

Challenging gender stereotypes through primary education



**STEREOTYPES STOP
YOU DOING STUFF**



A PROJECT BASED IN FIVE PRIMARY SCHOOLS ABOUT GENDER STEREOTYPES

The NUT worked for two years 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 provides an overview 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.

These three supporting publications are also available at www.teachers.org.uk/educationandequalities/breakingthemould:

- *Boys’ Things and Girls’ Things – challenging stereotypical choices and behaviours* contains detailed examples of how staff worked to address gender stereotypes in primary classrooms and sections on adopting a whole school approach, toys, ambitions and jobs, sports and playtime, and creating and updating new resources.
- *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*.

Investigating different ways to use children’s literature was at the heart of the project – the project books are listed on page 30.

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

The NUT would like to thank the author of this report Mark Jennett without whom this project would not have been possible.

INTRODUCTION

“They have aisles for boys and girls so boys don’t get the wrong things”

Stereotypes are invidious things. They underpin prejudice and discrimination and place constraints on people’s lives. As the 9 year old child quoted above expresses so eloquently, they often prevent us from doing things we want to do – or oblige us to make choices that, without the pressure to conform to such rigid expectations, we might not make.

Arguably, ‘traditional’ gender stereotypes are both the most pervasive and the least acknowledged. From the moment of birth, society works to confine behaviour within rigid lines – children are taught which colours, toys, games and books are 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. Many children may chafe against these constraints. Some will be encouraged to do so but others will receive, at best, sympathy or even censure.

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 gender pay gap remains stubbornly hard to shift and women continue to be under-represented 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 seen as ‘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 genders, helping young people and adults to have respectful and fulfilling relationships and improving behaviour in our classrooms. Indeed, a significant body of research already exists to support this argument. 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.

As a society, we regularly seem to confuse gender with sex. Many of the differences that exist between men and women (such as physical strength and appearance) are linked to biology – and in our highly mechanised world, many of these are much less significant than they used to be. 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. In reality, there are

very few things men and women cannot do equally well. Nobody involved in the project was attempting to deny that there are some inherent differences between girls and boys but only to question why we often exaggerate those that do exist – and sometimes even invent others.

Many children's books and TV programmes still portray a world in which men are Fireman Sam and Postman Pat and women are either mothers or Princesses. More than ever, toys and games are marketed as being 'for' one gender or the other – dolls and ovens are for girls and trucks and construction toys are for boys. Even things as apparently innocuous as colouring books are promoted as being for one gender or the other and feature completely different content. We all know that men can cook and women can drive – and yet seem determined to keep these facts from our children! Given this context, it was hardly surprising that many of the teachers engaged in the project encountered very stereotypical views about what constituted 'women's or men's jobs'.

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 intellectual ability and to see social status 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 be seen displaying empathy or nurturing skills – abilities that are generally assigned to female characters.

So many of the influences acting on children seem to imply that there are 'typical' ways of being a boy or girl, thereby seeking to minimise awareness of the wide variety of gender expression which exists within as well as between the sexes. Many young people and adults will be unable or unwilling to conform to such narrow definitions of masculinity or femininity

and, as a result, endure needless challenges. These societal expectations also play a significant part in generating the negative outcomes outlined above for children of both sexes. They are, in large part, a result of the expectations placed on girls and boys and the roles society chooses to assign them – and we could change these expectations.

One way to bring about this change is to educate children for a world in which such stereotypes need not govern our behaviour and people are free to pursue the lives they want without feeling that certain things are expected of them – or opportunities denied them – because of either their biological sex or gender expression. As one teacher explained:

"We should be preparing children for the future we hope they will live in – a diverse, non-sexist one. We challenge racism by breaking down stereotypes but we don't do this anything like as effectively with gender. Why aren't we preparing them for a world in which women don't want to have children or men want to stay at home and care for them? If we refer to these possibilities at all, it is very much in passing. How many households are there already where the woman is the higher earner – and yet we are not educating them for this very real world."

Many referred to the need to help children to make choices that suit them and meet their needs.

"They need to leave at 11 with built in resilience. Sometimes it is hard to make the choice to resist stereotypes. We can try and give children that opportunity at school but outside they will be under pressure not to make those unconventional choices. On the one hand, it is good to promote the idea of school as a magic place where you can be free and safe to explore identity without the fear of prejudice but we need to talk to children about the reality of the pressures they will face – we need to build their confidence levels, their emotional resilience. Girls in particular need to learn the value of risk taking and also the importance of being assertive and asking for what you do – and don't – want."

When I get older I would like to be a runner in the Olympics because I enjoy running and getting awards.



Some teachers were surprised by how deeply some stereotypes were entrenched and how resistant they were to change.

“You really have to keep repeating the messages and monitoring their responses. You need to question their views about what it’s OK for girls and boys to like – even when they are saying what you want to hear. There is a danger that they just learn by rote that ‘boys and girls can do anything’ without really realising how much pressure there is on them to behave in certain ways – or how much they take the stereotypes for granted. Time and again, I thought I’d cracked it and then the next day somebody would tell me that boys can’t wear pink or girls don’t like cars.”

“There is a danger that they will tell you what they think you want to hear. I think they really do understand that people shouldn’t be prevented from doing something because of their ethnicity, for example, but they seem to take for granted that some jobs are only for women or men – and think that a child who is interested in non-gender stereotypical things is odd or unusual. They may not bully them – because they understand that is unkind – but they still think they’re peculiar!”

“There also seems to be a disturbing idea that equality is attainable for some people but not others. I’m not naïve about the impact of things like socioeconomic status but, working in a school where many of the parents are in low skill jobs, it’s important that we consider anything that raises aspirations for all. Many of our girls do not expect to continue in education and, although we live in an area of high unemployment, many boys are still being raised to identify themselves as much as anything in relation to their jobs as opposed to things like being good parents or partners.”

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.”*

Schools produced lessons and schemes of work that specifically addressed gender stereotypes. They found resources (in particular a number of children’s books) that challenged them in engaging ways. Examples of how these were used are included in this report.

The teachers took opportunities to challenge stereotypical representations of gender 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.

Schools also considered how staff modelled gender, the language they used and how they managed their classrooms. For example, many teachers realised that they often treated boys and girls differently and in ways that served to reinforce stereotypes. Staff noted improvements in behaviour and attitudes to learning as a result of changes like always encouraging children to work in mixed gender groups.

“BOYS’ THINGS AND GIRLS’ THINGS”- QUESTIONING GENDER STEREOTYPES WHEREVER THEY APPEAR

“Makayla looked at the diggers in the sand pit and said ‘are girls allowed?’”

Most staff involved in the project agreed that what they particularly wanted to unsettle was the concept that there are certain things – colours, toys, games, activities, comics, books – which are perceived as being the sole or primary preserve of one gender. Most of these distinctions have little logical purpose in contemporary society and seem to exist primarily as a means of exaggerating the differences and playing down the similarities between genders.

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.

Very quickly, the schools began to notice and challenge stereotypical choices and behaviours, for example:

- Many children would identify neutral objects as being ‘for’ girls or boys because of their colour. In particular, boys would refuse to play with scooters, bicycles or other toys if they were pink. Sometimes boys would be teased for wearing or choosing something pink.

