

An Institute of Physics Report | **October 2015**

Opening Doors

A guide to good practice in countering
gender stereotyping in schools



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Schools

Bay House School

Cams Hill School

Fairfield High School

Frome Community College

Hounslow School

Hove Park School

Oaklands Catholic School

Ralph Allen School

Wellsway School

Writhlington School

The IOP would like to thank the students, teachers and senior leaders in the schools we visited. We were impressed by their professionalism and the quality of their work as well as the enthusiasm with which the students contributed to the debate. We are grateful to them for giving up their time to attend network meetings, take part in school visits, and for their enthusiasm in implementing gender initiatives in their schools. We are also grateful to them for the open way in which they contributed to this guide and have helped initiate some important conversations that we hope will continue.

Foreword

I am delighted to introduce you to the *Opening Doors* guide to good practice from the Institute of Physics.

We know that social attitudes play a key role in determining girls' and boys' subject choices at school, and that as students go through life their career choices can be hindered by notions of "girl's jobs" and "boy's jobs".

Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths industries are calling out for new talent, and need people with the qualifications to do the jobs of the future. We must harness the skills and enthusiasm of everyone, and that includes making sure our students are choosing from the broadest possible range of subjects.

I want to ensure that no one is held back because of who they are, regardless of their gender or background. I believe schools have a crucial role to play in bringing this about, which is why the *Opening Doors* project is so vital.

This guide suggests a multitude of practical ways in which schools can challenge gender stereotyping – by getting students, teachers and parents on board as they challenge the barriers both girls and boys face when making their subject choices.

I hope that this guide will stimulate debate, encourage action and that it will encourage schools to continue to create an environment in which all students have the confidence, opportunity and encouragement to go as far as they can.



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Introduction

The Institute of Physics has been investigating and working on the problem of gender imbalance in subject choice for many years. The Opening Doors project is the latest piece of work to gather evidence and identify aspects of good practice in this area. This guide is the main output of the Opening Doors project. Its purpose is to identify barriers to countering gender stereotyping in schools and to provide some suggestions, based on observations during the project, that can be put into practice and investigated further.

In 2012, the Institute of Physics published its statistical report *It's different for girls*¹. The analysis showed that, for a girl that does A-levels, the likelihood of physics being one of them strongly depends on the type of school she attends. Girls attending independent, single-sex schools, for example, are four times more likely to choose physics than their contemporaries in mixed, state-funded schools.

The inference drawn was that school culture is a substantial factor in determining subject choice. In 2013, *Closing Doors*² built on that work and looked at progression from GCSE into six A-level subjects that display gender imbalance: English, mathematics, biology, physics, economics, and psychology. The results showed that 81% of state-funded, mixed schools were either maintaining or exacerbating the already poor gender bias of progression into these subjects. Moreover, to improve upon the ratio of 21% of girls doing physics nationally, schools needed to be reducing the imbalance in the other subjects too, providing further evidence that school culture is an important factor.

The Opening Doors project was co-funded by the Government Equalities Office and the Institute of Physics. The remit of the project covers all subjects and all aspects of school life, and there is no emphasis on any particular area. Its chief purpose was to generate this guide on good practice based on visits to schools and discussions with staff and students. The visits took place in 10 schools in two networks – one based in the south west of England, in the Bath area, and the other along the south coast. A panel including a gender expert and at least one teacher from another school in the network spent a day in each school, speaking with teachers, support staff and management teams. They also had lunch with around a dozen students segregated into gender groups. After each visit, a confidential report was sent to the head teacher of the school, highlighting good practice observed, together with any issues that were noted.

Those reports form the basis for this guide. In almost every case, the examples of good practice cited were seen in one or more schools; the barriers identified were, however, seen in essentially all the schools.

Essential features of good practice in countering gender stereotyping in schools

Based on the discussions and observations that took place within the site visits and subsequent recommendations given to schools, the following are the essential features of a school that is actively addressing gender equity. The next section explores these, and other, aspects of good practice in more detail.

1 Senior gender champion

Senior Leadership Teams identify one of their number as a gender champion whose role includes bringing together the whole school in a coherent campaign to challenge gender stereotypes. Governors are involved in the campaign in order to reinforce the message that this activity is a priority.

2 Training

Staff attend gender awareness and unconscious bias training, whether as part of their induction to the school or their ongoing professional development.

3 Sexist language

Sexist language is treated as being just as unacceptable as racist and homophobic language. Teachers receive training on unconscious bias and equality and diversity awareness.

