

The Achievement of boys at GCSE English

Janet Florey,
Sandringham School,
St Albans

Aim

To identify strategies which might improve the achievement of boys at GCSE English.

Dimensions of this Case Study

40 year 10 students were used for this study, divided into two groups with equal numbers of boys and girls.

Summary of Findings for this Case Study

- It was possible in this case to have an effect on the reading patterns of boys in this age-group.
- The role of the school library was central to the support of boys' fiction reading.
- Clearly structured and supported written tasks improved the quality of the written work of both boys and girls.
- Working in mixed sex pairs can raise the achievement of boys in writing.
- Working in mixed groups raised the achievement of both boys and girls in speaking and listening.
- Students who were made aware that they could learn from each other were more likely to be willing to do so.

Background

Boys are perceived as underachieving in GCSE English. Teachers need to find strategies they can use in the classroom which will raise the achievement of boys while continuing to support the achievement of girls. The subject has been much discussed by teachers and academics but there has been little research into what teachers can do in the classroom to influence achievement.

Research Methods

Four questions were posed which could be explored by working on a very small scale with two mixed-attainment groups of year 10 students (40 in total) on the first year of their GCSE course. One of these groups was originally intended to be a control group, but the department within which the work took place felt that this raised ethical issues and was keen to try the strategies with as many students as possible; therefore, both groups used the strategies and the quasi-experimental nature of the work was sacrificed and replaced by a stronger emphasis on qualitative data. The students were in their fourth year in the school and were of mixed social class, but predominantly white, reflecting the ethnic pattern in the school. The strategies were explained to and discussed with the group at some length so that they were aware of the possible benefits. These questions focused on the areas of speaking and listening, reading and writing and led to strategies which it is hoped could easily be replicated in a range of English classrooms. The research produced a great deal of qualitative data and some quantitative data which would need to be expanded in the long term. Much of the evidence arises from a series of small-group interviews conducted with boys and girls from the group.

Research Questions

- Can guided and supported reading in year 10 have an impact on the reading patterns of boys?
- Can a very specific structure to written tasks help boys to develop their writing?
- Can a system of mixed-gender writing pairs improve the accuracy of boys' writing?
- Can mixed-gender groupings improve the performance of boys in structured speaking and listening tasks?

(The mixed pairs were established at the beginning of the year by the teacher; prior attainment was deliberately ignored. Work in the pairs always took place in the classroom and it was therefore easy to monitor the work happening by observation. There was a three-way discussion with pairs who initially had reservations about the relationship and all of the pairs remained the same as a result.)

Speaking and Listening

- Students were clear that the different ideas and working styles contributed by boys and girls are complementary and that they can benefit from working together.
- Boys and girls stayed on task better in mixed groups.
- There was less opportunity in a mixed group for stereotypical patterns of social behaviour to sabotage an activity.

Reading

- The boys in the target group read more fiction than those in other parallel groups within the school.
- It was clear that the school library environment and stock had a powerful influence over boys' reading.
- Boys responded positively to active interest from the teacher in their reading, to target setting and to shared enjoyment with an adult.
- Girls' reading in the target group was also positively influenced.

Writing

- Use of the writing pairs developed over the year into an integral part of the class learning experience.
- Both boys and girls felt the value of developing a relationship with a partner who would always share their work with them.
- Differences in prior achievement were not a handicap in the developing of these relationships.
- All students valued enormously the clear structure and guidance given by the 'scaffolding' provided for each piece of written work.
- Their confidence grew over the year and they felt very positively about writing as an activity.
- The boys who had previously been the 'tail' in terms of achievement in examinations had improved their attainment relative to the rest of the group by the end of the year.
- Essays from both boys and girls were well-developed and showed evidence of careful planning and redrafting.

('Scaffolding' is the practice of providing students with a clear framework for their writing; for example, this might be a series of starter questions or sentences which, if the student responds to them, provide an outline for the whole piece of work. This framework can be provided on a worksheet, an overhead or on the board. It can be responded to individually, in pairs or groups and can be further supported, for example, by the addition of a list of key words. This is an approach which lends itself to differentiation.)

Other Issues

- Members of the group talked about the issue of peer pressure discouraging boys from working but said they did not feel it themselves. It seemed clear from interviews with the students that boys demand a high level of professionalism from teachers but that the personal relationship with teachers is also significant in their willingness to work. This seemed to be less of an issue for the girls.
- It was clear from the interviews that the girls found the strategies helpful and their work improved at a similar rate to the boys'. It seems therefore that these strategies could be seen as good practice for all and not purely for boys.

The Way Forward

- This cohort will be tracked through and the strategies will be continued to identify whether their achievement at GCSE seems to have been affected. The strategies will be built into the teaching and learning within the faculty.
- There is currently a small amount of data which suggests that the strategies are useful based on internal school assessment. It will be possible to provide quantitative data to support the findings in August 1999 when the cohort receive their GCSE results.

Further Reading

OFSTED & the Equal Opportunities Commission, *The Gender Divide: Performance Differences between Boys and Girls at School* (1996).

Mac an Ghaill, *The Making of Men: Masculinities, Sexualities and Schooling*, OU Press (1994).

OFSTED, *Boys and English* Ofsted (1993).

Arnot, Madeleine, David, Miriam, & Weiner, Gaby, *Educational Reforms and Gender Equality in Schools*, Research Discussion Series, EOC (1996).

Marland, Michael, ed, *Sex Differentiation and Schooling*, Heinemann Educational Books (1983).

Contact

Janet Florey, Sandringham School, St Albans, Herts AL4 9NX
Tel. 011727 863271