- KS1 children often identified certain activities as being for boys (construction) or girls (design). Staff noticed that, even though happy to take part in the full range of activities when encouraged to do so, many children gravitated to more traditional ‘pursuits’ when left to their own devices. Crucially, those who did not would sometimes feel pressured to abandon their preferred activity because of comments from other children.
- This effect was least marked in reception age children whereas children at KS2 were even more likely to favour stereotypical activities than those at KS1.
- Schools with nurseries did not notice many of these behaviours in the youngest children with both genders happy to take part in the full range of activities. All schools felt that there was a large ‘learnt’ element in much of the gendered behaviour in children in reception and above and acknowledged that staff sometimes contributed to this unconsciously by their behaviour, the language they used or simply failing to challenge stereotypical behaviour. Nursery staff felt that it was important to utilise children’s willingness to try different things and to stress that ‘everybody can do everything’ because there was so much pressure on children to conform.
- Schools felt that many children appreciated the opportunity to try other toys and activities that they might not get the opportunity to play with at home. They noticed that when children bought in toys from home their choices were often more likely to be ‘gendered’ than when they chose freely at school. Schools felt that gender stereotypes were often reinforced – or at least not challenged – at home.
- Teachers generally felt that girls who do not conform to gender stereotypes have an easier time than boys – they are less likely to be challenged by other children or at home. On the other hand, they felt that girls’ options were sometimes limited because, without supervision, some boys would dominate certain activities in ways that girls found hard to challenge. For example, at KS2 in particular, boys tended to take over the playground at breaks and lunchtimes.

THE INFLUENCE OF FAMILY, HOME AND CULTURE

“Women don’t go to work.”

During the course of the project, schools addressed a number of issues related to the engagement of children, families and school staff. These are outlined below.

Several schools expressed concerns about possible tensions arising as a result of attempts to challenge sexist attitudes or behaviour that might be accepted outside school. In general, they felt that children were often encouraged to behave in more stereotypical ways at home – for example, they would be bought or expected to play with particular toys and that some might be discouraged from pursuing interests not considered ‘appropriate’ to their gender.

Similarly, they felt that certain cultural values attached to male and female roles might be ‘at odds’ with messages being promoted at school. Staff spoke about the impact this can have on things like behaviour management in the classroom – with girls, for example, being more self-reliant and boys less able to manage their own behaviour. They were concerned about some girls who, they felt, were discouraged from being assertive or pursuing challenging careers. Teachers also reflected on how some older boys can be less respectful of female teachers – and how some older girls lack resilience and self-belief – and linked the work on challenging stereotypes to addressing these sorts of behaviours and attitudes.

Many teachers felt that, given the prevailing attitudes in some homes – which are also reinforced in the media it was important to offer children as full a range of opportunities as possible while they were at school.

Most felt that children are comfortable with the fact that values expressed at school are not always the same as those at home and often welcome the opportunity to do things that they otherwise might not. The message, they felt, was not that one view is right or wrong but just that there is more than one way of doing things – and that it was particularly important to offer all girls aspirational role models from a variety of cultures and social backgrounds. Similarly, with many jobs disappearing, particularly in industry, it was felt that boys needed to be encouraged to think of ‘success’ in terms of things other than work or career.

Some staff were concerned that a small number of children, usually boys, were being actively discouraged from pursuing certain interests and that they could provide a ‘safe space’ for these children to explore their identity.

Conflict with parents over such issues were rare and, when they occurred, staff explained that schools needed to meet the needs and endorse the interests of all young people – as well as encouraging the acceptance of difference – so that it would be inappropriate to discourage children from exploring particular activities simply because they were male or female. They also talked with parents about the importance of self-esteem and children being comfortable with themselves.

Staff felt that fathers often worried more than mothers about boys ‘acting like girls’. *“In reception, quite a few of the boys wander around in aprons and things like that. One mum commented on this. She said ‘I’m sure he’s going to be gay’ – but I don’t think she was being negative. However, sometimes parents say that boys mustn’t do this or that.”*

When I am older I
would like to be a
Argos man because people
gives you money.



In fact, many parents welcomed discussion with staff about how they might avoid reinforcing gender stereotypes with their own children. Schools used opportunities to encourage parents of both sexes to be as involved as possible in their children's education and perceived, for example, that there were particular benefits for boys when dads were involved with homework or attended meetings at school with their children.

Some staff expressed concerns about how work on challenging gender stereotypes would be perceived by families from some cultures. In that context, it is worth recording the thoughts of a bilingual assistant who read some of the project books with children and their families.

Points to consider

- Encourage girls and boys from all families and communities to take part in all activities and challenge any objections linked to gender – for example, the idea that certain activities are only for girls or boys.
- Encourage staff of both sexes to take part in and support all activities.
- Make sure all parents, carers and visitors are aware of the school's equality policy. Seek to ensure that visitors to the school do not affirm or perpetuate gender stereotypes through their practice.
- Think about how you organise the classroom – for example, ensure that children work in mixed groups wherever possible. Try to avoid actions that stress the 'differences' between girls and boys (e.g. lining up in single sex groups).
- Think about language used in the classroom. Little things such as substituting words like 'children' for 'girls' and boys' or 'parents and carers' or families' for 'Mums and Dads' can help to affirm the things we have in common rather than our differences.
- Where you do treat girls and boys differently (for example, by having a 'catch-up' class for girls to improve their skills), be explicit within the school and with parents and carers about your reasons for doing so.

ENGAGING STAFF – QUESTIONING PRACTICE, ACTING AS ROLE MODELS AND CREATING SAFE SPACES

As the project progressed, most staff became highly engaged and many commented on how thinking about the issues had impacted on their own practice. Many described how it had heightened their awareness of the link between gender stereotypes and issues including the gender pay gap and the lack of women in top jobs, homophobia, domestic violence and young people's emotional health and self-esteem – particularly in relation to body image and relationships.

Project leaders within schools acknowledged that some staff did not feel sufficiently comfortable or knowledgeable about challenging gender stereotypes and that some were (inadvertently) reinforcing them by their use of language, to behaviour they modelled or the resources they selected.

“The project has brought to our attention just how inherent some of this is. We've changed a lot just by having conversations with our staff and pointing out some of the stereotyping that is so common you just don't notice it. It's also natural in this school to be reflective and challenge our own practice. The Asda Xmas ad [in which a harassed Mum did all the work for her family's Christmas] got everybody going – but I had to point it out and comment on it first.”

One Early Years lead commented that *“what really shifted my thinking – and my staff's – was the idea of not limiting children's opportunities”*.

Many staff commented on how they were much more likely to challenge stereotypical comments from children – as well as from each other – and that they had become much more conscious of how so many films, books and other resources aimed at children perpetuate stereotypes.

They took opportunities to challenge them and, in particular, to endorse characters who behaved in non-traditional ways. In time, children began to notice and comment on these stereotypes themselves. Staff talked about the need to *“keep having the discussions – not just with the children but with each other as well”*.

Questioning practice and acting as role models

Some teachers felt that some of the most significant changes had taken place amongst staff. One commented that, for some, it *“goes against the grain because it challenges their own prejudices”* and some mentioned how they or colleagues were sometimes uncomfortable with children who were perceived as ‘different’. Many commented on *“all the things we didn’t realise we were doing”* like handing out pink pencils and stickers to girls and blue ones to boys or asking boys and girls to do different tasks in the classroom (boys to move desks, girls to hand out pencils or clear up). Others noted how, by always lining children up in separate gender groups, they were perpetuating awareness of the differences rather than the similarities between genders. Some teachers noted that – while they did not single out girls for jobs like washing up – they always chose boys to blow up footballs or put out gym equipment. As one teacher commented, *“I hadn’t realised that, while being careful not to stereotype certain jobs as ‘girls’ jobs’, I was effectively saying that other things explicitly weren’t girls’ jobs”*.

