

Aspirational Practice: Gender Equality
The challenge of gender and heterosexual
stereotypes in primary Education

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Abstract

This paper is presented as a thought-piece which discusses the challenge of gender and heterosexual stereotypes in primary education. It argues that stereotypes should be challenged in primary education so that children can grow up secure in their own identity, whatever that may be. It goes on to suggest that the primary classroom is a space in which the teacher can form a close bond of trust amongst the class, and can therefore initiate discussions on diversity to ensure that all pupils feel valued and included.

Introduction

Issues surrounding gender identity and expectation lie at the heart of human society, yet the precise definition of the term 'gender' is often confused with that of 'sex.' The World Health Organisation (2013) defines gender as "the socially constructed roles, behaviours, activities, and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for men and women," whereas sex is defined as "the biological and physiological characteristics that define men and women." Therefore, humans are born biologically male or female – except in rare cases of Disorders of Sex Development (NHS, 2012) – but their gender is constructed by society. As Paechter (1998: 40) notes, Western culture is centred around the assumption that biological sex, at least to some extent, determines gender and gender role behaviour. However, I posit that this biologically essentialist viewpoint restricts gender equality because it renders humans passive to construct their own gender identity.

According to Bem (1993: viii), there exist three gender "lenses" in Western culture: gender polarisation (the expectation of women and men to demonstrate stereotypical gender roles); androcentrism (the dominant focus in society upon men not women); and biological essentialism (the fundamental difference between men and women based upon their biological differences). The topic of gender equality in primary education is understandably too broad for the present discussion. I therefore address the challenges and effective approaches toward gender equality by focusing upon the continued existence of socially constructed gender and heterosexual stereotypes in primary education.

What do we mean by gender stereotypes?

Gender stereotypes are formed when a person's sex is aligned with appropriate masculine and feminine social roles. As Simone de Beauvoir (1949: 13) iconically wrote, "on ne naît pas femme : on le devient."¹ However, as I address later in this discussion, the struggle for gender equality no longer focuses solely on empowering women, as both sexes are restricted by socially constructed stereotypes. In the primary classroom, gender stereotypes exist in a number of forms, including the generalisation of attainment levels based upon sex, and attitudes towards gender-suitable play.

Links between gender and sexuality

¹ Translation: One is not born a woman: one becomes a woman.

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Within the intersectional field of equality, gender is not the only consideration. Interactions between gender, class, and race are frequently cited in discussions of gender equality in primary schools (Diller *et al.*, 1996; Gillborn & Mirza, 2000; Reay, 1991). However, only within the last decade has there been a focus on the relationship between issues of gender stereotypes and heterosexual stereotypes, and the resulting impact on primary education (Kehily, 2001; Renold, 2000, 2005). With the repeal of Section 28 of the Local Government Act (Great Britain Parliament, 1988a) in the revised Local Government Act (Great Britain Parliament, 2003), schools in England and Wales are no longer prohibited to intentionally promote homosexuality. However, as is evident from both my own experience and the research of Guasp (2009a, 2009b), heteronormative discourse and actions still remain the norm in both schools and wider society, and homophobic bullying is rife, particularly amongst young people. It has even been reported in the media that some British schools operate “anti-gay” policies (BBC Wales, 2013; Brown, 2013). Despite the increased global awareness and discussion of LGBT rights in the media, diversity of sexual orientation remains eclipsed by heteronormativity. Indeed, my ITE training thus far has incorporated a detailed discussion of all of the protected categories under the Equality Act (Great Britain Parliament, 2010) except for sexual orientation.

As a trainee teacher in a long-term same-sex relationship, I am exposed to heteronormative society on a daily basis. I argue that gender and heterosexual stereotypes are intrinsically linked: society expects girls to perform their gender in a certain way (Butler, 1990), which includes being sexually attracted to boys, and vice versa. Hence, one of the major challenges to gender equality is that the concept of diversity of sexuality, and as a result, gender identity, is frequently concealed by the dominance of heteronormativity. Therefore, this discussion of gender equality in primary schools incorporates an analysis of effective approaches to the problem of heteronormativity and homophobia in primary schools alongside that of gender stereotyping.

