

Free to choose

How can settings ensure that boys and girls are given equal and unbiased opportunity to take part in all activities? **Caroline Vollans** reports on the Gender Action approach



We have come a long way in terms of the diversity of career opportunities for both girls and boys in the past 30 years, but the job is not yet done. Despite all that has been achieved in challenging male and female stereotyping, it is well-documented that employment remains highly gendered. Women are hugely under-represented in STEM employment – science, technology, engineering and mathematics – and these industries have great difficulty in their recruitment. Similarly, men are vastly under-represented in traditionally female areas of employment – nursing, early years education and care work.

GENDERING OF BRAINS

The cause is not helped by the gendering of brains – the idea that there are female brains and male brains. It is not uncommon to hear women say, 'My brain is not wired up for maths.' More worryingly is that such unevidenced notions have been latched onto as neuroscience and translated into practice. Haven't we all heard comments like, 'The boys need to go and let off steam,' or been part of initiatives to target boys' writing through outdoor activities because 'their brains work differently from girls'?

Professor Cordelia Fine, author and psychologist at the University of Melbourne, dismisses such theories as 'neuroonsense'. Ms Fine overturns this so-called science about gender differences in

Boys are not born non-carers, and girls are not born carers

the brain. She says, 'It is appalling to me that one can, apparently, say whatever drivel one likes about the male and female brain and enjoy the pleasure of seeing it published in a reputable newspaper, changing a school's educational policy or becoming a bestseller.'

Professor Gina Rippon, author and cognitive neuroscientist at Aston University, Birmingham, agrees with Ms Fine's demolition of the idea of the female and male brain. She asks why such myths persist, concluding that a major problem in scientific research is that when studies find no evidence, they go unreported.

'The mainstream media tend to precis the minority that do identify differences, not always accurately. Thus "pink brain/blue brain" ▶

ideas are repeated and reinforced, even after being discredited.'

Gender stereotypes are neither innate nor inevitable.

GENDER ACTION

Fortunately, this problem is being addressed. In October 2018, London's City Hall announced the 'Gender Action school awards programme'. Led by the Institute of Physics, King's College London, University College London's Institute of Education and the University Council of Modern Languages, it supports schools to challenge gender stereotyping.

It is a programme that aims to transform school environments through promoting whole-school approaches to challenging gender stereotypes, thus hoping to limit the constraints these can have in the future lives of girls and boys. Gender Action is based on the premise that 'there are no inherent differences between the genders that should limit anyone's interests, capabilities and ambitions. Schools can encourage young people to be individuals and can be places where choices are free; not edited through a gender filter.'

There are four tiered levels at which a school joins this enterprise: Supporter, Initiator, Champion and Beacon. The first is basically about expressing support and interest – there are no further demands at this level. Progression up the levels requires further involvement.

CASE STUDY: 'ANYONE CAN DO IT'

Kay Rowe Nursery School in the London borough of Newham is a Supporter of Gender Action. Sarah Porter, acting head teacher, welcomes it for being accessible to the early years.

Ms Porter is working with her staff on the question of 'Are we in a situation where nursery-aged girls already feel a lack of entitlement in approaching certain activities?'. In order to begin to address this question, Ms Porter says, 'As a staff we are going to start monitoring the different areas of the nursery to try and get a true idea of how they are used in terms of gender. We like to think that we are offering all children all opportunities, but we want to do a proper appraisal of this and see what is actually going on.'

Kay Rowe's project of building a house in the garden (featured in

Nursery World, 20 August-3 September 2018) was a means of addressing gender stereotyping. The project was led by Rabia, a female member of staff.

'The gender difference at the start of the project was striking,' says Ms Porter. 'The boys were confident and keen, compared with the girls who needed much encouragement and role-modelling from the female staff.' Girls did go on to participate, providing a good example of how they needed to be told and shown that anyone can do it.

Kay Rowe's next undertaking is to talk to parents about gender stereotyping. 'This can be more difficult as gender is so deeply engrained in our society and our cultures,' says Ms Porter.

This problem is acknowledged and prioritised in the work of June O'Sullivan, CEO of London Early Years Foundation (LEYF). She says, 'If a (gender) balanced approach is not achieved, social norms learned in families, communities and peer groups will influence and reduce their choices, aspirations and social achievements. This perpetuates the stereotypical gendered roles, with boys potentially rejecting nurturing and caring careers and girls limiting their potential for careers in science, technology, engineering and maths.'

GENDER IDENTITY

Professor Averil Macdonald, emeritus professor of science engagement at the University of Reading, has done extensive work on getting girls into science. 'We create gender identity pre-birth and the expectations that go along with it,' she says. Drawing on Canadian research, she adds, 'The most powerful way this happens is through language – if we look at the English language there are certain words that are associated with feminine and masculine.'

It is probably not hard to guess which of these two lists are associated with feminine and masculine:

- Cheerful, committed, considerate, co-operative, dependable, empathic, honest, kind, loyal, modest, nurturing, people-focused, pleasant, polite, quiet, responsible, sensitive, supporting, trustworthy, understanding, warm.
- Adventurous, analytical, autonomous, challenging,



Kay Rowe Nursery School makes sure that all activities are accessible to both girls and boys

confident, courageous, decisive, determined, forceful, impulsive, independent, individual, intellectual, logical, objective, outspoken, persistent, principled, superior, self-confident, self-sufficient.

