

# Research for Teachers

## Gender differences

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### **How are some schools tackling the differences in achievement between girls and boys?**

Not all researchers agree about the level and extent of the 'problem' of boys' underachievement or even (see Gorard, 2001) whether the 'problem' exists at all; nevertheless teachers have expressed considerable concern about this issue. The research featured in this summary shows how some schools are tackling perceived differences in achievement between boys and girls by drawing on the experiences of teachers in 19 case study schools. The researchers explore three approaches in a way in which we hope teachers will find interesting and potentially useful for their own practice.

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## Appraisal

### **Robustness**

Research in this complex field has mainly sought to identify and explain gender gaps in performance. Some strategies have been suggested - usually with a rather limited base in empirical evidence - but little large-scale research has gone into the implementation of strategies and their effects on differences in achievement of boys and girls in schools. The researchers selected 19 schools from a list of schools identified by 83 LEAs as representative of good practice. The criterion for inclusion was that the school was implementing one of three chosen strategies to address boys' lower rate of improvement in achievement. This study draws together and analyses data collected in and by these schools. The schools themselves, and the authors, acknowledge difficulties in collecting data relating to student learning outcomes within the specified time. Consequently, the conclusions are more tentative than the authors originally envisaged. Care must therefore be taken in generalising from these case studies, but they do provide interesting and informative examples of what teachers tried to do in their schools, and the rationale behind their actions.

## Relevance

Concern about the slower rate of improvement of achievement of boys has grown among teachers, parents and governments over recent years. The authors identified and described three main approaches adopted by teachers to close this 'gender gap' viz. single-sex classes (but this is not a 'strategy', merely an organisational tactic; in order to be a strategy it needs to be accompanied by a rationale based on pedagogical/curricular enhancement), mentoring and additional literacy support. Teachers will find the investigation touches on a range of problems with which they will be familiar, such as maintaining equal opportunities, ensuring the strategies are implemented effectively and deciding on efficient monitoring systems. In their evaluation, the authors offer teachers pointers towards tackling the problem of gender differences in their own schools. The findings are supported by a range of data drawn from national test performances, interviews with teachers, pupils and parents, and school monitoring reports.

## Applicability

The study aims to investigate specific strategies chosen by schools to raise the achievement of all pupils but particularly of boys. Inevitably, the choice and implementation of these strategies involves decision taking at the whole school level rather than by individual classroom teachers. However, the authors do provide good illustrative examples of teachers putting the strategies into action in the classroom, information that will be relevant to teachers and enable them to build on their own practice. The study, by covering a range of schools with different geographical and socio-economic settings, and including both primary and secondary level, provides contexts with which most teachers can identify.

## Writing

The report is written in a straightforward style within a traditional research format of rationale, implementation then evaluation stages. Most of the findings are descriptive and the writing is jargon-free.

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## Overview

### Why is the issue important?

Concern about the slower rate of improvement of achievement of boys than girls has grown among teachers, parents and the government over recent years. Schools face a range of problems when tackling boys' underachievement, such as maintaining equal opportunities, ensuring strategies are implemented effectively and deciding on efficient monitoring systems.

### What did the research show?

The study identified three types of interventions that were followed by improvements in learning:

- teaching single-sex classes or groups at secondary level
- mentoring and role modelling by adults, including teachers within the school, and other pupils, at secondary level
- additional literacy support from adult volunteers from outside school at primary level.

Most teachers were supportive of the type of intervention implemented in their school, particularly when they had been closely involved in the decision to adopt the policy.

### How was this achieved?

Single-sex classes: Teachers modified their lesson structures and teaching methods to meet the needs of their

pupils when teaching single-sex classes. For example, when teaching Macbeth, an English teacher first gave the pupils a questionnaire to find out their preferred learning style, then chose appropriate teaching styles, such as: setting short, written tasks, often in the form of games or quizzes, using ICT to proofread, edit and display, presenting some of the text in tabulated form, and breaking Macbeth into recurring sections of horror, humour, fantasy and action.

