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## **Contributing to the debate: the perspectives of children on gender, achievement and literacy**

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There has been much debate about the underachievement of boys in the United Kingdom (UK), fuelled by continuing evidence that shows girls achieving better than boys in most exams, and boys continuing to dominate special needs education and school exclusions. Various theories have emerged, with boys' poor performance being attributed to a changing economic infrastructure, to the results of poor parenting or to innate biological differences where, for example, they are perceived as being less able than girls to learn language.

In this paper, I contribute to the debate by reporting a selection of the findings from a research project in a cluster of schools, where students from Year 1 (ages 5-6) to Year 11 (ages 15-16) and their teachers were interviewed about their perceptions and attitudes to learning and gender, and were observed in the classroom. While I provide much comment about raising standards and improving classroom practice for all students, I specifically focus on underachieving boys and on literacy. Data on the perceptions of children in Years 4 and 5 (ages 8-10) are presented here. Findings relating to the Early Years children and their teachers are reported in Wood (2001) and data on patterns of interaction and response in Years 1-8 in Myhill (2002).

### **Gender and underachievement: perspectives from research**

This study on gender and achievement has arisen out of national concerns about boys' attainment in formalised testing situations. For the last few years girls have consistently done better than boys in England and Wales in national tests at 11 and 16. The poor performance of boys relates to continuing concerns about working class boys' academic achievement, disaffection and the possible social consequences (Warren 2000).

The debate around boys' achievement is complex. Various research (OFSTED/EOC 1996; Pickering 1997) has indicated that teachers have lower

expectations of boys than girls; they rate boys' ability to concentrate, their self-esteem and their social skills as lower than girls and are likely to discipline boys more harshly than girls. Feiler and Webster suggest that teachers make judgements about literacy outcomes before children start school, and stick to these predictions once made: 'There is evidence that we tend to cling to our original perceptions despite the accruing of contradictory factors' (Feiler & Webster 1999, p 357). Evidence from the classroom shows that boys dominate classroom interaction more than girls, and are evaluated more, both positively and negatively (Howe 1997).

With specific reference to English, OFSTED claims that boys have a narrow experience of fiction, the content of their writing is predictable and they have problems with the more affective aspects of English. Girls, OFSTED (1993) reports, read more fiction and write at greater length. More recently, OFSTED (1999) concluded that the quality of work and rate of progress in writing for all students is still poor, but particularly so for boys. Brown (1994) also found the content of boys' stories to be stereotyped and suggests that boys become less committed to writing as they get older, with writing being seen as passive, reflective and therefore female.

Reading also seems to drop off as boys enter secondary school (Hall & Coles 1997; Lloyd 1999), although Hall and Coles question the prevailing notion that boys do not enjoy fiction, as the respondents in their large survey clearly enjoyed a range of horror, adventure and football books. Likewise Myhill (1999) found that the similarities between boys and girls, with regard to their preferences for different aspects of English teaching, were greater than their differences.

Academic achievement has long been discussed in relation to student behaviour. The pressure on boys to conform to a notion of masculinity which is unfemale, active and 'cool' is universally acknowledged, and thought to now start in the primary school rather than being an adolescent phenomenon (Millard 1997; Pollard & Trigg 2000).

Further, Jackson argues that some boys 'actively participate in their own underachievement by rejecting the school approved middle class culture, associating it with inferior wimpishness' (Jackson 1998, p 80). Theories as to why this might be abound range from a belief in biological differences, to the pressures of abstract socialising processes, deficit models of the family or changing economic infrastructures (Warren 2000). Thus underachievement in English may be genetic (boys being less able at language), cultural (as a result of social conditioning) or subject-specific, where English is seen as 'feminine' because it is literature-based and values personal and affective responses (Reynolds 1995).

