

Too Cool for School? Why are our boys not achieving?

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In the United Kingdom, there has been widespread debate in current years about the underachievement of boys, in particular in the English curriculum, namely in reading and writing. This paper reviews literature past and present, in an attempt to understand why boys may not be reaching their full potential in primary schools. The historical perspective shows us that 30 years ago this was not the case; it was girls who were the underachievers. This paper draws on a range of perspectives from newspapers, educationalists and government papers in an attempt to identify ways to engage our male learners in their education and considers implications for teachers in primary schools. It explores the debate of the feminisation of primary schools, boys' attitude to learning, the need for male role models in primary schools and sociocultural approaches in supporting boys in reaching their potential.

This study is divided into the following sections:

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1. Historical Perspective

Research during the 1970s and 1980s consistently showed primary girls outperforming boys, especially in reading and writing. The conventional wisdom was that girls only had an initial cognitive advantage due to their reaching physical maturity at an earlier age, and that boys overtook girls in the teenage years. Until the 1980s performance data supported these

beliefs. However since the mid 1980s in all areas of the UK the trend has reversed, boys are underachieving compared to girls. (www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/genderandachievement)

Each summer, media reports from the mid 90s onwards have focused on 'lost' boys (Gold, 1995), referring to boys „being lapped by girls“ (Williams, 1995), emphasising the need to „rescue Britain's lost boys“ and to devise „rescue plans for the weaker sex“ (Lee-Potter, 2003). This media concern has been reinforced, at different times, by prominent figures within the educational establishment, with Her Majesty's Chief Inspector declaring that the failure of boys was „one of the most disturbing problems we face in the whole educational system“ (Woodhead, 1996), and the then Secretary of State for Education maintaining that: *„We face a genuine problem of under-achievement among boys, particularly those from working class families. This under-achievement is linked to a laddish culture which in many areas has grown out of deprivation, and a lack of both self-confidence and opportunity“.* (Blunkett, DfEE, 2000, cited in Younger, Warrington et al 2005, p.16)

Delamont (1999) suggests that some researchers challenge the idea that „there is a problem“, in their view it is not that something has gone wrong with the boys just that it has gone very well for the girls. However if we are seeking to raise standards it is with boys that there is most scope for improvement. It seems that many boys are not being well prepared by the education system for the challenges ahead in their lives, and we need to ask: „What is the problem with boys?“ and „What can be done about it?“ (Fisher, 2002).

In the United Kingdom, this concern with boys' academic achievements and with their engagement with schooling embodied a marked change in emphasis within the gender mainstreaming debate. During the 1970s and 1980s, the focus of work on gender and equal opportunities was centrally on girls. Research demonstrated that career expectations and subject choices were structured along traditional gender lines, to the disadvantage of girls (Sharpe, 1976; Deem, 1980; Griffin, 1985). They showed that aspects of the hidden curriculum contributed to the reinforcement of sex roles (Woods, 1990) and that girls were frequently marginalized in the classroom, with teachers responding more readily to boys who monopolized linguistic and physical space and teacher attention (Mahony, 1985; Stanworth, 1987).

Equal opportunity initiatives focused on confronting these issues, on new textbooks and language conventions to reduce gender bias, on analysing classroom dynamics and interactions, on a common curriculum to attract more girls into science, technology and mathematics (Myers, 2000), and on policies to reduce gender discrimination in career structures (Rudduck, 1994). One could question if this emphasis on raising girls'

achievements and aspirations has had a detrimental effect on the achievement of boys in the United Kingdom today?

The debate about boys' 'under-achievement' focused the concern on to boys in their own right, rather than simply as students whose attitudes and approaches had to be changed if female disadvantage was to be eliminated (Kenway, 1997). There is an increasing unease with some aspects of this changed focus (Epstein et al, 1998; Francis & Skelton, 2001; Martino & Berrill, 2003) and the sense of moral panic which this has induced in some commentators and governments.

2. National Curriculum test results

Since 1995 all maintained schools have been required to test pupils at the end of Key Stages 1 and 2, and the DfES has reported the national figures annually. Devising annual tests with different test items that set the same standard each year poses very considerable challenges. Despite these, the tests are now firmly established in primary schools and provide an increasingly reliable picture of attainment in the core subjects of English, mathematics and science.

Test results are used to identify the National Curriculum level that pupils have achieved. They are also used by inspectors as one of the key criteria against which to judge pupils' progress and a school's effectiveness.

The percentage of pupils reaching Level 2 (the level expected of seven-year-olds) has remained constant at about 80 per cent in reading and writing. In spelling, in 1995 and 1998, the proportion of pupils reaching Level 2 was 66 per cent, significantly lower than the proportions for reading and writing. In mathematics, the proportion of pupils reaching Level 2 has increased steadily but not greatly, reaching 84 per cent in 1998.