**Mentoring:** A member of staff usually mentored pupils individually in sessions lasting 15-30 minutes. Areas of discussion included: planning of homework and coursework tasks, time management and meeting deadlines and revision techniques. Mentors directed the discussions, commenting positively about progress made and areas of weakness or difficulty.

**Literacy support:** The programmes usually consisted of adult literacy supporters (from eg. Business Partnership Schemes) coming into school for a half term block. Each supporter worked with three children individually for 15-30 minutes.

### **How was the research designed to be trustworthy?**

The researchers selected nineteen sc

hools from a list of schools identified by eighty-three LAs as representative of good practice. The criterion for inclusion was that the school was implementing one of three chosen strategies to address boys' lower rate of improvement in achievement. They collected and analysed a range of data to evaluate just how successful their specific approaches were, including: interviews with teachers and pupils, reading tests, Key Stage tests and GCSE results, questionnaires completed by pupils and teachers observation of teaching and mentoring, pupil monitoring records and pupils' option choice data.

### **What are the implications?**

The study showed the importance of teachers:

- identifying and investigating all data that may be relevant to attainment in order to identify gender issues
- developing teaching styles which harmonize with students' preferred ways of learning
- teachers extending the range of approaches they use in order to engage as wide a range of students as possible
- planning activities carefully and ensuring support staff are clear about what they have to do when asking other adults to mentor students or provide pupils with additional reading support.

### **What do the case studies illustrate?**

The case studies show how:

- teachers implemented single-sex teaching at one school as a way of raising the achievement of boys
- a school raised the achievement of Year 11 boys and girls on the borderline of five or more A\*-C grades at GCSE through mentoring in small groups
- primary schools provided additional literacy support particularly for boys and encouraged boys to develop a more positive attitude towards learning
- a secondary school helped boys improve their performance by identifying and implementing individual strategies for addressing their weaknesses
- science teachers identified a range of important factors they needed to consider when teaching low ability single-sex groups.

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## Study

### **How are some schools tackling the differences in achievement between girls and boys?**

Whilst not all researchers agree about the level and extent of the 'problem' of boys' underachievement or even, (see Gorard, 2001), whether the 'problem' exists at all, nevertheless teachers have expressed considerable concern about this issue. The research featured this month shows how some schools are tackling perceived differences in achievement between boys and girls by drawing on the experiences of teachers in 19 case study schools. The researchers explore three approaches in a way in which we hope teachers will find interesting and potentially useful for their own practice.

### **What did this study aim to do?**

Recent studies (eg, Noble and Bradford, 2000; Bleach et al, 1998) have highlighted concerns about the relatively slower rate of achievement of boys compared with girls in our schools. Little large-scale research has so far been undertaken into the implementation of approaches in schools and their evaluation. Whilst some studies (eg, Gorard et al, 2001) try to unpack and, to some extent, challenge perceptions about boys' achievement relative to girls, the concerns remain widespread. What do we know about the most effective ways of tackling these concerns? This study explores how far teachers have been successful in addressing them.

The study was carried out by researchers from the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER), and was funded by the Local Government Association (LGA). It began with a survey of LEAs - 83 of which identified schools showing good practice in their attempts to address gender differences in performance among their pupils (Sukhnandan et al, 2000). The researchers selected 19 of these schools as case study sites for Phase 2 of the project, which is summarised here.

They collected data from the schools to evaluate just how successful their specific approaches were. Although it is never possible to generalise from case studies, we believe that the examples provided will offer teachers some useful insights into approaches that other teachers have found effective. The preliminary survey and evidence collection processes serve to verify that the practice was perceived as effective by those involved and was linked to positive results.

Whilst this provides a useful starting point, further testing of such perceptions through comparative trials carried out by teacher or academic researchers would be useful. We would be very glad to hear from readers who may be involved in such activities.

The study focuses on three sets of approaches identified as important in the Phase 1 report and discusses the benefits and issues arising from their implementation. The report presents a 'menu' of approaches from which teachers may be able to find helpful examples.

### **What did the research reveal?**

The study identified three types of interventions that were followed by improvements in learning. It also analysed the processes involved in the implementation of these approaches. Details of how the approaches were put into practice in schools and how teachers felt they improved boys' achievement can be found on the following pages:

- teaching single-sex classes or groups at secondary level
- mentoring and role modelling by adults, including teachers within the school, and other pupils, at secondary level
- additional literacy support from adult volunteers from outside school at primary level.

