

Un- Doing Gender

Roles and Stereotypes in Early Childhood Education

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The journey to fight for the equal participation for both sexes in reducing stereotypes in different angles is key issue today. With this regard the whole world is implementing different strategies towards a change of social power structures.

Many efforts have been made in macro-level promotion of equal opportunities for men and women with more or less success. But if we look deeper into this agenda there is something important missing, if not missing rather minimal implemented! That is gender empowerment at micro-level which includes institutional, individual and family level. There is a new focus in scientific research and economic marketing on stressing the differences between men and women, boys and girls, whether for biological or environmental reason. This manipulates our self-conception and reduces the possibilities of our children, to develop their identity freely.

General outlook of the Gender role and Participation in Kindergartens

Starting with kindergarten-age, children give gender-stereotyped answers when asked about objects their guardians would want them to play with. (Raag & Rackliff, 1998) Parents are known to criticize them for engaging in behavior which they consider to be 'appropriate' for the opposite sex (Cahill & Adams, 1997; Martin, 1995). By the age of five, children already seem to have a firm understanding of how to behave 'proper' as a boy or a girl (Martin & Ruble, 2004). This knowledge is soon to be considered as 'correct' behavior and also expected from others. By the age of five, gender-stereotyped attitudes start to arise and expand with increasing age while rigidity seems to decrease (Huston, 1983; Ruble & Martin, 1998).

The developmental behaviour and personality are created by "doing gender". Gender is a product of daily social interaction and thus a social construction. From an early age, children learn to respect the boundaries of normative gender scripts, not to risk being judged or excluded from their peers. Gender-reflected teachers, educators and parents, we all agree that we want to offer all ways of development to the children, independent from their sex. But daily life shows how deep our own thinking is influenced by conventions and values, which make us react on boundary crossings, that we pretend to ignore. Un-doing gender starts on a self-reflection of our gender responsiveness and the creation of a gender-reflected surrounding.

By this recognition the Kinderladen Maimouna has developed a gender-competence in reflecting exclusive structures, behaviour and language. An appropriate approach was anchoring inclusive education in the guidelines:

- which includes all children during learning process
- which includes participation of all children into learning, communicating, and making decision
- valuing all children and staff equally, avoiding hierarchies
- viewing the difference between children's resources rather than problems and deficits to overcome.

The participation of all children in different sets of activities is encouraged. Each child is able to play and explore with any material he/she wants. The team works on an open atmosphere in all areas,

whether constructing, painting and creative work, movement, music, natural science, maths or role play. Girls and boys are invited to experience in all fields and to develop their individual interests.

Gender-justice does not mean that girls play foot-ball and do sport and thus behave like boys !! It means that each child individually can develop interests: a boy does not necessarily need to play football because all boys do! A girl does not need to play with dolls because all girls do! They can do, whatever they like to experience, without being judged or excluded.

By having two males working in the kitchen the team gives example for undoing-gender. Girls and boys see men working in the kitchen every day and thus meet role models to develop an own identity.

The team is also aware of heteronormativity, a viewpoint that expresses heterosexuality as a given instead of being one of many possibilities. These possibilities are visible in the children`s books, they are included in all discussions about the variety of family structures and are presented as normal and part of the diversity of the world.

Conclusion;

We shouldn't ignore gender-marketing (toys, clothes, food etc) or any other activities, structures or attitudes which have impact on our children towards excluding them from discovering themselves and their interests and from rightful participation. I call all parents and educators to have appropriate approaches towards gender participation so as to eliminate stereotypes from the very beginning.

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