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A Study of Children's Perceptions of Gender Identity and Stereotype in Public Pre-Primary Schools in Nairobi County, Kenya

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Abstract: Pre-primary education is a critical period when children develop, understand and express their gender identity and stereotype. Thus, pre-primary teachers should provide a rich learning environment with materials and equipments to guide and support children as they continue to explore their gender identity and stereotypes. The current study explored ways in which children perceive gender identity and stereotypes. In depth interviews were used with 20 children (10 boys and 10 girls), randomly sampled from 10 public pre-primary schools in Nairobi County. Data was analysed using themes in line with the study objectives. Findings reveal that the influence of teachers and mothers has an impact on how both boys and girls perceive their gender identity and stereotype. In particular, masculine and feminine characteristics, play materials and equipments, enhances children's gender identity and stereotypes. In conclusion, it is important to note that in order to bridge the gender gaps experienced by boys and girls, it is critical to deal with gender bias, stereotype and discrimination during the early years of a child's life. Relevant policies and programmes should be put in place especially in teacher education in order to empower teachers to help children deal with gender stereotypes.

Keywords: Gender Identity, Gender Stereotype, Feminine, Masculine, Perceptions, Pre-primary, Preschool Children

1. Introduction

Pre-primary is an epoch and a crucial period when children are in the process of developing, understanding and expressing their gender which then influences their identity and stereotype [1-4]. Research has shown that parents, preschool teachers, classroom environment, teaching materials and peer groups influence children's perceptions and development of their gender identity and stereotype [3, 5]. What this means is that children's gender identity and stereotype is constructed by their interactions and socialisation with family members, friends (at school, home, community) and the media [1, 6]. Children's decisions about gender related messages are shaped by the context in which they act and develop their identities and stereotypes [3, 4]. To

adequately support children as they continue to develop appropriate gender identity, preschool teachers need to be aware and understand well gender related messages [1, 3]. The purpose of this study was to explore ways in which pre-primary school children perceive their gender identity and stereotype, since to date (2020) no such study has been done in Kenya.

1.1. Defining Gender Identity and Stereotype

Gender is an element of identity that children attempt to understand and is linked to physical and psychological characteristics [5, 7]. Gender identity is at the core of people, society and a source of their expectations [8]. Gender identity is a construct which involves a set of cultural representations associated with female and/or male [6]. It relates to how

individuals view themselves in a gendered way, referring to a person's capability of being able to express themselves as either male or female, which requires them to use the inner experiences belonging to either gender [2, 8, 9].

Society forces, cultural norms and family members guide and teach children about values, beliefs, biases and attitudes that shape their gender identity and stereotypes [8]. Thus, gender identity is more of a social identity [10]. In normal circumstances most children develop gender identity that is similar to their biological sex, such that most biological females have a "female" gender identity, while most biological males have a "male" gender identity [10]. From a cognitive-developmental standpoint, gender identity is the child's ability to correctly identify with his or her gender status [11]. Within this framework, the development of gender identity is a cognitive milestone that enable people to understand that being male or female is a biological characteristic, that cannot be changed by altering superficial attributes [9].

Gender stereotype are beliefs concerned with psychological traits, characteristics and activities appropriate to males and females [12, 10]. Gender stereotype emerge within the development of gender identity during the early years of a child [10]. The stereotype affect ways in which male and females think about themselves and how they evaluate their behaviour in relation to others [12]. Thus, gender stereotype influence and affect ways in which male and female, conceptualise and establish their social categories with respect to specific gender. According to Brannon [12] these social categories represent what people think, while noting that although beliefs vary from reality, such beliefs can be powerful forces in the judgment of self, others and in line with one's gender.

Clothing and decorations, provision of specific toys and activities further enhances the understanding of how children identify with their respective gender, which sometimes lead to formation of gender stereotyped messages [5]. Clothing, length and style of the hair are some of the physical indicators used to identify a person's gender [5, 9]. Further, a girl may wear certain colours associated with femininity, while a boy may insist on wearing sports hat to show his masculinity [5]. As children continue to internalise these differences, they are forming their perceptions about gender roles, identity and stereotype. That is why sometimes boys and girls make sure that their choice of clothing and toys are gender specific [5]. However, children may tend to classify, group blocks and other outdoor play as boy activities, while art, music and dramatic play are activities associated more with girls.