The importance of these strategies in addressing the underachievement of boys was also identified in a separate teacher research case study based on a pyramid of primary schools.

The majority of teachers were found to be supportive of the type of intervention implemented in their school, particularly when they had been closely involved in the decision to adopt the policy. Despite the benefits, the strategies did create some tensions for most teachers and they are presented on the pages highlighted above.

## How helpful are single-sex approaches to teaching?

Eight secondary schools had adopted teaching single-sex classes as a strategy for a variety of reasons including that it was thought to offer:

- a practical way of targeting boys without jeopardising girls' performance
- an opportunity to improve boys' perceptions regarding 'feminine' subjects like English
- an opportunity to enhance girls' competence in 'masculine' subjects like science
- the possibility of challenging the anti-learning subculture among boys.

In many of the schools, the key to improving boys' performance lay in improving boys' attitudes. As one headteacher said: "We wanted to overcome the culture that states they cannot be seen to be successful without losing their street cred."

Teachers in the schools believed that:

- levels of motivation and behaviour improved
- boys developed positive perceptions of 'feminine' subjects like English among boys
- both boys and girls were more willing to contribute to lessons
- boys' achievement improved.

One teacher reported: 'I now have a group of boys for whom it 's OK to like English. There's been a change in the way boys are viewing English.'

Despite the benefits, this approach did cause tensions for some teachers who observed that:

- in single-sex classes boys and girls missed out on one another's approaches to learning, perspective and opinions
- some all-boy classes were very demanding in terms of behaviour management.

## How was single-sex teaching implemented?

*Who was targeted?*

In six of the eight schools, teachers targeted underachieving pupils in Key Stage 4 using a combination of test results, examination predictions and teacher judgement. Underachievers were usually defined as those on the C - D grade GCSE borderline. In selecting classes, most schools tended to focus on middle and/or lower ability pupils, although one school chose high ability sets and another extended the strategy to all pupils in the year. Most schools also concentrated on English although one included all subjects in their strategy.

*What did teachers do?*

Teachers modified their lesson structures and teaching methods to meet the needs of their pupils. This was particularly true for all-boy classes where staff aimed to address boys' learning styles. At Applewood School, for example, a 50-minute English lesson for an all-boy low ability set was highly structured around a number of short-term tasks based on an English text.

In their book *Getting it right for boys...and girls*, Noble and Bradford provide another example. They describe the characteristics of an English teacher's approach to teaching Macbeth to Year 11 boys. The teacher began by giving pupils a questionnaire about their preferred learning style, which she then used to help her choose appropriate teaching styles, which included:

- presenting some of the text in tabulated form
- using statistics and graphs
- breaking Macbeth into recurring sections of horror, humour, fantasy and action
- setting short, written tasks, often in the form of games or quizzes
- setting small group work to produce verbal accounts of the story
- using only a small amount of video to illustrate key points
- using ICT to proofread, edit and display
- raising the status of oral work and introducing a reward system.

In an independent teacher research study of Year 10 boys, Shipman and Hicks investigate the factors affecting the motivation of boys in the context of single-sex classes. The authors identify pastoral and pedagogic approaches that might be of interest to teachers.

### **Did mentoring help to raise achievement?**

Interviews with teachers in the eight secondary schools, which chose to use mentoring, suggested that the main reasons for doing so were that it offered the possibility for:

- staff to target specific groups of pupils
- staff to address the anti-learning culture existing among boys
- pupils to monitor their own progress and to identify their own strengths and weaknesses.

Teachers reported perceived benefits of mentoring in terms of improvements in:

- pupils' organisation and study skills
- confidence, self-esteem, motivation and attitudes among pupils
- attitudes to school and learning among boys
- quality of analysis of post-16 choices among both boys and girls
- levels of achievement among boys and girls.

Mentors and individual pupils claimed benefits for mentoring. One teacher observed: 'I think the benefits have got to be the improvements they see in their grades. Nathan is absolutely over the moon. Not even his parents thought that he could possibly get five A -Cs. It's also a benefit to us if it improves the pass rate.'

