

# Taken together: gender differentiation and mixed schooling

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**I**n this article I want to address some of our commonsense assumptions about the education of girls and boys in single-sex and mixed schools. In Malta there has recently been an interest in co-education. People as different as ex-Labour M.P. Ms Carmen Sant (Society, 1991), columnist Daphne on Sunday (STOM, 19 May 1991) and others (including the group of Trade School Heads currently engaged in the Trade School Project) have advocated co-education as a possible solution to gender differences in education

I would like to question the wisdom of such assumptions. The focus is on the construction of pupils' gender identities in school, looking at both foreign and Maltese mixed infant and primary classrooms. I have made the point elsewhere (Darmanin, 1991) that able Maltese girls in single-sex secondary schools are achieving as well, if not better than their male counterparts. Despite this achievement however, their aspirations for future careers are still within traditional feminized spheres. Whilst I have also argued (Darmanin, 1992) that the labour market in itself works as a constraint on girls aspirations, this is not to diminish the importance of the school as a site in which gender identities are constructed.

Indeed this article is intended to focus our attention on the often hidden though powerful processes that differentiate between girls and boys in mixed schools.

## Mixed schooling or co-education

**A**n important start is to consider the distinction Brehony (1987, p.4) makes between mixed schooling and co-education. Brehony's (1987) historical account of English mixed schooling bears similarities to our Maltese case. The mixing of boys and girls (as in small village schools) was a matter of what Shaw (1987) has also called administrative convenience rather than a specific policy decision to promote equality between the sexes. In Malta, many smaller rural schools did indeed have mixed infant and primary classes whilst larger urban schools were single-sex. In the move to rigid streaming in the late 1970s, mixing the sexes and amalgamating the primary schools was seen as one

way of creating large streamed schools with the better devolution of staff and resources. The issue of sex equality was not on the agenda then, nor has it been at any time since then. Though this has had an impact on the careers of female teachers and headteachers (Darmanin, 1991) again there has been no public discussion of the effect of this policy.

This special issue of the journal **Education** is intended to redress some of the gaps of our knowledge on gender issues in education. We have unquestioningly accepted our mixed primary schooling without stopping to consider the implications of this system for the construction of gender identities and the propagation of sexual inequality in our classrooms.

## We do need gender identities, but which ones?

**I**n following MacDonald's (1981, p.163) call for a theory of identity formation, researchers have made a useful distinction between sex which tends to refer to the biological aspects of femaleness and maleness, and gender which refers to the psychological, social and cultural elements of personality.

Sharpe (1982) makes the point that most societies do differentiate between the sexes, not forgetting however that the actual construction of the differentiation is in each case not arbitrary but vitally influenced by the economic structure and the division of labour. Moreover, as Sharpe (1972, p. 65) cautions

the ways in which they do differ are not important and do not warrant their exaggerated consequences in the separation of sex roles and personality.

Recently Davies (1987) has found that apart from having taken-for-granted knowledge about gender that considers male and femaleness as the only mutually exclusive categories relevant to gender, we also have an emotional commitment to the gender we have been assigned. This commitment is developed at a very early age. In

her own research with pre-school children, Davies (1987) notes the difficulties that children have in assigning other than stereotypical roles to characters in the fictional world of two anti-sexist texts. The difficulty arises both from a reading of wider social definitions (France, 1986) in which the polarity between the gender roles of women and men serves as the basic definer of appropriate gender identity

Maleness in our society is defined in a large part in terms of one's capacity not to behave like a girl and is thus constructed by some boys as something that has to be ongoingly achieved. Females, in contrast are not seen as at risk of becoming males. (Davies, 1987, p.45)

and from the children's own identification with the fictional characters on the grounds of sex, i.e.: girls identify with the princess, because she is female. Despite being an untypical female in that she wears a paper bag, triumphs over a dragon and finally rejects a prince, the girls still prefer to identify with her rather than the prince. If, as Davies (1987) and others (Jacklin, 1983; Archer, 1989; Browne and France, 1986) hold, children have already acquired a strong sense of appropriate gender identity by the time they are three, then it seems even more imperative that we recognise that they need 'to find ways of clearly signalling their maleness and their femaleness without limiting or constricting their potential' (Davies, 1987, p. 49). We also need to examine the ways in which the construction of the gender identity has been achieved in order to expose some of the spaces in which intervention can be successful if we are to change and extend what it means to be a woman or a man in our society.

