of boys versus girls. Not all boys 'underachieve' and not all girls are 'high flyers' (Skelton and Francis, 2003). There are class and ethnicity influences to consider (See Appendix One). Feminist research claims that it is the way boys construct their gender roles that ultimately leads to their dissociation from subjects traditionally determined as feminine such as literacy. However, many non-feminist commentators suggest that the high proportion of female teachers at primary level is responsible for boys learning needs being overlooked. Their suggested solution to the gender gap is to increase the number of male primary school teachers to provide positive role models linked with education. According to Skelton and Francis (2003) there appears to be no evidence to suggest that boys will perceive male teachers in a positive light, or that this will impact on their achievement. It has only been since 1975 when education was included in the Sex Discrimination Act that gender equality in schools has been highlighted (Nixon, 2005). However, the process in which children construct their gender roles is thought to be highly complex suggesting that equality between boys and girls is still being considered (Skelton and Francis, 2003).

The nature, nurture debate surrounding individual differences in areas such as gender has affected equality in education (Hughes, 1991). It is fundamental to distinguish between 'sex' and 'gender'. According to Cole (2005) a person's 'sex' is related to their biological make up. Gross (2005) states that sex and ethnicity are viewed by some as biological factors which can determine levels of intelligence and attainment in school. However, there are environmental issues to consider with reference to socialisation leading to 'gender' roles (Charles, 2002). Numerous surveys have suggested that boys and girls are treated differently from the day they are born (Hughes, 1991).

Oakley (1972, as cited in Charles, 2002) argues that there are too many variations in gender roles for the social differences between males and females to be innate. According to Charles (2002) parenting in Britain is still gendered, with fatherhood being associated with the role of supporting the family financially and motherhood with caring. As a consequence Hughes (1991) believes that many children have a clear understanding of what it may mean to be a boy or a girl, and the expectations which are attached to this. For example, Belotti (1975, as cited in Hughes, 1991) suggests that boys learn to suppress their emotions, a consequence of believing that it is not acceptable for boys to cry. This power over construction of values and beliefs has a direct influence on how children identify themselves and others. Siraj-Blatchford (2001, P.96) suggests ‘every adult and other child has the power to affect each child’s behaviour, actions, interactions, learning outcomes and beliefs’. Therefore, influences can come from parents, siblings, peers, educational settings but also the media. This view is backed by Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological model which shows how the environment can influence a child’s development (Feinstein et al, 2004). Feinstein et al (2004) suggests education has a significant role to play in influencing the factors which can affect children’s attainment. Bandura’s (1977) social learning theory suggests that children can learn indirectly through observation and imitation of others (Walkup, 2004). Therefore, children may relate to the way others whom they identify with are treated in society. In the process of developing an identity, children can distance themselves from others they deem as different to them or their ‘group’ (Siraj-Blatchford, 2001). Kenway (date unknown, as cited in Bond, 2000) suggests that it is not until the age of seven that children view their gender as fixed. Younger children can believe certain activities or behaviour will dictate their gender (Bond, 2000). Siraj-Blatchford (2001) believes without challenge to this way of thinking, children may carry on believing in stereotypes such as, ‘only boys play football and only girls read books’. If children are left to believe in negative images which they relate to their identity, they can become self-fulfilling (Siraj-Blatchford, 2001). Willan et al (2004) suggests it is the practitioner’s responsibility to understand and implement legislation to promote equality.

The Humans Rights Act 1998 prohibits discrimination in the United Kingdom under the European Convention on Human Rights. The Children Act 1989 (2004) also emphasises the rights of children in society to equal opportunities and protection from unfair treatment through discriminatory practice (Wilan et al, 2004). Internationally, these rights are addressed by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). The Education Act (1988) then provides the legal framework for equality in schools. This protection for children must be implemented appropriately to provide equality and inclusion (Wilan et al, 2004). There has been an increased awareness in

gender stereotyping since the Sex Discrimination Act was updated in 1986. The National Curriculum states that practitioners 'should be aware of the requirements of equal opportunities legislation that covers race, gender and disability' (DfEE/QCA, 1999, P31). Malik (2003) suggests that without equality of opportunity there cannot be provision of quality early childhood education. To ensure that discriminatory practice does not transpire it is essential for practitioners to consider their own beliefs and values (Willan et al, 2004).