There is little difference in the performance of boys and girls in mathematics, but in reading, writing and spelling at Key Stage 1, girls do substantially better. The difference in the number of girls and boys reaching Level 2 is about 10 percentage points, and this gap shows no signs of narrowing. It indicates that the underachievement of boys in literacy begins in the first few years of their education, and eventually this leads to many boys transferring to secondary schools with weak literacy skills that are often insufficient to cope with the demands of the secondary curriculum (Ofsted 1994 – 1998).

One might argue that the way in which the tests are presented prevent boys from achieving, particularly in writing. Boys like to write for a purpose and find writing for the sake of writing a chore. An NUT study in recent years that highlighted the fact that up to 60% of writing done in schools is copied from boards or from books could be a contributory factor. As indeed might the now well understood need for boys in particular to know the big picture. Why are we writing this? What is the purpose and what is the audience? As with virtually every other classroom-based activity, clear learning outcomes for boys are absolutely vital (Wilson, 2005).

Nevertheless, there is legitimate concern over the achievement levels of some boys, and it is apparent that in some schools, more boys are likely to perform below their potential, as defined in value-added terms, than girls. This differential pattern of achievement poses a major challenge for those concerned with raising standards in schools. Work in individual school contexts (Rudduck, Chaplain & Wallace, 1996; Pickering, 1997; Younger et al, 1999), emphasises that more boys than girls are disengaged, that more discipline problems are perceived to be caused by boys, that more boys are excluded from secondary schooling.

Similarly, more sophisticated attempts at value-added analysis (DfES, 2004a) and of charting the progress made by girls and boys who achieved similar levels of achievement at the ages of 7, 11 and 14 (as measured in National Curriculum tests and teacher assessments), suggest that more girls than boys make significantly greater progress over the course of key stages 2- 4 in English primary and secondary schools (Younger, Warrington et al 2005).

However it should be noted that female success is not the necessary corollary of male failure - there is no reason why we should not help both boys and girls to succeed.

3. Have our primary schools been feminised?

A recurring claim, according to Hill (2006) in the debate about boys' educational attainment - that is, their relative lack of attainment compared with that of girls - is that more male teachers are needed, in both primary and secondary schools. The argument is often made that, being male; boys need male role models in the classroom demonstrating that learning is a 'guy' thing too. Sometimes it is claimed that having more male teachers would help with discipline, as boys, especially those enjoying little contact with their fathers, need masculine authority figures.

This last point is often given extra emphasis in relation to black boys, and calls for more black teachers can be especially urgent as a result (Hill, 2006). Hill (2006) goes on to state that despite special efforts made to recruit more male teachers new statistics show that their

numbers are falling. In most of Britain the percentage for all schools has fallen below a quarter compared with more than forty percent in 1980. He adds that this paucity is far more marked in the primary sector where only thirteen percent of teachers are men but the proportion in secondary schools is falling faster. According to Hill, reasons for the decline include pay, the „paedo“-panic, isolation in the staff room and, tellingly, getting lumbered with sorting out stropky boys. Men are deserting teaching and their flight shows no sign of ending.

Calls for more male teachers in primary schools is not exclusive to the United Kingdom, these calls can be heard by governments in North America, Australia, New Zealand and across Europe (Skelton, 2002). The implicit message is that male teachers are needed to provide positive masculine images for boys and, to a lesser extent, girls. „Primary schools are supposedly feminised because the teaching staff is predominantly female and, as a consequence, the practice and delivery of the curriculum, management strategies and teacher expectations favour girls“ (Skelton, 2001, p.88). This, however, is a simple reading of a complex situation. As Connell pointed out: „Though most discussion of masculinity is silent about the issue, it follows from both psychoanalytic and social construction principles that women are bearers of masculinity as well as men“ (Connell 1995, p.230).

Regardless of the masculine traits or attributes portrayed by women, one cannot argue that male presence is on the decline in primary schools. Male teachers provide boys, and girls with a positive image of men, who are themselves learners and who demonstrate a positive attitude to education.

However, in the report, „*Motivating boys and motivating girls: Does teaching gender really make a difference?*“, academics concluded that there existed no such significant interaction between student gender and teacher gender. The only significant interaction that emerged was that girls reported a better relationship with female teachers than with male teachers, while boys reported fairly similar relationships (TES, 2005).

Being academically oriented, for a boy, is often devalued and denigrated because of its equation with ‚femininity‘ (Renold 2001). She found that whilst boys had a strong need to assert their academic superiority over girls, this often took the form of depicting their academic achievements as failures, belittling their serious commitment to school work and mocking their contributions to whole class discussions. This infers that boys perceive being studious as a feminine attribute, particularly in primary schools where there are few male classroom practitioners break this perception.

