Perceptions of gender roles: A case study
Extreme, or repeated patterns of gender behaviour can lead to gender stereotypes. This study explores how these stereotypes are observed and understood within the early years, as they can influence educational outcomes and affect children's emotional wellbeing.

Gender can be explained as cultural, referring to the social categorisation into men and women (Oakley, 1995). Gender can be further understood as roles, attitudes, attributes and behaviour associated with and/or assigned to each sex (Hatchett and Hatchett, 2007). In which case gender can be seen as subjective depending on how it has been learnt and can take various forms accordingly.

Extreme, or repeated patterns of gender behaviour or associated attributes can lead to gender stereotypes. Gender stereotypes can be explained as 'stereotyped representations of men and women within a culture, particularly in the mass media, which polarize differences between the sexes, notably in their physical appearance, traits, behaviour and occupations' (Chadwell and Murray, 2016: 64). Thus, this study aims to explore how these perceptions of gender and gender stereotypes are observed and understood within the early years from different perspectives. Perceptions of gender roles can also influence educational outcomes as well as have an impact on the child's emotional and social wellbeing; yet, often educational practice still does not reflect the need to follow a gender-neutral pedagogy (Warin and Adriani, 2017).

Reviewing the Literature: What we know so far

Gender can be understood as a concept that is learnt within the early years through social interaction, forms of engaging with and observing adults, as well as how certain behaviour from the child is received and rewarded (Massey, 2015). MacNaughton (2000) explains how the idea of gender is a social construction and its developmental processes begin at birth and then expand and develop with the child. WhYTE (1998) believes that gender role knowledge is actively developed within young children through monitoring of their social environment, in this way also echoing that of Bandura's (1977) social learning theory, which emphasises the importance of learning through observation and mimicked behaviour.

Gender schema theory (GST) is based on the understanding that children learn to understand gender from the society and culture in which they live through the development of cognitive schemas (Kemmel et al., 2016). Wingrove (2016) explains how children aged two to three years start to identify whether they belong to a male or female category, they then begin the gendering process by categorising the world around them accordingly, those who are the same as them and those who are not. As well as children gendering their understanding of the world, the child's perceptual development also categorises behaviour into gender.

It has been further suggested that by the age of five, children have developed firm beliefs on how girls and boys should behave (Freeman, 2007). However, Freeman's (2007) findings suggest that children felt that their parents would approve of them playing with stereotypically gendered toys that match their sex, yet also felt that should they choose a 'cross-gender' toy the opposite sex parent would be more accepting, suggesting that there may be some gender confusion in the child's perception of their parent's schemas of gender and a discrepancy between theirs and that of their own.

An alternative explanation for discrepancies in children's understanding of gender relates to the age of the child. Martin and Ruble (2004) as well as Marcus and Overton (1978) suggest that children understand gender and they gender identity at a slightly later stage:

- Gender identity, where a child can label themselves as a gender at two years of age
- Gender stability, where the child understands people (generally) have fixed genders throughout life at four years of age
- Gender constancy at four to five years, where despite material decoration or appearances one still belongs to the same gender.

Gender constancy being a beginning point for the gendering process has been found by to be consistent internationally across many different cultures (Munroe et al., 1984). This poses arguments for current post-modern views of gender fluidity and transgender being apparent in young children (Knight, 2014). However, for the purposes of this paper we focus on the traditional gendering between male and female.

An encouraging theory by Tobin et al. (2010) as cited in Wingrove, 2016: 5) suggests that the complexity...
of learning gender is acquired socially through a combination of” (emphasis added). The assimilation of gender stereotypes which inform the child about gender expectations and each child’s unique experience of gender, thus gender acquisition is both an individual and a societal experience. The vast amount of theory suggesting that gender is socially learned is evidence that the study which looks to consider the perceptions of gender in comparison with that of the child as well as their immediate role models, parents and practitioners.