Many staff commented on how they could do more to reinforce and endorse non-stereotypical choices – not just in classroom discussions but individually as well. Opportunities to reflect and exchange ideas had been welcome.

“It was free choice on a Friday and one little boy dressed in a frock – I said ‘you look great’ but I wish I’d asked what he liked about it and applauded that as well.”

“We had a dressing up day – come to school as someone from the castle. All but one of the girls (who is consistently “girls can do anything”) came as a princess. She came as a knight and we all just thought ‘good for you’ but I should have commented on how brilliant it was and talked about how girls could be knights just like the boys”.

“I’ve actually started quite deliberately saying things like can I have three ‘strong’ girls or ‘helpful’ boys when I want them to do things to try and counter some of the stereotypes that are reinforced elsewhere. I’ve also talked with the children about how much I hated not being asked to do certain things when I was a girl.”

Several teachers commented on how they were aware of some colleagues treating boys and girls very differently in the classroom. *“I think we are all aware that, because of all the pressure around raising boys’ achievement, we sometimes tend to focus more on the boys in things like group discussions. We have to make sure that this doesn’t lead to girls getting left behind or not being stretched enough – particularly some of the less able or confident ones, or the ones who just get on with things without making a fuss. What the project made me realise is that we also have to be careful about sending messages about boys being more ‘important’ than girls [by paying them more attention].”*

Some teachers were surprised when children noticed these changes. One Head said *“I asked some Year 4 girls to put out the chairs. They said ‘great – we never get asked to do that’ – so I think they do notice the different ways in which genders are treated.”* Another teacher feared outrage when she handed out pink and blue stickers arbitrarily to girls and boys – *“I thought they would complain but they didn’t. I realised that I was the one who, unconsciously, had been affirming stereotypes about pink and blue and it made me much more aware of things like how often I told the girls they looked nice but didn’t say it to the boys. I’m not sure if I tell the boys they are clever more than the girls but I’ll be on the look out for it now!”*

Research tends to refute the lazy assumption that boys do better with male teachers – in fact, work by Francis and Skelton and others¹ confirms that girls and boys respond equally to good teaching, regardless of the gender of the teacher. However, some teachers did comment on how male staff sometimes acquired extra cachet because of their minority status in most primary schools as well as the general influence of sexism in society. Some male staff felt they had an advantage in terms of challenging gender stereotypes in the classroom as they were not perceived as having an ‘agenda’. Others felt that, while adults might see it that way (so it could be useful when advocating with parents, for example), children rarely saw things in such terms and were engaged by the issues regardless of who was introducing them.

“I don’t think the gender of staff impacts on learning – it’s more about the personality of the individual. The male staff are very integrated here. They teach everything – not just the popular stuff like PE, music, art etc. If you’re liked the kids will do more. It’s all about the relationship you have with the children – though young men can have a head start because they are definitely perceived as the coolest!”

Men also acknowledged their position as potential role models: *“I tell the kids that I’m the person who cooks in our house. I didn’t think of this as breaking down stereotypes until now.”*

Creating safe spaces

Staff very quickly came to talk about the project as *“something that impacts on everything we do – not a one-off. It’s about how we maximise the opportunities for all children”*. Another echoed many of the children’s comments when she described it as *“all part of our message of be who you are and be proud of it”*.

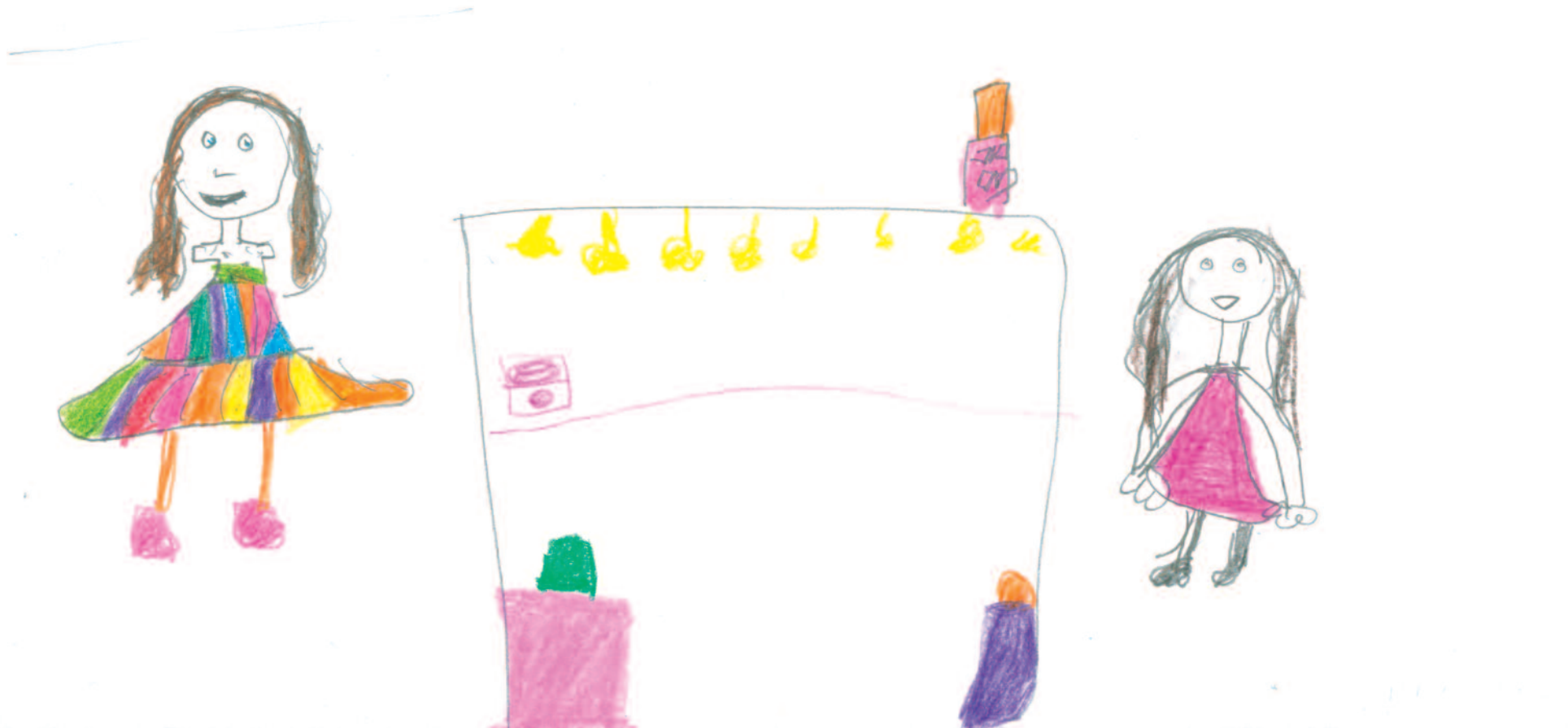
One school devised a set of questions to stimulate discussion among staff:

- Is it more acceptable for girls to cry than boys?
- Is there anything about your classroom organisation that might reinforce gender stereotypes – e.g. are there “boys’ toys” or “girls’ books”?
- How do you line up your children?
- Do you speak differently to boys and girls?
- Are sanctions different for boys and girls?
- Do you interact more with the boys than the girls?
- Are those interactions different?
- Can you think of any books (or other resources) that you have used that challenge gender stereotypes – e.g., which feature assertive girls and kind boys?
- What other things could you do to make children more aware that we can all do anything and that we need never feel constrained by our gender?

