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Elements at Play: Influences of Gender on Play in Single-Sex Settings

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Abstract

This thesis will examine the ways that gender impacts dramatic play in early childhood classrooms by analyzing experiences in two single-sex school environments. The paper will review past and present literature as it pertains to the general topics of play and gender and pose insights about the role that both play in single-sex classrooms. It will also take into consideration the various gendered elements of our world and the impact of our social environments. The aim of the paper is not to propose next steps for gender education, but to examine current work through descriptions and observations in two classroom settings. It concludes with insights and wonderings about next steps for all educators and the impact that this will have on my future teaching.

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Introduction

This thesis grew out of my experiences during four years working in single-sex classrooms in two different New York City independent schools. While working, I was simultaneously attending graduate school classes at the Bank Street College of Education. Sitting in these classes, it occurred to me that I had unique insight into single-sex schooling and could draw direct comparisons between both genders and environments. This paper serves as an attempt to share what I have observed and to pose insights about the impact of gender in the classroom, specifically as it pertains to dramatic play. It also considers the role that teachers and administrators play in conducting gender work, and how societal norms about gender support or refute current gender education.

For the purpose of this paper, I focus primarily on the gender binary, conceding that many definitions and aspects of gender will not be addressed. I use terms such as boy and girl, understanding that some individuals do not fit within the confines of these definitions. Although the first half of the paper examines past literature and gender research, much about the role of gender in the classroom is still being written, especially as it pertains to single-sex schools. In our country, gender continues to be the source of debate, as new laws propose changes to the ways we address gender legally and socially, and movements help to emphasize the dangers and pitfalls of gender stereotyping. I am encouraged to hear and see stories of people who have proven that we are all more than the gender we are assigned at birth but know that there is more work to be done. This thesis does not aim to propose what should happen next but merely serves as a commentary on the way things are.

In the United States, single-sex education began simply because one gender could receive a formal education and the other could not. In most areas, boys were expected to go to school and girls were expected to pick up domestic pursuits. As a result, single-sex boys' schools in New York can date all the way back to the 1600s, boasting decades of character building and academic rigor. At the turn of the century, single-sex schools for girls sprouted in an attempt to bridge the education gap between the two genders, mainly in urban areas. Many of the first girls' schools appeared in New England and in cities like New York, where pioneers like Samuel A. Brearley, Maria Bowen Chapin, and Clara B. Spence led the charge. As a result, most single-sex schools have a rich history and legacy. The challenge that these single-sex schools face is how they will adapt and evolve to meet the changing world of gender and define the next chapter of their story.

Rationale

After two years working in an all-girls setting and two years teaching all-boys, I often get asked to comment on the major differences between the two genders. While it would be impossible to make such a global statement, comparing the two environments does help me to understand the impact of gender in the classroom, especially as it relates to dramatic play. As a child, I loved dramatic play. Never the athlete, I always gravitated towards imaginary realms and engaged in scenes of restaurant and house play many years beyond some of my peers. In fact, I remember making a dear friend, Charlotte, promise not to tell the other girls in 6th grade that we still played with my plastic baby dolls on playdates.

Dramatic play served as an escape for me, as it does for many children. It was an avenue to express fears and desires, and to try out the roles of others. I have an older brother, but primarily played with other girls, sticking to domestic scripts or professional pursuits like post office. As a teacher, it is still one of the highlights of my day to watch my students during play-time. I love to see how they interact and create imaginary worlds, dressing up and experimenting freely. I have been fortunate to work at schools that value play and feature it heavily in the curriculum.

Often, one does not realize how unique one's own experience may be until you begin to discuss it with others. It did not occur to me what a rare window I have onto gender and play until I began to share my findings and wonderings with friends and mentors at the Bank Street College of Education. Having spent only one summer teaching in a co-ed setting, single-sex environments are all I know, and therefore my entire teaching experience has been affected by gender. This thesis is the culmination of my work at Bank Street and my experience teaching in single-sex settings. It is an opportunity to share what I have learned and how this window will impact my future teaching. I hope that it helps others navigate the gendered world of play as well.

Please note that names of both individuals and institutions have been changed to protect the privacy of the students and the schools.

Literature Review

Through reading various sources, I discovered that while researchers and educators have been dissecting young children's gender roles for several decades, a large gap still remains concerning gender and dramatic play within **single-sex** environments in

early childhood settings. In an effort to break down my findings, and emphasize my wonderings, I have segmented this literature review into the topics below. These topics highlight the various developmental and environmental elements that affect five-year-olds in the classroom and beyond.

Who Are 5-Year-Olds?

The start of formal schooling signifies the onset of what some in the field of early childhood refer to as the 5-7 shift. Sameroff and Haith (1996) write, "in our culture the major shift in roles and responsibilities is the transition to school" (p.12). Adult expectations of children change once they enter school, as they become members of a new community, and further develop their unique personalities. In many ways, the changes that take place are reciprocal. The world requires more of children and children rise to their new expectations through greater interaction with peers and less with their families. In the western world, therefore, school, becomes the child's domain and what takes place in the classroom is theirs to navigate and understand.

Five-year-olds are full of creativity, excitement, and spirit. Physically, they need lots of activity, and have an abundance of energy. They are gaining an improved understanding of running and jumping and are working on fine-motor skills (Wood, 2007, chapter 5). Cognitively, they think out loud and learn by doing; they seek concrete evidence to satisfy their many wonderings. Their memory is improving, and they are beginning to make more advanced connections between old and new information, as they observe the world around them. They continue to develop a toolbox of language that helps them to communicate their ideas and feelings. They are incredibly curious and determined to get to the why and how of their worlds.

In general, five-year-olds gravitate towards rules and routines. However, they are also in the mindset of testing boundaries and limitations (Wood, 2007, chapter 5). Once they understand where the limit lies, they are curious what will happen if they cross it. They might try different personalities in order to see what sorts of reactions they get from their classmates and teachers, and to test authority. Wood (2007) writes that they may be oppositional; they are "not sure whether to be good or naughty" (p.51). This boundary testing reflects their intrigue towards the idea of power and who holds it.

Piaget placed children this age in the pre-operational phase of development, where he believed there is still a level of egocentrism, as children are motivated by their own desires. Their logic is largely constructed through their own understanding, and therefore doesn't always follow adult reason (Jones & Reynolds, 2011, p.9). They are primarily focused on their own feelings and ideas, as they construct knowledge about the world around them through self-motivated actions (Berk, 2006, p.220). Children become more empathetic and their thinking becomes more complex with age.

