In a previous article in *Redress*, Carole outlined a project focusing on gender stereotypes in the career aspirations of primary school children [1] and their potential link to the sex-segregated labour market. She continues the theme with this article adapted from an unpublished thesis [2], discussing some of the results of her research and the implications for educators working in primary education.

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Any reader interested in more information about administering the checklist to their class/school, please contact Carole Ford at caford@qld.chariot.net.au

This well-known counting out rhyme, which has its origins in the fifteenth century, was unashamedly masculine in its emphasis. Lesser known is the accompanying rhyme for females:

This seems that the sexual division of labour has a lengthy and intriguing history [3].

On Equal Pay Day, 1 September 2011, the Australian Government released a fact sheet through the Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency to demonstrate the persistent nature of workplace inequities between women and men [4]. This includes an increasing discrepancy in the earnings of women and men in full-time employment: women earn 17.2% less nationally; 19.5% less in Queensland; and this expands to a 30% difference in some industry sectors. Estimates of superannuation fund accumulation profile that by 2019 women will have only accrued half the potential retirement benefits held by men, and are more than twice as likely to eke out their post-retirement lives in poverty (ibid). Women continue to be concentrated in ‘people services’ (health-care, retail, education and training, and social services) which attract lower pay rates, and research suggests that “…simply being a woman accounts for 60% of the difference between men’s and women’s earnings” [5]. As Figure 1 illustrates [6], even extended years of education are no protection against income disadvantage for females.

Given the evidence, why do girls and women continue to pursue employment that apparently causes them
disadvantage in the existing labour market?

**Figure 1: Lifetime earnings profiles 2008**

Despite numerous changes in policy and legislation, issues of gender equity in the Australian education system and labour market remain a concern of the Australian public [7].

When McMahon and Carroll [8] suggested in 2001 that career development programs should begin at the primary school level, there was a flurry of incredulous discussion in the popular media, tentative support from some educators, and minimal interest from researchers. Consequently my project was framed very consciously to provoke interest, invite comment and re-energise the dialogue, not only about gendered career aspirations and workplaces but the generalised context of gender in education. In the past decade there has been a retreat from feminist discussion which places girls and women at the centre of theory and inquiry (9) caused by the moral dilemma of ‘the boy question’. I would contend that educational concerns related to girls and boys frequently overlap, but where there is divergence the promotion of competitive stridency is unproductive [10].

**Career development theory**

The evolution of contemporary career development theory had its genesis in the first decades of the twentieth century, but the 1950s witnessed an intensified growth that has primarily focused on stages of vocational
aspirations of ‘generic’ adolescents and adults [11]. Aspects of maturation and parental influence were recognised
and in a few instances gender and culture added to the mix to create a link between self-identity and work identity
[12]. Super [13] promoted the centrality of self-concept and suggested that internal variables (interests, talents
and personality traits, for example) and external variables (including the labour market, the economy and hiring
practices) are all implicated in career choice. What remained implicit was the focus on ‘white, middle-class, young
men’ with an absence of detailed career development theory based on variables such as gender, age, racial/ethnic
background and [dis]ability (ibid).

The prevalence of different occupational aspirations according to gender is linked to the persistence of stereotypical
educational expectations from an extremely early age [14]. The disparity in attitudes to paid employment is
evident in the messages, internalised by boys, of the centrality of work for males, when compared to the confused
and conflicting perceptions young girls glean from the social environment [15]. While girls may articulate the
probability that they will embrace some paid work, they indicate that this would be in conjunction with home
duties and child-care (ibid). Whereas, it generally remains the responsibility of women to juggle the demands of
paid and unpaid employment, the reality is that long-term employment will be as essential to the life of women
as it is to men [16]. It is timely to emphasise that any generalisations about gender comparisons, or indeed other
social phenomenon, should be considered in the context that there will be similarities and differences between the
binary groups of female and male as well as within both groups [17].

The development of a gendered understanding of potential careers was explored by Susan Stroeher [18] through
research in her kindergarten classroom. She conceded that the limited size of her project prevented universalising
the outcomes, but there was compelling evidence that even young girls identified some work roles as gender-
specific, and they overwhelmingly preferred ‘traditional, nurturing’ occupations. This issue had also been a focus
of research by Lloyd and Duveen [19] who identified children at school-entrance age as invoking gender markers
of objects and activities and embracing occupational stereotypes which aligned with adult perceptions, even to
the extent that by 6-8 years of age they were discarding those careers seen as belonging to the opposite sex [15].
Within theories of career development there are differences in definition and concept, but overwhelmingly they
support a notion of career aspirations where a gender dimension is salient [11].