Professor Macdonald points out that, 'These words appear in job applications and affect whether the person applying feels alienated or that they belong there. Careers in science and engineering will use very different language from those in the early years or nursing.'

For all those working with young children, this is an apposite point. How often do we think about and observe how we speak to children specifically in terms of their gender? Surely, we are bound to do it in some way or other, either through what we say or what we don't say.

Do we, for instance, consider the above lists of words to be gendered, or is it just so routine for us to speak to girls and boys using different vocabularies that we do it unwittingly?

Professor Macdonald continues, 'Simply through the language they encounter, children grow up with notions of those areas of employment that are for them and those that are not for them.'

CASE STUDY: REFLECTING ON LANGUAGE

At Rye Oak Primary School in the London borough of Southwark – one of the first Supporter schools of Gender Action – the staff are seriously reflecting on the language they use. Glyn Hawke, deputy head and Reception teacher, is instrumental in leading this work. In his piece 'Challenging your own practice' on the Gender Action website, April 2019, he talks about some of the practice they have started in order to address the gendering of language:

- 'Avoid giving value-laden comments to children – this can be one of the hardest things to implement. If a child shows you a new dress, try not to say, "Oh, you look pretty", but just acknowledge what they are showing you – "Oh, do you have a new dress? It's got spots. It's purple." Children aren't often after validation; they just want to be seen.'
 - 'Avoid using pet names for children such as "sweetie", "buddy", "poppet" – again, this is really hard if it has become part of your daily interactions.'
- Mr Hawke goes on to explain that doing these things involves the staff

being prepared to challenge each other, as much of what we say is second nature and can be hard to change. Becoming increasingly aware of the language we use is demanding work requiring a great deal of trust and support from each other.

This work on the significance of the use of language with young children is reiterated by Ms O'Sullivan. 'You need to be more consciously aware of those throw-away comments that can undermine activities and planning for gender equality,' she says. 'You could be doing a great activity organised around breaking down gender stereotypes and then totally undermine the whole thing by something you say.'

A further aspect of the work at Rye Oak is an exploration of the concept of the male role model. This involves unpicking the notion and trying to develop some idea of the behaviours that it would be useful for male members of staff to be modelling. 'Beginning to explore one's own complicity in gender stereotyping challenges one's own sense of self and one's own practice. This is a really uncomfortable reflexivity but, in our view, one that was and is critical,' says Mr Hawke.

Thus, at Rye Oak, the starting point of its approach to Gender Action centres on 'raising our own awareness of who we are, our unconscious biases and the "myths" we've bought into'. Mr Hawke adds, 'It also means that once we've examined our unconscious bias, it

FURTHER INFORMATION

- Gender Action, www.genderaction.co.uk
- GenderEYE (Gender Diversification in Early Years Education), <http://gendereye.org>
- London Early Years Foundation, <http://leyf.org.uk>

REFERENCES

- Fine C (2011) *Delusions of Gender: The real science behind sex differences*. Icon Books
- Fine C (2018) *Testosterone Rex: Unmaking the myths of our gendered minds*. Icon Books
- Rippon G (2019) *The Gendered Brain: The new neuroscience that shatters the myth of the female brain*. Bodley Head
- Warin J (2018) *Men in Early Childhood Education and Care: Gender balance and flexibility*. Palgrave, Macmillan

You need to be more consciously aware of those throw-away comments

is no longer unconscious – we can then do something about it.'

This work reflects something of the long-term research interests of Dr Jo Warin, reader in gender and social relations in education at Lancaster University.

DECONSTRUCTING STEREOTYPES

Dr Warin is concerned with the deconstruction of traditional stereotypes in early years education. She focuses on the need for a 'gender flexible pedagogy' – a pro-active approach to tackling gender stereotyping. For Dr Warin, this is about creating a gender-fluid environment in terms of both the behaviours modelled by adults and the toys or activities provided.

For this to happen, the practitioner needs to be highly attuned to gender behaviours among both children and adults. Dr Warin states that early years practitioners 'are in a unique position to subvert a continuation of traditionally differentiated gender roles through flexible gender teaching because they have the opportunity to intervene at the very beginning of an individual's trajectory'.

She adds, 'Practitioners must provide children with various alternatives, presented through their own practices and behaviours alongside the resources and learning experiences they provide.'

CHANGING EXPECTATIONS

We cannot ignore the fact that girls do better than boys in the EYFS. It can be tempting to respond to this by providing boys' activities and, in doing so, perpetuate a gendered curriculum. Rather, we need to work on a diverse and versatile curriculum where each child can access activities that will enable them to make progress.

As Ms Fine argues, a baby is equipped to grow up into 'any sort of life' – girls are not born carers and boys are not born non-carers. Boys are not born engineers; girls are not born non-engineers.

Children's needs, interests, aspirations and brains will vary, but this is not simply because they are girls or boys. They should be free to make the choices that suit them, rather than conforming to expectations about what it means to be a boy or a girl. ■