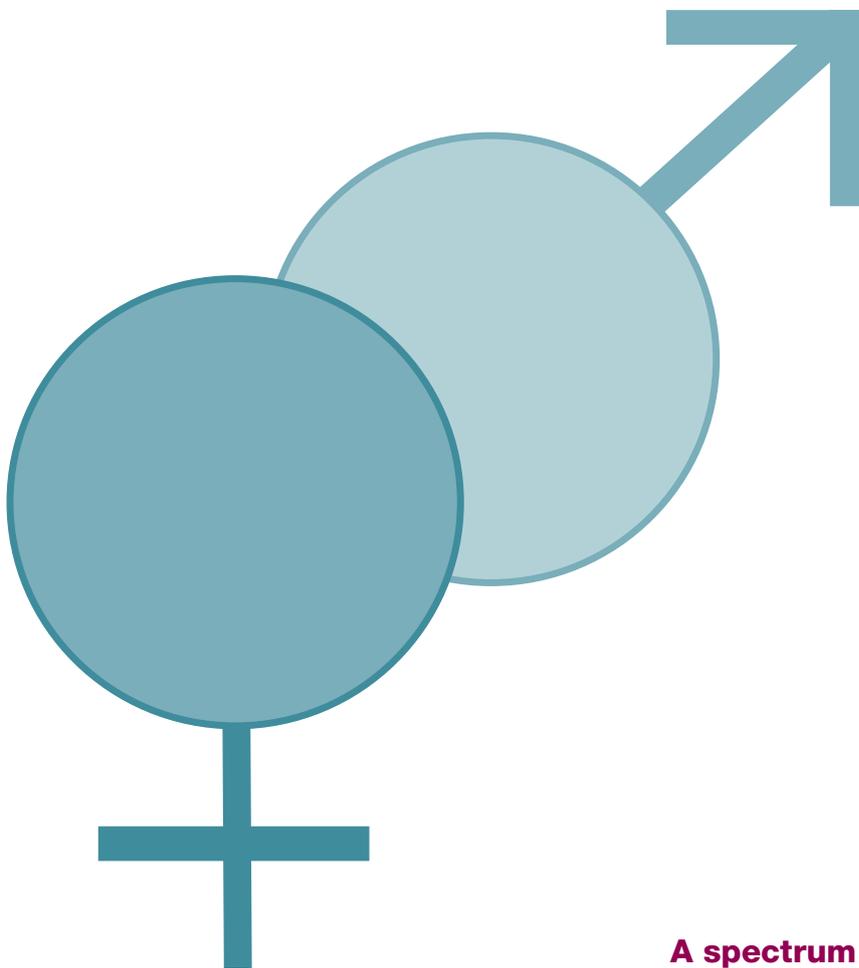


# GENDER in education 3 – 19

A fresh approach



**A spectrum of views commissioned  
and published by the  
Association of Teachers and Lecturers**

**Edited by Hilary Claire**

With contributions from Louise Archer,  
Gavin Baldwin, Caroline Daly,  
Becky Francis, Stephen Gorard,  
Anne Madden, Audrey Osler,  
Carrie Paechter, Ann Phoenix

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## Foreword

*This book could not have come at a better time.*

The past two decades have witnessed the imposition of a curriculum straitjacket, centrally determined directives about teaching and learning, the persistence of a patriarchal education power structure, and a hostile political climate in which equality issues have been ignored and differences denied.

The Labour Government is now promising a 'new relationship' with schools, including greater curriculum flexibility and more freedom for schools to look after their own affairs. The time is therefore right for schools to look once again at a whole range of equality issues, including gender equality. If every child really is to matter, and if the Government's 'personalisation' agenda is to mean anything to children and young people in schools, what is now important is that every individual is equally advantaged in sharing the benefits of learning. Gender equality in schools is about much more than satisfying political imperatives and improving boys' SATs results.

I believe that the education system has enormous potential to challenge gender inequalities in a way that may have a lasting impact on all children and young people and the communities of which they are a part. I also believe that individual teachers and schools have vital roles to play. Those of you who remember the achievements of many schools and local authorities prior to the implementation of the 1988 Education Reform Act will recall a hive of activity on the equalities front. The impetus for these activities came not from central government, but from teachers and schools. It was bottom-up, not top-down. If the teaching profession is genuinely to become re-engaged in the debate about gender equalities, it must find a voice and speak loudly and clearly. The commitment is there and, though never easy, I believe that real progress is possible.

When, two years ago, ATL commissioned Hilary Claire to edit this publication, we chose an author and an editor whom we knew to have extensive knowledge about equality issues; a wide network of colleagues working in the equalities field; the skills to communicate effectively; and the energy and enthusiasm to do the job really well. Right from the start, Hilary Claire's commitment to this publication has been outstanding. She has always been prepared to go the extra mile, particularly when the going got tough. We are delighted with the result, and we pay tribute to her integrity and her tenacity.

Although written with practising teachers and lecturers in mind, *Gender in Education 3 - 19* is a book which a wide range of readers will find of value: teaching assistants and others who work to support pupils' learning in schools and colleges; headteachers, principals and governors; students of education and lecturers in higher education; and administrators and managers in local authorities.

Mary Bousted

ATL General Secretary

## Acknowledgements

This publication owes its life to ATL's equalities group, and in particular to Gill Stainthorpe, a deeply committed teacher practitioner and ATL's equalities coordinator. Nearly two years ago, the group made a commitment that ATL should produce a publication on gender equality issues.

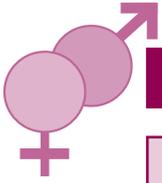
The publication also owes a large part of its life to Sheila Dainton, ATL's Education Policy Adviser, who, having never met me before, phoned me up one day out of the blue and said: "Hilary, how about a book for teachers and students about gender equity, you know, about the ideas that inspire us, that we still work for ... gathering together in one cover some of the most recent research to share effective practice and help promote understanding?" And so the journey started.

Sheila's passion, vision and commitment to equalities issues has been a source of inspiration in compiling this book. We both thought the focus on boys' 'underachievement' was in danger of dominating the policy agenda. We both believed that teachers needed to be reminded and kept informed about wider equality issues, including the ongoing debate about girls' and young women's achievements in the context of school and the workplace. We agreed that this book needed to acknowledge the intersections of 'race'/ethnicity and class with gender and so, together, we mapped out its content. For me it was a wonderful collaboration between women that is part of the way feminists try to work. So thank you Sheila, for a collaboration which has been always genuinely supportive and based on mutual respect and trust. We have sparked each other and worked together to make this book happen.

Thank you too, to Nansi Ellis, Primary Education Adviser at ATL, whose judicious eye for detail and expression has contributed behind the scenes, to Gwen Evans, ATL's Deputy General Secretary, for her ongoing enthusiasm for this project, and to Guy Goodwin, ATL's Publications Officer for his meticulous approach to the detailed editorial work.

Finally, my most heartfelt thanks go to the authors of these chapters who gave so generously of their time, their knowledge and their expertise. They did so because they also believe that we have not yet achieved gender equality, and now, as much as before, policy and practice needs to be researched, understood and developed. I am confident that their contributions will help make a difference to the lives and futures of the girls and boys out there in our schools.

Hilary Claire



This book, *Gender in education 3 – 19: a fresh approach* is for:

- anyone who believes that gender is an important issue in education and who is interested in up-to-date and expert analyses (i.e. more than one analysis) based on current research
- practitioners who want an update
- recently qualified teachers whose courses focused largely on the national curriculum and the National Strategies (there are lots of strategies, but the ones we are referring to are known as National Strategies) but marginalised gender
- student teachers seeking insights into gender in education across the age-range
- ITE tutors looking for accessible, reliable material for their students.

### **A commitment to doing something**

Our commitment to do something stems from a deep concern about the damaging consequences of well over a decade of neglect of equalities issues. This book cannot and does not try to cover everything. However, it aims to raise awareness and ask searching questions about gender in education in the early twenty-first century. As well as providing an up-to-date overview, we hope that individuals will be prepared to monitor and evaluate their own practice. In each chapter the author sets out the parameters of equality provision and makes suggestions about ways to move forward. We hope that you will be able to use the material in different chapters to monitor the situation in your own classrooms, and to intervene to address inequalities.

### **Equality of access and of outcome**

Few of the generation of teachers trained since the advent of the first national curriculum in 1988 have been alerted to look beyond simplistic mixed groupings, or single-sex groups, as the answer to equality of opportunity and many believe that simply mixing groups up or separating boys and girls will ensure equality of access and outcome. However, these two concepts need to be considered separately in terms of equality of opportunity.

Equality of access can mean simply 'provision', without looking to any features in the context which prevent some pupils actually making use of the opportunities or resources. For example, computers might be in the classroom, apparently available to everyone, but there may be no attempt being made to actually monitor whether all the pupils are actually getting a chance to have hands-on experience; tricycles might be available in the Early Years outdoor space, but it may not be clear whether some girls ever use them. Access issues can be more subtle: for instance, in a pair or small group at the computer, it might seem that all the pupils have access, but in reality, one might be marginalised or dominated by other pupils, and so be

getting a less rich experience. Monitoring is at the heart of knowing whether or not equality of access is occurring.

Equality of outcome is paired with access, because it is essential to equal opportunities. It would not be sufficient merely to ensure that all children have access, say to Lego or the climbing frame in the Early Years setting, or in later years to the science equipment or to a literacy task. Outcomes need careful monitoring, in the same way as access. For example, one might note that despite equivalent access to the Lego box, girls' models are on the whole less complex and sophisticated than those made by boys. Monitoring outcomes might indicate that boys climb higher on the frame and seem more confident. Despite the opportunities, some girls may take a back seat in the science class, and seem less secure with their predictions and experimental results. Paired with boys at computers, one may note that girls seldom get hands-on experience. Monitoring creative writing in literacy may show that boys' writing is on the whole less developed than girls', and that they seem reluctant to engage in fictional writing. The purpose of monitoring access and outcome is to give teachers a clear sense of what is at issue in ensuring equal opportunities, so that they can design appropriate interventions to ensure equality of outcome.

### **The limitations of 'entitlement'**

Various injunctions in the national curriculum orders and guidance about 'entitlement', 'inclusion' and consideration of the needs of girls and boys, do not provide any analysis of what the particular gendered nature of these needs might be. Nor do these documents offer any strategies to ensure equality of access and outcome. In fact, individual needs and the importance of differentiation tend to be defined in terms which cut across gender, rather than recognize how gender might inhibit or promote learning.

### **An historical context**

Gender equality in education is by no means a new area of research and concern. Gender was at the centre of attention in educational circles some 20 years ago but some people feel the issue no longer has any relevance. This book attempts to refute this through exploration of some specific issues. In many ways, as the different chapters in this book show, comparison with concerns of 15 to 25 years ago show how little has changed. The inequalities and areas of discrimination have not gone away, though they may require more subtle analysis.

Concerns with the experience and progress of girls and young women in the educational system was part of the Second Wave Women's Movement of the 1970s/80s. This concerned itself with the many features in society which were undermining girls' and women's progress towards equality with men and which resulted in women working in lower-paid work, and being unable to achieve the same levels of power and status as men. The Second Wave itself built on the foundations, campaigns and achievements of women in the nineteenth century and

into the early twentieth century, in Britain and elsewhere in the world. The First Wave Women's Movement went far beyond the campaigns for suffrage and included campaigns for the right to an education.<sup>1</sup> However, an interest in the detailed workings of classroom practice and its impact on girls and young women was new to the Second Wave Women's Movement and was a particular focus of certain education authorities such as the Inner London Education Authority who made considerable commitments to addressing equalities issues, including gender and 'race'. Along with a concern to reform the gender bias in the curriculum, classroom procedures, relations between staff and pupils, and between pupils themselves, were put under the spotlight of research.

During the 1970s and 80s, ground-breaking research was funded and projects set up – all from the perspective of girls' and women's underachievement: for example, Dale Spender's work on classroom interaction and language, and interventions to raise achievement and counteract negative attitudes to maths and science.<sup>2</sup> Within other curriculum areas, teachers and advisors worked to promote girls' participation in football, support their confidence to do woodwork, and get them working with 'boys' toys' such as Lego and bricks. Practical strategies for intervention were summarised in handbooks such as Kate Myers' edited book *Genderwatch after ERA!* (2nd ed. 1992) and *Gender Matters* (ILEA 1986) which still have considerable relevance. At the same time, boys' machismo, their tendency to regard girls as lesser beings, and their unwillingness to engage with traditionally female activities were being seriously addressed. The analysis focused on the effects of masculinity on girls, as well as the theory that challenging prevailing views of masculinity would lead to improvements in boys' all-round emotional development. If boys could be encouraged, for example, to play with domestic resources in the Early Years, take part in domestic science work, or read more fiction they might be on the way to becoming more well-rounded human beings, more ready to share their power, less dismissive of girls and women, more prepared to share domestic chores and admit women into their workplaces as equals. Along with this, there was research about which subjects girls and boys chose voluntarily and why; which resources boys and girls used and how they used them; investigations of how boys dominated the teacher's attention and classroom resources; and careful qualitative work on mixed and single-sex groupings.

However, subsequent to the 1988 Education Reforms Act the role of the local authority as a key provider of support and resources for schools was drastically diminished – and all too often, those offering advice to schools on equalities issues were the first to go. Equally worrying was a widely-held assumption that inequalities would somehow disappear once all children and young people had the entitlement, in law, to a broad and balanced curriculum – including the national curriculum.

The increasing centralisation of education, mechanistic approaches to curriculum development, relentless emphasis on valuing only that which can be measured and the 'delivery' of learning did nothing to further the cause of equality of opportunity. The 1990s will thus go down in the

history of education as a retrograde decade in which, all too often, differences were denied and schools were actively encouraged to be 'race' and gender blind.

With the new century, two things challenged this 'race' and gender blind attitude. One was the inquiry into the death of Stephen Lawrence (the Macpherson Report) which once again brought racism in education onto the agenda. The second was the oblique consequence of the emphasis on measurement and assessment. Now boys' underachievement became the 'new' gender equality issue. Boys' underachievement is debatable, as several chapters in this book discuss, and there are a number of considerations which suggest that the situation is more complex anyway.

This brings us to the present. There remain gender inequalities both during the school years and when pupils leave school, but it's a complex picture which reflects the intersections of class and ethnicity as well as gender. For example, the so-called glass ceiling continues to block the progress of young women – although provision and access have become more equal as a result of the national curriculum. Examinations may appear to favour girls and not boys, but youths from the ethnic minorities are not on a level playing field as they enter the job market, and class and 'race' cut across gender, so that it is impossible to say that 'girls' as a whole group are in a better situation than 'boys'. Boys and young males are apparently more powerful, vocal and certainly command more attention in school – but is their attempt to live up to their vision of masculinity in fact prejudicing their futures, rather than advancing them?

## **What is the relationship between gender, class and ethnicity?**

The most recent statistics show that girls and boys in different ethnic and class groupings achieve differently, sometimes significantly so. None of us is just female or male – we grow up within a certain class with all its attendant subtle cultural influences, even if, as children – or as adults – we have made 'border crossings'. Though definitions of class do not exactly match with wealth and poverty, recent data show that poverty, measured by pupils on free school meals, cuts across gender and ethnicity and continues to account for the poorest attainment of all.<sup>3</sup> Each of us, too, has 'ethnicity', including those from the dominant, white, English-speaking, Protestant group, although people from that majority ethnic group do not always recognize its impact. Though it is important not to stereotype any group, gender may mean different things within different class and ethnic groups. As the influential Parekh Report<sup>4</sup> pointed out, ethnic identities themselves are fluid, partly as a consequence of changing gender identities within ethnic groupings.

## **Gender and power**

In this book authors refer regularly to the 'social construction' of gender, namely that how we behave as males or females is part of our social learning and identity, and not fixed by our biological sex. In the analysis of socially constructed gender, learning and 'doing' gender are

inextricably interwoven with power relations between males and females in the wider society. Both sexes have power, but power can be, and is, exercised in different ways, and typically within different contexts, for example by exclusion or by enforcing deference and conformity to certain behaviours. As several of the chapters explore, boys and girls learn how to 'do boy' and 'do girl' within a context where they are rewarded by adults and policed by their peers (by both their own gender and by the other) to behave in line with the prevailing constructions of gender. 'Femininity' depends on clear differentiation from 'masculinity' and vice versa. So, for example, girls may learn that they should be polite, not rush around bashing into people or making a huge noise, should wait their turn, be helpful and not interrupt. The subtext is that they simultaneously learn to defer to boys who are permitted to behave in opposite ways. They will be controlled by other girls and by boys for going out of line, through exclusion, mockery or bullying. Similarly, boys learn that any behaviour which is seen as effeminate will be punished by other boys who will use their power to ridicule, bully and marginalise, and they may also be punished by girls who see such behaviour as inappropriate to 'proper' masculinity. As we shall see, prevailing conceptions of gender can strongly influence how girls and boys behave as learners.

## **What is 'underachievement' and why is the concept important?**

In this book underachievement is discussed in terms of social groups and not individuals. 'Underachievement' is a concept which recognizes that children's potential to achieve is not innately limited by their gender, class or ethnicity. This still recognizes that among the categories potentially leading to inequality, specific disabilities may hinder learning. So, if innate characteristics are not responsible for failure to attain, one needs to look elsewhere. Research into underachievement uses data to show that a certain social group is not reaching the same levels of attainment relative to another which otherwise shares the same characteristics (e.g. holding age, ethnicity and social class constant, researchers can look at sex differences). Research on underachievement is normally committed to using this information to identify what factors might be holding back a group's attainment and what remedies could be put in place. In particular, such data can demonstrate that a group has lost ground over time within the schooling system, forcing us to ask probing questions about the nature of schooling in that period. It can also show where a group has improved, which can help to identify positive factors which could be generalised to other situations.

## **An overview of the different chapters**

The first two chapters in this book draw on quantitative rather than qualitative research. Gillborn and Mirza address broad issues to do with the inter-relationships between gender, ethnicity and class. They emphasise that it is not possible to consider gender in isolation from class and ethnicity. Correlating the official data, collected in the late 90s, they conclude that of all the inequalities, ethnicity is the most potent. In fact, the gender gap is smaller than inequalities of attainment associated with ethnic origin and social class background and the Black/White

gap is twice the size of the gender gap.<sup>5</sup> This is an important reminder of a national situation, which should provide a lens through which all the chapters should be considered.

Stephen Gorard's chapter 'International dimensions' also offers a framework to consider gender and attainment in a wider context. Drawing on international evidence from the PISA<sup>6</sup> report in 2000, he puts the British data and concern about boys' underachievement into a wider perspective. Boys' underachievement, especially in reading literacy, is an international and not just a British concern. In fact, the gender gap in the UK is unremarkable and slightly less than the average in the international league tables. Gorard concludes that given the universality of the gap between girls and boys, cultural or pedagogic specificity cannot be the reason and proposes that it is more realistic and sensible to regard boys and girls as 'differently literate'. He suggests that many of our interventions are useless, or disadvantage girls. Like Gillborn and Mirza, he believes that in addition to the effects of socially constructed gender and changed assessment procedures, the interaction of gender, ethnicity and poverty is the source of difference.

The six chapters that follow draw chiefly on qualitative in-depth research, rather than large-scale quantitative work, and look at specific issues within the school and classroom setting. Ann Phoenix's chapter 'Learning styles' starts by emphasising the power that 'doing girl' and 'doing boy' has upon learning and attainment. Learning styles are not something that come with one's genes; they are far more dynamic, involving relationships and negotiation with others. Boys are underachieving, Phoenix argues, because they are more concerned with negotiating their masculinity than with the demands of schoolwork and this needs to be addressed.

Becky Francis' chapter on classroom interaction reiterates Ann Phoenix's analysis of the power of 'doing gender'. Boys have a tendency to be homophobic and misogynistic, punitive of those that go 'out of line'. Francis ends her chapter with important recommendations for addressing this situation. Teachers need to reflect honestly on their own classrooms and their own practices, and how far they need to change and challenge what is going on.

Louise Archer's chapter reviews current thinking about mixed and single-sex schools and groupings. She too sees gender inequalities interwoven with social class, ethnicity, sexuality and disability and is careful to avoid a 'one size fits all' recommendation. She concludes that we may be focusing on the wrong question. Rather than focus on whether groups should be mixed or not, Archer argues that we need to challenge the prevalence of sexist attitudes and practices in education.

In her analysis of language issues and boys' so-called underachievement, Caroline Daly argues against simplistic gendered categories. As Phoenix reminded us, White middle class boys are not the objects of concern. We must, Daly urges, address ethnicity and class – particularly poverty, in discussions about literacy. She draws similar conclusions to Gorard, that there may be less of a 'boys' problem' than difficulties with restricted definitions and

understanding of literacy, leading to unconfident teaching and narrow assessment strategies. Best practice in literacy is for everybody, not just boys, and Daly ends her chapter with a long list of key factors to enhance literacy across the board.

Audrey Osler draws attention to a largely hidden issue in schools – girls' exclusion. Exclusion is typically defined as a male problem and part of the 'crisis in masculinity'. Osler reports on her own research with girls excluded or self-excluded from formal education. Racism, particularly against recent migrants, asylum seekers and pupils of Asian descent is common, leading to truancy and self-exclusion. African-Caribbean girls are much more likely to be excluded by the school than White girls. The chapter ends with suggestions for remedies offered by the young women who participated in the research.

Gavin Baldwin's chapter on heterosexism and homophobia highlights an issue which is largely evaded in primary schools, and not always handled well in secondary. He draws attention to the underlying abuses of power by a dominant group and suggests that schools should recognise that sexuality is as much a part of identity as ethnicity. Education to counteract homophobia and heterosexism needs to be part of 'education for life' in which people develop fully and confidently, valuing who they are and recognizing the equal value of others. Anti-bullying policies need to be much more explicit about including lesbians, gay men, bisexual and transgendered people (LGBTs to use Baldwin), and acknowledging and challenging the extent to which dominant heterosexist/heterosexual discourses oppress and stunt people.

The penultimate chapter by Carrie Paechter, entitled 'The gendered curriculum', draws together an historical overview of the curriculum. She analyses the many continuities from the elitist and male assumptions about education, from the nineteenth century. The powerful subjects are still maths and science, taught, Paechter argues, in ways which make them less attractive to girls, with the human application that appeals to girls being played down. The other core, literacy, has become increasingly feminised. Paechter points out that despite the National Curriculum, there are many areas of inequality in provision and experience. She ends by referring briefly to the vocational curriculum 'the most gender segregated aspect of the entire educational system'.

Anne Madden's chapter, which ends this book, draws on important research from the Equal Opportunities Commission and challenges the assumption that girls are the main beneficiaries of more enlightened approaches to gender issues in schools. Although some progress has been made in improving the educational opportunities for girls and young women both at school and in the world of work, the author looks at what schools need to do now to ensure that hard-fought gains are not undermined. A particularly concern is the Government's apparent lack of engagement in issues surrounding gender-stereotypical subject choices at a time when broadening the 14-19 curriculum means that students have greater choice. Madden argues that this could be a lost opportunity leading to more gender bias in students' choice of subjects, not less. The message is plain: the sex stereotyping which moulds children from their earliest days continues to sabotage efforts towards equality. The battle is not yet won!

## Glossary – some definitions, relationships and clarifications

### *When and why do we use ‘gender’ and not ‘sex’?*

**‘Sex’** refers to the biological identity that we were born with – the presence of physical characteristics which determine whether our birth certificate states that we are male or female. Often the word ‘gender’ is wrongly used, including in official material, to show divisions between people. When nothing other than biological difference is at issue we should really use the word ‘sex’ (e.g. all these children are the same sex; they are all girls; or, this changing room is for girls, that one for boys).

**‘Gender’** refers to the socially constructed ways in which we live out our identity as males or females. Virtually every chapter in this book alludes to the social construction of gender as a critical factor in why girls and boys may behave – even attain – differently in the educational setting. The concept of ‘gender’ as a social construct is integral to the arguments in this book about gender inequalities and how to deal with them. The social construction of gender is not a new concept, though it is helpful to be reminded about how it contrasts with ‘essentialist’ views which suggest that people are biologically determined to behave in certain ways. Some people will argue that we still carry the heritage of lives as hunters and gatherers, in which men were biologically programmed to be aggressive and women to be protective of their young. It is very difficult to prove one way or another, since the controlled trials one would need are not viable. In any event, for every non-aggressive male one can often locate an aggressive female! Hence, the extent to which gendered attitudes and behaviours relate directly to biological sex is contentious. For example, women’s tendency to defer to males in conversation and, conversely, some fathers’ tendency to hand smelly babies over to the nearest woman when the nappy needs changing is gendered: though possibly indirectly related to sexual behaviour, there is no direct biological link.