The critical issue in considering underpinning theories of career aspirations is not whether gender constraints
exist—the evidence appears fairly conclusive [20]. Though elements of contention may exist, what is substantially
unexplored and unexplained is the recursive nature of influences from which this behaviour develops [13], and
what interventions may contribute to changing children’s occupational aspirations: “…not only the what but the
how…” [21].

Pre-schools and primary schools are well positioned to provide meaningful career education [22] as part of policy
to expand children’s cognitive understanding of occupations and promote self-concept [12]. Even at elementary
school level, girls are self-effacing regarding their lesser ability in maths, ITC and the sciences when compared to
boys of the same age [23]. The construct of gender and internalisation of perceived ability—or lack of ability—is important in relation to curriculum differentiation, school subject choice, expectations of parents, school personnel and self [24] and these constructs are evident from an early age [17]. “Early career interventions provide the ideal venue for the promotion of social action initiatives aimed at improving academic achievement and expanding future career options for all students” [14]. Where primary schools did take the opportunity to include career-related education, particularly through incursions and excursions by people in varied work roles, children were motivated to think more about ‘future jobs’ and to be influenced by role models [20].

Tracking the changes in children’s knowledge and understanding of careers and career-related decisions highlights that career development is a lifelong process, and one which begins in early childhood [25]. Pre-schoolers demonstrate a significant knowledge of gender-stereotyping of occupations and are reluctant to indicate an interest in cross-gender-type work roles [23]. In early childhood, girls and boys identify with adult role models, frequently the same-sex parent or carer, and gain a broad understanding that work is ‘something that grown-ups do’, and their gender expectations of careers are relatively inflexible [17]. As they reach the senior primary (elementary) years, one aspect of divergence is noticeable: girls demonstrate less rigidity about careers designated as male-only [25], while greater sex-typed choices are starkly evident for boys of the same age [21].

In the world of the corporate and consumerism, social status in the labour market and the rewards which accompany such status, are very determinedly gendered. Helvig [26] argues for the “inevitability of gender-role stereotyping” of occupations by young children through immersion in a gendered cultural environment, and suggests that the role of significant adults—parents, teachers, counsellors—is to expand children’s options. The contemporary world of work is increasingly flexible, and the concepts of work, career and education must be considered in the context of the social and economic milieu of transitory and precarious employment [27], rather than ‘a job for life’. While occupational segregation may result from girls and boys adhering to their perceptions of gendered work roles, there are no intrinsic elements of any job which make it inappropriate for either/or/both genders [28].

Changes in the youth labour market have been accompanied by extended school participation, especially for girls, but gendered outcomes persist although ameliorated by socio-economic status. Gender gap disadvantage which is minimal for girls at the highest socio-economic level widens as the student’s status declines [27]. Research suggests that girls’ career ambitions also decrease as they progress through the school system (ibid). What is often not effectively understood is that both the ‘bread-winner’ and the ‘housewife’ labels are historical, social constructs which do not accurately reflect the enormous change to the workplace in the past three decades [29].

Education is identified as crucial to addressing social and economic inequity, but the outcomes are dependent upon the participation of all sectors of society [30]. While education settings are too frequently involved in the perpetuation of gender inequities and stereotypes, “…it can also be a crucial focus for changing them” [31]. This was relevant to the conjecture in the mid-1990s that early childhood settings had been relatively invisible in the gender debate [32], and yet the evidence indicates that the kindergarten, pre-school or child-care centre and the
early years classroom provide educational experiences that are anything but equitable [33]. For children of all ages, educational settings are an important primary location for developing social relationships, and yet they are also a primary location for exclusion and inequity [34]. Unfortunately, in Australia the leadership teams in many schools may profess to be “supportive—sort of” of the implementation of gender reform without any substantial notion of “what is and isn’t happening in their schools” [35]. Addressing issues of gender equity—and gender inequity—may project some educators to a place outside their comfort zone: however, gender equity cannot legitimately be regarded as an ‘optional extra’ [36], a situation which continues to be evident in the mainstream education system [20].

Educational knowledge and curriculum and the language used in educational settings replicates the dominant or mainstream culture and educators are well positioned to provide a positive model for influencing and challenging sexism, both overt and covert, within their classroom or more widely through other areas of the school structure and programs. If teachers do establish the ground rules and have telling input into class discourse, then their responsibility to identify gender dualisms which endorse conventional perspectives of femininity and masculinity, and to ensure the utilisation of inclusive, gender-sensitive methods and materials, is enormous [37]. The first key to accepting such responsibilities is incumbent on recognising their existence [38].

