

Gender issues in school – What works to improve achievement for boys and girls



This resource provides guidance for senior leaders and teachers in schools who are seeking to improve boys' and girls' achievement, particularly in English and literacy.

It is to be seen as a companion piece to 'Addressing Gender and Achievement: myths and realities' (DCSF 2009) a document which dispels some of the current and unhelpful myths about gender and education.

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Introduction

Over the past two decades, educational policy has been concerned about the 'gender gap' in achievement, specifically boys underperforming when compared with girls. This has led to calls for educational policy strategies and interventions aimed at raising the achievement of boys, as well as improving their attitudes and motivations towards schooling. However, this focus on *all* boys as underachievers has been misleading. Some groups of boys achieve highly at school and some groups of girls do not. Achievement gaps for social class and ethnicity often outweigh those for gender, and it is the interplay of these factors that together impact on the performance of girls as well as boys.

It is sometimes assumed that girls as a group outperform boys across the curriculum, but in fact boys broadly match girls in mathematics and science. The one area of the curriculum where boys do tend to underachieve is English. The mean attainment of girls in English is higher than the mean attainment for boys. This is so for all social groups. However, there is much greater variation between schools in the levels of attainment that pupils achieve in English, and such variations are more strongly informed by social class than gender.

Pupils' access to and understanding of all subjects in the curriculum is dependant on them having good literacy skills. To address ways to improve literacy and English is also to address pupils' competence and performance in other subjects. Reviews of the research evidence suggest that there are two key areas that are important for educators seeking to improve boys' engagement with and attainment in literacy, *the construction of gender difference* and *the organisation of the English and literacy curriculum*. Various rationales have been put forward to explain gender differences in achievement, including: natural differences between the sexes; gender differences in learning styles; the 'feminisation' of schooling and gender biased assessment procedures. However, all these theories have been challenged or discredited by counter-evidence (see 'Addressing Gender and Achievement: myths and realities', DCSF 2009). Any interventions designed to address boys' attainment should not act to the detriment of girls. Schools also need to examine how gender, social class and ethnicity interact in their particular setting (Mirza and Gillborn).

The construction of gender difference

Gender differences are constructed and may be reinforced in schooling through staff and pupils consistently associating or attributing certain behaviours and characteristics to one gender over the other and then acting accordingly.

Key points shown by research into gender differences in education (Jackson, 2006; Francis 2000; Alloway et al 2002) indicate that:

- boys and girls produce constructions of gender (masculinity and femininity) that 'fit' social norms in the peer group and in wider society. These include giving preference and more time to particular behaviours, interests, and school subjects whilst shunning or avoiding others. These gendered behaviours 'are deep-seated, and children enact these without being unconsciously aware of them.' (Skelton, Francis and Valkanova 2007) but they vary depending on the child's social class and ethnicity;
- constructions of gender difference by teachers and pupils produce different behaviours which impact on achievement. The 'gender gap in achievement' can be removed by challenging notions of gender itself;
- the peer group is of central importance in reinforcing gender stereotypes. For instance, given the choice, pupils usually sit in same-gender groups and both primary and secondary pupils 'police' the gendered behaviour of their peers, and punish failure to conform to traditional gender norms.

Schools which attempt to alter the curriculum to provide a 'boy-friendly' curriculum not only exacerbate gender stereotypes, but their actions have been shown to be ineffective. In playing to gender stereotypes, they reinforce the idea that only some activities and behaviours are gender appropriate, and thus limit rather than enhance pupils' engagement with the curriculum. Rather, what is required to address such attitudes is a whole school approach to challenging gender cultures, which covers the school's ethos, its teaching practices and its organisation. "It's in schools where gender constructions are less accentuated that boys tend to do better – and strategies that work to reduce relational constructions of gender that are most effective in facilitating boys' achievement." (Francis and Skelton, 2008).

Whole school approaches

Tackling gender differences that have a negative impact on educational achievement is best done at a whole school level and as part of the institution's general ethos. Warrington et al (2005) have set out the essential components which need to stand as the background to any such planned interventions:

- *Behaviour*: the school establishes an expectation of high levels of self-discipline, and supports this by prompt attention to misdemeanours and by responding in a constant and consistent manner to issues of behaviour. Staff show courtesy to pupils;
- *Equal opportunities*: there is a commitment to valuing diversity through curriculum content, classroom grouping arrangements, school activities and worship. This is particularly in the context of challenging gender cultures, including a strong and dynamic equalities policy, and zero tolerance of homophobia and other forms of discrimination/harassment;
- *Fostering pride, effort and achievement*: the school places emphasis on pupils having pride in their work, effort and behaviour, as well as having high expectations of responsibility and independence. Pupils are aware that staff care for their effort, progress and happiness;

- *Pupil involvement in the life of the school*: there are many opportunities for pupils to become engaged in the life of the school, and the school is keen to ensure that individual pupils become involved;
- *Values and aims*: these need to be transparent, consistent, shared by colleagues and pupils, and permeate all the work of the school.