Different aspects of femininity or masculinity, male or female become internalised as part of the way people think about their gender identity [13]. For instance, society tend to think of boys in terms of 'masculine' with such characteristics like assertiveness, dominance, and competitiveness; as girls think in terms of feminine aspects like compassion, warmth and nurturance [5]. Teachers may be willing to reward gender stereotypes, for instance a teacher may expect boys to be more noisier than girls and will be quick to punish a noisy girl as compared to a noisy boy [5]. Through this interaction and expressions, children learn that girls are supposed to comply and be quiet, while boys are expected to be aggressive and forceful, as activities in school continue to be categorised according to respective gender categories [5]. A study on gender is likely to allow teachers to have a more broader perception and interpretation of their day to day classroom events, thereby giving children space to develop their gender identities in the most appropriate ways, while discouraging gender stereotype behaviours [7]. The current study explored children's perceptions of gender identity and stereotypes by using their daily experiences and interactions while in school and at home.

1.2. Development of Gender Identity and Stereotypes Among Children

Generally, children begin to develop gender identity and stereotype when they are toddlers and this continues throughout their lives [2]. Although the development of gender identity and stereotype differ from one context to another, it is normally well established by the time the child is two to three years old [9, 14]. At two to three years children begin to understand gender stability and are conscious of their physical differences, as boys and girls and can answer such questions as, "Are you a boy or are you a girl"? [9, 14, 15]. Even before children are three years, they can differentiate toys used by boys or girls and engage with those of their own gender, while indentifying activities associated with that gender. For example, a girl may wish to play with dolls, while a boy play games that are more masculine, enjoy use of toy soldiers, blocks and trucks [13].

At three to four years, children learn and understand that society is composed of male and female where each is assigned different attributes, roles and behaviour, with males being given masculine activities which are of higher value [16, 17]. By so doing children are more likely to develop gender identity and stereotype, while beginning to understand what it means to be male or female in the society [7]. Since most children have a stable sense of their gender identity, they learn gender roles, behaviour and stereotype that means, doing "things that boys do" or "things that girls do"[14], while playing with peers of their own gender. This reveal striking differences in the way boys and girls play and interact. Thus, given the gendered messages children receive every day, by the time they are in pre-primary, if teachers are aware of the impact of gender stereotype, they are likely to encourage children to engage in gender neutral play and learning which to some extent could facilitate the achievement of gender equality. Once children become aware of their gender, they begin to develop stereotypes which they use to give meaning and enhance understanding of their gender identity [17]. Gender identity, roles and stereotypes is likely to affect a child's behaviour, interaction with the peers, choice of toys and activities [18].

The development of gender identity and stereotype is

evidenced by the intensity of children's "emotional commitment to doing what boys and girls are supposed to do" in terms of their gender roles [9]. This is evidenced by the way in which children announce their gender and the embarrassment they experience if and when mislabeled by others [19]. By the time they are six years old, most children tend to spend most of their playtime with members of their own gender and may gravitate towards sports and other activities associated with their gender. Thus, children should be allowed to make choices regarding what sports and other activities they wish to be involved in [14]. In this study, the researcher explored pre-primary school children's (5-6 years) perceptions of gender identity and stereotype, since any development and learning experiences during the first five years has a profound impact on the child's life [3].