Whether overt or covert the curricula are set up and supported by the school and provide messages about gender role development through activities, modelling, reinforcement and other forms of communication. Prevalent classroom practices perpetuate the stereotypes of inept and dependent females and the competent and active male hero. This mirrors gender stereotypes that exist throughout society and is part of what is referred to as the hidden curriculum [39]. Adjacent to the hidden curriculum is what David Sadker [40] refers to as gender blindness: circumstances where the gender bias is so normative that it escapes scrutiny. Self-evaluation of the learning environment they provide has resulted in some teachers claiming that they inhabit a gender-free zone, but the ‘norms’, or normative assumptions which most early childhood and primary teachers have accumulated over their lifetime routinely escape scrutiny [41].

Research with children in a primary school setting detailed how, if given the opportunity, more than 40% of girls would prefer to be born a member of the opposite sex; yet this was the response from only 5% of boys [40]. Such a finding suggests that both genders have absorbed the prevailing climate in the classroom and beyond and have a functional understanding of ‘adult-validated sex-stereotyped beliefs’ [42]. Girls know who is winning the war!

Results from the research
The project included 58 children:
• Grade 1 – 10 girls and 10 boys;
• Grade 3/4 – 11 girls and 7 boys; and
• Grade 7 – 14 girls and 7 boys.
In assessing a list of 20 career options children were asked to consider the gender-appropriateness of each role by nominating careers as appropriate for:
- both women and men (B);
- men (M);
- women (W);
- don’t know (DK).

It was assumed that if children were not influenced by gender differences then the majority of career options would be identified as non-gendered or gender-neutral: that is most children would label every career (or the majority of careers) as suitable for ‘both women and men’.

Figure 2: Aggregate of options nominated by all children (n=58) in the project
Figure 2 provides a pictorial representation of the raw data, and is an aggregate of girls and boys at all the Year levels (n=58). The blue shaded area in each column represents the number of children who identified a career option as gender-neutral: from a low of 6 for plumbing to a high of 47 for shop assistant. The extent to which children have viewed many of these options through a gender filter is readily evident. Where the gender-neutral option has not been chosen, which accounts for more than 45% of options, alternative choices have generally indicated that the role is seen as for women or for men. The roles seen as most gender-specific for women include hairdresser, nurse, model, librarian and kindergarten teacher, while men are nominated as plumbers, fire-fighters, pilots, prime ministers, principals and basket-ballers.

The data from this small-scale research project specifically relates to a limited cohort of students from one setting but the findings demonstrate some critical emerging themes. Consequently, while the results are not universally applicable, that is, their ‘generalisability’ is limited [43], they do provide contextual indicators and the potential for the project to be replicated. McMahon & Watson [44] identify the sparseness of recent research on young children’s career development and suggest that there has been “…an overemphasis on occupational aspirations and an under-emphasis on other critical aspects of children’s career development”. While my research does acknowledge individual career aspirations, it is rather a critical view that links gender with careers to which children do not aspire. Identifying the negative appraisal of particular careers by both girls and boys may provide some clues to the occupational knowledge children need to make considered and relevant choices, themes that are pursued through individual interviews.

The participants’ responses at each year level confirmed that children are beginning to make observations about the world of work and their potential position in paid employment. They demonstrate awareness of why people have ‘jobs’ and some rudimentary concepts of career selection and pre-requisites. What they also clearly indicate is that gender dimensions are already directing and constraining their aspirations. The overwhelming indications from those research studies that have been conducted at the primary school level [32] emphasise that deferring learning about ‘work’ deprives children of valuable opportunities to gain greater insight into the pervasive nature of gender stereotypes and aspects of self-concept. Further, teachers and counsellors may lack the confidence and/or understanding of the relevance of implementing curriculum and classroom practices which promote and expand children’s existing framework of career development skills and knowledge [45]. The learning continuum in career development should be as essential and rigorous as other areas of children’s development learning. Most importantly it should be inclusive and challenge the prevailing discourse of gender stereotyping [46].

While the prevalence of literature on career planning and development highlights the importance of secondary education and post-secondary pathways, the focus of this research is most emphatically on children at the primary school level (ages 5-13). The very limited discussion on the career aspirations of children in this cohort [47] demonstrates, in clichéd terms, that career counselling for many girls at Year 9 and 10 levels, is probably passé. Lufkin [48] in a most comprehensive document outlining the limited nature of non-traditional career selection, highlights one root cause as a lack of early exposure ‘in elementary school’ to gender stereotyping. While the proposal for
equitable workplace participation is more extensive than females diversifying into non-traditional work roles, the tenet persists: addressing gender stereotypes in career aspirations is most effective when it commences at the early stages of formulating work/gender schemas [49], that is, in early childhood.

References


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