

## **Session 2: Combating Gender Stereotypes in the education system: success stories**

**Speaker: Steven De Baerdemaeker**

*“Steven, are you a boy or a girl?”*

*“A boy, why do you ask?”*

*“But... You have long hair... And earrings!”*

*“So? I like long hair and earrings...”*

*“But... That’s for girls. Didn’t your mommy tell you?”*

*“I think boys can have long hair and earrings too, you know.”*

*“Hmm... Are you gay?”*

Right now, my job is to create gender aware and lgbtqi friendly school cultures in Flemish schools, but in former times I taught for 10 years in a primary school in Brussels. Conversations like this - and I have had lots of hem, especially with 4 to 6 year olds - made me fully realize how actively these kids were constructing their ideas about girls and boys, men and women. I also realized that we taught them a lot about gender, without being aware of it. It was a part of our hidden curriculum, the things we teach without knowing we are actually teaching them. As a consequence - and like in so many schools - we just copy pasted, unaware, lots of traditional ideas about gender to our children.

After more study and observation, I also came to understanding the extent to which we were treating boys and girls differently and I was no exception. When I first confronted my colleagues with that fact, most of them responded with disbelief (“I don’t do that”) or the complete opposite answer: “Of course I do, because boys and girls are just different.” It took me a quite a while and lots of perseverance to show my colleagues that we were in deed treating boys and girls differently and that it mattered. I got them to see that we overestimated the average differences between boys and girls as a group and forgot for most of the time how big the intrasexual differences are. Finally, I also got them to

realize that we did not really give equal opportunities to boys and girls but rather steered them in one direction or another, based on stereotypes.

So we took action. We examined in which ways gender was included in our hidden curriculum and how we could make it better. For example, we decided to pay attention to the way we spoke to children. We tried to improve gender diversity in the images, texts and exercises we used in lessons. We changed some of the corners in classrooms, so that they became attractive for boys and girls (which had an immediate and huge impact on the playing behaviour of the kids). We bought new, gender neutral toys, for both classrooms and playground. We decided to avoid splitting the children in boys and girls unnecessarily. With the gradual application of these measures and lots of other similar ones, the message about gender we send to our kids changed and we felt how gender awareness became a part of our whole school culture.

Of course, we did not stop there. Children noticed that teachers often did not confirm the gender stereotypes they were used to see and hear. So even more than kids normally do, they started to ask questions about gender, mostly starting with “why”? The next logical step was making gender not only a part of the hidden curriculum, but also a part of the explicit curriculum in all grades. We decided to put the focus in lessons about gender on reflecting on it, rather than on copying an idea. More than teaching kids what to think about gender, we taught them how to think about gender. We tried to make them more critical thinkers. This pointed out to be a key factor in the relationship with our parents. Some of them had very traditional ideas about men and women, visions that were not always compatible with our gender aware teaching. But because we were not imposing any ideas on their children, they could live with the fact that we as a school had a different point of view. Of course, most of the parents understood the benefits of our approach for their children and fully supported our efforts.

Gender became an important factor in our career guidance as well, not only at the end of primary school, when in Flanders, at the age of 12, children are guided to a new school and a field of study, but throughout their whole time at our school. We did that, for example, by very actively exploring what talents and interests each kid had, trying to get passed our gendered expectations as much as possible. We talked about what we saw with the children as well, in

order to help them construct a realistic self-image. Whenever we had the chance, we showed our children that all fields of study and all professions are open for everybody of any gender, and again reflected with them on the reasons why some professions seem to be only for men or women.

I talked a lot about my school, but as mentioned before, I am now full time coaching lots of other primary and high schools in becoming more gender aware and lgbtqi friendly, commissioned by the government of Flanders. Changing a school culture is always a complex and long term process. In addition, every school is different, so every school needs a different kind of approach. To continue, I would like to share with you some of the key factors that I think are important to create more gender aware school cultures.

First of all, let us not fool ourselves: lots of teachers are gender blind and don't see why they should pay attention to gender. Therefore, our first focus should always be on the teachers, not on the kids. A good eye opener for the whole school team - not just one teacher or a small group of teachers - is crucial. This training should not only summarize the problems caused by gender blind education, but also confront teachers with the ways in which they treat boys and girls differently. I am convinced that it should not be the Big Problem Show either. The primary goal of an eye opener should be to motivate teachers to tackle the gender theme. Some humour does wonders as well. We do things a different way when we know why we do them and it is a plus when it is kind of fun too, is it not.

Secondly: taking it slow is very important. School cultures don't change overnight. Ideas need to sink in. Giving it time also helps teachers to feel less like gender is "something more on their plate, again". For the same reason, it is very important to link gender to other things the school sees a very important, like for example reading education, well-being or cultural diversity. In every school I work with, I start by studying how the school is organized to find the ways in which we can achieve the most with as little as possible extra workload for the teachers. Instead of bringing gender as a whole new theme, selling it as a new angle of approach for the themes the school is already dealing with, does wonders for everyone's motivation too.

Key factor number three: creating a gender aware school culture implies that all elements of this school culture are tackled. We have been talking about the implicit and explicit curriculum, about the gender awareness of the teachers, about career guidance, but of course: there is much more. I have mentioned parents, who play a crucial role. We need to try to involve them in the change as much as possible or necessary. Another important element is the school policy, which should include clear guidelines about gender aware education.

There are great, very useful books and education guides on how schools can become more gender aware. But we do not open a book when the subject does not trigger us, do we? Therefore, we have to bring gender to the schools. It gives me pleasure to notice that both the European and the Flemish government understand this and create means to make it possible. In this way, education professionals get the message that gender is really important. At the same time, I think it is equally important that schools, once they have heard what gender is about, get the freedom to tackle the subject in the way that suits them best.

*"I am going to become a nurse."*

*"Are you?"*

*"Yeah, I thought boys could not become nurses, but we are talking about professions today and there is a picture of a boy nurse on our wall. So I asked Miss Ann if boys can become nurses as well and she said yes."*

You should have seen the smile on his face.