Mid-way through their kindergarten year, many five-year-olds shift from thinking very literally to becoming more flexible in their understanding; they continue to grow in their ability to take the viewpoints of others and to gain empathy. Play becomes an avenue for relationship testing, and the classroom becomes the stage for development. Jones & Reynolds (2011) describe play as "the self-initiated re-creation of one's experiences in order to understand (assimilate) them" (p.8). The significance of play is fundamental to this age-group and will be further discussed in the paragraphs that follow.

The Importance of Play

Most educators agree that play is fundamental to healthy childhood development, and at a particularly playful and imaginative stage, most five-year-olds can't get enough. In a recent United Nations General committee meeting it was argued that more attention should be attributed to play in order to allow creativity and spontaneity to flourish amongst children (Kilvington & Wood, 2016). As shocking as it is that this would need to be reminded to leaders of the world, the crux of the message cannot be ignored: children learn about the world around them through play, and it is a necessary element of any kindergarten classroom.

While at face value, a child immersed in play may appear to be lost in their imagination, much about their play is based in their present experience. Children at play are at work, trying to dissect and understand their surroundings. Renowned writer and educator, Vivian Gussin Paley, was one of the first to highlight this idea. She argues that the dynamics of play allow children to practice turn-taking, negotiation, and compromise. These are fundamental life skills that serve as a blueprint for all future relationships (Paley, 2004). Jones & Reynolds (2011) write that, "play is intrinsically motivating, and children voluntarily relinquish impulsive behaviors and immediate gratification to align their actions to the unfolding script" (p.4). Play, therefore, is fundamental to social development and is the groundwork for self-regulation. Even though the term "self-regulate" is relatively new, Piaget also believed that children learn how to manage their emotions, navigate relationships, and make meaning through play, even though the term self-regulation is relatively new. He believed that through make-believe, "children

practice and strengthen newly acquired representational schemes" and "show new levels of social mastery" (Berk, 2006, p. 232).

While some theorists debate the merit of different types of play, whether it be self-directed imaginary play or outdoor adventure, few refute its importance. Most educators call for a mix of both realistic materials, and materials without "clear functions" (Berk, 2006, p.233). Blocks, for instance, are a wonderful play tool because they allow children to define what and how they are used. In the classroom, they can teach about both infrastructure and design. They unlock children's inner-architects, builders, and designers, allowing them to create structures that mimic visuals of real cities and towns or create their own fantastical realms (Lange, 2018, chapter 1). Environments without time for building and for play, restrict the curiosity and work of children. Maccoby (2003) agrees, writing that play is, "a major enterprise of childhood. It is an activity which strongly distinguishes children from adults. It marks the early phases of development in other mammalian species as well as in humans" (p.32).

Who are Five-Year-Olds at Play?

Many argue that play behaviors demonstrate the biggest gender divide for young children. Kilvington and Wood (2016) write that, "it is believed that boys and girls choose to play at and with different things in different ways and that after the age of about three of four, they tend to choose more play partners from their own sex than the other" (p.36). Most boys gravitate towards games that highlight organizational skills and logical reasoning, whereas many girls act out scenes that contain more empathy and sensitivity. Boys are typically viewed as more physical. Maccoby (2003) writes, "boys engage in a good deal of roughhousing such as play wrestling and mock fighting" (p.33).

She notes that boys are four times as likely to engage in rough and tumble play than girls. Edwards, Knoche, and Kumru (2001) write that, "girls seek a smoothly flowing style of play and interaction", whereas boys seek, "an exciting even if more discontinuous flow of play" (p. 810). Overall, boys can be more raucous and louder when in segregated groups. Jane Katch (2001) noted that went she let her kindergarten and first-grade students pick their own seats at lunch, the lunch tables were mostly segregated by gender. She writes that, "the almost total segregation of sexes that occurred when the children chose their own lunch tables had led to a large, raucous group of boys, shouting across to one another, falling off chairs, and laughing too loudly" (p.42). Their play language is also different; girls use more nuanced language during play, while boys use direct language and commands. Girls have an advanced language facility in general and are less likely to use their language aggressively; they position themselves as more sensible to the boys' wildness (Barbara, 2011, p.34). Martin Barbara (2011) writes, girls "use[d] an extensive range of communication strategies to show friendship and solidarity", adding that they develop close friendships early, and have more complex ways of communicating (p.29). In contrast, Barbara writes that many boys take, "pleasure in demonstrating physical strength, ball skills, ability to build elaborate constructions and engaged in fighting games", and he notes that they use "words, gestures, and bodily postures to exclude girls from areas and activities dominated by boys" (2011, p.31).

In *Boys & Girls: Superheroes in the Doll Corner*, Vivian Gussin Paley (1984) writes, "kindergarten is a triumph of sexual stereotyping. No amount of subterfuge or propaganda deflects the five-year-old's passion for segregation by sex" (p. xi). Children crave gender delineation and seek to abide by gender rules; playing outside the gender

lines can be a source of great discomfort. At this stage, they are becoming more social and developing new relationships, and in turn, are more aware of gender differences. Some researchers believe that children do not need to have a vast and extensive gender understanding to begin gender segregation. Martin and Little (1990) note that "children do not need to have sophisticated levels of gender knowledge for preferences and stereotypes to develop" (p.1429). Boys and girls simply begin to watch each other and note how the opposite sex interacts and behaves. Whereas at age three, domestic play looks similar for both sexes, by age five lines are drawn. Boys take note of who should and should not be in the domestic play area and may shy away from dramatic play all together. They avoid any scheme that would leave them playing the role of mom or big sister. As Paley (1984) writes, "the doll corner is becoming a women's room", and boys stay away to reinforce that they are not women (p. xi).