Strategies to foster a gender-equitable and inclusive ethos

In the light of the more general guidance to schools, given above, the following strategies have been found useful when focusing on gender.

Focus: Create a gender equitable school culture by tackling gender stereotypes

Rationale: It is important for the headteacher and the senior leadership team, in consultation with other staff, pupils and parents, to review and tackle stereotypical constructions of masculinity and femininity which exacerbate differences and impact on pupils' engagement with the curriculum. *Genderwatch: still watching* (Myers et al., 2007) provides many practical ideas and tools for classroom practice to address inequality.

Action:

- Find out, through conversations with pupils and staff, the range of images and concepts of masculinities and femininities that they bring with them into the school environment.
- Find out their expectations and perceptions of masculinities and femininities which form part of the school fabric, organisation, daily practices and classroom materials. For example, what are their expectations and perceptions of the roles or responsibilities that boys or girls should adopt? Or, what do they think of the depiction of males and females around the school and in curriculum resources?
- Having ascertained the prevailing ideas, attitudes, expectations and images of masculinity and femininity in the school, devise and implement whole school and classroom strategies to challenge any conventional and restrictive ideas, attitudes or images.

Evidence: Keddle, A. and Mills, M. (2007). Mills, M. (2001). Murphy, D. and Renold, B. (2007). Myers et al., 2007. Reay, D. (2001). Lloyd, T. (2007)

Focus: *Apply expectations of high achievement for all girls and boys*

Rationale: The emphasis on boys' underachievement can lead to a situation where all boys are seen as, and see themselves as, underperforming; similarly, assumptions that all girls are academically successful could mean that those girls who lack confidence or whose achievement is not couched in academic performance might be marginalised.

Action:

- Find out what teachers' and pupils' expectations currently are. Do they have the same high expectations of boys as girls? This can be done through discussion with individual or groups of teachers and through classroom observation.
- Are there patterns which emerge in relation to particular subject areas? For example, do teachers in a particular subject have lower expectations of boys, or do boys or girls in a particular subject or age group have lower expectations of themselves?
- Work with those teachers and/or pupils to raise their awareness of their lower expectations and to identify strategies to help them to formulate higher expectations for learning, progress and attainment.
- When fewer boys or girls are choosing to follow a particular subject route, devise strategies to support atypical learners and encourage other students to make less gender-stereotyped choices.

Evidence: Sukhnandan, L., Lee, B. and Kelleher, S. (2000)

Warrington, M., Younger, M. and Bearne, E. (2006)

Younger, M., Warrington, M. and McLellan, R. (2005)

Focus: *Use a wide variety of approaches as a vehicle for deconstructing and challenging stereotypes*

Rationale: There may be many areas of the curriculum, including PSHE, English, History and PE, that lend themselves to teachers and pupils reviewing, exploring and challenging gender stereotypes and gender stereotypical expectations.

Action:

- Use a range of approaches to enable teachers to discuss and challenge pupils' essentialist and traditional attitudes and expectations towards gender.
- Review existing schemes of work and associated lesson plans to identify opportunities in lessons where gender stereotyping can be discussed openly.

Evidence: The following resources offer suggestions for useful practices in helping pupils examine, discuss and critique gender stereotyping in English lessons:

Davies, B. and Banks, C. (1992), Marsh, J. (2000), Marsh, J. and Millard, E. (eds) (2006), Millard, E. (1997), Wing, A. (1997), Yeoman, E. (1999) Skelton, C., Francis, B. & Valkanova, Y. (2007)

Gender and the English curriculum

Explanations for the gender gap in English attainment

Of all areas of the curriculum, children's progress in English and literacy is most closely monitored by teachers and parents during the first stages of schooling. Indeed, learning to read and write is seen as the central task for children as they begin school. As part of standard practice, primary school teachers group children according to their skills at reading and teach them accordingly. This creates distinctions between pupils in class which become highly visible – through where children are expected to sit, and the kinds of reading materials and curriculum tasks they are given.

Research has shown that boys and girls designated "poor readers" react differently to this designation (Moss, 2007). Boys designated "poor readers" are more likely to react against their perceived low status in class than girls working in the same group. In an effort to bolster their standing with their peers this group of boys may avoid spending much time on a task they find difficult. Girls reading at the same level are more willing to be seen reading "easy books" and are happier to receive help from other more experienced readers. These strategies mean that girls labelled weak readers continue to practice their skills. By contrast by spending less time on the task, boys labelled

weak readers fall further behind their peers, so compounding their difficulties. This kind of negative feedback from early failure at reading is described by Stanovich as the Matthew effect (Cunningham and Stanovich, 1997). He and colleagues have demonstrated that this has long term impacts on the progress made (Ibid).

