

Practical strategies for challenging gender stereotypical choices and behaviours in primary schools



BOYS' THINGS AND GIRLS' THINGS?



www.teachers.org.uk/educationandequalities/breakingthemould

CHALLENGING STEREOTYPICAL CHOICES AND BEHAVIOURS

This resource should initially be read in conjunction with the main project report, *Stereotypes stop you doing stuff*.

The NUT worked with five primary schools to consider how ‘traditional’ gender stereotypes could be challenged in nursery and primary classrooms. The project quickly acquired the name *Breaking The Mould*. The five schools were provided with support and training.

This booklet contains examples of how staff worked to challenge gender stereotypes both inside and outside the classroom and includes sections on adopting a whole schools approach, toys, ambitions and jobs, sports and playtime and creating and updating resources as well as specific examples of practice from the project schools. Further resources (including lesson plans, book notes, activity sheets and presentations) can also be found on the project website. The following supporting publications are also available at

www.teachers.org.uk/educationandequalities/breakingthemould:

- *Stereotypes stop you doing stuff – challenging gender stereotypes through primary education* provides an over view of how the different schools looked at the impact of gender stereotypes on young people and considered how they could begin to unsettle some of the established assumptions about what girls and boys might like or do.
- *It's Child's Play: challenging gender stereotypes through reading* contains a set of accompanying notes on the project books and how to use them, plus more information on using children's literature to challenge gender stereotypes.
- An article called *Breaking the Mould: children's books that challenge gender stereotypes*.

The Appendices mentioned throughout, and listed at the end of this booklet are available on the same webpage.

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GETTING STARTED: KEEP ASKING WHY...?

Why gender stereotypes matter – and why we need to challenge them

Research outlined in the Breaking The Mould project report, *Stereotypes Stop You Doing Stuff*, indicates the extent to which gender stereotypes limit children's and adults' choices and behaviour. Challenging these stereotypes is likely to have widely beneficial effects in terms of improving educational and life outcomes for both sexes.

Most of these gender distinctions serve little logical purpose in contemporary society and seem to exist primarily as a means of exaggerating the differences and playing down the similarities between sexes. Teachers felt these rules, in part, to be market driven and partly about policing behaviour and relationships and, in particular, sexuality.

Many children seemed to accept them without question and teachers noted that they frequently influenced their choice of activities. Some children even refused to take part in things they usually enjoyed because of them (*"Sam really wanted to ride a bike but said he couldn't because the only one available was a 'girl's bike' because it was pink"*).

Older children in particular also often held very set views about everything from jobs and hobbies to areas of study and relationships with many aspects of these being judged as only appropriate to one sex or the other. Teachers recognised that these ideas – and the self-imposed restrictions they lead to – become harder to challenge the longer they go unquestioned. They agreed that what they initially wanted to unsettle was the perception that there are certain things – colours, toys, games, activities, comics, books etc – which are the sole or primary preserve of either girls or boys. Opportunities to challenge such assumptions arise throughout the school day, both inside and outside the classroom, and this first section looks at how teachers used gentle challenges to support children to question established beliefs about gender.

When I am older I would like to be a teacher because I like helping children learn and that always makes me smile. I would like to be a teacher because I will be pretty.



Schools also felt that questioning assumptions about what constituted 'boys' things and girls' things' was something that all staff and children would be able to relate to and that it could also be used as a starting point for beginning to gauge the impact of any work to address gender stereotypes.

They found this approach useful for a number of reasons – not least because

- it could be easily incorporated whenever the subject of gender came up
- it required minimal planning
- all staff felt comfortable to initiate the discussions
- The children themselves very quickly began questioning their own and others' stereotypical assumptions
- It gave staff an easy way of assessing children's attitudes to gender stereotypes as well as a useful measure of how views were developing and changing.

Finding opportunities to challenge assumptions across the curriculum

Teachers made a point of taking opportunities to look at attitudes to gender whenever they arose. *"We were doing work on 'extreme environments' around the World. The boys weren't comfortable wearing African tunics because they felt too much like 'dresses'. We talked about how we can be limited by others' expectations. It prompted us to look at things like clothing around the world. We looked at how men and women dress in other cultures and particularly at the Guérewol courtship rituals in Niger when young men dress elaborately and paint their faces, dance and sing to attract young women."*

Discussions like this can be an effective precursor to more explicit work on gender stereotypes and staff also noticed the impact that they sometimes had on the children's own interactions. *"There was only a pink apron left to borrow on the paint table and one boy teased the boy who took it but quite a few other children defended him and said it doesn't matter what colour it is – it's just an apron."*

Several schools used things like design and drama to encourage children to think about how stereotypes were 'promoted' and endorsed through the media or in books they read at school. One teacher showed her class a collection of 'new baby' cards (see Appendix 7).

It was very easy for them to pick out which ones were 'for' girls (pink, dolls) or boys (blue, trains). *"When I asked why people bought pink cards for girls and blue cards for boys they couldn't tell me – they hadn't realised before how we just accept things which really have no logical justification."*

Staff made a point of using examples from stories, the media and their own lives that helped to affirm their challenges to stereotypical assumptions about gender (*"When they say that pink is for girls I always say it's my Granddad's favourite colour."*).

However, they noted that it was often not enough simply to offer children different options – for example in the form of role models who challenge gender stereotypes – but that it was important to always question why certain toys or careers are perceived as being 'for' only girls or boys.

It has been common practice in schools to present children with (for example) strong female role models but, in itself, this has rarely led to changes in attitude amongst young people with regard to gender roles.

In order for examples of non-stereotypical role models to be relevant to young people in schools we need to talk about the barriers these individuals had to overcome, how they did it and, crucially, help children see how their stories are relevant to their own lives and how overcoming stereotypes benefits all of us.

“They have no real concept that things were once different from the way they are now – trying to get across how much discrimination has occurred, how much has changed and how much hasn’t. It’s a really big job – you can’t do it in a few sessions. It needs to be filtered through everything. Looking at a few stories is great but not enough. At the same time, you don’t want to be preachy, or talking about ‘poor women’ (you want to make it positive) or seen to be ‘bashing’ the boys.”

“Stories about gender perhaps don’t have the some emotional or personal impact as – say – the holocaust, slavery or segregation do around race. But the impact of sexism is just as limiting for women and men. The best way to remind children of this is to notice it when it happens.”

Similarly, simply saying to a child that pink isn’t just for girls, that boys can enjoy dancing or that women can be doctors and scientists is bound to be less effective than going on to ask why some people seem to believe that the opposite is true – and then encouraging children to challenge these assumptions for themselves.

Some staff found that “younger children sometimes had no answer to the question ‘why do some people think this is just for boys or girls?’. They just say ‘it just is’ which makes it hard to challenge.” Staff would prompt them with supplementary questions like ‘is it because girls aren’t strong enough?’ which they could then respond to.

When I am older I will love to go the olympics because I love to show off. I love to sing some time I just burst into a song so I will love to be a Popstar. I love swimming so I will like to be a swimmer. I love running but I don't think I can beat boys.



“If the children say knights are men because they’re strong, ask if women can be strong too (you could give them the example of Olympic weightlifters) – rather than just asking if women can be knights as well. You want them to come to the conclusion that women can be knights because they can develop the necessary skills – not just tell you they can because they think that’s what you want to hear.”

Another approach, rather than to ask ‘why can’t boys play with dolls?’ was to turn the question around and ask ‘why do children play with dolls, what do we like about construction?’ etc. This could open up discussions about how both sexes might enjoy particular activities – or why it might be OK for girls or boys to do things that were not always associated with their gender.

“In a drawing activity, most girls picked pink paper, most boys blue. One girl was very specific about not wanting blue paper – as it’s for boys. Another said she liked blue. We had a discussion about this and some came round – several boys said they liked pink and one said ‘I’m going to pick pink even though I’m a boy because it’s my favourite’. It gave me an opportunity to challenge some assumptions that they would otherwise just have taken for granted.”

One way that staff found to ‘integrate’ work on gender across the curriculum was to question stereotypical depictions of girls or boys in books and, particularly, to question children’s assumptions about them. One teacher noticed that children were speculating as to the gender of the dragons who appear on the cover of the book Zog by Julia Donaldson.