In order to promote equal opportunities practitioners need to become aware of and deconstruct their own stereotypical thinking (Willan et al, 2004). Malik (2003) suggests that stereotyping in a negative way can damage children's perceptions of themselves and others, denying them the chance to fulfil their potential. Stereotyping can lead to prejudice through preconceived ideas, it is this type of attitude that often results in discriminatory practice (Malik, 2003). Haberman (1995, as cited in Cole, 2005) suggests that practitioners can follow five concepts order to overcome prejudice (See Appendix Two). It is through awareness of differences in people or groups that stereotyping, prejudice and discrimination can occur. However, it is also through valuing difference that inclusion and equality can be promoted (Malik, 2003).

Malik (2003) suggests all children are different, not just through gender, social class or ethnicity but in every way. Individuality must be valued and encouraged. It is through developing this ethos in an educational setting that children can be taught to perceive difference as their own uniqueness but not their value (Malik, 2003). The National Curriculum details the promotion of self-esteem and emotional well-being as significant for children to value and respect themselves and others (DfEE/QCA, 1999). According to Maslow (1954, as cited in Bentham, 2002) self esteem is required before the process of learning can develop. Jean Piaget (1886-1980) states that children learn from their environment and through their own experiences (Walkrup, 2004). Therefore, the environment can be used to provide positive images of role models to children, through books, posters, equipment, role play areas, dressing up clothes and other resources. Children should be offered a wide range of activities and organisation for group activities by sex should be avoided (Skelton and Francis, 2003). Adults in the environment must be aware of appropriate communication to promote inclusion, but can also provide challenges to discriminatory behaviour in children by providing examples of equality. Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934) believed that children learn through social interactions, and Bruner (1983) suggests learning can be developed through scaffolding (Walkrup, 2004). Therefore, it may be useful to invite visitors into the setting, to show diversity in the community, and to promote partnerships with parents (Rice, 2005). The Centre for Studies on

Inclusive Education (CSIE, 2000 as cited in Rice, 2005, P.76) suggests that educational settings should not see diversity as a problem but as ‘a rich resource to support the learning of all’. However, practitioners should be aware of conflict between anti-discriminatory practice and the beliefs and values of the family (Hughes, 1991). According to Hughes (1991) it is important to incorporate equal opportunities and inclusion in planning the curriculum to ensure that it is fully integrated. The National Curriculum states that inclusion should be implemented right across the curriculum, guaranteeing a full and rounded entitlement to learning for all children (DfEE/QCA, 1999). However, not all discrimination is intentional.

The ethos of a setting can influence equality through the hidden curriculum. Policies setting out strategies and practice that reflects the aim of the setting as a whole to promote inclusion will assist in creating an equal ethos (Jones, 2004). Principles of good practice should be considered as a fundamental aspect of working with young children (Malik, 2003). The Key Elements of Effective Practice (KEEP) as outlined in the Primary National Strategy suggests practitioners can work with children and their families in a sensitive, positive and non-judgemental way (DfES, 2005). This can be achieved through knowledge of six areas considered key for effective practice (See Appendix Three). Clark et al (1990, as cited in Jones, 2004) suggests learning and growth can aspire through an interaction between policy and practice. CSIE (1999, as cited in Jones, 2004) suggests policies can be developed through six key areas (See Appendix Four). In providing children with an environment which promotes understanding, acceptance and respect for others, practitioners are creating a more tolerant and positive society for the future. Therefore, directly challenging inequalities that are prevalent today (Malik, 2003). According to Malik (2003) good practice means providing equal opportunities through applying responsibilities as a practitioner to support legislation, policy and codes of practice. The National Curriculum sets out clear guidelines for inclusion by giving all children the opportunities they need to achieve. The Foundation Stage Curriculum for three to five year olds also regards equal opportunities as highly significant (QCA, 2000). Providing constructive gender role models at the earliest opportunity will promote positive images for children. The importance of equal opportunities is a top priority for early years education therefore it is not left to chance.

