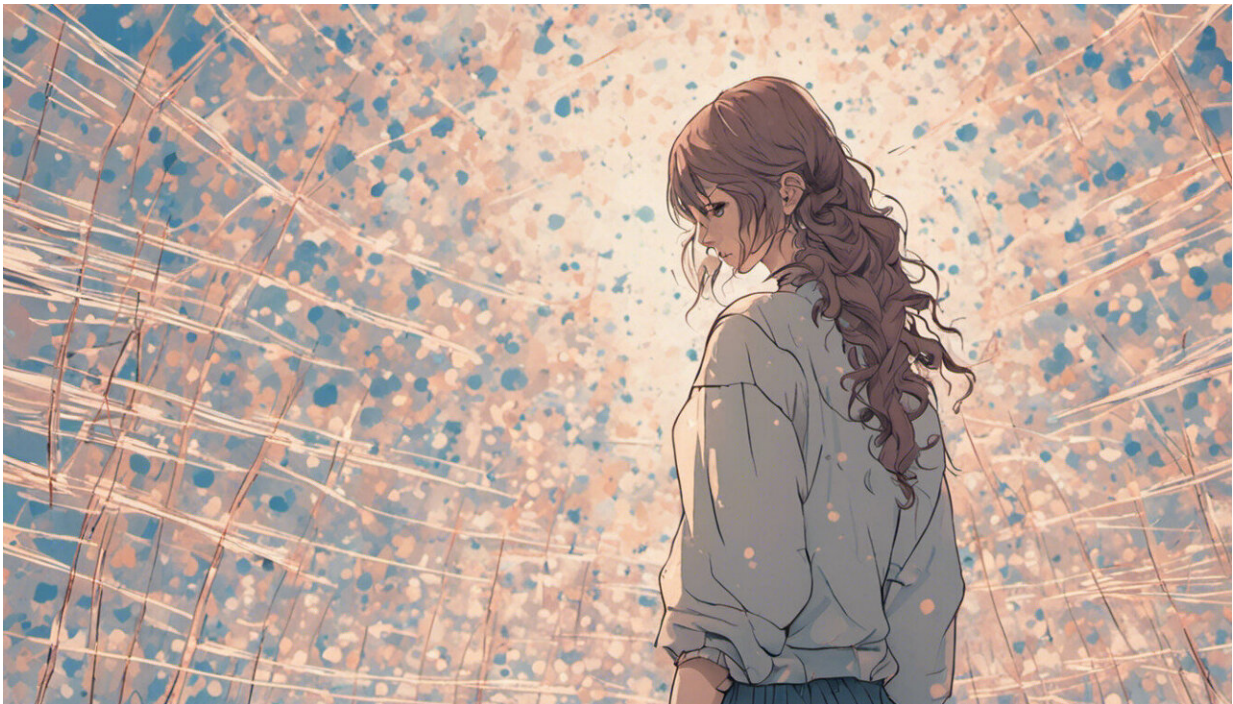


Opinion: Girls can have it all—how to stop the damaging gender stereotyping in schools

November 3 2015, by Athene Donald



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Few things make us as competitive as getting our children into the right school. That is why families are willing to spend so much money either moving house to get into a good state school's catchment area or sending their children to a fee-paying school.

But the vast majority are stuck with the local school, good or bad. So how can we create a level playing field for students? Unfortunately, it seems we are still a long way away as too many teachers continue to exhibit a tendency towards gender stereotyping by making assumptions about what [girls](#) or boys are suited to, such as boys being "better" at science. But, as [outlined in a recent report](#), there are actually simple ways to avoid this.

Obvious actions

The report by the [Institute of Physics](#) highlights what can be done to ensure that boys and girls are offered the same opportunities and encouragement to pursue each and every subject. The IOP's initial motivation for the work is the paucity of girls proceeding to Physics A-level: a mere 20-25% of the A-level cohort.