Wingrave (2016) further discusses how gender can be viewed as both a socialisation of, or through biological determinism. Native views of development consider that gender is influenced from biological determinism, there being anatomical differences between men and women, such as differences in hormones and brain activity and the preceding differences have on their social roles (Wingrave, 2016). Featherstone and Bayley (2010) suggest that the differences in hormone levels and how one reacts to the hormone result in variations of behaviour. For example, a strong reaction to testosterone, as primarily found in males, produces more violence and aggression whereas, a weaker reaction, as seen mostly in females results in more calm and controlled behaviour (Featherstone and Bayley, 2010). Other theoretical bases of biological determinism are supported by the differences in brain activity between the two sexes which are argued to result in innate behavioural, cognitive and social differences (Schönig et al., 2007). Although, this research claims to suggest the differences seen in early childhood, the research from Schönig et al. (2007) is limited to differences found between male and female adults; yet still forms a controversial argument which counters the socialisation theory of gender as well as work of feminism. Wingrave (2016) suggests that these neurological findings may provide proof that male and females are unequivocally different. Yet, two key social arguments prevail; different life experiences create different neuropathways, which can result in biological differences between brains in boys and girls, especially in early childhood where the brain has higher levels of plasticity (Schmitz, 2011). Alternatively, these different neuropathways may be formed due to different experiences, treatment and opportunities due to the child’s different sex itself therefore “could be the result of gendered practices that reinforce particular behaviours and preferences” (Wingrave, 2016: 4). In this way, both approaches, social and biological development of gender will be considered when analysing the data collected.

What reinforces gender stereotypes

Collins (2000) suggests that gendering is a life process and that it is learnt through the adult’s behaviours and actions towards the child, further supported by Eckert and McConnell (2013), in that adults reflect their own expectations and views of what it is to be a boy or a girl (as cited in Wingrave, 2016). Similarly, the charity campaign Zero Tolerance (2013: 10) which challenges gender stereotyping in Scotland, suggests that children do not exclude or devalue each other or set limits upon themselves until they learn to do so from adults. Children learn from a very young age that their behaviour, likes, dislikes and expectations should follow “rules” about male and female roles. Yet, research which found similar findings showed that parents believed in promoting gender equality to their children and that children in the early years should be treated the same. Furthermore, that both parents showed interest in being equally involved in their children’s lives indicating less gender stereotyping in regard to the care-giving role which was once very rigid (Oak Watch, 2018; Freeman, 2007). This would suggest that instead of reinforcing traditional gender stereotypes, modern parents are helping to reinforce a flexible gender understanding with less rigidity placed on the differences between either gender.

However, Freeman’s (2007) research found that in 100% of cases children had internalised gender stereotypes despite the fact that this was not congruent with their own parents’ perceptions; suggesting that there are other factors which influence gender stereotypes in children more so than what is passed on from their parents’ beliefs directly. A common occurrence that parents tended to be more liberal and accepting regarding girls playing with toys aimed towards either gender than toward the boys playing with toys aimed at either gender can be found in a range of literature (Freeman 2007; Kollmayer et al. 2018; Oak Watch, 2018; Wood et al., 2002). Furthermore, Wood et al. (2002) highlight that parents often stereotype girls and boys in how they play with their children; however, parents are more gender flexible when they engage in play with girls. The research suggests that although parents may claim that they treat their children equally and promote gender equality, their true perceptions of the matter were indicated more explicitly through their behaviour and engagement with their children, which as shown by Freeman (2007) is reinforced on impacting the child’s learning of gender stereotypes.

Another source which can have a significant impact on reinforcing gender stereotypes in children are the perceptions of gender from surrounding practitioners. Research from Baig (2015) investigated how gender identity was constructed among girls in the early years in Pakistan. It highlighted that the perceptions of gender from that of the teachers/practitioners were of great influence on how the children regarded their own gender identity; these perceptions of gender from the practitioners were found to reflect many cultural gender stereotypes and thus, were passed onto the children’s own understanding of gender. Although this study was set in Pakistan, similar findings have been found internationally by Chapman (2016) and Wingrave (2016), both of whom suggested that practitioners’ perceptions of gender can influence how gender is learnt in the early years by how the curriculum is implemented and their variation of expectations between genders.

