

Pink is for girls and jobs are for boys

Challenging gender stereotypes to advance sex equality

Parts of this article are adapted from materials produced for the National Union of Teachers's *Breaking The Mould* project which is described below. More information and resources can be found at <https://www.teachers.org.uk/educationandequalities/breakingthemould>

The rigid rules of gender

So many of the inequalities faced by women and men are underpinned by entrenched gender stereotypes which both establish and perpetuate assumptions about the wishes, needs, tastes, ambition and behaviours of both sexes. Nowhere is the pressure to conform to a rigid set of gender-related rules more apparent than in the way that we treat young children – the books we read them, the clothes and toys we buy them and the activities we encourage them to take part in. From the moment of birth, society works to confine behaviour within rigid lines – children are told which colours, toys, games and books are appropriate for boys and which for girls. Choices about what they will play with or wear are made for younger children and, by the time they come to make their own, they have already learnt what is expected of them and will often behave accordingly.

We regularly confuse gender with sex. Gender describes the characteristics that a society or culture delineates as masculine or feminine. These definitions are culturally dependant and highly malleable – and, perhaps, it is for these very reasons that we police them so strenuously. However, these gender expectations inevitably impact on the opportunities open to women and men and on our perceptions about what activities are considered appropriate for either sex to participate in. Just as the Public Sector Equality Duty is concerned with both religion and belief, it might be more useful if it referred to both sex and gender since it is clearly impossible to address discrimination related to an individual's biological sex without challenging preconceptions related to their gender expression. This also has implications in relation to other forms of prejudice (in particular transphobia and homophobia) and these will, no doubt, be discussed elsewhere in this issue. For now, we can simply accept that, while there may be some inherent differences between girls and boys, our concerns about moulding behaviour and gender expression often lead us to exaggerate those differences that do exist – and sometimes even to invent others – often to the detriment of individuals and society as a whole.

The impact of these ideas about how men, women, boys and girls are expected to behave is widespread. The Government frets about the number of girls studying science and engineering – and, indeed, is beginning to make efforts to change this – but seems less willing to tackle the problems which underlie this persistent trend. As well as making many girls feel that they are

part of the problem (perhaps because they are not brave or ambitious enough to study such challenging subjects), it fails to address what it is considered ‘unfeminine’ about science – and, indeed, ignores any discussion about what constitutes our understanding of femininity in the first place.

Despite some recent advances in children’s books and films, the ‘Princess’ culture – in which young girls are encouraged to prize physical appearance and likeability over intellectually ability and to see social status and material success as closely linked to being in a relationship with a member of the opposite sex – is still widely promoted. At the same time, many toys aimed at boys encourage the idea that masculinity is about action – and coming out on top whatever the cost. Boys in fiction are much less likely to display empathy or nurturing skills – abilities that are generally assigned to female characters. While such characteristics are prized in girls over experimentation and risk-taking it is hardly surprising that science is not perceived as an activity for girls.

Schools are in a unique position to challenge the preconceptions which are established early and are so hard to undo later. The Public Sector Equality Duty requires that they advance equality for both sexes but many are currently failing to address the stereotypes that keep girls and boys in their place – and, in many cases, reinforcing and perpetuating them. This article summarises some of the work which took place in five primary schools to try and undo some of the ideas about what girls and boys are ‘supposed’ to like and to encourage the idea that our sex should not limit our choices and opportunities – in other words that there are no ‘girls things’ or ‘boys things’ but just books, games, activities and jobs that any of us might enjoy.

The impact of gender stereotypes

The evidence of how gender stereotypes impact on children and young people is stark and unequivocal.

- Although some girls achieve better test scores than boys – and are more likely to go on to higher education – this does not translate into equality at home, at work or in society in general. The pay gap between the sexes remains stubbornly hard to shift and women continue to be underrepresented in sectors such as science, engineering and technology. Efforts to recruit men into careers such as teaching and nursing continue to enjoy limited success.
- The permanent exclusion rate for boys is four times that for girls and more boys enter the youth offending system than girls. Some boys feel that learning is not ‘masculine’.
- Primary age girls are known to associate being slim and conventionally attractive with social and economic success. Girls as young as twelve feel under pressure to be sexually available - and boys feel similarly pressured into making such demands on girls.