Many staff were attracted to the idea of creating safe spaces for children who are ‘different’. One teacher said, *“when people say ‘this is all a bit PC, boys and girls ARE just different’ they’re often the ones who are uncomfortable with children who challenge stereotypes. I say to them, it’s not about ‘trying to make boys into girls’ etc – it’s about letting them be whoever they are.”*

¹ Francis, Skelton, Carrington, Hutchings, Read & Hall, I. (2008) A Perfect Match? Pupils’ and teachers’ views of the impact of matching educators and learners by gender

When I get older I would like to ~~be~~ ~~would~~ work at
clinique because I like makeup



Another commented, “we can’t know which aspects [of girls’ and boys’ behaviour] are ‘inherent’ and which aren’t. We’re not saying men and women aren’t different but [as a society] we do exaggerate the differences massively – and sometimes, if you’re not different enough [i.e. too much like the ‘opposite’ sex] it can be a problem”.

Several staff spoke about the need to counter the influence on young girls of magazines and other media. “Girls are bombarded with very specific and unrealistic images about how they should look. One Year 4 girl said to me, “I won’t need botox on my lips as I’ve inherited my father’s nice full ones”. “I’ve seen a magazine aimed at KS1 children that includes pictures of 10 year olds in crop tops and gifts of lip gloss.”

One teacher talked about reading *The Boy With Pink Hair* [by Perez Hilton] with her Year 6 guided reading group. “They were really enthusiastic about this story. Some of them related it to their own experience of being ‘different’ (‘I was born with speech and language difficulties’). They said things like ‘some people (in the story) didn’t like him but some people stood up for him. It was good that he was his own person. He saved the day because he was clever. It shouldn’t matter what colour your hair is. The author is saying that it is good that we are all different.”

“Two boys said that some people teased him because they thought that pink was a girl’s colour ‘but it isn’t – we like pink’. I asked them if they thought he was odd – they said no, but he was unusual and some people don’t like that.”

It is interesting that this group related to the story so closely. They seemed to respond to it because they are ‘different’ (or understand that they are perceived as such) and they feel quite strongly about people who are different being included.

Another commented, “Boys [in Reception] sometimes want to wear the Princess dresses. This bothers one or two of the staff and sometimes parents object. One boy wanted to wear the Mummy Bear outfit, an apron, and mum questioned this. We encourage staff to support the children’s choices – our role is to accept what comes out of the role play.”

“Sometimes we have to be a bit conspiratorial – it’s important that school is a safe place where you can be yourself so we give them as much freedom as possible and affirm their choices – even though they sometimes hear different messages outside.”

Challenging patriarchy in the classroom

The schools were aware that many girls and boys held quite stereotypical views about each other. They wanted to find out more about these views in order to challenge them more effectively. Several schools looked at what girls and boys thought about each other. Significantly, the results suggested that girls generally have a higher opinion of boys than the other way around.

One school asked girls and boys to suggest words associated with both sexes. They recorded the results on four sheets of flip chart paper (see Appendix 2).

“We asked children to brainstorm any words they associated with girls or boys. First, we did it with a mixed group in Year 4 but the boys and girls just tended to repeat each other and the lists ended up looking very similar. We repeated the exercise with single sex groups in Year 6 and this time the results were very different.

“The boys tended to be very stereotypical about both genders. Words for boys were linked to sport or physical strength (‘muscly’, ‘six pack’) and a lot were quite aggressive (‘violent’, ‘aggressive’, ‘get away with

stuff', 'shouty', 'rude', 'scary'). Lots of the stuff about girls was sexualised ('lover', 'hot', 'kiss', 'fancy', 'sexy', 'breasts') and, while they were also described as 'kind' and 'funny', the majority of the other words were quite negative. Girls were also dismissed as 'baby changers' or 'cooking in the kitchen' or objectified as 'good dressers'

"The girls tended to be much more reflective. They definitely saw more than one way of being a boy – they used words like 'motorbikes', 'karate' and 'kickboxing' but also 'nail varnish', 'hair dye' and 'earrings'. Boys were possibly seen as show-offs but there were very few negative words. Some of the words for girls were stereotypical ('pink', 'puppies') but they also included lots of words like 'sports', 'fire-fighters', 'car-racing', 'playstation'. When the boys wrote about themselves, they didn't include any equivalent 'girly' stuff."

In this activity, the girls not only seemed more open to other ideas of what they (or boys) might be, but also more aware of having some things in common with boys. Some individuals were determined to be different – but again, far more of those were girls.

Significantly, quite a few words – particularly those relating to appearance and jobs – appear on both the girls' lists. The boys used far more negative words to describe both genders and far more adjectives than nouns (the girls talked about objects and jobs as well as personal qualities). When they did use nouns in connection with girls they were frequently both sexist and objectifying – 'baby changer', 'breasts', 'sexy legs', 'cooking in kitchen' (see page 17). The boys' views of girls were by no means wholly negative but were undoubtedly more so – and also much more limited – than the girls' view of boys. Their view of their own gender was also less favourable and reflected a dichotomy with boys described as 'smart', 'funny' and 'handsome' but also 'violent', 'naughty', 'greedy' and 'evil'.

It is important not to read too much into an exercise like this, but it is also difficult to avoid the conclusion that a significant number of boys hold both stereotypical and negative views about girls.

It is interesting to compare this with an exercise which took place in another school that asked children in a couple of KS2 classes to draw pictures of girls and boys. Using a simple template, boys drew pictures of a girl and girls drew pictures of a boy. They then wrote on their pictures characteristics that they ascribed to the other sex (see Appendix 3).

"Generally, the girls' views of the boys were much more positive than the other way round. Lots of the boys assigned annoying characteristics to girls and even the good ones were very 'passive' – words like 'kind' and 'gentle'. Interestingly, the class where the boys were more positive was the one where boys are significantly outnumbered by the girls. The boys, by necessity, spend much more time with the girls and perhaps that's why they have a more positive view of them."

"It's been useful because it's given us some ideas of stereotypes we could explore. It would be interesting to do some drama work where we get them to act out being the opposite gender and see what choices they make. We could get them to critique each others' choices and explore with them why they made the choices they did."

Such views were much less apparent further down the school – although, again, boys tended to be more concerned with stereotypical gender associations – and with policing them – than the girls.

"We were drawing pictures of girls and boys doing different things. One boy was quite adamant that only boys like football. His talk partner that week was a girl and she talked to him about attending football club. I said 'so maybe we can draw a picture and write 'but Zara likes football too'. He couldn't do that ('no – boys football'). He put the picture in the bin."

“We asked three and four year old children which toys a boy and girl puppet would like to play with and why. We deliberately chose things that might elicit discussion like a pink truck, a blue tambourine, a soft toy wearing a pink T-shirt, a sparkly dress and a racing driver’s suit.