“They immediately assumed the pink one was a girl and the blue one a boy – and they didn’t know what gender the orange one was! This became an opportunity to point out that we don’t know what gender the dragons are in the story – and that you can’t tell what somebody’s gender is just because of what they are wearing (or what colour they are!).”

Taking a whole school approach – advancing equality throughout the school

For work on challenging stereotypes to be effective, it needs to take place across the school and not just in specific, focused lessons. This resource looks at how opportunities present themselves across the curriculum as well as during playtimes and after school activities.

One Head remarked, *“the stereotypes are so pervasive that it is important that, at school, they are challenged wherever possible and certainly never reinforced. We’ve talked to our whole staff and, frankly, I was surprised by how receptive some of them have been. Some of them were worried that it would be taken as criticism of some people’s values but when I explain that it’s about giving every child the broadest set of options – not about trying to steer them down one or another route – then they usually come round”.*

Clearly, there is no ‘one size fits all’ answer but one teacher described her school’s approach thus: *“we’ve looked at things like behaviour in the playground, how we talk to the children, the kind of images and resources we use throughout the school and the membership of clubs. We’ve worked very hard to break down the impression that any activity is just for one sex or the other. I think that you’ve got to demonstrate that this really is how things are [in our school] and not just something you talk about.”*

Some of the schools gave considerable thought to how they organised groups of children in the classroom.

Several teachers commented that, particularly in KS2, most children tended to work in single sex pairs unless staff consciously mixed them up. Reflecting on this one teacher commented, *“They’re perfectly happy to work with a child of a different ethnicity but they seem much more aware of gender. I think it’s partly because we have done a lot of work to tackle racism and break down prejudice about ethnicity – children are very clear that you can be friends with people of different races or faiths.”*

Schools felt that actively ensuring that boys and girls worked together had a beneficial effect on behaviour. *"We always ask people to line up in 'boy/girl' [mixed] lines for example, and make all our tables mixed. It helps behaviour for both sexes."*

"Working in mixed pairs and groups challenges them – they have to be more adventurous about talking and learning from each other. They stay on task more and talk in full sentences. It keeps them on their toes because it is different from the playground where they tend to play in single sex groups. Some children object but we usually find they are the ones it's most effective with!"

"We have a talk partners system – you work with the same person for a whole week and build a relationship. We consciously ensure they are mixed – including by gender – and find that, over time, even really quiet children will come out of their shell."

One Head said *"I think the nursery is very 'gender neutral' ground – partly because they come with much less experience of gender stereotypes (they haven't learnt them yet!) but also because, in the context of learning through play, it's very much about everybody having a go at everything and exploring anything they want to do without judgement. I think we could apply some of that ethos higher up the school."*

"It's also vital that we affirm all the positive, non-stereotypical choices that the younger children make. Maybe that way we can stop some of these gender distinctions becoming set so quickly – and save ourselves some hard work later on."

One school talked about how they tried to ensure that all their clubs had a good mix of sexes:

"The cookery club is totally mixed. Though I think the boys tend to prefer the special occasion stuff like cakes. We've talked about why you cook – it's not just for instant gratification but it's about looking after people or doing something nice for them and I think that has helped them see the point of the everyday stuff."



“We’ve got three boys in the knitting club. We found they preferred bigger needles because they wanted things to happen quicker! They’ve really stuck with it. We’ve been making Christmas gifts. Some of the wool is pink but nobody commented on it. I need to check whether any of the boys chose to use it!”

“We had open auditions for free dance lessons with KS2 and all the children had a go. We read the book ‘Dogs Don’t Do Ballet’ and talked about how some people think boys can’t do certain things (that was quite effective – they didn’t want people thinking they couldn’t do stuff!).”

Adult role models are also important. *“Where possible we also try to get visitors who challenge stereotypes so we always ask if we can have a female firefighter or police officer or a male nurse. We had a visit from a female pirate linked to some work we did around the book Pirate Girl. We’re also trying to get some of our male staff to help with things like knitting club (they’re willing but need to learn the basics!) and more women playing football.”*

Points to consider

- Offer gentle challenges whenever children make stereotypical choices, comments or assumptions. Regular interventions are far more likely to effect lasting changes in attitudes.
- Ask children to consider where these ideas come from. How do we ‘know’ that blue is for boys and pink for girls?
- Be vigilant with even the youngest children. Try to challenge stereotypical views before they become ‘set’ – by which time they will be much harder to shift.
- Encourage the view that ‘at school we can all do anything we enjoy – regardless of our gender,’ and affirm non-stereotypical choices.
- Monitoring ‘stereotypical’ comments about gender is a simple way of targeting interventions and measuring impact. Where is the ‘gender divide’ most noticeable in your school? Is it around playground games, toys, clothes or colours? Use these areas as the starting points for discussions.
- Consider recording comments that affirm gender stereotypes. Are they becoming less frequent (after interventions)? Are children challenging each other more regularly?
- Try not to keep stressing the differences between sexes rather than the similarities – simple things like not always lining up girls and boys separately – or talking about ‘children’ rather than ‘boys and girls’ – can make a real difference.
- Encourage girls and boys to take part in as wide a range of activities as possible.
- Encourage children to be confident about playing with children of different genders.
- Invite visitors who challenge stereotypes and encourage staff to model non-traditional skills and interests.

BOYS' TOYS AND GIRLS' TOYS...

Schools based many activities around toys. Some designed sorting activities – they would ask children to decide which toys were for girls, which for boys and which for both and to give reasons for their decisions.

Very often discussion would lead to toys being moved to the 'both' pile – sometimes even to the surprise of staff.

“We actually did a toy sorting activity at the beginning and end of a term’s work on gender stereotypes and it was great to see the children had become more open. They gave some good reasons for why most toys were for both girls and boys so I felt that, to an extent at least, they had really internalised the arguments – rather than just repeating what they thought we wanted to hear.”

“Work with toys was useful [in reception] because we’d already noticed that, left to their own devices, they often made much less ‘gendered’ choices than when we explicitly asked what do girls or boys like to do. It meant that, when they put the toy drill on the ‘boys’ pile, we could say ‘hang on, I’ve seen lots of girls in the construction corner’ and then ask both girls and boys why they enjoyed construction. Staff were able to affirm unstereotypical choices and, perhaps, some children began to recognise how stereotypical behaviours are often ‘learnt’ and not ‘natural’ as we might assume.”

“It’s all about the discussion. We asked them to imagine a toy box that would be good for a boy or a girl. At first they struggled to think of much to put in it but, as we discussed each toy, they agreed that virtually anything could go in there. We reminded them of some of the stories we’d read like William’s Doll and also agreed that not everybody had to like everything – but that you could like anything regardless of your gender.”

“The colour of things is very significant – often children would play with anything unless it was pink – in which case the boys wouldn’t touch it and, sometimes, the girls would be quite proprietorial about it. Perhaps we should just get rid of anything pink...” Another teacher commented,

No girls allowed in the Construction Area.



Only boys can be pirates.

“I asked if the girls would play with the tractor if it was a different colour. One child said ‘yes – if it was pink or purple’. It concerned me that they were already placing restrictions on themselves”.

One Year 2 class paid a visit to the nursery to see what toys the children played with. Their teacher asked them if they were surprised by anything they saw. One child said, *“my brother was playing with dolls – this was surprising because we don’t have dolls at home and because he’s a boy. He was enjoying playing with the dolls.”*

The teacher commented, *“One girl was reading what the older children identified as ‘boy’s book. Some thought it was a boy’s book because it had a castle on the cover – it’s for boys because there are knights in there. This was despite the fact that we’d recently read The Princess Knight.”*

The (female) teacher used it as an opportunity to make lots of gentle challenges – *“for example, I told them I don’t cook much!”*

Another boy was playing with a spider – which was not surprising to the children because, apparently, girls don’t like spiders. *“I pointed out that that my husband doesn’t like them and I have to get rid of them in our house.”*

“I wrote a statement on the board – ‘girls don’t like playing with cars’. Lots of the girls disagreed and some of them said ‘I don’t like them but I know some girls do and that’s OK’. I introduced the idea of a ‘gender stereotype’ and they gave me examples. They challenged the idea that all boys like football.”