### *‘Doing gender’*

Several authors in this book use the phrase ‘to do gender’ which powerfully suggests how each of us actively constructs and reinforces gendered behaviour from moment to moment, whether subtly, consciously or subconsciously. When a woman sits with her knees together and a man sprawls; when a woman stops talking because someone else has butted in, or jumps up to clear the table; when a man becomes the spokesperson for a mixed group, or takes over in managing a joint project – they are ‘doing gender’. Girls and boys learn to do gender from the earliest age with positive and negative reinforcements at every turn, which, for most of us, are extremely difficult to ignore or unlearn.

### ***What is the relationship between gender and sexuality?***

There is some dispute in the literature about whether gender should include sexuality or whether sexuality should be a separate concept. Sexuality refers to one's preferred sexual orientation, whether towards one's own or the opposite sex. It is important, again, not to fall into stereotypes and assume that there are clear-cut behavioural differences between heterosexual and homosexual people, even if, for reasons to do with establishing one's identity, some people adopt more stereotypical positions with respect to their sexuality. For heterosexual and for gay or lesbian people, there are a variety of socially constructed gendered options and behaviours, including to hide one's sexuality, or to make it public.

**'Race'** – In this book, following contemporary practice, we put the word 'race' in inverted commas to indicate that the construct is highly controversial and may even be offensive. The term 'mixed-heritage' is now generally more acceptable than 'mixed-race'.

The *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, (2000, Houghton Mifflin Company) offers this explanation:

*'The notion of 'race' is nearly as problematic from a scientific point of view as it is from a social one. European physical anthropologists of the 17th and 18th centuries proposed various systems of racial classifications based on such observable characteristics as skin color, hair type, body proportions, and skull measurements, essentially codifying the perceived differences among broad geographic populations of humans. The biological aspect of 'race' is described today not in observable physical features but rather in such genetic characteristics as blood groups and metabolic processes, and the groupings indicated by these factors seldom coincide very neatly with those put forward by earlier physical anthropologists. Many cultural anthropologists now consider 'race' to be more a social or mental construct than an objective biological fact.'*

Parekh (2000, p.xxiv) emphasizes that the word 'race' is important since it refers to the reality of racism; it is unhelpful, however, to the extent that it reflects and perpetuates the belief that the human species consists of separate 'race's. A further disadvantage is that overuse can deflect attention from cultural and religious aspects of racism, as distinct from those that are concerned with physical appearance.

Ethnicity refers to the cultural aspects of individual and group identity and includes origin or ancestry, language and religion. It may also include the arts, customs, beliefs and practices such as clothing or food preparation. Ethnicity is a dynamic and fluid concept. What people mean by their ethnicity will change as a result of immigration to a new country and contact with different ethnic groups, blending and intermarriage. Though commonly used about minority groups, everyone, including the majority, has ethnicity. A multi-ethnic society such as ours is

by definition multi-cultural and normally, multi-lingual as well. The term EAL – ‘English as an Additional Language’ refers to people with a first language other than English.

### ***Homophobia and heterosexism***

Homosexuality refers to a preferred sexual orientation towards one’s own sex. Heterosexism is the taken-for-granted assumption that heterosexuality is both the norm and the correct orientation. As a general rule, gay and lesbian people do not share the same acceptance of their sexuality as heterosexuals. The extent of discrimination or victimisation they suffer may lead them to feel obliged to live a lie about their identity. In a book about inequalities, it is important to remind ourselves of what Gavin Baldwin, the author of the chapter entitled ‘Combating homophobia and heterosexism’ has called ‘the last prejudice’.

## **References**

- 1 The First Wave Women’s Movement also campaigned for the right to work in the professions, for rights in marriage, against victimisation of prostitutes and violence against women, for child benefits and family allowances to go to the mother.
- 2 For example: Burton, J. (1986) *Girls into Maths Can Go*. London: Holt; the ‘Girls into science and technology’ (GIST) project headed by Alison Kelly.
- 3 Data extracted from GCSE results, 2003.
- 4 Parekh B, (2000), *The future of multi ethnic Britain*, Runnymede Trust. London: Profile Books.
- 5 The most recent data (2003) complicates this picture by showing that Black girls are in fact now achieving at a higher level than White boys in GCSE (see BBC online education 24.02.2004: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/3517171.stm>).
- 6 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) conducted by the OECD ([www.pisa.oecd.org](http://www.pisa.oecd.org)).



## Mapping 'race', class and gender: A summary of the report by David Gillborn and Heidi Mirza

Hilary Claire

When we proposed a book on current gender issues in education, we were well aware that the days are long past when gender could be considered in isolation from the other main categories of class, 'race' and ethnicity. David Gillborn and Heidi Mirza's report on behalf of Ofsted – *Educational Inequality: mapping 'race', class and gender: a synthesis of research evidence* – published in 2000, is, to date, the most comprehensive, measured review integrating the different strands. With the permission of Dr Gillborn and Professor Mirza, I have summarised the report, setting the scene as they do with an analysis of the impacts of 'race' and class on attainment, and then concentrating on the sections which specifically deal with gender. Rather than laboriously transpose their text into reported speech, I have quoted directly and extensively from the report. In the interests of easy reading, without interruptions, I have not put page numbers for every quotation. All italicisation within quoted sections is from the original document. Readers are strongly recommended to go to the original for the full text, which is available and downloadable at [www.ofsted.gov.uk](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk).

*'The [Macpherson] report does not place a responsibility on someone else; it places a responsibility on each of us. We must make racial equality a reality. The vision is clear: we must create a society in which every individual, regardless of colour, creed or 'race', has the same opportunities and respect as his or her neighbour.'*

(Jack Straw, then Home Secretary, speaking on the publication of the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry, Feb 1999)<sup>1</sup>

The Gillborn-Mirza Report was commissioned in the context of the Macpherson Report and a realisation that ethnic inequalities needed to be discussed within the wider domain of educational inequality. It aimed to establish '...on the basis of the best available evidence, the relative significance of 'race' and ethnicity alongside other factors, especially gender and social class background, so as to clarify an agenda for racial equality in education.' No person is without class or gender, whatever their ethnicity, and through meticulous and systematic scrutiny of material which breaks down the broad categories of 'race', class or gender and takes into account the ways that they intersect, Gillborn and Mirza show how much more complex, and sometimes surprising, is the reality of lived experience. Because it grew out of the particular concerns about 'race' and ethnicity which the Macpherson Report had identified, the initial focus of *Mapping 'race', class and gender* is on ethnicity/'race'. It then moves to an overview of the effects of social class, and how these interact with 'race'/ethnicity. Finally, introducing statistics about gender, the Report offers a three-dimensional

model reflecting all three categories. In the summary that follows, I have followed this pattern, so that readers have a clear view of the context in which gender fits with categorisations about educational attainment based on 'race'/ethnicity and class.

## **The focus on 'race' and ethnicity**

Gillborn and Mirza use 'the principal minority ethnic groups as defined in the last census: Black Caribbean, Black African, Black other, Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi. The ethnic group names... used... are those most commonly adopted in official statistics and relevant academic research. There is also a recognition of terms that would be acknowledged and supported by the people so labelled. Consequently, the term 'African-Caribbean, is used as a general signifier for people of Black African and/or Black Caribbean heritage.' The Report does not, however, mention that the largest ethnic minority group in England, is actually the Irish, or provide separate statistics for this group within the general category 'white' – reflecting this gap in official statistics. The main data about minority groups came from the Educational Minority Achievement Grant (EMAG) submissions, in which LEAs reported the proportion of pupils attaining at least five higher grade GCSEs. The authors are careful to point out that there was considerable variation in data available from different LEAs and due to limitations of official requirements, which asked for percentages and not raw numbers, they had to be very cautious about comparisons and how the data was used.

## **Equality of opportunity – inclusion and underachievement**

Gillborn and Mirza set the scene by pointing out that 'equality of opportunity' is a vital issue of social and economic importance to the whole of society. The view which assumes that minority ethnic performance is only of relevance to the minorities themselves, they argue, is out of date in the context of the wider economic and social trends towards global diversity and the necessity for a sustainable multiculturalism: 'If any individual is denied the opportunity to fulfil their potential because of their racial, ethnic, class or gendered status it is now widely understood that society as a whole bears a social and economic cost by being deprived the fruits of their enterprise, energy and imagination.'

In a climate in which 'inclusion' has, for many people, come to signify pupils with specific learning needs or disabilities, it is helpful to be reminded of its wider meanings and that 'inequality of educational attainment is a key factor placing young people at risk of isolation, non-participation and social exclusion later in life.' There is a further pertinent reminder that the way the term 'underachievement' is used, particularly in the media, makes implicit assumptions about causes. This is despite the extensive critique from the 1980s onwards of analyses which 'blamed the victim'. Thus, even now, 'it is often assumed... that the reason for 'underachievement' must lie with the pupils and/or their families, rather than the education system itself.' In a comment which could just as well apply to the notion of underachievement

with respect to gender, the authors point out that ‘what began life as a useful concept, meant to identify an inequality of opportunity, has sometimes slipped into a pervasive ‘discourse of despair’ among and about ethnic minorities.’ Moreover, analyses of inequalities in educational outcomes, should ‘not lead to a hierarchy of ethnic minorities based on assumptions of inherent ability.’ On the contrary, they are at pains to show that ‘differences in average achievement between social groups raise cause for concern but do not, in themselves, *prove* anything about the potential of those groups.’ Indeed, official statistics can show that a group ‘ranked poorly in national measures of achievement... can be doing relatively well in some schools and in some LEAs... of the six minority ethnic categories... analysed, every one is the highest attaining of all in at least one LEA.’ ‘In one in 10 authorities that monitor GCSE results by ethnicity, pupils in all recorded Black groups are more likely to attain the benchmark than their White peers. However, there is still a picture of marked inequality elsewhere: there are almost four times as many LEAs where the picture is reversed and White pupils outperform each of the Black groups.’

In contrast, in LEAs where ethnicity is monitored as a group, Indian pupils are not just performing better than other South Asian groups but attaining higher outcomes than their White counterparts. The picture for Pakistani pupils is more complex in that nationally they are less likely to do as well as their White peers, but in a small number of LEAs they do better than their White peers. Similarly, pupils of Bangladeshi origin still lag behind both White pupils and other minority groups nationally, but at local level this pattern is challenged.

In summary then, ‘the EMAG returns demonstrate that no ethnic group is inherently less capable of academic success’, but that ‘African-Caribbean, Pakistani and Bangladeshi pupils are markedly less likely to attain five higher grade GCSEs than their White and Indian peers nationally.’ The group which has made the most significant gains over the decade is Indian pupils; Bangladeshi pupils have improved significantly but the gap between themselves and White youngsters has stayed much the same and the gap between African-Caribbean and Pakistani pupils and their White peers is bigger now than a decade ago.

## **The situation with African-Caribbean pupils**

It is of even greater concern that ‘available evidence suggests that the inequalities of attainment for African-Caribbean pupils become progressively greater as they move through the school system; such differences become more pronounced between the end of the primary school and the end of secondary education.’

Important issues arise when one attempts to account for these discrepancies which the report returns to, in considering the effects of class and gender as well as ‘race’/ethnicity. ‘Research evidence... challenges stereotypes about alienation, disenchantment and lack of motivation. In comparison with White peers of the same sex and social class background, for example, studies show that Black pupils tend to display higher levels of motivation and

commitment to education. This has been documented in relation to pupils' enthusiasm for school, rates of attendance and support for homework. It is also clearly indicated in the relatively greater encouragement to pursue further education that African-Caribbean pupils receive from their families and in the young people's decisions to pursue such study, often despite negative experiences in the compulsory system... Qualitative research (in primary and secondary schools) has consistently highlighted ways in which Black pupils are stereotyped and face additional barriers to academic success.'

## **Social class**

Receiving Free School Meals (FSM) is conventionally an indicator of social class in educational circles, but in reality it can be seen as an indicator of family poverty and not simply a measure of social class. 'There is a strong direct association between social class background and success in education: put simply, the higher a child's social class, the greater are their attainments on average... This is one of the longest-established trends in British education but the association is not static. Indeed, there is evidence that the inequality of attainment between social class has grown since the late 1980s.'

## **African-Caribbean pupils and class factors**

Data that has only now become available confirms the associations between class and attainment. The exceptions are African-Caribbean pupils; indeed Black pupils are doing less well than their peers regardless of class background, and working-class African-Caribbean pupils are falling behind working-class peers from other ethnic backgrounds. African-Caribbean pupils from middle-class groups are not attaining at the same level as other middle-class groups. In other words, social class factors do not override ethnic inequalities for this community.

## **Summary of influences of class and ethnicity**

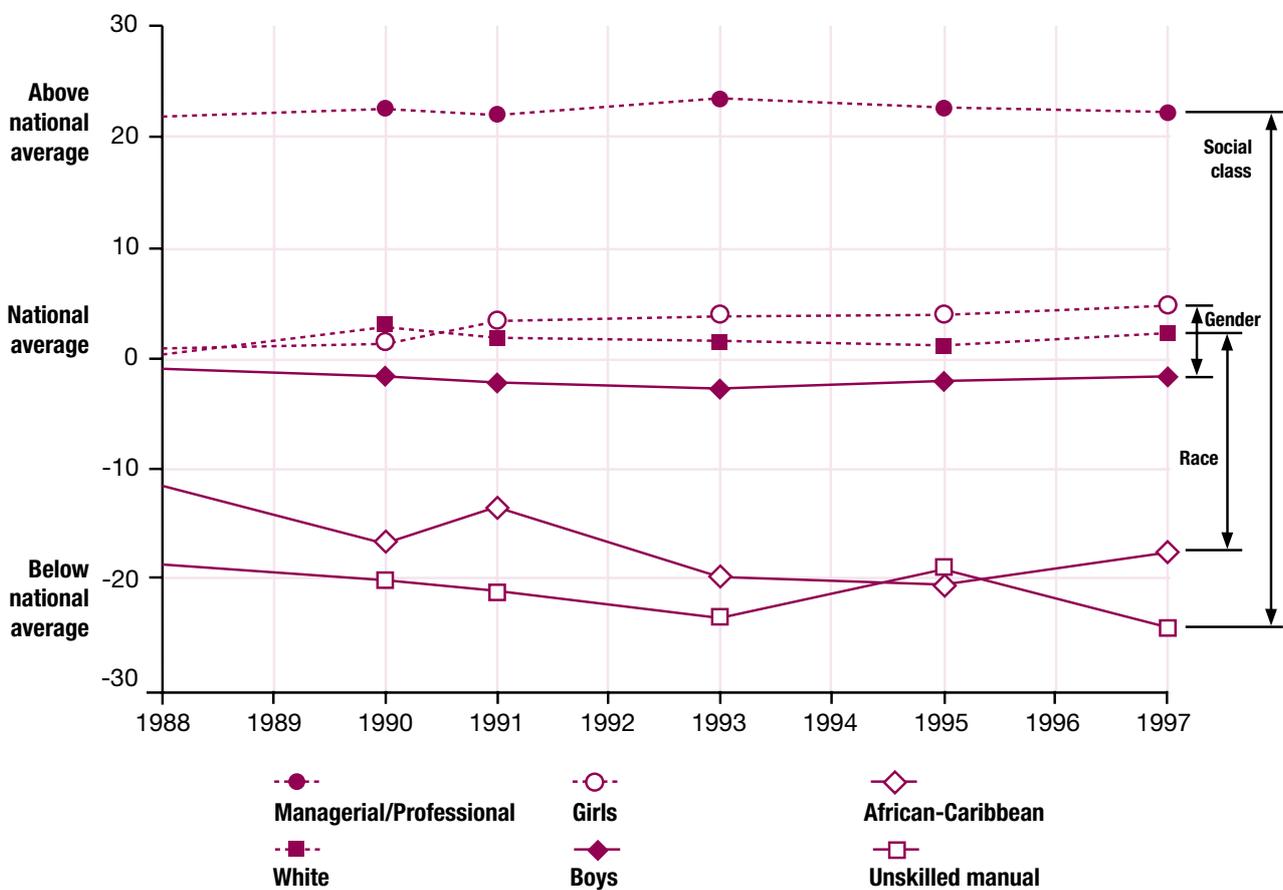
'Social class factors do not override the influence of ethnic inequality: when comparing pupils with similar class backgrounds there are still marked inequalities of attainment between different ethnic groups. Indeed, in some respects the analysis reveals new inequalities; showing that Black pupils from relatively advantaged backgrounds are little better placed as a group, than White peers from manual backgrounds. This suggests that while targeting class disadvantage is clearly necessary, in isolation, such action may have only a limited effect in closing the gap between particular ethnic groups.'

## **Gender differences – is there a 'gender gap'?**

As we will see in following chapters, the existing gap in attainment between girls and boys in GCSE results has widened over the past decade. Gillborn and Mirza briefly allude to the

explanations on offer, ranging from new approaches to assessment, the positive impact of equal opportunities policies on girls' attainment, the effects of changing notions of masculinity, and new attitudes to school and work on the part of boys and girls. They remind us that the phenomenon of 'boys' underachievement' is not consistent across subject areas, and that relative gains made by girls at GCSE are reversed in certain A-Level results. Furthermore, they warn against complacency about girls' achievement, pointing to the additional barriers that girls face in fulfilling their potential. Figure 1 is extremely useful in contextualising the 'gender gap' within the other aspects of educational inequality which have already been summarised.

**Figure 1: GCSE attainment by gender and ethnic origin, England & Wales 1988-1997 (five or more higher grade (A\*-C) passes)**



In this graph, the proportion of pupils nationally attaining five or more GCSE higher grade passes is on the horizontal axis. The graph clearly shows that social class accounts for the greatest difference in attainment, that the gender gap in favour of girls has increased by six per cent and that the gap between Black and White pupils has increased from 12 per cent to 18 per cent over nine years. This information is set out again in Figure 2 opposite.

**Figure 2: The percentage attainment gap in the three areas of inequality in 1988 and 1997.**

	<b>Gender</b> % girls out-performed boys	<b>Social Class</b> % managerial/prof out-performed unskilled/manual	<b>'Race'</b> % White pupils out-performed Black pupils
1988	3%	39%	12%
1997	9%	49%	18%

In each set of figures, the higher attaining group is first (i.e. in 1997, nine per cent more girls than boys attained five or more GCSEs; 18 per cent more White pupils than Black pupils.)

Mirza and Gillborn point out that 'in the latest figures, the Black/White gap is twice the size of the gender gap'. Figure 1 and 2 show that 'the gender gap is considerably smaller than the inequalities of attainment associated with ethnic origin and social class background.'

Although patterns of attainment do vary by social class background within ethnic groups, 'this analysis reveals that of the three best known dimensions of inequality ('race', class and gender) the latter, gender, and in particular boys' underperformance represents the narrowest disparity. In contrast to the disproportionate media attention, our data shows gender to be a less problematic issue than the significant disadvantage of 'race' and the even greater inequality of class. ...it is important [however] not to fall into the trap of simply arguing *between* various inequalities. *All* pupils have a gender, class and ethnic identity – the factors do not operate in isolation.'

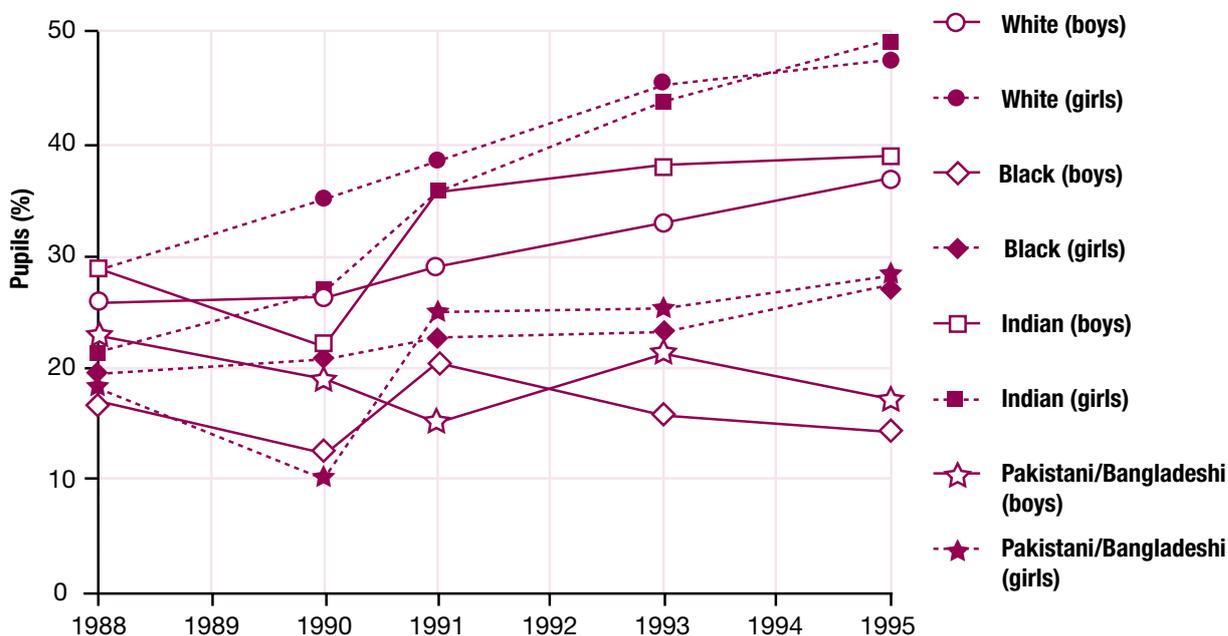
### **African-Caribbean boys and girls**

'Qualitative research showing African-Caribbean girls doing relatively well in comparison to their White male and female peers within the locality of their schools has been much cited as evidence of gender-specific strategies to resist racism and overcome disadvantage. This has generally been misinterpreted to mean that it is only Black boys and not Black girls who face inequalities.' However, data from the Youth Cohort Study suggests that Black girls are also part of the generally unequal picture for Black pupils, which operates *regardless* of pupils' gender.

### **GCSE attainment according to ethnicity and gender**

Figure 3 shows data organised by ethnic origin and gender. It is important to note that in order to produce viable samples, the numbers for Pakistani and Bangladeshi groups have been combined and, even so, numbers for some groups are very small.

**Figure 3: GCSE attainment by gender and ethnic origin, England & Wales 1988-1995 (five or more higher grade (A\*-C) passes)**



There are two ways to interpret this data, both important and revealing:

*i) With respect to gender*

The diagram shows that Indian and White girls are the highest attainers of all groups. By 1991 Pakistani/Bangladeshi girls had overtaken their male peers, confirming a picture in which *all girls overtook boys from the same ethnic groups*. It is possible to draw a general conclusion from this data, that ‘in each of the principal ethnic groups nationally, girls are more likely to achieve higher grade GCSEs than boys of the same ethnic group.’

Since 1991, White girls and Indian girls have achieved more educationally, not just compared to girls from other ethnic groups, but all other pupils. Indian boys’ and White boys’ academic attainment remains above that of other ethnic groups. In 1996, of all groups, Black boys’ attainment was the lowest, although in 1988 they were part of a cluster of low-achieving pupils excluding Indian and White girls, and Indian boys. This represents a slight drop in performance since 1988, and, along with Pakistani/Bangladeshi boys, a failure to progress.

*ii) With respect to ethnicity*

Setting aside gender as the focus, significant differences remain between attainment for different ethnic groups, regardless of pupils’ gender. Indian pupils are the exception to a rule in which pupils of other minority ethnic groups are underachieving relative to their White peers. This puts into perspective optimistic interpretations of the situation for Black girls, sometimes quoted as the contrast to Black boys, whom they are indeed overtaking. Looking up the graph, rather than downwards, there remain considerable inequalities with comparison not just to White or Indian girls, but also to White or Indian boys.

## 'Race', class and gender

Gillborn and Mirza use the data from the Youth Cohort Study, which uniquely categorises pupils' attainment at GCSE using all three dimensions, to show that comparing like with like, all pupils were more likely to attain five high-grade GCSEs in 1995 than in 1988.