The interlinked comparison between both parents and practitioners and how they compare with corresponding children’s perceptions of gender is an area that have
Methodology
A case study approach was adopted to support the data collection process, focusing on an early years class and the three different groups: children within the class, the parents of the children, and the practitioners. The research predominantly set out to identify trends in the parents’ and practitioners’ responses, comparing whether this would be reflected in what was observed within the children’s data and congruent with other research. The sample was taken from a mainstream early years class in a fairly rich socio-economic area. The setting is based in a small village in Berkshire (England) and had 200 children attending. All 20 children attending the reception class, as well as their parents and the four practitioners within the class were invited to take part. Four practitioners and eight parents gave their consent for themselves and their eight children to take part in the study (four boys and four girls).

The case study employed mixed methods of data collection. At the start of the data collection process, the parent questionnaires, which were sent out allowing for a predicted two weeks turnaround time. The parents were given an option of either filling in their completed questionnaires in an assigned box outside the classroom or that they wish to further anonymise their feedback; otherwise the questionnaires were collected from their children’s bookbags. Also, two 45-minute focus group interviews were conducted with a total of three parents, which were recorded to allow for transcription. The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner and the questions were adapted from Chapman (2016).

Finally, the Mosaic approach was adopted to include verbal questioning and collection of drawn representations in combination with additional activities to generate information regarding the children’s understanding of gender. The Mosaic approach adopted here included three activities over the course of two weeks. These included an observational audit of what the children chose to draw up as from a storybook, a collection of drawn representations from the children of figures in positions of authority (e.g. a police officer, a teacher/practitioner, a doctor), and transcripts of verbal conversations made with the children surrounding their ideas of the question ‘what a boy/girl is like’. All information was written up for tentative comparison and further analysis. Using a Mosaic approach allowed a collection of a varied bank of sources, enabling the creation of a more accurate, wider representation of the children’s voices (Clark and Moss, 2011).

The research follows the guidelines set out by the University of Reading Code of Good Practice in Research (2012) and prior to any research being conducted, the study sought approval by the University Ethical Committee at the Institute of Education (University of Reading). The research also meets the ethical recommendations as set out by the British Ethical Research Association (2011).

Results and discussion
The findings indicate that parents are concerned in relation to girls’ career aspects (table 1). This is in line with research that suggests that this issue within society may be resulting from a pivotal time in children’s lives when they move from associating their own gender with brilliance at the age of 5 and from as young as girls show diminished ideas of self-confidence and view boys as being more intelligent (Bian et al., 2017). During the favourite book character activity, the children could choose to dress up as their favourite book character. During this activity, only girls dressed up as a character of the opposite gender and twice as many girls dressed as a gender-neutral character. This confirms Bian et al’s (2017) findings and the idea that children must be taught to deconstruct gender binaries to enable them to grow up with gender equal outlooks (Chapman, 2016). MacNaughton (2000) and Robinson and Davies (2007) added that once children have these fixed ideas of femininity and masculinity they are reluctant to change despite efforts from their surrounding role models.

During the interviews, the practitioners highlighted that gender- stereotypes were reinforced by television and toys and that clear differences during children’s play time were apparent. It was further felt that girls were usually the ones disadvantaged. Most importantly, all practitioners agreed that they unintentionally adhered to similar gender stereotyping in their practice. Dinella et al (2017), as well as Francis (2010), suggested that the advertising and functions of toys, television shows and DVDs convey messages to children regarding gender. In this way, children are split based on their sex and limited to different toys that have different cues of how they should behave; mostly being communal based for girls and aggressive based for boys (Kollmayer et al., 2018; Wood et al., 2002) setting a foundation for these gender stereotypical inequalities. Wingate (2016) states how disadvantages arising from gender stereotypes can lead to a prejudice culture and is an area of concern from other gender equality charities as it is recognised to affect children’s opportunities, achievement and health (Zero Tolerance, 2013).

Biological determinist theories of gender development suggesting that anatomical differences between male and female result in distinct femininity and masculinity. Biological determinism is a theory that states that attributes such as intelligence, personality, and sexual orientation are determined at conception or in the prenatal period of a child’s life. This is opposed by the social constructionist view that gender roles are socially learned and not biologically determined. The social constructionist theory proposes that gender roles are learned and not biologically determined. The social constructionist theory proposes that gender roles are learned and not biologically determined.

