

Part Two:

Changing the School Environment



When someone with the authority of a teacher describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked into a mirror and saw nothing.

Adrienne Rich, *Blood, Bread and Poetry: Selected Prose* (1986)



When embedding gender equality throughout a school and taking a whole school approach to preventing sexism and sexual harassment, there are some key considerations to be made with regards to the school environment. It will be possible to implement some changes quickly and easily, whilst others may take time, but all will set the school on the path to being safe and inclusive.

Barriers



'I am worried about bad publicity'

The media can be fickle and unkind to those making positive changes, so there can be an understandable fear that by taking steps to change the school uniform or available facilities the school will face backlash. It can be useful to ensure that there is an evidence base to support the changes made (such as the profound impact on young people) which is documented and readily available to all. Furthermore, when implementing a particular change (such as an introduction of gender-neutral toilets), it could be useful to prepare a short, positive communication for parents and carers and publish something on your website. Be open and transparent and provide people with the opportunity to come and speak with someone at the school if they have concerns.

'We don't have the money to do this'

Budgets are often tight, so updating and changing the available resources (such as new books with more diverse authors and characters) can fall down the list of priorities. It's important to remember the impact that even seemingly small changes can have on young people; many changes can be implemented at low or no cost. In addition, consider finding alternative ways to raise funds for books and resources through cake sales or other initiatives, which young people themselves may wish to lead.

'This isn't practical!'

Not all schools are in a position to make structural changes to a building which can lead to a feeling that 'we can't make any changes.' There are many ways to change environments and spaces without calling in builders, and this chapter will help to explore those possibilities.

Areas to Consider

Classrooms



"Children learn these 'rules' of how to be a boy or girl at a very young age, via marketing, media and those around them. It can be upsetting to the child if their interests do not conform and can prevent them from being the people they really are."

(Perryman and Rippon, 2014)

It is important that classroom environments provide a safe space for all young people to be themselves, feel safe and to ensure equal access to learning. Some areas to consider in the classroom are:

Register: Do not segregate the register by gender. This reinforces an assumption that one gender should always be 'in front' or ahead.

Seating plans: Rather than segregating students by gender ('boy, girl, boy, girl'), which can exclude trans students and may be based on gendered assumptions about behaviour patterns, it is much more effective and inclusive to get to know students and organise the room based on their individual behaviours and how well they work together. Of course, this isn't always possible or practical, in which case other randomised systems such as numbering students as they arrive or organising alphabetically can be used.

Case Study:

A teacher changes their seating plan every week using a random generator. The following online generators can be used:

<https://www.clickschool.co.uk/seatplan/>

<https://profsamscott.com/seatingplan/>

<https://www.megaseatingplan.com/>

Rewards: It is important to be aware not only of who is being rewarded and why, but also what rewards are offered. For example, are girls offered stickers which are pink butterflies and boys, stickers which are cars or footballs? Have assumptions been made about the sorts of rewards young people will want?

Reflecting on how rewards are earned and who is receiving them can also help to highlight and challenge unconscious biases. Take time to think about classroom expectations and whether these expectations are upheld and reinforced in the same way for all young people. Taking note of which young people are rewarded most often can highlight some patterns that may need consideration.

Roles: How are roles assigned in the classroom? For example, are 'strong boys' asked to move furniture and 'helpful girls' to hand out books?

For more information on how the language teachers use impacts classroom dynamics, watch the BBC's documentary 'No More Boys and Girls: Can Our Kids Go Gender Free?' (BBC, 2017).

Respecting each other: It is important that staff and pupils respect each other's personal space, feel able to articulate if they feel uncomfortable and show respect when someone says 'no'. Sexist behaviours, slang words for body parts, sexual innuendo, sexual advances or comments should be consistently challenged and incidents should be used as an opportunity to educate young people as to why they are unacceptable.

Staff Interactions

Staff interactions with young people, families and each other are a crucial part of building a safe and equal environment.

First and foremost, staff must demonstrate and role model a zero-tolerance approach to sexism and sexual harassment. It is important that staff communicate respectfully, respect each other's and young people's personal space, do not engage in sexualised jokes or behaviours and avoid unnecessary gendered and patronising language, such as 'the girls in admin', 'man up' or 'don't be such a girl'.

It is important that young people and staff who may report incidents are taken seriously and listened to, and any staff or young people displaying these behaviours face appropriate recourse. For further information on creating policies that will support this work, see 'Policies and Procedures'.