‘Boys will be boys’ and ‘girls will be girls’: Why gender is still an issue in primary education

The gender debate in education is not a new one. Locke (1693: 5) insisted that his model of education for “a young Gentleman” was not suitable for the “Education of *Daughters*” (original emphasis). In both education and wider society, gender equality has progressed significantly since the seventeenth century. Under the Equality Act (Great Britain Parliament, 2010), schools must provide equal opportunities for all pupils, regardless of age, race, class, religious belief, disability, sex, gender identity, or sexual orientation. However, I argue that the normative prevalence of gender and heterosexual stereotyping in school and wider society restricts such equal opportunities. Despite advances in equality, girls’ career aspirations are still routed in traditional stereotypes (Ofsted, 2011), and the average salary for women in the UK is still £5000 lower than that of men (TUC, 2013). According to TLRP Principle 1 (James & Pollard, 2011), effective teaching and learning equips learners for life in its broadest sense. Although it cannot be denied that there exist biological differences between men and women, I believe that no-one should have to be restricted by the socially constructed stereotypes of gender and heterosexuality that are imposed upon everyone from a young age. Therefore, I consider it imperative that the life that primary teachers equip their learners for is not founded upon such stereotypes, and as such, this discussion explores examples of aspirational primary practice that challenges gender and heterosexual stereotypes.

Challenging Gender and Heterosexual Stereotypes in Primary Education

My experiences

When I was in primary school I had mostly male friends, which, from my observations as a trainee teacher, is relatively unusual for a female child. I did not purposefully make friends with boys because of their sex, but rather because of our shared interests: I enjoyed playing sports and generally being really active. I have an older brother, and I spent my childhood trying to compete

with him in the same activities. As a result, I was often treated as 'one of the boys.' By the time I was in upper KS2, however, my friendship with boys was sometimes misconstrued by others, and I was teased about having many 'boyfriends.' This early sexualisation made me very uncomfortable, and when I went to secondary school, I tended to have mainly female friends.

As a trainee teacher, sexuality still causes me some discomfort. Homophobic language such as "that's so gay" is prevalent in society amongst young people (Guasp 2009a, 2009b). On the occasions that I am in a position to confront children on this language, I fear that I will be put in a situation that I have to reveal my homosexuality, and risk negative comments or a loss of respect from pupils and parents. Despite the repeal of Section 28 in the most recent Local Government Act (Great Britain Parliament, 2003), the heteronormativity of society, and of schools in particular, still makes me feel unsupported in the free expression of my sexuality.

Theoretical perspectives

Research has shown that children are aware of gender role stereotypes from a young age (Browne & Ross, 1991; Halim *et al.*, 2013; Martin & Ruble, 2010; Murphy, 1997). Social constructivist theorists believe that children interpret the gender identities they experience and apply them to themselves. Kohlberg (1966, cited in Skelton & Francis, 2003: 12) drew upon Piaget's theory of object conservation in children during the concrete operational stage (7-11 years) to state that if a child observes another child change into non-gender-stereotypical clothing, or play in a non-gender-stereotypical way, the child's sex is believed to change. Bem (1981) developed this research in her gender schema theory, in which children interpret the stereotypical actions of other humans around them and thus view the world through a sex-linked schema based upon both gender and heteronormative stereotypes.