Table 1. Key themes from parents indicated that: a) most felt an inequality in gender disadvantages and that b) most felt that gender is not important to their child’s development

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key themes</th>
<th>%</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Some parents felt that they can be more physically playful with their sons</td>
<td>38%</td>
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<tr>
<td>as they felt the boys were stronger and more robust</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some parents felt that their daughters although they are not affected now,</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>may face disadvantages as they mature in areas such as work inequality</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Half of parents felt that girls also faced a disadvantage as society expects</td>
<td>50%</td>
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<td>more of them regarding their behaviour and imposes more social restrictions on girls than boys</td>
<td></td>
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Table 2. Key themes from parents highlighting further details of how gender equality is felt to be promoted by parents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key themes</th>
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<tr>
<td>Practitioners felt that they unintentionally conform to some gender stereotypes within their practice</td>
<td>100%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Practitioners felt that TV and toys were heavily impactful toward influencing gender stereotypes in the early years</td>
<td>75%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Practitioners felt that gender has a negative impact on girls' opportunities for work as well as disadvantaging them in society due to higher expectations of behaviour</td>
<td>75%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Practitioners felt that they observed differences between the genders in behaviour; boys predominately engaging with physical, agentic attributed play and girls predominately with creative and communal attributed play</td>
<td>75%</td>
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An argument further discarding biological theories of gender development through the findings of the cultural shift in parents' roles become more equal regarding care-giving (Our Watch, 2018; Freeman, 2007) and also support the study's findings that parents stated to promote equality to their children and treat them equally regardless of gender (Table 2).

In addition, findings from the children's data show that in an activity where the children took part in fancy dress, the girls appear to be more gender flexible by either being more likely to dress up as a gender-neutral character or as the opposite gender. Comparing these findings to other research discussing the implications of reducing gender stereotypes and promoting gender flexibility (Our Watch, 2018; Warin and Adriany, 2017) indicates that the girls may be demonstrating a more confident and liberating gender understanding. Massey (2013) offers insight into this when describing that gender is learnt through the observation and internalisation of how certain behaviour is received and rewarded. In this way girls may have observed gender flexibility being more readily rewarded by adults than the boys. Interestingly, the findings are congruent with theory from other research which found in several cases parents were often more liberal and allowing of their daughters to play with either gender toys than their sons (Freeman 2007; Kollmayer et al, 2018; Our Watch, 2018; Wood et al, 2002).

When the parents were asked about how gender affects how they interact and engage with their children, only 63% of the them indicated that they encourage their children to engage with all areas of play regardless of gender. Additionally, as found by Freeman (2007), what parents claim they do and how they act in regard to gender equality may be contradicting. Further findings show that parents feel an injustice in gender opportunities towards girls, this was further supported by 75% of the practitioners reporting limitations placed on girls due to gender inequality.

Despite all adult participants claiming to treat children equally, the findings show more gender flexibility from the girls. This might be a result of parents and/or practitioners sympathising with the girls' perceived gender disadvantages and thus, treating them with more leniency when it comes to adopting different gender-roles during play. This suggested link is supported by Freeman's (2007) work which showed discrepancies in parents' attitudes and actions towards gendered play with their children. It is also reinforced by research suggesting parents are more accepting of girls engaging with play despite gender stereotypes (Freeman 2007; Kollmayer et al, 2018; Our Watch, 2018; Wood et al, 2002). However, due to the study's limitations (small-scale), further research into developing this theoretical link would be required to increase its validity.

In addition, the findings indicate clear patterns of themes amongst the words used for boys and girls, physical characteristics dominating to describe boys and emotional characteristics for girls; this implies differences in how gender is wholly perceived and is consistent with gender stereotypes. These discrepancies found...
within the perceptions of gender from parents are also supportive of Kollmayer et al. (2018) and Freeman (2007) who reported the same differences in parents’ attitudes and behaviour regarding gender. Similarly, Chapman (2016) suggests that when comparing perceptions and practice from early years practitioners, either implicitly or explicitly, gender stereotypes were found to be occasionally encouraged.