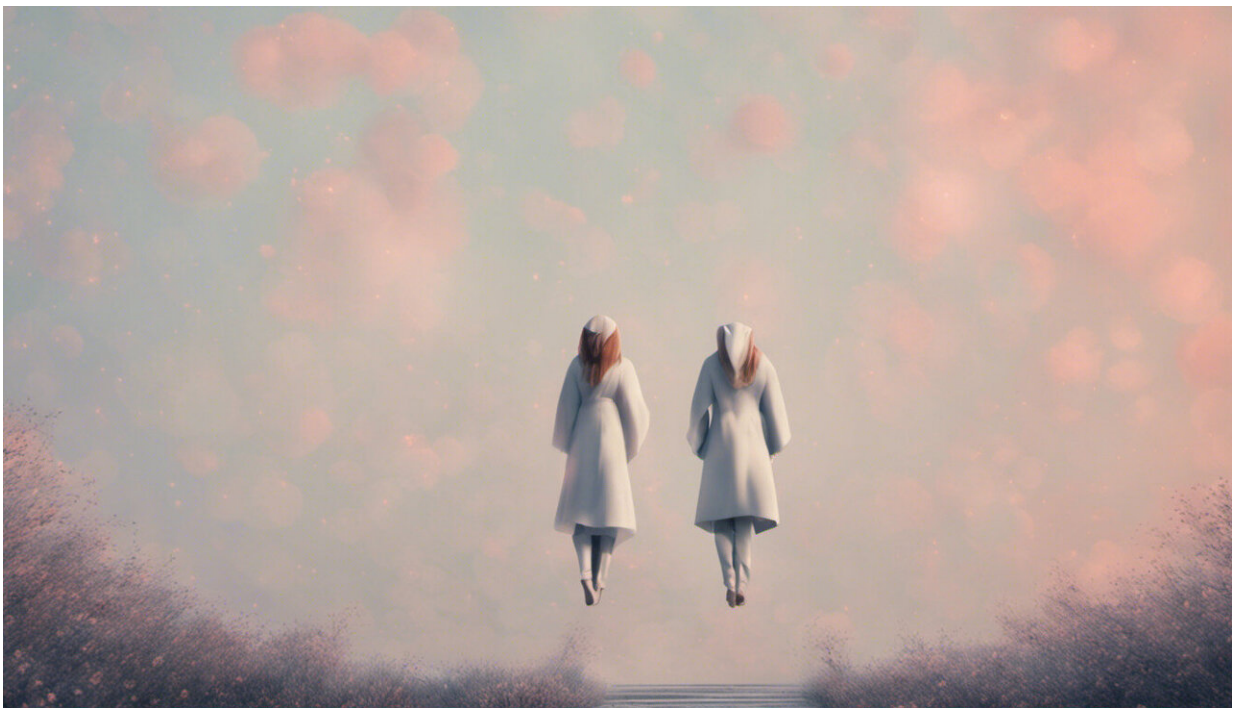
The factors at work in schools that affect the progression of girls to physics post-16 were detailed in a [2012 report](#). Building on this first report was [another](#), which demonstrated that gender stereotyping is as damaging for boys, putting them off subjects such as Psychology and English. This third and most recent report aims to identify actions that every school could and should take to eradicate this unnecessary stereotyping, in order to ensure that all children can follow their dreams and fulfil their potential in whatever direction it lies.

Common examples of stereotyping include telling a girl "you do maths like a boy" (I'm not even sure I know what that means) or, perhaps even worse, "girls can't do maths". Too many parents have asked me how they could influence teachers to stop giving such negative messages to their daughters.

The actions seem so obvious. They include identifying a senior champion and providing training to counter stereotyping. Also, it should

not need to be spelled out – yet it clearly does – that there should be 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. Similarly obvious is the recommendation that sexist language should be treated as being just as unacceptable as racist and homophobic language and that all teachers should receive training on unconscious bias and equality and diversity awareness.

For all in or interacting with the teaching profession, whatever your subject speciality or at whatever level, I would recommend you read the full list of proposals and, if you have time, the full report.



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

A recent newspaper article illustrates the problem well. The head of Frances Holland School in London, one of those fee-paying schools wealthier families aspire to get their girls into (it is a single-sex school), [was quoted](#) as saying on motherhood and career: "I believe there is a glass ceiling – if we tell them there isn't one, we are telling them a lie." She added that: "Young girls have massive options these days and some of them will make a decision that they don't want to combine everything and that is as valid as making the decision that you do want to combine everything."

This doesn't go quite as far as the headline, which read "Girls must choose career or motherhood, says top head", implied, but it does suggest that those who do try both won't get very far. It's a deeply damaging message and dispiriting to see it run in a national paper.

Surely this is not the advice we should be giving to young girls making crucial decisions about their futures. Why aren't teachers acting according to the IOP guidelines and treating boys and girls in the same way? By and large, babies have two parents who, once the pregnancy and birth are over, should be working out how, as a pair, they can bring up the child. A head teacher who implies it is the mother's sole responsibility has neither caught up with the law about parental leave nor our changing society's expectations.

A recent report claimed that the mother was the main earner in [a third of families](#) (the bulk of these being low-income families). Head teachers have a responsibility to encourage aspirations and not to deter dreams. They should make sure that their pupils are aware of reality but not smothered by anachronistic views.

Positive role models

That girls are still discouraged from subjects such as maths and physics

by teachers, as well as peers, parents and the media, is deeply disappointing. Forty years ago, this would perhaps have seemed less surprising. Indeed, back then, it was probably the norm.

Shortly before the report was published, I engaged in a [public conversation](#) with [Dame Carol Robinson](#), a prize-winning chemist who holds the unique distinction of being the first woman to hold a chair in chemistry at both Cambridge and Oxford (where she now is). I was trying to tease out what motivated her, how she had set out on her career and how it had unrolled.

Even a brief conversation with her highlights her most unusual career path, starting with the fact that she left school at 16. She left in part because of the lack of encouragement she received from both school and family to stay in education of any sort. She simply wasn't expected to make a career for herself, so education presumably seemed irrelevant. In fact, while working at Pfizer in Kent she was able to get further qualifications.

Ultimately, she moved back into full-time education to complete a PhD in Cambridge – without ever getting a first degree. After that she took eight years out to bring up her three children before going back to work. Yet now she is an acclaimed professor, and a fellow of the Royal Society with many awards to her name. (You can listen to the whole conversation [here](#).)

Surely she is proof of the fact that not only can women be successful in the physical sciences, but that you can get to the top of the game and still be a mother, indeed still have a period as a stay-at-home mother. You might think that would not need saying, but apparently it does. Even today.

In a generation, perhaps aspirations – for boys and girls, regardless of

subject, class ethnicity or any other irrelevant category – really will mean we have reached equity. I have to live in hope, but we are clearly a long way off that happy state as yet.

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