As noted, Martin Barbara (2011) shares that children have a need to demonstrate their understanding of gender lines early. One way to express this need is to stick to activities that are clearly defined as "boy" or "girl". Another way is to "police the behavior of other children" (p.25). He calls this phenomenon "gender borderwork" (2011, p.43). In some classrooms this may result in the use of intended insults such as "that's what girls do" or "you are such a girl" as a means to thwart the behaviors of others. This demonstrates the discomfort that children feel even watching something they believe to be wrong. Emma Renold also found that taunting was common for boys who strayed from "the norm". In a 2004 study, she wrote, "over one third of boys were subject to routinized forms of gender-based bullying (including verbal and physical abuse, exclusion, ridicule and ritual humiliation) if they did not desire and/or 'fit' the hegemonic

ideal" (p.249). Hannah Hatch writes that boys and girls try to train one another how to be a girl or a boy at the same time that they figure out how to perform their own gender (2010). As they define who they should be, they also monitor others. It has been well documented by now that of the two sexes, girls are more likely to cross the play gender-divide than boys, for example girls playing the role of father, than boys playing the role of mother and in general, girls are more flexible with gender, such as with dress up items (Paley (1984), Thorne (1993), Renold (2004), Hatch & Hatch (2010)). Boys are more rigid and aware of what it might mean to cross the gender divide, as they receive messages about masculinity early on. The set-up of a school environment, and the support of classroom teachers, can impact willingness of students to experiment with non-gender stereotypical items during play time. The impact of the school environment is addressed below.

Impact of School Environment

While the research above demonstrates a strong developmental influence around children's gender roles in play, much of children's play is also determined by the environments in which the play takes place. Whether at home or at school, the toys and materials available help to dictate the scope and sequence of play exploration. When viewing play through the lens of gender, this means that spaces can be set up across a continuum offering more gendered to less –gendered opportunities. For example, the dramatic play area of a classroom may be predominantly kitchen-oriented, or it may highlight blocks and trains. In a qualitative study of teacher's view of gendered play in kindergarten, Meghan Lynch used ethnographic research methods to understand female teachers' views on dramatic play. Through online message boards, she gathered a

treasure trove of information and direct teacher dialogue regarding the setup of their dramatic play areas. She found that the majority of dramatic-play areas were set up with a feminine-tilt. One female teacher shared, “in one of my centers I will have a kitchen set-up, baby dolls with a crib and stroller, and dress up”, while another agreed, “I often feel that most of my activities are girls-oriented.” (2016, p. 686). Upon reflection, teachers in the study viewed their set-ups as inherently more female, and it seemed like this interview was the first time they considered how their dramatic play centers were set-up. Prior decisions appeared to have been subconscious.

Jones & Reynolds (2011) agree that the set-up of the environment impacts the way that children use the classroom as a stage for play. They write, “the scripts played by the children in a preschool or kindergarten program reflect the convergence of the experience children bring with them and the materials and equipment in the school environment” (p.15) They reinforce the idea that play needs props. Props can be actual representations of objects or can serve as imitations. Organic materials encourage children to be flexible in their use, and function. They concede that as children begin to master the elements of play, props take on less of a role, but time and space remain key (Jones & Reynolds, 2011, p.28). Berk (2006) concurs writing that educators must offer a wide variety of “both realistic materials and materials without clear function” in order to inspire fantastical role playing. She notes the example of children using blocks, cardboard cylinders and plastic bags to play pirate or to create creatures from outer space (p. 233).

Role of Teachers

As an important figure-head within a school setting, teachers greatly impact the gendered views of children within the classroom. Lynch’s research revealed that,

"examining gender roles in kindergarten classrooms frequently reveals the perpetuation of stereotypes". She found that, "teachers regularly segregate kindergarten students based upon gender", and that they, "encourage children, especially boys, to play with toys and in activities traditionally associated with their gender" (2014, p. 680). It can be deduced that children are praised when they reflect the values of the teacher and questioned when they skew from the norm.

For her 2006 Bank Street thesis, Jamie Cohen studied the teacher's role in gender relationships in the classroom. As part of her study, she interviewed teachers in various public schools and grades to determine the impact that gender had in their classrooms. She found that many teachers had gendered experiences from their own childhoods that subconsciously impacted their classroom decisions. In one interview, Valerie (teacher pseudonym) recalled being taunted for being a tomboy as a child. Her mother made her throw away her G.I. Joes and swap them for more feminine toys and dresses. Valerie felt that "she didn't have support at all for the interests she had. She doesn't recall her teachers doing anything about it; their attitude was that she needed to be more of a girl" (2006, p. 16). As a teacher (and an adult), Valerie noticed that girls in her classroom gravitate towards domestic-oriented dramatic play, at a higher rate than boys. She wondered if it was because boys felt they had to stay away, or whether it just occurred naturally. Other teachers involved in the study agreed. Cohen writes, "Debbie and Connie noticed that when the girls engage in building activities, it tends to be small and connected to domestic play, such as playing house or pets with their buildings" (2006, p. 22). At the conclusion of the study, the teachers realized that they would have to make a concerted effort in order to remove the gendered aspects of their classroom,

acknowledging the weight and responsibility they have in helping children navigate the play arena (2006, p.38).

Martin Barbara also believes that narrow gender school practices reinforce gender stereotypes and segregation (2011). He argues that even educators who appear to disagree with gender segregation get caught up in their own messages, and that the way we use language reflects our gendered perceptions. For example, teachers may say something like, "we don't have girls' only tables, but at the same time, say 'boys, stop shouting'!" (2011, p.39). There is a grouping that happens when we speak to gender as opposed to individuals and inherent divide that is formed. Addressing things as predominantly male or female may be ingrained in teachers' subconscious and therefore can be reflected in the minutia of their interactions. Jane Hatch struggles with her temptation to define gender for her students. While counting how many boys and how many girls were present during morning meeting, her kindergarten student, Timothy, decided he didn't want to count himself as a boy because he preferred girl things. Hatch reflects on her impulse to deny him this ambiguity and to reinforce that he is a boy (2010).

Impact of External Environment

While the setup of the classroom may influence what is used to play or what gender controls the dramatic play area, external environments send messages that are just as pervasive. Maccoby (2003) was one of the first to outline that children's play is largely determined by the "scripts" they learn from culture at large, most often transmitted through television and media (p.150). Jones and Reynolds (2011) define scripts as "play theme[s] based in the child's real or fantasy experiences", adding that, "it is the dramatic

portrayal of a sequence of events, with predictable variations" (p.15). Adults also follow scripts, but they are so embedded in our daily routines that we do not realize that we are acting them out. Therefore, society creates scripts for us all, and as children, we try them out for the first time.

