’Cause Boys like Cars and Girls like Dolls!
A Cognitive Analysis of Young Girls’ and Young Boys’ Development of Genderised Knowledge

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R : Can you tell me who are in these pictures? (Researcher is pointing at the pictures of a boy and a girl)
Ch : (pointing at each of them respectively). That’s a girl and that’s a boy.
R : Can you tell me if you are a boy or a girl
Ch : I am a girl (own emphasis)
R : Can you tell me whether you were a boy baby or a girl baby when you were little?
Ch : When I was little I was a baby girl (own emphasis)
R : When you grow up...will you be a man or a woman?
Ch : When I’ll grow up I’ll be a lady (own emphasis).

Interview extract of a 5 years old girl in the study. She responds whilst observing the pictures of a boy and a girl used in the interviews.

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Socialisation and the development of gender knowledge in young children have been given much attention in recent research (Browne, 2004; Skelton and Hall, 2001, MacNaughton, 2000, Yelland, 1998).

Findings have reported on the implications gender knowledge has on enacting and embodying behaviours, beliefs and attitudes even from very early stages of children’s socialisation. It has also been noted that gender knowledge and understanding will influence how children make gender-related choices not only in early childhood but throughout life. The evidence has also highlighted that this process, initially considered to be mostly defined by nature, is also heavily influenced by factors including ethnicity, culture, religion and social class.

One issue appears to be common across cultures and it relates to the genderised knowledge (stereotypes) children are exposed since perhaps the moment they are born or even earlier (Brown, 2004; Burman, 1995). Such genderised knowledge of ‘being boys’ or ‘being girls’ creates sets of categories and uses of what is seen as being ‘socially acceptable’, transmitted and reproduced. Consequently, even young children are affected by and enact such distinctions. This is especially the case in pre-school settings where young children socialise and display their gender knowledge. In most cases children come to pre-school with a gender knowledge which they have constructed at home; Pre-school activities offer a range of choices and interactions in which children use such gender knowledge, especially in socio-dramatic play, and most learning activities. Questions thus, arises when highly genderised behaviours appear in young children’s interactions with peers and adults and the extent to which young children fully understand the nature and use of gender stereotypes.

This study examines the role of cognition in constructing and understanding