

# **Polyphony? Prospects for a different discourse of gender in pedagogy**

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## **Introduction**

In this chapter I am going to look at how discourses of gender, curriculum and pedagogy over the last seventy years have moved between monophonic and polyphonic forms, and how this has affected the education of both boys and girls. I will argue that the current ‘boy turn’ in educational research and policy is a move from monophony to polyphony, and that this is problematic for a number of reasons, which I will outline. I will end by proposing that it would be better to have a heterophonic discourse: one that would enable us to resist stereotype-based and segregated approaches to children’s education.

The metaphor of musical forms is useful as an aid to thinking about how discourses around curriculum and pedagogy are related to each other, and how they evolve within specific political and social arrangements. I am going to start by explaining the musical meaning of polyphony, contrasting it first to monophony and, later in the paper, to heterophony, as alternative forms.

‘Polyphony’ refers to the simultaneous performance of several different melodies of equal status. *Grove Music Online* notes that

full development of the separate parts – the investing of several parts with the character of a main voice and the raising of accompanying voices to the status of counter-voices – has been regarded as a defining feature of polyphony. (Cooke 2001)

I will argue that, for much of the second half of the twentieth century in England and Wales, dominant discourses of gender and schooling took this form, although the practice was somewhat different. Equal opportunities legislation in the 1970s, coupled with the move to comprehensive secondary education, gave the discourse a more monophonic emphasis. Monophonic music has only one voice or part, and the approach to education in England and Wales at this period reflects this: all children were, officially, at least, were offered the same curriculum, although gender differentiation did occur in practice. Feminist work during the 1980s, for example aimed at improving girls' participation in science and technology, still functioned within this monophonic discourse, with girls being encouraged to adapt to a largely masculine approach to curriculum and pedagogy (Paechter 1998). Subsequently, the more recent 'boy turn' has introduced the idea that we need to have multiple, equal strands of educational provision, giving a 'different but equal', polyphonic approach. I will look at the effects of these various moves in more detail, before concluding with a call for a more heterophonic discourse and practice.

I am going to focus mainly on curriculum changes in England and Wales, as this is what I know best; I will also give examples from other educational systems where appropriate. I am aware that the situation in Germany has been somewhat different, and I will have to leave it to you to decide whether the metaphors of musical form work for your curriculum and pedagogic history as well as they do for mine. I

shall also have to discuss social class and notions of ‘ability’, as well as gender, as the impact of policy on all three is deeply entwined. My intention, however, is to show how discourse forms impact on the gendered possibilities open to particular groups of children and young people, and to explain why we need an alternative discourse and practice to give them a wider range of available ways of being.

### **Historical overview: monophonic and polyphonic discourses of curriculum and pedagogy**

In England and Wales, from the 1940s to the 1960s, educational discourse gave strong emphasis to polyphonic forms. Enacted just before the end of the Second World War, the 1944 Education Act provided for universal secondary education, but through three distinct pathways, followed by children in different schools. This ‘tripartite system’ differentiated between three ‘types’ of student: the ‘academic’, who would have a traditional liberal education at a grammar school, those who were considered more suited to the study of science and technology, who would go to specialist technical schools, and everyone else, who were considered to be more able to deal with concrete things than with ideas (Thom 1987) and who went to the secondary modern schools which were formed (along with primary schools) from the former elementary schools (Penfold 1988). Differentiation was by use of verbal reasoning tests, and, as very few technical schools actually opened, this left most of the secondary-age population split between the largely middle-class grammar school elite (between 10% and 30% of children, depending on their locality) and the mainly working-class remainder.

This split applied to both boys and girls, though the tendency for girls to perform better than boys on verbal reasoning tests at age 11 meant that in practice higher marks were required for grammar school entry for girls than for boys. There was a strong rhetoric of different but equal provision and also of equality of opportunity: in practice, however, relatively few working-class children entered grammar schools and there was little provision for secondary modern children to take public examinations until the mid-1960s. A major implication of the tripartite system, however, was that, while the grammar school curriculum was, in essence, internally monophonic with respect to gender, that of the secondary moderns was, in contrast, internally polyphonic. This meant that working-class and 'less able' students in secondary moderns had a far more gendered curriculum than their middle-class counterparts in the grammar schools.

