



## FEATURE

### The 'lady techies'

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## The 'lady techies'

*Shirley Cunningham reports on a study of a small group of women breaking into what had traditionally been a man's world*

It was a new dawn twenty years ago for technical education in Scotland. In 1987, by official memorandum, technical teachers became teachers of technology. A radically revised curriculum designed to reflect advances in computing and to attract a wider range of pupils replaced the familiar subjects of Technical Drawing, Woodwork and Metalwork with Graphic Communication and Craft & Design. And a new honours course of B Technology Ed enrolled women students in what had traditionally been a man's world.

Six years on, in 1993, there were 19 women technical teachers (as inevitably they were known) in Scottish secondary schools. All but two agreed to take part in a research project on their experiences: nine B Tech Ed graduates and six others with three years' (or less) teaching, and two who each had nine years' teaching experience. So how did these 17 pioneers - for such they were - fare in a territory traditionally populated by male teachers, non-academic and predominantly working-class boys?

### Their previous experience as pupils

Their own experience as pupils had alerted them to the constraints of that tradition. In half of the schools technical subjects were simply not on offer to girls in S1 and S2. At third year, when choices had to be made, few were encouraged to continue with technical subjects and some were actively discouraged:

I wanted to do technical drawing. The teacher couldn't give me a reason beyond 'girls are not allowed to do it'. I thought it so unfair.

One girl, hoping to be an architect, wanted to take Technical Drawing in S3, but having no technical experience in S1 or S2, she was told she could not do it as she was a girl. Then, after protest,

I was told by the technical teacher I would have to catch up myself... I said I would teach myself. I sat on my own and couldn't ask questions. I wasn't spoken to for three months. Then at the first test I got 99% and the boys all failed. After that I was a 'little angel' who could do anything I wanted - woodwork and so on - but I wasn't interested.

Pupils' ability as well as gender was relevant.

I couldn't understand why I was not allowed to do woodwork but I realise now that the boys who did it were non-academic.

Some of the brighter ones did succeed in getting their own way, and it was quite a feather in the cap for technical departments to enrol higher ability pupils instead of just 'those who can't do anything else'. Nearly all the technical teachers (male, of course) had been supportive of their girl pupils 'once we had proved ourselves'. But not all staff reactions were positive.

I quite fancied the new technology degree but I had a lot of trouble with the careers adviser... She would have nothing of it and kept on insisting on a secretarial course.

Other guidance teachers did not so much discourage girls from technical subjects as simply fail to mention them as possibilities.

### As teachers

How far had schools moved with the times when as young women they returned as teachers?

Not surprisingly, since some head teachers had almost certainly had a say in their appointments, the women nearly always found them - and senior management - supportive and even quite proud. One or two suspected that, at a time when some education authorities were pushing equal opportunity policies, they might have been appointed because they were women.

Most heads of department and colleagues were supportive - once they saw the women could do their job.

When you say 'a female technical teacher', they expect you to be really butch. I turned up looking quite feminine. I'm quite small, too. At first they thought 'There's no way she's going to be able to do this' and tended to go a bit easier. I think it's softened the department a bit. The kids know I'm firm but can approach me.

They used to explain things as if I was a dummy.

Now they know they don't have to, and couldn't be more helpful and treat me as one of the staff.

The teaching staff is young but the older technicians come from a male-dominated ethos. They like a wee drink, cards, and apologise for the occasional swear.

The two longest serving teachers had had contrasting experiences. One recalled that toilet arrangements were a major concern: would they make it 'men only' and make her go elsewhere? (The outcome was not reported.) She won 'street cred' by taking a length of guttering from an incompetent workman and doing the repair job herself. 'If you want a job done properly ask a woman', became her running catchphrase with pupils.

The other veteran teacher had unhappy memories of her first head of department and this eventually led to a request for a transfer.

I felt picked on by my head of department - partly because of gender, partly personality. He made me think I was the worst teacher that walked the earth. I was always the wee lassie who came in and I didn't get a fair crack of the whip. I heard that his comment before I arrived was 'Jesus Christ, they're sending me a woman. What good will she be when the wood arrives!'

Most teachers spoke about being teased and a great deal of banter, but not in any offensive way. Cheers and applause had greeted several of them on their introduction to the school, somewhat to their embarrassment. There were disadvantages:

The head introduced me on parents' night as 'a very rare breed' and the same to staff, i.e., labelled as strange. Pupils pick it up when they hear me introduced as 'strange'.