“Relatively few of the choices seemed driven by any particular gender association. One girl chose the phone for the girl puppet ‘so she can ring everyone’. Some children couldn’t say why they had selected a particular toy – or just said ‘because I want one’ or ‘because he [the puppet] likes it’. Sometimes we thought the pink and blue gender association seemed to be the reason for the choice – but when the child explained, it was a different reason entirely.

“The boys may have been a little more stereotypical than the girls – several of them chose toys for the boy puppet because they were ‘noisy’ or ‘went fast’. While most of the children were happy to let the puppets swap their toys, one boy insisted that the pink bus was for the girl puppet and the blue car for the boy. A small number of children did base their choices very clearly on stereotypes – ‘that’s for girls’, girls use that’ and most of these children were boys. These boys (and a few girls) also tended to make more stereotypical choices in their own independent play – it did seem that their views were already quite fixed and they did not seem open to different suggestions or viewpoints.”

Staff also talked about how some boys in particular have to ‘fall in line’ in order to be accepted.

“Ethan is in Year 6. Both he and his friend Liam have been at the school since they were three. They’re really good friends. Ethan wants to play with Liam but Liam wants to play football and, though Ethan doesn’t, he makes the choice to play football to be with the other boys. If he didn’t he wouldn’t have anyone to play with. Ethan has to do things he doesn’t want to do to be with his friends. How many other children

(and adults) have to do this? If you want companionship with your own gender, you have to compromise and fall in. You have to choose between doing stuff you don’t like or having few friends of your own gender – a stark choice.”

While younger boys may hold some less stereotypical views about girls (and boys) than those in KS2, it was also notable that a disdain for girls and anything associated with ‘traditional’ femininity began early. There are several examples elsewhere in the resource of where boys refused to play with ‘girls’ toys. Most staff were unsurprised by this – however, many were taken aback by the degree to which this manifested itself. One nursery lead talked in detail about the great reluctance boys showed to draw or colour anything associated with girls. Girls tended to prefer more stereotypically female things like princesses and pink but did not object to ‘boys things’ in the same way (see Appendix 1 for more information on this). When one Year 3 teacher asked children to draw a princess and write about her, some of the boys were indignant and a few insisted on drawing Princes (or pirates!) instead.

It is difficult not to conclude that anything associated with femininity is perceived negatively by boys from an early age. By the time they reach year six this appears, in some cases, to have hardened into a negative view of girls in general.

It was certainly the case that many teachers noted a greater reluctance in boys to embrace non-stereotypical gender choices (i.e. things more typically associated with girls) than the other way around. While this is significant in terms of limiting boys’ options it is far more worrying in terms of where it places girls in a hierarchy which still prizes maleness over femaleness in the broadest terms.

YEAR 6 BOYS' VIEWS ON GIRLS



The findings and observations above clearly suggest that, if work on challenging gender stereotypes is to be effective, it needs to acknowledge and address the fact that girls and women – and activities traditionally associated with their gender – are still frequently perceived as being inferior to boys and men.

Furthermore, we need to strike a balance between addressing concerns about boys' behaviour (as well as worries about the 'vulnerability' of some boys who don't conform to traditional stereotypes) and building resilience in girls in order for them to succeed in a world which still sometimes prizes maleness over femaleness. There is a danger that work on the latter may get lost or deferred as we respond to what may often seem the more pressing and immediate need of the former. In other words, we could continue to prioritise the needs of boys over those of girls and perpetuate the obstacles to success that many girls and women still face.

Engaging boys

Clearly, it is vital that we engage boys effectively in discussions about gender if we are to have any meaningful impact on this. As one teacher noted, *"It's actually quite easy to give girls all the opportunities at school. The problem is changing the attitudes and beliefs to ensure that it continues after they leave."*

Many staff felt that engaging boys in discussions around gender stereotypes posed particular challenges. The 'we should all be able to do whatever we want' argument has more resonance for girls since they tend to experience more exclusion – whether from football games in the playground or because of the limited range of jobs available to them. It is very easy for most of them to think of something they like that 'some people think isn't for girls'. However, many of the activities that boys 'can't' do are not as appealing – the jobs are lower status or the activities less immediately engaging.

Crucially, staff felt that boys found it much more difficult to admit to liking anything that was traditionally thought of as 'girly'. *"I asked some children 'how would you feel about getting a diary that you really wanted for your birthday if it were blue or pink – the girls would be fine with blue but boys wouldn't use a pink one – even if they really wanted a diary."*

Staff felt that there was more pressure on boys to conform to fairly narrow gender stereotypes and that girls *"have more freedom of movement. For example, it's OK for girls to want to play football but boys aren't supposed to like 'girly' things. The word 'tomboy' isn't a particularly negative word – but it's terrible to be called a sissy."*

Many noted how it was often easier for girls to do 'boys' things' than the other way around.

"I caught myself giving fairy stickers to girls and motorbike stickers to boys. I asked if anyone wanted to swap – one girl was much happier with a motorbike sticker and nobody batted an eyelid. Her best friend Jack wanted a fairy sticker – he started to ask for it, but then backed down – everybody was watching. If I had been more discrete he might have taken it."

Many boys could not understand why boys might want to play with girls. *"It's almost as if there's something demeaning about it. Girls who play football are quite high status – but some boys have actually dropped out of the team because there are girls in it."*

"One boy has given up his dancing career because of peer pressure. We've had boys sniggering because another boy talked about reading something."

Some staff also felt more confident about encouraging non-stereotypical behaviour in girls:

“For some reason the ‘feminine’ boys are more noticeable than the ‘masculine’ girls. Are we better at encouraging the girls to do ‘masculine’ things than encouraging non-stereotypical behaviour in the boys? Everyone thinks risk-taking in girls is good. But I think, for some people, there actually is a concern that we might make them [boys] gay.”

“I think we’re less willing to upset boys’ masculinity than girls’ femininity. Masculinity is much more prized than femininity. Successful women have to be ‘manly’. We’re fighting a whole society here! But we have a duty to try and give boys and girls an alternative view of how things can be. That they can do anything they want to.”

It is easy to make a case for the argument that much of the pressure on boys to conform to a narrow set of highly policed, ‘masculine’ behaviours is essentially about propping up a crumbling patriarchy. However, whatever the causes, it is essential to engage boys in the discussions if we are to make any meaningful impact on these behaviours – which in turn is the only way to remove some of the obstacles to girls’ achievement or empowerment. “Girls are already saying to me [in KS2] that men have more power than women. The boys’ behaviour in lessons can be a real problem at this age. We need to think about what we can do with boys lower down the school to affect this.”

“In the playground we noticed that, typically, girls are more reticent when they are with boys than when they are alone. It’s difficult to know whether it is the boys’ “aggressiveness” that puts them off or whether the girls might already be learning to be more accommodating (i.e. stereotypically “feminine”) or both.”

Staff thought it was important to ensure that girls had as many opportunities as boys – but also to help develop understanding in girls and boys about how they needed to take responsibility for their own actions.

“The bikes are overrun with boys [in Early Years]. We’ve made a real effort to let the girls ride on bikes – making sure they get the next go. But we also ensure that they know they can ask for a turn – and make sure the boys hear this too. It’s also important for the quieter boys. Bikes are not necessarily identified as ‘boys things’ but they are popular so a few alpha males will dominate them if we’re not careful.”