Even in single-sex schools, the grammar school curriculum was essentially the same for boys and girls. Modelled on what was historically an education intended for middle-class males, it emphasised English, mathematics, science, modern and classical languages, and the humanities. While manual crafts (for boys) and domestic subjects (for girls), and physical education (in different male and female forms), were taught, they were peripheral to the main curriculum (Penfold 1988; Sparkes, Templin et al. 1990): the emphasis was on academic knowledge taught in an academic way. While some aspects of this brought (and continues to bring) problems for girls, who can find it hard to accept success in what is in essence a masculine curriculum (Paechter 1998; Mendick 2006), it did mean that discourses around the curriculum for more academic boys and girls were basically monophonic: those aspects of provision

in which the sexes were separated were not considered to be particularly important, and frequently not studied beyond age 14.

For secondary modern students, on the other hand, there was clear differentiation between what was considered appropriate for boys and what for girls. In these schools the curriculum was much more practically focused. The practical subjects were, however, strongly gendered, so that while housecraft and other domestic subjects were seen as a central aspect of the secondary modern curriculum for girls (Attar 1990), that for their male peers contained a strong element of workshop training in manual crafts (Penfold 1988). Spending a considerable proportion of the last two years of their schooling in this way was considered to prepare these students for manual craft trades and domestic responsibilities in adult life: an adult life that was itself conceptualised as strongly gendered. For example, the Ministry of Education's Crowther Report of 1959 argued for very different curricular provision for each gender, although with the shared purpose of preparing the young person for adulthood. About 'less able' girls, the report stated that:

their needs are much more sharply differentiated from those of boys of the same age than is true of the academically abler groups. (Thom 1987: 133).

Consequently, girls were to study

Subjects based on direct interest in their personal appearance and problems of human relations, the greater psychological and social maturity of girls makes such subjects acceptable – and socially necessary. (Thom 1987: 133)

Boys were characterised very differently, with a consequent emphasis on craft training:

The boy with whom we are concerned is one who has pride in his skill of hand and a desire to use that skill to discover how things work, to make them work and to make them work better. The tradition to which he aspires to belong is the modern one of the mechanical man whose fingers are the questioning instruments of thought and exploration.

(Penfold 1988: 116)

The English and Welsh education system from 1944 to the early 1970s, therefore, was strongly dominated by a polyphonic discourse with respect to both class and gender, within which middle-class 'more able' children were educated in a way that was internally monophonic with respect to gender, while working-class 'less able' children's education was described using a gendered polyphonic (or more strictly, biphonic) discourse of separate but equal needs and provision.

This situation gradually changed with the move to comprehensive education in the period spanning the late 1960s to the early 1970s. The move to bring all children together in unified secondary schools stemmed from a social justice discourse which recognised the problems with using socially biased verbal reasoning tests as a means to differentiate between children, and accepted that the by now bipartite system did not really provide curricula and pedagogy of equal status for the different groups. Although in the early days of comprehensive schools children were 'streamed' by ability, in essence giving grammar school and secondary modern provision within the same institution, there was a gradual move, particularly with the availability, from 1965, of suitable public examinations for nearly all sixteen year olds still in schooling,

towards an incorporation of increasing numbers of young people into elite curriculum provision, with wider access both to the higher status areas and to domestic and craft subjects. Although in practice working-class and middle-class children still tended to take up different option choices after age fourteen, there was a far more monophonic discourse during this period, especially after the 1975 Sex Discrimination Act, which made it illegal for co-educational schools to prevent either boys or girls from taking any subject on offer. The discourse of curriculum and pedagogy therefore moved during the 1970s from being polyphonic to strongly monophonic with respect to gender, although the practice within schools, particularly after age fourteen, continued to result in working-class and 'less able' girls and boys studying mainly practical subjects in single-sex groups (Penfold 1988; Attar 1990) while their more 'academic', largely middle-class peers followed the elite curriculum in more mixed classrooms. Thus, while the comprehensive schools offered the high-status, masculine curriculum to their middle-class and 'more able' students in mixed gender classes, the remaining students were still more likely to spend far more of their schooling in single-sex classes in practical curriculum areas. While all students usually studied the craft or domestic subjects until age 14, those seen as 'more able' were discouraged from taking them thereafter (Riddell 1992), while those considered to be 'less able' or disaffected, particularly boys, were encouraged to spend as much time as possible in the kitchens and workshops (Penfold 1988; Paechter 1998). As one teacher in my own study of design and technology<sup>1</sup> put it:

In this school, that whole area [domestic and manual craft subjects] certainly gave [us] the best results in examination level. It also kept [us] out of an awful lot of trouble because a large number of the less

able children for example were pushed into that area because it was practical. (Sue Pennington, Head of Technology, Turnhill School)

In these spaces, where relationships were more informal and discipline more easily enforced, students who might cause trouble elsewhere were kept occupied working with their hands, being convinced that the skills they were learning would serve them well in their future lives (Penfold 1988; Paechter 2000). Penfold argues that while lip-service was paid to the value of the practical curriculum, in teachers of these subjects were reduced frequently to overalled equivalents of the community policeman, especially in our more robust schools. The workshop was the one area of the school where disciplinary problems receded and the air hummed with purposeful activity. (Penfold 1988: 20)

Thus while the discourse of curriculum and pedagogy had become monophonic, the practice did not reflect this, particularly with regard to those young people working mainly in the practical areas, where the curriculum for girls and boys remained strongly segregated.

During the 1980s it became increasingly apparent that equality of provision between boys and girls did not necessarily lead to equality of outcome. There were two key issues. The first was that, as explained above, a monophonic curriculum offer does not necessarily lead to monophonic uptake. While 'more able' young people were studying more or less the same things (with some exceptions, particularly regarding girls' rejection of science subjects), those who were less successful, or seen as disruptive to academic classes, continued, after age 14, to experience the biphonic, practical-focused curriculum typically found in the former secondary modern schools. Policy makers became increasingly concerned that the education of these young

people was seriously impoverished, and argued that all students should have access to the elite curriculum until age 16. Second, even within the elite curriculum, which now included a much wider group of children, girls were not gaining as many high grades as boys in public examinations in mathematics and the physical sciences. For example, in 1985 the pass rate for girls in mathematics in the higher status 'O' level school leaving examination, was as much as 6.5 percentage points lower than that for boys, and 6.2 percentage points lower for biology (Stobart, Elwood et al. 1992: 273). Although girls outperformed boys in English and French (by 3.7 and 2.5 percentage points respectively)(Stobart, Elwood et al. 1992: 273) the focus during the 1980s was on girls' lack of access to the prestige areas of mathematics, science and technology. The situation was exacerbated by curriculum choice after age fourteen: for example in 1990 girls made up only 29.2 % of the physics entry in the school leaving examination (Stobart, Elwood et al. 1992). In response to this, a number of initiatives were aimed at encouraging girls to take up and value mathematics and science, including Mathematics and Your Future days run by the Gender and MatheMatics Association (GAMMA), a range of curriculum initiatives from Girls into Science and Technology (GIST) and experiments with girls-only groups for mathematics and science teaching and introducing 'girl-friendly mathematics'(Burton and Townsend 1986). The emphasis was very much on bringing girls into line and supporting them in coping with a monophonic approach to curriculum in which science and technology subjects had much greater status than the arts and humanities, and in which a masculinist, formal, logically-based pedagogy predominated.

This strongly monophonic approach reached its peak with the Educational Reform Act of 1988. This arose out of an increasing use of an 'entitlement' discourse

which argued that all students, irrespective of gender, social class or ‘ability’, should have access to the same educational diet. The Act introduced a national curriculum for the first time, alongside a common form of graded assessment for all students from age five to sixteen. This curriculum was, once again, built around a strongly masculine elite curriculum form, with an even greater emphasis on mathematics, science and technology. Science and technology became obligatory for all students throughout compulsory schooling, and while the place of humanities and modern foreign languages initially seemed secure, their position was subsequently eroded. The effect on gendered performance was dramatic. Once forced to take science throughout their schooling, girls started to perform better at it, and by 1999 they had equalled or overtaken the performance of boys in mathematics and science, while continuing their dominance in English and modern foreign languages. For example, in 1999, girls were two percentage points ahead of boys in gaining higher passes in mathematics, and three percentage points ahead of them in science, in the school leaving examination, while exceeding boys’ performance in English and in modern foreign languages by sixteen percentage points (Department for Children Schools and Families 2000). Girls’ success, while not at the expense of boys, caused consternation among policy makers and some academics, and led to the ‘boy turn’ of the early twenty-first century. This is what I am now going to examine.

