

# The gender trap

Innovative programs around the world are helping teachers and students challenge sexual stereotypes.

by **Cyndi Tebbel**

### Briefly

- Gender bias limits girls' opportunities in education and the workforce.
- Initiatives that challenge sexual stereotypes help all children explore their natural interests.
- Innovative programs can create more equitable classrooms and societies.

**W**hen Queen Elizabeth II met recently with the Prime Minister and Governor General it prompted speculation on how these powerful women might influence Australia's youth. However, it takes more than a photo opportunity with three high-calibre female leaders to eliminate the persistent, unrecognised and unconscious gender bias that limits girls' opportunities in education and the workforce.

Australia is making progress: the 2010 NAPLAN results released by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority show that girls in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 achieved higher average scores in reading, writing, spelling, punctuation and grammar.

The only area where boys outperform girls is maths, yet women now outnumber men doing degrees in medicine and law. "There are more women entering engineering, too," says Susan Hopgood, AEU federal secretary and president of Education International. "But they're in civil rather than chemical or mechanical, and fewer still are in IT and the 'hard' sciences."

Hopgood also points out that there's no evidence that women graduates reach the higher levels of those professions. "Long-term positive change is unlikely unless we address the culture of workplaces, change employer attitudes and challenge prevailing gender stereotypical attitudes."

### Empowerment through education

Educators around the world are establishing interesting and provocative programs with the aim of creating more equitable classrooms and societies.

In Sweden, gender equity is a core mission of the national curriculum for preschools and a small tax-payer funded kindergarten that opened in Stockholm last year already has a long waiting list of parents who want their children to experience an environment that tolerates the full spectrum of humanity.

The program at Egalia (it means 'equality') encourages children to disregard gender differences and explore their natural interests and abilities. Teachers and children refer to each other as gender-neutral 'friends' or

'hens' instead of 'he' and 'she'; girls and boys play together in toy kitchens where anyone can be 'Mother' and nearby blocks are a subtle reminder that kitchens are constructed. Books feature stories about 'non-traditional' families and dolls are anatomically correct.

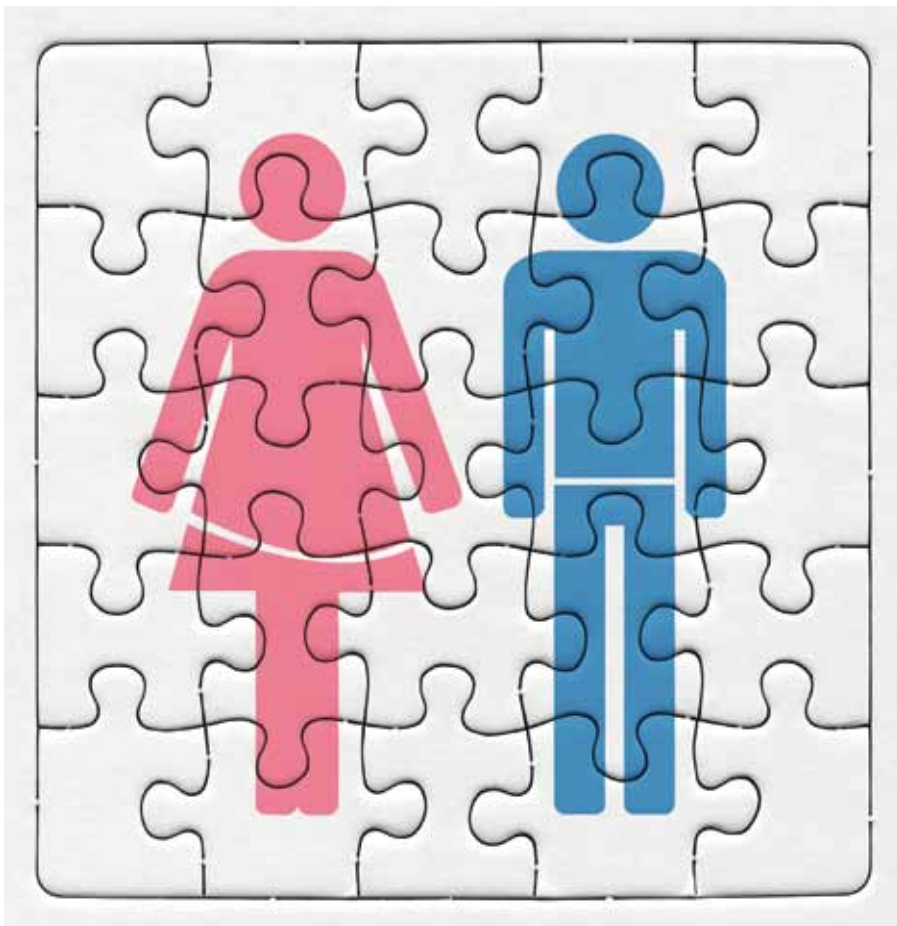
In her presentation to Education International's World Women's Conference in January 2011, Carolyn Hannan from the University of Lund in Sweden spoke about an innovative UNICEF project involving 18 junior secondary schools in the Vangaindrano district of Madagascar.