Smith and Lloyd (1978, cited in Paechter, 1998) devised an experiment to demonstrate that parents treat children differently based upon gender stereotypes, in which thirty-two mothers played with an unknown baby, whose name and clothing did not necessarily reflect their biological sex, for ten minutes. The mothers in this experiment interacted with 'boys' and 'girls' differently, both verbally and physically. Smith and Lloyd's findings remain relevant today, as demonstrated by the Twitter project, @GenderDiary (2013), which highlights the ways in which adults treat children differently as a result of gender stereotypes. From personal experience, society perpetuates gender and heterosexual stereotypes on a daily basis, particularly in commercial settings. Advertising for toy or clothing companies targets gender stereotypes. It is worthy of note that Marks and Spencer is the most recent corporation to promise that all toys will be gender neutrally labelled in response to the Let Toys Be Toys Campaign (McCormick, 2013; Smithers, 2013).

Given that society constructs and perpetuates gender and heterosexual stereotypes, and children interpret these from an early age, I argue that schools must provide a supportive space in which these stereotypes are challenged. Consequently, children will have the opportunity to broaden their understanding of gender roles and non-heteronormative sexualities. Otherwise, children who do not conform with the gender or heterosexual stereotype, as I did not, are at risk of feeling isolated, and this could affect their ability to learn. In second language acquisition theory, the affective filter hypothesis states that children's learning is most effective if in a low anxiety environment where they are motivated and can feel self-confidence and a positive self-image (Krashen, 1982: 29-30). I contend that this affective filter can be applied to all learning. If a child is made to feel uncomfortable in their self-image as a result of gender and heterosexual stereotypes, then their learning will be restricted by their affective filter. It is therefore the role of the classroom teacher and the school as a wider community to provide an inclusive environment where all children, no matter what their gender identity or sexuality, feel safe to express themselves however they wish.

Historical approaches

The focus of critical discussion surrounding gender equality has shifted in the last four decades, and this has influenced government policy and teaching practice. Second-wave feminism in the 1970s highlighted female gender discrimination as a socio-political issue across throughout the Western world (Weiner, 1990; Francis & Skelton, 2001). The Sex Discrimination Act (Great Britain Parliament, 1975) dictated that schools could not discriminate on the basis of sex, and the Equal Opportunities Commission was set up. However, research by feminists during the 1980s (Weiner, 1990: 36-37) showed that, although teachers did not intend the prejudice, girls remained seriously disadvantaged in the school system: textbooks and reading schemes portrayed stereotyped views of family life with mothers and fathers holding clearly defined and separate roles; teachers tended to have higher academic expectations for boys and found them more stimulating than girls; subjects such as sport were taught to single-sex groups; and free choice and play activities were gender stereotyped. It was also found that there existed an inequality between men and women in the school labour force, with men occupying the majority of management positions. Therefore, the gender equality focus during this period was to raise the position of girls within school, by implementing changes to both classroom practice and school policy.

With the introduction of the National Curriculum as a result of the Education Reform Act (Great Britain Parliament, 1988b), both sexes had to take the same core subjects, and teachers were advised to increase opportunities for both sexes to participate in non-stereotypical activities (Skelton *et al.* 2009: 195-196). However, contrary to these advances in gender equality, heterosexual stereotyping was exacerbated by the passing of Section 28 of the Local Government Act (Great Britain Parliament, 1988a), which decreed homosexuality “as a pretended family relationship.” Given that gender and sexuality are interlinked, this was a significant challenge to the progression of gender equality in schools.

A major shift in the gender equality debate occurred in the 1990s. With the introduction of GCSE examinations in 1988, KS1 SATs in 1990 and KS2 SATs in 1994, national statistics highlighted an apparent decline in boy’s attainment compared to girls (Arnot & an Ghail, 2006; Myers, 2000; Shaw, 1995; Warrington & Younger, 2000). Teaching practice shifted to sex differentiation, and gender-based learning theories (Francis & Skelton, 2001; Myhill & Jones, 2006; Skelton *et al.* 2009), and these practices of differentiation are evident today in S5 of the Teachers’ Standards (DfE, 2013a). However, by generalising that all boys are underachieving (and vice versa, all girls are achieving), narrow stereotypes still remain. Skelton (2001: 53) notes that:

There is an assumption that *all* boys act, think and behave in the same way and, consequently, such strategies as adopting mixed seating arrangements [...] are based largely on sex-role theory.