This debate is not limited to the UK. A substantial review of research and policy relating to gender differences (Alton-Lee & Praat 2000) indicates the level of concern in New Zealand, with Coote (1998) among many others calling for a critical literacy approach where conventional masculinities can be challenged. Martino (1997, 1999) and Alloway and Gilbert (1998) reflect concerns in Australia, where the latter have developed specific teaching units to meet the needs of boys in literacy. Collins et al (2000), also reporting on recent evidence from Australia,

conclude that although there appears to be little gender difference in the performance of high achievers, the average girl is outperforming the average boy. Johnson's summary of international assessment results indicates that, as in Britain, girls in the United States, Canada, Australia and Holland consistently perform better than boys from an early age (Johnson 1996). Thus it would seem that the gender gap in achievement is not the result of any one education system but a result of other, more complex factors.

### **Listening to children**

Central to this research is a belief in the importance of listening to both the teachers and the taught. Recent researchers in the school improvement field have argued that children are 'expert witnesses' who have much to say about 'the conditions of learning at school, how regimes and relationships shape their sense of status as individual learners and as members of the community and, consequently, affect their sense of commitment to learning in school' (Rudduck & Flutter 2000, p 76). Indeed, it has been argued that we ignore what children have to say about the classroom at our peril (Pollard et al 1997).

For our study, my colleagues and I were thus concerned to listen to both children and teachers talking about the same key issues. Doing so could, we felt, help us understand whether or not perceptions and values about gender and learning were shared, and at the same time give the learners a voice in an area where they are not often consulted.

### **The study**

A pyramid of schools, concerned by national reports of boys' underachievement and by statistics indicating such underachievement in its own schools, commissioned a team of researchers at Exeter University to design and conduct a research study into this issue. The pyramid consisted of a high school with its three feeder middle schools and their twelve feeder first schools. The schools in the cluster were both rural and urban, catering for students with a range of socioeconomic backgrounds in a predominantly white area. The researchers sought to investigate:

- a) teachers' perceptions of
  - the roots of under-achievement
  - boys' and girls' achievements in the curriculum (especially literacy)
  - boys' and girls' preferred learning styles and attitudes to learning
- b) students' perceptions of
  - the curriculum, especially the literacy curriculum
  - their preferred teaching and learning styles
  - the differences in achievement or behaviour of boys and girls

- c) the patterns of interaction and response in the classroom, looking specifically at participation, off-task behaviour and the frequency and nature of interactions between teachers and children.

An interpretative paradigm was adopted which permitted the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data in context, and which allowed the stakeholders, both teachers and children, to give their perspectives. The research design involved interviews with the focus children and their teacher, and classroom observation. The questions for teachers and children focused on the same key issues, but the language was simplified for the children.

The research was particularly focused on the underachiever. This presupposes that there are particular children who are not achieving as they should be and is predicated on the belief that boys and girls should achieve the same results. In the pilot project teachers were asked to select those they considered to be underachieving, but in some cases low achievers were selected who were working to the full extent of their ability and were therefore not underachieving. For this reason guidelines were devised to help teachers identify underachievers. These were not intended as a definition of underachievement, nor was it expected that an underachiever would exhibit all the characteristics listed. It was suggested that these children would display some of the following characteristics:

- have better oral abilities than abilities in reading or writing
- have good general knowledge
- grasp ideas and principles quickly
- challenge viewpoints or see things differently from others
- seem unmotivated but capable.

In each class, four children - a high achieving boy and girl, and an underachieving boy and girl - were selected for interview and observation. The children were interviewed in pairs, with the underachievers together and the high achievers together. They were unaware of being labelled as either 'high' or 'under' achievers. Thus boys and girls were interviewed together and asked the same questions. All interviews were tape recorded with the participants' permission and subsequently transcribed. A total of 41 teaching sessions were observed and 144 children and 36 teachers were interviewed. My focus in this article is on the twelve Year 4 and 5 classes (children aged 8-10) from the three Middle schools in the study, and thus draws on data from observations and interviews with twelve teachers and 48 focus children.

## Findings

### *Teachers' perceptions of gender and attitudes to teaching and learning*

Whilst one cannot generalise from a small sample of twelve teachers, nevertheless some commonalities emerged from the teacher interviews which point to the dominance of certain attitudes and beliefs.