2. Literature Review on Gender Identity and Gender Stereotype Among Children

In Portugal, Santarem district a qualitative study was done by [6] using 167 children (92 girls and 75 boys) from 39 kindergarten classes. The aim of the study was to explore preschool children's opinions and representations of male and female gender roles, while relating to formative process of gender stereotype. Results of the study shows that when questioned about differences between tasks, children reported that female tasks usually imply household chores, such as *cooking, preparing food, cleaning floor, ironing clothes and bathing children*, while male tasks do not always mean any kind of work, for instance, *watching television and sleeping*. Both girls and boys give their fathers jobs explicitly considered as work, jobs that usually earn the family income, for instance, *putting traffic signs in the roads*. Gender role stereotyping become obvious when boys and girls talk about occupations and schedules of their parents (mothers and fathers). The study concludes that gender role stereotyping is noticeable during the child's formative years and it is even stronger in girls in the rural settings more than in urban. In a study done in USA, Daitsman [20] collected data using 112 children (18 to 33 months old) drawn from a multi-ethnic background where the researcher explored gender identity among children through story dictation and drama. Data analysed from stories, video and audio using gender themes revealed a number of insights into children's gender constructions, irrespective of whether they believed that they were 'boys' or 'girls' stories. The data led to an understanding of how children interpret gender in stories. From the analysis, it was clear that 'girl' stories contain princesses and or fairies, while 'boy' stories contain combat and or superheroes. While, 36.3% girls and 30.19% boys never dictated any 'girl' and 'boy' stories respectively, more than a quarter of girls and boys were reluctant to give any stories pertaining to either gender. Thus, it can be noted that gender differences in stories is not correlated with age, but with experience. The older children with less storytelling experiences avoid use of

gendered themes in the stories. By engaging children in discussions about gender stereotypes in storytelling, this is likely to help them expand their perceptions of gender identity.

Tocu [21] did a study in Romania to establish the process preschool children take in forming and developing their gender identity. Tocu investigated children's gender identity as a way of distinguishing between gender appearance and reality. The findings show that the development of the ability of appearance-reality gender (AR) distinction is not related to the gender of the subjects. With the increase in age, more children acquire the ability which enable them to differentiate real gender from the apparent one. This contradicts earlier findings by Daitsman [20] who established that gender differentiation is not correlated with age.

In San Francisco Bay Area Solomon [7] did a study in preschools to find out insights that make researchers understand the processes leading to development of children's identity. Solomon used 21 children (4 and 5 years old), in addition to a variety of curriculum materials and activities, in addition to field reflective notes, video, photos and weekly journals. Research findings show that curricular materials and activities are more likely to offer boys and girls opportunities to act outside their traditional gender roles. For example, use of wooden logs and hand tools led to activities that attracted more girls than boys, thus, providing them with the opportunity to explore roles outside the traditional female roles. In a separate occasion, three boys played with baby dolls showing the concurrent stereotypical portrayals of gender roles. This means that the type of materials given to children is likely to provoke them to assuming roles that are more or less stereotyped, thereby influencing their social interactions and learning. Conclusions drawn from Solomon's [7] study shows that there is need to have abroad approach in the provision of curricula materials, a way of advancing children's ideas about their gender identity and stereotype. This is likely to give children a wide range of gendered opportunities if they have to step outside their comfort zones in regard to the activities, peer relationships and personal challenges.

In their study, Breneselovic and Krnjaja [3] examined children's perceptions of kindergarten practices using 50 children (30 girls and 20 boys) aged between 5 years and 7 months from 30 state kindergartens in Serbia. The aim of the study was to identify the dominant discourses of gender identity that shape kindergarten children's practices using mosaic method. Data collected shows that kindergarten culture reinforces prescribed gender stereotyping instead of problematising it. There is need for preschool children to simultaneously familiarise themselves with activities that contest gender stereotypes, for instance, narratives that are likely to enhance negotiation and reconstruction of stereotypes. Decisions by preschool children about gender related activities are usually shaped by the context in which they act and develop their gender identities. Further, gender roles that children assume tend to determine the type of play materials they are likely to use [22]. Studies reviewed in this

paper have been done in Portugal, USA, San Francisco Bay area, Romania and Serbia. So far, there are no studies that have been done in Africa and Kenya in particular, which motivated the researchers to undertake this research, since issues related to gender identity and stereotype among pre-primary children a potential area of study.

3. Methodology of the Study

Use of qualitative research design enabled the researchers to obtain valuable insights from preschool children regarding their gendered norms and practice, and how this relates to their perceptions of gender identity and stereotype [23]. A total of 10 preschools attached to public primary schools in Nairobi County formed part of this study. From each of the 10 pre-primary school, two pre-primary school children, a boy and a girl were randomly sampled to participate in the interview schedules. Thus, a total of 20 pre-primary school children (10 boys and 10 girls) aged between 5 to 6 years participated in this study.