Interestingly, Renold goes on to discuss that boys perceived as popular, or ,cool' by their peers, were high achievers, interested in sport and football and could make their friends laugh. Previous studies promote the idea that humour is a product, an effect or strategy through which pupils cope with boredom or disaffection with school. Mealya (1989) and Woods (1990), suggest that humour is a ,coping strategy' and an antidote to schooling, they explore the notion that oppressed groups such as boys particularly display humorous practices or responses. Bringing outside behaviours into the classroom, thus presenting a more active, masculinised self, went some way to evade looking as though they were working and often prevented them being positioned through the many ,nerd' labels (Skelton, 1996, Renold 2001).

Recent research by the DfES (Department for Education and Skills, 2004) has emphasised the need of greater involvement for fathers in their children's education. The DfES highlights the fact that currently there is considerably lower participation by fathers than by mothers in schools (particularly during the primary years) and in family learning initiatives.

Research shows that both fathers and mothers impact on their children's development – sometimes in similar, and sometimes in quite different, ways. The combined influence of fathers and mothers is also important. Taking action to include both parents in the life of the school and in their children's learning can make a significant and positive difference to children's achievements, motivation and self-esteem (DfES, 2004).

4. What are the gains for children of engaging fathers?

Positive father involvement in their children's learning is associated with better educational, social and emotional outcomes for children, including:

- better examination results
- better school attendance and behaviour
- less criminality
- higher quality of later relationships
- better mental health.

A belief that helping their children to learn is important for their children's success (even when their own school experience was poor) and a strong desire for their children to do better than they did (DfES, 2005, p.5).

Fathers being involved and interested in their children's learning, particularly with boys, helps to break down some of the barriers that boys can have towards their education. They

develop a more positive attitude to learning, nurture its value and succeed in school on a number of levels as well as eradicating the view that ,education is for girls‘.

5. Sociocultural Approaches

Socio-cultural approaches are those which attempt to challenge within school the dominant images of laddish masculinity held by the peer group, or perhaps the family and community, and to develop an ethos which helps to eradicate the „it’s not cool to learn“ attitude amongst boys. In many ways, sociocultural approaches underpin other approaches, so rather than being something different and separate, they are an integral and foundational aspect of other successful strategies. Thus schools which are successfully challenging the gender gap are those that do get boys on board; they are schools that are particularly sensitive to the socio-cultural contexts of which they are a part, and their whole school ethos embodies that understanding.

The aim, in the words of one head teacher, is to attempt to „reframe the students‘ view of school so that academic success is valued, aspired to and seen to be attainable“ (Standards, DfES, 2003).

Shipman and Hicks said that teachers and boys had different ideas of motivation. Teachers thought boys were motivated when they were taking notes. But the boys felt this was just teachers keeping them heads-down in useless busy work. Boys felt they were motivated when they were exploring, experimenting and arguing (West, 2002, p. 112). One could argue that ,boys being boys‘ have a need for some risk, challenge, even a whiff of danger and that this as part of how boys want to learn; hence the attraction of the outdoors. If it’s too safe, it becomes boring for many boys. And bored boys often cause trouble.

Whilst the dominance of an anti-learning culture is less obvious in primary schools, a number of boys begin to disengage with school at the approach of puberty, and so schools are adopting sociocultural strategies through organisational means. There are various approaches here, each chosen to reflect the particular context of each school, but the main aim of all of them is to promote greater involvement in school and develop boys‘ self esteem in learning. We need to engage boys in effective learning during their primary school education to prevent disaffection at the onset of puberty.

In a West Midlands primary school, several activities have been introduced which allow boys to voice their thoughts and opinions and to become involved in improving their school environment, for example through a ,You Can Do It‘ programme, or a School Council.

They are also given opportunities to make oral contributions when taking part in Circle Time and PSHE sessions, which aim to develop their sense of belonging to the school community as well as their self-esteem. A playtime buddy scheme is a further example of an approach which can give underachieving boys a sense of pride both in themselves and in the school. In a south London primary school, a creative arts programme has been implemented to explore the extent to which music, dance and drama can break down some of the barriers to learning and enable underachieving boys to become more engaged with learning (DfES, 2003).

6. Involving and engaging boys in primary schools

Whilst most or many girls will learn under even bad teachers most boys will not; they get fed up, disengage and get into mischief. Being a boy, with all its qualities of noisiness, risk and adventure, does not mesh very well with what teachers expect of children who are in classrooms (West, 1999).

Gender bias in everything from resources to teacher expectations has the potential to present further barriers to boys' learning. None more so than the gender bias evident in the ways in which we talk to boys and talk to girls. We need to be ever mindful of the frequency, the nature and the quality of our interactions with boys and our interactions with girls in the classroom.