4 Use of progression data

Gender-disaggregated data on both achievement and progression are collected for all subjects and discussed formally at whole-school level, using benchmark data for comparison. Where there are issues to be addressed, actions are generated, including targets where appropriate.

5 Initiatives

Initiatives are introduced and developed on the basis of what works and in a way that shows how they address a problem identified in the school data. Carefully planned external visits encourage students to challenge stereotypical views as do role models who commit to developing sustainable relationships.

6 Subject equity

There is a strict policy that all subjects are presented equally to students in terms of their relative difficulty and teachers refrain from making any remarks about how difficult they find particular subjects. The emphasis is on working to the best of one's ability rather than seeking to find subjects where one has innate talents.

7 Careers guidance

Careers guidance starts an early stage. It focuses on the next educational phase, emphasises keeping options open and actively challenges gender stereotypes.

8 Student ownership

Students are at the heart of any campaign to counter gender stereotyping. They are made aware of the issues and be encouraged to think of ways of combatting them.

9 Personal, social, health and economic education

Regularly timetabled PSHE sessions are regarded as a high-value activity that can have a positive impact on students' lives, teachers delivering content are provided with resources and activities. Sessions on equality and diversity form the basis of a wider school campaign and discussions on these themes continue through other topics.



Data from IOP's Improving Gender Balance student survey

Survey data collected by James Lambley & Associates, September 2014

921 female students surveyed from years 9, 10 and 11 in 20 schools

Year 9 36.6% • Year 10 61.8% • Year 11 2%

Girls are often steered towards art and humanities

TRUE
45.6%

FALSE
29.5%

DON'T KNOW
24.9%

I am aware of at least two examples of gender issues in choosing careers

TRUE
64%

FALSE
3.8%

DON'T KNOW
32.2%

Boys and girls choose different post-16 subjects due to different influences on them

TRUE
50.3%

FALSE
12.4%

DON'T KNOW
37.3%

Our school challenges old-fashioned gender stereotypes

TRUE
25.4%

FALSE
20.1%

DON'T KNOW
54.4%

Good practice in schools

Teachers and schools work hard to provide students with the tools and opportunities they need to achieve to the best of their ability. However, the evidence² shows that the choices of many children (especially in mixed, maintained schools) are influenced by gender. Schools, as publicly-funded bodies, have a legal responsibility, through the *Public Sector Equality Duty*³, to advance equality of opportunity. However, before taking part in the Opening Doors project, very few of the schools visited had seen gender issues as a priority or interpreted that duty in a proactive manner.

The Government and Ofsted have already made progress in addressing gender issues, with initiatives such as the *Body Confidence Campaign*⁴ and *Your Daughter's Future*⁵, together with the dissemination of *A-level subject take-up data*⁶.

The section that follows outlines some of the barriers to combatting gender stereotyping observed in the Opening Doors visits. In each case, the barrier is followed with an example of good practice in dealing with it. The latter constitute ways in which schools can support students to ensure that their subject choices, achievement and well-being are affected as little as possible by their gender or gender stereotyping.

1. Management, structure and environment

1.1. Prioritising gender issues

Positive changes had occurred only in those schools in which the school leadership team (SLT) and governors identified gender issues as a priority and transmitted that message strongly to their staff and students.

Good practice: *SLTs should identify one of their number as a gender champion whose role includes bringing together the whole school in a coherent campaign to challenge gender stereotypes. Governors should also be involved in the campaign to reinforce the message that this is an important activity.*

1.2. Equality of opportunity

In many of the schools visited, there was confusion about what it means to have equality of opportunity. Many teachers expressed the view that because they treated all students in the same manner, they could not be discriminating between boys and girls. A related point in some schools was that, while they placed a laudable emphasis on treating each student as an individual, they sometimes lost sight of group behaviour that was impinging strongly on the behaviour of individuals.

Good practice: *In staff training, ensure that everyone understands the difference between removing gender bias and treating all students in the same way. While it is certainly good practice to treat each student as an individual, those giving advice and support should be aware of group pressures that can affect individuals.*



A diversity champion

In one school, a member of SLT took on the role of diversity champion and decided to launch a gender awareness campaign among staff and students. Year 10 and 11 students were surveyed about sexist language and gender equality in their school. In parallel, a Feminist Society has been set up to engage both male and female students in equality discussions. The school has sent a strong message about the importance of equality and diversity in their community.