The data shows that using ethnicity as the main variable, 'Indian pupils did best, followed by White, Pakistani/Bangladeshi and Black pupils respectively.' However:

- 'by 1995, the gender gap was present within each ethnic group regardless of social class background
- ethnic inequalities persist even when simultaneously controlling for gender and class
- when comparing like with like, in terms of gender, class and ethnic origin, consistent and significant ethnic inequalities of attainment remain clear'.

## Conclusion

The concluding message of the report is this: *'social class and gender differences are... associated with differences in attainment, but neither can account for persistent underlying ethnic inequalities.'*

The authors recommend that in the interests of inclusion and equality, various school and LEA strategies which have been identified as successful should be adopted much more widely. In line with the main concern of their review, set out in the opening quotation from the Macpherson Report, these strategies focus on 'race' rather than gender. Nevertheless, this report is unequivocal that, even if class and 'race' are more powerful predictors, in all the data, gender is a factor in unequal attainment. Even mainly White schools are part of a wider multicultural national and international community, and, as they point out, 'all pupils have a gender, class and ethnic identity – the factors do not operate in isolation.' Thus, despite the main focus on gender of the book in which this summary appears, Gillborn's and Mirza's conclusions should be read as having relevance to our readers. Moreover, as other chapters point out, the recommended strategies to reduce inequalities of 'race'/ethnicity are equally applicable to class and gender.

## Recommendations

Schools and LEAs should:

- establish 'strong leadership on equal opportunities and social justice' (from the LEA and the headteacher in particular)
- seek and make use of pupil and parent perspectives
- design and implement clear procedures for recording and acting on racist incidents
- generate and sustain an ethos that is open and vigilant, which enables pupils to discuss 'race' issues and share concerns
- develop and communicate high expectations accompanied by a clear view that under-performance by any group is unacceptable
- review curricular and pastoral approaches to ensure their sensitivity and appropriateness
- employ ethnic monitoring as a routine and rigorous part of the school's/LEA's self-evaluation and management.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry (1999) was chaired by Lord Macpherson, whose name is commonly given to the ensuing Report.

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# The international dimension: What can we learn from the PISA study?

Stephen Gorard

## An introduction to PISA

Comparisons between the educational processes and outcomes in different countries are growing in popularity. Indeed, they have become a kind of annual ‘education Olympics’ for some commentators. These international comparisons allow policy-makers in one country to put the position of their own country in perspective. They allow researchers to broaden their understanding of the impact of new policies, by comparing changes in countries in which a new policy is introduced, with changes in a country unaffected by the new policy. They present, in effect, a kind of natural and ethical experimental control.

International comparisons also have a downside. International league tables encourage policy-makers to concentrate on improvements relative to other countries rather than absolute changes over time. Above all, they seem to encourage glib remedies. In fact, it is very difficult to draw practical answers from international comparisons within education because of the huge variations in age ranges, curricula, motivation, and forms and times of assessment. We know that educational tests even within one country are neither totally accurate nor reliable in what they measure. It is, therefore, almost impossible to reach agreement on the comparability of different national qualifications such as the Baccalaureate in France and the A-Level in the UK. There are different curricula and different standards of record-keeping in different countries. There are different response rates to surveys, and education is not compulsory in some countries, meaning that a large proportion of the age cohort is missed out. We therefore need to be cautious in our interpretation of the publicised results of such studies.

In 2000 the OECD conducted an international, comparative study called the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). PISA covered 265,000 15-year-old pupils from 32 countries. The survey items included tests in literacy, maths and science, and pupil and school questionnaires on aspects of student motivation, use of ICT, school organisation and so on. This chapter presents some of its findings as they relate to differences in the achievement of boys and girls, and places them in the context of more detailed work on test scores in the UK.

## PISA findings

One interesting phenomenon that emerged from the PISA study is the variation between countries in the extent to which students are separated by sex in schools or teaching groups. For example, table 1 (Column 2) on page 28 shows that the percentage of the sample from each country in the EU in single-sex schools ranges from zero in the Scandinavian countries, which also recorded the highest levels of attainment in PISA, to 44 per cent in Ireland. Column 3

indicates how male and female students are distributed between schools. It shows that in Finland only seven per cent of pupils would have to exchange schools for all schools to have equivalent numbers of males and females. In Ireland, this figure rises to 30 per cent. This degree of separation of the sexes is largely explicable by the proportion of single-sex provision, but is also related to the proportion of selective schools (where girls tend to do better) and faith-based schools in each country. Thus, the UK has a relatively high proportion of students in single-sex provision, but an otherwise even distribution of boys and girls between schools. This is in contrast to Austria, for example, where the selective process leads to considerable segregation between schools by sex, in fact, even if not in principle. Interestingly, the degree of separation of the sexes in schools is unrelated to other types of separation such as pupils' country of origin, family income and so on.

Policy-makers worldwide have given considerable priority to gender equity in educational opportunities and attainment, and have been especially concerned to combat the disadvantage faced by females. The PISA 2000 study shows that progress has been made internationally. According to the PISA website, however, there is now a growing problem of relative under-achievement for males, especially in reading literacy. But is this really the case?

Surprisingly perhaps, the degree of separation reported in Table 1 on page 28 and discussed in the paragraph above is not related to the differences in the reading, maths, and science scores for males and females in each country (columns 4 and 5). Column 6 shows the proportionate gap 'in favour' of girls for reading literacy (the only test with complete coverage in 2000). Females, on average, do better than males in all countries (and not just in the EU) and by about the same amount. The largest attainment gap is in Finland – a country otherwise feted for its comprehensive intakes and schools outcomes – and Finland has no single-sex provision in the sample. The smallest gaps are in Denmark (also no single-sex) and Spain (only two per cent single-sex). It is clear that boys (and indeed girls) in the UK perform well on this test in comparison with many of their European and worldwide peers. The gender gap in the UK is unremarkable and slightly below average, with a good score for males (way above PISA average) and a very good score for females. So two pragmatic conclusions emerge from Table 1: first, that single-sex provision cannot be justified on the grounds that it leads to greater equity in outcomes, and secondly, that co-educational education systems are associated with some of the highest overall attainment scores.

**Table 1 – Gender differences in EU countries**

Country	Percentage of single-sex schools	Degree of separation by sex in schools	Average reading score, female	Average reading score, male	Percentage gap in reading score
Denmark	-	10	511	486	2.5
Finland	-	7	573	522	4.7
Sweden	-	9	535	498	3.6
France	1	12	517	488	2.9
Portugal	1	8	488	464	2.5
Spain	2	10	506	482	2.4
Germany	3	11	514	482	3.2
Greece	4	13	492	454	4.0
Belgium	6	22	532	501	3.0
Italy	6	23	506	471	3.6
Netherlands	7	10	557	528	2.7
Austria	10	28	516	482	3.4
Luxembourg	14	12	457	433	2.7
UK	16	16	539	511	2.7
Ireland	44	30	542	513	2.7

Column 2 shows the percentage of the PISA sample in single-sex schools for each country.

Column 3 shows the percentage of girls who would have to exchange schools within each country for there to be an equivalent number of boys and girls in all schools.

Columns 4 and 5 show the average score for females and males, with a PISA average of 500.

Column 6 shows the proportionate gap in favour of girls in the PISA reading literacy test.

Despite what some commentators have said, and what is implied on the PISA website itself, the relatively low scores for boys' literacy are not heavily concentrated among the lowest attaining groups. Rather the problem for boys' literacy not only appears in every country but also across all outcome groups. If anything, the gap is higher among the highest attainers and smallest among the lowest attainers. For example, there are four per cent more boys than girls in the PISA study attaining the lowest level of reading scores, and five per cent more girls than boys attaining the highest level. In the UK, this pattern is even more marked with a gap of two per cent at the lowest level and of five per cent at the highest level. These findings, confirmed by my more detailed analysis of UK examination statistics, have several implications. *If the differences between males and females are universal, then they are unlikely to be the result of culturally specific, or even pedagogic changes.* The differences occur in very different education systems with different ages of school entry, curricula, teaching styles, forms of assessment, methods of allocating school places and so on. Any plausible

explanation for the apparent underachievement of boys must, therefore, transcend all of these differences. This means, of course, that a lot of money, time and effort is currently being wasted in the UK by schemes to overcome the attainment gap, which are based on an incorrect diagnosis of its causes.

In the PISA study, around half of males reported reading only when they had to, rather than for leisure. This compares with only a quarter of females. However, at least part of this difference may be due to differences in the nature of their reading. Girls reported reading more novels – probably more relevant to their schooling – whereas boys read more newspapers, comics and web-pages – which may be less relevant to their schooling, but more relevant to later life. Coupled with the fact that females interviewed in the PISA study reported that they were more reliant on memorisation strategies and males reported being better at relating new and old knowledge, this suggests that boys and girls may simply be differently literate at the age of 15. Perhaps, girls do better in school tests partly because they are being tested in genres they tend to read for fun at that age anyway.

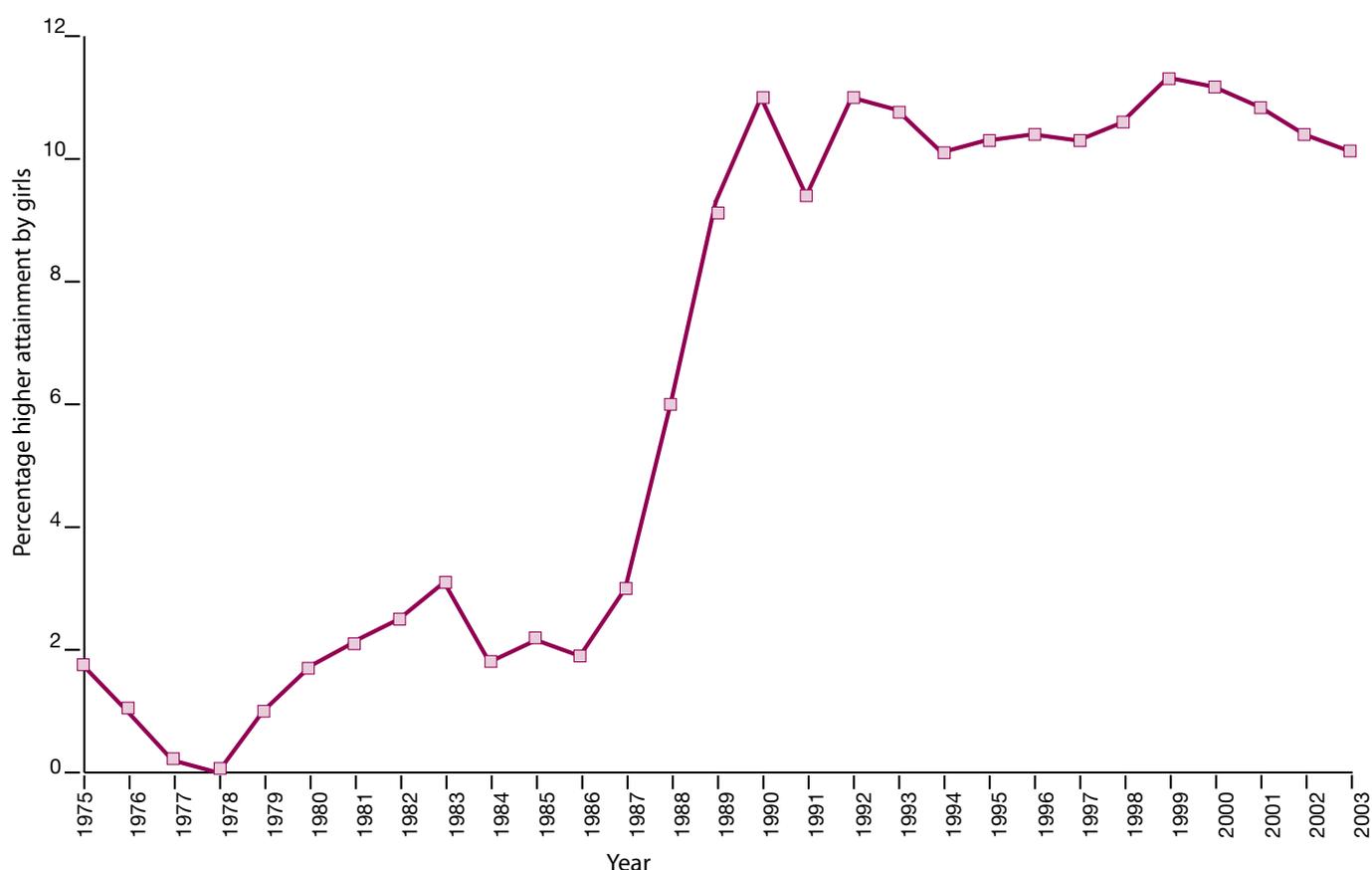
The attainment gaps for science and maths in PISA are much smaller than in reading. In around half of the 32 countries in the study, males performed slightly better in mathematical literacy, while in the UK the scores for both science and maths were very similar for males and females. This is, again, evidence that testing for different forms of literacy leads to large variation in the apparent gender gap. The results are ‘test-sensitive’.

## The gender gap in the UK

Consider the situation within the UK again. The dominant account of the gender gap in attainment is that boys were once ahead, that girls have overtaken them, that the gap is widening over time, and that the problem of boys’ underachievement is most marked at the lowest level of attainment. Figure 1 shows the gender gap for the five GCSE A\*-C or equivalent benchmark for as long as the DfES has records. There is no evidence for a period when scores for boys in this test were ahead of girls. Until 1987/88 the overall trend in the gender gap was small and relatively static. Then there was a sudden jump in the size of the gap over a two year period until the gap stabilised again at a considerably higher level from 1988/89 onwards. A number of changes occurred at the same time as this sharp rise. CSE and GCE were merged into GCSE; annual rises in qualification attainment began; there was a move from norm-referencing to criterion-referencing; there was an increase in coursework and changes in the nature of recording and publishing results. All of these changes provide a rich source of explanations for the sudden increase in the gender gap. It is peculiarly naïve to assume, as the DfES and some researchers in this field appear to, that the assessment system is gender neutral and that any differential is related to genuine discrepancies in achievement or performance. The dramatic shift from 1987/88 and relative stasis in the gender gap both before and after this period suggest that many potential explanations are untenable. In particular, this pattern of change over time is unlikely to be the result of a cultural change in society, or the direct

outcome of new styles of teaching. Whatever is deemed to have produced the change, it must be almost instant in impact, and one-off in nature. Such a conclusion has serious implications for the conduct of future work, and for the validity of previous work in this area. Any useful causal explanation should focus on attainment at all levels, not just at the lowest. In effect, this differential attainment cannot be attributed to the 'usual explanatory suspects', for example, a cultural change in society, new methods of teaching, seating arrangements in schools, mixed-sex classes, boys' laddishness, or poor attendance at school.

**Figure 1 – Proportionate gap in favour of girls attaining 5+ GCSE A\*-C or equivalent**



Note: the gap in favour of girls for any indicator is calculated as the number of girls attaining that indicator minus the number of boys attaining that indicator, divided by the number of all students attaining that indicator. The result is multiplied by 100 for convenience here. If the gap is 0 then girls and boys attain that indicator equally. If the gap is 100 then twice as many girls as boys attain that indicator. For more on this see Gorard, S., Rees, G. and Salisbury, J. (2001) The differential attainment of boys and girls at school: investigating the patterns and their determinants, *British Educational Research Journal*, 27 (2): 125-139.

One obvious conclusion would be that differential attainment by gender is a product of the changed system and nature of assessments rather than any more general failing of boys, their ability, application, or the competence of those who teach them. Such a conclusion, that differences are highly dependent on the nature of assessment, would be supported by the recent debate over the apparent improvement in boys' literacy as a result of the literacy hour where sensitivity to the precise nature of the test appeared to determine the nature of the gender gap, and by the finding that achievement gaps can vary considerably depending on whether the assessment is by teacher or by task or test. The potential practical importance of such a basic re-reading of the statistics cannot be over-estimated.

There are several other problems with the standard accounts of boys' underachievement at school. Using complex value-added models, we can predict test scores for any pupil with considerable accuracy based on their prior attainment, home background, motivation and attitudes to school. In these models, the sex of the pupil becomes an irrelevance. Girls are no more likely to report attending school regularly, and they record equivalent scores to boys in tests of cognitive attainment. We might observe that there is differential attainment between male and female students on a particular academic test, but this is very far from saying that the lower-attaining group could and should do better on that particular assessment.

## Conclusion

I started this chapter with a reminder to balance the intrinsic appeal of international comparative studies against their limitations and set the findings against in-depth work in individual countries, as I have done here. Nevertheless, studies such as PISA often give us a key starting point to put our work in one country in perspective. The problem of gender differentials is not specific to the UK. Nor does it disproportionately impact on low achievers. Nor is it particularly large compared to differences by region, school type, and above all by family income. Nor is it growing over time. In fact, once the complexity of factors and obstacles such as home background, school structure, and social skills are taken into account a simple gendered explanation of achievement does not work. So it follows, of course, that the simplistic solutions being suggested to the problem, such as single-sex teaching, do not work either. In any event, gender alone is insufficient explanation for the observed differences because we cannot change the gender of pupils to overcome these differences; rather, we need to look elsewhere for the causes – the curriculum, for example. Nor can we design interventions that benefit boys only, such as the imposition of alternate boy/girl seating, without being deeply unfair to girls. We are better off focusing on those elements of schooling that we can change without obvious damage in terms of social or later-life outcomes. The most obvious of these elements is probably the assessment system itself, starting with the recognition that pupils, both boys and girls, may be *differently* but equivalently literate.

Whatever ameliorative strategies are proposed, it would be preferable for them to be considered carefully in light of a fuller analysis of differential attainment than hitherto (especially through a consideration of the *interaction* of gender, ethnicity, poverty and so on). This should also be done with the full realisation that all such strategies may have longer-term impacts on the lives of both men and women in adult society.

## Resources and further reading

### ***The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)***

[www.pisa.oecd.org/knowledge/summary/f.htm](http://www.pisa.oecd.org/knowledge/summary/f.htm)

Smith, E. and Gorard, S. (2002) *What does PISA tell us about equity in education systems?*, Occasional Paper 54, Cardiff University School of Social Sciences, available for download via [www.cf.ac.uk/socsi/equity](http://www.cf.ac.uk/socsi/equity).

### ***The Third International Maths and Science Study (TIMSS)***

<http://timss.bc.edu/timss1999.html>

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## Learning styles and gender

Ann Phoenix

As countries increasingly define themselves as ‘knowledge societies’ and see education as the guarantor of economic prosperity, inequalities in attainment and in social positioning give cause for concern. In many countries much anxiety has been generated by the fact that girls’ educational performance is increasing at a faster rate than that of boys. The tenor of debates about differences in boys’ and girls’ educational performance often implies that improving educational performance simply requires an act of will on the part of boys if they are to keep up with girls. However, a look at the everyday practices of boys and girls shows that girls’ and boys’ learning styles have to be viewed in the context of what it means to ‘do’ boy or girl, as well as contributions from schools.

This chapter considers how gender and young people’s learning styles intersect. However, within gender groups, there are clearly differences between girls and between boys. For that reason, this chapter also briefly considers how ‘race’ and social class impact on gender and learning styles.

### Gender and learning styles

Since the Second World War, there has been recurrent interest in the issue of learning styles. Much of that interest has been on individual cognitive differences in perceiving and processing information. It is, for example, well known that girls start to speak fluently earlier than boys and that girls and boys like to play with different toys from early childhood onwards, with boys taking more to technology to mediate their learning (e.g. computers) and girls reading books more than boys, who are more likely to read manuals and comics. In summary, girls have been found to be more inductive and concrete in their thinking and to be better able to follow meandering and detailed arguments than boys – probably because they listen more closely than boys. On the other hand, boys have been found to be more deductive and abstract in their thinking and to more often ask for evidence to support arguments as well as getting bored more easily than girls. This boredom partly results from boys’ greater propensity to move around and to use more space than girls. Girls have been found to be more sensitive to group interactions than boys and to have less hierarchical social arrangements, which enable them to work more cooperatively in groups. Boys appear to prefer to use more symbols, graphs and diagrams in printed material, while girls, who are more linguistically fluent, tend to prefer written texts. Of course, all group comparisons tend to exaggerate differences between groups and downplay similarities across groups, so it is important to recognise that there are girls and boys who do not fit into these gendered patterns and that such differences do not indicate essential differences between boys and girls.

Explanations for the above findings on differences between girls' and boys' learning styles – which have been found in numerous countries – have been much debated. With developments in both genetic research and techniques for studying the brain, some researchers are convinced that girls and boys learn differently because they are biologically predisposed to do so and argue that the implications are that we should teach and treat girls and boys differently in ways that play to their strengths. There is, however, already evidence that girls and boys are treated differently at school, with teachers tending to view boys' active and sometimes resistant behaviour as natural and indicating innate cleverness, while girls' quiet compliance is considered to demonstrate that they achieve well only because they work hard, but not that they are naturally clever. To some extent, teachers may reinforce behaviour, and hence learning styles, that militate against good academic performance because they find it amusing. Thus, while some of those who rely on arguments of 'natural difference' construct boys as the new gendered victims, boys are frequently indulged for being boys. Such arguments are often biologically determinist and in privileging biology over social processes, they ignore gendered power relations and that gender organisation is subject to change over time.

While individuals may prefer, and be able, to learn in very different ways, the evidence is far from clear about whether or not there are gender differences in individually preferred learning styles. This is because learning is not just about what individuals do. It is a social process in which the fact that boys and girls have to negotiate gender relations may mean that their personal preferences for learning styles take a back seat in relation to 'doing' boy and 'doing' girl. What appear to be clear-cut gender differences in preferences for ways of learning (e.g. boys' preferences for using technology) have to be seen as produced, or at least sustained, within gender relations. This point is perhaps clearer in debates on social class and learning styles. In the 1970s Basil Bernstein argued that middle-class and working-class pupils had different linguistic codes ('elaborated' and 'restricted' respectively). While this idea was hotly debated, there is general agreement that, in comparison with the working-classes, the privileges enjoyed by the middle classes mean that they have more 'cultural capital' and that this smooths the learning process. It could not be said, however, that the learning styles associated with social class are to do with individual preferences.

What at first sight appear to be clearly established gender preferences for particular sorts of learning styles may thus not be 'natural' or fixed. For example, it is well known that young children have strongly-held gender stereotypic notions of what girls and boys should do and that superhero play is generally the preserve of young boys, allowing them to explore a limited range of masculinities with equally limited, stereotypic constructions of girls who, in addition, are positioned as passive in opposition to the active roles allowed to superhero boys. Yet, in a study conducted by Jackie Marsh, girls engaged in superhero play once they were presented with positive images of females as active agents and it was clear that superheroes were not just masculine. It is also the case that, over time, gender styles do change somewhat so that, for example, some girls are more noisy and active in the classroom than used to be the case. Furthermore, gender does not operate in isolation, but intersects with, for example, sexuality,

‘race’ and social class. It would seem, therefore, that we need to think in complex ways about learning styles and gender.

## **Constructing identities in ‘communities of learning’**

In recent decades, Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger have helped us to see that learning is not an individualistic process that results from different learning styles and teaching. Instead, learning is social and comes from our experience of participating in daily life and negotiating interactions. Lave and Wenger developed a model of ‘situated learning’ that proposes that learning involves a process of engagement in a ‘community of practice’ or the social group in which we learn. In this model, identity is central since learning involves changing identities and seeing ourselves in new ways. Since gendered identities are so important to children, it is not surprising that boys and girls engage more with the educational spheres related to conventional gender identities (e.g. language for girls and technology for boys).

Participants in the learning process do not necessarily behave in what are constructed as reasonable and rational ways. Learning involves and depends upon regulatory processes, therefore students who do not accept this process will have difficulties in the classroom. As a result, communities only work smoothly when they are covertly regulated, and where learners are expected to learn to police themselves in the ways desired by the educators. The joint activity of learning does not only require the appropriating of the knowledge to be passed on, but also requires that people create or reconstruct the context in which they participate. Learning styles are, therefore, about emotion and values as well as cognition. Learners bring their personal histories and the sociocultural context to their learning and, in the process, produce relations of conflict and control. When it comes to studying in school, young people’s social relations and identities thus have an impact on what they can and cannot do in school, including in the classroom.

## **Masculinities at school**

In recent years, concerns about boys’ underachievement in relation to girls has fuelled much research that helps to illuminate how gendered learning styles are actively produced by boys within the constraints imposed by masculinity.