### **In the nursery and primary school**

**W**hilst acknowledging the parental and societal role in the inculcation of stereotyped gender identities, Marland (1983) turns to the world of the school as one in which girls and boys are made more different than society would otherwise make them. In his words (Marland, 1983, p.2) 'Schools act as amplifiers for society's stereotypes'. Marland (1983) follows Jacklin (1983) in submitting that although parents do construct different identities for their children, they also tend to see them as more similar to each other, regardless of sex, than they do other peoples' children. With experience, some differential attributions disappear and by the time

they enter school, Jacklin (1983, p.16) finds that

in general intelligence, attention span, cognitive abilities and task orientations boys and girls are alike.

According to Marland (1983) the school is from the start a site in which differential opportunities are provided for girls and boys, and in which different capacities will be developed. In an engaging appeal, Marland (1983, p.2) locates some of the consequences of this differentiation.

The sufferers are boys and girls who have learning opportunities denied them, skills withdrawn from them, possible interests thwarted, their perception of the identity of others warped and, perhaps most important of all, their view of themselves and their potential distorted.

### **Play**

**I**n the nursery and primary school, play is one of the most significant learning activities that pupils of both sexes engage in, yet research has shown that play is constructed differently for pupils by the teacher's definition of appropriateness. Serbin, (1984) was observing a nursery school in New York City when she found that as part of the celebration of Easter the teacher had organised an activity "Here comes Peter Cottontail" for boys and another "In your Easter bonnet" for girls. The boys hopped all round the room, noise and movement were an integral part of the activity, whilst the girls paraded quietly around the room, whilst the teacher encouraged them to "walk nicely". On the basis of this observation, Serbin (1984) observed systematically in fifteen different classrooms of pre-school children and found that firstly, teachers responded differently to children's disruptive behaviour in which boys were given more reprimands but also more attention. Secondly, girls were often ignored, or otherwise the only manner in which girls could gain the teacher's attention was by "hanging around" the teacher, thereby demonstrating the very dependent behaviour that teachers often dislike in girls. More alarmingly, Serbin (1984) finds that this pattern dominated classroom interaction

more interaction with boys, more praise, and one of our most interesting findings, a difference in the kinds of instruction given to boys and girls. Boys received more detailed step-by-step instruction in how to solve a problem or how to do something for

themselves. Eight times as much instruction was given boys as girls.

Debattista (1987) has found a similar pattern operating in Maltese primary schools. In her ethnographic study, Debattista (1987) makes the following observations that though there is some variation between the three teachers concerned as regards their expectations of individual children, all the teachers operated within a definition in which boys' disruptiveness and **poor academic performance** naughtiness rather than as a product of their attainment and ability, whilst girls were expected to work on their own, present tidy work and behave. They received no positive feedback for this behaviour. For example, Miss Harifa (Debattista, 1987, p.105) expected boys to be disruptive describing one boy thus "He is clever but he is so troublesome". In classroom sessions Miss Harifa actively encouraged the children to compete with each other. Having spent five minutes reprimanding the boys for their inattention, Miss Harifa continues writing on the board.

Miss H: Who does not pay attention does not get a mark.

Miss: The boys are not paying attention. There is someone naughty, I know although I am not looking. (She has her back turned to the class whilst she writes on the board).

Kevin tried whistling, teacher turns from the blackboard.

Miss H: I'm waiting for you. Charles, be quiet. Christopher, you're not paying attention at all.

Debattista (1987) comments that when a girl behaved in this way she was told

Miss H: Sarah, you were going to be born a boy - you are so naughty.