- Sexual bullying and bullying in relation to sexual orientation and gender identity remain widespread and are closely linked to ideas of how women and men – and boys and girls – are expected to look and behave.

In 2006, the Women and Work Commission identified the need to challenge gender stereotypes in education and ensure that children's aspirations are not limited by traditional ideas about what girls and boys can do. Challenging gender stereotypes is likely to have widely beneficial effects in terms of improving educational and life outcomes for both sexes, helping young people and adults to have respectful and fulfilling relationships and improving behaviour in our classrooms. Research has demonstrated how classroom discussions about gender constructions and using literature as a vehicle for deconstructing stereotypes can have a significant impact on educational engagement and learning. Furthermore, continuing inequalities in the workplace and unequal roles within families can be traced back to stereotypes about expected behaviour and attitudes which are learned by children when they are of primary school age and even younger.

Breaking The Mould – challenging the rules of gender

In 2012, the National Union of Teachers began working with a small group of primary schools to consider how 'traditional' gender stereotypes could be challenged in the classroom. Schools were provided with support and training designed to help them think about the impact of gender stereotypes on young people and to consider how they could begin to unsettle some of the established assumptions about what girls and boys might like or do.

Teachers acknowledged that "*You can't look at gender in isolation. You have to be aware of issues linked to culture, faith, socio-economic status etc. However, it's important to recognise discrimination when it occurs. Whatever their background, we recognise that some children may hear sexist messages at home but we are clear that such attitudes are never acceptable here, that everybody's tastes and choices are equally valid and that, when you grow up, you can be whatever feels right for you.*"

The data from the five schools proved to be incredibly rich but can be grouped around a number of key themes:

- Schools produced lessons and schemes of work that specifically addressed gender stereotypes. They found resources (in particular a number of story books) that challenged children in engaging ways. They also took opportunities to question stereotypical representations of the sexes or to highlight and endorse non-stereotypical expressions of gender whenever they occurred – be it in books or other resources, during classrooms interactions or manifested in children's behaviour or choices.

These opportunities occur constantly – for example, there are stereotypical depictions of girls or boys in stories (in terms of their

interests or the jobs they do) and toys or clothes are produced in pink or blue. Furthermore, children will often say that this or that toy or activity is 'for' girls or boys. Teachers noticed and challenged these observations whenever they occurred. In turn children were encouraged to question things like how shops target toys at different sexes or the differences between comics aimed at one sex or the other.

- Schools also considered how staff modelled gender, the language they used and how they managed their classrooms. Staff tried to ensure that they did not perpetuate stereotypes and acted as role models in the way they talk about their own interests and tastes. They avoided making choices *for* children based on their sex – such as handing out pink and blue stickers – and considered whether they treated girls and boys differently and in ways that served to reinforce stereotypes – for example by assigning them different tasks. They thought about their use of language and noted how often they used words like 'helpful' and 'pretty' in relation to girls and 'strong' with regard to boys.

Staff noted improvements in behaviour and attitudes to learning as a result of changes like always encouraging children to work in mixed sex groups. Acknowledging that we tend to stress the differences between girls and boys rather than the similarities, teachers thought about some of the ways that schools often differentiate the sexes. They considered the language they used – referring to 'children' rather than 'girls and boys' and 'families' rather than 'mums and dads' – and tried to avoid marshalling pupils in single sex lines (after all, we would generally consider it odd to bring children back from lunchtime divided into groups based on their race or faith – why should it be any different with sex?).

