



# Learning sequence linked to

## *Letters to the future: on equality and gender*

by Laura Bates and Owen Sheers

### Introduction

The experiences, attributes and actions of the characters we read about enable us to recognise ourselves. The ideas we present and vocabulary choices we make when writing enable us to express ourselves. Reading and writing are central to the development of our identity; they shape who we are and who we become. The National Literacy Trust is therefore delighted to present teaching resources linked to the texts by Owen Sheers and Laura Bates for Hay Festival, both of which explore gender roles now and what they might be in the future. In this learning sequence and the accompanying booklist, we invite you to open up this conversation with your students and to help them explore the ways language impacts on the development of our identities.

[Find out more about \*Letters to the future: on equality and gender\*.](#)

### A word of caution

Both of the texts by Owen Sheers and Laura Bates are emotionally charged and deliberately use language to shock the reader so may therefore be challenging for students. Please be particularly aware that Bates discusses domestic violence and sexual abuse in her piece, which means there is the potential for safeguarding issues to be raised when using the text in class. If you are concerned about the reaction of any of your students, please report it to your school's designated safeguarding officer.

### About the National Literacy Trust

One person in six in the UK lives with poor literacy. This holds them back at every stage of their life. Lacking these skills undermines their wellbeing and prevents them making a full contribution to the economic and cultural life of our nation.

The National Literacy Trust is an independent charity dedicated to raising literacy levels in the UK.

We work to improve the reading, writing, speaking and listening skills in the UK's most disadvantaged communities. Our research and analysis make us the leading authority on literacy and drive our interventions. Because low literacy is intergenerational, we focus our work on families, young people and children.

## Learning sequence

The activities below are likely to provide enough content for two lessons, most likely with activities 1, 2 and 3 falling into the first lesson and 4 and 5 into the second lesson.

### 1. Gendered language

Split the class into two and provide each group with a large piece of paper with the outline of a boy and the outline of a girl. (If you have the space and large enough sheets of paper, you could ask each group to draw around a male and female student.)

Ask students to write 'gendered' words and phrases in each outline – those relating to men in the male outline and those relating to women in the female outline.

Some examples in case they get stuck:

Male	Female
Man up	To (verb) like a girl
Boys will be boys	Chick flick
Fireman	Air hostess
Master	Mistress
Mankind	Big girl's blouse
Man-made	Diamonds are a girl's best friend
Grow a pair	"Frailty thy name is woman"
History (his story)	Girl power
Mummy's boy	Daddy's girl

Give the groups the opportunity to look at each other's outline and as a class discuss the impact of gendered language, using questions such as:

- What do these words and phrases tell us about the English language?
- What impact might this have on us?
- Why could we think of fewer phrases on the female side? (If that is the case for your class)
- Have we achieved gender equality in our society yet?

If your outlines are of class members, ask them how they feel about the phrases that have been written onto their images.

## 2. Text analysis – rhetorical questions

Provide pairs with either text extract 1 from Sheers or text extract 1 from Bates (provided on page 5 of this resource) and ask them to analyse their paragraph:

- Does the writer think we have achieved gender equality? How do you know?
- How does the writer use rhetorical questions to challenge the reader?
- Do they use any other language features? What is the impact of these?

Put each extract on the board and invite pairs to discuss their analysis, annotating the paragraph if you have the facilities.

## 3. Imagine a world

*“What would it be like if we stopped identifying aggression with men, emotions and communication with women?”* (Sheers)

Ask students to imagine their lives in a world where gender equality has been achieved and produce a visual representation of that world e.g. using drawing or by creating a drama sketch. Their image will be more powerful if they focus on one particular aspect of life such as advertising, a parent with a small child, a toy shop, a children's party, supermarkets, fashion, books, magazines, domestic life, classrooms, politics or on a bus.

## 4. If I should have a daughter

Play the Sarah Kay poem *‘If I should have a daughter’* on TED.

Ask students to imagine they are old enough to have a daughter or son. What are three things they would want for their child?

Share the opening three paragraphs from Sheers' poem and ask students to identify:

- Who he is writing to?
- Why he is writing to them?
- Which emotion/s he conveys?
- The impact of his wordplay with the word 'reform'

Compare this with Bates' opening paragraph, also aimed at a future child:

- Which emotion/s does she convey?

- How is her use of language different from Sheers'?
- Which opening do they think is most effective and why?

## 5. Letter to the future

Invite students to write a letter to the future describing their hopes for gender equality. This could be a letter to a future child or to themselves in the future.

They might choose to replicate the structure of Bates' piece and begin each paragraph with the same sentence such as "I wish you a world..." or "I imagine a world where..."

### **Real audience and purpose**

Students are more motivated to write when there is a real audience and purpose for their writing. We would encourage you to use this learning sequence to work towards a piece of writing for a real audience. Some opportunities to provide this could be:

- Performing the pieces in an assembly about gender equality
- Displaying the writing in a classroom, corridor or on screens around school
- Publishing the pieces in the school paper, the local newspaper or as part of a collection in an anthology (see [www.literacytrust.org.uk/resources/amazon-young-storyteller/](http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/resources/amazon-young-storyteller/))
- Saving the writing for the future, either in a class time capsule (could they include other news articles or items that demonstrate the extent of gender equality today?) or by sealing it in an envelope and addressing it to themselves for a future date, perhaps 20 years from now

For more writing resources focused on a real audience and purpose, visit [www.literacytrust.org.uk/resources/](http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/resources/).

## Owen Sheers extract 1

So who's promoting this narrow definition of man? Well,  
just about everyone. Advertising, toy shops, fathers, brothers,  
films, games, our language, the internet, schools, sisters, mothers.  
'Boys will be boys' – when do we say that? Not when they've solved a problem,  
or painted a picture or helped someone.  
More likely when they've been too rough,  
misbehaved or maybe, even, cut back on their reading?  
Because it's easier that way isn't it? To give in to the idea that gender is fixed,  
so all we can do is roll over and accept it?

## Laura Bates extract 1

And how will we fix it?

What shall we tell our daughters? They ask me, over and over again. What shall we tell our daughters to fix this? Tell us what to tell our daughters.

But why aren't we telling our sons? Don't they need help and support and love and instructions as well? Don't they have a role to play in creating this brave new world? Aren't they as bewildered and confused by the bombardment of gender roles and expectations and online porn? Their place is in this conversation too, not outside playing football while the girls are taught about periods.

## Owen Sheers' opening paragraphs

So, my daughters, one recently born,  
the other still in the womb,  
why is it, when asked what I'd like to reform,  
my first thought was to address that reform to you?

Well, for me to reform means the future;  
how we might mould it with imagination  
into a better shape for all -  
although I must admit, since I became your father,  
it's become more specific - for you, my children,  
my two girls who will grow into women.

And maybe that's why, when I cast a reforming eye  
about our world, our lives,  
viewing it through your bodies, your minds,  
I kept seeing, at the root of so many of the ills that threaten you -  
injustice, oppression, pollution and violence  
- people like me, men.

## Laura Bates' opening paragraph

I wish you a world where children are equal. A world where your tiny baby clothes won't imprint you with the rigid expectation of a 'future superhero' or 'pretty princess' before you even know what the words mean. Where blue boys' onesies don't predict a future president while the purple girls' version proclaims: 'I hate my thighs.' Ages 0-3 months.