A few of the women said they preferred to work with male colleagues whom they found more straightforward (and less 'bitchy') than females:

The main problem is other female teachers. They're always questioning me. They think it's strange. I don't go into the women's staffroom, I don't enjoy the conversation. The stereotypes they have frustrate me. I'd rather stay away than rock the boat.

But such remarks have to be kept in perspective: several teachers mentioned great support from other female staff.

## The pupils

In school the least questioning of the gender of their technical teachers were the younger pupils. Those in first year did not know to expect anything different, had been used to women teachers in primary, and in fact sometimes preferred them.

Most of the comments had come from older boys, along the lines of 'Are you really a technical teacher?' -- and some disbelief that women would be taking the practical classes ('We'll go next door and ask Mr W. how to do it'). The women found some third and fourth years arrogant to begin with, the fifth and sixth 'amused', and there were often individual boys who would test the teacher's capability to the limits.

As with department colleagues, it was a question of the women proving themselves, even to the extent of doing 'tricky bits' of practical work after school hours. Like women drivers, many felt that mistakes would be attributed to their sex, and many had less craft experience than the men, usually because they had missed out at school.

You have to be quite tough - because of the equipment and dangers. You have to be willing to blast a 16-year-old boy if he's doing something wrong. In a non-female environment they're going to test you. 'What can she do?' That's fair enough, because you have to be sure you can cope.

A term or two saw relations with older boys (there were few older girls) often settling into friendly banter, enjoyed by both sides. Sex roles were sometimes discussed, for instance whether mothers should be expected to change electrical plugs.

Discipline appeared not to be a major problem, although in technical classes it was recognised that there were likely to be some difficult pupils. At her job interview one woman was asked how she would deal with a fourth year boy wielding a chisel. Another had made it clear that being a woman didn't mean that she was tidying up behind them; a few admitted to being somewhat intimidated by the sheer size of teenage boys. Each had her techniques:

I've quite a sharp tongue and can return any hassle from the older boys in a way that makes them more embarrassed than I am.

A memorable encounter - not typical - was with a boy who was quite adamant about not being taught woodwork by a woman:

Nothing against you, miss, but no way is any wimmin teachin' me how tae use a saw.

### The parents

At parents' nights reactions fell into two main categories, one personal, the other the suitability of the subjects for the pupils. On the personal level parents had been intrigued. On occasion they walked past, and one apologised for mistakenly asking for Mr X instead of Miss X.

A couple of men with an engineering background had the attitude, 'Wee lassie, doesn't know anything', and they were taken aback when I used technical terms. They still see technical as metalwork and woodwork.

If fathers try any put-down I say, 'When I was an engineer...'

Many parents seemed pleased that stereotypes were being broken down and said so. Such open-mindedness, however, did not always extend to their own children's courses:

I have to bite my tongue at parents' night when it comes to picking subjects. There was one who didn't want her daughter to take the subject because of 'the all male environment'.

Pupils choose... and then that decision is overturned at home. Daughters 'wouldn't do technical - that's for boys'. This is an academic school where pupils are encouraged to do maths, physics, and go on to university. Technical and home economics are second bottom in the pecking order.

Such a bleak appraisal was rare, although many of the women commented on the low status of their departments. 'They still think we come to work in

our dungarees.'

The other running thread in the teachers' responses was the responsibility the women felt as role models in countering sex stereotyping.

If even one girl decides to be a technical teacher I'll feel that I have given something, given them the chance I got because I had such a good experience [as a pupil] in my own school.

Certainly there are more girls in technical subjects now: in 2006 they made up 27% of pupils gaining Highers, compared to 6% twenty years ago.

Within the subject, however, there remains some hint of stereotyping, even in the comments of the teachers themselves. Technological Studies, for example, is still failing to attract many girls, which prompted the comment, 'Perhaps they just don't like circuit boards'; and another teacher explained the popularity of Graphic Communication (which replaced Technical Drawing) in these words:

It is neat and tidy, more arty, and has got colour etc, that a typical girl would be interested in.

All the 17 teachers said that they enjoyed their work and had settled in after the apprehension felt by all newcomers to the classroom -- and in their case, the gender label. A sense of humour, an ability to take a joke rather than offence, and to stand up for oneself, as well as enthusiasm, were considered essential tools, not just of their trade but for any teacher.

Now, 14 years on, the status of technical subjects has risen markedly, and they are recognised for entry to higher education. Currently there are some 160 women teachers of Design & Technology in Scottish schools, with equal numbers of women and men in training. 'Lady techies?' -- no longer 'that rare breed'.