In collecting data, the researchers used in-depth interviews. In-depth interviews provided a platform for researchers to easily access what is 'inside a person's head or world', making it possible to measure what they know (information), likes or dislikes (values and preferences), and thinks (attitudes and preferences) [24] in regard to how they perceive their gender identity and stereotype. As noted by Muasya [25], use of the interview guide allow the researcher to enter into the real world of children so as to elicit a more clearer picture of how they perceive their identity as boys and girls. The in-depth interview allowed the researchers to generate ideas regarding children's perceptions of the gender identity and stereotypes, by asking them about their gender, gender of their teacher, mother and that of their best friends in school, in addition to activities they are engaged in.

Data was carefully analysed by reading through children's narratives, checking on the emerging themes in line with the aim of the study. Some of the themes that emerged include; superficial appearances and children's gender identity; children befriends those of the same gender; how mothers influence the formation of children's gender identity and stereotype; masculine and feminine characteristics and children's gender identity and stereotype to mention but a few. In presenting verbatim data, the researchers used codes, for instance BC 1 and GC 1 to mean Boy Child 1 and Girl Child 1 respectively. Use of codes is a way of maintaining confidentiality of the research participants so that anyone reading the report will not be able to identify with those interviewed. This concurs with what Rubin and Rubin [26] noted, that use of letters, numbers or pseudonyms is meant to protect the privacy of the participants.

4. Presentation and Discussion of Findings

Data drawn from in-depth interviews with 20 pre-primary school children (10 girls and 10 boys) regarding their perceptions of gender identity and stereotype, was categorised using the following sub-themes: superficial appearances and pre-primary school children's gender identity; befriending those of the same gender: a discourse of children's gender identity; 'mothers' and their influence on children's gender identity and stereotype; masculine and feminine characteristics and children's gender identity and stereotype; children's perceptions of gender stereotype roles at home; gender stereotype play materials and equipments.

4.1. Superficial Appearances and Children's Gender Identity

Children mentioned type of clothes, hair style and make up or what Tocu [21] refer to as superficial appearances (clothing, length and hair style, accessories, and toys) as indicators which enable children be able to differentiate between boys and girls. While confirming Chartschlaa and Tocu [5, 21] findings, out of the 20 children interviewed, 6 (4 girls and 2 boys) mentioned length and hair style, as one of the ways they use to differentiate between boys and girls. For instance, '... I have long hair...' (GC 7); '... I don't plait my hair...' (BC 1); '...I don't have long hair like girls...' (BC 7).

Apart from hairstyle and length, type of clothes was used to differentiate boys and girls. Commenting on the type of clothes children wear which reflects gender stereotype messages, two of the girls said: '...I wear dresses to school...even at home I wear dresses and skirts...' (GC 2) '...I wear dresses and skirts...' (GC 3). Similarly, nine preschool children confirmed that they are able to differentiate the gender of their teachers by type of clothes, length and style of the hair. They said: '...my teacher is a girl because she has hair and she wears dresses...' (GC5); '...she is female because she wears dresses and only girls wear dresses...' (GC 8); '...female because she also wears a dress and has long hair...' (GC 9); '...my teacher is girl because she is a big girl and she wears dresses like girls...' (BC 4); '...my teacher is a girl because her hair is long and smart...'(BC 5);'...boys always shave their hair but the girls plait...'(GC 5).

However, there is an assumption that female teachers wear 'dresses' and not 'trousers', probably because trousers are associated with males. In their support, two girls said: '...our teacher is a woman because she puts on dresses she never wear trousers...' (GC 2). '...boys wear shorts and trousers...' (GC 5).

In addition to differentiating gender of the teachers by the type of clothes, length and style of the hair, two boys noted that female teachers wear high heels, earrings, apply lip stick and eye pencil. The following is what BC 1 and BC 3 says: '...my teacher is a female, because she has long hair, she puts on earrings, high heels and she applies lipstick and eye pencil...' (BC 1). '...because I don't apply lipstick like you... (while pointing to the interviewer who was a female)...' (BC 3). While comparing her teacher and mother, GC 1 says: '...my teacher is a girl, because she looks like mum...' (GC 1).