1.3. Timetabling

Schools did not always offer a free choice of options, due to timetabling constraints. Subjects were often offered in blocks, and these were usually constructed in a way that reinforced gender stereotypes. While most schools tried to accommodate students who wanted to make choices outside that structure, there was a strong message about the types of courses that are taken by boys and girls.

Good practice: Schools should try to offer free choice to students for their optional courses and then consider timetabling. While it may not ultimately be possible for all students to pursue all their chosen options, this approach avoids sending messages about which courses are suitable for girls or for boys. Where this is not possible, option coordinators could work with the school gender champion or group to ensure that subject blocks do not force gendered choices.

1.4. The school environment

Most schools tried to use the school environment to improve the student experience, to exhibit students' work and activities, and to provide motivational messages. But, in many schools, there was little consideration given to gender representations in these displays, and it was common for them to display gender bias and reinforce gender prejudices.

Good practice: Use the environment as a means of countering gender bias. The environmental displays should be properly planned, possibly as part of a gender campaign. It is essential to involve students in this planning, both because they will feel more engaged with the displays and because the act of planning will make them think about the issues.

Celebrating achievement



One school highlighted successes in their PE department by placing photos of students on the walls; a striking feature of their display was the alternation of male and female faces that adorned the hallways. We also saw student-designed equalities posters and a Hall of Fame celebrating the success of recent alumni. Similarly, in subject-specific displays, many teachers make a concerted effort to ensure gender balance in displays of key figures. Students were very aware of the teachers that took time to discuss the representation of both genders in their subjects.

1.5. Setting arrangements

Almost all the schools visited placed students into sets in terms of perceived academic ability. While there are strong arguments either way for the desirability of setting from an early age, it was noted that such arrangements sometimes led to imbalances in the gender make-up of classes, which reinforced stereotypes. Lower sets were usually more male, a situation that sometimes resulted in an increase in poor behaviour.

Good practice: *It is important to have a clear philosophy behind any setting arrangements and to look carefully at the evidence that it leads to better academic outcomes. While we are not suggesting that schools impose a limit on the number of girls or boys in each set, if setting results in heavily gendered sets, schools should consider the reasons for the imbalance and take suitable action to rectify it.*

1.6. Classroom management

Perhaps because so few teachers had received explicit training on gender awareness, teachers were not always aware that certain methods of classroom management could lead to profound differences in the engagement of boys and girls. Some schools, mindful of bad behaviour from boys, had policies of alternate boy–girl seating, effectively using the girls as buffers to keep the boys apart. In general, the girls noticed and resented this policy.

Good practice: *Teachers of all subjects should be aware of a variety of techniques for classroom management to ensure that all pupils are able to contribute to the lessons. Classroom management should be for the benefit of the students' learning and individuals should not be used to manage the behavioural problems of their peers.*

2. Policy and training

2.1. Training teachers on diversity

In the visited schools, a number of staff had observed casual sexism in class, (e.g. cat calling, sexist jokes, derogatory language) and many teachers were aware of the gender polarisation of their subjects but felt frustrated at not having sufficient guidance to allow them to combat it. Across all the schools, very few teachers had received training on diversity issues – those that had usually required it for some specific role, for example as a careers or pastoral advisor. The majority were also unaware of the notion of unconscious bias and how they might inadvertently be transmitting gendered views to students. Even during the conversations within the visits, it was possible to detect increasing awareness of the issue as teachers reflected on their own behaviour.

Good practice: *All teachers should receive training on diversity issues, including unconscious bias, as part of their regular professional development. Teachers that operate in any sort of advisory capacity should be given priority, as should teachers new to the school, as part of their induction process. Training should be evidence-based. Staff should reflect on their own language and behaviours to ensure that they are not inadvertently transmitting negative messages. Sympathetic peer appraisal of teaching can be enormously beneficial in this context.*

2.2. Diversity policies

Most schools had statements on diversity and inclusion somewhere on their websites but, in general, teacher awareness of the statements was very patchy and student awareness virtually non-existent. Often the policies had been put together by the SLT with little engagement from other staff and no input at all from students.

Good practice: *A clear policy on diversity is essential, and that policy must be well known across the school. The most successful policies engage staff at all levels and student representatives in creating the policy and in discussions as to what would and would not be acceptable. Gender awareness can be embedded into existing procedures, and such embedding can apply to all routine activities, such as choosing a curriculum, writing job descriptions, setting and running extracurricular clubs.*

Student code

In every room of one school, a code of behaviour was displayed, focusing on learning, attitude, respect and responsibility. Staff and students see diversity and equality as key parts of this code. It is used as a way of celebrating and rewarding excellence and students are well aware of staff expectations. This code is paired with a specific gender-equality policy, which clearly sets out the school's intended actions towards gender equality for all staff and students within the school's environment, curriculum and classroom frameworks.



