



7:GENDER ISSUES

What do we mean by gender issues?

When embarking on any consideration of gender issues in school, first ensure that you and your colleagues are agreed on what is meant.

This launch pad includes sections on:

- ◆ Definitions
- ◆ Why gender issues are an important focus in the education of gifted and talented pupils
- ◆ The key issues to consider
- ◆ What you might do at school level
- ◆ Recommended reading

You may wish to read the text selectively.

DEFINITIONS

The term 'gender issues' refers to the social and educational aspects of the pupil's being male or female. That is to say, to the real and perceived biological, genetic, cultural, educational, and indeed lifelong implications of their gender. Recent evidence shows that, aside from the obvious biological differences between boys and girls, there are common neurological and metabolic differences between them. These affect the rates of their intellectual development in different areas of learning (for example, language) during the early and primary school years, largely to the disadvantage of boys. An account of this is to be found in Portwood, 2000. Arnold (1997) reviewed evidence that there may be differences in the development of the function of brain hemispheres, and that language development follows a biological maturation 'timetable', where girls have a faster rate of progress than boys. He also remarked that there is said to be a greater proportion of boys among hyperactive children. Biddulph, too, (1998) argues that boys' motor skills, and their greater percentage of muscle than that in the case of girls, make them less able to sit still and concentrate on tasks for sustained periods, at least in the early years. Unless one knows of such factors, and acts upon them early, the result may be disaffection and underachievement, which is likely to continue into secondary school.

It must be remembered, though, that there also concerns for girls, and that knowledge of differences such as these should not be allowed to determine predictions.

Primary schools should be mindful of:

- patterns of achievement of males and females over their lifetimes, and not just their educational lifetimes;
- pupils' self-perceptions and motivation, in relation to how these seem to be influenced by their gender;
- the risks of boys and girls being gender-stereotyped in school, in terms of their subject preferences, achievements, etc.;
- and/or the danger of their underachieving, at least partially on the basis of their gender.

Schools need to address how they can recognise, minimise, and, where useful, even exploit, any male-female differences that do exist; they should debate the extent to which they are striving for equal opportunities for both genders.

WHY ARE GENDER ISSUES AN IMPORTANT FOCUS IN THE EDUCATION OF GIFTED AND TALENTED PUPILS?

- Freeman (1998) states that, according to much research, gender has proved the most powerful single influence on high achievement. The attitudes of pupils, teachers and parents about gender and achievement, for example, can have an enormous impact on the nature and extent of the individual pupil's achievements.
- In schools, when methods other than tests are being employed, boys are twice as likely to be identified as more able than girls (see below). As there is little or no evidence that either gender is innately more capable of achieving in any subject than the other, this pattern should be a serious cause for concern in schools.
- Gender stereotyping and stereotyping of ability, both unwise, are often interrelated, with cultural stereotyping thrown in for good measure. For instance, teachers and pupils' own peers can have preconceptions in their image of a highly able pupil in English, namely that of a quiet, white, neat, conscientious, middle-class girl. Similarly, their image of a highly able runner may be that of a tall, black, noisy, working-class boy. Such stereotyping may endanger the identification of ability, prevent the celebration of achievement, and block progress for many pupils.

WHAT ARE THE KEY ISSUES TO CONSIDER?

Uneven patterns of gender achievement

- *English:* According to KS1 SATs, girls make a better start at learning to read than boys. At KS2, the reading scores of boys are improving nationally but are still a few percentage points behind those of girls. In the 1999 English test overall, however, nearly 76% of girls achieved Level 4 or above while only 65% of boys did so. This is because writing scores showed only minimal improvement, with the gap between the achievements of boys and girls more sizeable than between their attainments in reading. This general trend persists at KS3.