Edwards, Knoche, and Kumru (2001) also write that "children may take in the ideas, attitudes, and values consistent with the rather simplified and extreme versions of gender stereotypes that the commercial media promote" (p.812). This socialization can happen through osmosis as it is reinforced by other agents of socialization in their external environment. Martin Barbara (2011) links early socialization to communities of practice, wherein "boys can be seen as apprentice men, and girls as apprentice women, learning through observation and peripheral participation what it means to be a man or woman in the local communities of practice in which they live" (p.23)

Other influences may be more direct as parents and caregivers help to perpetuate cultural stereotypes. For example, paternal pressure can be a factor in steering young boys away from "female" activities and materials, reflecting deep-seated feelings of male homophobia (Thorne, 1998) and personal discomfort with gender. There is more pressure on boys to be masculine than on girls to be feminine. Casper and Theilheimer (2009) agree, writing, "most theories of gender identity start with the assumption that children's perception of themselves as male and female and what that means are tied to sociocultural norms - the expectations and behaviors of the people around them- rather than to any underlying biological predisposition (p.182). Sameroff & Haith (1990) also note that, "the bottom line is that understanding children cannot be divorced from the

study of the contexts in which they develop" (p.14). Consequently, it is clear that the environment has a large impact on the how and what of children's play.

Impact of Single-Sex Schools

Much of the research that has been done on the value of single-sex education has been done to determine the effect that sex-segregation has on academic achievement; little has been written on how single-sex environments affect dramatic play. As Jennifer Martin and Jane A. Beese (2016) write, "proponents of single-sex education argue that there are differences between how boys and girls learn and behave in educational settings and that separating boys and girls by curriculum or schools increases students' academic achievement and academic interest" (p.87). Opponents argue that single-sex environments reinforce gender stereotypes and have little weight in academic achievement. While it is probably not as clear cut as that, Martin & Beese's study noted that some administrators trying out segregated classrooms found there to be more differences among the girls' and boys' groups than between them (2016, p.94), and therefore concluded there was no merit with regards to academic performance in single-sex schooling.

Recently, some single-sex schools have attempted to shake the idea that they perpetuate gender-stereotyping. In their study, *Challenging the pervasiveness of hyper masculinity and heteronormativity in an all-boys school,* Chris Hickey and Amanda Mooney (2017) found that while, "some boys' schools appear content with their 'masculine' profile, others appear more eager to present themselves as projecting tolerant and inclusive environments wherein respectful gender relations are actively encouraged" (p. 237). However, they concede that, "by the very nature of naming a school as a 'boys

school', gender is inherently foreground; women are positioned as 'different' or 'other' in these spaces by the political, social and economic structure that permeate educational institutions" (p. 241) In other words, students must leave any ambiguity at the door. They conclude that there is much work to be done in order to integrate more inclusive gender philosophies within single-sex institutions.

By analyzing my own experiences in the classroom, I hope to see how my observations align with the ideas and beliefs expressed in the above literature review, and to understand more about the holes in single-sex education research as it pertains to dramatic play.

Descriptions of Environments & Notes

BRENTWOOD

Girls School, Upper East Side

What is available in classrooms for dramatic play?

At Brentwood[1], dramatic play took place within individual classrooms during a period called "Work & Play". In the classroom where I taught, dramatic play items were tucked into a shelving unit which, kitty-cornered with another small table, helped to outline where the play was to take place. An adjacent window perch took the play vertical with the assistance of a bench close to the floor. The bench allowed the girls to get up onto the colorful cushions that awaited them on the windowsill. The block area was on the opposite side of the dramatic play shelf and was not visible to dramatic-players unless

[1] All names of individuals and institutions changed for anonymity.

one was standing directly next to the shelf itself. A similar window sill set-up invited girls to observe building from above on the block-side.

Most of the dramatic play items were passed down from teacher to teacher through the years and represented an amalgamation of objects. Miscellaneous “real” pots and pans were mixed together with small plastic toy utensils, while plastic food floated among a few random wooden items. There was a basket of baby-doll clothes, which appeared to have once been worn by a real-life baby. There was even a trademark newborn hospital blanket, with a stamp from a local hospital. There were a few vintage scarves, mixed together with old costume jewelry; clip-on earrings, big chains, fancy sunglasses, and bangles. There were no formal dress-up costumes, and the girls used the scarves as skirts, dresses, wraps, head pieces and more to create elaborate outfits. There was also a bin of used electronics containing old cell phones and filmless cameras.

Four brand new baby-dolls arrived while I was at Brentwood. They were requested by a new head teacher who selected them from a school supply catalogue. The dolls represented an array of skin-colors and were entirely plastic; they did not have hair or genitals. They were kept in big red bins, lined up in a row on the dramatic play shelf. However, they often found their way into other random areas of the room during play time. There was one plastic stroller and two bottles with milk-like liquid trapped inside. Aside from the addition of the new baby dolls, the new head teacher mirrored the set-up of previous years and replicated the layout that had been in place.

In the block area, there were approximately 100 blocks of varying shapes and sizes. There was also a bin of wooden people blocks and transportation blocks which could be used to build and play on the block-side. The block area was cleaned up at the

end of every play session and once cleared, the area was used for other things throughout the day including rest. There were math manipulatives in the classroom, but they were not used in the block area or during dramatic play. There were no other building materials available. The overall set up and use of both the dramatic play and block area were random. It was up to the girls to make the most out of the space and to create something out of the mix that was available.

"Work & Play", the period when building and play took place, occurred every afternoon right after lunch. Teachers would pull girls during this time to finish activities that had been started during various academic periods of the week, while others made their selections. Sometimes this thwarted the girls from being able to use Work & Play efficiently, as they were unable to carry out full dramatic play games or to pick up on scenarios started during other play times.

Descriptions and Notes of the Block Area

A few times a year, girls were assigned to the block area with a pre-determined buddy during Work & Play to build a structure and share it with the class. During this time, the two buddies determined what and how they would build. For example, girls were encouraged to negotiate and compromise in both the planning and the building of their structures. They often used signs and other elements to make their building cohesive, creating sprawling communities and elaborate structures. One pair I observed constructed a hospital center and outhouse buildings that served as a gift center, visitor center, and a cafeteria. It was mini-city planning at work. Despite the elaborate detail that some teams created, it seemed that the outcome of this buddy-building was more about working on relationship skills than a focus on creating an imaginative structure or

enjoying free play. Sometimes buddy-building led to conflict as the ideas of the more dominant child won out. Apart from team-building activities, block building was rarely highlighted as an activity during Work & Play time, and most girls preferred to use the empty block area to draw or read.