Although they were supportive of mentoring teachers observed that:

- lack of support for mentors limited the effectiveness of mentoring
- the withdrawal of teaching staff for mentoring presented organisational problems for schools.

### **How did schools implement mentoring?**

#### *Which pupils were targeted?*

The mentoring programme targets differed from school to school. In six of the eight schools Key Stage 4, pupils were targeted, the other two schools concentrating on Year 8 pupils. The most common group to be mentored were Year 10 and 11 GCSE borderline grade C-D pupils, a policy that may have arisen through schools' concerns about league table positions. For this rather restricted range of pupils, staff reported some evidence of an increase in the number improving their grade from D to C in the GCSE examinations. At three of the case study schools teachers observed that mentoring had helped to reduce the gender gap by raising boys' achievement.

#### *What was a typical mentoring session like?*

The most common pattern was a 15 to 30 minute session, usually out of lesson, when a member of staff mentored an individual pupil. Although there was diversity in the structure of mentoring sessions, most schools followed a similar pattern. One school's ideas about the focus areas for mentors and pupils seemed to be typical of a range of schools. Suggested issues for discussion included:

- planning of homework and coursework tasks
- time management and meeting deadlines
- monitoring and using the pupils' assessment data
- presentation of work
- liaison with parents about pupils' progress
- careers planning
- revision techniques.

At Abbott High School for example, pupil and mentor used record sheets, to focus a discussion about study skills and homework habits. They then looked at the boy's progress in particular subjects. The mentor directed the discussion through positive features about progress made to areas of weakness or difficulty. The

pupil participated fully in the discussion. Together the mentor and pupil identified specific targets for the pupil to work on. These included obtaining further support in science-based subjects and completing late coursework.

### *Did additional literacy support help pupils?*

In the three primary schools studied in the project, staff chose to implement a strategy of additional literacy support because boys consistently underachieved in literacy in their schools. This observation was consistent with Ofsted's identification of early literacy skills and, later, English, as one of three main areas of the curriculum in which girls outperformed boys.

Teachers at three of these primary schools decided to tackle the problem of boys' underachievement in literacy by providing additional literacy support. They noted:

- an increase in motivation, confidence and self-esteem among boys and girls
- increased participation by boys in literacy lessons
- improved behaviour of boys
- significant improvements in reading levels of boys.

Teachers also thought that because the strategy took some of the pressure off them, they were able to teach the other children in the class more effectively.

One school reported that children improved their reading scores by at least 0.5 of a year over a six-week intervention period.

### **How did schools implement additional literacy support?**

#### *What was the aim of the strategy?*

The schools wanted to enhance pupils' attitudes towards, and to raise their confidence in, literacy. This was quite separate from work explicitly directed at their literacy skills. The aims of the strategy were designed to be complementary to, but distinct from, the National Literacy Strategy. As one headteacher put it: "It is definitely not raising the skill of reading, it is raising their appreciation of reading".

#### *What did schools do?*

One school recruited adult literacy supporters from Business Partnership Schemes and the Voluntary Reading Help Scheme. The other two schools relied on parent and local community volunteers. One school recruited an allmale team of adult literacy supporters. Teachers at this school were interested to see if the use of male role models would help to challenge boys' stereotypical perceptions of literacy as 'feminine', although the policy was not evaluated.

The programmes usually consisted of adult literacy supporters coming in for a half term block. Each supporter worked with three children on an individual basis for 15 to 30 minutes. The children were taken from years two to six and were identified for support by their class teacher. At the end of the support period, class teachers used professional judgement and reading tests to decide if a pupil needed to continue the programme. Teachers were concerned that children withdrawn for support would miss parts of the curriculum, a risk they sought to minimise by establishing close liaison between literacy supporters and class teachers.

### **How was the research designed?**

In Phase 1 of this NFER project, the authors presented an overview of recent research into gender differences in achievement and the current approaches of staff to raising the achievement of boys relative to girls in their schools. The project then continued into Phase 2, which had as its main purpose the investigation of the strategies highlighted by the Phase 1 study.