- *Mathematics*: In KS2, boys and girls are more or less level, as they are at KS3, though not necessarily in individual aspects of the subject. In the 1999 SAT, about 69% of both genders achieved Level 4 or above.
- *Science*: By KS3, boys outdo girls, but at KS2 the picture is more mixed. Slightly fewer girls than boys gained Level 5 in 1999, while slightly more girls than boys achieved Levels 3 or 4. In 1998, boys had overtaken girls by KS3, with 27% of boys achieving level 6 or above compared with 23% of girls.
- *The broad picture*: There are similar patterns in language, mathematics and science internationally. (Arnot et al., 1998). However, beware of extrapolating from the broad picture to your own context: the situation there may differ in some or many ways from the above patterns.
- Another aspect of gender in relation to achievement is the patterns of improvement. Nationally, in recent years boys have made lesser improvements than girls in English, maths and science, but this does not justify generalised statements about boys' or girls' achievements over the whole curriculum. The school needs to examine trends of achievement in particular subjects, and even in aspects of some subjects, such as measurement and computation in mathematics.. It should be remembered, too, that boys and girls alike are to be found at *all* levels of performance, for example getting off to a poor start in a subject or achieving highly in it.
- Rates of progress are a complicating factor. For example, Arnot et al. (1998) found that, nationally, girls had made greater academic progress than boys between the ages of 7 and 16, while boys had made greater academic progress between the times of GCSE and A level. Freeman (1996) points out that girls and boys develop at different rates, in different ways, at different points of their school lives. Thus, the intelligence level that girls will reach as adults can be well predicted between the ages of 3 and 6, but less well in the case of boys at the same age. The IQs of girls 'begin to plateau in late childhood, while those of boys increase... boys' rates of development are slower, so that they pick up later in performance'. Therefore, **do not rely simply on 'snapshot' data of particular year groups, for example test results. It is valuable to follow the longitudinal progress of boys and girls, within a cohort, and to analyse trends in progress as well as achievement.**
- However, schools should not just consider the extent to which boys and girls achieve their potential while they are attending school. For example, despite their achievements in school, many girls 'underachieve' when they have left. Freeman (1996) found that, of a sample of gifted and non-gifted pupils studied in 1991, more boys than girls had gone on to university, the girls having often opted for less prestigious institutions, etc. Freeman also describes the 1995 findings of a Californian study of 1,528 'geniuses', which showed twice as many of the 'career women' remaining unmarried as men at the equivalent career level. The career progress of many of those women who did marry had been hindered by the notorious 'glass ceiling', in which women seem to be barred from certain high-level positions and occupations. Some of these trends may no longer hold so true in all school communities. For example, according to Freeman (1998), women made up 51% of university graduates. Nevertheless, schools should be deeply concerned for the lifelong effects of their attitudes to male and female pupils, and for the extent to which they can help bring about real equality of opportunity in the wider world.

Self-stereotyping, school stereotyping, family/cultural stereotyping by gender

- In the early years, more boys than girls are currently identified as able (Eyre, 1997). Freeman (1996) too points out that, when methods other than tests are used, boys are twice as likely to be identified as gifted, even when girls' records of achievement in school are as good. When building up a whole-school register of the highly able, teachers should therefore work to eliminate marked differences in gender numbers; if differences do exist, teachers should be prepared to investigate why.
- Gender stereotypes concerning high ability may well contribute to the problem described above. Freeman (1996) describes the significant 'double bind' experienced by many girls. They may conform to teachers' expectations and work hard but quietly and conscientiously, not asking for help or further challenge. This behaviour may be too readily accepted by teachers, and interpreted as an indication of lower achievement than that of those boys who demand attention and are more 'visible' in class. The opposite problem, however, may also occur. Girls may be overly rewarded for working quietly, conscientiously and neatly. Conversely, boys who are highly able may not have their abilities recognised if their 'visibility' or 'untidiness' is interpreted by teachers as inappropriate for the subject taught. Research by Walden and Walkerdine (1985), described by Freeman (1996), indicated that even when girls achieved highly in mathematics, they were seen by teachers as doing so by using inferior skills, i.e. by 'plodding' – showing persistence rather than brilliance. Teachers need to examine honestly their expectations of 'types of pupil' and of pupil behaviours, subject by subject, and the reasons for those expectations. In science or design and technology, for example, are highly able pupils expected to show themselves to be 'visible' and vocal, characteristics stereotypically associated with many boys? In English, on the other hand, are they expected to be quiet, independent, neat and studious, characteristics stereotypically associated with many girls?
- The gender stereotyping of subject preferences may warrant attention in your school. Research, some of it briefly mentioned in Freeman, 1998, does not suggest that either sex is innately more or less able in some subjects. On the contrary, some studies (also described in Freeman, 1998) show that highly able girls are not necessarily as aware of their strengths as are highly able boys, being caught up in a 'conflict between success and femininity'. Equally, they can suffer from 'learned helplessness', attributing success to luck and thus succumbing to a downward spiral of underachievement. It is likely that the same is true of some boys in some stereotypically feminine subjects. Schools therefore need to look at factors that might be leading to boys' and girls' unequal preferences in many subjects. Amongst others, these will include social and peer group factors, and pupils' lack of awareness of their own abilities.
- Attitudes of school staff and/or pupils contribute to the gender stereotypes attributed to different subjects. Freeman (1996) points out that 'most science teachers expect girls to produce conscientious neat work, but not to understand what they are writing about, whereas boys are seen as having a good grasp of science, but produce untidy work.' Many boys see English as a 'feminine' subject, equating it primarily with fiction or poetry, or with the consideration of feelings, relationships, and 'difficult' human issues and themes. Numbers of boys seem to feel uncomfortable with these aspects of English, and are unsure of their practical application in adult life. Peer groups, often single-sex groups, may influence individuals in favour of, or against, particular