The pupils most at risk to be discriminated against as a result of such differentiated teaching approaches are those who do not conform to gender and heterosexual stereotypes. By adapting teaching styles to appeal to hegemonic masculinity, so called ‘effeminate’ boys are marginalised, as well as girls who identify with such ‘masculine’ traits (Arnot & an Ghail, 2006; Francis & Skelton, 2001; Renold, 2000, 2005; Skelton & Francis, 2003).

Between 1997 and 2010, under a Labour government, gender stereotypes were simultaneously accentuated by the media furore of boys’ academic failings (Dean, 1998; Hill, 2009; Hussey, 2006), and challenged in research and reports with an emphasis on gender equality, such as *White Paper: Excellence in Schools* (DfEE, 1997), *Gender and Education* (DfES, 2007), and *Mythbusters* (DCSF, 2009). SEAL – Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning – (DfES, 2005) was developed as part of the Primary National Strategy as a framework for the promotion of children’s social and emotional skills, including an understanding of inclusion and difference. In addition, as has already been highlighted,

the intersectional nature of gender equality was increasingly researched during this period, which is reflected in the Equality Acts (Great Britain Parliament, 2006, 2010) and the creation of the Equality and Human Rights Commission in 2007.

Current UK Policy

Current UK government policy values equal opportunities for all in the primary classroom, and as such, forms part of the current Ofsted inspection framework (2013: 13-14): school inspections encourage “high-quality provision that meets diverse needs and fosters equal opportunities,” and inspectors evaluate the extent to which schools provide “an inclusive environment which meets the needs of all pupils, irrespective of age, disability, gender reassignment, race, religion or belief, sex, or sexual orientation.”

Non-statutory guidance (DfE, 2013b) is available for schools to ensure that they operate within the confines of the Equality Act (Great Britain Parliament, 2010). Although the content of the curriculum is excluded from the law, the delivery of the curriculum is included (DfE, 2013b: 9), for example, “it would be unlawful for a school to require girls to learn needlework while giving boys the choice between needlework and woodwork classes” (DfE, 2013b: 14). Looking ahead to the 2014 National Curriculum (DfE, 2013c: 8), teachers are informed that the curriculum delivery is subject to equality legislation, and that they should set high expectations for every pupil.

Overcoming Gender and Heterosexual Stereotypes

Current UK Best Practice

Despite the evolution of attitudes towards gender equality and the current equality legislation and government policy focus, the continued presence of gender and heterosexual stereotyping is testament to the fact that there exists a gap between policy and good practice in the majority of primary classrooms. However, there are a number of current projects in the UK that offer practical solutions to the problems of gender and heterosexual stereotyping as a barrier to gender equality. I regard the *Breaking The Mould Project* (Jennett, 2013a) as one of the best examples.² It focuses on the use of literature in primary schools that challenges gender and heterosexual stereotypes, given that children’s literature is one principal area where such socially constructed stereotypes are clearly visible, with ‘books for boys’ generally featuring a physically active, attractive, heterosexual male protagonist, and ‘books for girls’ generally featuring a subordinate, beautiful heroine, whose goal is to marry the attractive heterosexual male. By incorporating books such as *The Princess Knight* (Funke, 2004) and *The Sissy Duckling* (Fierstein, 2005) into everyday school reading, this project advocates using literature to expand children’s understanding of gender and sexuality beyond the socially constructed, and generally accepted, stereotypes. The project’s free publications include an overview of different approaches to discussing the impact of gender and heterosexual stereotypes with primary school children (Jennett, 2013b); detailed examples of such approaches (Jennett, 2013c); and accompanying notes to support teachers with the project books (Jennett, 2013d). I think this is a fantastic project because it combines the development of children’s literacy with a discussion of gender and sexuality equality, thus children’s reading attainment will increase simultaneously to a broadening of their understanding of gender roles and different sexualities.

