

## Part 2: Theoretical Background and Further Information

Boys are not less able than girls, so why do they continue to achieve less well in UK schools than girls? The problem with boys' underachievement is not exclusive to the UK, Francis (2006), recognises a parallel with boys in Australia and suggests that this 'moral panic' is spreading to other countries. It may be necessary to analyse classroom practice and attitudes to learning in order to guide boys to achieve greater success in their education. According to Ofsted (1999), improving the achievement of boys is a complex matter in which interlinked factors play important parts. They include a positive learning ethos, good teaching and classroom management, close monitoring of individuals and effective support for learning.

Jacklin, Griffiths and Robinson (2006) observed that in classes where there were a larger proportion of boys, that teachers often saw boys as synonymous with problems. Boys are sometimes viewed as being more difficult to handle. Often this is not the case, and their behaviour is a sign to denote lack of interest or enthusiasm and we should focus on why this is rather than focus solely on problematic behaviour.

In their report 'The Gender Divide' (1996), Ofsted findings were that boys often responded better to lessons that have a clear structure and a variety of activities, including practical and activity-based learning, applications to real-life situations and an element of fun and competition. Many boys find it helpful to be given short-term targets and feedback that focuses on how they can improve. The 'poor boys' discourse positions these boys as in need of help and attention. But according to Francis (2006) certain groups of boys are beginning to be demonized for their apparent wastefulness of resources and failure to take responsibility for their own achievement.



'Unwittingly, boys can be labelled and their behaviour perceived as inappropriate or even challenging. The qualities and skills that are most valued by schools, the ability to communicate orally and represent ideas on paper, are often the very aspects of learning that boys find the most difficult.'

(DCSF, 2007, p.5)

According to the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority in the UK (QCA, 1998), the key to raising boys' achievement in English lies in recognising their strengths and building on these. This a key recommendation based on evidence gathered from schools by a working party over a two-year period.

Findings from a longitudinal study, Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE 2004), which followed a cohort from age 3 to 7, indicated there were significant gender differences in young children's intellectual and social behavioural development at entry to pre-school. Girls generally showed better social development than boys, especially in cooperation/conformity and independence and concentration. Girls also showed higher attainment on all cognitive outcomes. Girls made greater gains in pre-reading, early number concepts and non-verbal reasoning than boys over the pre-school period.

The researchers also found that the pre-school home learning environments differed for boys and girls. Significantly more girls' parents reported activities such as reading, teaching songs and nursery rhymes. It was not possible to establish whether these self-reported differences in parenting reflected different expectations of boys and girls, and/or gender differences in the behaviours and interests of pre-school children.

In questioning classroom practice one might ask - to what extent patterns of curriculum, teaching and learning contribute to the disparity of achievement between boys and girls? According to the DfES:

- Contributions from boys are prominent both physically and verbally during classroom interaction. Boys have more experience than girls of having their contributions evaluated during classroom interaction.
- However patterns of classroom interaction may have fewer implications for pupils' performance than the development of attitudes and strategies - in order to make a real difference to the issue it must be acknowledged that the most intervention takes place at a classroom level.
- Girls do better than boys on sustained tasks that are open-ended, process based, related to realistic situations, and that require pupils to think for themselves.

Boys show greater adaptability to more traditional approaches to learning which require memorising abstract, unambiguous facts and rules that have to be acquired quickly. They appear willing to sacrifice deep understanding, requiring sustained effort, for solutions achieved at speed.

<http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/genderandachievement/understanding/tandl/>

Boys' achievement or lack of it, has recently been associated with the feminisation of primary education. The drive continues to recruit more men into primary education and to provide greater support for male primary teachers. In autumn 2005, the Training and Development Agency for Schools (TDA) surveyed 1,000 parents of primary age children and found:

- one in four parents were concerned that their children did not have enough interaction with male teachers
- 61% believed male teachers had a crucial role to play in helping children feel more confident with men
- 26% were worried that their children would lack a male perspective on life
- 22% were concerned their children did not have enough contact with positive male figures of authority
- 47% did not have any contact with male teachers.

According to the Department for Education and Skills there are 26,200 male primary school teachers in England compared with 141,000 female primary teachers; that's less than 16% men.

Research at Durham University suggests that male primary school teachers make no difference to pupil learning. Researchers analysed data relating to 8,978 boys and girls aged 11 in 413 classes in English primary schools. They looked at test results and questioned children about their attitudes to school.

Their findings showed that there was no significant link between gender and attainment and on attitudes it showed that female primary school teachers brought out the best in both sexes. There was no evidence that male teachers enhanced boys' attainment.

In responding to the Durham research the TDA stated that its purpose in trying to attract more men into primary schools was to create a more representative environment for pupils – not simply to raise attainment among boys.

It is also true that many young children lack a male role model in their lives. Family breakdown means that a significant number of children lose contact with their father within five years of divorce. Whether or not male teachers improve boys' attainment they do provide a suitable male role model for young boys to aspire to (<http://www.teachingexpertise.com/articles/primary-teaching-will-it-always-be-a-womans-world-1541>).

As previously stated, the boys' achievement debate is a complex discourse and there seem to be no simple answers. What is evident is that to bring out the best in boys and to help them experience success we must analyse our attitudes towards boys' learning,

consider the structure and contexts of lessons we teach and provide a positive learning ethos in order to nurture and engage the boys.

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### Further Reading:

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- Raising Boy's Achievement, Final Report, Homerton College Cambridge  
<http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/genderandachievement/pdf/HomertonReport-final.pdf?version=1> (16.06.2008)
- Raising Boys' Achievement Toolkit:  
[http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/genderandachievement/nhss\\_boys\\_achievement2.pdf?version=1](http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/genderandachievement/nhss_boys_achievement2.pdf?version=1) (16.06.2008)
- Teachers TV - Men in Primary Education: <http://www.teachers.tv/video/24053> (16.06.2008)