Herbert and Stipek (2005) claim how ‘children intuitively understand their parents’ and teachers’ gender-related beliefs and expectations, and this can impact on the way they view their own gender identities’ (as cited in Chapman, 2016: 1274). Thus, it is not surprising that the children show some conformity to gender stereotypes when they too gave descriptive words for either gender, this is particularly evident when comparing the most popular words used. Yet, Freeman (2007) also notes that in 100% of their data, children had internalised gender stereotypes despite not being reflective of their parents’ perceptions, indicating other factors of influence. One explanation of this could be the impact of toys, which heavily reinforce gender stereotypes (Francis, 2010), as well as hinting to the types of behaviour stereotypically assigned to either gender (Dinella et al., 2017). The types of words found mostly associated with either gender are consistent with those found by Kollmayer et al. (2018) and Wood et al. (2002) in that boy words followed the agentic theme and girl words followed a communal theme further strengthening the findings.

Additional findings support the above, since 100% of the practitioners admitted unintentionally following gender stereotypes despite the majority also claiming that they follow a gender-neutral practice. This links to Argyris and Schön (1974), highlighting that the practitioners may have an espoused theory of providing a gender flexible pedagogy and gender equality, yet their theory-in-use may actually be more conforming to gender stereotypes and thus, be an area of practice to address (Lindon, 2012).

In collecting various forms of representation of the children’s perceptions of gender, one activity asked the children to draw pictures of various job roles of positions of authority. When considering the findings showing representations of doctors and police officers (see figures 1 and 2) the children all identified the occupation with their own gender. The age of the children is key here when considering the results. According to Bian et al. (2017) the fact that the children’s own gender is reflected in the drawings could be due to the age of the children rather than their construction of gender not limiting opportunities. Bian et al. (2017: 1) found that children aged 5 all associated their own gender with brilliance yet by the age of 6 and 7 years ‘were significantly less likely than boys to associate brilliance with their own gender’. Bian et al. (2017) further suggest that this may be the source of the gender stereotype discouraging girls to be ‘really really smart’ and instead favouring boys leading to possibly explain the phenomenon of the gap in higher achieving jobs roles between men and woman (Bian et al., 2017; Our Watch, 2018). Wider research into gender perspectives across early years and primary education may offer further insight into this link.

**Conclusion**

Gender identity is developed in various forms within the early years, predominately through socialisation or biological determinism. When understanding gender and developing gender constructs, a large range of input has been reported which shows gender in a constructing view building ideas of gender stereotypes for children to absorb. Research has shown how fixed perceptions of gender that follow these stereotypical views can be damaging to children’s outcomes in various areas and affect their future opportunities (MacNaughton, 2000; Robinson and Davies, 2007). In light of this, the study aimed to explore perceptions of gender within the early years from a triangulated approach to compare against other research within the field and offer suggestions of how gender can be taught as to not perpetuate gender-based limitations. Research was conducted to obtain information regarding how gender was perceived from the parents, practitioners and children within a setting, using mixed methods of gathering qualitative data.

Perceptions of gender from the adults’ perspectives suggest that girls may have limited opportunities when compared to boys while girls appear to have greater gender flexibility than boys. Linking these two areas can help to draw implications towards pedagogy in relation to how these two key areas are reflective of the parents’
and practitioners’ attitudes and behaviour. Interestingly, the findings suggest that both parents and practitioners believe that gender equality is important from yet, there still appears to be a foundation of gender stereotypes acknowledged within their perceptions.

It is recommended that early years settings should aim to follow practices and pedagogies that offer equality between the genders, especially during the critical transition period between five and six years when self-confidence in girls may reduce (Bian et al., 2017). Warin and Adrian (2017) suggest that a ‘gender flexible pedagogy’, as seen in the Swedish curriculum, can help to reduce rigid gender stereotypes and allow children to understand that gender roles can be moderated, inter-related and flexible to their own interests. By being self-aware of gendered practice and actively promoting gender equality, educators can train children to be less accepting of traditional stereotypes while also offering further opportunities by encouraging learning without any gender bias (Warin and Adrian, 2017). Educators and parents should also promote gender flexibility and should accept the different choices made by children. Finally, early years settings need to communicate regularly with parents, especially in relation to issues of equality, inclusivity and gender-neutral pedagogy, aiming to draw attention to the proposed differences in parenting between the sexes of the children (Freeman, 2007).

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