

Children's Education and Family Lifestyle in My Country

Ms. Yin Wah Amelia LO (Hong Kong)

Education is an interesting area which highlights the difference between gender stereotypes. An interesting question is whether we are shaping the lives of boys and girls by the way we treat them, and the things we teach them.

Anatomically, boys and girls are different, and there are also noticeable physical and psychological differences between boys and girls. However, many of those differences are psychological, rather than physical, and are obtained during the process of socialization, rather than by birth.

Since childhood, Chinese parents often treat boys and girls differently. Boys are often given masculine toys, and asked to play with guns and cars, while girls are often given toys such as dolls and kitchen utensils. This is in accordance with the roles boys and girls are expected to play in the world. When girls attempt to wear superhero costumes during Halloween, they are often met with a frown, and are told to dress up as a princess or a witch instead. Boys are often not allowed to play with dolls, nor paint their nails, or cry openly once they reach a certain age.

Appearance-wise, boys are expected to like blue, not pink. While girls are expected to like pink, not blue. Girls are expected to use cosmetics as they grow up, and due to negative influences from the mass media in which a girl's worth is determined largely by her appearance, many girls are obsessed about their weight. Many students in Hong Kong are affected, including those as young as in primary and secondary school, calling themselves fat, and skipping breakfast or lunch. According to a Hong Kong filmmaker Nicola Fan, there were many, many voices around [her] telling how to be a girl, and I am sure these sentiments are shared by many.

During the secondary school, girls often learn home economics, a subject that has been found in the curriculum for nearly 50 years, and learn skills such as sewing, cooking and dishwashing. Education is meant to prepare us for the future, so if only girls know how to cook, would they be expected to be the ones heavily showered with housework in the future? Fortunately, after the Hong Kong Equal Opportunities Commission carried out a 1999 survey, nowadays home economics is no longer a female-only subject, and is often also offered as an option to boys in co-ed schools,

which is gratifying as it shows that gender stereotypes are shifting and are becoming more positive.

So what is the basis for these stereotypes, rather than history and prejudices, and do these stereotypes actually represent the truth? For instance, it is often presumed that boys are better than girls in science. In fact, according to a study¹ on 2,437 students from 140 Hong Kong schools, boys and girls shared similar scientific marks, although boys scored higher than girls at the higher percentiles. Thus, it is clear that boys and girls, when educated with a similar curriculum, can both do well in the sciences. Unfortunately, in today's society in Hong Kong, there is still a belief that "women aren't as good in mathematics as men". This may lead parents to have lower expectations for their daughters, while daughters to believe that they cannot do well in mathematics, and subsequently less girls to study mathematics or sciences, as a form of "self-fulfilling prophecy".

Margaret Thatcher once said. "Watch your thoughts, for they will become actions. Watch your actions, for they will become habits. Watch your habits, for they will forge your character. Watch your character, for it will make your destiny."

It is time indeed to examine our beliefs and expectations of how boys and girls should behave, as they determine our treatment of young boys and girls, and it is normal interaction through families, schools and society that shapes the lives of these individuals. Perhaps it is with the changing of our views on gender that we can allow young boys and girls to become who they want to be, rather than who they are supposed to be!



A girl encouraged to dress up as a gentle princess during Halloween

¹ http://www.fed.cuhk.edu.hk/~hkpisa/output/files/Yip_Chui_Ho_2004_Gender_Sci.pdf