Primarily, all twelve teachers believed that gender identity - and particularly boys' understanding of what it is to be masculine - was culturally and socially determined outside the school. They presented a picture of underachieving boys 'switching off' or disengaging and saw boys' underachievement as directly linked to poor behaviour. Boys were described as being 'outgoing', 'disruptive' and 'needing a challenge', whereas girls were 'willing' and 'wanting to please'. Boys received far fewer positive descriptions although there was a view espoused by some teachers that they were more prepared than girls to take risks, to want to find out 'the wider view' of things and to be more divergent in their thinking. This contrasts with a view of girls as compliant, conforming and industrious but tending to the pedestrian. These findings accord with those reported by Wood (2001) concerning the perceptions and expectations of the Year 1 teachers in this study.

Teachers were asked about the learning styles preferred by boys and girls. Whilst some thought that boys and girls learnt in different ways, the strategies mentioned usually related to the need to motivate boys and keep them on task. Several said that boys learnt best through active, lively approaches, as they needed 'more sparkle and fun in their learning'. Others added that boys liked 'investigative work', information technology, music, physical education and drama. They were seen as responding well to a sense of humour and a competitive element, whilst needing discipline. One teacher commented that boys 'definitely prefer short, structured tasks with a very hands-on input'. Girls, on the other hand, were thought to like 'longer, open-ended tasks', creative activities, dance, drama and personal and social education, and were seen as responding well to praise.

With specific regard to English, the teachers said boys preferred analytical activities, oral discussions and non-fiction writing, whereas they thought girls preferred story writing, extended writing and private reading. Teachers considered that boys did not like writing in general and that girls did not like problem-solving investigations or unfinished tasks. Some felt that boys underachieved in English because of poor writing skills, an inability to settle, poor behaviour and an unsupportive home background, whilst others cited the physically active nature of boys as a reason for their difficulty with developing good reading habits. As one said, 'you can't read a book when you're on a bike'.

Three key issues emerged from the teacher interviews:

- a) the different attitudes (and behaviour) thought to be exhibited by boys and girls;

- b) the different strategies and learning styles thought to be appropriate for boys and girls; and
- c) the different approaches to English thought to be appropriate for boys and girls.

The children's views will be reported under these headings to enable comparison and corroboration of this data.

### ***Children's perspectives on the different attitudes (and behaviour) exhibited by boys and girls***

Gathering children's perspectives allows us an insight into their world and in some cases challenges the views of their teachers. What is evident from the interviews with children is that they have a good understanding of their own learning and of the behaviour exhibited by both sexes. The findings are reported from the high achievers (boys and girls together) and then the low achievers (boys and girls together) instead of reporting on each gender separately, as this mirrors the pairing in the interviews and helps avoid polarising the perspectives of boys and girls, as in fact there were often more similarities than differences.

The high achieving girls and boys both said that some boys had a lower tolerance for 'sitting and listening'. They described these boys as children who 'fidget too much' and who 'lose their attention and get more bored'. Some felt frustrated by this 'mucking about'. One boy explained that the problem is 'they want to be tough and not listen because they think they're too clever to listen and actually learn'. However, another boy defended his peers, implying that listening all the time may not be necessary as 'boys listen to the important bits'.

Comments from the underachievers themselves endorsed the view that boys were less likely to concentrate and more likely to 'make jokes and stuff' and be off task. One boy commented that if the work was boring then he would just do something he 'would rather be doing'. Some girls and boys held stereotypical views of each other but the process of being interviewed together allowed them to agree with or dispute these opinions. For example, one girl maintained that 'girls like mostly learning by writing and reading and actually doing things and boys like, well boys like doing things but they don't like writing', whereupon the boy interviewed with her disagreed, saying he liked writing stories. She persisted in her view that, even if this was so, boys 'never listen much in literacy', whereupon the boy retorted 'that isn't true, some do. I don't, but some do'. He wished to establish that some boys were on task and good listeners, whilst acknowledging that he himself was not in this category. Two other children confirmed the pressure to be 'medium', rather than being seen as too clever. Some of the comments indicated an attitude amongst boys that was not necessarily anti-school but anti-effort.