It has repeatedly been found in research that masculinity is defined as being about ‘hardness’, aggressiveness and confrontation, as well as hierarchical power relationships, and that it is racialised in many countries. One consequence of this is that boys who quietly get on with their schoolwork and make it clear that academic achievement is a high priority for them may be considered effeminate by other boys and perhaps some teachers. The pervasive fear that other boys will not consider them masculine enough leads many boys to reject schoolwork and doing what girls are seen to do – something that Carol Jackson calls a ‘self-worth

protection strategy'. Popular masculinities thus counterpose 'coolness' and doing schoolwork, which they construct as characteristic of girls.

A London-based study of 11-14 year old boys (Frosh, S., Phoenix, A. and Pattman, R. 2002) found that the boys in the study recognised that gender positioning had changed. They knew from the media and their teachers that girls are doing better educationally than boys, and many complained that their teachers preferred girls or kept telling them that they had to work hard in order to do as well as, or better than, girls. At the same time, many were well aware that, in order to ensure success in the future, they needed to get qualifications. Yet, recognising this could not straightforwardly lead to an engagement with schoolwork because schools are not simply about the gaining of educational qualifications, but are equally about negotiating the complex social processes that produce boys' masculine subjectivities.

A pervasive finding in the London study was that boys constructed masculinity as being about toughness, style, sporting prowess – particularly at football – and not being seen to get on with schoolwork in the way many girls do. Their identities were produced in relation to each other and to constructions of what masculinities should be like, as the following example makes clear.

Sadeem: *We are a less popular group of people. We're not the least popular group of people.*

Question: *So the least popular group of people, could you describe them?*

Sadeem: *Um, I would say it's people who, who do lots of work and things like that and um um, that's mainly it actually, just people who are sort of boffins... We just all play basketball together and most of the ones at the top they play football and the bottom ones just stay [laughter] stay in the classroom and do homework and play cards or something.*

Boys were not, however, cultural dupes who were simply incorporated into already existing gender relations. Many wanted to get qualifications. As a result, they spent a great deal of time negotiating a 'middle position' for themselves in which they could manage what they saw as the demands of masculinities while still getting some schoolwork done, without being called names by other boys, as in the quote below.

Question: *Did you ever get teased for being a boffin?*

Julius: *No, it wasn't like that... I used to mess about and then at home just study, and now I do both; I can mess about and study at the same time so now I don't get teased.*

So while boys recognised that they were in changing social circumstances, and were actively negotiating those circumstances themselves and being self-regulating within the social constraints they experienced, they could not see themselves as free and autonomous or as entirely responsible for optimising their choices and educational chances. That boys are not

simply free to make rational choices about their learning styles and education becomes even clearer if we consider how masculinities and racialisation intersect in their everyday practices in their school communities of practice.

### **‘Relationality’, femininity and learning styles**

As discussed above, girls are frequently found to be more compliant with teachers and school rules than are boys. However, it is also often found that girls who are seen as being too studious are unpopular with their peers. It may be the case, therefore, that girls have learned earlier than boys how to negotiate the demands of school in ways that allow them to get on with schoolwork, but still be popular with their peers. The repeated finding that girls are able to manage cooperative work better than boys and that they have a more ‘relational’ style may serve to protect them in managing the tension between doing schoolwork and managing relationships since it allows them to give attention and care to others.

In widely influential work, Carol Gilligan argues that, once adolescence is reached, girls’ style of identifying and behaving is ‘relational’ and limited by the centrality of their relationships and the fact that their morality becomes structured around an ‘ethic of care’ in which they are afraid to say anything that might adversely affect their relationships. Gilligan sees this as presenting some problems for girls in that ‘once girls stop saying what they are feeling and thinking they often stop knowing it as well’, they suffer ‘loss of voice’ because they fear upsetting, being upset, or being divided from their peers. However, this disadvantage may be double edged in that it may have the positive effect of allowing many girls to understand the tensions involved in managing everyday educational practices and so allowing them to establish strategies for managing achievement. These strategies may include constructions of themselves as not working harder than boys, but as being better behaved. Sarah Whitelaw and her colleagues suggest that good behaviour may allow girls to present an acceptable public ‘smokescreen’ behind which to conceal their efforts and so to avoid being blamed for being ‘swots’.

In contrast, separation and individuation (rather than ‘relationality’) are the predominant styles for adolescent boys and this may make it harder for them to negotiate academic achievement and popular masculinity – particularly since many have been found erroneously to believe that clever girls are popular with their female peers. While schools have been at the forefront of attempts to promote equality in educational outcome, it may be the case that their ways of dealing with gender reproduce the masculine styles they apparently eschew. For example, Christine Skelton’s finding in one study that a primary school which wanted to provide students with alternatives to ‘laddish behaviour’ outside school, nevertheless reproduced aggressive forms of dominant masculinity through the control and management strategies they used – for example, male teacher camaraderie with boys rather than girls.

## Racialised (and classed) masculinities

Since (as discussed above) there are differences between girls and differences between boys, it is important to consider the implications of some of these differences for learning styles. This section thus briefly considers the intersection of gender with 'race' and, more implicitly, social class.

There is ample evidence around us that young Black men of African-Caribbean descent are viewed in some ways as 'super-masculine'. They are seen to possess those attributes that are constructed by young men as indicative of the most popular forms of masculinity – toughness and authentically male styles in talk and in dress. As trendsetters, they may be seen as archetypally active consumers, choosing and producing new styles. This positions them in particularly contradictory ways. At one and the same time, they are feared, discriminated against and face high rates of school exclusions because of those features. However, they are also respected and admired by classroom peers and gain power through taking on characteristics that militate against good classroom performance. This has been described in the USA as 'cool pose'—an aggressive assertion of masculinity that allows control, inner strength, stability and confidence in the face of the adverse social, political and economic conditions that many African American men face. 'Cool pose' fits many of the characteristics associated with popular masculinity. However, it also imposes costs on those Black boys and men who cannot deal with it simply as performance, but want others to believe that they 'really' possess it. This is particularly the case for working-class Black boys who have fewer options available to them since social class differentiates educational attainment more than does gender.

Many Black young men find themselves constrained by a construction of masculinity that gives them power in their local situations, but contributes to their relative lack of power in society as a whole because it helps to produce poor educational qualifications. Moreover, those boys who attempt to gain kudos by adopting this masculine position but are 'unsuccessful' in doing so, have to deal with failing to achieve racialised, gendered, classed, cultural practices which many take to be 'natural' to Black boys.

## Promoting change

The above discussion has hopefully indicated that gendered learning styles are complex, that they are differentiated and involve power relations. As a result, young people are both in control of the learning styles they choose, and yet constrained by the social relations in which they are located. Learning styles thus have to be seen as dynamic processes involving negotiation.

Current anxieties about boys' educational performance have fuelled concerns about how to promote change in schools. An increasing number of publications engage with strategies for

promoting such changes. It is clear that transformations of learning styles require changes in school cultures and in institutional practices. Indeed, some researchers argue that the national curriculum has provided a space for girls (but not boys) to make 'legitimate' achievement.

Understanding the challenges inherent in achieving racialised and gendered equality in schools requires that we consider the reasons that girls and boys are not entirely free to choose their learning styles. While many girls appear to be able to negotiate the demands of schoolwork and social relations, boys appear to have more difficulty in negotiating masculinities and the demands of schoolwork. This is largely because boys are concerned to manage the present rather than the future in the context of complicated, multiple positioning that means they are competing with each other just to be accepted as sufficiently masculine. The consequence of this 'informal pedagogy' is that boys have to spend a great deal of time and effort practising strategies that allow them to be accepted by their peers and permit them to do some schoolwork (and so, hopefully, to get some qualifications). Thus, while gender equity programmes are important to the process of starting to change gendered learning styles, it is equally important to find ways of disrupting commitment to current ways of performing masculinities and its racialised and social class intersections, while also enabling girls to work hard within their communities of practice.

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## Classroom interaction and access: Whose space is it?

Becky Francis

The issue of gender and classroom interaction is important because it affects pupils' immediate educational and social experience, and has consequences for their future behaviour and life outcomes.

As anyone who has experienced school classrooms will know, gender has an impact on classroom interaction. Gender differences in interaction are evident from the pre-school setting right through to higher education and this can have important consequences for the children and adults involved. Girls and boys tend to sit separately, unless organised differently by the teacher, and usually form friendships within same-sex groups, though there are, of course, exceptions. Many teachers will confirm that groups of girls and boys usually tend to behave in quite different ways. It is important to point out from the start that not all girls or all boys behave in gender-stereotypical ways. Yet it is certainly the case that in general terms children of the same gender tend to gravitate towards one another, and what has been termed 'doing gender' results in different behaviours. Indeed, these differences can be so marked that some teachers fall into the habit of using 'the girls' and 'the boys' as labels for delineating classroom groups and directing interaction, so emphasising the separation and differences between groups even further. These trends may be less marked in post-compulsory education, but issues of gendered interaction remain.

Before I discuss the different aspects of gendered classroom interaction I want to explain why I believe these differences occur. There is sometimes a 'common sense' assumption that biological sex differences mean that girls and boys are programmed to behave in different ways. It follows that differences in classroom behaviour between groups of girls and boys are simply 'natural' and inevitable expressions of sex difference. In fact, evidence of biological differences which might lead to behavioural differences is extremely slight. On the other hand, a large body of child-developmental and sociological evidence shows how children (and adults) actively construct their gender identities. Within this view, gender-stereotypical behaviour is explained through individuals seeking to cement and demonstrate their gender allegiance. Bronwyn Davies explains this particularly clearly. She argues that children realise from a very early age that the world is divided into male and female – and that gender is a cornerstone of social identity. However, gender is not just about appearance (especially for young girls and boys, who tend to be more physically similar). Young children often do not understand that sex is, generally speaking, fixed, but they learn very early what it means to be socially acceptable and attractive to others, and in this, 'doing gender' successfully is crucial. Gender is relational – 'masculinity' depends on a conception of

‘femininity’ to compare it with. So, from pre-school ages onwards children engage in what Davies calls ‘gender category maintenance work’. This involves behaving in stereotypical ways to demonstrate their gender allegiance, but also in policing other children to ensure that they do the same. It is this kind of behaviour that results in gendered trends in classroom behaviour and interaction. My own work has identified and illustrated some of the ways that this happens in primary and secondary schools, and how it impacts on gendered power relations and on individual pupils’ experiences. Other research (for example, Diane Reay, 2003, see further reading) shows that boys can have a negative impact on girls’ schooling experience and performance, and that this is leading to a growing ‘flight’ of female students from state secondary schools.

I will now explore various aspects of gendered classroom dynamics between mixed-sex groups of pupils/students, particularly the use of physical space and verbal interactions.

### **Physical interaction – classrooms and playgrounds**

Boys’ physical domination of the classroom and playground space has been well-documented. In the classroom, boys quite simply tend to take up more space than do girls. They sprawl more, they move about the class more, and they invade the available space. During my observations of largely working-class, ethnically diverse secondary classrooms I recorded that boys frequently kicked balls around, walked or ran about the classroom, pushed, slapped or hit each other, or threw things across the class. Girls sometimes walked about too, but less frequently than boys, and they rarely engaged in the other physical activities. Indeed, I was surprised and concerned for the boys themselves about the high level of physical violence which went on in the classroom, seriously, or in play-fighting. Christine Skelton has pointed out that maintaining an ‘aggressive and competitive masculine identity’ involves constant confrontation and challenges between boys. Certainly it seemed to me that boys were continually either competing or being policed by other boys in a ‘hardness’ hierarchy. What’s more, this behaviour by boys disrupted the classroom, and interfered with learning for boys and girls alike.

Physicality is not restricted to interaction between boys. As several researchers have reported, some boys sexually harass girls, and sometimes women teachers. Such harassment can be verbal as well as physical, and, as I discuss below, homophobic verbal harassment is also rife. Clearly though, the effect of this physical dominance in the classroom is to subordinate and constrain the girls’ interactions and those of less physically confident, assertive or aggressive boys.

This sort of behaviour continues in the playground. Playgrounds are exciting worlds where children develop both their social and developmental skills relatively free from adult intervention. However, playground activity is highly gendered. Firstly, it tends to be gender segregated: either children impose such segregation themselves, or sometimes they are

actually given separate play spaces by the school. Research also reveals that girls and boys use playtime and the playground for very different activities. This segregation is by no means 'natural' or unproblematic. It reflects power differences and struggles, and often psychological or physical enforcement. Research into playtime and playground interaction, including the youngest children, documents a myriad of pernicious issues, ranging from boys' domination of the physical space, to teasing and sexual harassment.

Football is one of the most obvious ways that boys dominate the primary and secondary school playground space. Football games usually involve a large number of boys and may take most of the available playground space. When wet weather stops children from playing on the grass, football games can force those children who are not involved in the game on to the very edges of the playground. Girls sometimes say that they are afraid of going too near the game. Boys may use football to enforce a masculinity hierarchy by excluding girls and less athletic boys from games. Such behaviour and constructions of masculinity can be racist as well as sexist: South-Asian boys, particularly, have been found to be considered 'effete' by some other boys, and excluded from football games.

It is not just boys who behave excludingly. Girls in primary school can do the same thing, excluding boys from their organised skipping games. However, some boys exercise their power by trying to disrupt games organised by girls.

As in the classroom, boys' dominance of the playground space, and the way they police girls and less 'macho' boys, can result in the sexual harassment of girls and homophobic and racist harassment of those boys not judged as sufficiently 'masculine'.

## **Interaction in the classroom between teachers and pupils – gender, class and ethnicity**

It is more than twenty years since Dale Spender wrote *Invisible Women*, reporting how boys gain more of the teachers' attention than do girls in the same classes. She argued that the result was that boys benefited from better quality teaching than girls. Other studies in the same period confirmed the finding that girls were marginalised, underestimated and ignored both by boys and by teachers. Twenty years later, research shows that, broadly speaking, boys continue to dominate the classroom verbally. This continues through school right into higher education, where men are shown to talk more in seminar groups and where women students are often silenced in mixed-sex interactions. However, researchers have developed more complex analyses of verbal interaction. In my own research I have found that although, as a group, boys verbally dominated the majority of the secondary school classes I observed, in a couple of classes girls 'out-voiced' the boys, showing that such non-stereotypical behaviour does occur. New insights into social class and classroom interaction show how teachers use prevailing constructions of social class to respond differently to girls and boys from different social class groups. In addition, a number of researchers have noted how teachers construct

ethnic minority children in particular ways, as 'better behaved' or 'less compliant'. These sorts of constructions of pupils according to gender, ethnicity and social class impact on verbal interaction. For example, working-class White boys as well as African-Caribbean boys and girls receive more verbal discipline from some classroom teachers.

The focus on discipline has led some researchers to consider whether boys receive more of teachers' attention simply because they require more discipline, rather than because they are being favoured over girls. Certainly boys tend to claim that they receive unfair amounts of discipline from teachers in comparison to girls. But because boys tend to resist the teacher in more overt ways than girls, it is hard to tell, even from classroom observation, whether boys' grievances are justified. Research (Paul Connolly and Diane Reay, 2001; Paul Connolly, 1998) continues to demonstrate that when girls do behave badly, they are penalised more heavily than boys; in other words, that teachers perhaps condone more resistance from boys, and are less tolerant of girls not fulfilling the 'good pupil' role. Recent research suggests that being loud, disruptive and abusive is an expression of a high-status form of masculinity in school. There is also evidence, however, that such behaviour is disadvantaging the boys concerned. For instance, although girls' interactions with the teacher may be less frequent than boys', they may be more constructive and more closely related to the learning task. In other words, the 'laddish' behaviour of many secondary school boys and disruptiveness of some primary boys ends up impeding their own learning. But it does more than this: because it distracts the teacher and other pupils and wastes teacher time, such behaviour also disrupts the education of girls and of non-'laddish' boys.

## **Interactions between pupils themselves**

Gender relations are about power. Aside from the issue of interaction between pupils and the teacher, gender impacts profoundly on interaction between pupils themselves. For the majority of pupils of all ages, 'being popular' and 'fitting in' are extremely important, particularly given the heavy consequences of failure – which can lead to marginalisation and/or bullying. 'Doing gender' in the accepted, conventional way involves particular types of behaviour. For girls in mixed-sex interactions this often involves giving up power to the more demanding boys and being 'sensible and selfless'. In my primary and secondary classroom work I have observed many examples of girls being silenced by boys, through ridicule or by sexist/misogynist abuse. Of course, not all boys are able or want to construct themselves this powerfully, but nevertheless, research offers many examples of boys with high-status masculinity systematically excluding and ridiculing girls. Misogynist and homophobic abuse is a frequent feature of classroom exchanges, undermining boys who do not choose or succeed in the prevailing ethos of aggressive hetero masculinity, as well as degrading the feminine as 'other' in the classroom.

## Implications and recommendations

Ridicule and marginalisation of girls and non-‘laddish’ boys does much to silence these pupils, and to ‘teach them their place’ in the classroom. Along with a conventional construction of femininity as demure and unassertive, this may explain why young women find it difficult to put themselves forward in mixed-sex discussions even when they have moved into post-compulsory education – and even when they are training to be teachers and academics. Fundamentally, gendered classroom behaviour supports a societal ‘hidden curriculum’ that can make girls believe that they are of less value than boys. The notion that boys take up more space and attention and dominate verbal interactions becomes ‘normal’ and simply extends the norm in other aspects of societal interaction. Girls who behave out of line are censured. Such behaviour does much to undermine girls’ confidence and self-esteem, and holds implications for them throughout the different sectors of education and beyond. In turn, boys learn about and experience a hierarchy of competitive ‘laddish’ masculinities in which those who fail to conform to the stereotypes may be routinely demonised, marginalised, and punished. As discussed above, this behaviour often includes racism and homophobia, which are themselves grounded in a construction of non-conforming boys as effeminate and of the feminine as ‘other’ and devalued.

So, rather than seeing gendered classroom interaction as ‘inevitable’, it is important that teachers and educators do what they can to address and challenge such behaviour. A simple starting point may be to reflect on our own classroom practice, asking whether we are in any way condoning or perpetuating gendered behaviour which disadvantages some of our pupils. Research has shown that even well-intentioned teachers can collude in giving more time and mental energy to boys, partly because, pragmatically, they need to hold boys’ attention in order to ‘get the job done’. I have also observed how some teachers adopt particular ‘roustabout’ approaches in their interactions with boys, and/or over-gentle approaches to girls, which may support the ethos of relational gender difference. So, one approach may be for teachers to observe, or get a colleague to observe, how much time they spend communicating with boys and girls. By recording which girls and boys get attention and what sorts of interaction are taking place, they will gain insights into how ethnicity and social class, as well as gender, are playing their part. It’s important that pupils see discipline as fair: having clearly articulated rules and punishments for breaking the rules can help to demonstrate that punishments are meted out fairly. Teachers can also watch out for occasions where boys talk over, interrupt or put down other pupils in classroom discussions, and take firm action to support the pupil being ‘silenced’. We can also ask ourselves to what extent we are implicitly colluding in endorsing particular gendered behaviours such as boys being ‘laddish’ and girls being supportive and caring.

In terms of the pupils’ behaviour, homophobic and misogynist abuse and teasing must be challenged by the teacher – pupils must understand that such behaviour is unacceptable in the school environment. This is vital to ensure a safe and unthreatening environment for girls,

non-macho or gay boys, and in order to constrain one of the most common ways of playing out a particular construction of masculinity.

Unfortunately, gendered behaviour is deeply ingrained among us all. Disciplinary measures by the teacher can only make a superficial impact – any real change must come from those participating in classroom interaction. So, in addition to teachers reflecting on their own practice and setting boundaries for pupils, they must encourage pupils to think about the consequences for everyone of gendered classroom interaction, and how far they are participating or colluding in this. The way forward is often through teacher-led classroom discussion and activities to explore the issues. Such discussions of gendered behaviour can be part of Citizenship Education drawing out the issues of discrimination and inequality. Pupils relish the chance to explore such issues. The class teacher could present evidence (such as that given in this chapter, or perhaps from their own classroom observation) about gendered trends in classroom interaction and pupils could collect evidence themselves. Pupils could consider why such behaviour occurs, the consequences of that behaviour and, if they agree that some of the consequences are negative, what they might do about this. Small group work to ensure that everyone has their say, with managed reporting back, may be important to ensure that all voices are heard. Ground rules will need to be set and agreed in advance so that ‘silencing’ and sexist remarks do not go unchallenged. Role playing is a good way to get pupils to consider and practise ways of behaving differently.

Classroom activities like these may not have an immediate or dramatic impact on gendered classroom interaction, but they do provide the opportunity for pupils: a) to consider and reflect on their own behaviour; b) to understand some of the consequences of their behaviour; and c) to offer strategies themselves to try to change their behaviour, and perhaps to challenge others. Here it’s worth remembering that teachers can have an important role not just in drawing attention to issues which have gone unchallenged, but also in supporting pupils who are themselves trying to challenge the norms of gendered interaction.

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## Mixed-sex or single-sex?

Louise Archer

In this chapter I review some of the issues and evidence about single-sex and co-educational schools. I focus on three key areas in which single-sex education (same-sex schooling and/or same-sex groups within co-educational settings) allegedly benefits either boys or girls, namely in promoting achievement, encouraging broader subject choices/preferences and aiding social development. I will argue that this is actually a very complex issue and that there is no simple 'best' way to teach girls and boys.

Single-sex schooling is not just an issue in the UK but also in other parts of Europe, Australia and New Zealand. In the United States, women's and civil rights groups are currently urging President Bush to drop plans for more single-sex schools.

The overall number of single-sex schools in England has fallen sharply over the last 40 years and yet it has become increasingly popular to separate boys and girls for some subjects. Debates about the merits and limits of single-sex versus co-educational schooling have a long history in the UK but mainly in relation to secondary schooling rather than to primary or post-compulsory settings. This reflects popular assumptions that, outside of adolescence, mixed-sex interactions are educationally 'more natural' and socially and cognitively preferable.

Proponents of co-education at secondary level argue that it offers a wide range of social benefits for boys and girls, such as replicating 'natural' gender relationships in society and exposing boys to the 'civilising' influence of girls. In the UK, alongside the rise of the co-educational, comprehensive school movement in the state sector in the post-war years, single-sex schooling has declined considerably. However, during the 1980s a growing feminist critique of co-education drew attention to the ways in which prevalent gender inequalities resulted in girls 'losing out' in mixed schools. At the time, Rosemary Deem and others proposed that single-sex schools and/or classes could be the key to promoting equality of opportunity.

The pendulum has swung again in recent years, but this time because of widespread concern about boys' alleged 'underachievement'. Although there is considerable academic scepticism about whether boys are really 'in crisis' and underachieving, the idea that single-sex teaching can address boys' underachievement in the classroom is still very popular. Parallel to this debate, specific groups such as some Muslim families and the remaining associations of single-sex state schools (such as the Association of Maintained Girls Schools) continue to promote and argue for single-sex schooling.

Feminist thinking about the benefits of single-sex education has developed and diversified over the years, particularly in response to the issue of boys' underachievement, where class

and ethnicity complicate an otherwise over-simplistic analysis. For example, statistics show that not all girls achieve highly, that not all boys under achieve and that boys/men still enjoy higher levels of earnings in the labour market when class and ethnicity, in addition to gender, are considered. In addition, feminists generally agree that inequalities not just in sexism but in 'race', class, etc. continue to exist and be reproduced within schools. The question remains how best to tackle these issues.

## **Can single-sex education raise achievement?**

The publication of national levels of achievement at GCSE and A-Level has fuelled debates about the merits and/or limitations of single-sex and co-educational schooling. Current league tables appear to show that, broadly speaking, pupils (but particularly girls) who attend single-sex schools tend to obtain higher results. While schools have always, of course, been interested in the factors that encourage pupil achievement, the current educational policy climate, in which emphasis is placed on league tables, testing and 'school improvement', has made it imperative for schools to focus increasingly on maximising and raising achievement levels. Thus, in contrast to the 1980s when single-sex schooling was advocated as a potential way to address gender inequalities, now single-sex education is being considered as a tool for raising achievement.

The evidence about single-sex and co-educational schools, however, is rather less clear-cut. There tends to be an over-representation of single-sex schools in the selective, private sector, which has a clear effect on the high position of such schools in the achievement league tables. Researchers such as Alan Smithers and Pamela Robinson have shown that, historically, single-sex institutions have the prestige and resources to attract the highest achieving pupils. A substantial body of research now demonstrates that when making sure to compare 'like with like' with respect to socio-economic and entrance criteria, academic differences between single-sex and co-educational schools largely disappear. This phenomenon has also been noted internationally: Pamela Haag has reviewed literature from around the world and concluded that results are skewed by the particular indicators of success that are used, the historical context in which single-sex and mixed schooling occurs and the entry criteria employed by different schools. Adjusting for pupil intake and selective status of schools, Peter Daly found that girls in single-sex schools in Northern Ireland gained only a small achievement advantage – and that this was not statistically significant. In comparison, Janette Elwood and Caroline Gipps have argued that co-educational schools actually appear to have better track records in raising the achievement of boys and girls who are in lower ability bands.