Research in each of the schools was co-ordinated and guided by a project coordinator. Staff in the schools undertook primary data collection, analysis and evaluation. This information was then analysed and evaluated further by the research team.

Data was collected from a number of sources including:

- interviews with teachers and pupils
- discussions with teachers, parents and learning support staff
- reading tests, Key Stage tests and GCSE results
- observation of teaching and mentoring
- questionnaires completed by pupils and teachers
- pupil monitoring records
- pupils' option choice data.

Because of teachers' concerns about boys' achievements, schools were keen to adapt and refine strategies as they were implemented. This led to problems in evaluating the effectiveness of the strategies in some cases. In other schools, the strategy had not been in place for long enough to evaluate it.

### **How were the schools selected for this project?**

In part one of the project the research team had sent pro-formas to 175 local education authorities to identify schools that showed good practice in addressing the slower rate of improvement of boys, and to discover the strategies adopted by the schools. From the 83 replies, the authors first selected the three strategies for further investigation on the grounds that they were frequently used by schools to address boys' underachievement.

Secondly, 19 schools were selected from those nominated by LEAs, as case study sites on the basis that they:

- had strategies in place that fell under one of the three headings
- covered a range of geographical locations in England and Wales, types of local authority and contexts (such as urban, suburban and rural)
- were situated in catchment areas with different socio-economic backgrounds.

### **What other issues and risks did teachers identify?**

A number of issues arose from the teachers' experiences. From this feedback, the authors identified the following as areas for consideration before gender strategies were implemented:

- securing equality of access to targeting and support of pupils
- selecting the right strategy for the school
- monitoring the effects of the strategies on school organisation. Staff varied in their willingness to adopt single-sex teaching in some schools. It was also found that re-arranging classes to make them single-sex led to a greater mix of abilities and an unevenness of size of classes
- monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of strategies. Among those teachers who were involved in mentoring there was a feeling that additional staff training would have made the strategies more effective.

In terms of equality of access most schools for example targeted pupils who were on the 5+ A-C GCSE passes borderline which left out a considerable proportion of the cohort of pupils who needed additional support.

A further danger was that in modifying teaching styles and planning in ways teachers perceived to be appropriate to each gender, stereotypes might be reinforced. In addition, although male role models were successful in challenging boys' perceptions, this approach could possibly undermine the authority of female teachers.

Similarly, seeking to modify learning resources to meet the needs of boys, could deny equal opportunities to girls. For example, two schools involved in additional literacy support bought new books specifically designed to interest boy readers.

### **Implications for practice**



While preparing this RfT we became aware of a number of possible implications for teachers and schools seeking to improve the attainment of under-achieving boys and girls.

School leaders may like to consider the following questions:

- The study suggests that it is important to identify and investigate all data that may be relevant to attainment in order to identify gender issues. Is this an activity which could be undertaken by subject or year teams of staff? Would it be helpful to engage staff in action research in relation to tackling problems associated to gender differences in achievement?
- Is there already good practice in your school in relation to gender differences in achievement which your colleagues could share with each other? Would it be helpful to free staff to work together to bring this practice together to provide advice for other staff?
- The study describes three strategies for dealing with gender differences in achievement in the classroom - single-sex teaching, mentoring, additional literacy support. Would it be appropriate for senior staff/curriculum planners to work with departments to select the strategies most likely to benefit in different circumstances?

At classroom level, individual teachers may like to reflect on implications for their own practice, including:

- Boys and girls often have different preferred learning styles - some boys may respond better to short-term tasks, competition and active learning involving role-play, girls may enjoy working in groups and on longer term projects. Could you extend the range of approaches you use in order to engage as wide a range of students as possible?
- The study highlighted three strategies for tackling underachievement and for developing teaching styles which harmonize more with students' preferred learning styles. Would it be possible and helpful for you to explore some of these approaches through small-scale research in your own classroom possibly in collaboration with a colleague?

The research suggests that the use of other adults for mentoring or additional reading support activities is most effective when the activities are carefully planned and the support staff are clear about what they have to do. Do you have the opportunity to plan jointly with these colleagues? If not is this something you could ask your head to provide time for? Joint planning between teachers and other adults in support roles was highlighted as a key factor in optimising the effectiveness of classroom support in our RfT on the role of teaching assistants.