subjects or areas of interest in school. If a child's same-sex friends all enthuse about or decry a subject, the individual may find it hard not to follow suit. Subjects or areas can thus become stereotyped as 'feminine' or 'masculine', making it increasingly difficult for pupils to make known an 'atypical' preference.

- It may be that a school's policy on pupil grouping is contributing to gender issues. For example, if large numbers of boys are found in 'bottom' sets or groups they can become disaffected, and this can create a self-fulfilling downward spiral of underachievement. Some educationists and others express strong feelings on the benefits of single-sex teaching, or teaching in single-sex groups, but there is little if any evidence to suggest that this is beneficial across large parts of the curriculum. Evidence is mounting, however, that flexible groupings, sometimes by gender, can boost achievement and motivation, depending on the teaching and learning context. There are, for example, situations where girls say that they feel intimidated by boys, such as computer work or science. Here, grouping the girls together seems to help. Similarly, when sensitive issues are being discussed in English, the grouping of boys with sympathetic male peers can give reassurance.
- Cultural issues can play a part in choices and achievement which are influenced by gender. Cultural and family background, including 'class', can enforce early patterns. There is, for example, the tendency of boys to strive for independence, self-reliance and responsibility, to gain their greatest satisfaction from achievement, and to attribute their successes to their innate abilities. Studies have shown that girls, on the other hand, often see their achievements as founded on hard work or luck (Freeman, 1996). These values and pressures will vary across cultures, too; in some cultures, for example, literacy may be valued much more highly among men than women. In respect of gender, schools could usefully investigate the value systems of any cultural groups within the school which may be 'sending messages' different from the value systems the school itself generally promotes.
- Stereotyping may be reinforced by the gender balance, or otherwise, of teachers and other staff and adult helpers, as role models in different subjects and areas of school life. Freeman (1996) pointed out the general dominance of men in senior school positions and in educational administration. At the opposite end of the spectrum, canteen staff and playground supervisors may tend to be women. Freeman cited a subject-specific example. The likelihood of pupils being taught science by a woman tailed off, in 1996, from about 40% at primary level to about 15% at A level. Conversely, in subjects such as English and modern languages, there is a preponderance of female teachers right through from primary to secondary school level. This is a potential problem which should be treated seriously. Schools need to analyse staffing for such imbalances and address them as best they can.

Underachievement – boys and/or girls

- Another problem for a school may be that of underachievement. Currently, there is a particular concern, in the press and many schools, with boys' underachievement. But the problem may affect different populations of both boys and girls within a school, e.g. different year groups or classes. Any problems of underachievement should be carefully analysed for their possible connections with gender issues. Underachievement should not, however, be confused with *low* achievement, a concept with which it overlaps. For example, there is a current concern with the difference between boys' and girls' respective achievements in writing at KS2; the populations involved include boys who are not fulfilling their true potential as writers,

and some of these are no doubt highly able. In other subject areas, highly able boys may also be underachieving; in yet others, there may be patterns of underachievement in girls. Some of the factors, e.g. gender-stereotyped views of certain subjects, have been considered above. If you wish to include underachievement in your gender focus, please see the separate launch pad on the subject.

- Remember: gender issues should not be considered in isolation from other related factors such as cultural issues and underachievement.

WHAT MIGHT WE DO AT SCHOOL LEVEL?

- At whole school level, course members could audit gender differences:
 - Compare numbers of girls and boys being identified as highly able across the school.
 - Compare numbers of girls and boys being identified as highly able in individual subjects, and/or aspects of subjects.
 - Compare numbers of girls and boys achieving at different levels and/or different grades, etc, in individual subjects in KS1 and 2 tests, optional SATs, NFER or other reading tests, internal formal school assessments, etc.
 - Track and compare girls' and boys' rates of progress in different subjects at different ages.
 - Identify underachieving boys and girls in different year groups and subjects, and compare numbers.
 - Compare school data with data from other local schools and from your LEA. Through questionnaires and interviews, ascertain from pupils their 'gendered' attitudes to achievement, different areas of the curriculum, high ability, etc.
 - Audit school staffing at senior and middle management level, and amongst ancillary staff and adult helpers, and analyse the extent of the gender balance.