There is some anecdotal evidence from a few studies that single-sex teaching groups within co-educational schools might yield some benefits to pupils' levels of attainment. For example, there have been reports recently in the media that some co-educational schools in England, Wales and Scotland are introducing single-sex lessons in subjects such as English for boys,

and mathematics and/or science for girls, in an attempt to raise attainment. However, Smithers and Robinson's research suggests that separating boys and girls for science and maths lessons in co-educational schools does not seem to have any lasting effect on their GCSE performance. They feel that though there are improvements, they tend to be short-term and can probably be explained by the enthusiasm and commitment of the staff taking part in the experiment. Carolyn Jackson and Ian David Smith conducted research in the UK and Australia which found that although single-sex teaching is an increasingly popular strategy, the evidence for its effectiveness on academic achievement is inconclusive. Other studies in the UK and in Australia, the United States and Ireland have reached similar conclusions.

### **Does single-sex education encourage broader subject preferences and aspirations?**

Advocates of single-sex schooling argue that it can enable both boys and girls to develop broader, less gender-stereotypical subject preferences and aspirations. For example, that girls-only schooling can encourage girls to consider stereotypically 'masculine' subjects and careers, such as science, engineering, mathematics, and that boys-only schooling can encourage them to consider stereotypically 'feminine' subjects and careers, such as arts and modern languages. More recently, acknowledging the role that class plays in self-image, strategies such as peer mentoring and role models within same-sex groupings have been suggested to widen and raise aspirations for some Black and White working-class boys.

Twenty years ago, a report by Ann Bone for the Equal Opportunities Commission noted that girls in single-sex schools reported broader subject choices and aspirations, but she also pointed out that these girls' schools had been particularly active in encouraging pupils to break away from stereotypes. She also found that the type of school that girls attended, comprehensive or grammar, and its 'style' – whether traditional or progressive – were key factors. For example, progressive schools were more likely to emphasise and support non-gender stereotypical aspirations among pupils. More recently, Joan Payne and colleagues have also indicated that, even when prior achievement is taken into account, there is slightly more likelihood of both boys and girls in single-sex schools breaking the stereotypical conventions in their subject preferences. This was particularly the case with arts and humanities for boys and maths/sciences for girls. Subsequent research by Helen Colley and her colleagues suggests that these subject preferences may be more pronounced among younger pupils (11-12-year-olds) than among 15-16-year-olds.

In 1990, Andrew Stables questioned over 2,300 13-14-year-old pupils in mixed and single-sex comprehensive schools about their attitudes to science subjects and their general subject preferences. He found significant differences between mixed and single-sex schools: in single-sex schools generally, both boys and girls were more interested in modern languages; and it is fascinating that pupils' preferences were indeed more polarised in mixed schools.

Though this strong polarisation was quite specific to certain subjects, where it did occur it was quite dramatic, for example in the case of physics. In general, however, Stables found that there was a marked gender effect, in that boys' views were influenced more by the gender composition of their school, than were girls'.

Just as with the issue of achievement, cross-cutting factors (such as the type of school, the social characteristics of its intake and the age of the pupils) cloud the evidence about the effectiveness of single-sex schools in broadening pupils' aspirations and subject preferences. For example, a report by the Trust for the Study of Adolescence notes that girls' schools have tended to have better facilities for encouraging girls' participation in stereotypically 'masculine' subjects, such as science. In other words, it is difficult to say that subject preferences might be broadened just because pupils are in a same-sex institution, irrespective of other circumstances.

### **Does single-sex education benefit pupils' self-esteem and social interaction?**

It has commonly been argued that single-sex schools for girls encourage their confidence and self-esteem. There is actually some evidence to support this. Smithers and Robinson, for example, report that in schools which had recently changed from single-sex to co-educational, teachers reported that on the whole pupils enjoyed the co-educational environment more, but that the girls seemed less concerned to do well and to assert themselves. As Smithers and Robinson also point out however, fewer studies have examined the views of pupils themselves, although their review of evidence suggests that there is some indication that pupils generally prefer co-education. Girls' lesser assertion of themselves in co-education may relate not only to the presence of boys (who have been widely documented as dominating classes and teacher attention), but also to the presence of fewer women in senior teaching positions. This latter factor can impact on the priorities, culture and ethos of the school and, some suggest, provides fewer senior female role models for girls. The gender composition of teaching staff seems to impact on boys as well. Belgian research also suggests that the gender balance of the staff body has more effect on boys' feelings of well-being than the gender composition of the student body.

Set against this, there is research evidence that single-sex schools and classes improve girls' self-esteem. In an Australian research project girls in co-educational schools were much more likely to rank themselves in the bottom half of the class whereas girls in single-sex schools were as likely as boys to rate themselves highly. However, Pamela Haag's review of the literature about the effects of single-sex schooling on self-esteem indicates a more complex picture. For example, research in Northern Ireland suggests that there appear to be differences in self-esteem between single-sex and mixed schools, but that these variations are not global, but within specific sub-categories of self-esteem. So it seems that

the relationship between girls' self-perceived physical attractiveness and feelings of self-worth takes on a different significance compared to single-sex schools and co-educational schools, i.e. this research suggests that in mixed schools, girls' feelings of self-worth seem to correlate more strongly with their perceived physical attractiveness. It seems, too, that co-educational environments can result in social disadvantages for some girls, although their academic self-concept is not necessarily damaged by transferring from single-sex environments into mixed-sex ones.

There are some interesting findings from studies of parents' and pupils' levels of support for single-sex and co-educational schools. Not surprisingly, parental views are polarised in line with the type of schooling attended by their children, with each side emphasising the social benefits of their preferred school. However, co-educational schools receive far stronger ideological support from their ex-pupils than do same-sex institutions. Robinson and Smithers interviewed 100 university students who had been to mixed schools; nearly all said that they would send their own children to co-educational schools. In contrast, only one-third of the students who attended single-sex schools themselves said that they would send their own children to single-sex schools in due course. This figure was similar among male and female respondents, although slightly more women (38 per cent) than men (30 per cent) who had been to single-sex schools said they would want to send their children to single-sex schools. Interestingly, though some pupils from single-sex schools anticipated difficulties in adjusting to the mixed environment of university, these fears were unfounded, and personality and other social factors (such as adjusting to living in halls, missing parents, the extent and nature of university entertainment on offer) had more to do with how well they settled in, than the kind of school they had attended.

There is research showing that single-sex groups can be very useful both for equal opportunities initiatives and for supporting vulnerable and disaffected students therapeutically and pastorally. For instance, Audrey Osler and Kerry Vincent have highlighted the ways in which girls' groups in mixed schools can benefit socially excluded young women. Diane Reay is one of the few people who has conducted research into single-sex groups in mixed primary schools. She describes how single-sex groups can challenge stereotypes and develop collaborative learning practices with multi-ethnic, working-class boys.

## **Implementing positive change in the school and classroom**

This chapter makes clear that there is no simple answer to the question whether it is 'better' to teach boys and girls together or separately. Notions of 'good practice' and 'best practice' are highly problematic for teachers and educational researchers and it is not possible to advocate a single set of practices that will benefit everybody in all contexts. Different socio-cultural factors, resources, political and policy environments, historical settings and a wealth of other interests and social and structural factors all work against a 'one-size-fits-all' model.

Some argue that the content and processes of schooling are actually more important for pupils than the gender composition of the student group. In other words, the focus of attention needs to shift away from debating whether schools or classes should be single-sex or co-educational on to how boys and girls are being educated. In particular, Madeleine Arnot suggests that it is crucially important to challenge boys' sexism rather than reproduce dominant gender ideologies and expectations among pupils in either mixed or single-sex settings. This involves tackling and reducing sexist practices in all types of school and promoting new and more positive forms of masculinity. My own view is that sexism cannot be challenged on its own: inequalities of social class, 'race'/ethnicity, sexuality and disability are all important additional concerns which interact with gender inequalities.

To summarise: what constitutes the 'best' way to educate children is politically and ideologically loaded – the answer will depend on how we define our terms and constituencies. Tensions and contradictions between different perspectives are inevitable: what we consider 'best' will differ according to our concern with economic performance or social justice. Whom we are talking about – individual schools, teachers, parents, pupils and policy-makers – will all affect what we think is 'best'. Each may have quite a different agenda.

There are no short cuts to becoming a reflexive practitioner – but it is certainly an important goal for all who are concerned with issues of gender and schooling. If we are going to implement positive change in the school or classroom, we need to start by acknowledging the complexity of the issues, and understand some of the relevant evidence. First we need to dissect the ways in which inequalities are re/produced in our own school settings and then try to tackle these using ideas from a range of sources. But this is not a task for piecemeal local tinkering. If there is to be any chance of success for individual classrooms and schools wider support and resources are needed, from the top levels of policy-making through to local management.

## Further reading

### ***Single-sex education and achievement***

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*This report provides a very accessible overview of key factors within the co-education and single-sex schools debate. It covers research and evidence relating to issues of school effectiveness, ability and social class, type of school, history and tradition of schooling, the 'genderedness' of single-sex schools, science choice and achievement, and social aspects of schooling. It provides a range of useful figures and tables.*

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*This journal article reports data and findings from two empirical studies: a ten-year project charting the transition of two Australian schools from single- to mixed-sex, and a study of the introduction of single-sex*

mathematics classes in one co-educational school in England. The paper focuses in particular on the issue of self-concept and the possible disadvantages for girls in co-educational environments.

### **Single-sex education and subject preferences**

Bone, A. (1983) *Girls and Girls-only schools: a review of the evidence*. Equal Opportunities Commission.

*Bone's is a classic- if now rather dated- report on the case for single-sex schooling. It comprehensively details evidence and arguments and as such remains a key text and reference point in the field.*

Stables, A. (1990) 'Differences between pupils from mixed and single-sex schools in their enjoyment of school subjects and in their attitudes to science and to school'. *Educational Review*, 42(3): 221-230.

*The work of Andrew Stables occupies a prominent position in the research literature around subject choices and preferences among school pupils. This selected paper does exactly what the title suggests, reporting on data from his survey of over 2,300 pupils aged 13-14 years old.*

### **Single-sex education and self-esteem**

Robinson, P. & Smithers, A. (1999) 'Should the sexes be separated for secondary education – comparisons of single-sex and co-educational schools?' *Research Papers in Education* 14(1): 23-49.

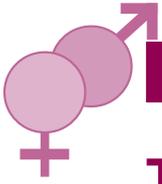
*Drawing on questionnaire and in-depth interview data from first-year university students, this journal article considers the popular claims made in favour of single-sex schooling and mixed-sex schooling with regard to issues such as academic advantage and ease of transition to university life. Findings are discussed according to the gender of respondents and their previous type of schooling.*

Reay, D. (1990) 'Working with boys.' *Gender and Education* 2(3): 269-281.

*In this article, Diane Reay discusses an Equal Opportunities project that she conducted in an inner-London primary school. This involved working with boys in a single-sex group to challenge sex stereotyping, peer group hierarchies and the alienation of ethnically diverse working-class boys from the educational system. Issues such as racism, sexism and bullying are all thoughtfully and carefully discussed.*

Haag, P. (2000) *K-12 Single Sex Education: what does the research say?* ERIC Digest EDO-PS-00-0 (University of Illinois. Illinois: USA).

*This short overview of research evidence focuses on the evidence regarding attitudinal variables and achievement variables with regard to single-sex education. It draws on international literature spanning the USA, Europe, Africa and New Zealand.*



## The language debate – what is going on here?

Caroline Daly

Engagement with language is a crucial factor in the success of boys and girls throughout their years at school. It is critical to their understanding of themselves and the world, and the means by which they negotiate the varying social contexts which help them to learn. Language learning is closely bound up with the development of identities, both individual and social. It is acknowledged that inequalities and differences in language exist within same-gender groups, and class and ethnicity are central factors affecting all students' learning – arguably more so than gender. The differences within same-gender language performance, however, have not attracted anything like the same policy-making and public concern as the 'boys' underachievement' debate of recent years. It is much easier to compare boys and girls as simplified groups who are different from each other, rather than to extract the multiple factors comprising class and ethnicity in our increasingly complex and diverse society. Improving achievement has been based on the flawed premise of comparative approaches to boys and girls, rather than in trying to eradicate the effects of class or poverty on how some pupils fail to progress in literacy. Yet factors such as these make a huge impact on how boys and girls cope differently with the language curriculum from the earliest years. In the current climate of alarm about boys' underachievement, we need to be clear which boys are the focus of the language debate, and to note that, as well as girls in general, white middle-class boys have not been the intended objects of concern.

Differences in the ways in which boys and girls experience the world of school through language have always existed. The ways in which such differences have been interpreted, however, have varied according to changing social priorities and historical contexts. In the 1970s and 1980s, for example, much feminist research into gender was focused on the unequal access to the curriculum brought about by boys' domination of classroom talk. Although improving girls' opportunities in language was a development focus at the time, it is only in recent years that we have seen an unprecedented growth in curriculum change and professional development rooted in concern about gender differences in language skills – this time with the focus firmly on the boys. For the past decade, the language curriculum and literacy teaching have been scrutinised by government, teachers and researchers in an attempt to establish what it is that may bring about a more equitable performance of boys and girls. Without taking account of class and ethnicity, legislation on curriculum and assessment has aimed at making boys perform as well as girls in all language strands of reading, writing, speaking and listening – a goal which has proved persistently elusive.

## Why a debate about language and gender now?

Current drives to improve standards have brought literacy to the forefront of initiatives to raise achievement in schools. Concerns about global economic competitiveness have raised the stakes in producing school leavers who are well-equipped with the requisite literacy skills demanded by a new kind of labour market. Boys have been perceived as the greatest obstacles to achieving ever-improving targets for higher standards in SATs at every Key Stage and at GCSE. This has been across all four strands of the language curriculum, though the focus has shifted between the strands at different times.

A decade of research into 'boys' underachievement' in English followed the publication of the Ofsted Report *Boys and English* in 1993. The Report highlighted differences in the achievement in English of boys and girls, concluding that more boys than girls experience difficulty in learning to read and write and that more boys have instrumental attitudes towards language skills which are accompanied by problems with motivation and a lack of engagement with the literacy curriculum. Girls were reported as outperforming boys in all areas except drama, media and argumentative essay writing. Differences in achievement have persisted throughout the intervening years. Boys' negative attitudes towards English were identified by the 1993 report as an area of concern, and the QCA publication *Can Do Better* in 1998 identified changing boys' attitudes as a focus for immediate action.

Despite the fact that independent research has indicated the complexities of the issues, it is important to understand the ways the 'problems' of boys have been interpreted by policy-makers and amplified by the media. Pessimistic newspaper headlines (like those illustrated opposite) have become part of the predictable annual outcry which has accompanied the publication of national literacy test results since the end of the 1990s.

Girls aren't even 'in the picture' – reflecting the current neglect of girls as unproblematic. The current focus is on school results, not on how girls fare later in life. Working-class females are still denied access to the most secure and well-paid jobs, despite their higher proportion of successful grades in literacy assessments throughout school.

This construction of boys as deficient language learners has come to be the prevailing view, and has informed an extensive range of policy-making and prescription of teaching methods in an attempt to rectify what is presented as a desperate reality. A closer look at the research, however, reveals that the reality is far more complex than this response suggests, and a wider analysis of boys, girls and language makes far less straightforward conclusions. Indeed, it conveys a strong sense that the more teachers learn about the effects of gender on language skill development, the more unsure are they that the issues are easily defined as 'boys' problems at all. Instead, it is the understanding of 'literacy' which is too often restricted, with related problems of unconfident teaching and narrow assessment strategies.

# Failing boys 'public burden number one'

Boys will be boys – and failures

EXCLUSIVE

Is English GCSE a girls' own paper?

Boys get no closer to English target

## Boys will still lag in literacy stakes

### Research into gender and language – how has the focus shifted?

A considerable shift in the research focus in this area has taken place over the past twenty-five years. Studies of language and gender took a broader perspective on inequalities between female and male pupils, and made a considerable contribution to the equal opportunities movement in the 1970s and 1980s. The everyday use of language in schools, both written and spoken, was subjected to scrutiny for how it privileged male pupils, in the ways males were represented in textual material, teaching resources and literature, and in the ways classroom practices often disadvantaged girls by facilitating dominant talk and the monopoly of teacher time by boys. During this period, considerable progress was made in understanding the importance of oracy in learning, and of ensuring equal opportunities to talk across the curriculum. Girls were identified as contributing more constructively to the talk of their peers, whilst boys tended to inhibit others, or made fewer productive contributions. The importance of an inclusive curriculum and group work to provide a secure and structured environment for shared speaking and listening became recognised as beneficial to the learning of all, and reflected a move away from teacher-centred approaches in which more boys assert themselves as 'talkers'. The move, however, was largely based on addressing what were seen as girls' problems, rather than seeing their talk patterns as a strength which boys would do well to learn from. By the time Ofsted reported in 1993, boys still showed a greater tendency to interrupt and dominate in group talk.

The emergence of current concerns about boys' literacy was heralded in England and Wales by the publication of *Boys and English* in 1993. Research conducted in 2000-01 by the Centre for Literacy in Primary Education reports that problems with motivation persist for under-achieving boys. During the intervening years, both research into and evaluations of boys' reading have somewhat overshadowed a focus on their writing across all Key Stages.

Several factors contributed to the general research focus on reading and gender in the 1990s, including:

- the polemic surrounding the so-called ‘phonics debate’ in primary schools
- ‘reading recovery’ and strategies for addressing weak readers as a policy priority
- the introduction of the Literacy Hour including whole class teaching of reading strategies
- the reporting by Ofsted of low reading levels in urban school populations
- post-16 literacy levels in schools leavers targeted as symptomatic of an inadequately skilled workforce
- the perceived crisis in reading skills spanning all stages of men’s lives, from Early Years to school leavers and male adults.

Concerns about boys’ reading have been part of an international trend. The focus on ‘reading literacy’ of the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2000 study across thirty-two countries (please see chapter 2), is indicative of the traditional investment in reading as a prime measure of literacy in the global economy. More recently, there has been an expansion in gender-focused research to include the ‘gap’ in boys’ writing achievements in relation to their reading and to girls’ writing. Successive quantitative evidence in England shows that there is a persistent shortfall in this area, and that this threatens the achievement of national targets for literacy. In 1998, *Can Do Better* demonstrated, through a series of case studies, that a focus on boys’ individual strengths and enthusiasms can have positive results. In writing, for example, asking boys to produce shorter pieces based on their own interests, that are carefully researched and drafted, led to improvements in achievement. More recently, interest in the teaching and learning processes which affect language development has underpinned a proliferation of research enquiries into gender and classroom practice in language learning.

There is increasing literature arising from action research and practitioner research, for example projects funded by the DfES Best Practice Research Scheme, which is indicative of how important the issue of differential gender achievement is perceived to be by teachers, headteachers and Local Education Authorities (LEAs). This is partly informed by concerns about the weaker performance of boys in national curriculum English tests, but is also a result of broader concerns raised by the school effectiveness and school improvement initiatives.

In contrast to a substantial research base into boys’ reading habits, there is only now being established a significant focus on boys’ views on writing. Boys have mostly featured as the objects of method trials, on whom alternative practices are being tested out, rather than being assessed in terms of their writing development in class, or teachers’ perceptions of their improved disposition towards writing. This utilitarian approach to improving boys’ literacy is

partly the legacy of the target-driven push towards quick and easily replicable solutions which will improve test results. The plateauing of SAT results in boys' writing tells us of the need for a more sustainable approach based on understanding the complex relationship between boys, girls and literacy. Such a complexity has been acknowledged in the most recent Ofsted research on this issue, *Yes He Can*, published in 2003, which stresses the importance of the inter-relationship between speaking and listening, reading and writing as being vital to the progression of all pupils, with particular benefits for boys. The report stresses a broader responsibility for all staff within a whole school ethos to promote an environment where boys' writing is valued by English and other teachers, within core school values attributed to aesthetic and creative experiences.

### **The importance of secure subject knowledge**

In order for such a positive language learning environment to flourish for both girls and boys, teachers' secure subject knowledge emerges as a major factor. Where teachers have incomplete understanding of the methods advocated by the national literacy initiatives, they can focus on managerial and bureaucratic aspects of 'covering' the recommendations. Boys in particular are not helped by a disassociation of taught 'grammar' from contextualised writing: they have difficulties in getting good ideas down on paper, despite frequent practice of component linguistic aspects. Insecure teacher knowledge can lead to the inappropriate use of methods which may do more harm than good. For example, the misapplication of scaffolding tools undermines writers' confidence, and features in the over-zealous application of writing frames which pre-empt thinking as well as writing. Pupils report wanting to use their own ideas and are frustrated by the imposition of teacher-language and teacher-ideas on their writing. Frames which are inexpertly constructed or undifferentiated contribute to a writing experience that is unstimulating. The adoption of an over-mechanistic approach becomes an obstacle for some boys, who find the process of preparing to write oppressively demanding.

Effective teachers emphasise the importance of meaning in their literacy teaching, and have secure subject knowledge about how to present content to their pupils. Such an understanding can determine the success or failure of strategies that, at face value, are perceived to be universally beneficial. Strong subject knowledge enables teachers to apply recommended strategies more effectively, for example, to scrutinise over-simplified conceptions that 'boy-friendly' texts and Information and Communications Technology (ICT) aid boys to produce better writing. It is more important for teachers to adopt a broader range of texts as stimulus material, and to learn about using ICT applications in more challenging ways. Learning is more successful when teachers are confident in their knowledge of how to mediate what they know, and use strategies within a developed understanding of how children learn to read and write. For these teachers, technical aspects of written literacy are a means to an end.

## What are the problems with writing?

Teachers' knowledge, understanding and implementation of the rationale behind the teaching of early writing is especially important. Too much focus on writing as transcription affects younger children's perceptions of what writing is and what it is for. Where letter formation is started too young, boys whose motor skills are less developed experience early frustration with writing that looks, and is, less proficient than girls'. Since transcription is an area in which weaker boys have difficulty, they make early associations of writing with failure. Early Years pupils can learn to identify success in writing as based on handwriting and quantity of output – two things which boys find particularly more difficult than do girls.

Teachers are not always clear in their distinction between writing for drafting and for presentation, and some disapprove of untidy draft work. Contrastingly, teachers can be too positive, failing to tell pupils where they are making mistakes. Where drafting becomes a chore, boys are noticeably more resistant to it than girls. Deteriorating handwriting over a longer piece of writing leads to loss of pride, lack of a sense of accomplishment and thus decreased motivation in both primary and secondary phases.

Overloading lessons, for example, by combining presentation and composition, can lead to less effective teaching and learning. The sheer length of narrative writing can be demotivating for some boys, who are better able to maintain their efforts on shorter, more focused, highly structured pieces. Time limits compound these problems, and can produce stress and disaffection which restrict boys' abilities to write well.

## What is the relationship between reading and writing and gender?

The importance of literature for language development is crucial. Increasing tendencies to read only fragments of texts as vehicles for language analysis deprives pupils of a main reading experience which informs a more meaningful understanding of what writing does. Experiencing emotionally powerful texts is a prime factor in the development of reading and writing for all pupils. The oral environment is vital, and the reading aloud of literature allows pupils to hear poeticised language which is memorable and contains powerful rhythms. Traditional tales with strong narrative structure have a significant impact on the development of early writing. Both boys and girls need to be exposed to expert readings of such literature, and to be given opportunities to pursue independent reading throughout the Key Stages.

Despite arguments that there is too much emphasis on fiction narrative in the early stages of learning to read and write, it is probably more important to focus on how boys experience the narrative genre throughout schooling. At all ages, there is a tendency for girls' and boys' narrative writing to reflect their reading preferences. For many boys, this preferred reading is not validated in school reading practices, or is only acknowledged in marginal ways. Failure to harness boys' enthusiasms for comics, graphic novels and their experience of narrative

in other media, is a lost opportunity. Boys' preference for action-packed stories may have consequences for their self-image as incompetent writers of 'approved' narratives and more value could be attached to the action and dialogue components of boys' writing. 'Gender skewing' is a feature of story-writing in the primary phase, in which boys and girls revert to gendered types of narrative. Boys are sensitive to teachers' disapproval of their preferred content in story-writing.