Descriptions and Notes of the Dramatic Play Area

In contrast to the block area, the dramatic play area was popular all year. The girls loved to play with the baby dolls and dress up with the scarves and sunglasses. There was one period of time when the same group of girls would get up on the low bench in front of the window and put on a song-and-dance routine. They'd ask me to play Ariana Grande or Taylor Swift music for them to lip-sync and dance along to. While this was the source of much entertainment, it occasionally was a stage for conflict, as the girls argued over roles and characters. When playing house, another favorite, the most coveted roles were that of mother and baby - while the sister roles were handed out in abundance. The same few girls were comfortable playing the dad role, and once this was clear, they were no longer given an option: it seemed that they would be the dad every time they played.

The same dramatic play themes seemed consistent throughout the year with the emphasis remaining on house schemes and stage performances. Occasionally the girls would also play school. They seemed intrigued to act out good vs. bad scenarios, with one girl always seemingly in control of the others, determining their fate. For example, the older sister would be scolded by the mom for not watching the baby while she was at the store or the teacher would send a group of students to time out. They enjoyed acting in roles of authority and trying out different levels of control. One day while playing house, the girls decided that two of the sisters would pretend to have broken their legs,

and they used to scarves as casts as they "sat in the car" on the way home from the hospital. At the time of this portrayal, another child in the class had a real broken leg and plaster cast, and others were intrigued. They used the dramatic play area to act out what this experience might be like.

When playing with the plastic baby dolls, the girls were very gentle and nurturing. They cooed at them and held them. I am reminded of one instance in which a child, Jasmine, carefully swaddled her plastic baby and held her to her chest as if to mimic breastfeeding. She looked down at the baby, smiling. Dramatic play was a vessel for the girls to act out their sensitive, nurturing side, and to try out some of what they'd observed in their own lives.

Occasionally, dramatic play would carry on during outdoor play times where girls ran around on the outdoor equipment and used small bikes and rubber hula hoops to navigate the small, fenced-in, play area. One game I remember vividly was called "chase that baby", where a handful of girls would play tag chasing after a group of bad "babies" on the loose. Once they captured a wild baby, they would say "now listen baby – don't try that again" and smile as the baby took off upon release. Other days, they'd use the foam blocks available in the outdoor area to create a restaurant scene with tables and large chairs. They'd put their feet up and use imaginary utensils and plates of food.

Role of the Teacher

Aside from encouraging the girls to build with a buddy, or working with small groups to finish up assignments, teachers were relatively hands-off during Work & Play. For me, this was an opportunity observe and take notes on what and who was playing. We later used these notes to inform larger takeaways on student performance, and shared

notable trends with the school psychologist and administration. We would also share the list of activities that the girls gravitated towards with parents during conferences.

Throughout the year, we had many conversations about gender in the classroom, specifically as it pertained to Women's History Month. As a school, Brentwood celebrated International Women's Day, and we learned about famous women both past and present. The girls particularly gravitated towards the Ruth Bader Ginsburg picture-book, *I Dissent*. As a follow-up activity to the story, the girls wrote letters to influential women in their lives. They wrote to all sorts of characters: mothers, aunts, sisters, caregivers, Beyoncé, Taraji P. Henson, and RBG herself. One girl wrote in her letter to Justice Ginsburg, "you inspire me because you give me choices to be whoever I want to be when I grow up". We also had several discussions about equity and inclusion in terms of race. My co-teacher identified as a woman of color, and we addressed stereotypes of gender and race as a community. We never directly connected discussions about gender to discussions of dramatic play, and so I don't have any notable shifts to note in terms of play pre- and post- gender discussions. My experience at Brentwood is contrasted to my time at Clark below.

CLARK

Boys School, Upper West Side

What is available in classrooms for dramatic play?

Dramatic play has evolved drastically in my two years at Clark. Until the start of this year, the dramatic play areas were relatively sparse within each classroom. Aside from a few rogue plastic food items, and an old toy cash-register, dramatic play items

were limited to plastic animals and various building materials. There were no baby dolls and all of the dress-up clothing was thrown away after a lice outbreak in the grade years prior and never replaced. A bag of old-puppets sat in an undesirable location and was scarcely noticed by the boys. An old mirror, leftover from the dress-up days, sat abandoned in a corner. Once the dramatic play clothes were disposed of, that option was taken out of the rotation for Choice Time, and the boys played with the plastic animals instead. The children brought out the cash register on occasion, but it otherwise sat undesired on a shelf amidst board games and puzzles.

The various building materials available allowed the boys to be imaginative and they often created elaborate structures out of Magna-TilesÒ, LegosÒ, and Lincoln LogsÒ. They used these manipulatives to explore their creativity, creating large structures with the Magna-TilesÒ, and plastic animals. They would call these their zookeeper scenarios. For example, during one scene, the large orange tiger escaped from his pen at the zoo, and the boys spent the entire Choice Time "searching" for it. It ultimately appeared and the zoo community was saved. "Choice Time" happens every afternoon at Clark and is usually the full hour before dismissal.

As of this year, the school administration created a new policy that encouraged more opportunities for dramatic play. The impetus for faculty began with a series of workshops led by a prominent gender educator who will be referred to as Jackie in this paper. Jackie arrived amidst mounting pressure on single-sex schools to consider the ways they enforce gender stereotypes. Her book was summer reading, and each grade level met with her to examine ways to make classrooms and curricula more inclusive. The timing of my research aligned perfectly with her work at Clark. As opposed to

sprucing up items within individual classrooms, a designated dramatic play area was introduced in the Lower School center, which is used by both kindergarten and first grade, in an effort to put Jackie's advice into action during Choice Time.

The new dramatic play area attempts to challenge gender stereotypes head-on by incorporating play items that have been previously categorized as "boy" or "girl". This includes tutus, skirts, mermaid outfits, baby dolls, strollers and other items. The new area also has costumes ordered from the internet including that of police officer, firefighter, train conductor, chef, dragon, magician, and so on. The costumes are hung up on hooks in a large costume-keeping structure, while the hats and accessories are assembled in bins. The baby dolls are lined up in a neat row on a shelf atop the costumes and their stroller is parked to the side of the dress-up stall. To the right of the costume area is a cabinet and stove with four plastic burners next to a sink and dishrack. A dishtowel hangs from the door to the oven which is positioned just below the burners. Every area is labeled with photos, and bins indicate where items are to go once play is over. However, these labels are rarely heeded and some days a costume ends up in the sink or food gets stuck with baby accessories

Descriptions and Notes of the Dramatic Play Area

The first day that the new dramatic play area appeared, there was a huge and immediate impact - all of the boys ran to it and the novelty of the new items was immense. They threw on the skirts and twirled around, not paying any mind to who was watching. They giggled at the sight of each other in frilly pink frocks, but that didn't stop them from trying things out. There was a mystique to these new items, some that had previously been absent. However, over time, the boys seem much more aware of gender-

normative peer pressure and began to shy away from the overly dramatic pieces. While a consistent group of boys continue to gravitate towards dramatic play during choice, the large mass that appeared at the onset dwindled after the first month and only the devotees remain.