- Some teachers noted that some activities traditionally associated with femininity were perceived negatively by boys from an early age. By Year Six this appeared, in some cases, to have hardened into a negative view of girls in general. As well as working to address the value placed on particular games and toys – and domestic and professional roles – they focused on the frequently negative use of the word 'girl' and challenged other increasingly common language such as 'slag' and 'tart'.
- Some boys undoubtedly remain socially vulnerable because of their inability to measure up to narrow social norms of masculinity and there was a perception amongst some staff that 'tomboy' girls may have an easier time of things at school than the 'quiet boys'. As one teacher put it, *"It really worries me that, even in KS1 we already have to combat the 'boys don't cry' thing. I can honestly say that no member of staff would say or think that so it is definitely coming from outside. Generally, the girls are much more relaxed about expressing their emotions – with the boys it often comes out in aggression or fighting."*

Concluding notes

While all children and adults are constrained by gender stereotypes in different ways, the greater economic penalties are paid by women.

Addressing this wider injustice by building resilience and awareness in girls will also make it easier for boys to express and fulfil themselves in less stereotypical ways as society becomes more intelligent about gender and more conscious of the continuing negative effects of sexism. As another teacher stated, “*What really shifted my thinking – and my staff’s – was the idea of not limiting children’s opportunities*”.

Education should ensure that children are equipped with skills that will enable them to pursue as wide a range of opportunities as possible. It should encourage them to challenge attitudes and beliefs which can reduce their own and others’ options and equip them with the self-confidence and resilience to overcome obstacles to self-fulfilment. The influence of gender stereotypes limits the range of experiences many children will engage with at school – in terms of the books they read, games they play, subjects they study and even the other people with whom they socialise. The repercussions of these limitations may continue to impact on their lives – at work, in society and within families.

Through education, we can challenge the message – still widely promoted – that children and adults should act in ‘gender appropriate’ ways and be judged differently depending on their sex. This is vital if we are to achieve progress on issues such as the pay gap between the sexes and sharing of caring responsibilities or to challenge the idea that professional success is ‘unfeminine’. We must also offer boys a broader view of masculinity, debate what it takes to be a ‘proper’ man and question some of the expected behaviours and attitudes that continue to exclude some boys from engaging with learning and prevent some fathers from planning or adapting their career or working patterns to allow time with their children. By questioning these ideas in supportive educational environments, in ways which engage children, we can begin to advance equality between the sexes.

Despite the potential gains for society and individuals, there is still scant support and encouragement for schools to address these issues. Work like that of the schools involved in the *Breaking The Mould* project can make a valuable contribution towards demonstrating a school’s confidence to address sexism and inequality in general and could be used to exemplify how schools are meeting the requirements of the Public Sector Equality Duty.

Schools involved in the project were working in very different contexts but all recognised the value of talking and thinking about gender and its links to improvements in pupil behaviour, engagement and the enjoyment of learning. It is important that staff feel supported to inspire children by challenging received ideas about what is appropriate for girls or boys and they should not be afraid to surprise and even confuse children with new ideas. It is often through confusion that our minds open up to new possibilities.

Breaking the Mould was a small project and there was not enough time for the teachers involved to explore all their concerns. Other things that need to be addressed more effectively in nursery, primary and secondary settings include

- Work on body image and asking why so many women alter their bodies or try to hold back the physical effects of aging.
- Work on relationships. For example, schools were concerned that so many KS3 girls were experiencing unwanted sexual advances and that boys felt obliged to pressure girls with regard to sexual behaviour. They acknowledged a need to consider more explicitly how work in primary schools could contribute to helping children manage these pressures.
- Considering how gender stereotypes are often used to police sexuality and looking at breaking down stereotypes about gender roles in families – including acknowledging that some children have two mums or two dads¹.

All of these issues impact on equality between the sexes and ensure that people continue to experience discrimination related to their gender expression. If schools are encouraged to see them as part and parcel of advancing equality in relation to sex, then attempts to address things like the underrepresentation of girls and boys in particular subject areas will be more successful – and the barriers to success and fulfilment that many women and men still face are more likely to be overcome.

¹ Undoing Homophobia in Primary Schools (Trentham Books) is a valuable resource for teachers wanting to do more to challenge stereotypes and prejudice about LGBT identities