## Improving achievement in language learning – for all

Changing gendered patterns of underachievement in literacy is about developing teaching and learning processes which enrich language experience, not just for boys. When we look into 'best practices' for boys, it is very difficult to establish anything which can be so exclusively termed. A positive school ethos for language use is more important than individual methods or strategies geared towards boys. The role of the headteacher is vital to how the school functions as a learning organisation in supporting enquiry into gender and progression. Schools where teachers question their practice, plan collaboratively and review curriculum organisation are more likely to support success in literacy for all pupils.

### Some key factors

- *High expectations about language.* Boys and girls progress most in classrooms where high expectations about their language use are shared by teachers and pupils. Teachers who 'own' their literacy teaching adapt their methods to pupils' needs and approach literacy objectives within the context of the impact of text as a whole. Confident teachers respond to the particular needs of their pupils, rather than overload them with literacy objectives.
- *Oral work plays a vital role in the development of literacy.* It provides open-ended opportunities for the independent formulation and articulation of ideas. Boys have been observed to develop sophisticated understandings of traditionally 'female' subject content for writing, characterisation, for example, during discussion and role-play which provides opportunities for oral rehearsal. Drama is particularly beneficial, and is still under-utilised as a language learning tool in many schools.
- *Reading for pleasure is underestimated as a main contributor to the development of positive attitudes towards learning language.* In too many schools, opportunities for independent reading are dramatically reduced once pupils demonstrate reading competence. Boys and girls benefit from a range of reading activities, including independent, group and class experience of whole texts from a variety of genres. Reading of all kinds needs to be discussed so that girls as well as boys learn about a broad range of models on offer for more effective independent writing.

- *Lesson planning and organisation.* Pupils benefit in general from tightly structured, well-focused lessons, which establish a firm sense of purpose towards the achievement of clear learning aims. This does not mean employing a uniform or repetitive structure. They respond to clearly defined aims which make what is being learnt explicit, and which use scaffolding tools discriminately, such as: writing templates, genre samples and visual and diagrammatic organising tools like grids and spider diagrams.
- *Active learning tasks.* Boys' preference for active learning across the curriculum is well-established in the school effectiveness literature. Boys feel confident and can succeed where language work across the curriculum focuses on the use of visual stimuli, ICT, video, drama, storytelling and play.
- *Meta-cognitive approaches.* For example, in the secondary school phase, boys' writing can be improved through self-review which takes place in discussion and writing based on gender and English as an assignment topic, and by keeping an English diary. Such approaches aim to support independent pupil awareness and responsibility for their own development, and are features of schools in which boys make good progress.
- *Explicit teaching about language.* Boys value teachers who articulate the features of good writing and connect linguistic items with effects they have on the reader. The explicit teaching of linguistic items for enhancing meaning helps pupils to write more effectively, providing continuity for the teaching of grammatical features, and developing sophistication in writing. Teachers need to be skilful in their assessment of pupils' knowledge about language features in texts, and use this to feed into the planning cycle for teaching writing.
- *The use of visual media.* Methods used by visual media to convey action are transferred effectively by boys into their own writing, and they benefit from using the language found in cartoons, television, video and computer games. This dramatic dimension to their writing is accompanied by a more effective use of language, in the choice of a range of adjectives, adverbs and complex sentences. Links exist between moving image media, 'cineliteracy' and print literacy, and there is growing interest in how moving image media may enhance literacy teaching. There may be significant scope for teachers to use film to support the development of writing skills in weaker pupils, with particular benefits for boys.
- *Ownership of writing.* Topic choice is important to boys throughout the Key Stages, and may be more important than preferences for writing fiction or non-fiction. Pupils in Key Stages 1 and 2 can be highly resistant to their teachers' selection of topics for narrative and non-fiction writing. They want to use their own ideas, and relate writing to their lives: they can otherwise see the writing curriculum as irrelevant. Belief that boys have a natural disposition to writing non-fiction can be over-generalised. Their desire to write using their own ideas means that they can find some informative/transactional writing to be

constricting and irrelevant. Boys' desire to choose their own narrative writing topics is very strong, and contributes to success in all phases, by affecting the writer's motivation and self-perception as 'expert' in the chosen topic, based on real-life knowledge and experience.

- *Writing partners.* Boys and girls can achieve a more coherent structure by working with response partners before and during writing, to negotiate the content of their writing and to review each stage, also considering choices about language. Some schools foster older boys as role models for literacy for younger pupils, for example, by publishing their work for younger classes or using them as 'reading buddies'.
- *Writing poetry.* Boys are more willing to accept topic selection by the teacher and show less reluctance to use figurative language in writing poetry. Many boys respond well to writing poetry, enjoying the highly structured approaches it demands. Pupils feel liberated from sentence/clause structure, and respond well to the shorter form and the immediacy of ideas.
- *Planning and drafting.* Boys are motivated where planning and drafting have clear aims. Effective strategies include the use of: mnemonics to aid planning for younger writers; photocopied scripts for editing exercises, with the whole class and in groups, and peer-drafting. Effective teachers separate presentation from composition aspects in their teaching of writing, dealing with presentation and handwriting in separate teaching episodes. Boys have a tendency to try new vocabulary more readily than girls, risking attendant spelling errors; where this is part of the normal drafting process, risk-taking brings results. Drafting is motivating where it is focused on composition and assembly strategies, and where pupils receive individual support and oral and written feedback from the teacher.
- *Information and Communications Technology.* The motivating effect on boys of ICT and its potential to enhance engagement with literacy activities is widely accepted. ICT supports literacy development through, for example, the oral work which takes place in front of the screen during pair work, where it stimulates discussion of the details of linguistic and organisational features of texts. Boys see ICT as a means of improving the presentation of their written work, and respond favourably to the instant feedback provided by spell-checkers. It is, however, in the alterability of text on screen that ICT offers the most impact on the linguistic choices all pupils make by supporting the teaching of composition features, for example, using the highlight and font facilities to focus on topic sentences and language choices such as conjunctions.

## Conclusion

Teachers of literacy need to be able to contextualise their teaching beyond the prevalent simplified comparative approach to boys and girls as language users, and the 'common sense' interpretations of boys' problems with literacy that accompany it. They need a developed subject knowledge which enables them to transform the common sense orthodoxies ('boys are good at ICT') and apply their knowledge beyond strategies offered by tools such as writing frames. Misconceptions abound, and there is a confusion of 'teaching tools' with 'methods'. Teaching is more successful when teachers have a confident knowledge of how to mediate what they know, and use strategies within a fully conceptualised understanding of how children learn language. 'Direct teaching' can be misinterpreted to imply an atomistic approach to the teaching of language and form, and an over-interventionist role for the teacher. Strong subject knowledge about literacy results in an understanding of the relation of the composite whole to its parts.

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## Excluded from school: A gendered story of behaviour

Audrey Osler

The belief that girls and young women have benefited most from education in recent years and are outperforming boys at all levels is widespread. Schools are often perceived to be girl-friendly institutions and girls are judged to be less susceptible to behavioural difficulties. At first glance, girls' apparent lead is confirmed by exclusion figures. According to national statistics, boys account for more than four out of five students permanently excluded from school each year for disciplinary reasons. As a consequence, girls have been largely overlooked in school exclusion prevention strategies and research. This is despite evidence that over a five-year period, from 1995 to 1999, in England alone, over 10,000 secondary-aged girls were permanently excluded from school as the result of disciplinary procedures. This amounts to the equivalent of a population of a small town. A significant number of these students effectively drop out of school altogether. They either disappear out of the sight of education authorities or reach school leaving age before an alternative school placement can be found. If we add the (relatively small) numbers of girls permanently excluded from primary schools, and the much larger numbers of 'hidden' (not officially recorded) exclusions from all types of school for short periods or on an informal basis, the figures increase considerably.

The issue of exclusion from school is closely linked to that of achievement and to the Government's standards agenda in two key and somewhat contradictory ways. Firstly, learners who are barred from school are unlikely to fulfil their academic potential; not only will they miss key lessons but they may also experience loss of self-esteem and are likely to encounter difficulties reintegrating into school if their exclusion is for a significant period of time. In 1998 the Government published its report *Truancy and School Exclusion* which recognised the direct link between exclusion from school and longer-term social exclusion. It set the target of reducing school exclusions by one-third by 2002.<sup>1</sup> Exclusion was seen as a threat to the standards agenda. In contrast to this, the exclusion of disruptive learners has more recently been presented as a means of supporting the standards agenda. From this alternative viewpoint the emphasis is on the ways in which such children threaten the education of their peers. Their exclusion is justified in terms of the interests of the majority.

Young people in each generation are often assumed to be more badly behaved than those who have gone before them. The behaviour of young people is often presented as a measure of the general health of the nation.<sup>2</sup> From this perspective, those who behave badly need to be punished or corrected so as to ensure the future well-being of society. When, in 2002, the Government failed to reach its target in cutting school exclusions, the then Secretary of State for Education, Estelle Morris, claimed she was 'not too upset' about the increase: 'there has

got to be a clear message to young people that behaviour is important. If boundaries are crossed, consequences take place'.<sup>3</sup> Exclusion levels have sometimes been read as a proxy measure against which a school's discipline standards can be measured. For some, a high excluding school is judged to be one in which high standards are maintained and unacceptable behaviour is not tolerated; for others, it is a sign that the school is not well managed and that it has difficulties in ensuring high standards of pupil behaviour.

Media accounts support the view that exclusion from school is largely a male problem and that the story of girls' schooling is more or less an unqualified success. Carl Parsons' 1999 study of media coverage of cases of school exclusion in the mid-1990s revealed a tendency to emphasise the violent nature of excluded young people and the danger they posed to other learners and their teachers. The research cited a number of examples of ways in which these children were demonised: one 13-year-old was repeatedly referred to as a 'thug', and in one newspaper his family was characterised as 'the family from hell'.<sup>4</sup> All the examples cited were of boys, reflecting the tendency of the media to portray school exclusion, more or less exclusively, as something which happens to boys. Exclusion from school is discussed in the context of concerns about male youth crime and boys' problems are presented in the context of a wider debate about an apparent 'crisis' in masculinity.

By contrast, media stories about girls have, until very recently, focused on the general trend for girls to outperform boys in GCSE and A-Level examinations. They confirm the impression that girls are not only succeeding at school but are also less likely to present behavioural problems than their male peers. Despite this, girls' success over boys is recorded as a worrying trend. When the reverse was the case it was accepted as normal and not worth reporting. Media stories also mislead, often giving the impression that all girls are succeeding. In 2001, 55.2 per cent of girls achieved five or more grades A\* to C in GCSE examinations, compared with 44.6 per cent of boys. There is little public discussion of which girls and boys are succeeding and which girls or boys are not reaching these standards. Little thought is given to female experiences of exclusion or to the substantial minority of girls (44.8 per cent) who reach the end of compulsory schooling without the qualifications which give them access to a wider job market and to those courses which lead to higher education.

This chapter explores the meaning of exclusion, drawing on our research. We were interested to establish how girls experience school, and to identify the factors which enable them to feel they belong and to achieve and those which led to alienation and disaffection. Our aim was to establish how girls understand and experience exclusion from school.

## Researching exclusion

My interest into exclusion from school dates from the mid-1990s when I undertook research on behalf of the Commission for Racial Equality. We examined the exclusion rates of learners, examining both fixed-term and permanent exclusions, by gender, ethnicity and school

attended. Our work confirms the findings of many other studies which indicate that Black (African-Caribbean) learners are many times more likely to be excluded than their White peers. We also established that African-Caribbean girls were much more vulnerable to exclusion than their White female peers.<sup>5</sup> Significantly, we also found that the factor which plays the biggest part in determining whether an individual is excluded is the school which s/he attends.<sup>6</sup> Drawing on this statistical data and on the experiences of teachers in primary and secondary schools, we were able to make recommendations on how inequalities in exclusion rates might be addressed.<sup>7</sup> Subsequently, I directed a project on behalf of the Department for Education and Skills on the reasons for exclusion.<sup>8</sup> Our research uncovered the growing phenomenon of unofficial (and unlawful) exclusion practised by headteachers, often carried out in the belief that such unofficial approaches are in the best interests of the child.<sup>9</sup> In carrying out these studies I also observed that research on exclusion focused, more or less entirely, on the experiences of boys.<sup>10</sup>

In order to understand girls' experiences of schooling and exclusion we interviewed 81 girls aged 13 to 15 years in six localities across England.<sup>11</sup> The girls included those who were believed by their teachers to be succeeding at school as well as those who had been excluded or who were believed to be at risk of exclusion. We also interviewed 55 service providers working with girls and young women, from a range of backgrounds. They included teachers, social workers and health professionals. We placed considerable emphasis on the voices of children and young people in understanding their experiences of schooling and exclusion. Nevertheless, we also recognised that young people, like adults, are likely to have their blind spots. It was therefore useful to compare their responses with those of professionals. In fact, the evidence collected from each group tended to support that of the other.

## Excluding girls

### *Different behaviour patterns*

Our research highlights very different patterns of behaviour between boys and girls, which go a long way towards explaining the differentials in formal, disciplinary permanent exclusion rates. For example, girls reported that when they got into trouble, rather than respond aggressively, they tended to adopt such tactics as apologising, crying or otherwise showing remorse:

*Girls apologise... and well, they can act innocent. They just, when they put a foot wrong, well they're just like 'Oh I'm sorry I didn't mean to do it, I'll never do it again', but with boys they're just like 'Yeah so what?'*

Anna, permanently excluded student, attending pupil referral unit

*Girls, they can talk their way out of some things... like they make excuses for themselves. And boys, when they get into trouble, they just make it worse by like shouting at the teacher and denying what they've done.*

Nicole, mainstream school, no exclusions

Girls' ability to extricate themselves from trouble through such means were confirmed by professionals:

*Part of the reason girls don't get excluded as much is because they are better at social skills. When they do get into bother, they are much better at dropping the eyes and saying 'I'm sorry'.*

Member of behavioural support service

## **Different perceptions of behaviour**

Girls' and boys' problems are categorised differently from each other, with consequent differences in the ways problems are measured and resources allocated. For example, suicide rates for girls and young women are low compared with those of boys. Yet if the problem is re-conceptualised to acknowledge differences in suicide rates between ethnic groups and to address the widespread problem of self-harm among young women, the picture looks very different. Adolescent boys are more likely to commit suicide, though girls and young women are more likely to attempt it but with unsuccessful outcomes, and they are more prone to engage in self-harming behaviour. Three times more young women than young men engage in self-harming behaviour and the group most likely to do so are girls aged 13 to 15 years.<sup>12</sup>

At school level, the professionals we interviewed recognised ways in which similar behaviour is also perceived in different ways, according to whether the student in question is a boy or a girl:

*I think there is an assumption that if a female is showing aggressive behaviour, it doesn't really fit in with the stereotype, so there must be something wrong here... let's try and sort it out. But if a boy does the same thing then that's it, they're out.*

Educational psychologist

Alternatively, some girls may be punished for behaviour which is regarded as 'extreme' yet would be accepted in boys:

*Girls are greater victims of inconsistencies: there is a degree of intolerance but also a degree of shock and horror; they do not have the ability to be 'loveable rogues'.*

Head of pupil referral unit

## Self-exclusion and bullying

Girls' own accounts demonstrate reasons as to why they may self-exclude and how they withdraw from learning:

*Some people... if they have problems with like dyslexia and stuff, they are too shy to admit it because of what their friends will say, so they go on pretending that they can do the things and they're not getting the right help because no one knows they've got problems.*

Student in group interview, mainstream school

*I was getting called fat and everything and then... [other students] they'd mostly swear at me and ... it was stupid but it really got on my nerves, so I didn't want to go.*

Emma, long-term non-attender

## Friendship, reputation and bullying

The girls spoke a great deal about bullying and described the exclusionary processes which girls show towards each other. Bullying was, for them, a key cause of exclusion, yet professionals failed to identify it as such. Girls placed a lot of emphasis on 'reputation' and on being liked by each other. This requires them to present themselves as attractive to boys, but to avoid being labelled by their peers as promiscuous. They are required to present a strong heterosexual identity, and to avoid any suggestion of lesbianism. They use friendship and the withholding of friendship as a means of exercising power and control over each other.<sup>13</sup>

The girls in our study identified gender differences not only in the ways conflicts were expressed but also in the ways conflicts are resolved between peers:

*If they [boys] are like having an argument with someone, they have to fight them. They've got to be seen like as good in the eyes of their friends, and they think they'll get respect from everyone by fighting and stuff from their classmates. Girls, they can think about things before they do it, and they don't fight as much, they're just more bitchy towards each other.*

Fiona, mainstream school

*Girls always support each other. Whenever you have an argument or something, there's always sides to it and there's always one girl and her mates and the other girl with her posse of mates on the other side, and as soon as the main girls make up, the groups are all right again. It always happens like that.*

Julie, mainstream school

## Racism and exclusion

Girls' accounts of bullying, harassment and exclusion revealed that sometimes there is a racist dimension to bullying and exclusion:

*I don't think there should be racism in school. I was bullied when I was in Year 7 ...um, you eat curries, you shouldn't be here, this isn't your country and things like that and I didn't really like that.*

Halima, mainstream school, no exclusions

*This girl kept making fun of me and saying that she was going to beat me up. It was in one lesson, right from the start to the end of the lesson... and there were racial comments as well, calling me 'black bitch' and stuff.*

Daniela, mainstream school, some exclusions

Daniela's account revealed how she had responded aggressively to bullying. She was excluded for getting into a fight with another girl who had been taunting her. Her account provides us with some clues as to why black girls may be more vulnerable to exclusion than their White female peers. She believed the bullying that proceeded her angry outburst was not taken into account by teachers and felt she had no choice but to deal with the bully herself.

There was some indication that asylum-seekers, recent migrants and students of South Asian descent were particularly vulnerable to racial harassment:

*I haven't seen lots of bullying towards black people... I see it towards Asian people and people from different countries.*

Julie, white pupil, mainstream school

## Truancy and absenteeism

Truancy was one form of self-exclusion which featured prominently in many girls' accounts. All but one of the girls reported that they had truanted at least once. A smaller but significant number reported missing extended periods of schooling. Girls reported two types of truancy. The first occurred when individuals were fearful of attending school. In the second, truancy was also acknowledged as something that happened because the alternative appeared more attractive:

*I didn't really fit in, so I didn't want to go to school. Teachers wouldn't help me with my work. It really started from there.*

Belinda, self-excluder being educated in pupil referral unit

*'Cause some [students] they have more fun sitting around someone's house... mainly drugs as well, 'cause once you get into drugs and that, you just think 'Oh school's rubbish, you might as well go and have fun'.*

Caroline, self-excluder, both fixed-term and permanent, mainstream school

Evidence from both girls and young women and the professionals who worked with them suggests that pregnancy is linked to school exclusion in complex ways. Although government guidelines expressly state that pregnancy should not be a reason for disciplinary exclusion, in reality it often marks the end of an individual's schooling. Many girls who become pregnant are often already alienated from school. This account is one girl's compassionate and sensitive explanation of how a classmate became excluded from schooling:

*There was this girl and she started to get bullied because she was very big built and they used to call her fatty and everything... but she wasn't. Then she started skipping days off school. They just thought she was skipping days off because she didn't like school. I think she missed 17 maybe 20 science lessons, then it was whole days, weeks and months. Then she left because she fell pregnant and then that was it. She's trying to get into college but she hasn't got any GCSEs and it'll be hard because she's got the baby. I really wanted her to have some more life. I wanted her to have an education... to just have something to help her but she never managed it. She's dyslexic as well but she's not stated. She just thought to herself she was thick: 'I don't know nothing. I'm stupid', because people put her down and so she'd skip days off school.*

Sam, mainstream school

Sam shows how bullying, absenteeism, unidentified special educational needs and, finally, pregnancy and motherhood, combined to exclude one student. The example she provides is in many ways typical of the way in which girls are excluded from schooling without necessarily having been subject to any disciplinary process.

## Rethinking exclusion

Current official definitions of exclusion define it in terms of disciplinary procedures. Since boys are more vulnerable to disciplinary exclusion, the support systems and alternative education schemes which are currently in place tend to be targeted at boys. So, for example, some schemes organised by voluntary sector agencies focus on boys' sports and on activities traditionally associated with boys:

*I'm thinking about the Key Stage 4 alternatives. I have an impression that a lot of the things that are organised are more appealing for boys, things like painting and decorating, car mechanics, bricklaying, woodwork, carpentry.*

Education welfare officer

Even when provision is designed for both sexes, some professionals are reluctant to send girls to pupil referral units and other provision where boys make up the vast majority of learners. Similarly, some girls are reluctant to join such provision when they realise it will be dominated by boys.

Many girls who need alternative places to mainstream school are not given priority because the pressure is to remove those students who cause teachers the greatest problems:

*There's someone I'm working with at the moment... she's very emotionally distressed, as shown by crying, worrying, refusing to do her homework and those sorts of things. Whilst the school is concerned about her, it's not as pressing as a six foot kid who's throwing desks about.*

Educational psychologist

*The withdrawn child sitting quietly at the back is more likely to be female and is in a sense excluded.*

Educational psychologist

I am arguing for a redefinition of school exclusion which builds upon girls' experiences of schooling and behaviour patterns which are more commonly found among girls. Redefining school exclusion to include girls' experiences is critical. It is not merely a matter of semantics. Currently, resources aimed at disaffected learners are targeted at boys. There is even a government website dedicated to 'underachieving' boys, but no parallel site which focuses on the needs of disaffected girls. Boys' behaviour cannot be addressed in isolation, nor can that of girls. Girls' behaviour and boys' behaviour needs to be considered as part of a more complex whole. If exclusion is defined so as to include girls' experiences then it is likely that resources designed to address disaffection will be more equitably distributed.

## **How can school be improved?**

As this chapter has illustrated, current official definitions of exclusion, built upon male experiences, have direct consequences for policy development and for the subsequent allocation of resources. Many of the forms of disaffection and exclusion experienced by girls do not tend to have an immediate impact on teachers. Consequently, they do not attract the attention of the media or policy-makers and they are generally not prioritised at school level. The research reported in this chapter focused on girls and young women in the middle and upper years of secondary schooling, but the research has implications for those working with younger girls and boys. Indeed, professionals from a range of services noted how younger girls are also experiencing problems. Those working in child and adolescent mental health services reported an increase in the number of children being referred to them, at a younger age. It would appear that we have learnt not to take seriously the forms of psychological bullying and exclusion which girls employ. Teachers and other adults underestimate the devastating effects that friendship break-ups can have on girls. It is at primary school level that girls are learning their social skills, patterns of behaviour and ways of dealing with problems, often without reference to adults. Our research suggests that boys' needs and girls' needs cannot be seen as separate and that we need to sensitise ourselves not only to different forms of exclusion but also to the different ways we respond to similar behaviours

in girls and in boys. It also indicates that early intervention strategies are critical if we are to prevent the exclusion of girls and young women from school.

The girls we interviewed made some suggestions as to how school might be improved to meet their needs. Drawing on their ideas, these are some of the key recommendations from our research:

- Schools should provide support (for example, a counsellor or school nurse) that can be accessed by learners on a self-referral basis.
- Clear plans are needed for re-integrating learners who have been out of school as a result of disciplinary exclusion, truancy, pregnancy, etc.
- Policies and practices which address bullying need to acknowledge the psychological forms of bullying to which girls may be especially vulnerable.
- Schools need to address racial harassment as a specific form of bullying.
- Schools need to provide support and training to teachers so that they have the skills to identify learners experiencing difficulties and have sufficient knowledge of sources of support.
- Interventions and support for individuals identified as vulnerable need to be discreet and sensitive as girls and young women are often concerned about peer reputation.
- Effective learner consultation and participation procedures are critical (e.g. student councils, engagement in policy development) and need to be sensitive to the differing needs of girls and boys.
- Specific initiatives to support girls need to be sensitive to the differences in needs between girls, related, for example, to ethnicity, sexuality, maturity and out-of-school responsibilities.
- Access to support systems, alternative educational provision and other opportunities, such as counselling, need to be monitored by gender and ethnicity.

