

Gender Stereotyping

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The thrust towards universal secondary education has resulted in increased educational access for a larger number of adolescents than ever before. However, many issues arise with respect to the quality of education provided, the majority of which are related to the curriculum and methods of delivery. One such issue is that of gender stereotyping in the curriculum choices made by students.

The concept of gender is used in referring to acquired characteristics that are normally associated with male or female. Frances Boudreau has defined stereotypes as “a cluster of beliefs and attitudes used to categorise large numbers of individuals without regard for individual differences.” Gender stereotyping therefore refers to beliefs regarding traits that are considered to be characteristically masculine or characteristically feminine. This phenomenon is viewed as part of the child's development. Researchers have indicated that as the child's understanding of gender develops, he will actively seek stereotypes of sex-appropriate behaviour in daily interaction with others.

Gender stereotyping affects beliefs about appropriate occupational roles and this, in turn, affects curriculum choice in schools. Although most educational leaders subscribe to the philosophy of equal opportunity for all, different educational provisions have traditionally existed in the pre-vocational areas for boys and girls in the majority of new sector schools. Boys were exposed to industrial arts as an introduction to technology, while girls were trained in home management. This was a clear indication that the planners held traditional views about the roles of both sexes. The Secondary Education Reform Programme, however, has introduced technology education as a core subject for all students so, hopefully, this may help to avoid gender stereotyping in this area in future.

An examination of student entry patterns for the Caribbean Examination Council (CXC) Examinations also shows evidence of gender stereotyping in subject choices. While the majority of subject areas are dominated by females, particular subject areas are associated with higher male or female entry. Higher female entry is seen in the humanities, business studies, craft subjects such as food and nutrition, clothing and textiles, home management, and some science subjects, namely, biology, integrated science, and mathematics.

Higher male entry is seen in other science subjects, namely, chemistry, physics, agricultural science, and technical subjects. Thus, clear patterns of gender stereotyping in subject choice are evident. Research suggests that this phenomenon is more extreme in coeducational than in single-sex schools, and that subjects can be classified as masculine or feminine on the basis of popularity with, or choice by, males or females.

The enrolment statistics from technical and vocational schools in Trinidad and Tobago show the same pattern of gender stereotyping in subject choice. Female students predominate in areas like

business education, office procedures, and shorthand and typing, while male students opt for areas such as auto and diesel, airconditioning and refrigeration, and machine shop.

Gender stereotyping, however, does not begin in adolescence when students choose subjects on the basis of their perception of certain subjects as gendered. Students enter school at the primary level with appropriate gender behaviours already well ingrained. From birth, parents treat boys and girls differently; girls are dressed in pink, boys in blue. They are given gender differentiated toys—dolls for girls, and trucks and guns for boys—and are expected to behave differently. Boys are told that boys don't cry and girls are encouraged to be quiet and obedient.

Gender stereotyping continues at the primary level, where many of the organisational features of the primary school seem to be based on a principle of gender separation. Although in many instances children gravitate to same-sex groupings, there are also occasions when they interact in mixed groups. Teachers, however, tend to rely on gender separation for order, for example, boys and girls line up separately and sit on different sides of the classroom. In addition, boys and girls are often pitted against each other in competition, or contrasted with each other for discipline purposes. When girls and boys are defined as opposite, group stereotyping and antagonism flourish.

At the secondary level, it is very noticeable that male teachers predominate in certain subject areas, for example, the technical subjects, while female teachers predominate in the traditional academic areas. This encourages the image of particular subjects as masculine or feminine domains. Some teachers use gender stereotypes in the classroom for instructional purposes, to control student behaviour, and to negotiate relationships.

When adolescents in a comprehensive school were asked about their hopes for the future, they opted for fairly traditional choices and occupations. The females chose work with children, social work, and hairdressing. This limited selection of careers is partly a result of curriculum choices but also their realistic assessment of their future prospects. The boys, when asked, chose a much wider range of occupations, again linked to their curriculum choices such as welding, auto-shop, opening their own business, and so on. The need for a job to earn a living and fulfil the role of breadwinner was very important for boys, as this is one of the aspects of masculinity often emphasised. Yet, in the context of the real lives of working class men in Caribbean society, this role is increasingly difficult to sustain in the face of rising unemployment, structural adjustment, and loss of jobs through technological change.

How can teachers and schools influence students away from these stereotypical educational and life choices? The task is one of eliminating gender stereotyping in the classroom. Teachers must first of all ensure that in their own practice they are not themselves reinforcing gender stereotypes by their words and actions. Teachers also have a crucial role to play in raising awareness of this issue, as it is in the classroom that stereotypes can be discussed, analysed, and subjected to critique. Young people should be encouraged to be independent and resist pressures to conform to the dominant gender stereotypes. Teachers can also provide materials in the classroom which, instead of presenting stereotypes, provide alternative views of masculinity and

femininity to help students develop themselves without limiting their life choices.

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