Research evidence on schools that foster high English and literacy attainment amongst both boys and girls shows that they offer an English and literacy curriculum that encompasses attention to basic skills alongside extensive opportunities for reading, writing, speaking and listening which are integrated in a holistic manner (Younger et al, 2005; Frater, 2000; Ofsted, 2003). The English and literacy curriculum is planned to foster children's enjoyment of reading and writing as well as develop accuracy and pays particular attention to supporting pupils' development as independent readers. In a major review of the writing curriculum in schools where the gender gap is narrowest, Ofsted (2003) point out "The culture of [these schools], reflected in the classrooms, is 'nonmacho', with intellectual, cultural and aesthetic accomplishment by boys expected and accepted."

Other key points from research into gender and English indicate:

- While gender does independently predict attainment in English, the social class gap has greater explanatory power (and is also considerably larger). Explanations for the different levels of attainment in English cannot rest with gender alone. The causes of poor performance in English are complex and are most likely to be redressed by improving the quality of English and literacy teaching for boys and girls alike. In their analysis of the available data the DfES comment: “A focus on boys’ underachievement loses sight of the fact that large numbers of girls are also low attainers. Tackling the scale of these numbers [ie low attainers] is arguably of greater priority and importance to policy makers than the proportionate difference between boys’ and girls’ attainment” (DfES, 2007);
- Any explanation for the impact of gender on English performance needs to take account of the variation within boys’ and girls’ attainment rather than simply focus on aggregate differences between genders.

In general, from a higher starting point, girls make better progress in English than boys in both primary and secondary school but this is not the case across the board. For instance, the gap between boys and girls operating at the highest levels/grades diminishes across the Key Stages. The DfES comment: “By A-Level, there is no gender difference at A grade.” (DfES 2007).

Strategies to foster greater gender equity in English attainment

In addressing gender English attainment the following strategies have been found useful. They do not single out and address boys as a group, but instead highlight key aspects of the English and literacy curriculum that are crucial to both boys’ and girls’ development as successful readers and writers.

Focus: *Well-targeted support for low attaining groups that offers challenge whilst maintaining learners’ self-esteem.*

Rationale: Boys designated “poor readers” are more likely than girls placed in the same group to avoid tasks they find difficult as they try to disguise their low standing. Such strategies exacerbate their position and make them more likely to fall further behind their peers. Conversely, girls designated “poor readers” may be too willing to accept tasks that are well within their competence and which may not stretch them enough to extend their skills.

Action:

- Provide a high quality English and literacy curriculum in the early years which builds maximum success for the greatest number of pupils in acquiring fluency in basic skills.
- Identify early and provide additional and well-focused support for those who struggle with basic English and literacy skills. Such support should be geared to maintaining self-esteem whilst keeping students on task.

Evidence: Burroughs-Lange, 2006; Cunningham and Stanovich, 1997; DCSF, 2008; Moss, 2007.

Focus: *Classroom practice that helps children develop and share their independent reading*

Rationale: Evidence suggests that wide-ranging independent reading has a significant impact on English attainment (Ofsted, 2003; Clark and Rumbold, 2006). It may be particularly helpful in developing writing as children absorb the forms of written language through their reading (Ofsted, 2004; Barrs and Cork, 2001). However, whilst many schools are aware of readers who struggle to acquire basic competence, and target their attention accordingly, far fewer schools actively plan to support children who can read fluently but seldom choose to do so (Ofsted, 2004). Moss (2000) calls this group “Can/don’t” readers. Commenting on schools where practice was less effective in developing independent readers, Ofsted (2004) remark: “When pupils read their books in the reading lessons and read well, teachers rarely considered the reasons why they were not reading the books at home or choosing to read when opportunities arose. Teachers did not always identify their lack of enthusiasm for reading. Consequently, their reluctance was rarely tackled effectively.”

Making the transition into independent reading can pose difficulties for many children. The DfES (2007) report: “On average across OECD countries, 46 percent of boys said they read only if they had to, compared to 26 percent of girls. Forty-five percent of girls reported that they read for enjoyment for more than 30 minutes each day compared to 30 percent of boys.” Evidence suggests that the numbers reading for enjoyment

diminish during secondary school. Yet research also shows that the reading culture of the teaching group has a far more significant impact on patterns of independent reading than gender considered on its own (Moss and McDonald, 2004). How classrooms foster independent reading makes a difference. Classrooms that successfully promote reading engagement set out to expand the repertoire of texts that both girls and boys are prepared to tackle, provide opportunities for children to choose what and how they read and build networks amongst peers that extend the kinds of reading they are willing to do.

