

Initiatives aimed at boys could be viewed by girls as not promoting gender equality but reinforcing existing girls' view that the world is male dominated.

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This paper was taken from research into the range of initiatives put into place by Local Education Authorities to raise academic standards.

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Salisbury, J., Gorard, S., Rees, G. (2002) *'Accounting for gender gaps in the differential performance of boys and girls: A state of the art review.*

Gorard, S. (2002) *An alternative account of boys' underachievement at school.*

Raising academic standards: Are initiatives aimed at boys detrimental to girls self-esteem?

An abstract from DfES statistics and a review of academic studies suggests that Government initiatives, to assist boys, need to be examined for any detrimental effects on girls' self-esteem.

In recent years there has been a focus on the 'achievement gap' between boys and girls and the negative impact that this has on boys. Guidelines have been issued to Local Education Authorities and to schools on how to raise standards, particularly amongst boys. Many schools have gone on to develop initiatives aimed at raising standards among boys.

The responsibility for education policy and strategy development lies at national level with the Department for Education and Skills. The Department produces a range of publications including White and Green Papers, performance tables, teacher training materials and information for parents. The Department's Internet web site holds much of its documentation. One section is specifically related to raising standards and there is an area titled 'Gender and Achievement'.

Boys underachievement

The web site is one of a number of communication channels where Government engages those involved in education with the discourse that 'boys' underachievement is a major concern' (DfES, 2002). Schools are advised to develop their own individual strategies to tackle boys' underachievement and that it is best to take a 'whole-school approach that involves senior management, teaching and

support staff.' Analysing performance data is seen as a crucial starting point in this process. Whilst schools are invited to consider the underachievement of other pupils such as those from particular social or ethnic groups the key focus is on low levels of attainment amongst boys, particularly in literacy.

DfES statistics

An abstract from the DfES website shows Year 2000 Key Stage results:

Key Stage 1

- 10% more girls than boys achieved level 2 in reading, writing and spelling
- 1% more girls than boys achieved level 2 in maths
- By level 3 there is a greater gap in reading, writing and spelling
- 3% more boys than girls achieve level 3 in maths

Key Stage 2

- 10% more girls than boys achieved level 4 in English
- 2% more boys than girls achieved level 4 in maths
- 11% more girls than boys achieved level 5 in English
- 3% more boys than girls achieved level 5 in maths

Key Stage 3

- 17% more girls reach achieved level 5+ in English
- The same percentages achieved level 5+ in maths
- 4% more boys than girls achieved level 5+ in science
- In non core subjects such as languages, PE and information technology, girls achieved better in all subjects apart from PE

Key Stage 4

- 10% more girls than boys achieved 5 A - C grades at GCSE
- In maths GCSEs the performance of boys and girls was the same
- The gap between boys and girls is greatest in languages and art and design

A level

- More girls took English and languages
- Maths, physics and design and technology were dominated by boys
- Despite this, at A - E grades, boys do better in French, girls do better in physics, but none of these percentage differences is greater than 5%
- At A or B grades boys out perform girls in history, English, French, and computer studies. Girls out perform boys in science and maths but by very small percentages.

Small differences

The DfES performance statistics, do indicate that girls achieve higher standards in some subjects than boys. These are however very general statistics concentrated at the higher end of achievement levels and show relatively small differences between boys and girls. By A level, at the highest grades, there is little difference between boys and girls.

Academic studies

A number of academic studies have been undertaken concerned with the topic of underachievement in boys. West (1999), notes that 'special attention has been given to the problem in England', with the UK Government seeing boys as 'having unequal chances in education'. West, and other researchers, suggest that there has long been a problem with boys' underachievement. He builds on work by Schnack and Neutzling (1990) who suggest that schools have become highly feminised and girls have been championed at the cost of ignoring boys.

Other academic research has challenged this view. Gorard et al. (1999) identified two methods of calculating achievement gaps that gave radically different and often contradictory results. The method they put forward

involves considering achievement gaps in proportion to the figures on which they are based. Their research concludes that much work in this area is 'overwhelmingly concerned with a pattern of boys' underachievement which is conceptualized as a general phenomenon'. They argue that interventions to raise standards among boys are too general and do not deal with the complexity of differential attainment.

Research by Arnot et al (1998), concluded that 'boys lag behind in early literacy skills and later in English' and that they perform less well at GCSE examinations. This is however not the full picture and girls perform less well at maths and continue to opt out of science and maths at higher levels of study. The choice of subjects at post 16 continues to follow traditional gender patterns and this is repeated in vocational qualifications. They argue that 'blanket statements about girls performing better than boys are difficult to justify'. There is a need to consider the achievement of particular groups of young people, particular subjects and at different levels of performance.

They draw attention to the need to look closely at factors such as class, ethnic origin and the local context.

This is also echoed by Epstein et al (2000), who suggest that boys' underachievement has been 'sensationalized recently'. The whole debate about boys and achievement levels is described by the government as recent and new but the authors show that 'underachievement among boys has been around for some time'.

They quote a study by Willis (1977), which looked particularly at disaffection within schooling among working

class boys and their achievement rates in comparison to middle class boys. They also point to other key historical features such as the 11+ examinations that were deliberately skewed so that girls had to achieve better results than boys to get grammar places in order that numbers were appropriately balanced. The key issue they argue is that girls' results have improved more markedly than

boys. They argue that little attention has been paid to which groups of boys are not performing well, rather that they have been homogenized and certain groups, such as African-Caribbean boys been subject to racist stereotyping. Their work seeks to illustrate what they term the 'binary trap' where gains made by girls are

assumed to equate to losses by boys and the problems caused by gender stereotyping, that is the 'real boys don't work syndrome'.