Stonewall, the LGBT charity, has run the *Education For All* campaign since 2005. This offers a variety of different free resources for teachers, pupils, and parents to understand the issues surrounding homophobic abuse, and how these can be tackled in both the primary and secondary classroom by challenging homophobic language and behaviour, as well as challenging heteronormativity (Education For All: Primary School Resources, 2013). These include education guides and age-

² This project was inspired by the *No Outsiders Project* (2009), which focused on sexualities equality in primary schools: <http://projects.sunderland.ac.uk/archived/ell-nooutsiders/about-the-project.html>.

appropriate lesson plans and display materials, as well as popular literature suggestions similar to the *Breaking The Mould* project. In addition, Stonewall runs the *School Champions* programme, in which schools employ Stonewall to work directly with them to help celebrate difference in the classroom. I think that every primary school (and secondary school) should use Stonewall's free resources to begin to tackle the problem of homophobic language and heteronormative culture. As Guasp (2009a: 21) explains, children often don't understand the meaning of using the word "gay", but it can be really damaging, particularly for young people beginning to negotiate a sexual orientation that does not match the heterosexual norm, or who have non-heterosexual parents. As a trainee teacher who feels uncomfortable revealing her homosexuality in the school environment due to lack of support, these resources will be invaluable in my practice.

Central Street Infant and Nursery School in West Yorkshire has been highlighted by Ofsted (2012) as an example of a best practice school regarding the creation of an inclusive school community. Staff at this school address issues relating to gender and heterosexual normativity as they arise during the school day, for example, in this scenario (Ofsted, 2012: 4):

A boy chose to tell the class that he had 'no father' because he was born from frozen sperm and had two mums. Another pupil in the same lesson from a heterosexual Christian family did not understand how this could happen and did not believe there could be a family without a father. The teacher abandoned the lesson and created a circle time and alternative lesson about different families to ensure that all pupils regardless of background were valued. The teacher then discussed the lesson with parents and carers at the end of the day.

The boy who offered the information about his parenthood clearly felt supported in the school environment to share information that is outside of the social norm. Equally, the pupil from a heterosexual Christian family felt able to share a different point of view. The whole group discussion allows all pupils to share their beliefs, and fosters a tolerant environment. The involvement of the parents and carers extends this tolerance beyond the primary classroom into the wider community.

International Best Practice

The identification of gender and heterosexual stereotypes as a challenge to gender equality is not isolated to the UK, and through my research I have identified a number of examples of best practice from abroad. Given that gender and sexuality stereotypes are socially constructed, these stereotypes, and therefore the approaches to tackling them, vary in international projects. However, because stereotyping exists as a universal barrier to gender equality in the primary classroom it is of value to briefly explore some examples in the present discussion.

No Name-Calling Week (GLSEN, 2012) is an initiative in American schools that is celebrating its tenth anniversary in January 2014. The aim of the annual project is to promote inclusion in American schools for all ages, and begin a dialogue about the effect of bullying in a school community. Lesson plans and ideas are available covering a wide variety of inclusion issues, including gender and sexuality. I think such a focal point in the school calendar would be of benefit to UK primary schools, because it provides a supported starting point to the discussion of issues that some teachers and schools find difficult to incorporate into the curriculum.

The USA, like the UK, is a nation where gender and sexuality inequality exists. However, as a nation, Sweden has consistently been named as a world leader in gender equality (World Economic Forum, 2013). Gender equality is part of everyday life, for example, both parents are entitled to the same amount of paid parental leave upon the birth/adoption of a baby. Tackling socially constructed problems in the classroom is much easier if the problems are simultaneously tackled on a wider social scale. Schools in Sweden, unlike in the UK, do not have to operate in a society where gender

and heterosexual stereotypes are the norm. Principles of gender equality are incorporated into Swedish education from preschool, with different teaching methods being employed to ensure that all children reach their potential. However, like in the UK, there is still a gap in educational attainment, with women comprising 60% of undergraduate students (Swedish Institute, 2013).