'Improving Girls Education for Gender Equality' has provided a range of materials to students, teachers, local education authorities and the community. The girls themselves have had a lot of input in analysing the issues and helping to come up with solutions, which they include in an action plan they can follow to chart improvements.

UNICEF reports that the girls were concerned about "time wasted between class hours" which sometimes led to negative consequences such as unwanted or early pregnancy. One of their solutions was to engage in more physical activity so they were given the support to create sports teams.

There have also been improvements to the school environment, with new libraries and refurbished dormitories. And teachers receive advice and training to help them create better teaching aids.

Hannan also flagged a comprehensive manual produced by UNESCO aimed at assisting educators. *Promoting Gender Equality Through Textbooks: A Methodological Guide* provides practical tools for the gender-sensitive revision and use of textbooks to ensure promotion of gender equality and empowerment through education.



### The ICT crowd

In an age of rapid development it's critical that girls and boys have equal access to education in science and technology. However, low expectations and stereotypical attitudes mean that girls, particularly in western developed nations, are less motivated to pursue these subjects and have lower achievement levels than boys.

In Victoria, for example, less than 20 per cent of Information Communication Technology (ICT) jobs in the state are

**“There is a sense of belonging in the class with fewer distractions, so their skills and knowledge progress at a fast rate.”**

**Anna Crow**  
Teacher, Brentwood Secondary College

held by women. That statistic prompted an innovative three-year research program developed by Swinburne, Monash and Deakin universities and Victorian secondary schools.

Digital Divas focuses only on girls in Years 8 to 10 and has been run as part of the curriculum in nine co-ed schools and single-sex schools around the state. “By getting more girls interested in IT, hopefully they’ll link the ideas gained in the classroom with IT careers later on,” says Dr Kathleen Bennetts, a research fellow in the Information Technology department of Monash University and a coordinator of Digital Divas.

Modules are designed to appeal to girls’ creativity and imagination, and girls are also introduced to women studying IT and working in the field. “They’ve been absolutely fantastic in providing that vital link between what’s happening in the classroom and the real world,” says Bennetts.

Anna Crow, a teacher at Brentwood Secondary College, has been involved in running Digital Divas for the past four years and says girls are extremely organised and demonstrate attention to detail with strong interpersonal skills that the IT industry is crying out for.

Since the introduction of Digital Divas Crow says girls seem more relaxed around computers and more confident asking questions in front of their peers.

The upshot for Crow is seeing past Digital Divas now choosing IT for one of their subjects in senior school. “This is really encouraging from a teacher’s point of view because they are beginning to realise that ICT is across all industries and careers and that having skills and/or an ICT qualification will put them in good stead for any career that they may choose later on.” ●

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