Teachers realised the importance of asking ‘why’ or ‘how do you know this’ to make sure children weren’t just saying things they thought the teacher wanted to hear without thinking about them.

“We looked at advertisements for toys from today and the past – there are some really funny 70s ones on YouTube! [See accompanying lessons in Appendix 9.] I tried to talk about how things are quite different now – I talked about my flatmates of both sexes and their jobs. Quite a lot of children did say ‘my Mum does the cooking and Dad goes to work’. I said that was OK – there is no right or wrong but there are different ways of being and we can all choose what is best for us. I ended by showing them what happens if you type “girls’ toys” or “boys’ toys” into YouTube or Google and they were really surprised by how different the responses were.”

Points to consider

- As elsewhere, always question statements such as ‘only boys can play with X’ or ‘Y is for girls’. Ask the children to back up their statements. Offer alternative views.
- Ask questions when children’s behaviour is at odds with their avowed beliefs – ‘but I know the boys like to read so why do some of you still think that reading is for girls?’
- Repeat simple sorting games and similar activities to monitor the impact of other work on challenging stereotypes. Are the children’s views becoming more open? Are they questioning things more?
- Pose challenges – ‘girls don’t like construction’, ‘boys can’t dance’ – and ask the children to discuss them.
- Model non-stereotypical behaviour. ‘When I was a girl I loved playing with trains’. ‘I think lots of the boys in this class would enjoy playing with dolls as they are all so kind and enjoy taking care of people’.
- Challenge assumptions about colours. Point out that ‘anybody can ride on the pink bike’. Try to avoid toys that appear to affirm stereotypes – like pink ovens and blue cars!
- Encourage children to reflect on how toys are marketed as being for ‘just’ boys or girls.

AMBITIONS AND JOBS

"Being a train driver is a man's job"

"Boys can't do ballet because it would look funny"

Almost without exception, schools involved in the project found that children held very stereotypical views about which jobs were 'for' women or men. These views were more entrenched in older children and many staff were surprised by how deeply they were held.

"The children often described female police officers and fire-fighters as 'policemen' or 'firemen' – sometimes without even clarifying their gender. In correcting such terms I also tried to discuss with the children why they might be so persistent. Most children struggled to think of female role models for these jobs in books they read or TV programmes they watched."

"Boys were frequently concerned about the need to be 'strong' to do certain jobs – which were therefore only available to men. Another common theme was that jobs which required people to be 'kind' (i.e. caring) were likely to be 'for' women – vets, for example, were frequently thought to be female."

Reception children were surprised by images of male nurses, and even at this age, 'corrected' other children's 'mistaken' (i.e. non-traditional) choices. Even though many of them had male teachers, hardly any boys saw teaching as a possible future role although this was popular with girls of all ages.



I would like to be a vet
When I am older because I like
animals and I would like to look
after them.

Job choices also tended to be reflective of what parents did and of the opportunities available to parents within the wider community. Many teachers felt the need to be especially rigorous about challenging anything that might limit children's options (including gender stereotypes) where parental aspirations were likely to be lower. Children of both sexes – but particularly girls – were more likely to favour certain jobs if teachers themselves were positive about them.

Where children tended to favour 'lower status' jobs their choices were likely to be even more 'traditionally' gendered – even though some of them came from households where a woman (as either single or co-parent) might have a better paid, more time-consuming job than some of their male role-models. Several schools were concerned that parental expectations were often particularly low for girls – both professionally and educationally. *"We asked Year 3 children to perform charades of different jobs. We were really bothered to see that some girls actually struggled to think of any jobs at all, while boys were able to come up with far more examples."*

Staff also found many assumptions about jobs to be based on 'received' opinions. As with discussions on toys and activities for boys and girls, gentle challenges were found to be effective with Reception and KS1 children.

Many staff noted that, in order for the changes in children's views to 'stick', it was important that challenges were made regularly and often and by all staff.

"We created opportunities to challenge stereotypes and affirm 'non-traditional' behaviour – for example by involving the whole class in construction activities or cooking, while noting that some people thought that these activities were 'just' for boys or girls ("but we don't agree")."

We then linked these to possible future job choices with examples of women and men talking part in a whole range of activities."

All agreed that it was vital for teachers to constantly endorse high expectations for both genders but also worried about not making children who chose lower status jobs (especially if they were jobs their parents or siblings did) feel less positive about themselves. They might praise these choices while simultaneously encouraging children to be more ambitious.

"One child expressed a desire to be a dog walker and I encouraged him to think about being a trainer or running his own kennels. I also encouraged a girl who wanted to work in a shop to think about being a shopkeeper or running her own business. I talked about the skills each job would require and what subjects it might be useful to study in school (science, mathematics etc) and both children were enthusiastic about the choices they had not thought might be available to them."

Reception and KS1 girls tended to be more ambitious for themselves than their KS2 counterparts – citing astronauts and musketeers as possible role models, as well as more realistic options such as bankers and doctors. However, even younger boys tended to be more fixed in their ideas than girls with few opting for less traditional roles.

In KS2, children's views tended to be both more stereotypical and harder to shift. There were exceptions – more likely to be influenced by experiences beyond the home, some older children stated more often that men could be teachers and women could be doctors or dentists. However, they were often quite adamant that jobs of which they had less experience were rigorously gendered – so camera operators and scientists were male and dancers and designers were female.

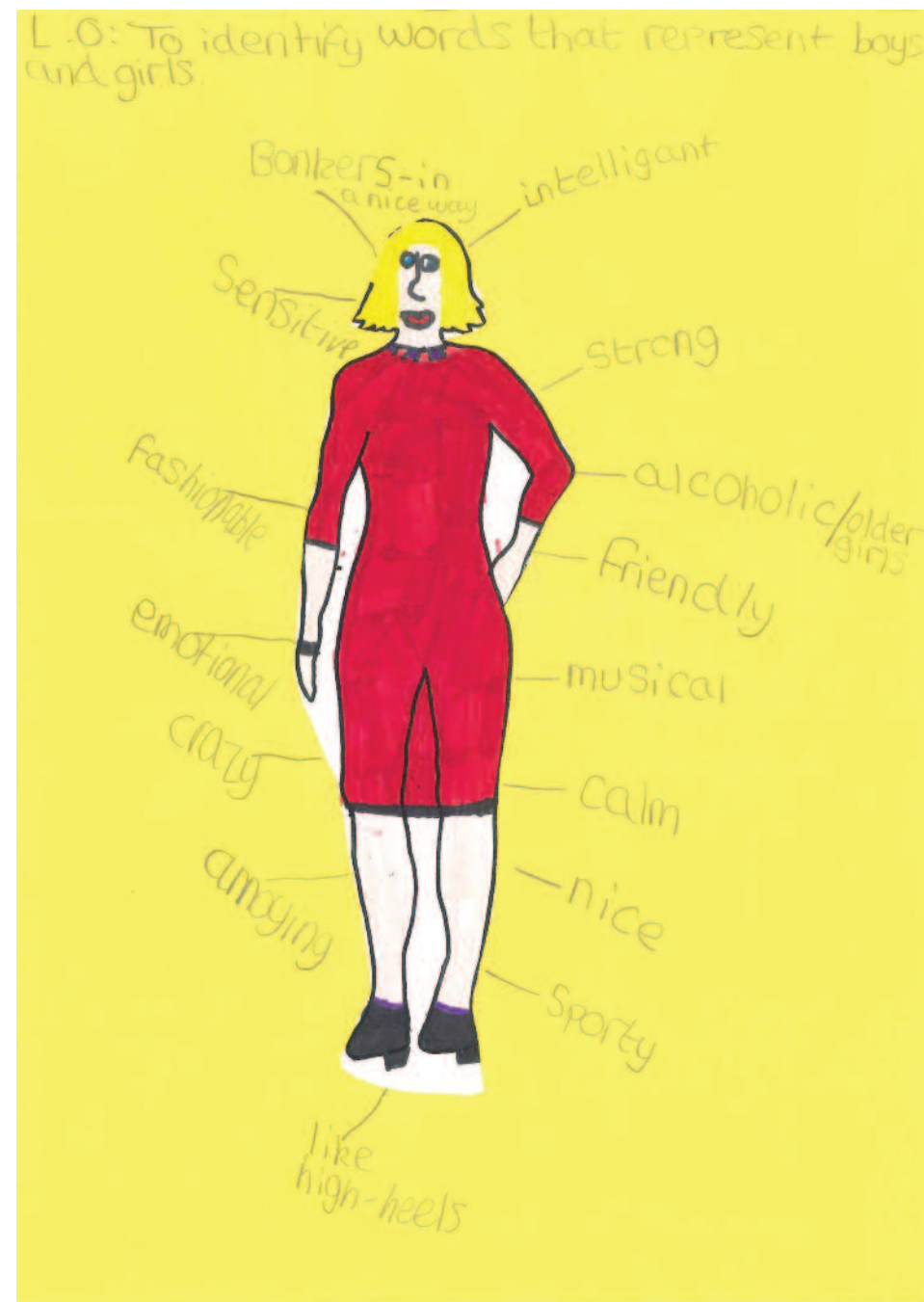
As in other areas of the work, characters from books were utilised to challenge stereotypical ideas. *“When the children said that the female knight in Jane and the Dragon [by Martin Baynton] was ‘surprising’, I encouraged them to think about the qualities a knight would require (courage, the ability to ride a horse) and how these were not exclusive to boys or girls.”*