In her classroom Miss Harifa punished the boys who broke the rules but found that a warning was sufficient for the girls, who as Debattista points out were being socialised into a role in which the teacher's authority is quickly accepted. In this Year III (age 7-8) classroom a number of the boys had already started a deviant career, as Serbin (1984) was to find with the number of boys referred to her for disruptive behaviour in the primary school. Conversely in their attempts to attract the teacher's attention, the girls in Miss Harifa's class exhibited a

strong inclination to dependent behaviour, asking for help when they lose rubbers, or crying if they cannot understand the exercise. Weiner (1980), Licht and Dweck (1983) and Sutherland (1983) all consider that learned helplessness and its corresponding anxiety to be one of the main factors in accounting for the discontinuity in girls performance in Maths in the secondary school. Similarly, difficult subjects are less likely to be chosen by girls, who learn that even if they are competent in the primary school, this competence is accidental or due to their neatness and conformity rather than their ability. The hidden curriculum (Serbin, 1983) of school learning seems to be an effective predictor of future choices and school careers.

Thus, we can ask, with Serbin (1984, p.281) what is the effect of boys receiving that much more step-by-step instruction, that much detailed analysis, that much modelling? One of the answers is given by Serbin (1984, p.281) herself when she notes that in order to gain the teacher's attention, the girls have to resort to proximity seeking. Indeed, where the teacher consciously attended to all the children at the same level, there was an decrease in clinging and girls worked at greater distance from the teacher, explored the room and played with more toys. Another consequence of the gender imbalances in interaction in mixed sex classrooms (French and French, 1984; Spender, 1982) is that as Stanworth, (1986, p.38) in particular, has demonstrated

both male and female pupils experience the classroom as a place where boys are the focus of activity-particularly in the forms of interaction which are initiated by the teacher-while girls are placed on the margins of classroom life.

For girls this can mean that certain toys and by extension the learning that is associated with them are beyond the space inhabited by girls. They are less likely to get the direct intervention of the teacher is securing the materials they want to use and less opportunity to ask and answer questions.

In a term's observation of a weekly music (singing and instruments) lesson for four to five year olds, I found that the boys predominately occupied the front row of the group and took the first choice of instruments when the lesson moved to the "band" activity. Despite the fact that for ten consecutive weeks it was invariably the boys who pulled out the drums, having been the first to push

their way to the instrument box, the teacher never tried to distribute the instruments in such a way that each child could have an opportunity to experiment with different musical apparatus.

This situation can be even more damaging for girls when one looks at the opportunities that girls have in exploring some of the construction toys that are still widely believed to ease the development of the visual-spatial skills necessary for mathematical ability. In their study of girls and mathematics, Walden and Walkerdine (1982) also stress that it is both the experience of action on concrete objects as well as teacher expectations and constructions of gender identity that accounts for the discontinuity in girls' mathematical performance. They find that in the two nursery and two primary schools in outer London in which they conducted their action research, it was a lack of opportunity and encouragement which led to a situation in which girls did not play with construction toys. By the age of four children will play with toys considered sex-appropriate by the society in which they live. Nevertheless, Walden and Walkerdine (1982) consider that children of both sexes spent over 70% of their time engaged in construction, creative and fantasy play. It is not necessarily differentiated play time that is perhaps the determinant feature of mathematical ability, but rather the messages and clues that teachers give when preparing children to "discover" mathematical relationships. As with the example of a shopping game that an infant school teacher uses to develop computation skills, the teacher also gives subtle cues about the masculinity and the femininity of the activities in which the mathematical relations are embedded (Walden and Walkerdine, 1982, p.37). Added to this the teacher's own insecurity about mathematics (many of the teachers did not even have "O" level Maths), the teacher's attention to disruptive boys and the amount of time given to bright children, then girls, especially less able girls would seem to be getting a meagre diet of mathematical learning through social relations in the classroom.

### **Teachers and the construction of gender identities**

**I**t will already be apparent from the above that teachers are largely, though often unconsciously (Weiner, 1980; Whyte, 1981; Reay, 1990) responsible for the construction of the differentiated identities we find in the mixed classroom. Thus, when Thomas (1986) asked staff to consider the way in which activities were provided and engaged by nursery children, the

response of the staff was that they endeavoured "to treat them all the same". Observation and monitoring of play in two classrooms revealed that the pupils were largely occupied in very differentiated and stereotyped play activities despite the staff believing that opportunities were being provided to all children equally.

