Introduction: What is gender stereotyping?

The Oxford online dictionary defines a stereotype as “a widely held but fixed and oversimplified image or idea of a particular type of person or thing.” (Oxford University Press, 2019).

Gender stereotyping may therefore involve oversimplified judgements of a person, their abilities or their behaviour based on an image of what they believe people of their gender should be or act like. Many pupils may speak of their experiences of gender stereotyping in the classroom. These have been reported by Myhill & Jones (2006), with pupils in their sample suggesting expectations of boys and girls in the classroom are different. We look further into how these stereotypes affect boys in particular and why.

How do stereotypes affect boys at school?

Reading ability

• Retelsdorf, Schwartz & Astrobek (2015), found a significant negative correlation between teachers’ gender stereotypes and boys’ reading self-concept. There was no significant association found for girls.

• Pansu et al (2016), found that when boys experienced a stereotype threat, (the fear of underperforming and confirming a negative stereotype) they performed worse on a reading task. This indicates how teachers stereotypes might directly impair boys’ reading ability.

Behaviour

• A meta-analysis by Jones and Dinidia (2004) found that overall, male students receive less praise and receive more criticism than their female counterparts. Research into the power of teachers’ expectations could be valuable in examining this.

• Coladarci, 1989). Research into the power of teachers’ expectations could be valuable in understanding this.

Academic attainment

• In terms of attainment expectations, boys’ ability to achieve is often underestimated. Riley (2014), found that when teachers were given short descriptions of pupils and asked to rate their likely achievement level, that gender often influenced their decisions. One teacher in the study, described her perceived academic differences between genders, saying, “Even as young little girls, they like to play school. It suits girls better than boys.”

• Hartley & Sutton (2013) manipulated stereotype threat, amongst children aged 7-8, finding that when they were told ‘boys do worse at school than girls’ boys’ performance in reading, writing and maths tasks was impaired (see figure 1).

The importance of teachers’ behaviours

Research suggests that when teachers treat pupils differently, whether its intentional or not, it is perceived by students and subsequently affects their self-concepts (Hoge & Coladarci, 1991). Research into the power of teachers’ expectations could be valuable in examining this. It is therefore important for teachers to critically analyse their treatment and expectations of pupils in relation to gender, as their use of stereotypes in informing expectations of individuals could have severe effects on the pupils ability to achieve in school. The work of Rosenthal and Jacobson indicates high expectations of all pupils regardless of gender may be key.

Why and how might these stereotypes occur?

Evidence shows gender stereotypes can arise from a very early age. LoBuDeLoache (2001) found that at just 2 years old, girls chose pink objects more than boys did. Explanations for how gender stereotypes are developed and reinforced include:

- Gender Schema Theory (Bem,1981,1983) – A child becomes aware of their own and others’ genders through cognitive processing. They organise and categorise gender related information into schemas, based on observations of gender in their environment. Children adjust their own behaviour to fit with the norms they have observed. Teachers may therefore have carried gender biases from an early age.

- Social Learning theory (Bandura & Walters, 1977) – This theory emphasises the importance of observational learning and role models in reproducing behaviour. It is possible that both teacher and student gender related behaviour is influenced in this way. Teachers’ gender biases may stem from their observations of other teachers modelling the behaviours. It could also derive from the differential treatment of girls and boys modelled throughout their own education, making them likely to reproduce this behaviour. Boys may be reproducing gender stereotypes in their own classroom. In a study by Nurius and colleagues, boys and girls were shown two pictures of a boy and a girl. When the gender of the child was not specified, the boys were more likely to place the boy in a picture of a university, and the girl in a picture of a nursery. (Nurius & Coladarci, 1989).

- Children adjust their own behaviour to fit with the norms they have observed. Teachers may therefore have carried gender biases from an early age, due to the development of schemas and gender related information processed from their environment. The blue theme of this poster will fit nicely into your gender schema of colour.


- A link between the stereotyping of boys and girls may therefore have an ‘effect’, such as a link between the stereotyping of of boys in the classroom and reduced academic achievement, this link may not be very strong and therefore the effect size is small. A small effect size is often an indication that there are other factors at play in this relationship. Studies with small effect sizes mentioned previously include: Jones and Dinidia (2004), Rosenthal & Jacobson (1968) and Retelsdorf, Schwartz & Astrobek (2015).

- Measuring the influence of stereotypes – It is difficult to directly compare the difference between the educational experiences of a children who has been influenced by gender stereotypes in the classroom and children who have not.

- Firstly, it is likely that every child will come to be affected by gender stereotypes at some point growing up, whether that be at home or in school. Therefore, even if we try to study the developmental trajectories of children with different schooling experiences related to stereotypical gender treatment and compare these, it is difficult to control for the presence or absence of cultural influences influencing their behaviours.

- Differences, such as those in achievement, could be influenced to some extent by biological factors. There are many biological differences between males and females, which could be confounding variables in these studies. However, it is difficult to separate nurture from nature. There may be a complex interaction between the biology of gender and the influence of stereotypes on behaviour.

- Separating pupils into classes in which gender stereotypes strongly influencing teaching and learning, and classrooms founded on gender equality seems an ideal situation to study the effects of stereotyping on boys. However, this would also be unethical. As if pupils are affected by gender stereotypes as previous research suggests, the pupils in this condition would be put at a huge disadvantage compared to pupils in the control condition. The ideal research scenario therefore is not possible, and even if it were may still be subject to the influence of other variables.

Missing Links: Research limitations and what we do not know

Whilst there is ample evidence to suggest boys are at a disadvantage in the classroom due to stereotyping, there are always going to be some problems and/or gaps in research. Some problems to consider include:

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- It is difficult to directly compare the difference between the educational experiences of girls who have been influenced by gender stereotypes in the classroom and children who have not.

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