Have you tried any strategies that were successful at raising the attainment of under-achieving boys? We would be interested to hear of examples which we could perhaps add to the case study section.

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## Case studies

The first four studies all come from the project report itself. For purposes of confidentiality, the authors have not given the real names of the schools.

### Single-sex class teaching at Greengage School

This study illustrates how teachers implemented single-sex teaching at one school. It highlights the importance of presenting the policy in a positive way. Greengage is an 11-16 secondary school situated in the suburbs of a city in the North of England. Its intake is largely middle-class with about a quarter of the pupils having ethnic minority backgrounds. Middle-ability boys in Key Stage 4 were identified as underachieving. Raising boys' achievement became a whole school initiative within which individual departments decided on their own policy for addressing this issue.

The mathematics department found that underachieving boys were all in the two middle-ability sets at the start of Year 11, so staff re-arranged the classes to form two new groups, based on gender. This move did not present much of an organisational problem as all Year 11 pupils were block-timetabled for mathematics. Pupils affected by the change, and their parents, were informed fully by staff who took care to present the policy in as positive a way as possible. Both parents and pupils were enthusiastic about the idea.

Evidence from discussions with teachers, pupils and parents suggested that the policy had had a positive effect on pupils' achievement, particularly that of boys. Participants felt that it had contributed to an

improvement in boys' performance in the GCSE examination where the number of boys achieving A - C grades in mathematics rose from 49 per cent, in the previous year, to 60 per cent.

Departmental staff considered that the reasons for success of the policy were:

- the positive, collaborative approach they adopted
- the fact that the policy suited the ethos of the school.

Hoping to build on this helpful start, the department decided to continue the policy and perhaps extend it to cover all abilities of children.

## An example of a lesson for an all-boy class at Applewood School

Although this example and others cited in studies emphasise single-sex grouping for boys the evidence available is mainly at a generic level. The study does provide an example of arrangements made by a teacher specifically for a boys' class, although there are no comparative data for girls' classes. The particular features that seem to be emphasised for the boys' class are those relating to short-term tasks, providing a structured environment and introducing competition.

The lesson was structured into whole-class teaching and a number of short-term tasks which consisted of:

- an initial question-and-answer session which reviewed previous work
- a whole-class reading session beginning with the teacher and continuing with individual pupils reading a paragraph at a time from a book
- another question-and-answer session to check understanding of the text
- a role-play exercise based on the text
- in the last five minutes, the teacher summarised the new ideas they had met and held a final 'quick fire' question-and-answer session.

During the lesson, the observer noted that the pupils all played an active part in the lesson, responding well to the teacher's questions, and appearing to enjoy the lesson. Another feature of the lesson was that the teacher turned the selection of characters for the role-play into a race, which seemed popular with the pupils.

## Mentoring at Constable Lane School

This case study highlighted the importance of 'tailoring' a policy to meet the needs of pupils. Constable Lane School is an 11- 16 secondary school located in the Northeast of England. Like Greengage School, the school population is predominantly middle-class. Close analysis of the school's GCSE examination results indicated that boys and girls had different learning styles, which influenced their levels of achievement. Mentoring was the chosen strategy to try to raise achievement of both boys and girls.

In the first year of the programme, staff targeted Year 11 boys who were on the borderline of achieving five or more A\*-C grades in the GCSE examinations. Once selected using data from previous tests, the pupils were asked if they wished to be mentored and parental permission was sought. The boys were mentored in small groups by an approach involving peer group pressure, competition and prizes to increase their motivation and achievement.

The effectiveness of the programme was evaluated through questionnaires sent to pupils and their parents and through GCSE examination results. Findings showed:

- parents and pupils felt the programme was successful
- there was a 10 per cent improvement in the number of boys who gained five or more A\*-C grades in the examinations,

with 17 of the 22 boys mentored achieving this target.

During the second year of the strategy, three groups of pupils were targeted, namely:

- girls on the borderline of five or more A\*-C grades in the GCSE examinations
- high-ability boys
- high-ability girls.