A potential mismatch of teaching and learning styles to boys' preferred ways of working continues to be a barrier for many boys. Of vital importance in this area is engaging boys in dialogue about how they learn, as well as ensuring that a balanced approach is incorporated in the classroom. It is not just about simply stereotypically labelling all boys as kinaesthetic learners and attempting to teach them all that way (Wilson, 2005, <http://www.teachingexpertise.com/articles/boys-talk-to-them-654>).

7. Implications for Primary School Teachers

In order to ensure that both boys and girls have equal access to and engagement with the curriculum, teachers need to find a balance that suits both genders. It would make no sense to create a 'boy friendly' only curriculum, as the aim of good quality education should be to engage all pupils in the learning in an inclusive manner regardless of gender.

Provide clearly structured activities, rooted in context and meaning that challenge children's thinking and provide choice in tasks to encourage ownership of learning (Brownhill, Shelton

and Gratton 2007). Abandon teacher talk as the main mode of instruction and provide as much variety in instruction as possible and maximise opportunities for success (Martin, 2002, p. 152; West, 2002, p. 168). Ensure that all children receive equal praise. According to West (2002) girls say that boys don't get praised as often as girls.

Active and practical learning is very important for all learners, highlight relevance and application of knowledge. „What can I use this for?“ is a key question for boys. Teach through real objects, excursions, artefacts, etc. Good teachers are teaching principles and generalisations from things relevant to boys' interests (Martin, 2002, p. 145, 152; West, 2002, p. 168).

Gary Wilson at Kirklees LEA in the UK says that boys often don't know many things which teachers assume they do. Things that are taken for granted include how to organise thoughts into paragraphs; how to put fors and againsts on a page; and how to sum up an argument (West, 2002, p. 132). All of which are essential features for the National Curriculum tests at Key Stage Two. Research says that nothing can be done until teachers raise their expectations of boys. If the belief is held that boys generally underachieve they may just become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

8. Implications for Schools

Give boys responsibility for learning. In one case, a school took Year 9 away from the rest of the school to a separate campus. They had no canteen; the boys had to organise one. They had no gym: the boys' fathers were asked to help the boys build one. The lessons of responsibility learned were powerful and the boys felt valued and respected and liked by their teachers, parents and peers (Martin, 2003, p. 152, p. 168).

Boys feel teachers „don't ask, don't listen and don't care“ in too many schools (Slade and Trent, 2000, p. 205). But schools that work well with boys show that they care through listening to boys' voices and correctly analysing needs (West, 2002). Slade and Trent (2000) summarised what a good teacher for boys looks like: *she or he listens to you, laughs with you, respects you, wants you to succeed, doesn't mark you down for bad behaviour.*

In an effort to engage boys in their learning, schools can help parents to understand and support effective pedagogy, support literacy at all levels, model reading and keep persisting with this. Schools can enable boys to feel that learning is something they ‚can do‘ without fear of ridicule by having fun in learning with them and maintaining a sense of humour in classroom.

Boys respect people who listen, respond and care about them. May be this is the first step in closing the gender gap? Enabling boys to develop and grow in terms of not only their cognitive, but also their affective domain.

Suggestions for further independent study of the topic (by R. Seebauer)

1. How is quality measured or quality assured at schools in your country? Are there so-called standardised achievement tests in your country? Ascertain the current status of debate on standardised assessment of achievement procedures and compile a list of opinions for and against this subject!

2. Contact the PSHE organisation (*Personal Social Health Education*) and ascertain its field of activity (NationalPSHE.MBX@vtplc.com)!

Are there comparable institutions in your country? If so, what resources and aids do they provide to teachers?

3. The text stated that all children should be praised equally and that – according to girls – they receive more praise than boys.

Using the relevant literature, attempt to find diverse statements on the topic of „praise and criticism“ .

Teaching observation (approx. 15-20 minutes): try to ascertain, using the following grid - initially as a checklist – for which types of behaviour boys or girls are praised. Which of these categories (tidiness, diligence, discipline, intellectual competence) leads the teacher to interact with a child? – Record the frequencies. Are there stereotypical patterns of interaction? If so, provide examples! Provide a written summary of the result of your observations!

Boys				Girls			
Tidiness	Diligence	Discipline	Intellectual Competence	Tidiness	Diligence	Discipline	Intellectual Competence

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Selected links

- <http://www.archive.official-documents.co.uk/document/ofsted/ped/ped-03.htm>
standards.dfes.gov.uk/genderandachievement/word/InterimReportAug03.doc
- <http://www.decs.act.gov.au>
- <http://www.teachingexpertise.com/publications/g-t-primary-update-221>
- <http://www.literacytrust.org.uk>