The steady constant for the group that has persisted has been the baby dolls - which are anatomically correct and have a wide assortment of accessories including baby wipes. While at times the boys can be rough with the dolls, through discussion and practice they have learned how to play with them respectfully and have enjoyed caring for them. This learning was fostered by a teacher who was always present at the start of dramatic play to intervene and show the boys how to use the dolls appropriately. The presence of a teacher also ensured that the boys interacted respectfully with one another as they experimented with the new items. The baby dolls serve many roles but most notably a contingent of boys take them on elaborate trips. On one occasion, Colin, who likes to play dad, grabbed the diaper bag and frantically filled it with what his family would need for their trip while his companions prepared the train tickets and spoke with the conductor. Occasionally someone will play the mom, but more often there appears to be no named female role. Other boys seem less comfortable even being named “Dad”.

While in the midst of writing this thesis, I got married and upon my return to the classroom, boys experimented with the concept of a wedding in the dramatic play area. After showing a few pictures of me in a wedding dress to the class, one child, Teddy, became enamored by the idea of a bedazzled frock. Later in the week I found him draped in glittery costumes in the dramatic play area announcing that there would be a wedding. A snippet of dialogue is below:

> "Today I'm a girl and I'm going to get married soon!!" Teddy exclaimed as he fanned himself with a large Venetian fan.
>
> "I heard on the news that robbers were going to come and steal your jewelry before your wedding – I know that they took it because the news people tell me what to do because I always watch television." Colin reported, dressed in a police uniform.
>
> "Tomorrow we are going to marry – get your wedding dress now!" Teddy said to me with a smile on his face. "Get my earrings back!", he directed Colin.
>
> "Yeah I know, I'm trying to find my handcuffs", Colin replied.
>
> Meanwhile Sean watches from the corner distracted as he searches for the badge of his firefighter outfit.
>
> "Hey – you are under arrest – you have one more warning or I am sending you to prison for 25 years", Colin says to no one in particular. Teddy lifts his skirt and fake cries. "I want real earrings so that I'm beautiful like a lady!" he exclaims.
>
> Then Jake appears: "I'm a dragon who is going to protect the castle where Teddy is going to get married", he yells wearing the red dragon costume which covers his head but leaves his face visible.
>
> "Good -We only have half an hour to eat the cake!" Teddy says to Jake. "Body guard, lock the drawbridge!"

Much to his dismay, there were no real earrings for Teddy to wear, but he settled for two plastic hoops that he held up to his ears. I made a note to add costume jewelry to the dramatic play materials for next year.

Another recent, recurring theme is that of King and rule maker, as the boys make themselves crown hats and march around the room chanting orders at the other children. One day, Teddy, made himself a large green crown and cut thorns at the top. He then asked his friend, Patrick, to make him a book about how to rule. "Please make me a book about kings so I know what they wear, and how they do things, because I'm a King", Teddy demanded. He then proceeded to stomp around the room turning to others asking, "WHAT ARE YOU DOING?" in a deep voice and then promptly turning around to ask someone else. It strikes me that after several months in the classroom, this is an attempt to try out authoritative roles and for the boys to put themselves in the position of rule

maker. This makes sense, as the first half of their school experience is devoted to learning the rules and routine. In reality they very rarely are the ones making the rules, at home or at school, and thus dramatic play allows them the opportunity to be in control.

Descriptions and Notes of the Block Area

The block area at Clark has been an impressive staple of the kindergarten curriculum for years and I am continually awed by the structures that the boys create. The block area is also a communal space in the Lower School center for kindergarten and first graders. It is a very popular choice during Choice Time, with boys flocking to play. There are close to 300 blocks to choose from and an ample arena to create structures. The only rules are that the structure cannot be higher than the boy building it and cannot go outside a highlighted orange tape barrier. The block area presents opportunities for a different kind of dramatic play than the dramatic play artifacts do. The boys tend to create cities and ships, rollercoasters and train tracks that demonstrate their keen imaginations. There is a great deal of self-talk and group conversation involved with the building. I recently watched as a group built a tycoon rollercoaster and took turns moving a cylindrical block along its' ramps.

The dramatic play area is visible from the block area through a circular opening and I sometimes catch boys looking longingly or inquisitively at the dramatic play area, while also clinging to the safety net that the block area provides.

Role of the Teacher

The role of the teacher has been much more pronounced with the introduction of the new dramatic play area than it was in the past. At first, teachers were intrigued to see how the boys were using the new items. Over time, we have had to intervene when play

got too rough, or when items were not being used appropriately. We have also had to encourage boys to try out the area that have otherwise been uninterested. This makes me wonder at what point are educators pushing children towards items for which they have no interest in an effort to make sure we are being more inclusive. I further explore this thought in my insights section to follow.

Our curriculum has also ramped up regarding gender, as the boys are encouraged to think about gender stereotyping as it pertains to our new dramatic play items. They were taught the phrase stereotyping when we discussed gendered toys and read books like Charlotte Zolotow's *William's Doll* (1972) and Christine Baldacchino's *Morris Micklewhite and the Tangerine Dress* (2014). Similar to at Brentwood, we have studied important women in history and learned about ways that women have been excluded from sports, politics, and more. Last year, while studying the Olympics, we learned that women were not allowed to compete in the high jump until 2014, despite men competing in the event for 90 years. Outraged, the boys wrote a letter to the Olympic Committee addressing their concerns.

Much of this new education around gendered play seems new to students and teachers. After speaking with a former colleague who works in a pre-school setting, they are not having conversations before kindergarten about gender. While I think it is wonderful to teach the boys how to talk the talk, I do not always see them walking the walk. In an afterschool Drama program that I teach for first-graders and kindergarteners we introduced the idea of performing a version of Peter Pan. The boys were thrilled until it came time for the assignment of characters, and they fumbled over who would play Wendy. "No one wants to play a girl because we are all boys!!" Luke screamed. When I

challenged them to think about what they had learned in class and female characters they loved in movies, another boy, Cody, said “I like Elsa in Frozen!”, to which Ralph replied, “boys don’t like Elsa!”. Then Huck chimed in and said, “that is a stereotype”, looking directly at me for reassurance. I wonder how much he believes this or how much he wanted to appease me in this situation. This and other inquiries are addressed in the following section: Insights and Wonderings.