3. Language and communications

3.1. Sexist language

All the schools had policies to counter racist, homophobic and sexist language. However, in almost all cases, infringements in the last case were treated less seriously than the other two. Often, during a visit, the SLT would assert that there was no problem with sexist language, only for the classroom teachers to refer to some cases and the students to report that it was an everyday reality. Such language was often dismissed as “harmless banter”, but many of the students, particularly girls, did not see it as such, and, in extreme cases, it verged on bullying. Examples were not confined to actual speech: teachers were aware that increased use of tablet computers in class can lead to an increase of sexist communication. Students were also sensitive to casual comments made by teachers, which, while not consciously sexist, often reinforced gender prejudices.

Good practice: *Sexist language should be as unacceptable as racist and homophobic language, and should be addressed as part of the anti-bullying policy. Staff and students should be involved in discussions about what is not acceptable and both groups should be encouraged to challenge transgressions. Staff training should include guidance on the use of language.*



Okay and not okay

Inspired by an activity developed by the IOP, one school has begun to collect phrases overheard in their school. The activity can be run with teachers, students or parents: 20 or so phrases gathered are separated into columns “okay” and “not okay”. The teachers who completed this activity were often surprised by the hidden meanings of phrases used by students, and also by the unintended consequences of language used by their colleagues.

Some examples of these comments collected from a school outside the Opening Doors project are shown below:

He is not very good at sewing

In terms of jobs, well you could become a nurse or a primary school teacher, or work in retail, or law. Women do all sorts of things

Men need clear boundaries

She is not very good at javelin

Man up

Female sport is underrepresented in the media

Girls' attainment at GCSE is better than that of boys

He looks smart in his uniform

I need two strong boys to help me with this laptop trolley

Male students are outnumbered by female students at most universities

3.2. Homophobic attitudes

All schools visited had noted that the word “gay” is used as a term of abuse, and that there is a link between this attitude and gender divisions. Many of the schools had organised awareness weeks or programmes to combat this particular use of language. There were cases of students being deterred from taking subjects traditionally associated with the opposite gender because they were worried about homophobic bullying.

Good practice: *Treat all aspects of diversity as part of a single package: dealing with homophobic behaviour and language will also help counter gender stereotyping.*

The elephant in the room



One school decided to tackle homophobia head on: after hearing and challenging homophobic language, the school integrated anti-homophobic material into the curriculum. This developed into a programme led by an enthusiastic teacher and some students who focused on the Stonewall charity as part of a citizenship project. The school brought together members of its diverse community to combat homophobia. Supported by Stonewall champions, the school worked to “educate, discuss, inform and debate”. Students in all year groups watched the films *Fit* and *Battyman* and were encouraged to talk about homophobia. The school shares best practice with other local schools and has worked with the local religious community to support students. A mentoring scheme is now in place, helping students to talk to their families about issues that they would otherwise find very difficult to discuss at home. Students and staff at this school show great awareness of diversity issues and it is clear that both groups will challenge homophobic and racist language. The successful anti-homophobia campaign is an excellent platform to launch an equivalent challenge to sexism, which the school is now preparing to tackle.

3.3. School publications

All the schools published material for recruitment and to provide guidance for students making choices of routes through education. Much of the material was of high quality and genuinely helpful, but it was seldom gender-neutral. As a specific example, career routes via mathematics and the sciences usually referred solely to jobs in science, engineering and technology, whereas arts and humanities included a much broader range of possibilities. This approach reinforces the incorrect notion that taking a science course narrows career options, a message that will tend to deter girls.

Good practice: *Gender awareness should be embedded into all published material. Special attention should be paid to material aimed at supplying careers advice to avoid incorrect messages about the breadth of opportunities or the relative difficulty of subjects. Attention needs to be paid to details, such as a consistent quality of presentation and the nature of photographs and illustrations that might reinforce stereotypes.*

4. Monitoring and support

4.1. Data on achievement and progression

Most of the schools had achievement data available, usually in gender-segregated form. But there was great variability in how those data were treated, whether at a whole-school level,

a departmental level, or even by individuals. Rather fewer schools, particularly those that teach only to GCSE level, looked at progression from GCSE to A-levels and other post-16 qualifications, largely due to the problems in collecting the data.

