

Breaking The Mould – challenging gender stereotypes through primary education

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The NUT recently undertook research in 5 primary schools to examine how teachers can challenge gender stereotypes and, in so doing, improve the life chances of all children. Even nursery age children can limit their own choices and police the behaviour of others with regard to what is considered 'appropriate' for one sex or the other and these distinctions only became stronger as children grow.

Many familiar experiences seem designed to reinforce gender stereotypes: a trip to a toyshop is loaded with messages about what girls and boys are 'supposed' to like. In order to impact on such commonly held assumptions, it isn't enough simply to present children with non-stereotypical alternatives – teachers also need to question *why* some people think that only boys or girls can do certain things. Staff took opportunities to gently challenge ideas about gender whenever they arose across the curriculum. They did everything from seeking to address the relative absence of women from the history curriculum to encouraging girls and boys to work and play together rather than in single sex groups. They questioned children's comments about why certain toys or games were 'for' boys or girls and found that, in time, children would make less 'traditional' choices, doing what they wanted to do rather than what they thought they *ought* to do.

In particular, teachers used a range of books which included characters that unsettle 'traditional' ideas about girls and boys. Children discussed the foundations of stereotyping, prejudice and discrimination at the same time as learning about key aspects of literacy such as relating texts to their social and cultural context.

The importance of discussion cannot be overstressed. Many of us use books like *Bill's New Frock* but if we don't question *why* Bill is so appalled at, apparently, becoming a girl overnight – if we just accept this as funny and don't examine it any further – there is a danger that we will actually reinforce stereotypes. Indeed, some teachers were particularly concerned to discover that many older boys held quite negative beliefs about girls - and that girls were often preoccupied with the need to be 'attractive' in order to be accepted. They also expressed concern about sexist language noting everything from the use of the word 'girl' as a generalised insult to sexualised terms like 'slag' or 'tart'. They shared ideas about how to respond to this and discussed how important it is to talk about why these words are inappropriate and not just dismiss them as 'naughty'.

Teachers also took opportunities to examine how often their own language or behaviour could confirm gender stereotypes. Many observed how they sometimes gave particular jobs to certain children simply *because* they were girls or boys or stressed the differences rather than the similarities between the sexes – noting the value of simple changes such as referring to 'children' rather than 'girls and boys' and not marshalling pupils in single sex lines. As one commented, "*children love talking about these things. Some haven't had their views questioned before so it calls on all your resources to help them think about the impact of such ideas on all our lives.*" They welcomed the opportunity to surprise and even confuse children with new ideas and, in so doing, open up their minds to new possibilities.

More information about *Breaking The Mould* – including information on books and other resources can be found at

<http://www.teachers.org.uk/educationandequalities/breakingthemould>

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