As well as talking about their own attitudes to learning, the children had a great deal to say about the attitudes of their teachers towards them. There was a general consensus among the high achievers that boys were told off more, but some

saw this as justified because of their 'bad behaviour'. Others felt that boys received an unfair amount of negative treatment and that some teachers were more likely to pick on boys. A girl went straight to the issue of teacher expectation: 'people don't expect girls to be naughty ... girls get away with being naughty more'. Another explained that the boys get picked on because 'they are not listening'. The boy interviewed with her said plaintively: 'but sometimes we are!', indicating what may be at the heart of the problem.

Boys may be less focused than girls some of the time, but feel they are seen as off-task or badly behaved all of the time. A defensive attitude emerged in some of these high achieving 10 year-old boys, with some maintaining that they were not given the chance to say what they wanted to say and even that bad behaviour could not be helped. One boy claimed that getting into trouble was 'just what boys do ... they just like getting themselves into trouble and they don't really care if they get told off'. He counted himself as one of those boys and as such was an example of a high achieving boy buying into the macho culture.

The underachieving boys seemed especially conscious of their negative treatment. They felt that boys were blamed more than girls and that teachers preferred girls. This was endorsed by some of the girls who agreed: 'it's just the way they smile at girls and talk softly'.

In summary, the teachers thought boys' poor behaviour was culturally determined outside the school and directly linked to underachievement. The children indicated that many of the pressures to be just 'medium' came from within the classroom and were of their own making. They were aware of the poor behaviour of some boys but felt that they were not always as bad as teachers made out, and not always treated fairly. There were indications of increasing resentment and defensive attitudes as children grew older.

### ***Children's perspectives on learning styles, strategies and preferred subjects***

The teachers' comments indicated that they thought boys learnt best through active, lively approaches and that they liked 'investigative work', information technology, music, physical education (PE) and drama. The teaching strategies and curriculum offered in school were thought to suit girls, who were seen as particularly enjoying creative activities, dance, drama and personal and social education. Table 1 suggests that the children had different views.

**Table 1: Curriculum areas mentioned by high and underachievers, in order of preference**

<b>High achievers</b>	<b>Underachievers</b>
mathematics (most cited)	art (most cited)
art	mathematics
English/writing	PE
PE	history
design/technology	science
science	design/technology
history	computers
computers	music, geography
geography	English/writing (least cited)
religious education (least cited)	

When asked about the curriculum areas they enjoyed, responses from the high achievers corroborated some of the teachers' views. A picture emerged of high achievers of both sexes who enjoyed all aspects of school, especially mathematics, art and creative writing in English. A high achieving boy did not like the literacy hour 'because of the sitting down and listening to it all' but liked creative writing, while another really enjoyed the creative aspects of history, going 'really far back in time ... especially dinosaurs'. Their comments indicate that they enjoyed lessons where they could talk to each other, work in groups or pairs and 'do' rather than just sit and listen. They liked teachers who were 'fun' but could 'keep control'.

Responses from the underachievers indicated that mathematics, art and PE were enjoyed by both sexes; English was only mentioned by one underachieving girl. The popularity of maths may be attributable to the practical approaches advocated in the numeracy hour recently introduced in the UK. History was also mentioned, especially when brought to life in some way. One boy enthused: 'I'm into history', and gave a highly technical description of dinosaurs' teeth and claws, whilst another talked about a trip his class took to a Roman museum:

You get to ... see a Celtic and Roman sword, but the Celtic's sword's harder to see because it's covered with mud but the Roman sword's kind of in a cabinet and you can actually touch bones because they're fake, and you have to sort them into groups of materials, like snail shells and all that.



It appeared that curriculum areas which were more active or genuinely engaged the imagination were popular with both boys and girls. As with the high achievers, these children enjoyed lessons where there was an element of fun and variety. Boys added that a good lesson should be interesting and exciting, while girls suggested it should be imaginative and not boring.