Good practice: *Gender-disaggregated data on both achievement and progression should be collected for all subjects and discussed formally at a whole-school level, using benchmark data. Where there are issues to be addressed, actions should be generated, including targets where appropriate, again working at a whole-school level to ensure coherence of approach. The board of governors should be included in the discussions, as should student representatives. Schools should put in place arrangements for tracking departing students, for example, by getting them to fill in a form when they are given their results.*

4.2. Embedding diversity

Some schools aspire to a culture of embedding diversity across all school activities. In schools where this was not the case, the monitoring of such matters as the diversity of visiting speakers, role models, staff responsibilities and so on was inconsistent.

Good practice: *Diversity should be embedded in all school activities. A gender or diversity champion can help ensure that this occurs, but, in the early stages of the process, there is a case for requiring a diversity impact analysis of any school activity.*



Equality and diversity group

In one school, teachers from all levels are involved in an equalities and diversity group, which monitors school documents that are sent out to parents. Examples range from the accessibility of letters to parents who do not speak English as their first language, to a review of careers documentation and images on the school website. Staff volunteer to join this group and are clearly proud of the impact that it has in tackling equality issues. Reflecting a diverse range of backgrounds, the board of governors is keen to make gender a priority and is keen to help the school combat any issues identified as part of these impact assessments.

4.3. Pastoral support

All the schools offered pastoral support and considered it a high priority; there were some very dedicated and caring staff that offered an excellent service to pupils. However, the service was usually reactive in nature, dealing with students that emerged with problems on a personal level such as bullying or family issues. While this type of support is essential, less attention was paid to more generic issues. For example, lack of confidence and resilience can present a barrier for girls taking subjects perceived to be the most challenging, and boys can get caught up in a culture of not working hard.

Good practice: *Pastoral support should operate in tandem with a strong PSHE programme and should not be seen exclusively as a way of dealing with personal issues. Certain groups may have issues in common and these can be addressed as part of the pastoral system by engaging the students to take some responsibility for addressing them. Specifically, schools should ensure that girls develop their self-confidence and resilience – they must not be afraid to fail sometimes – and boys should be persuaded of the link between hard work and high levels of achievement.*

Building confidence and resilience



Increasing the confidence of girls by matching them with local mentors as part of a Girls Network was one of several gender-aware initiatives seen in one school. Although only a few girls were involved in the initial stages, pastoral staff have seen a marked improvement in their confidence and resilience and hope to increase numbers next year. A “Girls into Maths” programme works with female students and their parents to overcome fears of the subject and improve numeracy. Also, a companion programme, “Blokes into Books”, has provided some male students with Kindles to raise their reading age.

5. School initiatives

5.1. Developing initiatives

In all the schools visited, there were examples of initiatives with the aim of addressing gender imbalances. Typical examples were: choosing English texts that might appeal to boys; analysing gender representation in media studies; and specific visits to try to encourage more girls into mathematics. While these schemes were admirable and some of them were very effective, they were generally driven by one or two enthusiastic members of staff and were focused on only one subject area.

Good practice: *Initiatives should be developed on the basis of school-level evidence and be related to issues identified from data analysis. They should be incorporated into a coherent programme of activity across the school. In addition, the legacy potential of each initiative should be assessed and outcomes shared across the school.*

5.2. Tackling underperformance

Many of the schools had identified the general underperformance of boys as an issue. As a result, some initiatives were applied disproportionately to boys and may have inadvertently created gender imbalances. A related point is that Pupil Premium money, for example, was often used to provide pastoral support to the most disadvantaged students, but little attention in those activities was given to countering stereotyping.

Good practice: *As with all initiatives, there should be a diversity analysis of the use of funds to support any underperforming group in the school. Specifically, the initiatives should be monitored to ensure that there are no unintended consequences and evaluated to see if they are effective.*

5.3. Role models and external visits

One common type of initiative used by the schools to try to combat gender imbalances, particularly the shortage of girls in mathematics and some areas of science and technology, was to take students on an external visit, or to host a visit from a perceived role model.

Good practice: *In order for these activities to be successful, schools should try to ensure that role models are prepared to commit to a series of visits to the school, which will allow the development of constructive relationships with the pupils. External visits are an excellent way of adding to the curriculum, but they should involve careful preparation, be of high quality and students should see the point of them. Former students are often effective, role models for students where long-term relationships can be established. Local universities can be excellent partners both for role models and as places to visit.*



Lasting links with the community

Making the most of local entrepreneurs, one school is setting up an incubator unit that will build on its already impressive work using local mentors to help students build their own businesses. The school has made many links with the local community, including celebrating successes through a two-page spread in the local newspaper, inviting staff from local industry to talk to students about careers and arranging student visits to the nearby university. Both staff and students are aware of gender issues and have addressed them directly, from a lack of female representation on visits to engineering companies, to arranging essay competitions about breaking the glass ceiling. Students, staff and the community are working hard to raise aspirations through lasting role models and links with employers. The school also seeks opportunities to showcase individuals that break stereotypes.