### **The ‘boy turn’ in education**

Towards the end of the 1990s there emerged concerns about boys’ position in the education system. This was for a number of reasons. First, as we have seen, boys’ academic pre-eminence, especially in the high status areas of mathematics and

science, could no longer be taken for granted. In England and Wales, the publication of assessments for children aged seven to fourteen meant that girls' greater success in reading and writing, established for more than thirty years, was brought more forcibly to public notice. Changes in approaches to examinations exacerbated this trend: for example, multiple choice assessment, at which boys tend to be more successful than girls, had been replaced by other, less gender-differentiating forms of examination, such as coursework. Second, girls' increasing success in public examinations, because it was always presented in the media in comparison with that of boys, rather than with previous performance, was seen as being at the expense of boys, although in fact the achievement of both genders increased significantly over the 1990s.

Third, in England and Wales, there was a perception that the National Curriculum, based on what was originally an academic curriculum for the elite, was not serving 'less able' and working class boys, who were becoming increasingly disaffected. It is long established that boys tend to be seen as more disruptive by teachers than are girls, and boys' tendency to show their boredom by being difficult in class rather than just switching off meant that where the curriculum and pedagogic approaches were not suiting some children, it is the boys' problems that are noticed most (Crozier and Anstiss 1995). Kenway et al note that:

Boys' low achievement is usually regarded in our schools as more of a problem than that of girls because, on the whole, girls fail quietly, while boys' failure is more noisy and noticeable. (Kenway, Willis et al. 1998: 51)

The perceived failure of the monophonic curriculum to address the needs of some boys became translated in the public mind into a failure to educate all boys. This

ignored, of course, the fact that white middle-class boys continued to be highly successful in school and beyond, while some groups of girls were still performing badly alongside their male peers.

Overall, a belief developed, among policy makers and some teachers, that there was no longer any need to encourage girls to take up mathematics and science, or to perform well in those subjects, because this had been achieved. It was argued that attention now needed to be paid to boys, and in particular to their relatively poor achievement in English and modern foreign languages. Coupled with what was seen as increased disaffection by some groups of boys from a curriculum irrelevant to their needs, and concerns about how this was affecting the education of all children, this led to a focus of attention on the boys, and on attempting to provide a more ‘appropriate’, ‘masculine’ curriculum and pedagogy. Unlike the work done with girls in the 1980s, this focus has not emphasised bringing boys in line with dominant curriculum and pedagogic forms, but instead attempts to provide alternative, equal, pathways for some groups of boys. It is this return to polyphony that I will now examine.

### **Returning to polyphony: approaches and problems**

The current ‘boy turn’ has as one of its salient features the frequent claim, particularly in the media, that boys need to have particular provision to cater for their needs. It is argued that schooling has become feminised, and that this needs to be addressed in order to prevent the production of a lost generation of uneducated young men. While this view runs counter to the evidence that the majority of boys continue to succeed in schooling, it has been taken up by both policy makers and practitioners, and has led to

a number of initiatives, three of which I will consider here: the reintroduction of the vocational curriculum post-fourteen; single-sex teaching in co-educational schools; and the use of ‘cool, tough things’ (Martino and Meyenn 2002) to encourage boys’ participation. I will argue that all three approaches are highly problematic both for boys’ education and for gender equity.

### *Reintroduction of the vocational curriculum*

As a result of the problems encountered with the officially monophonic curriculum that I indicated earlier, there have been increasing moves in England and Wales to reintroduce a vocational pathway for students after age fourteen, reflecting practice in many other countries. The discourse surrounding this has been remarkably similar to that used in discussions of the tripartite system introduced after the Second World War, with talk of providing ‘suitable’ curricula for particular groups of students. While aimed at both genders, it is seen as particularly applicable to working-class boys who are often perceived to be disaffected with the more academic emphasis of National Curriculum provision. The practice, however, is problematic due to its perpetuation of vocational segregation and the tendency of that to reinforce stereotypical approaches to masculinity and femininity.