Pirates were also regularly evoked both in fiction (*Pirate Girl* by Cornelia Funke) and history with Anne Bonny – who refused, unlike some other female pirates, to disguise herself as a man – proving popular. Children in one school had a visit from Captain Cutlass.

“When we asked them what they thought the pirate would be like, all but one of the children expected a man with a big beard – even though they had previously read stories about female pirates. They were all surprised when she turned out to be a woman and, even after the visit, several children still used the pronoun ‘he’ when talking about her.”

“A subsequent circle time discussion focused on whether ‘only boys can be pirates’. Again, some boys were bothered that girls might ‘get hurt’ but we detected a much more open view and several children now made specific reference to stories about female sailors and pirates which they seemed to have forgotten before. A colleague has a female friend working as a sailor in the gulf and I’m hoping to involve her in further discussions with the children via Skype or some other means.”

Two teachers used the book *Dogs Don’t Do Ballet* to talk about other things that we ‘don’t do’ – perhaps because other people think we shouldn’t – and used this as a starting point for thinking about how our choices are often influenced by received opinions and beliefs. *“We talked about how subjects we study at school might affect future job options and how it is important not to let our decisions be constrained by other people’s preconceptions.”* They also noted the value of non-stereotypical role models – for example, how Brian Cox has encouraged both girls and boys to choose science. They thought the fact that he was not ‘blokey’ was a significant factor in his appeal for girls.



One teacher made a particular study with Year 5 students of women's rights as part of work on civil rights in general. As a practical exercise, children were encouraged to apply for particular jobs and then received replies saying that they could not do the job because they were a girl (or boy). They then replied to the letters challenging the views they contained. They were encouraged to think about how rights cannot be taken for granted but must be constantly asserted.

"We found some information about land girls – and a great article online about women spitfire pilots during the war. We included reminiscences from the women involved and talked about how some of them felt after the war when they were obliged to give up their 'men's jobs'. We talked about how lucky we are that women and men can now do all jobs but that it isn't that way everywhere and how we should never take these sorts of advances for granted. We concluded by agreeing that it was important that we didn't make people feel that they couldn't do something just because they were a girl or a boy."

One school showed Year 3 children untitled job descriptions and asked them who they might apply to (see Appendix 8). They included lists of skills that turned out to relate to dancers, farmers or footballers. Many children thought the dancer's job description was for a footballer. They were then encouraged to identify which footballer was the source of a particular quote – she turned out to be Faye White whose achievements in the game surpass those of most of her male counterparts.

"We bought in a male nursery nurse. Some of them were shocked but enthusiastically questioned him about his job and what he liked about it. When he asked if any of the children would like to do his job, one boy said he might – because he liked children – and a couple of others agreed. However, other boys remained adamant that it was not a job for boys."

In another lesson, children were asked to think about 'jobs for Mums and Dads' – both inside and outside the home. *"We had some knowledge of what their parents did and noted that the children's views were more stereotypical than the reality. We were able to use this knowledge to gently question and challenge some of their views. Prompted further, children began to make less conventional suggestions."*

Teachers stressed the need to discuss ideas about why certain jobs are considered to be only for men or women – 'one-off' examples or role models did not seem to have much effect on children's thinking.

"Children need to be encouraged to think about what a job actually entails and whether it's for them. You have to really unpick who would like to do this job – sometimes the only way it becomes "for both" is if one child gamely says I want that [non-stereotypical] job."

"I tried not asking them whether a man or woman could do a job – if I do they tend to come up with stereotypical responses. I started with a list of jobs, looked at what was involved, and then asked who would like to do them. Some of the responses were still stereotypical but less so than when I just asked 'is this a man's or a woman's job'. It was also easier to question their responses by asking things like 'aren't there any boys in this class who like to do this or that?'"

Teachers found that the simple expedient of asking children to close their eyes before putting their hands up to identify jobs they would like to do produced less stereotypical choices – especially amongst the boys.

One noted that *"there is a still lot of social pressure. I felt that, when they couldn't see each others' choices, they were less influenced by what the others said and less concerned to conform."*

Another teacher noticed a similar outcome after asking his class to 'write your answer secretly'. *"I asked children to nominate jobs that a man or woman could do. Many more children wrote that a man or woman could do any job than did when I conducted an open discussion."*

Some teachers wanted to encourage KS2 children to start thinking about subject choices at secondary school. Reflecting on research that demonstrates a high degree of gender stereotyping in subject and career choices, they felt children needed to be encouraged to think about the consequences of these choices earlier. Teachers stressed the importance of 'keeping your options open' and trying everything available while at primary school. *"I'm always talking about the value of learning new skills and how, for example, joining clubs gives you the opportunity to try things you haven't done before."*

Several teachers noted the need for more 'realistic' role models for Reception and KS1 children, noting that non-traditional role models (particularly female ones) tended to be fantasy figures unrelated to children's lives. Many found books such as *Man's Work* and *Red Rockets and Rainbow Jelly* to be more effective because they featured children doing (possibly) surprising things in familiar situations. *"When they expressed ambitions to be Princesses or Power Rangers, we found that, by encouraging them to think of more 'realistic' options, we could then develop the conversation to include discussions of non-stereotypical or more aspirational roles."*

Points to consider

- Create opportunities to discuss assumptions about 'who can do which job' as often as possible and ensure that all staff are involved in doing so. For example extend discussions about which toys or games are 'for' boys or girls, or include them as part of activities focusing on particular subjects or skills.
- Encourage children to tell you why assumptions about particular jobs being exclusively for women or men are wrong (e.g. see the example on page 14 about children being asked to respond to a letter telling them they could not do a particular job 'because' of their gender). Circle time is another useful vehicle for this.
- Employ real and fictional role models that challenge stereotypes. While storybook characters – Princesses, pirates, animals – are engaging, ensure that you also include 'realistic' examples that children can relate to their own lives.
- Look for simple opportunities to point out assumptions – such as the use of words like 'policeman' or 'fireman'. Remember to use non-gendered terms yourself when describing jobs, regardless of the gender of the individual performing them.
- Challenge assumptions that generalised qualities like 'strength,' 'bravery' and 'kindness' are exclusively male or female characteristics. Point out that, nowadays, most jobs that require 'strength' involve machines that anyone can operate – and that many women are 'stronger' than many men anyway.
- Encourage children of both genders to be more aspirational in their choices and help them to think about jobs they might not have considered which reflect their interests.
- Try to limit the impact of peer pressure – think of the above examples where children made choices with their eyes closed or wrote them down. Also, encourage children to think about whether we sometimes make choices because we believe other people think we should. Several of the books highlighted elsewhere in this resource are ideal starting points for these discussions.

SPORT AND PLAYTIME

“Girls can do football – I watched the Olympics and girls did”.