There has also been consistent evidence that language use in the mixed nursery and primary classroom further reinforces the teacher's construction of separate identities for boys and girls (Browne and France, 1986). Linking the possibilities of understanding through talk with the limited opportunities afforded to girls to interact in the classroom, Spender (1983b, p.103) finds that if in mixed sex-classrooms females

did not have the opportunity to talk the problem over (and males in contrast did have the opportunity), then it could be that females were being deprived of the opportunity to learn, that they were being discriminated against.

Whilst there is some evidence that their passivity and attention might give girls more useful experience in contextual clueing, phonic anticipatory skills (Lee, 1980, p 125) the overall message that girls received along with their increased verbal ability is that reading, as a passive activity is more appropriate for them. Moreover the girls also learn that they are expected to listen and sit still, qualities which are not valued in other curricular areas, such as the guided discovery science of the secondary school (Kelly, 1981, 1987).

Equally damaging to children are the overly sexist comments that teachers make to children regarding their dress (Debattista, 1987; Browne and France, 1985), their behaviour and their play. Browne and France (1985) have identified a series of labels attached to boys and girls that produced constant pressure on boys to be tough "brave" and "strong" (a finding also reported in Askew and Ross (1988) and on girls to gain social approval through being "sweet-natured", "neat and tidy", "busy bee" and so on. Casual comments at to a boy who is called a "cissy" because of pretend playing in women's clothes, not only hurt the boy involved but

hurts all the girls who may have heard because it states categorically that appearing like a girl is considered wrong by a respected and popular adult. What he must think if you

not only appear like one but actually are a girl!

In using femininity as the antithesis to masculinity (MacDonald, 1981) we are constructing a masculinity in which boys are pressured to hide their vulnerability and to become aggressive. They then find it difficult to talk about themselves thereby restricting their overall personal development (Askew and Ross, 1988). Although Askew and Ross (1988, p.31) find with Clarricoates (1978) Mahoney (1985) and Stanworth (1986) that boys do dominate mixed classrooms in both the primary and secondary school, their increased opportunities to learn are not always leading to a spread of skills and talents. For example, while showing a preference for 'doing', 'making', 'handling' and 'manipulating', Askew and Ross (1988, p.31) found a real reluctance on the part of boys to undertake other sorts of tasks.

In this sense mixed schooling is not necessarily widening the range of skills of boys and it is clear that unless teachers have been specifically trained to cope with mixed sex classes to reduce difference and promote equality, the intended advantages will not be had.

### In the Maltese Primary Classroom

Some cases from my ethnographic research (Darmanin, 1989) show how important teacher consciousness is. The 1980 amalgamation of the previously single sex State primary schools had generated a specific response from Miss Vilhena, Year 6A1 teacher in Haddiema Primary School. The boys posed a new and difficult to resolve dilemma for this teacher.

The fieldnotes read thus

Friday 15th January 1992

The teacher remarks that in the two years that she's had boys, she's found that there is a big difference between boys and girls. The boys are untidy and careless, and their handwriting is terrible. She thinks that the girls are more intelligent and conscientious. As an example she quotes last years results of the entrance exam for the Junior Lyceum (11-plus). Out of 28 pupils, 21 passed the exam. Eleven of the 28 were boys and of those eleven only 4 passed. Whilst of 17 girls, all passed.

Whilst it has been established that teachers do hold stereotyped views of the ability of children of different sexes (Stanworth, 1986; Clarricoates, 1978) what seems to be happening here is not simply a "practical consciousness" (Cole, 1984, p.68) but an identification of teachers with their pupils. That the boys are not "her" pupils came out inadvertently whilst we were in Mr Pinto's Year 6D class listening to the religious broadcast on the Redifusion wireless.

Mr Pinto's Redifusion is not working well either.

Miss Vilhena: Wed better go, girls. Shall we go, girls?

Mr Pinto: And the boys too, I hope. You're not leaving them here with me? (Laughter)

1050 am-Back in Miss Vilhena's classroom.

Miss Vilhena: Let's do the religion ourselves (She has lesson notes) Now listen carefully. Either you're going to write neatly on your leaflet because that isn't ours. Or on your religion notebooks. Louis decide. Louis, the holy pictures. You still haven't pasted in yesterdays holy pictures. Susan (has already) stuck them. The boys always two days (behind)...