Despite widespread co-education and thirty-five years having passed since the Sex Discrimination Act, vocational subjects remain strongly marked by gender. This is an international problem. Mjelde (2004) notes that even in the Nordic countries, where gender equality is so well established that it is seen as natural and inevitable, vocational courses remain strongly gender-segregated, with girls studying shorter courses in home economics, health and social services, aesthetic and handicraft

subjects, and boys manual, electrical and building trades. This benefits boys, because in the areas they favour apprenticeship contracts and craft certificates are available, leading to more lucrative jobs. Kraus and Carter (2004) argue that since unification gender divisions in vocational choices in Germany have been exacerbated: young women in the East have moved from more or less gender-neutral career preferences towards aspirations that are more stereotypically feminine, leaving, of course, the boys to take over the traditional male occupations once more. In the USA, gender segregation in vocational courses at high school level is widespread and pervasive: for example, in a study of students in vocational programmes in thirteen states, the National Women's Law Center found that:

male students comprised 94% of the student body in training programs for plumbers and electricians, 93% of the students studying to be welders or carpenters, and 92% of those studying automotive technologies. (National Women's Law Center 2002: 4)

While this can benefit boys because it gives them better career opportunities, it restricts them in other ways, particularly in their personal development. Although it may also be better for some students to follow a curriculum that they consider to be more relevant to their lives, learning in such overwhelmingly single-sex groups is not conducive to the construction of flexible masculinities and femininities. It is arguable that this problem is exacerbated in vocational schools and classes by the forms of masculinity that are embodied in manual and craft work, and the use of these classes as a place to corral working-class and disaffected young men. Lakes (2004) argues, for example, that, in the automotive class he studied, a white working-class masculinity was constructed in which white maleness was embodied as a marker of

moral and cultural superiority in which white women were seen as possessions who had to be prevented from interracial dating.

The reintroduction of a vocational pathway in England and Wales, therefore, while embedded in a polyphonic discourse of equal routes through schooling for different kinds of student, is likely to bring back all the previous problems associated with polyphonic forms of curriculum provision. It is already evident that these vocational pathways are mainly taken up by working-class students, giving them a school experience that is significantly gender-segregated, while their middle-class peers remain in mixed classrooms that not only give them higher status educational outcomes (despite longstanding Government efforts, vocational education is of low status in the UK) but also a wider range of models of femininity and masculinity.

#### *Single-sex teaching in co-educational schools*

In the UK and Australia, there have been a number of experiments with single-sex groupings within co-educational schools. These approaches have been started for a variety of reasons, including a belief that it will limit disruptive behaviour and limit elements that distract students from learning (Kenway, Willis et al. 1998). These experiments have, however, had a number of unintended outcomes, most of which are detrimental to both boys and girls.

Teachers' understandings of gender underpinning gender segregation for teaching certain subjects can lead to a significant reduction in the opportunities offered to both genders. Ivinson and Murphy (2003) report that in one school experimenting with some single-sex groupings for English, those in boy-only groups were offered only a limited number of genres with which to work. In particular, these

boys were not offered the romance genre at all; it was regarded by teachers as so antithetical to masculinity that they did not even consider the possibility that some boys might wish to experiment with it. Furthermore, when boys in co-educational classes encountered this genre through the writing of their female peers, and decided to try it, they were understood by teachers as only doing so as a way of legitimising the writing of pornographic material in order to disrupt the classroom. While a high-achieving girl was permitted to hand in a piece of work modelled on popular romantic fiction, a boy was not. The authors comment:

Consequently, through his engagement with the English task, Adam came to a renewed understanding that certain practices are not legitimate for boys...[The teacher] projected a social representation of masculinity onto the 'low ability' boys that made it essential to police and maintain the boundary for Adam by steering him away from femininely marked writing practices. She extended to Adam a hegemonic masculine identity wherein it was only possible to reconstruct Romance as pornography. Adam had not option in this setting, if he wished to succeed, [but] to forgo his text and to fall back and comply with this extended identity. For his submitted coursework Adam produced gender appropriate texts such as a war story and a crime story. (Ivinson and Murphy 2003: 105)

Here, the teacher's preconceptions about what is suitable for boys has limited boys' access to some parts of the curriculum. Although this restriction was common to both the single-sex and mixed classrooms, the boys in the mixed classrooms were able, up

to a point, to learn about the romance genre from their female peers; in the single-sex classroom, on the other hand, it was completely absent:

No boy read out a novel opening in the Romance genre in the single sex boys' setting. The teacher did not discuss the Romance genre with the boys as a possible writing style. In this way she seemed to legitimise the implicit consensus that boys were not expected to reconstruct English in the form of Romance and, therefore, it did not acquire a high status. (Ivinson and Murphy 2003: 97)

This exclusion of romance from the space of the boys-only classroom reinforces dominant constructions of masculinity and makes it harder for young men to develop alternative approaches both to their English studies and to their identity. If the teacher does not introduce and legitimate romance in such a setting, it becomes impossible for boys to do so, as for a boy to engage with such a personal genre without such legitimation would compromise his masculinity in the eyes of his peers. The social dynamics of the single sex classroom, unless deliberately challenged by the teacher, exclude work that deals with emotional topics, and, as a result, the curriculum becomes impoverished. As Ivinson and Murphy remark about a highly successful boy in this group:

Steven can be seen as a sophisticated social actor within the 'all boys' classroom setting. He was able to reconstruct English in a form that would be considered high status by the teacher and that preserved his social gender identity as a popular boy. In his interview he showed detailed awareness of the principal features of the Romance genre, but

he also recognised the danger to his standing as a popular boy if he had written a romance. (Ivinson and Murphy 2003: 103)

Single-sex groupings in secondary schools can therefore lead to a significant reduction in the breadth of curriculum provision, due both to teacher perceptions of how boys will react to certain kinds of material, and to boys' self-limitation in reaction to dominant forms of masculinity in these classrooms. Single sex grouping, as one polyphonic pedagogic form, seems to be a highly problematic strategy for addressing boys' needs within schooling. It leaves them with fewer options regarding both their construction of their own masculinity and their learning of school subjects.

### *Cool, tough things*

This leads us to a further problem with single-sex groupings, and one which I want to deal with separately: their tendency to reinforce particular forms of masculinity and even sexist behaviour in both teachers and students. This seems to arise from a combination of three things. First, working in single-sex group gives boys no alternative but to conform to hegemonic masculine identities in the classroom; they cannot escape from this and gain support from girls for alternative ways of being. Second, it appears that male teachers working with boy-only groups are more likely to enact such dominant masculine identities themselves. Third, teacher beliefs about what will encourage boys to learn, when conveyed to the students either explicitly or implicitly through their pedagogy, reinforce, rather than challenge, gender stereotypical ideas.

Kenway et al (1998) report that in a school where an all-male social studies class was set up to counter disruption from a small group of boys, both teacher and

students used the absence of girls to give themselves permission to behave in sexist ways, making comments about girls passing the classroom door. They note that:

The boys who caused the original problem are rewarded with a class which allows them to continue to behave in an offensive manner with regard to girls – only this time behind their backs and with the teacher’s encouragement....And certainly there appears to be little concern about the sexist atmosphere encouraged in the boys’ class, let alone about the flow-on effects of that elsewhere. (Kenway, Willis et al. 1998: 29)

While the high-achieving boys in the boy-only group in Ivinson and Murphy’s study were not encouraged to be sexist, the gender segregated setting certainly seems to have encouraged the construction and performance only of particular forms of masculinity, to the exclusion of others:

There was a general recognition that one had to appear as independent and autonomous, and if possible to have good ideas. The boys considered that their male peers judged ideas as a measure of masculinity. Male peer group culture maintained and amplified hegemonic masculinity through the ways boys policed other boys’ behaviour, practices and texts. (Ivinson and Murphy 2003: 98)