School sport and playtimes were issues highlighted by several schools – not just in terms of how they demonstrate the impact of gender stereotyping (for example, with boys tending to exclude girls from certain activities at playtimes) but also with regard to the opportunities they present to talk about the impact of prejudice and stereotyping.

Typically, KS2 children tended to play in single sex groups at playtime. This was also the case to an extent in Reception and Year 1 but rare in nursery. The pitch was often an almost all-male preserve and, when girls did play, they were often on the fringes. Some girls felt they were being actively excluded with boys refusing to pass the ball to them, for example. This behaviour was sometimes replicated, to a lesser extent, in other parts of the playground.

More than one teacher noted that the girls would play quite competitively with each other but that some were less assertive when playing with boys – and that this was particularly true of the older girls. *“I sometimes think the older girls are more concerned to be conventionally ‘feminine’ – and that doesn’t go with being assertive around boys. At other times I just think they are put off by the boys’ aggressiveness!”* Several schools used the section of Anne Fine’s Bill’s New Frock that deals with the playground to initiate discussions about boys’ behaviour.¹

Sometimes the issues were exacerbated by things like the limited space of inner city school playgrounds. Nevertheless, even schools with more space identified that they faced challenges around boys dominating some areas of the playground and, in particular, any area designated for team games. Schools experimented with various approaches to this issue and spent some time talking with children about their concerns.

“A lot of the girls find the games at break too ‘physical’ – as do some of the boys. It’s too crowded so we’ve tried to think about how we might reduce the numbers. Boys can tend to kick the ball “too hard” [on purpose] so we started using softer balls at break time. Some of the less confident children are less put off now and we have fewer injuries.”

Schools also talked about the importance of not affirming stereotypes about what boys and girls can do in PE lessons. *“Everybody does everything in PE. We don’t have any single gender activity. We’ve had no resistance from the boys to dancing – and the after school dance club is completely mixed. It might make a difference that it is one of the male staff who leads most of the sessions.”*

The schools discussed with children how, as we grow up, male and female bodies change in different ways – which is why adult sport is often played in single sex groups. They went on to talk about how younger children don’t have those differences (in strength etc) so that it is fine for all children to play sport together.

Even where teams and clubs were generally mixed, football tended to be boy-heavy in Years 5 and 6. One of the main reasons for this seemed to be that there is more selection at this stage because of inter-school tournaments etc. Girls were trialling but not getting into the teams and schools had identified that there were issues around girls not getting the opportunity to develop their skills.

One school was thinking about a football club for Years 3 and 4 which would give all children (but particularly girls) a chance to improve their skills. *“Some boys admitted that they tried not to pass the ball to girls ‘because they weren’t as good’ so I pointed out that the only way anyone will get better is if you let them join in – they were a bit grumpy but I think they got the point!”*

¹ A range of teaching resources linked to this particular title can be purchased or downloaded from the internet.

The Olympics was used as an opportunity to discuss different sports and activities. Quite a lot of work to challenge stereotypical views about sport took place in classrooms:

“We did work in English and History about the Olympics – in particular looking at women’s historical participation in the Olympics (and other sport) and how this has increased dramatically in the last 50 years. Questions were asked about why women played so much less sport until recently and the reasons (i.e. it wasn’t because they were less good at it!) were discussed. We had a visit from an Olympian who talked about what she’d done to get where she’d got.”

“Lots of children didn’t realise that women play Rugby and Football at International level. After boys insisted that only boys can box, I now have pictures of women weightlifters on the white board. One boy still thought he could beat the Olympic gold medal champion because she was a woman!”

“We watched a short BBC video about Fanny Blankers-Koen who won four gold medals at the 1948 London Olympics.² She was criticised for even taking part because she had children and people thought she was being ‘selfish’. We wanted to make the children aware that there are barriers to women taking part in sport. We also talked about Sarah Attar who represented Saudi Arabia in 2012 and gave the children articles about Muslim women in sport, including one about the Iranian women’s football team who couldn’t compete internationally until recently because FIFA wouldn’t let them wear anything on their heads.³ We wanted to surprise them and unsettle some assumptions. They felt very strongly that everybody should be able to take part in everything.”

² <http://www.guardian.co.uk/sport/blog/2012/jan/18/fanny-blankers-koen-olympic-moments>

³ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/football/2011/jun/06/iran-women-olympic-strip>



“We also talked about how women only competed in five categories in the 1908 Olympics – whereas in 2012 they competed in every sport. We asked them if men were ever discriminated against in this way and one of the children knew that synchronised swimming wasn’t open to men in the Olympics. We showed them film of women doing synchronised swimming and got them to think about the skills you’d need. They agreed that men could do every single one of these things and thought it was really unfair! Both boys and girls seemed more outraged by this than any of the stuff about women – it showed me how far we still have to go in terms of tackling sexism!”

“We looked at pictures of different sports and activities and asked could this be done by girls, boys or both? To begin with, we did it in all girl, all boy and mixed groups to see if that made any difference to their responses. The all girl and mixed groups generally thought that most people could do everything. One boys group thought darts was a male sport. They thought men would be stronger at throwing darts. However, several of our female TAs play darts – one of them challenged this and pointed out that it’s not about strength it’s about accuracy! In another all boys group one boy said cheerleading was for girls but another challenged this – because he’d seen it on television.”

See page 20 and Appendix 17 for more discussion of issues related to sport and playtime.

Points to consider

- As far as possible, ensure that all organised PE is mixed and that boys and girls are encouraged and supported to take part in all activities.
- Use discussions about the history of women’s participation in sport to highlight the impact of stereotyping and prejudice.
- Ensure that images and resources challenge stereotypes about women and men’s participation in particular sports and activities.
- Encourage boys to reflect on their own behaviour in the playground or on the pitch – do they sometimes play ‘too rough’ and could these behaviours exclude some children who might like to join in?
- Consider the use of things like ‘softer’ footballs or changes that might make it easier for some children to participate.
- Consider creating opportunities for girls to develop sporting skills – particularly if they tend to be excluded from informal sessions at playtimes. For example, could you organise ‘catch up’ groups for girls (or boys)? (N.B. Schools are covered by the Public Sector Equality Duty which encourages them to consider making ‘Positive Action’ provisions – targeted measures that are designed to alleviate disadvantages experienced by pupils with particular protected characteristics. Gender is a protected characteristic in the Equality Act 2010. This means that schools can use clubs to target measures at girls or boys to counter disadvantage.)

CREATING NEW RESOURCES AND ADAPTING EXISTING ONES

Below are just a few examples of how staff used existing resources or created their own to support work on challenging gender stereotypes.

“We found that when we did drawing [in reception] children were already making very stereotypical choices. We’d ask them to choose a picture and girls were colouring princesses in pink and boys were using blue and red for Spiderman. So we developed our own images for them to colour. We mixed up characters like Cinderella and Power Rangers [see Appendix 1] and made a real point of encouraging everybody to use all the colours.”

“It would make such a difference if the media would think about using a broader range of colours. One girl was sure that Cinderella wears a pink dress because she’s a princess. But just pointing out to her that it was blue helped her to expand her own ideas about what girls like. She’s now switched from pink to yellow as a favourite colour.”

“We tried to buy baby dolls in blue clothes but couldn’t find any – they were all in pink or white! So we made our own outfits in a range of different, bright colours.”

“Our Autumn science topic was “Investigate Materials”. The books we found seemed to only feature pictures of men so I found images of both female and male builders and construction workers.”

“Later we asked them to write down some of their favourite things – animals, TV programmes, smells, food, colour, book. Then they had to move round the class and find someone who liked the same thing as they did. They found that there was a mixture of boys and girls who liked the things they liked.”

“As part of our discussions we asked children to think of some stereotypes and question them. On one page we wrote ‘Some people think that...’ and on the other ‘...but actually’ so that they could write the stereotype on one page and then critique it on the other. We had responses like ‘Some people think that only boys like Transformers ... but actually lots of girls like them too.’”

“We worked on a gender stereotyping activity which we found in our SRE resources. The children were asked to decide if Jack, Emily or both did specific activities [see examples in Appendix 14]. The responses were varied with some of them being quite unsterotypical. When we challenged the more traditional views, we found the children seemed to be heavily influenced by their parents’ views and by what they saw on television.”