Implications for my pedagogical practice

In order to implement the examples of best practice that I have highlighted, the whole school community has to be involved, including the parents. The socially constructed nature of gender and heterosexual stereotypes means that, although the individual classroom teacher can influence his/her class to a certain extent, in order for a greater effect to be achieved, stereotypes would have to be challenged on a whole school, and ideally, whole community level. Depending on the school and the community, this may be difficult, as tensions may exist between some religious and political beliefs, both in the school and in the wider community. As a trainee teacher, and looking ahead to when I am an NQT, I am not in a position to enter a school and try and change their ethos of inclusion. I must therefore ensure that I work within the individual school's framework, as well as government policy, whilst maintaining my personal passion for the challenging of gender and heterosexual stereotypes.

Citizenship has been removed as a statutory requirement at primary level in the 2014 National Curriculum (DfE, 2013c) and schools do not have to be involved in projects such as *Breaking The Mould* (Jennett, 2013) or *Education for All* (Stonewall, 2013). However, no matter what a school's stance on the overt teaching of gender and sexuality difference, all pupils must have access to equal experiences, and foster an environment where children (and staff) are free to express who they are. As a teacher I must ensure that lessons and free play opportunities are not gendered, and indeed, that everyone is encouraged to try out different activities. For example, within a D&T scheme of work, I would plan a carousel of activities, ensuring that everyone has the opportunity to develop a range of skills, not just those traditionally linked to gender, for example, woodwork for boys and textiles for girls. The class could be split into mixed-sex and mixed-ability groups ensuring the opportunity for peer as well as individual learning.

Conclusion

This discussion set out to address the challenges and approaches towards gender equality by focusing upon the continued existence of socially constructed gender and heterosexual stereotypes in primary education, and analysing examples of best practice nationally and internationally in order to challenge and overcome the damaging effects of such stereotypes. Although I accept that men and women are biologically different, I assert that they do not have to be constricted to the socially constructed stereotypes of gender and heterosexuality that are imposed upon them. Therefore, I argue that these stereotypes should be challenged in primary education so that children can grow up secure in their own identity, whatever that may be. This issue is personal to me because as a child I was sometimes made to feel abnormal because I did not always express stereotypically feminine traits, and as an adult I can feel restricted by the heteronormativity of society. I hope to implement the examples of best practice that this discussion has explored in order that the children I teach do not have to feel restricted by socially constructed stereotypes as I did.

The challenging of gender and heterosexual stereotypes ensures that children understand that diversity is both normal and acceptable. The primary classroom is a space in which the teacher can form a close bond of trust amongst the class, and can therefore initiate discussions of diversity and ensure that all pupils are valued and included. In addition, with the continuing career choice and pay gap between men and women, it is important that children of primary age do not feel restricted by gender-stereotypical career options, particularly as children today are being encouraged to think of career paths from the age of 11 (Evans, 2013).

Gender equality has been an issue in education ever since formal education began, and it will continue to be an issue until we live in a gender equal society. With the rise of technology, 24-hour news, and social media, gender and sexuality issues are a highly contentious global issue. In the same year that the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act (Great Britain Parliament, 2013) legalised same-sex marriage in England and Wales, and the day after New Mexico became the seventeenth US state to legalise same-sex marriage (Pollon, 2013), Uganda passed an anti-homosexuality bill with a penalty of life imprisonment for homosexual acts (Conway Smith, 2013). In my opinion, it is imperative that British children grow up in a tolerant and equal society. In tackling issues of gender equality by challenging gender and heterosexual stereotypes in primary schools, small steps along the long and complicated road to equality will have been taken.

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