We would expect that Miss Vilhena's definition of the boys as slower, and her positive identification with the girls would create an environment in which the boys are perforce disadvantaged in her class. Observation showed that this would be a premature conclusion. Because of her definition of the boys' need of extra help and instruction, Miss Vilhena consistently gave more time to the boys, more opportunities to them to answer, and to think about her questions, in short a large proportion of her interactive time on task. Overtly sexist comments on their ability could be seen to damage their self-esteem, yet the very attention that she focused on them compensated in part for this attitude and left the girls in an educational vacuum in her classroom. Her main positive evaluation of the female pupils centred around their ability to present neat and tidy work. Interestingly, Spear's (1989) investigation of science teachers' perceptions of secondary school science and scientists, shows that whilst teachers "recognise" girls' work as being neat and tidy, whilst that of boys as untidy, they attribute this difference in appearance in children's work to

different approaches to work and to different abilities.

According to Spear, (1989, p.274) girls were described as 'being more conscientious, painstaking, careful, fussy and meticulous. Although untidy, boys' work was evaluated as being more accurate and showing more understanding than the work of girls. Some teacher valuations of the work characteristics of each sex include the idea that boys 'on the whole [seem] to be more able to grasp overall ideas, despite in attention to minute detail'. With Sharpe (1976) and Walkerdine (1989), Spear (1989) finds that neatness might be of questionable educational value for girls. Miss Vilhena's primary school girls were certainly responding to the teachers' expectations of girls' work. Again, Borg and Falzon (1989) have found that Maltese primary school teachers rank *careless, untidy in work* a more serious undesirable behaviour in girls than in boys. No explanation is given of this result but from my experience in ethnographic observation (Darmanin, 1989) it seems that girls are getting a message about the appearance of their work which could contribute to difficulties in the secondary school when ideas rather than neatness are valued positively (Spear, 1989; Kelly, 1987). Relevant here is Walkerdine's (1989, p.268) point that on the 'just or only phenomenon', that is that when girls do perform well, the performance is accounted for by something which amounted to nothing, as 'just luck' for example and is therefore downgraded or dismissed. Walkerdine (1989, p.268) finds that many boys whose performance is poor are said to possess something even when it is not visible in their performance.

## The packaging of curriculum material

Another important source for the transmission of stereotyped gender identities in school is in the packaging of curriculum material. Lobban's (1976) work was the first of a series of studies on curriculum packaging. Apart from coding 225 stories in six popular British reading schemes (including the *Ladybird* scheme which is currently in use in Maltese State schools) and pointing to the division of all the stories of activities into two compartments, 'masculine' and 'feminine', Lobban (1976) also demonstrates the total derogation of female children and adults. The passivity and limited activities of girls, the activity and more engaging occupations of boys and men, are compounded by the view that domestic labour is a completely female activity. Indeed, the only new

learning skills that girls are seen to acquire in these schemes are cooking and the care of younger siblings. Similarly, in their preliminary study of some of the set texts in Maltese primary schools, the *Kummissjoni għall-Avvanz tal-Mara* (1989) have found the same patterns of the derogation of women. Passivity in girls and the superiority of boys are a dominant theme in the five areas under review. They note that *Denfil* (a Maltese language reading book) and *Lejn il-missier* (a religion textbook) are replete with images of traditional sex-roles with women at the centre of domestic and only domestic activity. Men and images of men only, signify the range of occupations that exist in contemporary Malta, including dentist, policeman, grocers, business people, and even teachers. As the *Kummissjoni* (1989, p. 69) comments this is certainly not the reality that children meet in everyday life. To this remark we can add the observation that in many of the *Denfil* books, there is a near total absence of girls and women from the stories and poems. In *Denfil* Book 4, for example, out of a total of 59 stories only 7 include a girl as a main character in the story.

Another two stories include a girl as a secondary character. The girls portrayed in these stories are either jealous of friends (*It-Tuffieha ta Marija*) or love dolls and koala bears, receive sex-stereotyped presents for birthdays and so on. The *Denfil* scheme gets progressively more sexist with the age it is directed at. Thus, Book 6 which is read in Year 6 classroom (the final year, age 11 of primary and therefore of mixed schooling in Malta) has an even more unrealistic ratio of males to females.