In contrast to the teachers' beliefs, these findings indicate that all of their children preferred active learning styles and approaches which use the imagination, and that most subjects were equally enjoyed by boys and girls. Where there was a difference, it was by achievement rather than by gender.

### *Children's perspectives on English*

#### **a) Reading**

The majority of the high achievers found reading easy and both boys and girls talked enthusiastically about what they had read. Books cited indicate that there were greater similarities in reading taste between boys and girls than differences. In general the genres of horror and fantasy were popular with both sexes. Girls were more likely to read animal stories and boys were more likely to read non-fiction, but there was little evidence of a strong fact/fiction divide on gender grounds. Indeed, when talking about books it was fiction that fired the enthusiasm of both boys and girls. One girl liked 'exciting animal books with jungles', and two boys liked 'longer stories ... ones with quite a lot of action in them' and 'thick books... where they go to the Amazon and have lots of adventures'. Authors such as JK Rowling, Roald Dahl and Enid Blyton were mentioned by all, as were the Goosebumps series and Horrible Histories.

The underachievers were more ambivalent in their attitudes to reading, with girls tending to be more positive than boys. Some found reading easy, some said it depended on the book. A nine year-old boy explained that 'some books have really hard words you haven't heard of before'. Another added:

Some books are kind of hard and I don't really want to read them, because either they're too boring or they've got too many hard words and I don't know what they mean or anything.

Nonetheless, when asked to talk about books they had read recently, it was apparent that for both boys and girls stories with an active narrative thread were popular, encompassing adventure, fantasy and horror. Again the Harry Potter stories and Horrible Histories were mentioned by both sexes, while boys also talked about comics, joke books and dinosaur books, and girls mentioned animal stories, ghost stories and adventure stories.

#### **b) Writing**

With only one exception, all of the high achievers claimed to find writing easy and liked to write. As with their reading, most children chose to write fiction. Both boys and girls enjoyed writing stories with 'action and adventure' and liked

working collaboratively where they could think together about stories. They also liked the freedom to choose what they wanted to write about. As one boy explained:

I like to do things my sort of way, so I like to get my own talent into it.

However, more boys than girls acknowledged the frustrations of writing, mentioning problems with handwriting and punctuation. With this exception, there was very little gender difference in the writing habits and preferences of the high achieving children.

There was a marked difference in the attitudes of the underachievers to writing. They found writing much more difficult, but significantly, when they did write, they still favoured action and adventure stories. These were possibly along more stereotypical lines than the high achievers, with boys choosing to write about pirates, mysteries and Star Wars, and girls choosing friends and relationships to write about. Two boys, who said they do not like extended writing tasks, nonetheless spoke of taking pleasure in being creative, in writing 'stories really, stuff that I can just make up, like fairy tales really ... I like using my imagination'. These boys appeared to enjoy writing that was open-ended and allowed them to pursue their own interests, ideas and imaginative flights.

The problems with writing arose for a number of reasons. Three girls and one boy mentioned problems with spelling, four boys and two girls spoke of problems with presentation, and for three boys a long piece of writing was a disincentive. They made comments about preferring tasks where 'you don't have to write as much' because 'I'm not good at holding a pencil'. One felt frustrated by the teacher's interruptions:

He (the teacher) just makes it awkward really. Like "Now I'm going to start you off" and it takes you quite a long time and you can't remember where you came from 'cause then he tells you what to do all over again and you've forgotten where you've got to.

He returned to this later in the interview, and his comments illustrate both the pleasure of doing a piece of creative writing and the frustrations of not being given the time to do a piece of work properly: 'we're just doing a nice good story and while we're in the middle of it he has to say "Right, we're doing maths"...'.