Staff involved in the actual mentoring received some training in gender and achievement, although the senior staff who co-ordinated the strategy did not. Participating staff reported that there was a significant increase in the amount of work, effort and cost in implementing the strategy.

The key factors in the success of the strategy were considered by staff to be their own commitment and the presentation of the policy in a positive way.

## Additional literacy support at Callaghan Primary School

This case study highlighted the importance of close liaison between literacy supporters and class teachers. The school is in an inner-city area with a mainly working-class population. Boys were seen to be underachieving in literacy relative to girls in national tests, a trend that was in line with national concerns about boys' achievements.

Staff from Years 2 to 6 each selected two pupils to participate in the programme, making ten pupils in all, the majority of whom were boys. While selecting these pupils, all pupils were informed about the strategy to reinforce the idea that it was a whole-school policy that would involve others later. Letters were sent to parents of the selected children to inform them about the programme and to secure their consent.

Although the volunteer literacy supporters, who came from the local community, were not given formal training, their role was carefully explained to them by the headteacher and an adviser from the LEA. New books were purchased to interest reluctant readers and the library was redecorated to provide the right environment.

Literacy supporters worked with children for half a term, on an individual basis for 20 minutes three times a week. They helped to increase pupils' appreciation of reading by discussing texts with them and by reading to them.

Sessions took place in lesson time. Class teachers and supporters worked together to minimise how much of the regular classwork children missed. The school SENCO tested the pupils' reading ability before and after each support block.

The effectiveness of the strategy was evaluated through the reading test results and informal discussion with teachers, parents and supporters. Test results after two blocks of support showed significant improvements in children's reading although it was too early to say whether the gains would be maintained. Teachers, parents and supporters felt that pupils were also benefiting in terms of increased confidence in, and enthusiasm for reading.

In the opinion of staff, the main reasons for the success of the strategy were the high levels of communication, enthusiasm and commitment on the part of teachers, parents and literacy supporters.

## Strategies for improving boys' academic performance at George Abbott School, Guildford, Surrey

The aim of this study was to identify strategies for improving boys' achievement and to evaluate a mentoring

process that addressed the needs of the pupils concerned. Twenty Year 10 boys and 15 teachers participated in the study at this large (2000 pupil on roll) comprehensive school. Although the school as a whole achieved at above the national average, boys were often seen to fall behind girls.

The main objectives of the mentoring programme were to:

- understand the factors which motivated boys
- investigate the factors boys regarded as instrumental in determining their success or otherwise
- help boys gain an awareness of their strengths and weakness and of their potential
- develop a strategy to enable boys to take responsibility for their own learning.

By focusing on work rather than on behaviour, mentors helped to foster positive attitudes among the boys. During baseline interviews mentors and pupils established pupils' strengths and weaknesses.

At a second interview mentors worked with pupils to help them identify and implement individual strategies for addressing their weaknesses. Progress was monitored through other meetings. The mentor also helped pupils make more accurate assessments of their own abilities and potential, a problematic area for many lower ability boys.

The teacher-researcher found that:

- the boys who participated in the programme perceived the process positively and felt it contributed to an improvement in their academic progress
- the pupils responded better when goals were short-term
- good staff/pupil relationships developed during the mentoring process
- pupils were successful in identifying individual strategies for improving their performance.

For the full summary see:

Strategies for improving boys' academic performance  
Cawdell, S. (2000)  
TTA publication no. 135/8-00

## How can primary schools encourage boys to develop a more positive attitude towards learning?

This study was based on 23 teachers in three infant/nursery schools and three junior schools within a pyramid in West Yorkshire. It highlighted the importance of raising boys' self-esteem.

The research project sought to identify factors that influence boys' learning negatively, and to find ways to overcome them.

The author observed good practice towards supporting boys' learning in the case study schools, which included the following:

- giving them more responsibilities, such as training boys with low self-esteem to act as partners assisting less able boys in reading
- implementing behaviour policies to counteract 'boy culture' activities such as bullying, sexual harassment and swearing
- careful grouping of pupils to complement pupils' individual strengths
- developing a strong partnership with home at an early stage in children's reading activities

- monitoring and analysing gender differences in the interactions between teachers and pupils and using it to inform practice
- modifying learning materials to balance gender bias in content or style
- presenting boys with short, achievable tasks.