Out of 70 stories only 7 include females at all. Not only are children indoctrinated (Spender, 1980) into believing that the male will become a worker whilst the female can only hope to be a housewife (Serbin, 1983) but also all the children get the message that women are invisible or insignificant (Scott, 1980) in the world of learning. It is worth considering with Lobban (1976, p.38) the extent to which children are influenced by their first readers, which are their first introduction to the written word, and as Lobban (1976) stresses, set in the context of authority in the classroom. Serbin (1983) finds that children are sensitive to the sex-typing in story material and preferred to read about characters of their own sex and try out activities modelled by characters of their own sex. In this situation it is even more important to provide the child with positive role models and to reduce the difference in the roles portrayed by adult females and males. Both Serbin (1983) and

Davies (1987) find that since children have already made a positive identification with sex-roles before they start to read and since their attention patterns and learning are related to the congruence of material, changing the material may not be as simple a matter as we would expect. Serbin (1983) in particular, reminds us that material which is incongruent may not be readily absorbed and the active intervention of the teacher must be sought to explain the images produced. However, if we return to the problem of some of the texts used in Maltese schools, such as *il-Gojjin* (a Maltese language and reading book used in the Private schools) we find that a majority of the material is authored and acknowledged as being the work of men, presenting the children with the idea that only men are writers. Such obviously sexist messages can be reduced by including the contribution of female authors in these texts.

Recently, an original member of the commission that compiled the *Denfil* readers for State schools revealed that the commission had the brief to "portray the mother as the basis of the family and to emphasise the soundness of the family with the mother as its anchor" (Mr V Fenech quoted in *The Sunday Times*, February 18, (1990). The official ideology of patriarchal education is still restricting the portrayal of women and girls in curriculum materials and this official ideology continues to operate as a dominant discourse in the writings of those not bound by the centralization of the Education Department. For example, although the authors of *Il-Gojjin*, the text prepared for Private schools could have avoided the stereotyping of *Denfil* we still find within the *Gojjin* scheme a predominantly stereotyped world. The only work roles for girls presented in the series apart from that of the housewife are those of nun or teacher. Occupations for boys include sculptor, painter, architect, fisherman, priest, soldier, shopkeeper, policeman, pilot, diver, writer, poet, fishmonger, postman and teacher. Moreover, some stories depict boys' aspirations for future work "If I study and obey and pray perhaps I can become a lawyer" (Father's Day, *Gojjin* Book 6). It is significant to compare the roles portrayed in these stories with the aspirations of adolescents as reported in Darmanin (1991) Browne and France (1986) and Holly (1985) consider that not only are children able to perceive the way in which people are depicted but that also images can be more potent than children's lives. Children whose own parents do not subscribe to stereotyped roles may still internalise the images presented in these texts.

## Resistance in the Primary Classroom ?

In the classroom interaction there is some opportunity, as we shall see in the religion lesson produced below, for pupils to resist some of the definitions of the teacher but the printed text remains always the final authority on the subject, and taken together with the teacher's endorsement of it can produce a powerful "collective effect of all the resources on offer in a classroom (Browne and France, 1986, p.126). In the extract from Miss Perellos' religion lesson we can see that the teacher is torn between applying a quasi-supremacist view of girls (for her Year 6B girls contained 17 girls and 10 boys) and their ability, and a stereotypical interpretation of "natural" sex roles as ordained by (a patriarchal?) God.

21st January 1982

T: A lot of you laughed when I said He picked up the knitting needles. Is there anything wrong with a boy doing this? When I was young I used to like riding a bike, and my mother used to say that is for a boy. Do you think it is right for a girl to play football?

Remi: They don't know how to play.

Girls: It's not fair, we know.

T: A girl can learn.

Children: It doesn't suit a woman.

T: Good

Girl: Because girls become mummies, and stay at home.

T: Almighty God makes us like that

Max: Men have more energy.

Boy: Women who work at home get muscles too.

