

Mary Scarlett

A COMMENT ON SEX-ROLES IN THE NURSERY CLASSROOM

I have been teaching since January, in the nursery classroom of an inner London Primary school. I have seen much less crude sex-role divisions than I expected. However, even in as progressive and child-centred school par excellence as the one I'm lucky enough to work in, sexism plays quietly among the children, even if it doesn't (often) rear a blatant head.

If I do not tell anecdotes, I have little enough to report. The classroom, and my teaching, is set up to promote the choice of each individual. There are no set activities *per se* bar storytime and dinner. This is a style of teaching that suits me, and it has been gratifying to watch the children - twenty or so three to just-under-fives - develop in their ability to concentrate and play imaginatively, using regularly all the equipment, including that tucked away in trays and only pulled out by their own choice.

In this environment of self-directed choice of play and use of time, what have I seen? I have seen that the boys play with everything, including 'proper' games in the Home corner (but draw and paint rather less than the girls). I have seen that many of the girls, especially the older ones, play rarely with bricks and trains and cars, even playing only occasionally with the plastic animals - a genderless game one would have thought - and usually divide their time mainly between the Home corner, painting and drawing and dough. This is a crude, almost predictable impression, but one that has remained a persistent undercurrent in my observations.

I've been playing 'babies' at school now for a week. I thought of this because there are four new babies born into the lives of four of my nursery-age children. Two of these children have seemed happy and relaxed about their new siblings; two seem upset and withdrawn. I read all the children an excellent story called "That's my Baby" about a new sister, love and jealousy. We talked about babies. "What do babies do?", I asked. Babies apparently suck dummies, crawl, cry, drink from a bottle and horror of predictable horrors, "Babies watch television".

So into the carpeted brick corner. Expecting only a few children I had intended to join in but nearly all the children gathered there, plus a small audience of two or three who pulled up chairs on the sideline. Because of the number of children I had to act as 'mummy', encouraging them to cry - not to talk, because "Babies can't talk". I did this knowing that their pretend crying might

trigger real crying, and feeling able and competent to deal with this should it arise. It didn't. It seems a game is a game after all, even at the nursery level.

I laid rugs on the floor for mattresses, covering them up, two or three to a 'bed', with curtains and pieces of material and tucked them in and soothed them if they 'woke' and 'cried'. Lacking bottles, I fed them water in paper cups - "water-milk", one child named it. As I moved around, soothing them or 'despairing' at all the babies needing milk or comfort, they crawled, and giggled, laid and looked at me with eyes that seemed to say, "Is she really letting us play this?". The sense of delight and permission they seemed to be experiencing was interrupted by a mum's arrival. At this point they all went haywire, an unusual occurrence, their privacy disrupted.

Left to their own devices, the game emerged in their own play. Two days later several children played babies in the Home corner. I witnessed the following scene. One child, a baby in the Home corner, approached two other children in the book corner. The younger of these was lying under a bedspread on a cushion, being a baby. The child being mummy said to the approaching child, "Do you want to be my baby?", and lifted the bedspread to invite her into the 'bed'. These two 'babies' were both children with new siblings; one apparently happy about it, one disturbed, in a sad withdrawn way. The upset child began 'crying', and the 'mum' called out to me across the room, her voice a little anxious, "Mary, the baby's crying". "That's alright", I said. "Let the baby cry. Just stroke her back". So she did, and the baby was allowed to 'cry'. Before this entreaty, I had been moved to tears, watching the tenderness and care the older child bestowed on her 'babies'.

No, I'm not about to say this is an example of sex-role division. This particular child is so interested in, and caring of people - staying near upset children, close to visitors, watching them intently - that I observe only that she has an extraordinary capacity for caring, such as one would be pleased to meet in a professional people-worker, let alone a child.

It happens often in this classroom that a game may be played, or staged rather, with adult assistance, only to be taken over and improvised upon by the children. (And sometimes, vice versa). The day after this incident, I was sitting cuddling a child who had been crying in the book corner, when another child asked to sit on my lap. Choosing not to shorten the cuddle I asked for a 'mummy' for the other child. (I admit in this an internalised sex-role division of mothers as caregivers to babies). Soon the book corner was full of children of both sexes, alternating between being babies and caregivers. Some children ran for water and cups to 'feed' the 'babies', another brought 'food', some shells on a saucer, only to have them promptly overturned by the baby to whom it was handed.

And here the point of the story emerges, one that, I'm afraid reflects rather more on me than on the children. One child rather rough in her desire to 'mother' someone, and pulling children by the arms, was repeatedly rejected

as a mother. "I'll be daddy", she announced. This brought me no great surprise, rather approval at her ingenuity. And yet I was to be surprised. A boy-child responded to my call for a 'mummy' for a 'crying' child, "I'll be her mummy". Immediately I was embarrassed, and a little anxious. The one child quiet and sensitive, the other robust and daring embodying attributes reserved for sexes, not individual personalities, in this society. And there was I, priding myself on my ability to develop each child's whole personality, startled by a boy saying he'd be mummy.

What can I say in conclusion? There are other stories, such as the boy who said to me "I've got muscles. Girls don't have muscles". Or the boy who chose to push the new pram rather than ride the new aeroplane, and was laughed at by his mother as she arrived to pick him up. Or the child who questioned me about a boy in a nurse's uniform, "He's wearing the nurse's dress. Is it alright?" Or the three cousins who played in the house all day and every day, until I temporarily banned them, and they found other things they could do, and blossomed in the process. Or the fact that some boys would play Batman every time they were outside if I didn't intervene. (Which I do, disliking the paucity of their television imagination and encouraging the use of their own minds by censorship - which does happen).

It is complex, watching and nurturing children into their wholenesses. I give myself that focus and not the more strident one of pushing them out of obvious sex-role behaviour. But there is also the positive. The new entrants, mostly girls, play more widely than the older girls, with all the equipment; track and trains, home corner and bricks alike. With care maybe I can keep this breadth of activity alive as they grow older.

ODD QUOTES FROM AMERICAN JUMPING BEANS

The tomb of Emperor Herkimer the Soup-king was placed in a area the size of Salt Lake City. The tomb was half a mile high. Its gold into which had been set diamonds, rubies and emerals sparkled so brightly that migrating birds were baffled. A trumpet corps sounded the hour. Sentries stood guard day and night. It was a monument to resentment at being born from a womb.

On the shore I wondered which was making me more lonely - the rain rising in the abandoned boats or the foghorns sounding like a cow as high as a mountain.

I learned that the inventor of Chinese boxes - one smaller than the other was inspired by removing a series of idols from a wall.

Jerome Salzmänn