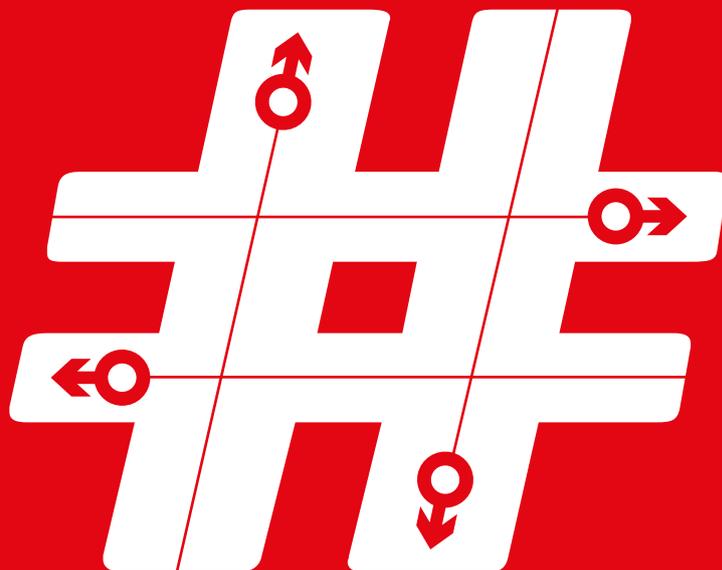


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# PICK A NEW #LANE

*How can we increase boys' participation and interest in Literature and Language, the Arts, Nursing, and Education and Early Years?*



*Whilst campaigners have justifiably concerned themselves with increasing young girls' participation in STEM, an equally important equality issue has thus far been overlooked. There has been little to no interest in promoting young boys' participation in traditionally 'feminine' subjects and careers, like the Arts, Literature, Nursing, Early Years Education, and the creative industries*

**W**hilst the importance of encouraging girls and women to enter and participate in subject areas and professions typically dominated by boys and men is now widely-acknowledged, initiatives promoting movement in the opposite direction are yet to take shape. So how can we encourage boys' interest in traditionally 'feminine' subjects, and why does it matter in the first place?

### Getting girls into STEM

For several years, a critical awareness has blossomed regarding the importance of getting girls into STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering & Mathematics) subjects and careers. Specifically, a number of grassroots, charity-backed, and government funded initiatives have emerged to encourage girls and young women to branch into these traditionally 'masculine' disciplines. Such programmes (like [girlsintostem.co.uk](http://girlsintostem.co.uk), or the WISE campaign) have arisen within a broader context of increasing equality and liberation for women and girls worldwide, particularly in Western democracies, and are based on both Liberal and Socialist feminist principles emphasising freedom of choice and economic empowerment respectively as essential in the pursuit of equality. This has been complimented by an increasing evidence base suggesting that, whilst biological influences on gender identity are not immutable, gender differences in behaviour, including subject choice, are largely shaped by the environment (O'Siochru, 2018).

The necessity of such campaigns is supported by both statistics and research. For example, whilst most STEM subjects receive an equal share of male and female entrants at GCSE level, the numbers skew dramatically at A-Level in favour of boys (take Computing 88%, Physics 77%, Economics 68%, and Mathematics 62% as examples; Joint Council for Qualifications, 2018). This trend continues at degree level (e.g., 82% of Computer Science undergraduates are male; HESA, 2017) and in the associated occupations and industries (e.g., only 16% of IT Professionals are women, ONS, 2018). Such patterns are identified as reflections of outdated patriarchal values and roles which label such subjects and professions as 'better suited' to men and their associated abilities, which in turn restrict and discourage girls from choosing STEM career paths. Indeed, research supports the idea that agents in the environment (such as parents and teachers) directly shape and influence girls' choice of subject at school and beyond (see Blakemore, Berendaum & Liben, 2009, for review), and that such messages influence girls' estimations of their own abilities (which are not reflective of

actual performance; Salikutluk & Heyne, 2017). It is therefore no wonder that so many organisations are now interested in addressing the dearth of girls entering into STEM professions, both in order to honour commitments to gender equality and freedom of choice, but to also increase access to the considerable earning potential attached to careers in these disciplines.