Create an environment where staff are approachable. Make sure that young people feel that they can share worries and concerns and ask any question with confidence.

Ensure a variety of staff supervise different areas of the school and different activities. For example, games of football should not only be supervised by male staff. Likewise, if all teachers for a particular subject are of one gender be sure to invite external visitors of another gender to help supervise clubs.

Ensure all staff use the right gender pronouns to refer to people.

Pronouns are linguistic tools used to refer to people and validate their identity. It is important to refer to people by the pronoun that they identify with. If in doubt, it is fine to ask 'What pronouns do you use?' or 'What pronouns would you like me to use?'. Often, an individual will have a very clear idea of which pronouns work for them.



"Just like chosen names, using the proper pronouns is validation. It's an expression of love and acceptance. To not do so is an attack on [someone's] very being."

(Soukup, 2018)



Want further information about pronouns? Try the following links:

Seventeen, Why Gender Pronouns Matter: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9iKHjI5xAaA>

Chak, A. (2015) Beyond 'he' and 'she': The rise of non-binary pronouns. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-34901704>

Communications and Displays

The school's commitment to promoting equality and tackling discrimination and harassment should be clearly outlined in its mission statement and aims and flow through the school's policies and procedures. Policies and procedures should be kept up-to-date and shared on the school website and in communications with parents and carers. Pupil-friendly versions of policies can also be created, shared with the young people and displayed around the school.

It is important to consider language and imagery used in communications and displays and the messages that this sends.

For example:

- The school website, prospectus and other communications (such as leaflets and letters) should use gender-neutral language. For example: communications should refer to parents and carers rather than mothers and fathers.
- Posters and leaflets should not be targeted at a particular demographic, explicitly or implicitly. For example, if the poster for the football club only features boys it will send out a message that it is not for girls.

Whether in classrooms, the reception area or through the halls, school walls are often filled with displays. These are a great opportunity to demonstrate the school's commitment to equality and diversity by considering what content to display and the language and imagery used.

- Do school displays represent a diverse range of people, topics and ideas?
- Are displays arranged to avoid segregating them by gender?
- Do the displays reinforce gender stereotypes or challenge them?
- Are the displays reflective of the diversity within the pupil population and local community?

Case Study:

A school uses every topical display as an opportunity to challenge stereotypes. For example, on a display showing a recent science project, the display will also include a photo and information about a renowned female scientist.

Notice boards can be useful to ensure all young people are aware of the reporting systems and support available for anyone experiencing sexism or sexual harassment. Young people can be involved in creating posters or leaflets highlighting that these sorts of behaviours are unacceptable, and what they can do if they see or experience them.

Facilities

Where possible, the school should offer gender-neutral toilets to staff, young people and visitors. Individual cubicles can be made available to those of all genders with a change of signage. Depending on the design and layout, bathrooms without urinals can be gender-neutral, and a gender-neutral layout can also help to reduce bullying.



63.4% of transgender students reported avoiding bathrooms
(Gender Spectrum, 2017)

Where gendered toilets are in place, the décor should remain neutral, avoiding gender stereotypes such as painting the girls' toilets pink and the boys' blue.

Adequate sanitary provision should be available for all who require it. Rules around toilet usage should place the best interests of the child first, ensuring no detrimental impact to a young person's dignity or health.

When young people are required to change their clothes for sports, gender-neutral facilities should be provided where possible for people who might wish to use them. Transgender young people should be supported to use the facilities appropriate to their gender identity.

Should a complaint arise from a young person regarding transgender young people using facilities appropriate to them, the complainant should be provided with the opportunity to change separately, rather than asking the transgender young person to do so.

It is important not only to consider facilities provided by the school, but also policies regarding when young people can use them. Blanket policies on toilet access ('no toilet breaks during lessons') go against recognised guidance from human rights agencies. Young people who are menstruating (and young people of any age at risk of 'accidents') require unrestricted access to the toilet (RightsInfo, 2018).



Case Study:

Barrow Hall Primary School in the north of England removed the gender designation of their toilet blocks, stating:

'We strongly believe that it is our responsibility to ensure our children are fully prepared for the ever changing and diverse world that they are living and growing up in and that this change is in line with this responsibility [...] Barrow Hall believes passionately in equality of opportunity... We therefore believe children should be able to access all facilities equally and we should not segregate pupils unnecessarily.'

The facilities are designed to be safe for gender neutral provision. They have floor-to-ceiling doors and panels and can be locked from the inside. Washing and drinking facilities are in open areas clearly visible from the corridor and classrooms.