6. Academic matters

6.1. Relative difficulty

One factor deterring pupils from taking certain subjects is the perception that they will find them difficult. This is particularly true for girls contemplating mathematics and the physical sciences⁷, but it also applies in other contexts. Many of the schools visited were inadvertently reinforcing the notion that certain subjects are harder than others. For example, teachers of other subjects commonly admitted to pupils that they had struggled with mathematics. Another common observation was that, while most schools claimed to have a uniform policy on whether students would be allowed to take an A-level with grade B in the relevant GCSE, in practice, students were told in private that A or even A* was “really” necessary to cope. In some cases, teachers seemed to think it was a badge of honour that their subject was seen as more difficult than average.

Good practice: *Schools should have a strict policy that all subjects should be presented equally to students in terms of their relative difficulty and teachers should refrain from making any remarks about their own abilities in any subject. Any attempts to have higher than standard entry requirements should be substantiated by real evidence and not be based on the opinion of the teacher.*

6.2. Hard work vs innate ability

In the schools visited, many students and some teachers held the view that achievement in a subject is based more on natural talent than on working hard. This view, which is notably less prevalent in other countries and some ethnic minority cultures, undoubtedly contributed to gender differences, with boys suffering by not feeling that they have to work as hard and girls diminished by the implication that, in subjects where they do have to work hard, they lack ability.

Good practice: *Schools should develop a culture in which all subjects are potentially accessible to all students and where the emphasis is on working hard to make the best of one's ability rather than seeking to find the subjects where one has an innate talent.*

6.3. Boys' underperformance

Most of the schools visited reported a marked underperformance of boys relative to girls. But that underperformance was rarely, if ever, seen as a gender issue, and never addressed in terms of combatting gender stereotyping.

Good practice: *All substantial differences between boys and girls in achievement, participation and progression should be identified as gender issues and addressed as such. The culture of boys working less hard is a gender stereotype that has developed relatively recently.*

6.4. Equal opportunities for sports

One of the most common topics raised by female students during the visits was physical education (PE). Several schools boasted strong PE departments. The staff in these schools made an effort to ensure that female students had access to the full range of sporting activities and that diversity was celebrated throughout the department. In other schools, girls resented being prevented from taking certain sports considered unsuitable for them.

Good practice: *While students following a formal PE course have to choose between the options available, in general, all students should have the opportunity to pursue all sporting activities available. In some schools, there are mixed sessions for some sports and these are very popular.*

Inclusive sports

Mixed gender sports aren't always possible in PE lessons; however, one school has successfully established inter-form leagues with mixed teams competing in activities such as volleyball, boccia and penalty shoot-outs. These inclusive sessions, which take place at lunchtime or after school, can help male and female students feel more comfortable playing with, and against, each other.



7. Careers advice and parental engagement

7.1. Careers advice

In none of the schools visited was the careers advice truly satisfactory, and, to their credit most of the schools had identified the problem but were clearly struggling to improve the service. Many schools held large events that were effective in engaging parents, but seldom worked at the level of an individual. Advice given on a one-to-one basis was usually reactive, providing information on the best route to a particular career identified by students themselves. There is little use made of data on salary prospects, or the sectors where jobs are likely to be available.

Good practice: *There is no perfect system of careers guidance, but good advice⁸*

- *is tailored to the individual*
- *is aspirational but realistic*
- *challenges gender stereotypes*
- *is supported by data*
- *requires students to think about their future*
- *focuses on the next educational phase and keeping options open*
- *avoids being too specific at too early a stage*
- *engages with parents and the local community*

7.2. Routes through education

It was rare to find evidence of careers advice that builds as a student progresses through the school. A typical offer would be for an external advisor to visit the school for one day a week. While the advisors came over as enthusiastic and dedicated, within the time available they were able to offer little more than a reactive service to students who had expressed a desire to see them. Even then, there were often waiting lists. Not all the advisors had been trained on gender issues.