### The missing picture

However, whilst campaigners have justifiably concerned themselves with the important task of increasing young girls' participation in STEM, an equally important equality issue has thus far been overlooked. Put simply, there has been little to no interest in promoting young boys' participation in traditionally 'feminine' subjects and careers, like the Arts, Literature, and health sciences, or in getting them into traditionally female-dominated careers, such as Nursing, Early Years Education, and the creative industries.

The lack of discourse around this issue is deeply surprising when examining the complimentary statistics for these subjects and professions. For example, for almost every 'male-dominated' subject at the STEM end of the spectrum, a 'female-dominated' counterpart exists at the Humanities, Language, Literature and Arts end. Indeed, as Table 1 (page 29) highlights, the problem of female-dominated subjects at A-Level and within Higher Education is just as pervasive, and extreme. Examining a few select areas in more detail further highlights the extent and gravity of the issue.

### Literature and languages

In their excellent 2018 Psychology Today article, Schwanenflugel and Knapp present some of the most worrying statistics surrounding boys' engagement with reading. For example, that boys have scored lower than girls in reading at all grade levels every year since 1992, and that the gap grows larger as children grow older (Schwanenflugel & Knapp, 2018). The authors also provide some of the reasons why boys, on average, make a slower start in reading, and may have more trouble engaging with reading as an activity. Importantly, they highlight the disconnect between the expectations we place on boys to be highly physical and outdoorsy, and the quiet, calmness of reading, which may discourage boys from developing an interest from a young age. Their observations, which are supported by an increasing number of reports and studies, are particularly alarming when considering the importance of early reading on later school success.

The lack of boys choosing to pursue subjects related to literature and language (as well as modern

language subjects), is reflective of their disinterest, and may both result from, and contribute to, the labelling of these subjects as 'feminine'. For example, only 24% of students taking English Literature A-Levels were male, as were only 31% of students studying English Language. Modern languages fare no better, as French, Spanish, and German all enjoy more female than male entrants (33%, 32% and 39% male students respectively). This pattern is reflected at both degree level, where women make up around 70% of undergraduates pursuing a 'languages' degree (HESA, 2017), and in occupational statistics, with women making up 60% of authors, writers and translators (Office for National Statistics, 2018). In short, reading has a boy problem.

### The Arts

This attritional pattern is reflected in another typically 'feminine' subject area – the Arts, with boys comprising only a quarter of those taking Art A-Level in the UK. Figures for performing/expressive arts are even more striking, with boys making up only 8% of entrants (a total of 126 boys across the country). This is again reflected in uptake at university level, with only 36% of those taking degree programmes related to 'Creative Arts & Design' being male (HESA, 2017). And, whilst men are healthily reflected in some arts occupations (such as entertainers and presenters, musicians, and photographers) they constitute less than 8% of dancers and choreographers nationwide (Office for National Statistics, 2018).

The stigma surrounding the Arts begins in childhood, as detailed by Doug Risner (2009), in 'What we know about boys who dance', stating 'From an early age, many young girls are encouraged to pursue dance as a gender-appropriate activity, whereas it is something largely avoided by boys, who are rapidly learning and synthesising appropriate male behaviour, which generally means avoiding all that is feminine, homosexual or un-masculine to any degree' (p. 62). In other words, as outlined for reading above, boys are likely to absorb gendered information from the environment which either directly or indirectly positions activities like the creative arts and dancing as inappropriate for them, as boys; messages which are often reinforced by important figures in the environment, along with the media. In this sense, such subjects are deemed as either not aggressive, loud or physically challenging enough for boys, or that they are too physically/emotionally expressive or flamboyant.



### Nursing (and Allied Health Sciences) and Education/the Early Years

Along with artistic pursuits and reading, boys also receive discouragement from engaging in pretend play relating to 'lower status' care roles, including childcare. This includes, for example, interacting with dolls, and playing 'house' with peers (or rather, discouragement against playing any kind of father role that isn't solely constructed around work, or being a 'provider'). Such dissuasion occurs within the context of broader parental disapproval of boys' gender atypical play, and in the policing of their feminine behaviour (Kollmayer, Schultes, Schober, Hodosi, & Spiel, 2018). As such, it is argued that boys are often prohibited from developing skills centred around nurturance and care, as well as related emotional and socio-cognitive capacities such as empathy.