Insights and Wonderings

The more time I spend observing and writing about dramatic play, the more insights I develop and questions I uncover. When I first thought about what this thesis might reveal, I surmised that the girls would have more progressive and transformative anecdotes than the boys. However, once my fingers hit the keyboard, I realized that in my experience, it has been the opposite. Researchers and educators have long argued that girls have the opportunity to experiment with gender roles and explore who they are through dramatic play (Barbara (2011), Paley (1984), Thorne (1993). My experience so far indicates that boys are just as intrigued and will experiment if given the freedom. I have the chance to analyze my unique experience in the following section.

Role of Environment: Materials and Set-Up

In reading through my observations, one cannot ignore the glaring differences between the dramatic play set-ups and materials present in the two environments. While there was something endearing about the mish-mash of objects available for the girls to play with at Brentwood, they were lacking in concrete play tools and space. I often

wonder how their play might have been different had they been given a proper dramatic play set-up as opposed to a small kitty-cornered area, and what they might have gravitated towards had there been a more thorough selection of play items. Would this have affected which girls went to Dramatic Play? How would a different set of materials dictate different games? How would they play with male-stereotyped toys like trains and construction tools? I surmise that they would have integrated them without much encouragement, as they did the new dolls, but cannot be sure.

The boys, on the other hand, had a much richer opportunity to play with an array of items than the girls. The presence of non-gender stereotypical dramatic play items was clearly a novelty when they first arrived. To see a whole throng of boys running towards a bin of tutus was remarkable. Watching them, it was clear that this was the first time many of these boys were experimenting with dolls and tutus, otherwise deemed "off-limits" or only for sisters or female counterparts. Even though there was some initial giggling when they first put the costumes on, they were committed to trying them and appeared to be having a great time. They walked around in the firefighter costumes with as much ease as the mermaid frocks.

Over time, the initial excitement wore off and nervous laughter turned into more uncomfortable giggling and ultimately some decisions to stay away from the dramatic play area. The tutus were not the only source of discomfort, as the dolls soon became a target as well. While at first the boys liked to pick up the dolls and dress them in different outfits, the way that some boys used the dolls shifted as time progressed. They began to hit the dolls against the walls and to throw them around the dramatic play area. While research suggests that this kind of behavior may be indicative of a child's own abuse at

home, (Cunningham & Baker, 2012[2]), teachers at Clark surmised that this had more to do with their discomfort with the dolls than abuse. We equated it to a more serious form of bathroom humor, where they feel discomfort and so use what they know is inappropriate as a way to get a rise out of their friends. While they initially accepted the new items, and took them into their play, the shift that took place shows signs of insecurity and anxiety with how they were meant to use them. Hannah and Jane Hatch discuss the idea that boys need to shout their masculinity from the proverbial rooftop, as they make it clear in every way, that they are boys. Hitting the baby dolls into the wall made it clear that they were not going to act as mother figures, which Hatch and Hatch attribute to boys needs to, "make it clear in every way that they're not girls by showing they have no feminine characteristics" (2010, p.381). I wonder how the new items would have been used in a co-ed environment. Would the boys have been more wary to try things out or more willing? Would they have gotten violent with the baby dolls? Research shows that young boys are more physical than girls (Maccoby, 2003, Katch, 2001, Barbara, 2011), but would the girls have softened the space? Certain students highlighted in my observations, including Teddy and Colin, were not afraid to put on the tutus, call themselves women in play, or enact more feminine roles. Would they still been so willing had there been girls to take play these roles instead? The impact of the materials therefore cannot be ignored when analyzing the differences between the two spaces, and neither can the idea that the materials did not need to be shared with the other gender.

Impact of School Environment and Role of Teacher

[2] In 2012, Alison Cunningham and Linda Baker wrote "Little Eyes, Little Ears: How Violence against a mother shapes child as they grow", and it was published on the Government of Canada website. In the article, Baker and Cunningham explain that, "imitation in play may be related to aggression they saw or heard" at home (2012, p16).

Both the materials and space available are at the discretion of the school, and therefore the role of both school and teacher cannot be ignored. Clark is determined to help boys break-free from the gender stereotypes that have long plagued all-boys settings, and therefore decisions regarding the new dramatic play area were made with that in mind. Many all-boys settings acknowledge the ways that they reinforce hyper-masculinity and there are movements afoot to change this (Hickey & Mooney, 2017). For some schools, both co-ed and single-sex, this includes emphasizing women's history and bringing women to the forefront of curriculum. This was the case at both Clark and Brentwood. Clark took it a step further with their new dramatic play set-up, hiring external consultants to help strategize gender discussions and the introduction of gendered initiatives throughout Lower School curriculums.

Teachers are then responsible for carrying out the ideals set forth by the school and must weave conversations about gender and stereotypes into the classroom. They must train themselves how to do this effectively and feel brave enough to challenge their own beliefs and perceptions (Hatch & Hatch, 2013). They must be prepared to intervene and encourage children to experiment with things like dramatic play. In my experience, educators are diligent and committed to this initiative, but I have found that students can talk the talk during discussions but then don't necessarily walk the walk when they leave our doors. It's similar to the analogy of leading a horse to water; we can open their minds to new gender ideas, but we can't force change. To quote my mentor, Virginia Casper, "a lot has changed but little has been transformed" (2018). There will always be a subset of boys who are more comfortable with gender ideas than others and therefore some boys will not go to the dramatic play corner no matter how hard teachers may try.

Role of Home Environment

The boys' discomfort with some elements of dramatic play, and the lack of follow through, begs the question of what messages they are receiving at home. I did wonder how conversations occurred at home when the boys reported about the new dramatic play items. Though the school informed parents at back-to-school night about the new gender-initiatives, it was not necessarily clear if or how they would follow through at home. I remember asking one boy if he would play with the new baby dolls and he said no, because, "Mom said that boys do not play with dolls". Schools can only do so much if conflicting messages about gender are expressed at home. This makes me wonder how on-board parents must be in order for a school's gender initiatives to be successful. I will note that my student, Colin, who is very comfortable with the dolls, has two dads at home and therefore he receives messages that other boys do not; he sees men in roles that other boys may not. If more fathers are more a part of disrupting gender stereotypes, would their sons have more freedom to explore? Research shows that parents attempt to pass along their gender beliefs and attitudes to their children and that they create environments that support what those beliefs are. They select play items and coordinate relationships that they believe follow their gender guidelines (Edwards, Knoche, Kumru, 2001). If parents brought more non-gender-stereotypical items into the home, and allowed their children to experiment freely, would this have an effect?