Teachers regarded clear lesson structures as a particularly important strategy for teaching boys. One observation echoed frequently by teachers was, "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".

Teachers also felt it was important to get to know more about boys - their expectations and aspirations, fears and concerns. With reference to the transition to high school, one Year 6 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. However, we must build up their confidence. We must build up their faith in themselves."

The involvement of parents led to a successful parents' conference that produced an advice leaflet for all parents in the pyramid.

For the full summary see:

How can primary schools encourage boys to develop a more positive attitude towards learning?

Cawdell, S. (2000)

TTA publication no. 82/9-99

## How can teachers motivate less motivated boys?

This study focused on 22 boys in Year 10 who had been taught science in low ability single-sex groups. Part of the research focused on the unintended outcomes of ability setting that resulted in single-sex teaching groups. The study also explored factors in teaching that were important to improving boys' motivation in the resulting single-sex groups. The authors identified a range of factors that teachers had to consider in teaching low ability single-sex groups.

These included:

- listening to boys to make them feel valued and respected
- identifying boys who are under pressure and providing them with pastoral support
- helping boys to develop and clarify their career ambitions
- helping boys to organise their work more effectively
- developing tasks which require thinking rather than copying
- using examples which are relevant to the boys' lives
- using humour.

The research highlighted the importance of teachers taking the time to listen to the boys as a means of establishing good relationships with them. The boys appreciated teachers who showed that they cared about them and wanted to teach them. It made them feel valued as learners and individuals.

The authors found that understanding the pressures on the boys also helped teachers to create positive and supportive learning environments for them. These pressures arose from a variety of external causes including sibling rivalry, school/parent relationships and parental illness. By working with parents, individual teachers were able to make support for the boys more tailored and therefore effective. Certain lessons and leisure activities in school made a difference to the pupils' lives. One pupil said: "When I'm wound up, if I have problems outside school having fun in school helps you forget it."

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## Further reading

### What else might I enjoy reading?

Sukhnandan, L. (1999). *An investigation into gender differences in achievement. Phase 1: a review of recent research and LEA information on provision*. Slough: National Foundation for Educational Research.

Noble, C. and Bradford, W. (2000) *Getting it right for boys...and girls*. London: Routledge.

Gorard, S., Rees, G., and Salisbury, J. (2001) *Investigating the patterns of differential attainment of boys and girls at school*.

Bleach, K., (1998) *Raising boys' achievement in schools*. Stoke-on-Trent: Trentham Books.

### Where can I find out more online?

DCSF: Raising Boys' Achievement

<http://publications.dcsf.gov.uk/default.aspx?PageFunction=productdetails&PageMode=publications&ProductId=RR636>  
&

TRIPS: Research digests

[www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/research/themes/](http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/research/themes/)

Training and Development Agency for Schools

[www.tda.gov.uk/](http://www.tda.gov.uk/)

Copies of all TDA case studies are available from the TDA website.

The British Educational Research Association

[www.bera.ac.uk/](http://www.bera.ac.uk/)

Publishes articles on many research topics including gender.

The DCSF Standards site

[www.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/](http://www.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/)

Features a wide range of articles about education including gender issues.

The Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency

[www.qcda.gov.uk/](http://www.qcda.gov.uk/)

Has a range of statistical data about gender and achievement.

### Related research

The Gender Agenda Final Report (DCSF 2009) and related publications:

- Mythbusters - Addressing Gender and Achievement: Myths and Realities
- Gapbusters - Schools that close or narrow the attainment gap between boys and girls in English
- Narrowing the Gap: The Gender Agenda - making a difference in science

Available from:

<http://publications.teachernet.gov.uk/default.aspx?PageFunction=productdetails&PageMode=publications&ProductId=DCSF-00165-2010&>

Gender and Education: 'Gapbusters' - Schools that close or narrow the attainment gap between boys and girls in English <http://nationalstrategies.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/node/195899>

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