

BY COLLETTE TABER  
WSMS Teacher



## **TOMBOYS, PRINCESSES, & TOUGH GUYS**

### **One Teacher's Quest for Gender Equity in the Classroom**

**“WORDS can be everything. They can expand a child's perception of what is possible. They can also limit. It all boils down to expectations.”**

Suzanne Hunton is head teacher in classroom 3W at West Side Montessori School. Like many of her colleagues, she has been encouraged to bring her outside academic research into the classroom, testing the merits of the theoretical on the rigors of a routine school day.

For almost a decade, the focus of Suzanne's exploration has been gender equity in the classroom. She has gathered significant research suggesting that a child's comprehension of gender roles, including attitudes about gender, develops early in life. We learn what it means to be a girl or a boy from our

“I now think critically about my own behavior, my choice of words, and what messages I may be sending to impressionable minds.”

– SUZANNE HUNTON



parents and other caregivers, from our earliest classmates, and from the books and other media in our environment.

Over a twelve-week period in 2007, Suzanne surveyed the parents of the children in her classroom. Respectful of the participants' privacy, she collected details about each household's composition, parents' professions, and the toys and books available to the children. For countless hours, she documented the play and interaction of the children in her classroom. Suzanne also interviewed parents to gain a sense of where subconscious gender biases may exist. Gently, respectfully, she teased to the surface those assumptions and the consequent choices and behaviors that can lead to unwelcome, negative expectations for our children.

#### WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS...

Children as young as two years of age begin to construct an understanding of what constitutes a girl and a boy and what each is capable of accomplishing. By the age of seven, a child may have already completed this picture. During those critical early years, it is imperative that the adults in a child's life be *aware* of how they may be affecting the formation of self-image.

“The process of gathering data and conducting research in the classroom was enlightening,” Suzanne says. “I now think critically about my own behavior, my choice of words, and what messages I may be sending to impressionable minds.” Suzanne focused her efforts on three significant areas: language, modeling, and media.

#### MORE THAN STICKS AND STONES

Through a concerted effort, teachers and parents can work together to become more sensitive to their choice of words, consciously trying to eliminate any biases from their vocabulary and teaching repertoire. Suzanne has found it important to continuously monitor her own language strategy for calling on children in the classroom, both individually and in groups. “I try to be keenly aware of the social relationships in the classroom and the resulting language,” Suzanne says. She does not group children into single-sex activities or lines, and she intervenes in cases of gender-based teasing and exclusion, such as games involving “boys chasing the girls” or “no boys (or girls) allowed.”

Other choices can have more subtle ramifications. Language is the one constant for children when deciphering cultural norms and beliefs. “Children are exposed to gender stereotypes and beliefs through the way we speak,” Suzanne explains. “A culture's negative attitudes towards one sex are passed along through language, so we must be mindful of word choice and tone.” For example, when indicating an object

or an unnamed person, most people will refer to it as “he.” This can very quickly become the norm for a child, effectively negating the possibility of a female participant. One child’s adept observation skills were apparent in her response to a question about why she kept referring to a nondescript teddy bear as “he.” She said, “I’m more used to ‘he.’ I always say ‘he.’”

Ultimately, it is all about a balanced approach. Suzanne counsels nurturing sensitivity to word choice and making sure that descriptors for both genders are equally represented. For instance, she suggests purging the phrase “you guys” when speaking to a mixed-sex group, and making an effort to use gender-neutral designations, such as “firefighter” and “police officer.”

Beyond language, tone of voice can influence how a child will view gender. Adults will often imply that boys are strong

### WHAT CHILDREN MAY BE HEARING WHEN YOU SAY...

- “You look pretty today.” [Appearance is a defining quality.]
- “You guys come here.” [The girls in the group are not worth recognizing.]
- “Pink is for girls.” [Something is wrong with me because I like the color pink.]
- “You’re okay. Stop crying.” [Be tough all the time. Showing emotion is bad.]
- “Dolls are for girls.” [Boys aren’t nurturers.]

and girls are fragile by adjusting the pitch and/or volume of their voice accordingly. One parent in Suzanne’s survey said, “I think I speak more softly with girls, feeling more protective of them. In contrast, I’m more likely to get boys to ‘settle down.’” It is important to ask yourself whether you are responding to a situation or to a child’s gender.

### ENRICHING THE REAL WORLD THAT IS THE CLASSROOM

Any environment—school, home, or even the mall—may communicate information to children about very narrowly defined gender roles, e.g., that women can only pursue certain professions or that men can only hope for a limited parental role. In response, a young child in the midst of forming conceptual patterns may restrict her or his involvement in behaviors perceived as “inappropriate” for her or his gender. This self-restriction effectively decreases opportunities for skill-developing interactions and learning experiences. “It is through an equality of play that children can begin to see that these roles are for everyone,” Suzanne points out. “We want children to observe, practice, and learn all the skills they will need to be successful in school and in their adult lives.”

As a result of her research, Suzanne has become methodical about monitoring her own behavior for gender stereotypes. She has also begun modeling activities traditionally gender-typed for the opposite sex. Suzanne now spends more time in the building block area, while her male assistant teacher engages in dramatic play with the children, participating in cooking and cleaning activities as well as nurturing activities, such as doll play. Suzanne routinely introduces the children to the full spectrum of social and occupational roles occupied by women and men in the United States. She invites community members who exemplify non-traditional roles, such as male nurses and female firefighters, to visit the classroom.