Ofstead (Office for Standards in Education) is the regulatory body for early years provision, care and education in England. It is their duty to enforce legislation and to guarantee that children are safe well and cared for in their setting. Ofstead also to ensure that children are offered activities which will provide them with learning opportunities (Kay and MacLeod-Brudenell, 2004). Early

Years Development and Childcare Partnerships (EYDCP) work with agencies providing care and education for children from birth to five years. Their role is to ensure that all children have positive opportunities to fulfil their potential. The Every Child Matters initiative is seen as key by EYDCP in ensuring that all children have the chance to be happy, healthy and successful (Walker, 2006).

The view that girls achieve higher in education than boys is much debated. The way in which gender roles are constructed and the process of socialisation is highly complex and is still being considered. In view of this, it is fundamental to understand that differences in educational outcomes focused on gender also have class and ethnicity elements to consider. However, it is understood that in order for practitioners to promote equality and challenge discriminatory ideology, it is first imperative to identify and deconstruct any negative stereotypical thinking. All children are at risk of inequality, intervention is necessary to promote inclusion and provide equal opportunities and chances for all children. Equality can be promoted through the curriculum hidden and overt and should be included within planning. The environment can be used as a resource for providing positive role models. However, it is important to understand the conflict between challenging discrimination and family values so as not to undermine the role of parents and carers. Supporting self-esteem through valuing and encouraging diversity can lead to better educational outcomes and will challenge discriminatory practice in society. It is the practitioner's role to implement legislation and equal opportunity initiatives to protect children's rights. It is through incorporating elements of good practice and legislation that equality can be promoted in an educational setting. Therefore ensuring that access to quality education is not determined by gender, class or ethnicity.

Appendix One

- Middle-class, white boys and Indian and Chinese boys have been shown to be high achievers.
- Working-class white boys and African Caribbean and Bangladeshi boys have been shown as having a tendency to underachieve.
- Working-class white girls underachieve when compared to middle-class white girls.

Appendix Two

Habermans (1995) steps considered essential to overcome prejudice.

✓ Step One

Self analysis of the prejudice:

Is it overt or covert?

What form does it take?

Is it biological or cultural?

Is it dominative or evasive?

Is it intentional or unintentional?

✓ Step Two

The question of source:

How did the prejudice com about?

Was it learnt from parents/carers?

Was it learnt at school?

Was it learnt from peers?

Was it learnt from the media?

✓ Step Three

What are the benefits and drawbacks of being prejudice?

How is it demeaning to hold these beliefs and how is it beneficial psychologically and materially?

✓ Step Four

How is the prejudice affecting the way that education is being provided? Are assumptions being made about individual's behaviour based on their social class, ethnicity or gender etc?

✓ Step Five

Action plan

How to unlearn and counteract it and get beyond the prejudice.

Cole (2005)

Appendix Three

KEEP – Key Elements of Effective Practice.

- Understanding the individual and diverse ways that children can develop and learn.
- Knowledge and understanding in order to actively support and extend children's learning in and across all areas and aspects of learning.
- Practice in meeting all of children's needs, learning styles and interests.
- Work with parents, carers and the wider community.
- Work with other professionals within and beyond the setting.
- Relationships with both children and adults.

DfES (2005)

Appendix Four

The Centre for Studies on Inclusive Education (CSIE) suggests that strategies and policies for inclusion can be developed through six key areas.

- Changing attitudes inside and beyond the setting.
- Designing and publishing new policy for inclusion.
- Acquiring resources to ensure policy is implemented.
- Making the environment accessible.
- Developing staff expertise.
- Developing inclusive activities.

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