Good practice: *It is difficult for schools to offer an effective service for careers advice within the budgets currently allocated for the purpose. Nonetheless, given the importance of students making the best choice of subjects for them, schools should make sure that information about routes through education, and about subsequent career opportunities, is part of the school curriculum from the early years. Ideally, teachers should provide examples of how student learning and skills development is related to work applications. All people involved in offering advice to students on careers should be trained to avoid reinforcing gender stereotypes.*

7.3. Training teachers on vocational routes

Many teachers enter the profession directly from graduation and have no personal experience of other work environments. The teachers we spoke with were particularly aware that they lacked knowledge of alternative paths, for example, vocational routes and apprenticeships.

Good practice: *More support should be given to all teachers to make them aware of the various different routes available to students. While it is unrealistic to expect all teachers to be careers experts, they should know where to direct students for information on the different routes through education, including those of a vocational character.*

7.4. Collecting data on work placements

Teachers provided anecdotal evidence of extreme gender stereotyping in students' choices in work placements and other schemes. More formal evidence was not usually available; although some data was collected it was rare for this to be rigorous. Arrangements for work placements and the various schemes in which schools link with business and industry varied widely between schools.

Good practice: *Where work placements or similar schemes exist, participation and satisfaction data should be collected and acted upon where gender differences are identified.*

7.5. Students' destinations

Few schools were reliably aware of the destinations of their students, whether it was progression to A-levels and other post-16 courses, or directly into work. Staff discussed the difficulty in obtaining reliable information from post-16 institutions and local learning authorities.

Good practice: *Schools should make every effort to collect gender-segregated data on student destinations. These are useful for all sorts of purposes, but two particularly important ones are, first, to see the degree of gender stereotyping, and, second, to help maintain a list of alumni who can be approached by the school later.*

Engaging careers advice



Each of the schools demonstrated at least one example of good careers and subject advice. Some of the activities included equality, diversity and gender awareness themes to help students, and parents, make less gendered choices and raise aspirations. Examples of these activities included:

Subject-taster sessions whenever students are making subject choices

Mock interviews with local employers, colleges and universities

Student options and careers interviews, open for parents to attend

Careers and subject events for lower year groups

Equality and diversity training run by external careers advisors for staff that give advice to students

A focus on alternative routes post-16 – skilled occupations, apprenticeships and employability

Routes through Education focus – emphasising the education choices that keep careers routes open

Working with local industry and setting up links for students to gain experience and receive advice

Work-experience placements that are connected to individual careers and college advice

Parent drop-in sessions to discuss careers and subject choices with teachers

Discussing choices as part of PSHE work

Pathways documents and information that shows the breadth of opportunities available from different subject choices

Discussing gendered aspirations with parents at options evenings

Accessible and regularly updated information for students through careers hubs, libraries and wall displays

Holding events on apprenticeships as well as those concerned with college and university entrance



Collecting and using data

In some schools, Information, Advice and Guidance Coordinators ensure that all students complete a form detailing their education or career plans in the coming academic year. Some schools are also collecting information on college and work-experience placements. One school noticed some gendered trends in the data and has worked with the pastoral team and students' families to discuss alternative options and raise aspirations.

7.6. Subject guides

All schools provide guidance on possible subject choices, whether in the form of web pages or hard copy. A great deal of work goes into such documents. However, few of the guides actively combat gender stereotyping. Unfortunately, this oversight can often lead to inadvertently reinforcing gendered views. In addition, there was often an inconsistent approach in presenting possible careers for each subject area.

Good practice: *Guides to subject choice should be edited to have a common form to ensure that all subjects are presented fairly. As with all school documents, the guide should be scrutinised for gender-neutrality, for example, in terms of photographs, and to make sure that it does not reinforce stereotypical views. One common fault is to present science subjects as suitable only for those who want to pursue a career in science or engineering.*

7.7. Engaging with parents

Most teachers and students identified parents as being very influential in terms of subject choices and career aspirations, sometimes exhibiting strong gender bias. Schools understood the importance of educating parents about career routes but found it difficult to engage with parents in large groups other than at parents' evenings. However, others were working on options evening presentations to break down gender prejudices.

Good practice: *Parents should be made as much part of the decision-making process as possible, starting as soon as their children enter the school. A survey of parental opinion could identify common prejudices, giving the school a starting point for a gender awareness campaign.*

8. Addressing gender in PSHE

Personal, social, health and economic education (PSHE) sessions play an important part in preparing students for society: they were usually the vehicle through which the schools dealt with issues such as racism, homophobia and sexism, although the last was much less common than the other two. While some schools had clearly worked hard to create an impressive programme, others did not place a high value on PSHE sessions, often relegating them to already busy tutorial periods. In some cases, students were even allowed to skip these sessions if they were involved in certain extra-curricular activities. Where gender issues were addressed via PSHE, it was unusual for the sessions to be part of a concerted campaign across the school.