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- <sup>2</sup> Griffin, C. (1993) *Representations of Youth: the study of youth and adolescence in Britain and America*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- <sup>3</sup> Estelle Morris, *Radio 4 Today Programme*, BBC 23 May 2002.
- <sup>4</sup> Parsons, C. (1999) *Education, Exclusion and Citizenship*. London: Routledge.
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- <sup>6</sup> Osler, A. and Hill, J. (1999) 'Exclusion from school and racial equality: an examination of government proposals in the light of recent research evidence'. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 29 (1): 33-62.
- <sup>7</sup> Commission for Racial Equality (1997) *Exclusion from School and Racial Equality: good practice guide*. London: CRE.
- <sup>8</sup> Osler, A., Watling, R. and Busher, H. (2000) *Reasons for Exclusion from School. Research Report 244*. London: Department for Education and Employment.
- <sup>9</sup> *Our evidence suggests that this is rarely the case. Although an individual avoids the stigma of having an exclusion on his or her school record, the child will move on to another school without the new institution being aware of his/her needs and without appropriate support. An unofficial exclusion presents additional problems for parents or carers, who are likely to find it more difficult to appeal against such a decision than against one which follows proper procedures. We have charted the experiences of one family whose child was informally excluded and where there was no question of any disciplinary code having been broken. The decision followed the school's inability to meet the student's special education needs. See: Osler, A., and Osler, C. (2002) 'Inclusion, exclusion and children's rights: A case study of a student with Asperger Syndrome'. *Journal of Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties*, 7 (1): 35-54.*
- <sup>10</sup> *For example, a study of exclusions at primary level included case studies of boys' experiences, but not of girls' experiences. See Hayden, C. (1997) Children Excluded from Primary School: debates, evidence, responses. Buckingham: Open University Press.*
- <sup>11</sup> *Further details of these areas can be found in our research report. 'Not a Problem? Girls and school exclusion' (Osler et al., 2002). They included contrasting environments in both rural and urban areas and were situated in the north of England, the Midlands, London and the South East.*
- <sup>12</sup> Meltzer, H., Harrington, R., Goodman, R. and Jenkins, R. (2001) *Children and Adolescents who try to Harm or Kill Themselves*. London: Office for National Statistics.
- <sup>13</sup> See Osler, A. and Vincent, K. (2003) *Girls and Exclusion: rethinking the agenda*. London: RoutledgeFalmer and Hey, V. (1997) *The Company She Keeps: an ethnography of girls' friendship*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

## Further reading

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## Annotated bibliography

Commission for Racial Equality (1997) *Exclusion from School and Racial Equality: good practice guide*. London: CRE.

*This is a practical and accessible guide to the steps that LEAs and schools can take to ensure they address inequalities in exclusion rates between ethnic groups.*

Osler, A. (1997) *Exclusions from school and racial equality. Research report*. London: Commission for Racial Equality.

*This report examines statistical data and teachers' accounts of exclusion in two Midlands LEAs. It analyses patterns of inequality by gender and ethnicity and identifies steps which schools and LEAs can take to address inequalities.*

Osler, A. and Hill, J. (1999) 'Exclusion from school and racial equality: an examination of government proposals in the light of recent research evidence'. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 29 (1): 33-62.

*In this article the authors present detailed statistical data on school exclusions, including fixed-term exclusion, over a period of years. This discussion of government policies on exclusion emphasises how general targets to cut exclusions do not address existing inequalities between groups. It calls for policies which focus on existing inequalities and target resources to address this. It also highlights a problem which is rarely discussed: the disproportionate exclusion of African-Caribbean girls in relation to their White female peers.*

Osler, A. and Osler, C. (2002) 'Inclusion, exclusion and children's rights: A case study of a student with Asperger Syndrome'. *Journal of Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties*, 7 (1): 35-54.

*This article presents a case study of unofficial exclusion from school and shows how difficult it can be for parents to secure a child's rights when a school operates unofficial exclusion.*

Osler, A., Street, C., Lall, M and Vincent, K. (2002) *Not a problem? Girls and school exclusion*. London: National Children's Bureau.

*This report presents the findings of a Joseph Rowntree Foundation study into girls and exclusion from school, carried out by the centre for Citizenship Studies, University of Leicester and the new Policy Institute. It is a key text for researchers and professionals in social work, health, education, youth work and child psychology.*

Osler, A. and Vincent, K. (2003) *Girls and exclusion: rethinking the agenda*. London: RoutledgeFalmer.

*This book won the National Association of Special Education Needs/TES Academic Book Award 2003 for the book which does most to inspire and inform educators. The judges' verdict: 'A consistently excellent book on a serious issue with much to say to professionals, politicians and the public. The voices of the girls are allowed to come out and give it life. It's well written and entertaining, but all the research is there and the message comes through.'*

Osler, A., Watling, R. and Busher, H. (2000) *Reasons for exclusion from school. Research report 244*. London: Department for Education and Employment.

*This report examines the practice of exclusion in six LEAs across England. It highlights a growing practice of unofficial and unlawful exclusion, often practised 'in the best interests of the child'.*



## Combating homophobia and heterosexism: The last prejudice

Gavin Baldwin

### Definitions

The first problem is what to call ourselves. When I first drafted this paper, although I do not like it, I opted to use the term 'Queer' as the best of a range of insufficient terms.

After further discussion, we felt that this may alienate and perhaps disturb those people who are working to deal with homophobia in the workplace. We also felt it could play into the hands of those with homophobic tendencies.

We therefore opted to use the term, LGBT (lesbians, gay men, bisexuals and transgendered people) in the hope that this would not exclude or favour.

*Homophobia:* I use this in the sense of a fear of 'queerness' leading to prejudice against LGBTs.

*Heterosexism:* By this I mean the privileging of heterosexuality as a more valid option than a LGBT lifestyle.

In this chapter I am going to tackle the last acceptable prejudice. This is a bold way to begin and an indication to you of the tone and direction of my discussion. This is a plea: as a relatively successful gay man, I have grown up in a society in which I have had to 'manage' subtle prejudice. As a child I knew that I was different: my classmates attaching the label 'poofter' which only later I came to see as 'true'. My parents brought me up in a trouble-free and fairly liberal household where their love was clearly unquestioning but where relationships and certainly those of the sexual variety were not discussed. I learnt the protection of silence. As a teenager I fell in love but never formed a relationship. As a student I came out to myself, my closest friends and then my parents, haunted by a fear of rejection and social isolation which was happily unfounded. As a young teacher I fell back on the protection of silence again until, more confident in myself and the value of my sexuality as an expression of the profoundest love, I decided that my gayness was the business of no one but those with whom I chose to share it.

I have been lucky. Generally speaking the damage that homophobic and heterosexist prejudice has done to my self-confidence and self-concept have been limited. It has not always been easy waking up in the morning knowing that I am different from some others, knowing that I am hated, knowing that I might not be trusted, knowing that I am labelled – but I have never

been physically harmed, unlike many, have never seriously considered suicide, unlike many, and have never been rejected by family and friends, unlike many. I may have been discriminated against at work but I am unaware of it, unlike many, and have not been discriminated against by housing or health authorities, unlike many.

It is for the many LGBT people, adults and children, less fortunate than myself that I make this plea. Examples of young LGBT people who have been physically or psychologically harmed through homophobic bullying and the consequent impact on their educational achievement and life chances are well documented (starting with the pioneering study in 1984 by Trenchard and Warren working with the London Gay Teenage Group).

After some general observations about homophobic and heterosexist prejudice I will locate positive equality education concerning LGBT people and their lifestyle within a general approach to education about living. I will then consider three ways of intervening in school-based education which may make a difference. Firstly, in the whole life of the school through ethos-effecting policy, then through ways of reacting to children's unwanted behaviour and expression of attitudes, and finally through curriculum interventions.

## **The nature of prejudice related to sexuality**

To be prejudiced against someone for expressing their sexuality in a certain way or forming relationships based on their particular sexual orientation can only stem from a belief that one form of sexual practice is better than another and that an individual can choose the form of sexual expression most natural to them. In a purely reproductive sense heterosexual sex is certainly the only way to achieve the procreation of the next generation but this is to see sex at its most basic. As a recreational activity or as a way of expressing the profoundest love to another individual, I can see no argument that privileges one form of sexual expression over another. For me, all sexual relationships are bound by the same strictures – that they are between consenting adults showing mutual respect concerning physical health and psychological well being.

There are, of course, religious objections to certain sexual practices which motivate certain preferences and prejudices. I will conveniently leave these to the theologians. The time is clearly ripe for debate about the role of LGBT people within different faith groups as is already happening in the Anglican Church.

## **Education for life**

It is a truism to say that schools reflect our society but there is a strange ambivalence in that relationship when considering aspects of education relating to sexuality and lifestyle choices. This ambivalence is, I believe, based upon false assumptions of childhood innocence (confused with ignorance) and prejudice (of the heterosexist variety – amongst others). Currently we have a more liberal and open attitude in society towards LGBT lifestyles than ever before.

They are represented in an increasingly non-stereotypical way on television; prominent citizens and celebrities are 'out' and the law is changing. Section 28 has been abolished and plans are afoot to recognise same-sex relationships in law and offer the same protection and obligations currently afforded to heterosexual marriage. Schools cannot protect pupils from these changes – indeed they have a responsibility to educate people to function as fully active citizens within this society.

To assist in this development to produce a more equal and just society, schools must develop their equal opportunities work to tackle heterosexism and homophobia – not in isolation but in relation to all other equal opportunities issues. The aim must be to allow young people to develop fully and confidently, valuing who they are and recognising the equal value of others. It is only in this way that they will achieve educationally and socially. These issues are of an absolutely fundamental nature at the heart of what it is to be human. These are identity issues and just as 'race', gender and disability are identity factors, so is sexuality: each with its attendant prejudice. An active citizen will therefore be one whose identity is fully developed and valued. In struggling to assert that identity we often have more than one factor to contend, with as this quote from Femi illustrates:

*“For Black lesbians and Black gays the battle is a tougher one to take on because it means fighting with the same family and community that cushions and protects you from the racism within the wider community, but it is the same battle.”*

*(Femi, 1997)*

This compels us to see separate equal opportunities issues in schools as parts of one strategy each demanding equal attention.

This conceptualisation of the problem asks teachers to see their schools as places where identities, which are in part sexual, are developed. For this to happen in a way that is not heterosexist, schools need to change their practices radically. This challenge is based on the recognition that schools are dominated by a heterosexual discourse that makes heterosexuality all but 'compulsory'. Much research has emphasised the dominance of heterosexual discourse in schools, both in the hidden and overt curriculum (Epstein *et al*, 2003, draw much of this work together). This dominance can be seen through the games children play in the home corner, the models of family life to which they are exposed, the discussions of relationships and love they take part in, the history and literature children study, the sex education they receive and, sadly, the bullying to which they are exposed. It is this dominant heterosexual, and, most of the time, heterosexist discourse that oppresses and stunts the development of LGBT people. The task then is to create an ethos where sexual identities can develop without pressure to develop towards any particular orientation.

The presence of homophobic bullying worsens the situation. Homophobic behaviour and consequent bullying is commonly found amongst children including those of primary school age (as clearly presented in a case study by Emma Reynolds). At all levels this can lead to

isolation so that ‘young people who might offer each other support in exploring their sexual identity and coming out are kept isolated from one another’ (Douglas *et al*, 1999. p56)

## Meeting the challenge

### ***Through policy***

Clearly homophobia and heterosexism need to be dealt with through the further development of equality of opportunity, behaviour and bullying policies. A survey of secondary schools in England and Wales undertaken in 1999 revealed that whilst secondary schools had bullying policies, reference to lesbian and gay bullying was rare (Douglas *et al* 1999). Such policies should make reference to the DfEE Sex and Relationship Guidance 2000. This guidance has been criticised for its heterosexism (Epstein *et al* 2003) but can still be used to tackle homophobia as Schools Out UK have shown ([www.schools-out.org.uk](http://www.schools-out.org.uk)). Policies are binding on all members of the school community and all activity within the school. Following the advice of Paul Patrick and Helena Burke they should include a statement emphasising the duty to uphold the policy even when it may differ from a person’s own personal beliefs. Obviously policies need the support of the school community and specific support may be given through in-service education to develop curriculum initiatives and materials, and training in dealing with homophobic behaviour and bullying in the school.

### ***Through tackling homophobic behaviour***

As we have seen, homophobic bullying, both through teasing and physical attack are present in both primary and secondary schools. Such behaviour must be tackled explicitly and never tacitly condoned. Unfortunately, many LGBT people report responses from teachers such as raised eyebrows, nervous laughter or comments such as ‘don’t be silly’. Homophobic teasing must be tackled with as much seriousness as racist or sexist taunts. With young children it may at first be necessary to ascertain that they understand what they are saying and if they don’t, to explain the seriousness and meaning of what has been said. A useful response is to ask what difference it makes. This enables teachers to explore issues of homophobic prejudice. Discipline without seizing the teaching opportunity is unlikely to lead to a modification of attitude.

Schools must also develop strategies to prevent expressions of homophobia in lessons. This can be particularly prevalent in single-sex sex education classes where boys often adopt homophobic stances in order to assert their own heterosexuality (or, sadly, to appear heterosexual if they are not – I remember this strategy well!).

Teachers’ attitudes clearly have a powerful impact on the security of LGBT students, as this quotation from a respondent to one of Martin Mac An Ghail’s projects demonstrates:

*At school there's no such thing as sexuality, so it seems. Then one day you come out and say you're gay and then you find out that its the most important thing in the world. The teachers try everything to change you. 'It's a phase, you need psychiatric help, it's unnatural, it's against your religion, your parents won't accept you, your friends will reject you, you won't get a job.' I've had it all. I think that teachers feel more threatened by gays than any other group.*

Raj (Mac An Ghail, 1994, p168).

### **Through the curriculum**

The creation of a positive environment where all people, regardless of sexual orientation, can develop, requires a willingness not only to tackle oppressive forces such as underlying heterosexism and homophobic bullying but also to develop a curriculum which positively celebrates a diversity of sexuality. There is a great deal of work to be done here if superficial tokenism is to be avoided. I will offer little more than signposts for further development and deal with specific sexuality and relationship education after reviewing ways in which other areas of the curriculum might offer opportunities for the discussion of sexual diversity.

Given the child-centred nature of the Foundation Stage, teachers have the opportunity to observe and talk about the ways in which children play, to challenge their emerging gender roles as expressed through chosen activities and the stereotypical roles they might adopt in the home corner. Children may well have parents and/or relatives who are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgendered whom they talk about in school – such relationships should be totally accepted.

Throughout Key Stages 1 and 2, as children become more aware of different family organisations, opportunities can be taken to give examples of LGBT parenting. As issues arise in the news and through popular television programmes, teachers can take the opportunity in Personal Social and Health Education (PSHE) and 'circle time' to discuss homophobia and LGBT lifestyle opportunities. There is no intention here to 'promote' one lifestyle over another, rather to acknowledge the existence of many successful alternatives. Children should also have access to good quality stories that celebrate sexual diversity. In history, particularly in response to Holocaust Remembrance Day, the persecution of LGBT people can be acknowledged. More positively, the lifestyle of ancient Greeks, who saw no competing dichotomy between LGBT and heterosexual love, can be explored. There is plenty of contemporary evidence to investigate and opportunities to compare their way of life to our own (asking – at least in this respect – who had the freer society?). Whilst I believe that the acknowledgement of LGBT people's achievements is essential, I am wary of work that spotlights sexuality as if it were someone's major achievement – unless campaigning for gay rights was their particular contribution to society, or they suffered persecution, and positive lessons can be drawn from discussing this.

Similar opportunities can be found in the secondary curriculum. As young people become more explicit about their sexuality, so the material discussed can be more direct. Work in liaison with local young lesbian and gay groups is an obvious example. The study of gay literature, like Timothy Ireland's *Who lies inside?* enables young people to explore issues of adolescent experience and 'coming out'.

The problem with an added-on positive image strategy is that it fails to recognise the political reality of LGBT life: that gay and lesbian sexualities are subordinated, marginalised, and constructed as 'other' in society both in and out of school (Redman, 1994, p144). To develop an understanding of the historical construction of sexual mores and prejudice as traced by Foucault requires a serious review of the curriculum to give opportunities, in secondary schools at least, to seriously discuss sociological and political analyses of society. I hope that citizenship education can be used for such a project.

Turning to sexuality and relationship education, and following Epstein and Johnson (1998) and Epstein *et al* (2003), I want to argue for an approach that starts with an understanding of how people develop and sustain relationships (non-sexual, heterosexual and LGBT) and then consider the role that sex might play in exploring and developing those relationships. Sex education that starts with the biological cannot fail to be heterosexist given that it concerns procreation. Moreover, it often emphasises AIDS as an issue predominantly affecting gay men (offering a negative, indeed frightening image of them), ignores the safety of lesbian sex and is based on issues such as avoiding teenage pregnancy and encouraging abstinence. In short, it fails to address the discourse of desire.

(Indeed, in countries with more enlightened sex education policies where responsible relationships of all varieties are emphasised and sex is seen as an inevitable and essential (and fun!) part of life, instances of teenage pregnancy are lower.)

Such an approach to sexuality education would provide young people with the opportunity to develop an understanding of themselves and others as sexual beings open to the possibility of expressing themselves sexually in a variety of ways. The emphasis can then be on responsibility, mutual respect and safety, in an open environment where ideas and problems can be discussed. Boys and girls would feel less threatened and less coerced into conforming to sexual stereotypes and freer to relate to each other in a truly equal way. Clearly this has implications for all levels of education and not for a moment am I suggesting withholding biological knowledge and education about connected health issues. I just want them to be presented in a way that does not focus solely on the reproductive aspect of sexual activity.

I have saved this discussion of sexuality education until last for another reason. It is too easy to see heterosexism and homophobia as relating solely to sexual practice. A LGBT way of life is just that – a total way of being and, as in most ways of being, sex plays an important part. I have been arguing for the development of schools where all people can develop their

identities free from prejudice. I have concentrated on the experiences of LGBT people because that is where much work remains to be done but the benefits of an education that openly acknowledges a range of diversities and encourages the development of all aspects of identity is better for all and for society as a whole.

## Further reading

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School's Out. [www.schools-out.org.uk](http://www.schools-out.org.uk)



## The gendered curriculum

Carrie Paechter

### What are the issues?

We saw earlier in this book that students make gendered choices about what they do in school. When they are young, boys and girls make different choices in free play or free choice activities, and as they get older this translates into selecting different school subjects or aspects of subjects. These differences in what boys and girls choose matter for two main reasons. First, they offer young men and women different life chances and career options. Having A level mathematics, for example, is an important passport to a whole group of high status occupations; A-level English, while still useful, is not. Being open to the possibility that, as a male, you might enjoy childcare or dance, or, as a female, you might like to study engineering or play soccer, opens up wider life vistas, which can surely only be a good thing. Second, and related to this, these choices reflect not just the different preferences of boys and girls overall, but also the gendered nature of the curriculum. It is this latter aspect that I am going to explore in this chapter. I will consider how the curriculum, not just the choices students make about it, is itself gendered.

The curriculum is gendered in two ways, and I will discuss these each in turn. First, it is gendered as a whole – in its origins, in how it has changed over the past hundred and fifty years, and in its current form. Second, it is gendered in its delivery. Boys and girls experience the curriculum differently; subtly, and not so subtly, different forms of school subjects are offered to boys and girls. Taken together, these give us a powerfully gendered curriculum which has longstanding effects on student choices and life chances.

### Gendered (and classed) curriculum origins

The current curriculum is very firmly rooted in the elite male curriculum of the nineteenth century. It is thus not only gendered but classed, being devised to prepare middle- and upper-class young men for the professions, for managing their own estates and for the civil service. This orientation towards particular future occupations affected even the detail of the curriculum offered – for example, the précis writing that until recently was a required part of English language examinations was there to prepare future civil servants for summarising documents for their superiors. Although some specific emphases have changed, most notably that classics is nowadays only infrequently taught in state schools, while science has become much more important, the overall diet, particularly in secondary schools, has hardly changed at all.

This elite-based curriculum has its origins in the eighteenth century Enlightenment, a time in which reason gained pre-eminence over emotion in Western thinking. During this period, Descartes formulated his basic principle: 'I think, therefore I am', which located personhood fundamentally in the mind rather than the body. To be a person was to think, with feeling coming a distant second. The abstract life of the mind was thus seen as much more important than practical activities, emotions, or the life of the body. This was reflected in upper-class male education of the time, which emphasised the abstract (classics, for example, had no practical purpose except in terms of allowing one to study the ancient philosophers in their original language) and the rational. Caring and empathy were not stressed.

While upper-class educated males were seen, by their birth and education, as those most capable of pure reason, women and lower-class men were considered to be lacking in this respect. Women, because they were fundamentally tied to their bodies through their ability to bear children, were considered not only incapable of sustained rational thought, but in danger of being harmed by it. This meant that women were positively discouraged from studying mathematics and classics, although some upper-class eighteenth and nineteenth century women did study experimental science in their homes; because it was more practical, it was considered to be less dangerous. Working-class people of both sexes were also thought to be naturally less capable of reason and thus not expected to study higher mathematics or classics, although science was offered at night schools for skilled workers. However, while women and working-class men were encouraged or permitted to gain an awareness of the 'wonders of science', they were not expected to consider scientific principles. Indeed, the education of the working-classes was explicitly expected to exclude this, as a way of preserving class differences.

Working-class children were not expected to learn more than was strictly necessary for their assumed future occupations, and their curricula were strongly gender-segregated. In the early nineteenth century, basic literacy and needlework were considered all that was necessary for girls. By 1900 this had been expanded to include further domestic instruction due to a state focus on producing good servants and housewives; the moral backbone of the state was by then seen as residing in the properly domestic working-class wife and mother. Where facilities allowed (mainly in London), boys were taught manual crafts. The education of working-class children was, however, deliberately restricted by the state as there was concern that a high level of education might lead children to have occupational aspirations beyond their station.

The association of reason with the life of the mind, and the parallel association of this with full personhood, meant that the more abstract school subjects, such as mathematics, classics and the more theoretical aspects of science (particularly physics) were considered more important. Their study was therefore restricted to upper-class boys and, by the end of the nineteenth century, to their sisters attending the elite girls' schools whose headmistresses were adamant that their charges should have an education equal to that of their male counterparts. It was an understanding of these subjects that marked out an educated man,

and symbolised his higher ability. In the twentieth century, verbal reasoning, also considered to be abstract (though in practice very culturally bound) was also used as a way of establishing who was 'more able', and, with the eleven plus examination, who would be more likely to benefit from the high status, reason-based curriculum of the grammar schools. This curriculum, particularly as classics fell out of favour during the latter half of the twentieth century, was strongly underpinned by the dominance of mathematics and the physical sciences. It is the basis of the curriculum we have today.

This curriculum, because of its origins in the eighteenth and nineteenth century separation of mind and body, is also strongly gendered. Because women were not considered capable of studying mathematics or physical sciences, these subjects developed a strong association with masculinity, which they still retain. Although girls, overall, are now performing well in these subjects, this is a relatively recent phenomenon. Furthermore, this improved performance does not seem to reflect enjoyment of the subjects. Girls and young women take them because they are compulsory, and as soon as they are not, they walk away from them in droves. They complain that they are too abstract, too detached from human needs and purposes, too divorced from their practical applications.

These masculine-labelled subjects still dominate the current curriculum throughout compulsory schooling. Along with English, which has obvious importance because it relates to our national language, the pre-eminent subjects are mathematics and science, which are mandatory, and tested, throughout compulsory schooling. They are the subjects that matter, and the ones that are considered to be the hardest. Their teachers dominate the staffroom, the promotional grades, and the timetable. What we have, therefore, is a largely masculine curriculum, devised in the nineteenth century for the education of an elite group of males, with little subsequent change apart from the introduction of information technology.

## **The gendered delivery of the curriculum**

The origins of the current school curriculum are also reflected in the way it is taught. Mathematics and physical science are still presented in ways that emphasise their abstractness and play down their human applications, which makes them unattractive to girls. Thus girls believe that mathematics is a subject which has no practical use; it is for boffins who are not interested in helping society. Science has a similar image, with many of the sort of things that are actually taught in school appealing to neither boys nor girls. Even before the end of primary school, girls are found to prefer biological sciences and to reject earth and physical science. At secondary level, both boys and girls are interested in physics applications, particularly medical applications, though the girls tend to focus on the medical uses and the boys on the physics-based technology that is being used. This suggests that attitudes of both genders to school physics could be transformed if the curriculum were given a different emphasis.