Action:

- Provide good access to a wide range of resources and opportunities for children to find out what is worth reading.
- Create reading networks in class to “road-test” library books and pass on recommendations for what to read as well as what to avoid.
- Use pupils’ recommendations to inform library purchases and/or help choose an author of the week.
- Set up a *Review and recommendation* time as a starter to a lesson where pupils give a short presentation about a text they have read or are currently reading and teachers read aloud “tasters” from different kinds of texts.
- Establish reading clubs and fuel them with thought-provoking texts. Involve teachers, other staff, parents and older pupils too.

- Make use of guided sessions to develop ways of discussing texts and developing independent reading of a range of genres from different cultures and times.
- Through modelled and shared reading, show pupils how you choose texts to read. Ask them to compare this process with the way they might choose a DVD, encouraging them to reflect on the similarities and differences.
- Set up a paired reading project where pupil pairs interview another pair and record key information to identify how this might support them with selecting texts.

Evidence: Clark and Rumbold, 2006; DfES, 2007; Moss, 2000; Moss and McDonald, 2004; Ofsted, 2003; 2004; Sainsbury and Schagen, 2004; Wang and Guthrie, 2004; Younger et al, 2005.

Focus: *Structured support for writing that builds in time to prepare, think, talk and reflect with peers to ensure meaningful engagement with the task*

Rationale: Learning to write involves orchestrating an increasingly complex set of skills. This is a recursive process which develops over time as children build familiarity with a range of text types, in part through wide reading. Sustained interest in and commitment to the task is a necessary ingredient in building the relevant skills, alongside explicit instruction in key features of language and form (Adams, 1990; Frater, 2000). Schools where boys write well balance good planning and teaching, via guided and shared writing, with approaches that support all children in developing their ideas before they write, often through discussion with their peers. Pupils are also given opportunities to choose what to write about over a

time frame that encourages commitment to the task (Younger et al, 2005). The writing is seen as purposeful rather than routine, value is placed on “succinctness as much as elaboration” (Ofsted, 2004) and marking offers both detailed and supportive feedback, clearly assessing what has been done well whilst also pointing out what needs improvement.

Action:

- Plan writing tasks that incorporate drama, hot-seating techniques, or the use of images, including ICT, into pre-writing activity.
- Incorporate talk into the writing process through modelling oral rehearsal for writing setting tasks that involve re-shaping talk into writing eg oral story telling, interviewing, or recounting shared experiences.
- Provide opportunities for children to talk about and share their work with others and receive suggestions for improvement eg through the use of response partners, paired writing or whole-group shared marking.
- Use focused marking and oral feedback to value what has been achieved and identify next steps to progress.

Evidence: Adams, 1990; Frater, 2000; Ofsted, 2004; PNS, 2005a; UKLA/ PNS, 2004; Younger et al, 2005

Focus: *A collaborative learning environment with opportunities for children to take responsibility as learners*

Rationale: In a recent review of provision that can help pupils who make less than expected progress at KS2, the DCSF highlight the importance of moving away from “low-level and low-value

targets which focus on simple functional skills” to classroom tasks that challenge children to extend their skills repertoire and encourage them to take more responsibility for their learning. This includes fostering a classroom environment “which promotes independence and supports self-help” (DCSF, 2007) e.g. through planning collaborative group work on activities that carry an element of risk and by designing a range of opportunities for speaking and listening as part of the work of the class. Research has shown that encouraging children to work together on carefully-designed open-ended tasks can enhance the quality of thinking and engagement. Baines et al (2008) describe the appropriate activities as “Tasks that are high in ambiguity, where the outcome and the path to that outcome are not obvious”. Fostering this approach to learning in the English classroom may be particularly beneficial in closing the gender attainment gap.

Action:

- Encourage children to work with response partners as part of the routine process of teaching and learning.
- Promote paired reading, especially when older children work with younger partners as tutors and tutees.
- Use whole class teaching to model giving others time to think and tentatively explore particular issues; asking open questions; expecting and encouraging extended talk rather than one word answers. Use this as a basis to introduce dialogic talk.

- Use open ended tasks that can be solved in more than one way to stimulate exploratory group work.

Evidence:

Alexander, 2006; Baines et al, 2008; DCSF, 2007; Mercer, 2000; Topping and Bryce, 2004; Warrington and Younger, with Bearne, 2006 (pp128-140; p161-164).

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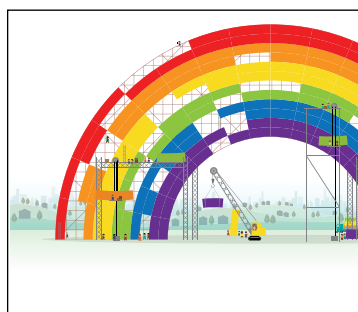
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