“To try and reinforce some of our challenges we looked at Piggybook [by Anthony Browne] and discussed roles in the home. The children came up with comments like ‘that’s not very nice – they should help mum cook and clean’. We felt the conversations helped to reinforce the work we had done before and showed the importance of discussing these things as often as you can.”

EXAMPLES OF PRACTICE FROM THE PROJECT SCHOOLS

Involving children in discussions about girls using the football pitch

See Appendix 17 – *Supporting more girls to use the football pitch at lunchtimes* for a more detailed account of this work.

One school involved children in letter writing and discussion about challenging gender stereotypes. While many children showed considerable openness with regard to ‘traditional’ gender roles, staff had identified that this did not extend to the football pitch – boys were dominating the pitch and girls that did try to play football complained that they often felt excluded.

Staff began by canvassing KS2 children’s views about having a ‘girls only day’ on the pitch. Many boys were against this. Some girls were in favour as they said they would like to play football but often felt excluded by the boys. While some boys did concede that *“girls get hurt more, or they are weaker and we should go easy on them”*, neither sex seemed to question whether the boys’ attitude or behaviour might have an impact on whether girls felt comfortable on the pitch. However, most did concede that some of the older boys played quite roughly and that this could make it difficult for younger children who wanted to use the pitch.

The children were asked to write letters expressing what they felt about the issue. The Head responded to the letters challenging some of the points – suggesting, for example, that the girls’ only time might provide them with an opportunity to improve their skills.

The school decided to go ahead with allocating one lunchtime a week for girls only. The matter subsequently went to the school council who decided that there should also be a special session for Years 3 and 4 children. Staff noticed that play was less rough on both these days and that girls who had not previously used the pitch were beginning to do so.

Reading *The Paper Bag Princess* with Year 3

Several of the storybooks used by schools involved in the project take the ‘traditional’ view of a princess character and subvert it. The central character in this particular story (by Robert Munsch) rescues a prince from a dragon. At the end, she is rejected by the Prince because she is dirty and untidy after her ordeal.

The teacher re-read the story and then gave the children different questions to discuss in pairs (see Appendix 11 for the full list of questions along with some of the prompts she used to stimulate discussion).

The children were asked to answer the question and give reasons for their response – for example, to use the form “I think this because...”.

The teacher used opportunities to question or help the children develop their responses and affirmed those that challenge stereotypes. She commented, *“I like the story because it offers lots of opportunities to unsettle assumptions. The children clearly identified the differences between Elizabeth and Princesses in other stories. One session or story alone won’t do it but, if you make a point of using lots of books like this, things should begin to change. It needs to become part of our everyday teaching.”*

This particular book was popular with many teachers.

*“Our topic for the term was Castles so we used lots of stories involving knights, dragons and princesses like *The Princess Knight*, *Princess Pigsty* and, particularly, *The Paper Bag Princess*. We read it and talked about what we expected a princess to be like. I was pleased that the children were quite accepting of a warrior princess and did not seem particularly biased when discussing the story.*

“We were surprised to find out that the children didn’t really have traditionally ‘stereotypical’ ideas of what a prince or princess should be like. Without prompting, the children described princesses in fairy tales

that they know as being 'feisty', strong, intelligent and brave. From our discussions, we realised that the children are more used to watching films which portray female characters as being independent and heroic (e.g. *Brave*, *Tangled*), than perhaps we were when we were younger."

However, as elsewhere, children were enthused by the characters as they read the stories but felt less confident about challenging stereotypes themselves.

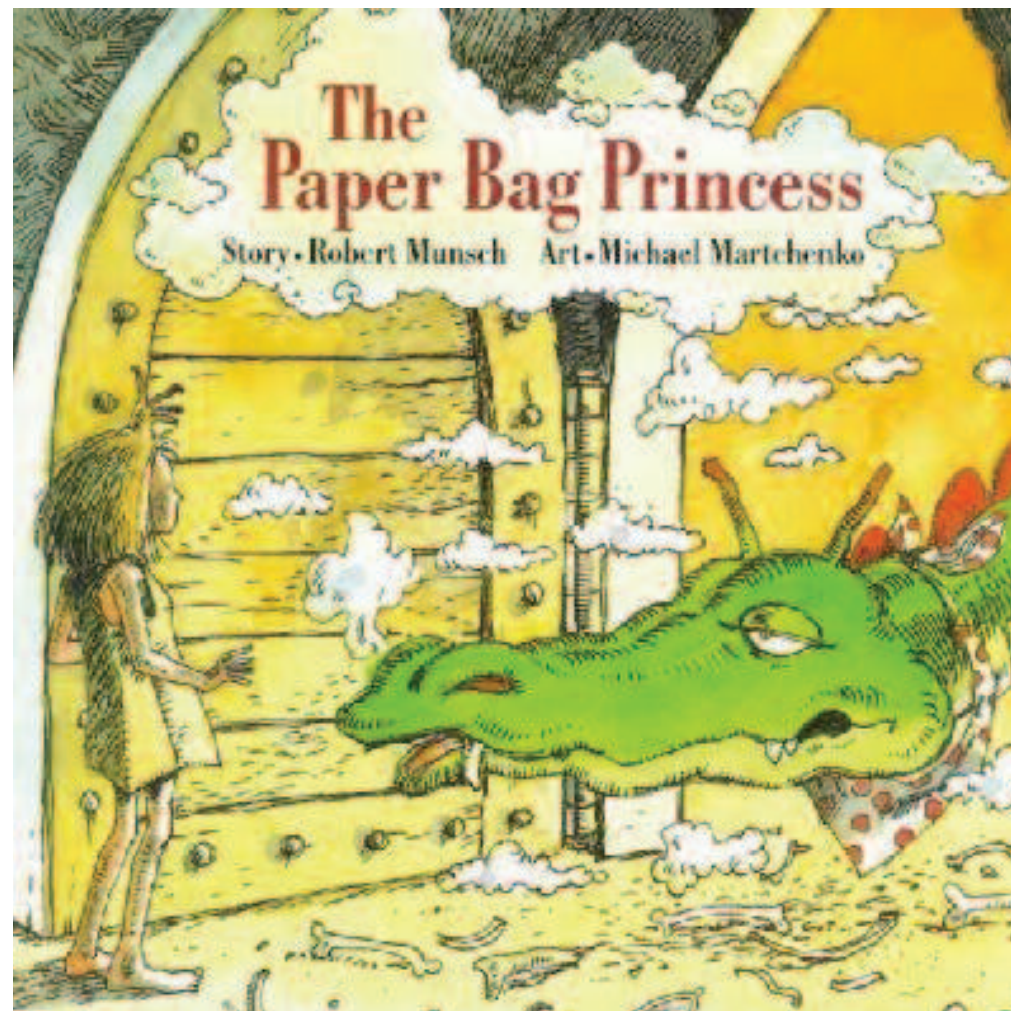
"I was so disappointed when we had our special castle day, where the children could dress up as a knight or a princess or prince. Almost all the girls dressed up as princesses and the boys as knights. I dressed up as a knight as did two other female members of staff but one boy who wanted to be a prince came as a knight because his mum wanted him to be like all the other boys! I wonder if we should have involved the parents in this more and explained what we were trying to do and why."

Design and drama

Two schools in particular did work looking at magazines and comics which were marketed as being for either girls or boys. One school (see Appendix 4) showed Year 4 children the covers of two comics – one aimed at girls the other at boys – and asked the children who they thought they were for and why.

"They knew straight away which was which – one was for girls because of all the pink and the other for boys because it had Spiderman on it. Interestingly none of them were very interested in the 'girl's' one but the 'boy's' comic prompted more comment. They noticed things like the spiky writing. The boy's comic had a really detailed picture on the front whereas the girl's one just had lots of quite 'babyish' pictures.

"There's a picture of ['Disney's] Cinderella but even she's pretty unsophisticated looking – just a wash of colour. The Spiderman picture is very detailed and realistic, the ones on the other [girl's] comic are just a broad wash of a few colours (primarily pink)."



The teachers led a discussion about how stereotypical these images are and the assumptions they make about what all boys and girls like. They talked about how comics could also influence people to think they were supposed to like particular things – even though everybody can like Spiderman or Cinderella.