Staff commented on the challenge of addressing aggression in boys. “Girls are rarely overtly aggressive [in play] but many boys are. They need opportunities to explore different sides of themselves. The ‘atypical’ [non-stereotypical] boys need more support to be comfortable with themselves and the ‘typical’ boys need to feel that they don’t have to try and police these atypical boys to be more like them.”

Staff also expressed concerns for a number of boys who they felt were particularly vulnerable because of their non-stereotypical behaviours – and about the impact of stereotypes on boys in general.

“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.”

USING LITERATURE TO CHALLENGE STEREOTYPES

“Girls shouldn’t be knights because they never are in stories.”

One of the easiest ways to initiate discussions around gender stereotypes is to use stories about characters who challenge ‘traditional’ views of the way girls and boys are expected to behave. See the accompanying book notes and article on children’s books on the NUT website (www.teachers.org.uk) for more information on this and many of the titles mentioned below. The following are further examples of how teachers used books to complement other work taking place in the classroom.

“We recently bought a new toolset [in reception]. Some of the boys thought the girls shouldn’t use them as they were ‘boys’ toys’ – the girls were keen to use them and could name the tools. We looked at Men’s Work [a picture book about a boy helping his dad with the housework] and most of the children said that both mum and dad do housework at home and that they help out. No one said that it’s women’s work.

“We then went back to talking about tools and it was much easier to persuade the boys that girls could play with construction tools as well. We took photos of girls and boys using the tools and put them up round the room to remind the children that both can use them. We’ve now got both girls and boys doing lots of ‘fixing’ around the room! We also have Percy the Park Keeper’s corner – he does all sorts of things including baking cakes, cleaning his kitchen etc. His jobs can be [stereotypically] ‘male’ or ‘female’ and we always talk about what jobs he is doing today.”

“They loved It’s a George Thing [about a zebra who enjoys dancing] – they realised that he was worried his friends would laugh because he was wearing ‘girls’ stuff’. When questioned, they pointed out that athletes wear hairbands, that there are male dancers on Britain’s Got Talent etc.”

“At the moment some children are happy to play with ‘girls’ or boys’ things’ but most are still assigning them to one gender or the other. We read Dogs Don’t Do Ballet. We started by asking why dad thinks that and then why some people think certain things are for girls or boys. Then we asked if it was true – and prompted them with some ‘adult’ examples like dads looking after babies (which we linked to playing with dolls) and women driving cars.

“We found that they didn’t necessarily get the implication at first – that it’s really about the idea that boys don’t do ballet – so it was a great opportunity to talk about things like subtext. We asked them if they thought the negative attitude some of the characters expressed could refer to other groups. We discussed the skills you’d need to be a ballet dancer – how you would have to be very fit and strong – and many boys are good at these things. We asked them to think of other examples of subtext in books they were reading like Amazing Grace (by Mary Hoffman).”

“They all loved The Princess Knight. We used it and some of the other books as the basis for writing exercises using ‘describing words’. We wanted to associate words with sexes that they might not usually be assigned to. We talked about how the Princess Knight could be described as ‘strong’ and ‘brave’ and that Elmer in The Sissy Duckling was ‘kind’.”

“We picked William’s Doll on purpose partly because the father is in charge at home [William’s mother is not mentioned in the story – only his Grandmother]. But we also wanted the boys to see that they can make their own choices – and to try and stop the other boys telling each other what they should be doing.

when I'm older I would like to
be a karate man and fight people.



“We did some acting – one child would pretend to be William cradling the train and another would speak his thoughts – then we got them to talk about why he would love a doll. Thinking about the last page of the story and what William’s Grandmother said we did some writing in pairs on ‘William wants a doll so he can...’. We got them to think about other reasons why he might want one aside from just practising to be a father. Quite a lot of boys said they had played with dolls – I wasn’t sure if they all had (they might have been saying it to please me) but it was good that they felt they could or might and that no one got laughed at or teased for saying it.”

“I was surprised how they really didn’t notice the gender stereotyping in Bill’s New Frock. They just thought he was having ‘an upside down day’. We’re going to look at the book again but this time I want to start by looking at assumptions about girls and boys – is this for a girl or a boy? Would a man or a woman do this? Which person does which job? etc. We’re hoping this will lead them more into catching on to the different ways that boys and girls are treated in the book.”

*“When the class found out that Tyke [in *The Turbulent Term of Tyke Tyler*] was a girl they were really shocked as no one had ever considered that the character was anything other than a boy. This was based on the behaviour, actions and attitudes shown by the character throughout the book. The very close friendship with Danny also was greatly discussed as generally such a strong friendship between a boy and a girl is not found within the class or within their understanding.”*

*“Talking about the character of Dennis in *The Boy In A Dress* was great. He is brilliant at football but also likes dresses. We had some really interesting conversations about whether you have to ‘pick a side’ – e.g., if you’re a boy do you have to do all the things boys are ‘supposed’ to do or can you do whatever you like regardless of which gender things are traditionally associated with? We talked about whether it’s easier for Dennis to be ‘different’ because he’s also good at boys’ stuff like football and whether that was fair.”*

Staff also talked about how they challenged stereotypes as they occurred in other stories.

Points to consider

- Select books that challenge gender stereotypes and incorporate them into literacy schemes of work – do not just use them when you are talking explicitly about the issues.
- Make a point of drawing children’s attention to it whenever books and stories challenge – or affirm – stereotypes.
- Encourage children to identify ‘stereotypical’ characters in other stories. With older children, you could discuss whether their prevalence in literature and other media could make some of us feel that we have to behave in certain ways.
- Link characters in books to real life role models.
- Ask, what would happen at our school? Can we do anything we like at our school – would we be ‘judged’ (as some of the characters in the books are)? How do we make sure that everybody feels included at our school?
- Talk about why some characters in books think in stereotypes (Dad in *Dogs Don’t Do Ballet*, the Prince in *The Paper Bag Princess*) – or others feel constrained by them (George in *It’s A George Thing*, the title character in *The Different Dragon*).
- Act out scenes. Use techniques like forum theatre and hot seating to explore the characters’ motivations – ask ‘what could you do?’ or ‘what happened next?’.
- Do not assume that children will always ‘notice’ stereotyping and how it affects some of the characters in the books. Unpick why they feel as they do.

KEEP ASKING WHY...?

FINDING OPPORTUNITIES TO CHALLENGE THE ASSUMPTIONS MADE BY CHILDREN

“Girls’ shouldn’t be allowed in construction because they make silly things.”

Most teachers involved in the project were surprised by how ‘set’ gender stereotypes were – particularly in older children. They recognised that, while specific lessons focusing on gender stereotypes and their implications were important, it was also vital to question such assumptions whenever they occurred.

“This work needs to be both explicit and implicit. Just having stories of female explorers may not be enough – we have to talk about whether seeing women in these roles is unusual, surprising etc before we can know if there has been any effect on attitudes.”

Teachers also noticed that, with younger children asking, ‘what do you like’ would often produce a different response from ‘what do boys or girls like’ – though this was less useful with older children who were much more likely to give a stereotypical response however the question was phrased.

Some teachers commented that children *“soon get to know what they think you want to hear”* and so may give ‘rote’ responses without considering the issues. They commented on the importance of offering ‘subtle’ challenges that do not ‘lead’ children too much.