As a result of these changes, the school has said: 'the behaviour of children in the KS2 toilets has significantly improved compared to when the school had gender specific blocks in the previous school building [...] pupils report that they feel much safer than they did in the gender specific blocks in the old school building.'

The school's recent Ofsted report stated:

"Pupils have a good awareness of what it is like to be, or to feel, different. They say everyone is welcome and 'no-one is made to feel uncomfortable for being who they are' at Barrow Hall. They proudly told me about the school's new gender-neutral toilets."



Library and Resources

When creating a whole school environment that promotes gender equality and tackles sexism and sexual harassment, it's important to consider the resources and activities available to young people. When looking at the books and resources available in the school library or other areas, consider the following:

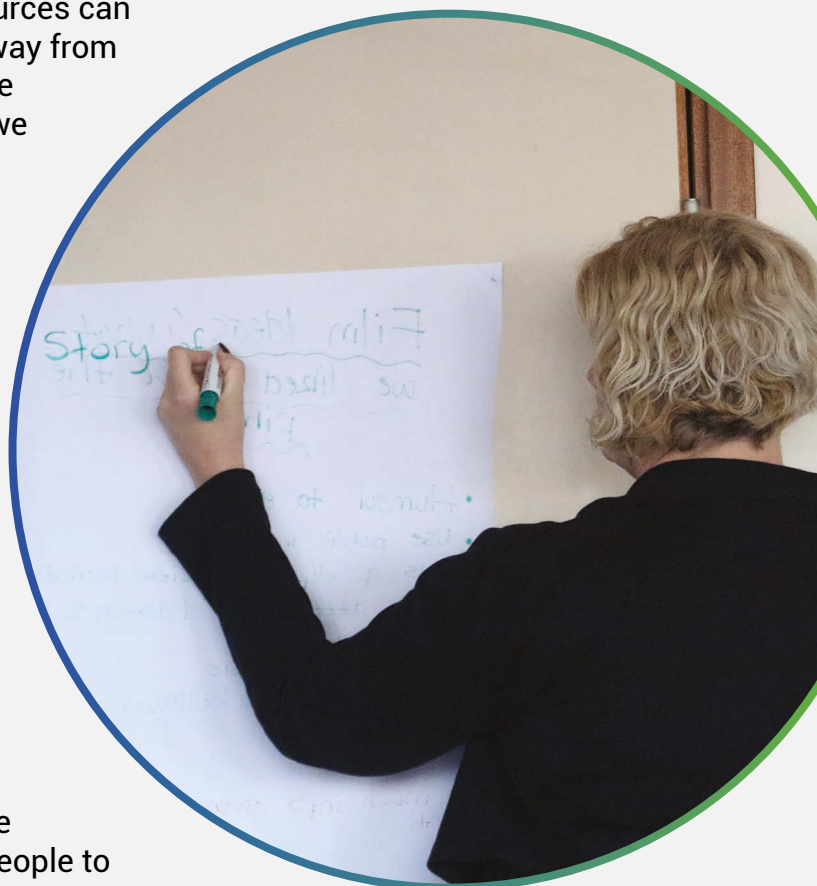
- **Diverse authors:** Are the available resources written by a range of authors of different genders and backgrounds, bringing a variety of experiences and perspectives? Even if there are lots of books featuring female protagonists, if they are not written by diverse authors, providing a range of different perspectives, it is doing young people a disservice.



"Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity."

(Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, 2009)

- **Diverse characters:** Can young people easily access books and resources where they can see themselves reflected, and where they can find perspectives and experiences that are different to their own? Stories may depict a relatively narrow representation of women's lives if, for example, all the protagonists are White, or non-disabled.
- **Non-stereotypical storylines:** Books and resources can also be useful for challenging and breaking away from stereotypes. By choosing stories which feature characters in non-stereotypical gender roles we can help to normalise those ideas for young people. Does, for example, the school library offer books featuring male characters in a variety of roles?
- **Not organised/separated by gender:** Books and resources can be organised by topic, by author, by title, but shouldn't be organised by gender (as in 'Boys' books/ Girls' books'). Young people can then make the decision as to which stories they are interested in.
- **Healthy relationships and signposting:** There should be books and resources available which provide young people with the opportunity to learn about healthy and respectful relationships; what respectful behaviour looks like; consent; body confidence and self-esteem; and which signpost young people to sources of extra support.