From these responses, it seems that boys and girls are specific on how they differentiate the female gender, by clothes, hair, shoes, earrings and lip stick, although those interviewed did not seem to specific on how to superficially differentiate male gender, an area which may require further research. In contrast, Piscalho, et al [6] reported that when boys and girls are questioned about their differences, they tend to use reproductive roles like preparing food, cleaning and ironing clothes for females, and leisure related roles for males like watching television and sleeping. It is interesting in the current study that both boys and girls refer to their teacher as *'girl'*, does this imply that they are not able to differentiate between 'boy', 'girl' with 'men' and 'women' because of the age differences?

4.2. Children's Friends Belong to Same Gender: A discourse of Their Gender Identity

Children express their gender identity by associating and imitating with friends of the same gender. Findings from the current study shows that majority of children (girls and boys) prefer being in close association with those of the same gender as evidenced by the following responses: *'...I choose a girl because I love girls...'* (GC 1); *'...because I'm a girl also and I love girls...'* (GC 2); *'...choose her because she is a girl like me...even me I'm a girl...'* (GC 3); *'...I choose a boy because he is like me and I love boys...'* (BC 2; *'...I choose a boy because I'm a boy ...'* (BC 1). In contrast to the current findings, Breneselovic and Krnjaja [3] reported occurrence of mixed gender friendships among kindergarten children in Serbia. The need for children to develop close and affective relationships with their peers across gender is well documented by [3, 19]. However, the question still remains; are children able to differentiate between *'love', 'like'* ?; do they understand what is meant by the following statements: *'he is like me', 'she is a girl like me'?* In what ways are they like each other? This is an area that requires further research.

In addition, both boys and girls tend to share play materials with those of the same gender as is evidenced by the following responses: *'...because she is funny and shares her toys with me...'* (GC 7); *'...because she shares her dolls with me and also lives near me...'* (GC 8); *'...we met before I came to this school and he plays with me and shares his toys...'* (BC 7); *'...boy because he plays with me and shares his toys and plays material...'* (BC 10). Although it seems that sometimes boys and girls like to play separately, Tansey [28] echoes the need for teachers to encourage boys and girls to play and work together irrespective of their gender to enable them appreciate the fact that society is made up of two genders, males and females, this is likely to facilitate the achievement of gender equality.

4.3. Masculine and Feminine Characteristics and Its Influence on Children's Gender Identity and Stereotype

Researchers have shown that discourses of femininity like compassion and nurturance, masculinity characteristics like assertiveness, dominance, competitiveness tend to be internalised as female and males respectively [5, 13]. This is likely to influence the ways in which children are able to conceptualise their gender identity and stereotype. In the current study, two girls stipulated their reluctance to have boys as their best friends, while associating them with masculinity saying: *'...I can't have a boy as a best friend because they don't dress like me and are rough...'* (GC 9); *'...I can't be friends with boys because they are rough and make a lot of noise...'* (GC 10).

Use of masculine and feminine discourses by children is similar to findings by [19] who analysed children's stories and found that 'girl' stories contain '*princess*' and '*fairies*', while 'boy' stories contain '*combat*' and '*superheroes*'. Such stories are likely to influence children's perceptions of their gender identity and stereotype. Specifically, BC 8 noted that feminine characteristics are likely to influence girls on the gender of their best friends, as he says: *'...I don't like girls because boys will laugh at me when I play with girls...they mock me...'* (BC 8). Similarly, Tansey [28] found out that influence of gender stereotype, is likely to make boys dominate, for instance in the block areas, as girls laugh at boys when they try to dress up like them.

4.4. Children's Play Materials, Equipments and Gender Stereotype

Research has shown that boys and girls like to play with materials that are gender specific [5]. While answering the question of how they are able to differentiate between the two gender, both boys and girls gave examples of play materials and equipments that reflect gender stereotype. Findings from the current study shows that boys prefer to play with bicycles, cars and balls while girls use skipping ropes and dolls as shown in some of the following responses: *'...they play with me help me with their bikes and balls...'* (BC 6); *'...because boys play with balls and girls play and skip with ropes...'* (BC 8); *'...girls play with dolls while boys play with ball and cars..'*. (GC 7); *'...boys play football while girls don't...* (BC 3).