“We also looked at the Beano (see Appendix 6) – the children identified this as for both boys and girls. We looked at all the principle characters and they discovered that there are FAR more boys than girls throughout the comic (and only two black characters in ‘supporting’ roles). Most of the boys were stereotypically ‘naughty’ and the girls largely insignificant”

Another school asked children to design a magazine for both girls and boys. Interestingly, the children generally responded by producing images that were a mix of ‘stereotypical’ themes – some pink and some blue, footballs for boys and fashion for girls – rather than images that challenged these stereotypes or which didn’t have a stereotypical component (see Appendix 5).

“When we discussed designing the magazine cover, they talked a lot about what’s for boys and what’s for girls. They couldn’t really say WHY [people think] some of these things are for one gender or another. Even the fact that children of the other sex disagreed with their assumptions didn’t seem to change their views. For example, boys insisted that girls don’t like sport despite many girls saying they did.”

“We’re going to be doing some drama subverting fairy stories (a female Peter Pan and Snow White, male Rapunzel, seven female dwarfs, Three Little Wolves and a Big Bad Pig etc). We talked about what these different characters might do. Again, the responses were very stereotypical. When I asked how the girl dwarves would earn money, (they didn’t think they’d be miners!) it was suggested they could be fashion designers. Manzel (Rapunzel), on the other hand, would break out of his tower. Girls wouldn’t be able to do this, of course, because

they wouldn’t be strong enough. It will be interesting to see if working on the role-plays themselves actually helps to shift these perceptions.”

This account illustrates the extent of the challenge involved. Stereotypes are very persistent and, since the characters in many children’s stories tend to perpetuate them, just swapping their gender may not be enough. Children here just substituted one set of stereotypes for another. Again the key is perhaps to ask why we think the characters would behave differently if they were a different gender.

“We could talk about successful female athletes before we ask again why Rapunzel could not (apparently) break out of her tower. Perhaps she could – it is just that some people think she cannot because they think that men are ‘strong’ and women are not. It is hardly surprising if children cannot imagine female dwarves doing manual work if they still hold stereotypical views about the kind of jobs women do. As part of the process of creating the characters, we could look at some of the manual jobs women do across the world. We could talk about the history of female miners in the UK (perhaps the dwarves were some of them?) and how women are working in mining in increasing numbers in parts of the world like South America.”

What job would you like? Class Activity

The Year 3 class had already spent some time talking about gender stereotypes. They had talked about the different jobs that people do and the skills they require. They had learnt about the work and careers of a female farmer and footballer and a male nursery nurse and talked about several of the project books – in particular why Princess Pigsty was much happier doing something ‘useful’ and rewarding than being waited on like a ‘traditional’ princess.

The teacher began the session by asking children what jobs they would like to do when they were older.

“The list showed more variety – and greater aspiration – than when we did something similar at the start of the work. There were some less stereotypical choices which was great. The girls in some ways seem more aspirational than the boys. But this is still a big shift from where we were at the start.

“Their list also gave us the opportunity to challenge some language – so we talked about Police Officers, Headteachers and Air Stewards as opposed to Policemen, Headmistresses and Air Hostesses.”

The teacher placed pictures of different people all around the room – a mixture of genders, ages, ethnicities etc. She named a number of jobs and, as she did, children had to stand by the person who they thought did that job. She then asked children for the reasons for their decisions.

The teacher asked them what skills a builder would need. They came up with:

- Strong
- Own tools
- Bag of ingredients for cement
- Tall to reach stuff
- Small to go under stuff

“I asked, ‘has anyone in any of the pictures got these things? Could we know?’ I thought they might pick some of the men but they said that, no, we can’t tell because we can only see their faces.”

She asked, ‘what skills do you need to be a nurse?’

- Friendly
- Serious
- Brave
- Good at reading (could give the wrong medicine)

Again, she asked, if you could tell if anyone in the pictures had these qualities. Again, they said no.

I ~~two~~ want to be a builder
because it IS FUN.



“I said, ‘so, we can’t tell from the pictures – and you can’t tell just by knowing what gender, age or ethnicity someone is whether they will have these skills or what job they will do. When you think about the next job, think about whether you can tell just by looking.’”

She repeated the exercise with several other jobs (doctor, teacher, lawyer, farmer etc). Each time, she asked the children to list the skills you would need for a particular job. Sometimes she would ask – ‘is that something you would like to do?’ or affirm that ‘a lot of us are good at X – perhaps we could do that job’.

In a subsequent lesson, children watched a film about a female train driver, a job which most children had previously identified as a ‘man’s job’.

“We discussed whether it’s surprising to see a woman doing this sort of job. What does it involve – does it look interesting? We reflected on how the job of train driving has changed and speculated about why some people still think of it as a man’s job etc.”

The children worked in pairs. Each pair had to write down the skills they would need to do a particular job.

“This was still quite challenging for some of them – especially when boys had to write about a ‘girls’ job like hairdressing – they couldn’t think of what it might involve. One boy said one of the ‘skills’ for being a hairdresser was to be a girl!”

“We processed it by talking about how any of us could learn the skills each of the jobs involved. We identified how many of the same skills were relevant to jobs which are traditionally identified as ‘boy’ or ‘girl’ jobs. Footballers and ballet dancers, doctors and nurses for example need many of the same skills. I reminded them that ‘you can do anything you want. The only person stopping you from doing anything in life is yourself.’”

See Appendix 8 for lesson plans linked to some of this work.

Circle time

Circle time was frequently cited as a useful vehicle as it allowed children to challenge each other’s assumptions. Often sessions would begin with children expressing broadly stereotypical views but, with gentle prompting, they would recall different examples and challenge traditional ideas.

“One boy was prompted by other children to agree that he only thought all hairdressers were women because he had never seen a male one. Several girls challenged another boy when he asserted that girls were not ‘interested’ in skateboarding – while another boy pointed out that this was unlikely to be true since women did ‘everything’ in the Olympics.”

Teachers noted that these responses often mirrored things they themselves had pointed out in previous lessons and felt the circle time sessions gave children opportunities to further examine and reassert these ideas.

Another school found that children were more open to challenging stereotypes in circle time than elsewhere. *“Although some still made quite stereotypical choices in writing and drawing exercises, in circle time they were more relaxed. I think they see circle time as very safe – we had several girls wanting to be things like ‘stuntmen’ [their word] and runners – saying ‘I can beat the boys at that’”.*

Philosophy for Children

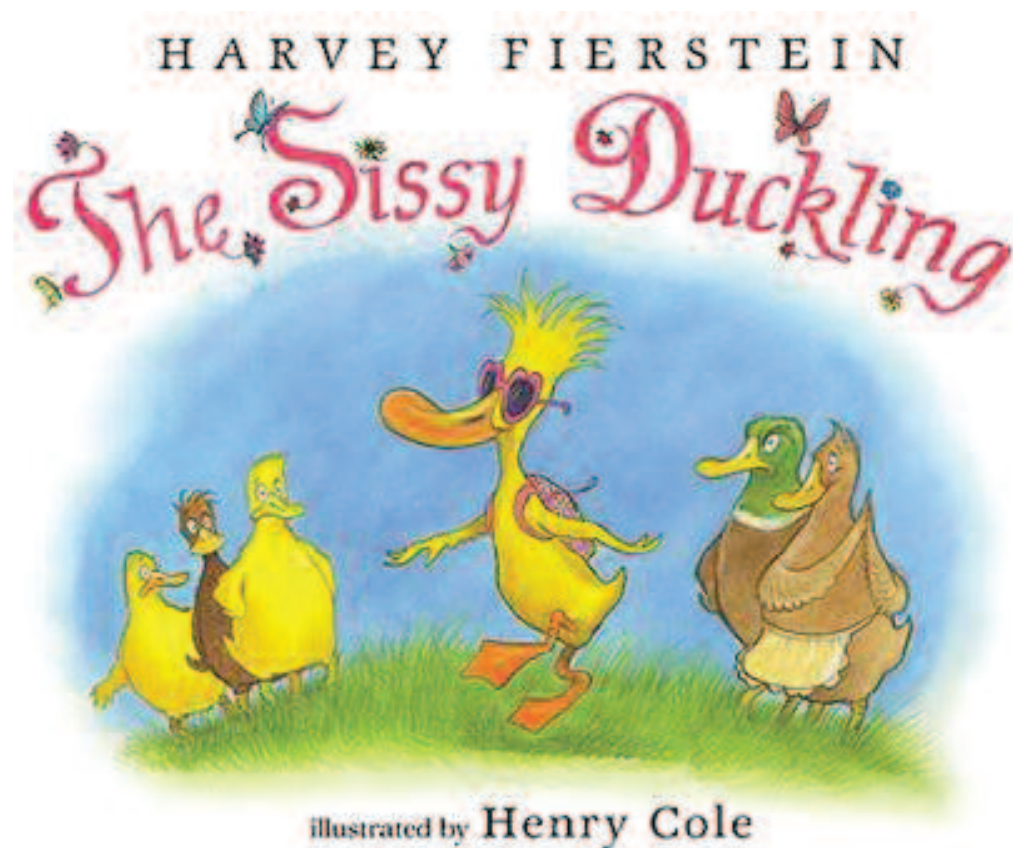
One teacher used *The Sissy Duckling* by Harvey Fierstein as the starting point for a P4C discussion about the impact of gender stereotypes.