History became a particular issue for some schools because so many of the stories seem to focus on men and their achievements. One teacher had devised a lesson on Maid Marion and Her Merry Men (see Appendix 10) and others used the Suffragettes or Joan of Arc as key figures. One girl asked her teacher why there are no girls in the Guy Fawkes story, asking “if there were only men then?”

Points to consider

- Initiate discussions about why some people believe that things are only ‘for’ one gender. Ask supplementary questions like ‘is it because people think girls aren’t strong enough?’. Ask ‘what do we all (girls and boys) like about ...?’.
- Ask why girls can’t do this or boys can’t like that. Question where ideas about ‘girls’ things and boys’ things’ come from.
- Use role models – people (particularly women) who challenge gender stereotypes. Ask if it’s surprising to see a woman or man doing this particular job. Talk about what they like about what they do and how they achieved their goals.
- Discuss images that challenge ‘traditional’ concepts of gendered behaviour such as dress. Select examples from different cultures or people closer to home such as Eddie Izzard.
- Focus on the role of women at different periods in history. Ask older children to imagine how different the society we take for granted might be if women did not have the vote. Look at how things have changed for women and men.
- Discuss books and stories that include characters who challenge stereotypical views of what girls and boys can do and enjoy (see Using literature to challenge stereotypes and the accompanying materials on page 20).

ADDRESSING CHILDREN'S LANGUAGE

"If girls play Lego, it won't be fair on the boys."

Teachers expressed concerns about the appropriate way to challenge sexist language. Broadly, this fell into three types:

- **Sexist assumptions such as 'only boys can...' or 'girls are better at'.**

Some staff acknowledged that they had often left them unchallenged in the past but, with practice, found them easy to respond to and used them as opportunities to open brief discussions about particular activities, where such stereotypical ideas come from or simply to affirm that, in fact, girls and boys can do most things just as well as each other. These issues are addressed more fully elsewhere in the report.

- **Sexist comments or bullying.** The most common example of this was the use of the word 'girl' as a generalised insult. Most commonly, it was used by boys amongst themselves. However, several teachers noticed its use by girls – sometimes even against each other. As one teacher commented, *"when I heard one girl using it as an insult against another I thought, well, that's not a very positive message for girls – or boys – to be hearing."* Again, teachers felt that such language sometimes went unchallenged: *"we would never let them use 'gay' as an insult but I think some people think this isn't as bad."* Again, they found challenging such language quite easy:

"I said that's very insulting to girls, what do you mean?"

"I reminded them that we didn't use words that described somebody's identity – like gay – to be unkind and said that this was just the same"

"I just laughed and said 'don't be ridiculous, girls are fabulous!'."

- **Insulting or sexualised language, usually used about women or girls.**

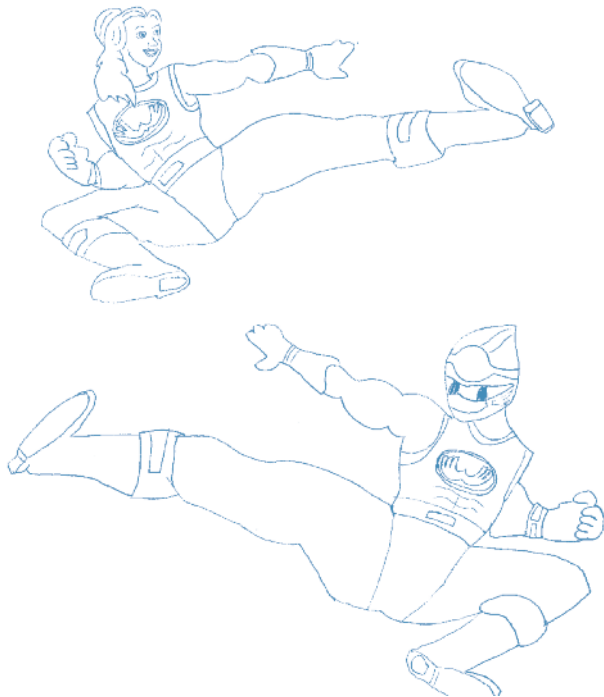
Two schools had particular concerns about the use of words like 'slag' or 'tart'. *"We used to say 'don't use words like that, they're rude' – but now we've realised we need to find more constructive ways of challenging them. We're trying to explain why they are inappropriate rather than just 'naughty'. It's not always easy but we always say they are very insulting and unkind words and completely unacceptable at school. I have talked with the older children about what the words mean which makes it much easier to explain why they are wrong. It's actually often the KS2 girls who use these words about each other so it's quite easy for them to understand why they are so insulting when they know what they mean. Sometimes, the girls also challenge the boys in no uncertain terms now. I think it's actually given them the confidence and resilience to challenge these things more which is really good to see"*.

Another teacher commented that *"it's sometimes hard for teachers to question these words [like 'Ho's'] but they appear in the lyrics of pop songs now. They use them but they don't understand the implications so we have to explain why they are so inappropriate before they take hold."*

Points to consider

- Use children's 'stereotypical' comments as opportunities to challenge such assumptions
- Support all staff to develop consistent responses to sexist comments and bullying
- Explain 'why' sexist and sexualised language is inappropriate – don't just say it is rude – as this will help children to understand why it is harmful and to challenge it for themselves
- Recognise that language is an indicator of attitudes and views so expect work about attitudes to pay dividends
- Empower girls to understand why they must not use derogatory language to describe other girls

NAME



Colouring sheet designed by project teacher with gender neutral action heroes.

CONCLUSIONS

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. By failing to challenge them, we are re-inventing those boundaries for each generation.

Through education, we can challenge the message – still widely promoted – that children and adults should act in a gender 'appropriate' way and be judged in different ways depending on their sex – including that the greatest achievement for any young woman is to be conventionally physically attractive. This is vital if we are to achieve progress on issues such as the gender pay gap and sharing of caring responsibilities or to challenge the idea that professional success is 'unfeminine'.

We must 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.

Despite the potential gains for society and individuals, there is still scant support and encouragement for schools to do this work. The NUT is proud that staff in the project schools worked hard to develop and trial resources and approaches.

It is hoped that this work is the beginning of an ongoing discussion – a step change in the importance accorded to challenging sexist attitudes in schools. Schools are now required to report on how they are meeting the requirements of the Public Sector Equality Duty. Work like that outlined in this report makes a valuable contribution to demonstrating a school's confidence to address sexism and inequality in general.

Much of the evidence gathered for the report indicates that challenging gender stereotypes across the whole curriculum needs to be an explicit objective. Many of the sexist representations of male and female characters in books and other resources – as well as the attitudes of pupils (and staff) – went unnoticed until schools were prompted to look for them.

Gender stereotypes can be affirmed or challenged in every aspect of school life. The 'traditional' school fete – where dads operate the coconut shy and mums sell cakes – may be a thing of the past but there are many other occasions where such divisions help to shore up outdated ideas about male and female roles.

The data from the five schools proved to be incredibly rich. Evaluation of the strategies used produced these key themes and areas for development:

- **In schools, just as in wider society, we tend to stress the differences between girls and boys far more than the similarities.** We need to think of children as individuals and try not to impose expectations on them linked to gender. We can begin by making small changes to the ways in which we constantly differentiate the sexes – such as referring to 'children' rather than 'girls and boys' and not marshalling pupils in single sex lines.