It is therefore no surprise so few boys consider careers in Nursing and the Education sector, particularly the Early Years. For example, only around 10% of nursing students in the UK are male (HESA, 2017), with this figure directly reflected in the 11% of registered nurses who are male (Office for National Statistics, 2018). Such low figures are echoed across a whole suite of 'caring' professions including Midwifery, Health and Social Services, Healthcare, Psychology, Social Work, therapy professionals and other healthcare associate professions. Teaching and the provision of childcare suffer similarly uninspiring numbers. For example, in 2018 only 2% of UK workers in early years settings were male, with two out of every three councils stating that they employ no men at all in these roles (Hemmings, 2018). Moreover, only 26% of teachers in primary (15%) and secondary schools (38%) are men (Office for National Statistics, 2018), suggesting that, whilst male participation appears to increase as children get older, such careers are still overwhelmingly female-dominated.



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### **Patriarchy and hegemonic masculinity**

So where are all the men? Ironically, the same explanation can be given for both the dearth of males choosing the subjects and professions described above, and the under-representation of women in STEM subjects. In that, both phenomena stem from the notion that particular traits, activities, roles and professions are associated with either men or women. For example, characteristics associated with femininity such as being kind, sensitive, nurturing, emotional, caring and attentive supposedly place women in a better position to fulfil societal roles relating to care, such as nursing, teaching and childcare – both paid and unpaid. Masculine characteristics of being authoritative, self-assured, ambitious, and more logically minded supposedly therefore place men in a better position to enter more scientific and business-oriented professions.

In brief, the two principal issues with patriarchal explanations of gendered behaviour are as follows. Firstly, gender expression and biological sex are often conflated or too strongly linked (that is, that men and women are presented as only capable of displaying masculine and feminine traits respectively, or that displaying such traits is only appropriate for one sex). Such ideas purport that this is the way individuals are biologically programmed – ignoring environmental explanations. This approach results in, and is further strengthened by, the second issue; the presentation of the two sets of characteristics as binary (that is, that masculine and feminine behaviours are mutually exclusive, and that one must principally display either feminine or masculine traits). This acts in a limiting capacity for various behaviours – as individuals feel falling into one category excludes them from the other.

Such issues are exacerbated by the politicisation of gender ideology and debate, as well as the complex and undefined nature of the

relationship between biological sex and gender identity and behaviour. However, regardless and arguably because of the complexity of that relationship, it can and should be argued that, even if some or most of our gendered behaviour does have some relationship to biological sex, no individual should be disbarred or discouraged from displaying any form of ‘gendered’ behaviour, be it masculine or feminine, if they are capable of doing so. It can further be argued that enough evidence now exists to demonstrate a significant learned component to gendered behaviour, and that the conceptualisations of masculinity and femininity, and associated appropriateness of behaviours for men and women, are, in part, constructed. Indeed, one of the principle outcomes of multiple feminist movements is the acknowledgement of the existence of a socially constructed gender ideology, and that, when challenged, women are capable of displaying whichever feminine or masculine traits they wish, providing they are presented with the opportunity.

Problematically, within such a framework, value is not only assigned based on congruent versus incongruent performance of gendered behaviour, but to the differing sets of behaviours themselves. Put simply, the construction of gender outlined above also places a greater value on masculine traits and characteristics, particularly those characteristics viewed as most honourable and admired, otherwise known as hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2005). Importantly, this means that society views many masculine traits as inherently desirable, and boys in particular are encouraged to orient themselves to and strive towards such an archetype. Moreover, this model also presents feminine characteristics as carrying low value and status, not only in terms of societal perceptions of those behaviours, but in the intrinsic and extrinsic rewards associated with them (for example, the lower status and pay afforded to many female professions).

Understanding gender in this way carries two important implications. Firstly, it explains why feminist scholars have been able to successfully argue for the liberalisation of behavioural repertoires available to women – for whilst this violates a pervasive societal pressure for gender conformity, this is to some extent compensated by the performance of [masculine] behaviours that are still societally valued. Secondly, it explains the absence of a parallel debate concerning the relaxation of male gender role norms, as the performance of feminine behaviours is judged in the context of the lesser societal value placed on such actions and the compromise to hegemonic masculinity ideals.