Good practice: *Gender issues should be part of a coherent PSHE strategy, stressing the importance of all areas of diversity. The sessions should be integrated into the school campaign to counter gender stereotyping. Students should play an active role in the sessions*

and be encouraged to act as champions for the various areas of diversity. Where students do miss PSHE sessions, catch-up periods should be timetabled, partly to emphasise the importance of this element of school provision.

Diversity in a day



Embedding diversity discussions in PSHE was the passion of one coordinator that we met. Gender stereotyping and equality issues are tackled across all year groups and these sessions are linked to school assemblies and tasks for tutor time. The school has recently run “Diversity in a day”, a catch-up session for students that had missed PSHE sessions. Dedicated staff, who volunteer for the work and receive in-house training, deliver the PSHE programme and provide materials for tutors. The programme itself focusses on the changing needs of students as they progress through the school, maintaining a thread of equality and diversity. Topics include body image, relationships, representation of men and women in the media and workplace, and equal rights are revisited as students mature.

Gender in the media



Several schools used celebrity statements or news items on feminism, equal rights and diversity issues as discussion items in tutorial sessions. Tutors had good relationships with their students that allowed for more open debates than would be the case in formal lessons. Typical examples included Emma Watson’s HeForShe campaign, student-led assemblies celebrating Malala Yousafzi, the gendering of toys, and stereotypical representations in films. It was encouraging to see both teachers’ and students’ enthusiasm for such debate. A number of schools are beginning to provide resource packs through year group leaders for tutors to use on a regular basis.

9. Student experience

9.1. Engaging students in countering stereotyping

In all schools visited, students were very aware of gender issues in school, at home or in the media. In many cases they were much more engaged with these issues than their teachers believed. Lots of students, male and female, reported living with a daily barrage of sexist “banter”, and were aware that some of their behaviours and subject choices are heavily gendered, and often driven by peer pressure. Despite this awareness, most students still found it difficult to break out of their roles, and many girls, in particular, passively accepted the situation. More positively, there were some cases of students taking the initiative in setting up feminist/equality societies, awards for teachers who challenge sexist behaviour, and other similar activities.

Good practice: *There is a great deal of potential in engaging students with gender issues. Any initiatives should be seen as being in partnership with the students, not as something done to them. One very positive activity is to use the students as ambassadors, working either with pupils lower down the school or with local primary schools to raise awareness of, and to counter, gender bias.*



“Equalistaff”

In one of the schools, a student-run equalities group decided to recognise and reward teachers who they see challenging racist, sexist or homophobic language and behaviour in schools. Any student can nominate their teacher; the group are then invited into staff meetings to present their teachers with an equalistaff certificate. During our day at the school, we heard about the enthusiasm and positive voice from this group. Recently, some staff had been nominated for challenging stereotypical views voiced about Romeo and Juliet, calling out homophobic language and addressing the historical gender imbalance in philosophy by talking about female philosophers as well as the curriculum-mandated male philosophers.

9.2. Developing initiatives

Some of the schools visited, rather than seeing students as the subject of an initiative, actively encouraged their students to devise and run their own equality and diversity groups. These groups were very successful, and had most impact on school life when teachers took an active role in encouraging younger students to join, ensuring that the groups are sustained as older students leave.

Good practice: *Students should be at the heart of any campaign to counter gender stereotyping. They should be made aware of the issues and be encouraged to think of ways of combatting them. Where students do emerge with good ideas, they should be taken seriously and treated in the same manner as staff-driven projects. Some examples are:*

- *Students presenting staff with awards for countering gender bias*
- *Establishment of equality or diversity groups*
- *Student-to-student teaching*
- *Buddy systems*
- *Using topical issues as a basis for discussion*

9.3. Perceived gender bias among teachers

Students were particularly sensitive to any perceived gender bias in teachers. They picked up on any gendered use of language, or subtlety in the treatment of students. For example, both girls and boys routinely felt that bad behaviour is tolerated more for girls than for boys, whereas for violations of the dress code it is the other way around.

Good practice: *While it is very difficult to remove all potentially biased remarks completely, if both teachers and students work together on the use of language and behaviours, there is a real opportunity to change the culture of the school.*

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