Authority Rules

As previously outlined in the literature review, five-year-olds are tempted to push the limits that have been set both at home and at school. They are not in control of either environment, having to follow the rules and routines set by parents, caregivers, teachers

etc. Dramatic play, therefore, allows them the opportunity to experience control in a way that they are otherwise not able to. Themes like cops and robbers, mom and reckless baby, dragon protecting the castle, all allow them to exert power. Often times children battle for hierarchy in these scenarios, negotiating roles that will allow them to feel the most superior. They shout phrases that they have heard adults use like "get to bed this instant" or "sit there and think about what you've done". They are intrigued by power struggle, and dominance. They thrive off of the reactions they get, and enjoy trying out new relational skills (Paley, 2014). This type of authority testing was evident at both Brentwood and Clark.

At Clark, it would appear that children believe there is a sense of weakness associated with depicting a role that is not typical for your gender, and a sense of power that comes from policing students who are experimenting with the gender divide. Students who want to appear secure in their gender identity, exert authority over gender roles when playing. They take charge in assigning roles and often give that of the opposite sex to someone else. I am reminded of an instance that took place when we went to the park last year. The boys were going to play a game "Little Chicken Parm Dinner" and were assigning roles. It struck me that they were more willing to be the "soon-to-be-eaten" chicken parm than they were the mother. The boy in charge, Sam, decided Patrick, a small child, should be the mother because "mothers are small". That led me to believe that in his mind, men were big and strong, and women were small and meek. I am also intrigued by the marriage scenario I highlighted in Clark's observations section. The cop felt the need to protect the damsel in distress and protect her from the dangerous bad guys who had stolen her jewelry. Would this look different if the main role was that of a

groom instead of a bride? How much do images and ideals of masculinity portrayed in the outside world affect this idea of protecting or saving?

Impact of Single-Sex Environment

Much of what I read while researching gender and dramatic play highlights how the two genders play in direct opposition to each other; that is, the research commented on how the two genders interact during dramatic play in the same environment. Edwards, Knoche, and Kumru (2001) discuss how the genders select play companions and analyze what they consider a hall-mark of early childhood: "the pulling apart of boys and girls" (p.810). They note that their differences in play style lend to this need to divide, and to seek those that fit within their own gender expectations. Since neither environment I observed had a pulling apart by gender, much of what I witnessed has me wondering how the two groups would have interacted together. It also has me pondering about the goal of single-sex institutions. My research into the *why* of single-sex schooling uncovered rationales tied to academic performance and achievement. Martin & Beese (2016) found that there were ultimately more differences among boys and girls than between them in the academic arena, so what impact does gender really have on academics? How do these differences change with age? Brentwood believed in empowering women and giving them a voice in a male-dominated world. Often colleagues spoke about how great it was that girls did not need to compete with boys and were not dominated in the classroom. However, I noted that they were often dominated by one another instead. At Clark, the mission is to help boys prepare to be leaders and to give them a moral compass. Students would also stress that it helps create a "brotherhood". Doesn't the idea of a brotherhood

follow age-old gender stereotypes? How much change, in regard to gender, can actually take place within a single-sex environment if they remain single-sex?

Conclusion

In December of this year, faculty at Clark met with Jackie to provide her with updates on how our new gender curriculum was unfolding. We shared anecdotes of success and moments of perceived failure, all of which were met with great enthusiasm. The fact is, gender work is hard. The pervasive quality of the media and cultural stereotypes has made it so that there are many layers which must be peeled back before a teacher can truly say that they teach in a gender-free classroom, if that is even fully possible or the goal. Gender education is a process and as noted in the above thesis, there will always be kids who are more willing and flexible with their thinking than others. The best that educators can do, at this time, is inform themselves, and think critically about how gender may be constructed in their classrooms and curriculum. Teachers can then take a supportive role in imparting non-stereotypical material both directly and indirectly in the classroom and can provide space and opportunity for children to experiment with new information through play and other avenues. Teachers can also encourage parents to participate in "gender-creative" initiatives and conversations at home. Children have an inherent want to please adults, and therefore some students may talk the talk before being ready to take the leap. This is all part of the process. As Barack Obama famously said at his re-election speech in 2012, "progress will come in fits and starts - it's not always a straight line – it's not always a smooth path".

I am curious to see what progress looks like for single-sex schools in this country. As evidenced, there are movements afoot to challenge the way that single-sex schools, especially all-boys institutions, reinforce gender stereotypes. I'm encouraged by the steps taken at Clark to challenge historical ideologies but wonder if we can ever take gender out of the discussion while a school remains single-sex. Gender is so inherently tied to the whole notion of single-sex schooling that it seems hard to imagine an alternative. While writing this paper, I often wondered about what it meant for children not to go to school with the "other". I found that in my experience, it has allowed for an expanded definition of boy and girl, but that it isn't necessarily a test to their gender understanding if they don't see the opposite. I can't stop wondering what dramatic play gender education looks like in a co-ed classroom.

What I am sure of is that play must remain in all kindergarten curriculums, and that its' significance during early childhood cannot be ignored. Children are little sponges, who act out what they perceive in order to create meaning. Play allows them to take in the world around them and helps to shape their identities. Martin Barbara (2011) wrote that the onset of school is the first time "young children need to establish themselves as legitimate participants in communities of femininity and masculinity by interpreting and generating messages available to them, drawing on their experiences from home, and those they encounter" (p.21). If messages and expectations change, I wonder how school communities will expand and evolve.

A few weeks ago, I was sitting outside in the Lower School center at Clark observing the block building and play taking place. A group of fourth graders bounded down from the third floor, in search of another teacher. They paused, shocked at the play that was

unfolding. Kindergarten boys were wearing frocks and had dragon tails draped down their backs. The fourth-graders looked at each other and then began to laugh. The kindergarteners looked at me and at each other. I could see that with age, the world of dramatic play changes. Kids gravitate towards more advanced themes and complex games, and the role of imaginary play evolves. I wonder how my kindergartners will change once they move on, and if they will stand firm in their new beliefs about gender or if they'll look in shock at future kindergarteners too. Only time will tell.

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