Mathematics is also taught in ways that girls find difficult to deal with. Jo Boaler's research, for example, suggests that girls and boys can have very different attitudes to mathematics learning. Girls emphasise understanding, and are reluctant to move on until they feel that they have achieved this, while boys prefer to get on quickly and finish, even if they do not understand everything. This can cause problems for girls in top sets in secondary schools, particularly in express sets, which tend to move at a fast pace and have a very competitive atmosphere. This speed and competitiveness puts girls off, so that even if they are very successful in terms of their examination results, they feel that they are not any good at the subject. Consequently, relatively few continue with mathematics after GCSE.

The literacy curriculum, on the other hand, has become increasingly identified with femininity. Nola Alloway and Pam Gilbert point out that many literacy practices at which boys excel, such as surfing the internet, are not recognised as such in the classroom. The forms of texts enjoyed by many boys, such as comics, are not considered acceptable as classroom reading matter, and reading schemes tend to consist mainly of story books rather than the non-fiction texts preferred by boys. The literacy curriculum is also often focused on a personal and emotional response to fiction, something to which boys tend to be antipathetic; it is only at A-Level that it starts to be more in line with their preferred styles of working. Gemma Moss and Dena Attar point out that boys also use highly illustrated non-fiction texts as a way of avoiding reading at all during primary school free-reading periods. They look at and discuss the pictures, ignoring the text, thus sidestepping some aspects of the literacy curriculum altogether.

Bronwen Davies notes that in early primary literacy teachers can reinforce gender stereotypes through traditional literacy forms such as the fairy story. Although some teachers are attempting to challenge or encourage resistance to these stereotypes, for example, by using feminist children's books, these interventions may in turn be resisted by children whose expectations are already geared towards traditional gender forms and storylines. Davies also argues that boys and girls see story texts as things to learn from, so the traditionally gendered stories in many primary classrooms reinforce rather than challenge stereotypes. Research by Gabrielle Ivinson and Patricia Murphy suggests that, in secondary English classes, boys are not encouraged to write romance; when they do they are treated as attempting to write pornography rather than the bodice-ripping romances that are permitted to girls. This limits their possibilities of expression as well as reinforcing gender stereotypes.

Even subjects that are less powerful are taught in highly gendered ways. Physical education (PE), for example, is taught separately to boys and girls from the junior years in some schools, and throughout secondary education. While the boys play rugby, girls are only allowed touch rugby, in order to protect their reproductive organs – despite the fact that these are safely enclosed in the pelvis, unlike those of boys, which remain far more exposed. Other girls' games, such as netball, are attenuated versions of those played by boys, and as they get older, the differences in activities and training offered to the two genders mean that skill levels

become so far apart that a return to co-educational lessons becomes impossible. By the time students are in their mid-teens, even work in the multigym is differently organised for boys and girls, with girls being given exercises to develop toning and muscular endurance, along with aerobics classes, while boys' work is aimed at developing strength and power, with running activities to provide aerobic exercise.

Even when there is a superficially neutral curriculum, boys and girls get different diets – sometimes in the same lesson. In plenary discussions, for example, boys tend to occupy the 'action zone' around the teacher, so they get a better view when experiments or techniques are being demonstrated, and greater contact with the teacher when sitting on the primary school carpet. Because of the increased eye contact with this largely male group, teachers are more likely to call upon them to speak and then tailor the lesson to their responses. Boys and girls therefore experience school subjects differently, despite a mandated common curriculum.

## Ways forward

Finding a way through all of this is very difficult. We are in the midst of a long heritage of masculine curriculum content and form. This heritage also reflects wider society. It is not just in school that males avoid writing romance and females choose to take part in aerobics rather than contact sports. The current curriculum still relates closely to the world outside, i.e. it is still geared towards the education of middle- and upper-class males, who, despite over a hundred years of feminism and thirty years of the Sex Discrimination Act, still dominate society as a whole. Consequently, individual teachers or groups of teachers in schools may only be able to take small steps to ameliorate the gendered nature of the curriculum.

First, we need to work, within individual schools, on changing how subjects are perceived, so that students can become more able to resist gender stereotyping outside. In physics and mathematics, in particular, we need to show very clearly the human applications of what is being studied, maybe even starting from these, so that students are better motivated to study the theory. In literacy education we need to think about the messages we give to students if we fail to encourage boys to read or write feminine-labelled genres such as romance, as well as maybe presenting both boys and girls with opportunities to experience more masculine-labelled literary forms, such as technical manual writing. We need to consider what our lessons feel like for students. Jo Boaler's research demonstrates that students can still be very successful, even if mathematics lessons are not competitive or fast-paced. If we follow the example of the teachers she studied we may get more girls to continue with mathematics beyond GCSE. In practical classrooms, and when children are sitting on the carpet in primary schools, we need to be aware of who is in the 'action zone', and thus getting the lion's share of our attention and a curriculum tailored to their needs.

In the longer term, we need to gradually equalise provision for boys and girls. In subjects like PE, where separate provision is entrenched, this is likely to take some time and require an

enormous amount of care. We cannot move straight to mixed PE, as was tried, disastrously, in the 1980s. Given the very different diet that older boys and girls have had to date, this would simply mean that, in many sports, the boys would totally dominate the girls, and would exclude them from the game in the way they already exclude weaker male players. However, if we stop segregating boys and girls in the latter half of primary school, support girls in playing currently male-dominated sports such as football (and campaign against rules that prevent schools and clubs from fielding mixed teams in local competitions), then maybe in the fullness of time we could have mixed PE right through compulsory schooling.

In moving towards mixed provision in all subjects, we need to make sure that this does not just mean that the girls take part in the traditional male curriculum, while those subjects seen as being for girls get left by the wayside. This means, for example, that the Government needs to restore work in food and textiles to design and technology at Key Stage 4, and give it more emphasis in the earlier years of schooling. In previous attempts to introduce mixed PE, girls ended up doing what were traditionally boys' activities but not vice versa; if we are to take mixed PE seriously, this means compulsory dance for boys as well as compulsory football for girls. Although boys tend to be more resistant to what they see as girls' subjects than girls are to those marked as for boys, we need to find ways of demonstrating that this gender-marking is not necessary, that everyone can take part in all aspects of the curriculum.

Finally, we need to make sure that things do not get any worse. I have not discussed the vocational curriculum in this chapter, but (and in many ways for good reasons) it is an increasingly important aspect of compulsory secondary schooling. However, it is also the most gender-segregated aspect of the entire education system in the UK. Faced with choices around vocational classes and qualifications, boys and young men overwhelmingly choose engineering, ICT and manual trade-based courses, while girls and young women opt for those clustered around health and social care, nursery nursing and hairdressing. This means that if we are serious about tackling the gendered curriculum, we need to address these issues, ensuring at the very least that young men and women are given thorough counselling, including consideration of non-gendered options, when selecting vocational routes. We do not want to end up with a relatively ungendered academic curriculum, with those taking vocational subjects studying a thoroughly gendered curriculum in overwhelmingly single-sex classes.

The gendered school curriculum has a strong historical legacy. This legacy is so taken for granted that it is easy to feel that such gendering is inevitable. It is not. Removing or resisting it is hard work, but it is necessary, in order to improve the life chances, possibilities and horizons of students in our schools. We need to work together to do this.

## Further reading

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## Gendered subject choices

Anne Madden

If recent media stories are to be believed, women now have it all. Their equality has been secured, they out-perform boys at school, are taking high-level jobs and are enjoying independent lifestyles unfettered by husbands or caring for children. The negative impact on men of this perceived societal shift has created a new gender debate and a new focus on challenged masculinity and on the role of men and women in society. In schools, the debate and the practice have rapidly shifted from addressing inequality as predominantly a women's issue, towards how best to engage boys and young men in learning and how to close the gap in achievement between girls and boys.

Since the Sex Discrimination Act of 1975, there have been significant equality gains, with greater focus on working and caring roles for both women and men. Research into sex stereotyping by the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) in 2000 found that the majority of young people interviewed believed that they could do any job that they wanted to.<sup>1</sup> Women entering higher education now outnumber men, and some young women, predominantly those from higher income families, are increasingly moving into law, medicine (where women's applications for medical school now outnumber those from men), and accountancy, with the possibility of associated high financial rewards.

But significant inequalities remain. These inequalities require social policy interventions and changes to labour market practices. They also require a re-evaluation of the learning experience of girls and boys in schools. Education is a key determinant of opportunities beyond schooling. Current education policy appears to be supporting rather than challenging gendered experiences, gender-stereotypical subject choices and gender-differentiated outcomes. As this chapter will show, the negative consequences impact upon women in particular, throughout their lives.

### The gender pay gap

In 1999, the Equal Pay Task Force reported that nearly 30 years after the 1970 Equal Pay Act, the gender pay gap remained unacceptably high at 19 per cent.<sup>2</sup> Regardless of qualification level and age, average hourly pay for men is still higher than for women. For example, men with a qualification at GCSE A\* – C or equivalent between the ages of 25 to 54 earn an average hourly pay of between £8.34 and £10.92. In contrast, women in the same age groups with the same qualifications earn an average of between £6.61 and £7.07 per hour. The Task Force identified occupational segregation as second to discrimination in pay out of three main factors contributing to the gender pay gap, with unequal impact of women's family responsibilities coming a close third.

Concerns about gender discrimination in the labour market were echoed by Her Majesty's Chief Inspector, David Bell, in a speech to the Girls' School Association in 2002. He confirmed that despite the fact that girls' academic performance is better than that of boys, the reality of the labour market is that boys with the same qualifications continue to earn more. He went on to suggest that girls need to do even better academically than they do now if they are to overcome the disadvantage still built into the workplace. This exhortation is in stark contrast to commonly held assumptions that girls are the key beneficiaries of schooling.

Labour market survey statistics show that more than 60 per cent of working women are concentrated in just 10 out of 77 recognised occupations, with the female share ranging from 61 per cent for teaching professionals to 84 per cent for childcare and related occupations, 87 per cent for health and related occupations and 93 per cent for secretaries, personal assistants and typists.<sup>3</sup> Jobs which are classified as 'women's work' command lower wages than 'men's work', even when they require similar qualification levels. Even among graduates, research showed that women consistently earn less than men and that the highest earnings are achieved in male-dominated graduate occupations, with less gendered occupations having higher average earnings than female-dominated ones.<sup>4</sup>

The gender pay gap becomes evident as early as age 16 when young women and men move into different Modern Apprenticeship sectors where pay rates for male-dominated apprenticeships are higher than those in sectors dominated by women. An analysis of the average hourly pay rates in one region shows that hourly pay rates in hairdressing and childcare were less than half the rates paid to engineers and plumbers.<sup>5</sup>

The tendency for women to predominate in some occupations and men in others correlates with the subject choices made by boys and girls at school. Evidence demonstrates that choices at age 14 are gendered and are exactly mirrored in later choices of Modern Apprenticeships.<sup>6</sup>

Sex-stereotyping of academic and vocational subject choices impacts on the employment destinations of men and women. This is particularly the case for women from lower socio-economic groups, where there has been no discernible improvement in their labour market position in recent years, despite them having better qualifications on average than their male peers.<sup>7</sup> For many girls, the reality of working life continues to be low paid jobs, with poor prospects in highly segregated, traditionally female-dominated work sectors. All the available evidence points to the fact that gendered subject choices at school are linked to inequality in the workplace and to women's greater likelihood of poverty throughout their lives. For boys too, perceptions of the appropriateness of certain subjects linked to traditional gender roles have negative consequences. For example, despite a new government focus on the benefits of men as carers within both work and family, and a DfES target to increase the number of men in childcare to six per cent by 2004, only three per cent of childcare modern apprentices are male. Reasons for low male participation include the low social status of caring, poor salaries and the belief that this is simply not men's work.

## Education policy and subject choice

The current emphasis on improving boys' performance at school is not matched by an emphasis on ensuring that girls are better able to capitalise on their school achievements in terms of subject choices at age 14. Research to identify equality initiatives in schools has found many examples of support strategies to improve boys' performance but very little evidence of similar strategies to challenge gendered subject choices.<sup>8</sup>

Moreover, evidence from a range of sources to the EOC for its current investigation into occupational segregation and modern apprenticeships has found that many teachers and careers advisers continue to accept without question students' highly gendered choices about subjects, training and work. The investigation has also highlighted the fact that the education policy focus on achievement, completion and engagement is further reinforcing traditional expectations of girls' and boys' choices because teachers, careers advisers and Connexions Personal Advisers are reluctant to recommend atypical choices which might lead to drop-out or non-completion. In a heavily funding-driven system, with payment-by-results and a sharp focus on the measurable 'performance' of students, the temptation to play safe and stick with 'what works' could serve only to perpetuate a risk-averse culture within institutions and thus reinforce rather than challenge gendered subject choices.

## 14-19 issues

As we have seen, for the moment at least the issue of gendered subject choices is not a high public policy priority. However, the overall issue of subject choices, and in particular the new vocational options being introduced through the emerging 14-19 curriculum, is very much at the fore of government policy. Much of the debate has been about parity of esteem between so-called 'academic' and 'vocational' subjects, and about selling the worth and value of vocational skills and modern apprenticeships in an education climate where academic achievement and higher education are still widely regarded as the ultimate goal. There has been no serious consideration of the gender impact of greater choice at age 14 by DfES, even though the EOC has consistently raised this issue in the context of the 14-19 agenda.

The relationship between subject choice and work has become all the more critical now that 13- and 14-year-olds are required to make important choices about academic and vocational options before they enter Key Stage 4 (i.e. the 14-16 phase of statutory education). It is encouraging to note that, in the recently published New National Framework for Careers Education and Guidance, the DfES and the Connexions service have jointly highlighted the issue of choice at age 14, encouraging those advising young people to challenge gender stereotypes. However, there is an urgent need for increased resources and support if schools are to play their part in challenging stereotypic assumptions.

Comprehensive data regarding the take-up of vocational GCSEs is not available at the time of writing. For the moment, the main source of information is the evaluation of the Increased Flexibility Programme for 14-16 year olds which was established by the DfES in 2003.<sup>9</sup> Statistics to date on the gendered nature of vocational GCSEs are not encouraging. In common with the patterns seen for other vocational qualifications, females were over-represented among students taking qualifications in care and childcare: 28 per cent of females, compared with one per cent of males, were taking these qualifications. Similarly, some 14 per cent of females, compared with less than one per cent of males, were taking hair and beauty. In contrast, males were over-represented amongst those taking engineering and motor vehicle studies (28 per cent of males, compared with one per cent of females) and in construction (12 per cent of males, compared with one per cent of females).

The widening of choices for 14-year-olds in the context of the emerging 14-19 agenda provides a welcome opportunity to give a new focus to the issue of gendered subject choices. While there is already a great deal of research on how and why young people make choices and the key influences on their decisions, there is little evidence that policy-makers are taking the issue of gender-stereotypical subject and option choices seriously – or that teachers and others working with young people in schools and colleges are being encouraged to address these issues in their day-to-day practice.

## **Subject choice and gender**

Until the 1975 Sex Discrimination Act made it unlawful to exclude pupils from subjects on the grounds of sex, many schools (both co-educational and single-sex) taught different subjects to girls and boys reflecting traditional expectations of their different roles in society, i.e. men as breadwinners and women as carers and homemakers. Since then, while all subjects have been available to all pupils, wherever choice is offered, gendered patterns of take-up still emerge.

In 1981, 45,000 girls entered physics O-Level compared with 131,000 boys. The situation was reversed in relation to biology where girls outnumbered boys by almost 2:1. Since the introduction of the national curriculum in 1988, science has been compulsory for all pupils from 5-16. Statistics show that GCSE science entries and achievements are now broadly even with girls achieving a higher percentage of grades A\*-C in single and double award general science and more boys than girls being entered for all the single sciences.

## GCSE – young people in school – England 2000/01

	Girls		Boys	
	Entries thousands'	% pass A-C *	Entries thousands'	% pass A-C*
Science single	25	21	25	15
Science double	234	53	231	50
Physics	15	89	23	90
Chemistry	16	91	23	89
Biological Sciences	17	90	23	90
Other sciences	1	46	2	52
Any sciences	275	53	280	51

\*As a percentage of 15 year olds attempting the subject

Statistical First Release November 2001 SFR 45/2001

The cut-off point for girls' engagement with physical science comes when compulsion is removed and the opportunity is presented either to continue to A-Level, or to opt for other subjects. The following picture emerges:

### Success rate at GCE A-Level selected subjects 2000/01 candidates aged 17-18

	Girls		Boys	
	Entries	Success rate*	Entries	Success rate*
Physics	5,935	92	21,769	89
Chemistry	16,543	92.3	16,989	90.5
Biology	27,431	90.3	16,974	87.9
English	52,587	94.6	22,364	93.2
French	10,570	91.2	4,600	92.8
History	17,953	88.8	15,933	89.6
Computing	4,356		15,061	

\*Total number of grade A-E passes as a percentage of the total number of attempts.

Statistical First Release November 2001 SFR 45/2001

English is by far the most popular A-Level choice for girls, although it is also top choice for boys (for whom physics is a close second). Once again, boys dominate entry for physics while more girls than boys opt for biology. Chemistry entry is broadly similar. It is worth noting that girls have a slightly higher success rate than boys in all A-Level sciences.

Girls' ability to achieve in science is evidenced not only by GCSE and A-Level results but also by Key Stage 2 test results. When given the opportunity, or when they are obliged to study science, girls of all ages perform as well, or better, than boys. The decision to opt out is, therefore, one of choice rather than ability. While a compulsory curriculum has delayed the exercise of choice and enabled girls to succeed in science at GCSE level, it is evident that the learning experience has not engaged girls sufficiently for them to continue to A-level and beyond.

## What influences choice?

All the available evidence on subject choice, including that cited above, demonstrates that, for young people, stereotyped behaviour and choices are all too much the norm. Research indicates, not surprisingly, that societal pressure, traditional gendered expectations and messages from a range of people with influence over children impact profoundly upon the ways in which young people make their choices.

- Parents/family – the different attitudes and expectations of the roles of men and women are played out at home through perceived behaviour in relation to work and family tasks.
- Peer groups – accentuate and define what they have learnt as acceptable and traditional gender behaviour and identities for the sexes.
- Teachers – particularly where there is no agenda to challenge gendered choices – can further gender divide in everyday class management:
  - with undifferentiated teaching styles in the teaching of specific traditional gender-linked subjects
  - with their interactions with female and male pupils and their responses to different behaviours based on gendered expectations
  - with the organisation and management of formal and informal curriculum based on traditional gender roles
  - with actions and decisions that reinforce stereotypes and send out messages about appropriate, expected and acceptable behaviour based on the gender of the pupil.
- Careers teachers/Connexions advisors reinforce the status quo and unwittingly reinforce stereotyping by not taking a proactive approach to widening choice, and by only providing gendered work placements.

- Training providers including Learning and Skills Councils – currently fund and offer Modern Apprenticeship training which is more segregated in terms of gender than the labour market.
- Labour market/employers – the segregated make-up of the labour market; its failure to tackle young people’s false perceptions of the skills and experience required for non-traditional work; the way in which opportunities are biased towards either girls and boys; how employers engage differently with the sexes; traditional male dominated workplace environments; the harassment of women in non-traditional work; and general discrimination in recruitment all influence young people’s choices.
- Media – still tends to promote what will appeal to traditional gender expectations and reinforces gender-stereotyped roles and still questions behaviour that challenges this stereotype, for example, the negative impact of working women on family life.

Often these gendered attitudes and expectations are worryingly behind the times. They do not reflect the reality of gender roles in society today or current opportunities in education, training and work. However, traditional attitudes and expectations are stubbornly pervasive. From the early years on, they strongly influence the development of gender roles as well as formal and informal choices both within and outside school.

## Gendered perceptions of ability

In forthcoming research for the EOC, Miller will consider the role of ‘ability’ in the choice process, identifying it as an important factor in development both of interest in a subject area and in the possibility of employment in that area. While ability may be thought by some to be largely innate, there is evidence that experience can help to modify attitudes and the individual’s recognition or perception of their own abilities, and break down the stereotypes of which subjects girls and boys are good at. Thus stereotypes about which subjects are for boys or for girls can be replaced with real knowledge. This was confirmed by a recent review of the impact of a range of ‘hands-on’ activities in the science, technology, engineering and maths sector.<sup>10</sup>

This research also noted that, without appropriate intervention, boys tend to ‘monopolise’<sup>10</sup> IT equipment so that girls gain little ‘hands-on’ experience. Similarly, research into work placement activities has raised concerns over the restrictive and often stereotypical nature of these experiences.<sup>11</sup> There is always a danger that those advising young people about work placement may be inclined to play safe by arranging gender-stereotyped pupils’ placements, and students themselves often make choices based upon previous experience.

There are clear implications here for all those responsible for advising young people, including teachers. If hands-on experience in atypical subjects can promote interest and achievement and improve individuals’ estimates of their own ability, then students clearly

need to gain practical experience in a range of atypical areas of activity while at school. Without this, pupils' views of their abilities and potential are likely to be severely gendered and constrained, with obvious implications for career choices.

## Classroom strategies

Research over the years from a wide range of sources demonstrates that the approach adopted by teachers and others who advise young people can influence subject choice. Teachers, often quite profoundly, can help develop favourable attitudes towards a wider range of subjects with some specific classroom strategies making a positive difference. The following strategies for subject and careers teachers have been found helpful in challenging gendered subject choices:

- Intervening in early learning and the play experiences of young people – to support activities and validate behaviour that challenges traditional gender identities and promotes development free from stereotyping.
- Intervening in the curriculum – this needs to extend beyond repackaging male- and female-dominated subjects; removing masculine and feminine associations; making courses attractive; motivating and relevant to girls and boys; humanising and personalising curriculum content as much as possible; using real-life problems as examples within lessons and taking into account girls' and boys' interests and abilities and their preferred learning styles.
- Rethinking environment and resources – science, engineering and technology classrooms need to be more 'girl-friendly' and curriculum materials need to be appealing and relevant to the target age group; careers materials should aim to motivate all girls, or target separately girls with either high or low aspirations.
- Rethinking classroom setting – research supports the view that girls benefit from working without the distraction of boys (although mere segregation is not an automatic guarantee of success) and that girls and boys approach group work in quite different ways. Recent research by Arnot and Gibb found that some strategies to lift boys' performance could have detrimental side-effects for female classmates. In particular, the popular current practice of sitting boy/girl, boy/girl is not helpful for engaging girls, particularly in science and ICT. It is suggested that all-female and all-male groupings in the classroom should be developed.
- Looking at role models – the lack of female teachers as role models for participation in science and technology is evident throughout schooling. Strategies are needed to attract women into SET teaching generally, and into specific posts in schools.

- Developing teaching styles – training is needed for teachers and lecturers in teaching atypical subjects to girls and boys. This should be built in to initial teacher training programmes and should form part of teachers’ continuing professional development.
- Establishing confidence – where pupils are operating in subjects traditionally associated with the opposite sex, positive encouragement and support is needed.
- Working with parents – to sell the benefits of wider choices, recognising that some ethnic minority parents will need additional information and encouragement.
- Updating subject image – girls need to be able to relate on a personal and emotional level, so that the relevance of subjects for them may be better heard.
- Developing more hands-on experience in atypical subjects – such as the new computer Clubs for Girls’ initiative, to promote interest and ability.
- Developing more creative solutions to gendered work experience – such as community-based work projects, which apply science and technology in the human context.

## New research

In late 2004, the EOC will report the results of its general formal investigation into occupational segregation and modern apprenticeships, focusing on the five sectors of engineering, construction, ICT, plumbing and child-care. Research into gendered subject and career choices and the impact of current education policy and practice will form a major part of the findings and will inform recommendations for change. This work has been undertaken because of the growing recognition that occupational segregation is a major continuing barrier to equality – and that there is a pressing need to identify new, creative and lasting solutions. To inform the investigation, the EOC has commissioned new research into:

- occupational segregation, skills gaps and pay gaps
- gender equality and modern apprenticeships
- young people’s and employers’ choices and incentives for change
- women training and working in non-traditional jobs.

Also, with additional support from JIVE (Joint Intervention Partners – a partnership whose aim it is to enable more women to thrive in areas of education and work dominated by men) and the DfES:

- gender equality and work experience
- gender equality and 14-19 pathfinders.

All of these reports will identify strategies for change and good practice and will be available towards the end of 2004.

Active interventions can bring positive results. However, further successes in diminishing stereotyping will not occur by some kind of automatic evolution over time. Young people are entitled to an ever-widening pattern of opportunities.

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