

How can Primary Schools Encourage Boys to Develop a More Positive Attitude towards Learning?

Gary Wilson,
Newsome High School,
Huddersfield, West Yorks

Aim

To identify strategies that will improve boys' attitudes to learning in primary schools.

Dimensions of this Case Study

The study focused on 23 teachers in three infant/nursery schools and three junior schools within one pyramid.

Summary of Findings for this Case Study

Building on the literature, teachers from this pyramid suggest that strategies which were amongst the most successful in changing boys' attitudes were:

- those which enhanced self esteem, such as shared reading and peer tutoring systems and significant whole school responsibilities;
- work on behaviour policies to address bullying and other unacceptable elements of 'boy culture';
- careful grouping of pupils from nursery upwards;
- developing strong 'home-school partnerships in literacy' which emphasise in particular the involvement of older males in the home;
- careful teacher monitoring of the ways in which they talk to boys and the ways in which they talk to girls;
- frequent evaluation of resources for gender bias;
- work offered to boys as a challenge and in short, achievable chunks;
- work offered to boys with a very clear understanding of the teacher's aims and objectives.

Working as a whole pyramid of schools to improve boys' attitudes to their learning was found to be extremely beneficial.

Introduction

The study took place within a single pyramid of schools - three junior schools and three infant and nursery schools. The three areas that are served by these schools vary in the nature of their intake in so far as one area contains predominantly owner-occupied housing, the intake of the second is largely drawn from a council estate, and the third is a mixture of the two.

The study set out to explore the following research questions:

- *What behaviours and attitudes of boys do primary teachers see as detrimental to their learning?*
- *What aspects of primary classroom practices do teachers see as being central to the establishment of a learning environment in which boys can achieve their potential?*
- *What sorts of changes in teaching styles and learning strategies do primary teachers need to consider in order to make a significant impact on the attitudes and behaviour, and therefore learning, of boys in their schools?*

Through structured discussions with teachers of boys from the age of four to 11, and from analysis of the ensuing evidence of classroom practice, several clear attitudes emerged which could be detrimental to their learning:

- the desire to be outdoors,
- the desire to be involved in active play sometimes to the exclusion of all else,
- the apparently weaker powers of concentration,
- the inability to keep on task,
- the lack of effort in certain types of work,
- the apparent disinterest in presenting work neatly,
- the growing disenchantment with 'girlie' things like reading.

Teacher Comments

The teachers in this study put the inability to concentrate down to many factors. As the evidence search suggested at the outset, the most important factor was boys' decreasing interest in certain types of work, especially reading. Teachers suggested that interest seems better sustained in subjects where there is 'a real answer', e.g. maths and science. There is also evidence in the literature and in teachers' responses that boys overestimate their ability and underestimate the need to work to support achievement.

One comment encapsulated a widespread perception about the changes that occur as many boys pass through their primary years:

"of course at this age (Year One) most of them just want to please their teacher; by Year Six all they care about is pleasing their mates."

Some evidence was found that an 'anti-swot' culture commonly observed by secondary school teachers, begins to rear its ugly head at the top end of the junior school. Whilst this is not all pervading, as it can be in the secondary school, it does exist.

Strategies for change

The issue of self esteem, "(the) need to find ways of promoting their self image," was felt to be a key factor. Establishing appropriate, and immediate reward systems was one way and ensuring a gender balance in the display of pupils' work around the room was another. But these were regarded as cosmetic. Teachers recognised a real need to raise the genuine self-esteem as opposed to the superficial self image of boys and several schools from the pyramid of schools studied are developing strategies to that end. These include shared reading (a process involving fairly competent boy readers with low self-esteem being trained and then set to work as partners assisting less able boy readers), 'executive' systems (giving pupils a high profile via photographs in the entrance hall, badges etc. and significant whole school responsibilities such as running the school office at lunchtime) and peer tutoring systems (including paired writing).

In most of the schools, considerable work had taken place on behaviour policies. The main targets of such work were the unacceptable elements of 'boy culture' such as bullying, sexual harassment and swearing.

The issue of pupil grouping was seen to be significant. There was a general acknowledgement that within mixed groups, boys and girls had many things to learn from each other. In the context of discussions, for example, boys have the opportunity to learn to be more reflective whilst girls have the opportunity to learn to be more assertive. Hardworking boys were used as positive role models as early as the nursery to modify the behaviour of other boys.

The development of a strong partnership with the home during early work on reading was considered particularly important, with the emphasis being put firmly on the involvement of older males in the household.

The need to monitor the different ways in which teachers talked to boys and girls was considered important, with several short 'action research' projects providing useful insights. One Infant and Nursery school, for example, devised a monitoring chart to calculate the difference in number and type of interaction between teacher and boys/girls which highlighted both the over-demanding nature of many boys and the high level of self reliance of many girls.

The need to consider the gender bias of resources and topics selected for study was also seen to be a necessary task. *Several topics were significantly modified in the light of such monitoring, not only with regard to content but also with regard to a shift in teaching and learning styles to more accurately present a balance of boys' and girls' preferred styles.*

Teachers stressed the need to present work as a challenge and in short achievable chunks.

The tendency for boys to rush from one activity to another was particularly evident. Many said that it was particularly important with boys to ensure that each stage of a task was completed satisfactorily before they were allowed to move onto the next.

The need for a clearly structured lesson was referred to time and time again, "Give them a freer activity

where they actually have to control and physically organise themselves and keep themselves on task and they're not so good," was a frequently expressed observation. Part of the lesson framework that was particularly important for boys was a clear beginning to a lesson containing an explicit statement of aims for the lesson.

There was a general feeling that *not only all teachers but also all parents need to be made fully aware of the issues involved* in order that they can work together for the benefit of all. One 'meta strategy' tried with considerable success in this case study was for all the pyramid schools to work together. A key element of this strategy was a parents' conference, the outcome of which was a leaflet of advice for the parents of all boys in the pyramid. An account of this process is included within the full report.

Talking to the boys themselves was seen to be very important, discovering their expectations and aspirations, their fears and concerns and supporting and encouraging them every step of the way. In the context of preparation for the high school, for example, one Year Six teacher commented, "...it's more than giving them a list of things they need. It's letting them know that there will be very different pressures, and in some cases seemingly impossible demands. But we must build up their confidence. We must build up their faith in themselves."

Teachers across the pyramid were keenly aware that even more work needs to be done to enhance the value which boys attach to education, reinforced in their homes and the community at large.

Notes about methods

All of the schools in this study were part of the same pyramid. One representative from each school had been working for almost two years as part of a pyramid Gender and Achievement Working Party. Subsequently each representative had been involved in initiatives within their own school and was responsible for feeding back to their own staff and to the pyramid group. As a result, many other members of staff across the pyramid became involved in further initiatives. The level of awareness of the staff within each school visited was clearly heightened by all this activity. The teachers

interviewed were drawn from every year group from nursery upwards. Taped interviews were conducted, each approximately half an hour long. Full transcriptions were then made of each interview. The interviews were subsequently analysed. Where patterns and agreements appeared in the responses these were duly noted in the full report.

Many responses were based upon the findings of small action research projects conducted by the individual members of staff as part of the whole pyramid project. Where views were found to support 'the literature' references are made in the full report.

Further Reading

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Contact

Gary Wilson, Newsome High School, Newsome, Huddersfield, West Yorkshire HD4 6JN