Below is a list of some of the issues the children discussed and, in italics, a few of the teacher’s prompts.

- Being proud of who you are and not doing things because other people think you should.

- Things the children liked that were ‘typically’ associated with the other gender – and why they liked them.
- Things they might do but don’t in case people laugh at them.
- How great it would be if none of us worried about what other people thought of how we dress or the things we like to do. *“Wouldn’t it be amazing if we were all like that? Would it be better than being tall, strong, pretty or being able to run fast?”*
- How Elmer [the title character] is ‘his own person’ – he does what he wants. People who are their own person have their own style and don’t care what other people think.
- Why some of the other ducks wanted Elmer to be ‘the same’ as them and how some people are threatened by people who don’t want to ‘be like everyone else’ – but how boring it would be if we were all the same. *“We’re all saying it’s OK to be different but one day you’ll be in a group when someone’s making fun of someone who’s different. When that happens you will have a choice – join in, say nothing or stick up for that person. Will you think ‘I am my own person’?”*
- How they would feel if they had a child like Elmer who was ‘different’ – ‘I’d be proud because he’s doing his own thing’ *“Yes – it takes courage to be different.”*
- How some people use the word ‘gay’ to describe people like Elmer. *“When you use ‘gay’ as an insult it is the same as insulting somebody because they are a different race from you.”*

The teacher commented, *“I also liked the fact that the book focuses on Elmer’s relationship with his Dad. Dad’s have a key role in all this [reinforcing – or challenging – stereotypes]. I think lots of the boys don’t read because they don’t see their fathers doing it. I like the fact that the book is saying it’s cool not to need to be like other people – you don’t have to do things [or not do them] because other people do.”*



Avoiding a 'gendered' Christmas

Much of the project work took place during the autumn term and so preparations for Christmas became a topic for discussion. Teachers explored some of the issues relating to which children would wear which outfits in Christmas productions.

“A lot of the boys thought that angels were girls. In a book we read, the boy is a shepherd and the girl is an angel so that didn't help! The boys refused to be angels but the costumes do look like dresses so we probably need to change those – or at least make sure we call them 'robes'! The girls didn't want to play 'snowmen' so we talked about snowgirls instead – but of course we should have really called them 'snowwomen!’”

“The children were dressing as dolls for the nativity show. We tried to find some 'boy' dolls but they were all Action Men which didn't seem very seasonal! We had a very useful discussion about what else a boy doll might look like and what other roles they could model.”

“With the onset of Christmas I was aware that boys didn't want to be seen with carrier bags from certain retailers. Everybody was happy to carry bags such as Primark, Superdry, French Connection, Jaeger etc, but only girls wanted to be seen with bags from places like Joules or Kath Kidston. I wondered why – even though all these shops sold products for both boys and girls or things like household goods. We asked the children to identify what the important elements were and they identified that it was about the colours and designs used and the image that these shops had. We got them to design and construct carrier bags that both boys and girls would be happy to be seen carrying. The children used cross-curricular skills, including maths, art, design and literacy in the making of their bags and we used them as part of a Christmas display.”

Venn diagrams – boys' toys and girls' toys

The following account of a Year 2 lesson concludes with some reflections on how it went.

The teacher used two overlapping hoops to make a big Venn diagram and had a pink card on one side that read 'boys' toys' and a blue card on the other that read 'girls' toys'.

She put children into pairs and gave each pair a picture of a toy. They included a Wii, connect 4, dolls' house, football, train, iPad, toolset, pushchair, Action Man, Barbie (dressed as a pilot), regular Barbie – i.e. in a dress, toy vacuum cleaner, Lego and a skipping rope.

Each pair had to think about the toy on their card and then place it where they thought it should be on the Venn diagram and say why. The teacher said she would discuss their choices with them at the end.

After discussion, most toys ended up being for both girls and boys – except Action Man, the football and toolkit (just boys) and Barbie (just girls). The teacher told the class that she was pleased to see so many toys in the middle of the diagram because *“we can all play with anything we like”*.

Initial judgements made by the children in pairs could be quite stereotypical but discussion often prompted more nuance. Association with older children seemed significant – several saw the fact that older cousins or siblings played with this or that toy as important. The feelings expressed by the children about things like the pushchair and the vacuum cleaner also seemed influenced by what children witnessed their fathers doing at home.

The teacher reflected, "Some boys seemed more concerned than girls with things being for one sex or the other. In discussion, several boys said that something is just for boys. Girls are less likely to do this – in fact, they are more likely to say that something is also for girls. Boys actively reject pink, whereas girls are less bothered about blue – it might be identified, to a degree, with boys but it isn't explicitly not for girls".

"This is definitely an advance – I think this has come about because of the discussions they have had around – for example – girls being able to play with the construction tools and how these are not just for the boys".

"In discussion, boys cited examples like 'we don't see girls playing with X' – even though, at school, they do. It's likely to be different if they know a particular girl who plays with X. I think it might also have been different if we'd put them all in mixed pairs. The girls would then have been able to challenge some of these assumptions in their initial discussions."

After further discussion, many children agreed that everything except Barbie could be for girls or boys. "Barbie just seemed really toxic for the boys. When I asked if any boys like to play with Barbie they all said 'no' amongst much laughter – even when I reminded them that they all play with the male and female dolls in the dolls house. One girl talked about Barbie being "too pretty" for boys. It's still easier for girls to play with "boys' things" than the other way round. Perhaps it's not her gender so much as the fact that she's just such a stereotype!"



LIST OF ADDITIONAL RESOURCES AND APPENDICES

The following appendices are available:

- Appendix 1. Colouring – and talking about gender stereotypes – in Nursery
- Appendix 2. Words used by girls and boys about girls and boys
- Appendix 3. Girls’ and boys’ drawings of each other Appendix 4. Comics for girls and comics for boys Appendix 5. Design a magazine for both girls and boys
- Appendix 6. Male and female characters in the *Beano* – worksheet
- Appendix 7. Pink and blue new baby cards
- Appendix 8. What job is this – and who would do it? Lesson plan and slides
- Appendix 9. Toys, gender stereotypes and advertising. Lesson plan
- Appendix 10. English history, Robin Hood – and Maid Marion. Lesson plan
- Appendix 11. Questions for the class after reading *The Paper Bag Princess*
- Appendix 12. Talking about books – *It’s a George Thing*
- Appendix 13. Prompts for Year 2 discussion about what girls and boys can do
- Appendix 14. What do boys and girls like? Worksheet examples
- Appendix 15. Drawings of Tyke Tyler
- Appendix 16. When I am older ... Drawings
- Appendix 17. Supporting more girls to use the football pitch at lunchtimes

The appendices are available at:

www.teachers.org.uk/educationandequalities/breakingthemould

THE PROJECT BOOKS

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- 10,000 Dresses*** (Marcus Ewert – ISBN 978-1583228500)
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When I get older I would like to work at ~~the~~ a makeup shop because ~~I like~~
I like makeup.



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