Both Kenway et al (1998) and Martino and Meyenn (2002) point out that male-only classrooms tend to construct masculinity as universally heterosexual, marginalising any forms of attitude or behaviour that might challenge or undermine this. Martino and Meyenn suggest that, while some teachers argue that the single-sex classroom makes it possible for boys to discuss issues that they might feel

uncomfortable about in the presence of girls, they consider these possibilities in the context of

an essentialising pedagogy grounded in heterosexist assumptions about boys which ignores the reality that homophobia, for the most part, is perpetrated by other boys against certain types of boys and not by girls...This raises the whole question about certain boys feeling more comfortable in a single-sex class. (Martino and Meyenn 2002: 320)

Martino and Meyenn examine how teachers' beliefs about boys and girls and what will motivate them to study affect how they approach how the different genders are taught. The variations in approach can be quite overt: as one teacher said to them, 'We looked at war and guns and things like that...actually cool tough things' (Martino and Meyenn 2002: 318). Such assumptions that in order to engage boys it is necessary to build a curriculum around stereotypical masculine interests serve to reinforce gender stereotypes rather than challenge them. The teachers in Martino and Meyenn's study altered both their curriculum content and their pedagogic styles to cater for the perceived needs of the boys' groups, for example emphasising practical work such as model making, in place of writing, to explore literary themes. This both restricted what was available to both genders and conveyed to the young people concerned some extremely stereotypical views about gender differences:

Even in the face of reputable research which questions brain sex differences...certain truths about the way boys and girls are or learn are perpetuated through the teacher knowledges that are applied in the execution of specific pedagogies in the single-sex classroom. This is not to say that the single-sex classroom necessarily lends itself to the

kinds of pedagogies outlined above. Rather, it is the teacher knowledge and normalising assumptions about boys that drive the pedagogy, irrespective of structural reform. (Martino and Meyenn 2002: 318)

In providing different kinds of pedagogy for boys and girls, and telling the students, either explicitly or implicitly that this is what they are doing, teachers are actively teaching that males and females are fundamentally different, rather than challenging normative assumptions about masculinity and femininity, or working with students to understand how different masculinities and femininities are constructed.

### **Heterophony: a possible new approach**

I think by now that it is clear that I do not think that polyphonic approaches to the education of boys have been particularly successful. In particular, they tend to reinforce gender stereotypes while supplying boys with a limited curriculum and restricted access to a full range of pedagogies. I conclude by proposing that we move instead to a discourse of heterophony, for the benefit of both boys and girls.

Heterophony is a term 'used to describe simultaneous variation of a single melody' (Cooke 2001). It seems to me that this would be a more useful discourse for pedagogy than the monophonic and polyphonic ones that have gone before. A heterophonic discourse recognises that all children, boys and girls, require a sound common curriculum and pedagogy, but allows that there should be multiple variations on this. It allows us to understand that people are different, and learn in different ways, but not to attribute this to stereotyped constructions of gender and class, but instead to consider the individual and how that person is able to respond to the common provision.

In approaching curriculum and pedagogy from a heterophonic perspective we can learn from the girls interviewed as part of my own study of tomboy identities<sup>2</sup>. A tomboy, loosely defined, is a girl who likes to do the things that, stereotypically, are masculine activities, such as playing football, fighting, or getting really dirty. We found, however, that most of the girls who identified as tomboys at all described themselves as 'a bit tomboy'. They rejected the either-or identities of tomboy or girly-girl, presenting themselves instead as taking up subject positions that varied according to circumstances, weaving in and out of gender stereotypes in a heterophonic discourse of multiple identities that can be taken up by a single individual.

We need to approach education in an analogous way, rejecting the stereotypes and instead constructing a discourse which allows curriculum and pedagogy to shift according to who an individual wishes to be, and how he or she wishes to learn, at any particular time. Such a discourse will be enabling and enriching, challenge gender norms, and provide a broad range of ways of being and learning for both boys and girls. Abandoning the idea of the separate but equal polyphonic pathways, and instead constructing a flexible, unified curriculum and pedagogy along heterophonic lines, will give all our children and young people the possibility of exploring different ways of learning and of being, while providing them with a common and inclusionary education.

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