Case Study:

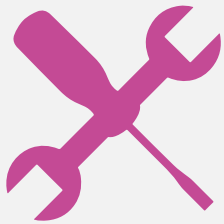
A school notices a trend amongst their year 5 students that boys appear disinterested in reading. In an attempt to encourage reengagement, all boys are offered books about football. It is good practice to recognise and monitor engagement and achievement based on different characteristics such as gender, and to work to bridge any gaps. However, this approach makes assumptions about the interests of the young people based on their gender and reinforces stereotypes.

Even Better If:

Exploring different mediums such as graphic novels, comics or short stories may be useful for young people who appear disinterested in reading.

Conversations with young people may help to uncover underlying reasons for disengagement and may also help to point to more effective resolutions.

For example, it may become apparent that young people have internalised societal messages that reading is for girls, so that school can take steps to counter these messages. This might include educating young people on gender stereotypes and their impact, or highlighting role models who challenge gender stereotypes, such as the rapper Stormzy, who has recently launched a partnership with a publishing house, and said "Reading and writing as a kid was integral to where I am today" (Stormzy, 2018).



When looking to diversify the resources in the school, visit:

Diverse Kids: <https://diversekids.co.uk/>

Letterbox Library: www.letterboxlibrary.com

Willesden Bookshop (multicultural books only):
www.willesdenbookshop.co.uk

BookTrust: www.booktrust.org.uk

Tamarind Books: www.tamarindbooks.co.uk

BookLove: <http://thisisbooklove.com/>

Some of the above organisations offer diverse book packs and will offer consultancy based on the demographic of the school community.

Playground/Outside Spaces

Young people should feel safe and protected from sexism and sexual harassment wherever they are in the school. This includes outside spaces and playgrounds.

It can be useful to work with young people to find out where bullying or harassment may be more likely to take place, and what could be implemented to make these areas safer. This can be done by organising a walk around the school with a small group of young people or by conducting surveys and focus groups.

Some potential initiatives or solutions that could be implemented based on the findings include:

- **Safe zones:** It can be helpful to provide designated safe zones. This may include a classroom or outside area which is always supervised by staff, or the office of a member of staff who young people can talk to and report their concerns. Making the school community aware of these designated spaces not only provides a clear message to those who may need to access support, but to the whole community that sexism, sexual harassment and all other forms of bullying are not acceptable, and that the school is working to eradicate them.
- **Staff supervision:** Based on the findings from surveys or focus groups, the school may choose to increase or relocate supervising staff in order to improve the safety of the school environment.



Activity for mapping bullying and harassment 'hotspots':

Use a large sheet of paper and create a map of the whole school. Include areas such as toilets, classrooms, the playground and corridors.

Invite young people to place stickers on the areas where bullying or harassment is most likely to take place.

Young people can add post-it notes to explain why bullying or harassment is more likely to take place in those areas, and what they think could be done to help.



External Visits and Visitors

An exciting part of school life for young people is the various trips, visits and experiences they will take part in. These provide another great opportunity to challenge stereotypes and get young people thinking outside the box, but also require consideration with regards to safety and inclusion.

The following questions may be useful prompts to think about when planning an educational visit:

- Are there any exhibitions or events that cover the chosen topic but in a more diverse and representative way?
- Do exhibitions include a diverse range of stories and contributors? If not, can this be highlighted as a discussion point or learning opportunity?

Case Study:

As part of a topic on 'Jack the Ripper', the History department at an East London Secondary School take their Key Stage 4 students on a school trip: 'A Hidden History of Women in the East End: The Alternative Jack the Ripper Tour'. This tour encourages young people to focus on the lives and experiences of the victims rather than the celebrity of Jack the Ripper.

For more information visit: <https://beyondthestreets.org.uk/2019/02/04/hiddenhistory/>

It is also important to think about the facilities available when making external trips:

- Will gender-neutral and/or accessible toilets be available on site?
- If required, are gender-neutral and/or accessible changing facilities available (for example if going to a leisure centre)?
- Will it be possible to adequately supervise all young people at all times to ensure that they are safe from situations which may put them at risk of incidents of sexism or sexual harassment?
- Do young people know who they can talk to on the trip if they have a worry or concern?

Finally, when inviting external visitors into the school, the following considerations should be made:

- Are a diverse range of guest speakers regularly invited into school? Do they represent different genders, as well as different cultures, religions and nationalities? Can this opportunity be used to challenge gender stereotypes?
- Are exhibiting staff who attend school careers fairs representative of a diverse range of backgrounds?
- Will the visitor's session/content will be in line with the school's values?