### It's time to talk boys

The arguments outlined above therefore present a tremendous challenge for scholars, businesses and individuals in the fight to pursue a true equality agenda; one which incorporates and values freedom of choice for boys and men as well as girls and women. But several arguments present as to why it is time to stimulate discussion surrounding boys' participation in typically 'feminine' subject and careers:

Some arguments have been put forward regarding the existence of a possibly unique male contribution to various industries, particularly in the education sector and improving experiences of school for young boys. Such proposals either: outline the unique contribution of male teachers, purely by virtue of being male; highlight the influence of male role models on boys' perceptions of school, academic achievement and positive masculinity, or both. Both arguments centre around male teachers as mediators between a restrictive and incompatible school environment and young boys, as those who are uniquely situated as having 'been through' the experience of boyhood and associated masculine expectancies. This also positions male teachers in a powerful pastoral position, as many boys might only feel comfortable talking about sensitive, intimate or sexual issues with another man. Similar representations are made regarding nursing, where some male patients may feel more comfortable with a male nurse. And whilst such arguments are usually rooted in the problematic essentialist assumptions outlined in the previous section, they should not be overlooked, as, whether due to biology, socialisation, or both, the childhood experiences of boys and girls are often markedly different, and this may provide a unique insight for men in these professions.

Even if the contribution being made by such men is not unique to being male, it is unique to them as individuals, and they should feel free to give it. In this sense, and in line with radical feminist theory to liberate everyone from an unjust society by challenging existing social norms and institutions (Willis, 1984), it is important to address the issue of choice for both men and women in the context of gendered behaviour. Thus far, as the party more significantly disenfranchised from more highly rewarded occupational choices, the conversation has largely centred around increasing avenues of participation for women. However, challenging barriers to choice for both men and women benefits everyone, as it serves to erode the oppressive gender structures which benefit no-one.

By institutionally, societally and individually promoting freedom of choice in this way, the

experiences of those already within gender 'atypical' professions will also improve, as stigmatisation and stereotypes are both gradually eroded. This is important in preserving the occupational choices of those individuals who have already chosen to defy societal expectations, and to protect their job satisfaction and professional longevity.

Finally, encouragement of such discourse and increased participation by men in 'feminine' subjects will also likely alleviate anxiety and gender-role stress in younger children who wish to enter gender 'atypical' professions. Indeed, children experience a high level of strain in navigating their membership to differing social groups, and in maintaining performance of behaviours deemed as congruent to that membership. The more we can remove this tension the better.

### Getting boys to pick a new #LANE

So, how do we get boys engaged in these areas? The steps outlined below provide some directions in meeting this challenge.

In a world characterised by technology and social media, having a catchy, coherent and effective centre point for a campaign is crucial. For example, the hashtags of #STEM and #GirlsInSTEM on platforms like Twitter have made it easy for efforts from multiple bodies and organisations to become synthesised, and easily located. This article therefore proposes #LANE (Literature/Languages, Arts, Nursing, Education/Early Years) and #PickaNewLANE as the hashtags around which to centre this a corresponding movement for boys, and to provide a singular voice for those wishing to support this cause.

No movement or campaign is effective without substantial support from reputable and powerful bodies. Just as with the campaign to get girls in STEM, there needs to be a recognition of the issue from governmental and charitable bodies; as well as a desire to provide both the funding and the political will to address the issue. This will be difficult, due to the issues outlined above in recognising this as a problem at all, and due to the subjects and career areas involved. However, the arguments put forward in this piece should capture the attention of any who truly claim to be in favour of gender equality.