Murphy and Elwood (1998) draw attention to the introduction of the National Curriculum and the impact this had on course choice, style of examinations and the way that this may influence differential attainment levels.

Gorard, in recent work, (Gorard, S. 2002, *An alternative account of boys' underachievement at school*) points to the need to look closely at factors such as home background, school structure, social skills and

differences in achievement levels at different levels of attainment. The combination of all of these and other factors, such as changes in assessment mechanisms mean a 'simple gendered explanation of achievement does not work'. He takes issue with the term 'underachievement' suggesting it has 'conceptual and practical difficulties'. He argues that when it is used in relation to gender 'there is no evidence that, given the nature of the assessment system, boys are underperforming in relation to any potential any more than girls are'. All that can be observed is 'in general, girls are achieving higher aggregate scores in statutory assessments and examinations at school'. To say this is the 'fault of boys' assumes the assessment system to be 'gender neutral'. The underachievement of boys has therefore not

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been established and Gorard questions whether educators should therefore 'tolerate the existing differential attainment rates'. He makes a case for not intervening in schools (which he describes as 'initiative overloaded') at the present time, instead to focus on research which gives a more complete and accurate picture of differential attainment. He draws attention to the longer term impacts that any schooling initiatives may have on the lives of both women and men in adult society and the need for them to be more equitable and effective.

Little difference

The DfES performance statistics, referred to earlier, do indicate that girls achieve higher standards in some subjects when compared to boys. The statistics are very general and concentrated at the higher end of achievement levels. They show relatively small differences between boys and girls. Interestingly, by A level, at the highest grades, there is little difference between boys and girls.

However, the types of 'headline statistics' seen in the media appear to justify general claims of boys' underachievement. Researchers are beginning to question the way the statistics are calculated and Gorard et al (1999), indicate that there are potentially different ways of calculating the statistics which show different results in terms of gender gaps.

Broad-brush approach

Even if one accepts the validity of the statistics, then their 'broad-brush' approach must be noted and raise a cause for concern. The statistics fail to show in any detail the achievement of particular groups of boys or girls. Much of the research reviewed in this paper point to the need to look at other factors as well as gender. These include class, ethnicity and personal background. It would appear that little acknowledgment, of the lack of statistical detail, has taken place in many of the Local Authority initiatives (Lewis, 2002). Mainly, their focus is on boys generally rather than even specific groups of failing boys. Girls may especially lose out in this scenario. As they are not seen as a priority,

underachieving girls may get less help and attention. The report from the Trust for the Study of Adolescence (2000) suggests 'it is time to look at the fine detail rather than at the broad picture'.

The research findings suggest that schools need to concentrate more time on assisting, both boys and girls, in a focused way with greater depth of understanding of why pupils underachieve compared with the potential for each individual.

Greater need

There is a greater need for schools to focus on the overriding inequalities of society and the task of empowering girls. Hearn and Morgan (1990) suggest some initiatives in schools should focus on boys because of, 'their bullying, sexual harassment, physical and physiological abuse', which they argue 'are seriously damaging to girls emotional and physical lives (and to the lives of marginalized boys)'.

Emler (2001) argues there is 'a lot of interest in the concept of self esteem' but there appears to be little work on the differences in levels of self esteem between boys and girls and even less on how schooling affects this.

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Evaluation

Little evaluative work, on the impact of LEA initiatives on girls appears to have been carried out by the Local Authorities reviewed (Lewis, 2002). Thus little evidence exists to judge the impact of initiatives, aimed at boys, on girls self-esteem. What appears clear however, is that if high self-esteem involves feeling good about oneself, then the implied criticism of the way girls learn and the focus on helping boys because they are

being 'out performed' by girls, may not help girls' self-esteem.

The evaluation of the initiatives in West Sussex by Gubb and Arnot (2001) didn't explicitly look at self-esteem but did however draw some interesting conclusions in relation to how the girls felt about the initiatives. To take a specific example, that of teacher directed seating, girls reported that they found it hard to concentrate when placed next to potentially disruptive boys and that they didn't feel that it worked. In relation to increasing competitive activities in the classroom, girls found it put unnecessary pressure on them.

'Not cool to work'

Girls in the West Sussex schools were asked to explain why boys underachieved; they put it down to 'boys don't like school, girls work harder' and it being 'not cool to work'. They confirmed they had problems with boys' behaviour and teacher expectations. Boys were felt to dominate discussion times. Girls expressed a number of feelings: they felt too unworthy to ask questions; were not important enough; were 'expected to be quiet and get on with it' and, thus did not receive teacher-time. Feeling unworthy may well contribute to low levels of self-esteem. Gubb and Arnot (2001), also found that the secondary school girls were noting that it is a 'male dominated world, boys don't need to work hard'. The authors also found that some of the girls were 'becoming 'laddish' and joining a culture which suggested that 'to achieve is to be not liked'.

The above comments suggest that any initiatives aimed at boys could be viewed by girls as not promoting gender equality but reinforcing existing girls' view that the world is male dominated.

Anecdotal evidence

A lack of research evidence, to suggest that initiatives aimed at boys are detrimental to girls' self-esteem, should not diminish the need to answer questions arising out of anecdotal evidence. As Salisbury et al argue (Salisbury, J., Gorard, S., and Rees, G. 2002 *Accounting for the differential attainment of boys and girls at school: A state of the art review*) the 'evidence is simply not available yet to allow judgments to be formed on the effectiveness of these measures'. It would appear to be much more important to look at each individual and relevant subjects. It is also important to consider the individuals' achievement levels, recognizing that

differences within gender are much more significant than those between the genders.

The types of LEA initiatives that have been reviewed claim to address gender difference in levels of achievement, what they fail to do is recognize and address more important overall differences in gendered power relations and make no attempt to work towards how these could be reduced or removed.

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