An educational environment can be influential in many

ways, including through materials and curriculum and, significantly, through children interacting with each other. Suzanne has reorganized her classroom to facilitate girls’ and boys’ involvement in a range of activities, encouraging both active and quiet play, as well as large and small motor work. For example, she has integrated the previously segregated block area with other activities, and she has situated the dramatic play areas in places where children will be more likely to simultaneously engage in large motor activities, such as climbing, lifting, and carrying.

### HARNESSING THE POWER OF CONVERSATION

“I think it is important to point out exactly how silly it is to assume that ‘just because I like this or that’ this makes me a boy or a girl,” Suzanne remarks wryly. “I like to think of regular conversations with the children as validation of ‘so what.’” (“So what if I’m a girl. I can run fast, climb high.”) And, her students do get it. Often, laughter has served as the most effective means of delivering a positive message about gender.

Literature typically serves as one of the most powerful tools in Suzanne’s overflowing kit of strategies. She uses books and the subsequent discussions about them as a means of communicating a simple message: gender does not indicate capability. She picks books that depict the achievements of characters in terms of their abilities and initiative, rather than beauty or a sweet, compliant nature. Male characters are portrayed, as often as female characters, as nurturing, caring, and sensitive.

Suzanne regards the group conversations, which are always a part of any class reading, as a critical component of her strategy to develop healthy, gender-fair attitudes. Her goal is to produce an increased sense of self-awareness and self-confidence in the children. She encourages discussions by asking divergent and open-ended questions. Such questions have no right or wrong answer. She promotes non-judgmental attitudes and empathy by asking the children if anyone “thinks differently” about what has been said by the previous speaker. She often models an alternate position and actively promotes tolerance for all viewpoints.

### WHAT MESSAGE IS YOUR HOME LIBRARY SENDING?

- Do the stories acknowledge and value differences and similarities among people?
- Are the adventurers and explorers depicted in the stories represented by both sexes?
- Can both boys and girls positively identify with the characters?
- Is there a balanced representation of multiple cultures, perspectives, and experiences?

### MONTESSORI PERSPECTIVE

A primary goal of Montessori education is to foster independence, respect, and critical thinking among all children, **regardless of gender**. Suzanne agrees that this has indeed been her objective in pursuing and implementing her research: “I decided my plan would be to get children to think critically about their roles in regard to gender.” She adds, “Our differences are what make us individuals—differences that cannot be reduced to simplistic representations of femininity

A primary goal of Montessori education is to foster independence, respect, and critical thinking among all children, *regardless of gender.*



or masculinity.” Suzanne emphasizes the fact that her research is not about canceling out differences. Rather, she celebrates her students’ newfound confidence and “ability to think about and voice their opinions about gender” without fear of being judged. Ah, the power of conversation and self-awareness!

#### ABOUT SUZANNE HUNTON

As an undergraduate at Lehigh University studying Psychology, Suzanne volunteered her time and energies to a Head Start program in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. She experienced a profound sense of community among the teachers and children there. During the summers she worked at JKL Montessori School in Commack, New York, where her colleagues placed a similar emphasis on community building and collaboration. It was this very positive experience that ultimately led her to pursue her certification in Montessori education. Suzanne joined West Side Montessori School in 2001. Three years later, she returned to academia in pursuit of a Master of Early Childhood Education from City College of New York.

Language as it relates to early childhood development represents an ongoing theme in Suzanne’s work. Her initial research, as explored in her master’s thesis, focused on environmental conditions (at home and in school, suburban versus urban settings, etc.) and the resulting impact on verbal expression. These ideas continue to engage Suzanne, for she brings this expertise to her recent work with other education professionals. She is currently helping to teach the language curriculum component of the WSMS Teacher Education Program.

#### SUGGESTED READING WITH YOUR CHILD

**Amazing Grace** by Mary Hoffman

**Calico and Tin Horns** by Candace Christiansen

**The Daddies Boat** by Lucia Monfried

**Mommies at Work** by Eve Merriam

**Sheila Rae, the Brave** by Kevin Henkes

**Sweet Clara and the Freedom Quilt** by Deborah Hopkinson

**White Dynamite and Curly Kidd** by Bill Martin, Jr., and John Archambault

**William’s Doll** by Charlotte Zolotow

#### NOTE ABOUT WSMS’S COMMITMENT TO CONTINUING EDUCATION

Professional development for West Side Montessori School teachers is central to our mission. Bi-weekly seminars focus on ongoing concerns and developments in contemporary education. Each classroom’s teachers meet with the Head of School on a bi-weekly basis to discuss issues impacting their children and themselves. Workshops and non-matriculated graduate courses are made available throughout the year. WSMS encourages participation and pays expenses for teachers to attend and contribute to annual Montessori conferences held throughout the country. In addition, each teacher receives tuition reimbursement for graduate study and access to a cultural fund, which can be used for museum memberships/admissions and other culturally rich experiences. For teachers who have been with WSMS for three years or more, the school makes travel grants available for educational purposes and for furthering cultural knowledge. These investments in faculty development help us continually improve our program and methods. And, most importantly, our children reap the benefits.