- **Opportunities to challenge stereotypes occur throughout the curriculum.** Start making a difference today by noticing and questioning them whenever they occur. Challenge colleagues to reflect on their use of language and to ensure that they do not perpetuate stereotypes. Encourage them to act as role models in the way they talk about their own interests and tastes. At the very least, avoid making choices for children based on gender – such as handing out pink and blue stickers
- **Start when children are young** – encourage the non-stereotypical behaviour of nursery children and make sure to challenge emerging stereotypes in the early years through discussions about toys, games and activities and ensure that, where possible, books and other resources do not affirm them.
- **Engage the support of parents and carers** by raising awareness of the impact of challenging gender stereotypes and discussing the ways in which they limit attainment and aspiration.
- **Challenging stereotypes about gender benefits all girls and all boys.** Some boys undoubtedly remain socially vulnerable because of the pressure to measure up to narrow social norms of masculinity and there was a perception that ‘tomboy’ girls may have an easier time of things at school than the ‘quiet boys’. However, all adults are constrained by gender stereotypes in different ways and gender stereotypes perpetuate gender inequality. Building resilience and awareness in both boys and girls will make it easier for all children to express and fulfil themselves in less stereotypical ways. This is a key precursor to equality between men and women and a more equal society.

Schools and their staff are busier and under greater pressure than ever. Those 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. One head teacher talked about being “conspiratorial” in challenging some of the messages children receive outside school. Remember to inspire as well – and do 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 to address everything the teachers wanted to explore. There are examples in the report of how staff intended to continue developing work they initiated as part of the project. Other things they would have liked – or intend – to address further included:

- Work on body image and asking why so many women alter their bodies or try to hold back the physical effects of ageing
- 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. 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 dads².

² Francis, Skelton, Carrington, Hutchings, Read & Hall, I. (2008) *A Perfect Match? Pupils’ and teachers’ views of the impact of matching educators and learners by gender* 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

Early in its development, the team discussed whether the project should focus just on girls or on children of both sexes. Women are still the greater losers in terms of sexism and face particularly challenging obstacles to gaining equality – but affecting male attitudes and behaviours is also of key importance in reducing the impact of such discrimination. It was decided to focus on both sexes and to think about supporting boys to think differently at the same time as encouraging girls to aim higher and wider.

The project was undoubtedly successful in both these endeavours and the message of widening opportunities and possibilities for all – and raising awareness of the impact of stereotypes on both sexes – is a vital one.

As one teacher remarked, *“It’s easy to teach [about gender stereotypes] because it’s interesting, challenging and enlivening. Children – and teachers – love talking about it. The children will always challenge you – and, because some of them haven’t had their views questioned before, it calls on all your resources to help them think about the impact of such ideas on all our lives.”*

It is intended that work will continue under the *Breaking The Mould* banner. The project served as a reminder that gender stereotypes will not go away without strategies to build schools’ capacity in this area. Children do not simply “grow out of” these stereotypical ways of thinking – their lives are informed and shaped by them.

Primary schools – with their ethos of promoting acceptance and advancing the social and emotional aspects of learning – are ideally placed to address such vital concerns. The energy of the school staff involved in *Breaking The Mould* is an illustration of the commitment and dedication of teachers to achieving the best outcomes for all children.



THE PROJECT SCHOOLS

In this project, the National Union of Teachers worked with a small group of primary schools to consider how 'traditional' gender stereotypes could be challenged in the classroom.

The *Breaking the Mould* project team helped the school staff begin their planning by providing them with a range of children's books which help challenge gender stereotypes and which are listed at the back of this resource. In the course of the project, the schools developed different and creative activities and approaches but also common themes emerged.

The five primary schools are described below.

School A is a larger than average primary school in Portsmouth with three classes in each age group. 25 different languages are spoken at the school. The proportion of pupils supported through school action or eligible for the pupil premium is above average. Extensive work took place in six year 3 classes over two academic years.

School B in Kings Lynn serves a wide area and the majority of pupils are white British. Work was led by the Deputy Head with every class in the school doing some focused work around gender. There is a culture of challenging and reviewing practice in the school and, as well as work with pupils, this was a particular focus at this school with staff thinking a lot about things like the language they used and how they 'modelled' gender when working with children.

School C is a large primary school. The proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals is above average. Most pupils are of white British heritage. The proportion of disabled pupils and those with special educational needs supported at school action is above average. The level of pupil mobility is higher than that experienced by many other schools. Unemployment locally is high. The school has a long tradition of challenging gender stereotypes and has done some quite challenging work in the past including looking at domestic violence. The work in school was led by the Deputy Head with significant activity taking place in both Year 6 and nursery.

School D is a larger primary school. The percentage of pupils from minority ethnic groups is well above average. The majority of pupils at the school are of Bangladeshi heritage. Nearly three quarters of the pupils speak English as an additional language. The percentage eligible for free school meals is well above average, as is the proportion with special educational needs and/or disabilities. Work on equalities is well advanced. Project work in the school was led by one Year 4 teacher with the active participation of several other members of staff.

School E is based in an inner city area of south Cardiff and caters for pupils between three and eleven years of age. The school has two classes in most year groups. About 50% of the children come from families of minority ethnic origin including about 8% from travellers' families. There is a very high rate of mobility. About 50% of pupils are entitled to free school meals. Work was led by the Additional Learning Needs Co-ordinator with the participation of other staff from Early Years and KS1 and 2.

THE PROJECT BOOKS

The project team decided to help school staff begin their research by providing them with a range of children's books, which challenge gender stereotypes. In the course of the project, staff found other titles and introduced colleagues to their favourites.

10,000 Dresses (Marcus Ewert – ISBN 978-1583228500)

Amazing Grace (Mary Hoffman – ISBN 978-1845077495)

Bill's New Frock (Anne Fine – ISBN 978-1405233187)

The Boy In A Dress (David Walliams – ISBN 978-0007279036)

The Boy With Pink Hair (Perez Hilton – ISBN 978-0451234209)

The Different Dragon (Jennifer Bryan – ISBN 978-0967446868)

Dogs Don't Do Ballet (Anna Kemp – ISBN 978-1847384744)

Girls Are Best (Sandi Toksvig – ISBN 978-1862304291)

It's a George Thing! (David Bedford – ISBN 978-1405228053)

Man's Work! (Annie Kubler – ISBN 978-0859535878)

The Odd Egg (Emily Gravett – ISBN 978-0230531352)

The Paperbag Princess (Robert Munsch) – ISBN 978-0920236161)

Piggybook (Anthony Browne – ISBN 978-1406313284)

Pirate Girl & The Princess Knight (Cornelia Funke – available in A Princess, A Knight and One Wild Brother – ISBN 978-0545042413)

Princess Pigsty (Cornelia Funke – ISBN 978-1905294329)

Red Rockets and Rainbow Jelly (Sue Heap – ISBN 978-0140567854)

The Sissy Duckling (Harvey Fierstein – ISBN 978-1416903130)

Super Daisy (Kes Gray – ISBN 978-1862309647)

The Turbulent Term of Tyke Tiler (Gene Kemp – ISBN 978-0571230945)

APPENDICES

These appendices are available at www.teachers.org.uk/educationandequalities/breakingthemould

- 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
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