Educational bodies, from Early Years settings up to Higher Education institutions, have a role to play. In earlier settings such as primary and secondary schools, institutions and educators should promote and encourage flexibility in subject choice, and provide impartial career advice to both young boys and girls which cater to the child's interests, rather than their sex. Admittedly, this is not easy to distinguish, as children's experiences are often shaped





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Subject	Male Entrants	Female Entrants	Total	% Male*
Computing	9075	1211	10286	88%
Physics	29422	8384	37806	78%
Mathematics (Further)	11577	4580	16157	72%
Other Sciences	1919	792	2711	71%
Economics	21211	9599	30810	69%
ICT	3871	1772	5643	69%
Design and Technology	7227	4221	11448	63%
Mathematics	59270	38357	97627	61%
Business Studies	19633	13234	32867	60%
Physical Education	6724	4583	11307	59%
Political Studies	9393	8571	17964	52%
General Studies	1726	1696	3422	50%
Music	3145	3106	6251	50%
Geography	16310	17228	33538	49%
Chemistry	25574	28560	54134	47%
Critical Thinking	12	14	26	46%
History	21803	27134	48937	45%
Media/Film/TV Studies	11288	14096	25384	44%
Other Modern Languages	4096	5577	9673	42%
German	1220	1838	3058	39%
All other subjects	3849	6223	10072	38%
Classical Subjects	2134	3523	5657	38%
Biology	23495	40324	63819	37%
Irish	122	210	332	37%
Law	3967	7298	11265	35%
Spanish	2680	5575	8255	32%
English Language	5615	12434	18049	31%
French	2646	6067	8713	30%
Drama	3362	7877	11239	30%
Religious Studies	5837	14690	20527	28%
English Language & Lit.	2684	6992	9676	28%
Communication Studies	314	848	1162	27%
Psychology	14845	44863	59708	25%
Art & Design Subjects	10683	32351	43034	25%
English Literature	10425	33865	44290	24%
Sociology	8001	26872	34873	23%
Welsh	114	422	536	21%
Performing/Expressive Arts	126	1394	1520	8%

**TABLE 1:** Number of Male and Female Entrants for A-Level Subjects in the UK

\* Subjects with over 60% male entrants are shown in white text, and those with over 60% female entrants are shown in black text





by socialisation processes, but educators should make every effort against exacerbating this process, instead making young children and adolescents aware of their choices and options. Likewise, universities have a role to play in increasing the participation of men on particular courses, through advertising, role modelling and even financial incentives.

Role modelling, across all of the #LANE areas, is particularly important. Many young children look to role models within the environment to learn gendered information; thus, providing young boys with examples of men engaging with the subjects and careers outlined above is important in teaching them that such pursuits are open to them, as boys. Research using reading as an example supports this approach, as boys who were recommended books by their father, and who felt they could talk to their father about what they were reading were more likely to be avid readers themselves (Merga, 2014).

However, none of the above will be effective until our individual and societal perceptions of 'appropriate' gendered behaviour change. In this sense, the most effective campaign for promoting boys' participation in these subject areas and careers begins within the home – as parents afford increasing flexibility in behaviour to both their young boys and girls. For example, by providing young boys with more diverse and less restrictive representations of masculinity, or by giving less emphasis and attention to traditional gender roles overall, we may begin to promote a new freedom in boys' behaviour, similar to that afforded by an increasing number of young girls.

This approach must also be reflected at societal level, starting with a fundamental reassessment of patriarchal gender structures which place lower value on traditionally feminine characteristics, values, interests and occupations. Until this happens, few adolescents, male or female, will make the active choice to enter into professions which carry lower status and financial recompense, particularly in the demanding world in which we now find ourselves.

*Just as girls should have the right to hypothesise, test, and experiment, boys must have the right to nurture, create, and teach if they choose*

#### Meeting the challenge

On face value, the question of increasing boys' involvement in traditionally 'feminine' subjects and careers like the Arts and Nursing is one of simple gender equality. On closer inspection however, myriad issues present in understanding why boys may become disinterested in such pursuits, and in meeting the challenge of rectifying the current landscape. However, an important message from the reflections provided above, is that such issues are never neatly divided between boys/men and girls/women. Instead, it is the same constructions which serve to disadvantage and restrict *both* groups, albeit in different ways, and with differing associated outcomes and injustices. Therefore, the drive to increase boys' participation in #LANE subjects and careers is worthy of our attention, as, in the words of Martin Luther King Jr, 'injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere'. Indeed, just as girls should have the right to hypothesise, test, and experiment, boys must have the right to nurture, create, and teach if they choose.

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