The teachers had thought that boys preferred analytical activities, oral discussions and non-fiction reading and writing and that girls preferred story writing, extended writing and private reading. However, it seems that all of these activities were enjoyed by both sexes, with the exception of non-fiction, which was mentioned by a few boys. Whilst there were some gender differences in the types of books read, most children preferred stories with an active narrative thread and their creative writing reflected this. The struggles of some of the underachievers with the technical aspects of English cannot be ignored, as this was an area of real concern for both children and teachers.

## Discussion

A picture emerges of children aware of the issues under investigation and with much to say about effective conditions for learning. The children acknowledge gender as an important factor, but indicate that at this age there are more similarities than differences with regard to learning preferences. For example, within English, both boys and girls enjoyed writing stories and creative tasks and the most popular genres of fiction were equally read. Where there were differences, these were often between the high achievers and the underachievers; a reminder of the need to be cautious in ascribing attributes solely on the grounds of gender. The classroom environment is complex, with gender and achievement both influencing learning outcomes.

First, there is an awareness amongst these 8-10 year-olds that some boys and girls have different attitudes and behaviour, and that there are different expectations and pressures. The teachers thought these pressures arose from situations outside school and that they were a 'given'. The children indicate that gender expectations are an important part of school culture and that the pressure to conform increases as they grow older. A few of the children maintain that the pressures to conform to gender stereotypes are far greater in school than outside. Some of the boys acknowledge that they 'actively participate in their own underachievement' (Jackson 1998) because of the importance of doing what is expected of boys.

Children's avowed commitment to gender conformity means that strategies such as encouraging all children to behave in the same way (or make the same curriculum choices) may not work. Such an approach, says Green, is often doomed to failure: 'for in offering the opportunity we ride roughshod over the very delineations of gender differences in which students desire to invest or feel compelled to invest' (Green 1997, p 187). However, the openness of these children to talk about behaviour and about what they feel to be the unfair treatment of some teachers towards boys (endorsed by Pickering 1997) does pave the way for in-depth discussions between children and teachers about school culture, gender identity and the harmful effects of some stereotypical behaviour.

Second, the children's perspectives on the curriculum and teaching styles need to be heeded if we are to avoid future disengagement. There are indications that many girls make the best of the teaching they receive, but that they would prefer to be doing work which is more active - involving discussion, group work and using the imagination. Boys, particularly the underachieving, are less compliant and do not concentrate if the subject does not engage their interest. However, when active teaching styles are involved, there is considerable enthusiasm amongst these boys for exciting fiction, history, maths and art. They like working with a partner and enjoy collaborative group work.

This preference for active learning styles by both girls and boys and their enthusiasm for the more creative aspects of English (corroborated by Hall & Coles 1997; Myhill 1999) may indicate a need to re-think both teaching styles and the curriculum, and re-assessing the place of creative writing, history, the creative arts and PE. These findings are endorsed by Pollard and Trigg (2000), who note the increasing disaffection of primary children as they move through the school and

encounter more testing and whole-class teaching and fewer opportunities for discussion, group work and the space to work independently and creatively.

At the same time we must listen to the underachievers' frustration at the difficulties they encounter with written English. Whilst most of these boys (and girls) like reading and writing fiction, the problems of some of the underachievers foreshadow the decline in commitment to writing found in older boys by Brown (1994). These problems may be compounded by low self-esteem and, in some cases, the feeling that they are 'told off' more than is fair. Taken together, these findings indicate the urgent need for creative solutions to this situation.

Boys' underachievement will not be solved by more of the same. As is evident from the perspectives of these children, there are complex dynamics at play in the classroom, where teacher expectations interact with student attitudes to create learning environments that do not necessarily produce the best results. Listening to children provides clues as to what they as consumers value and are willing to engage with. It signals that significant gains may be made from re-assessing and adapting curriculum and teaching styles to meet children's preferred learning styles and subject content.

At the same time, teachers may need to re-assess their strategies for management of behaviour and consider how best to redress the disaffection felt by some boys about what they consider to be unfair treatment. In turn, in-depth discussions between teachers and children may help the latter to understand their own part in creating positive learning environments, so that they too are able to challenge poor behaviour, take responsibility for creating positive gender identities, and raise achievement.

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