While confirming these findings, Chartschlaa [5] noted that both boys and girls are specific on the type of play equipments and materials they use while engaging themselves in various activities depicting different aspects of gender role stereotype. However, there is need for preschool teachers to assist boys and girls identify with the tools and equipment that are conventionally used by the other gender, to enable them explore roles outside the traditional roles in order to minimise stereotypical portrayals of gender roles, thus enhance achievement gender equality [7, 28]. For example, girls may be encouraged to use hammer, spade, wooden logs and hand tools while boys can sew, cook and play with dolls a reverse of the society's expected gender roles [7, 28].

4.5. Children's Perceptions of Gender Stereotype Roles at Home

When asked about responsibilities and roles given to boys and girls at home, gender stereotype roles featured in their responses. Boys and girls gave examples of productive roles, for instance, (sent to shop; pay rent and other bills, buy food and clothes), leisure work like watching movies, cartoons and riding bicycles; school work, like homework, all supposed to be done by fathers. The work done by mothers is usually associated with domestic and reproductive chores, for instance, cleaning utensils, washing clothes, brushing shoes and taking care of baby. In their perceptions of gender stereotype roles among boys and girls, the following is what they had to say:

'...I'm the one who is sent to the shop always...my mother cleans the utensils with my sister while I watch the television with my dad...if I have homework my mother tells me to do it and she tells my sister to do other chores if she does not have any homework...'(BC 1).'...Girls clean the shoes and wash clothes...boys do not do anything they watch movies and cartoons and riding bicycle...girls clean the table after eating..'. (BC 4).'...My mother is a woman because she gave birth to me, men pays rent and takes care of all the bills in the house, my dad goes to work and he buys food and clothes...' (BC 2).

While emphasising on domestic chores and reproductive roles of 'mothers' and 'girls', both boys and girls tend to agree as is shown in the following responses:'...mum says I am a big girl I should help her...washing the dishes, washing handkerchief...'(GC 6);'...I help my mom to wash clothes, wipe the table, brush my shoes and taking care of the baby because mum says I am a big girl...'(GC 10);'...boys do not clean clothes because they do not know how: it's a girls' task...the girls organize the house, they clean utensils...my sister cooks when our mother is not there, the girls also clean clothes because they are the ones who are supposed to clean clothes...'(BC 2).

The statements confirm performances of gender typed plays in the kitchen or hair salon play centres with the accompanying gender stereotype roles and established patterns for boys and girls [3].

4.6. 'Mothers' Influence on Their Children's Gender Identity and Stereotype

Research has shown that girls and boys bring specific gender stereotype from their homes and practice them in schools [29]. It seems that 'mothers' and 'fathers' reinforce messages on appropriate gender structures which is likely to affect the development of children's gender identity and stereotype [30]. Although mothers and fathers are key players towards the development of children's gender identity and stereotype, mother's role tend to be more pronounced as compared to that of the father. Commenting on how 'mothers' are likely to influence their children's gender identity more than their fathers, two pre-primary school children said: '...my mother told me that I'm a boy, I used to think that I'm a girl because I was playing with my sister all the time...' (BC 1); '...my mother tells me that I'm a girl...'(GC 2). Research has further shown that girls tend to easily identify with the 'female teachers role' by forming close relationships [3]. So does this confirm the important role played by both 'mothers' and 'female teachers' in enhancing children's gender identity and roles both in school and at home?

5. Conclusion

It seems that promotion of gender equality among pre-primary school children is a sensitive issue that should be dealt with during the early years, since gender identity and stereotype are well pronounced during the early years of a child's growth and development. I agree with the suggestions that in order to bridge the gender gaps that girls and boys experience later in life, it is critical to begin tackling gender bias early in life [15]. Since interventions among pre-primary school children have long-lasting effects, it is critical that education system tackle gender stereotypes in the early years, instead of reproducing them, in order to keep girls' and boys' development within the status quo. The fact that the current study examined ways in which pre-primary school children perceive their gender identity and stereotype, further research on the role played by teachers in shaping children's gender identity and stereotype may be necessary. This is because teachers produce and reproduce dominant gender ideologies among children during the teaching and learning process [30]. At the same time, relevant policies and programmes should be put in place especially in teacher education to empower teachers on how to deal with gender stereotypes.

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