Although many of the children laugh at this comment, there is by no means consensus with Miss Perellos' view that "Almighty God made us like this". Some of the girls are shaking their head in disagreement with her and some of the boys agree with the idea that women get muscles through domestic activity and have energy too. Miss Perellos continues undaunted.

T: For football, you have to be rough. The girls should work at basketball. Certain things are suitable for girls.

Remi: Girls do not learn quickly.

T: No, I don't agree with you. How many Year 6 children are there? Take Year 6A and Year 6B. What are there most of? Girls. Girls.

T: You see Remi, there are more girls, and hadn't I brought you with me, you wouldn't be here [but in a lower stream]. Now you can see the natural inclinations as created by God.

The authoritative voice of the teacher together with the newly produced sexist religion text *Lejn il-Missier* are likely to produce even less opportunity for children to resist the gender identities being constructed for them. As the *Kummissjoni għall-Avvanz tal-Mara* (1989), illustrate for *Lejn il-Missier* (Towards the Father, a symbolically appropriate title for a patriarchal text) the picture of a boy looking up towards the Father and claiming "I was created by God" is bound to produce a feeling of the chosen male, representative for the human race, in boys and to exclude girls from this special privilege.

Often the teacher consciously directs the children to gender specific texts, in which the stereotypes of the active male and the passive female are propagated. For example on the very first day of the Autumn term and therefore in the initial encounter in the classroom, Mr Valletta talks about the necessity of reading in a pre-11 plus classroom. The need to be good readers seems to be distributed unevenly between the boys and the girls for whilst the boys are told that they have adventure stories, the girls are told that "they have their books", without any specification made by the teacher. The teacher follows his direction of the boys to adventure books and thrillers with further sexist comments.

T: The Lyceum. Seven out of nine boys passed. Girls, I was disappointed. Eight girls from nineteen. And there were a lot of good ones who didn't pass. The year before was a record. Twenty-three girls out of twenty-six. The girls are afraid of Maths. Why are you afraid of Maths? Is it a subject which should scare us? Think carefully. Divide the problem into bits. Even in English. That depends on the reading you do.

Here not only are girls automatically cast into the role of "afraid of Maths" but the reference to the importance of reading takes up the earlier discussion in which the boys were given specific guidance as to which texts to follow and girls were told "the girls have theirs", without the teacher engaging himself enough to locate the source for girls' reading. It is apt to recall that many of the stories that the children do indeed read in their set textbooks, especially in the *Ladybird* scheme are written as adventure stories, possibly to attract the attention and interest of the boys, who as Claricoates (1978) points out often have curriculum materials specifically designed to prevent them from losing interest and becoming disruptive. Even in the sixth form, Stanworth (1981) finds that textbooks are written with apparently a male readership in mind.

### Taken Together

Taken together practices in mixed primary classrooms work in such a way as to actively construct differentiated learning and social experiences for girls and boys. In this situation any ambitions for changing stereotyped gender roles are unlikely to be achieved. Certainly mixing itself has many unintended consequences. In considering the complex classroom processes that construct differentiation in primary school, this article has sought to challenge some of the commonsense assumptions surrounding mixed schooling.

An important next step would now be to consider practical solutions to the problems identified. Single-sex schooling is but one of them. Despite the evidence that girls are better off in this system, it is not argued here that we should cause an upheaval in our mixed primary schools on these grounds alone, though it would appear (Darmanin, 1991) that there are many advantages to be had in keeping our single-sex secondary system. Rather, a policy needs to be developed that will be useful to all our primary and secondary schools. This policy should not be directed at merely changing the nature of pupil grouping, but more specifically address the issue of what it is that children can receive at school. There is not the place here to consider possible proposals in detail, and these should of course include a plan for helping boys out of masculine stereotypes. But perhaps Reay's (1990, p.38) poignant and applicable appeal for a change in girls' education is one way of starting a new era.



What girls do need, and rarely get, is the opportunity to become more independent, confident and intrepid, to receive support around curriculum areas where they lack assurance, to take risks and to begin to develop a view of themselves as autonomous learners, while simultaneously having their feminine qualities of co-operation, empathy, quietness and the ability to listen validated.

## Notes

All names are pseudonyms. The ethnographic transcripts have been transliterated from the original Maltese.

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