Avoid snapshot data; build up a picture over time.

- At whole school level, course members could:
 - Review procedures for identifying more able pupils, e.g. are there, in some subjects, preconceptions arising from gender stereotypes?
 - Examine staff recruitment. Could the school seek adult helpers or experts to act as gender role models to enthuse and support pupils in some subjects?
 - Discuss and publicise issues of gender stereotyping, e.g. through assemblies, posters in communal areas, and classroom discussions. Promote the fact that the school has no gender stereotyping with regard to 'boy-friendly' and 'girl-friendly' subjects.
 - Ensure that all whole-school documentation uses non-sexist language.
 - Promote and celebrate high achievement, by all pupils, of both genders, in all subjects, throughout the school, e.g. with badge, sticker, progress chart, certificate or other achievement award systems, and in assemblies.
 - Where appropriate, arrange sensitively-handled discussions with cultural groups, for example particular groups of parents, who may have different attitudes to achievement by one gender or the other, for instance in certain subjects. Strive for common ground.
 - Consider school systems of pupil grouping. Compare the advantages and disadvantages of single-sex and mixed-sex grouping methods in different subjects

and learning contexts. Try to evolve a flexible model of grouping, so that the advantages of single-sex groupings can be exploited in some contexts, the advantages of mixed-sex groupings in others.

- Examine whether there are enough breaktime, after-school or out-of-school activities to appeal to either gender, and enough encouragement to take part in them. Girls, for example, may need more encouragement to participate out of school in order to improve their sense of independence and self-worth.
 - Consider support for especially vulnerable gender groups from sympathetic adults, e.g. mentors. This may be subject-specific or at the whole-school or classroom level. Mentoring seems to work well for highly able girls, for example, not only improving their 'subject confidence' but also having positive emotional effects. They might spend time with 'role model' adults or older pupils, perhaps with specialist expertise, e.g. on the computer. Such support may consist of a series of discussions or sessions, and can work both with boys and with girls.
 - Undertake some action research in a class, to support such programmes and to ascertain what effects they are having.
- At subject co-ordinator or classroom teacher level, teachers could:
- Identify and target groups of boys and/or girls who are underachieving, or in danger of underachieving, at least partly because of gender factors, e.g. peer group or parental pressure, or stereotyping by teachers.
 - Ensure that gender-biased or stereotyped materials are not used in lessons, but plan to introduce into appropriate lessons the critical discussion of materials of this kind. Integrate into PSHE the discussion of peer pressure as it applies to gender; integrate discussion of gender roles into, for example, English, games lessons, and design and technology.
 - Agree with colleagues on the indicators of high achievement that teachers expect to see in pupils, in various subjects, e.g. confident oral contributions, well-organised written work. Examine them honestly to ensure that there is no gender bias, and make them known to pupils. Review the indicators and celebrate examples on a regular basis, integrating them into planning, target-setting and assessment.
 - Review classroom provision for the highly able. It may be appropriate to discuss it with some of them. Is the provision more attractive to one sex than to the other? Do girls and boys who take part in it achieve equally well? If you or they think not, enlist gifted pupils of sufficient maturity or insight in evaluating why this might be. Try to revise provision accordingly, and ask the pupil to help monitor the success of any changes.
- At subject co-ordinator or classroom teacher level, teachers could:
- Using tape recordings, record the nature of interaction in lessons in terms of exchanges between teacher and boys and teacher and girls.. Are boys offered more adult support? Are boys chosen to answer questions more often than girls? Are they allowed to interrupt more often? Analyse results. Any imbalance can best be redressed by debating with pupils themselves what justification there could be for favouring one sex at the expense of the other.
 - Assess whether, in class, girls and boys are encouraged to take intellectual risks to the same degree, and audit any differences in the expectations and confidence levels of boys and girls. If there are discrepancies, reflect on why. As a result, try to revise planning, pupils' chances of receiving adult support, and opportunities for extension.

RECOMMENDED READING

Adams, C., 1986. *Some Approaches to Equal Opportunities in Primary Schools*. London: ILEA Primary Matters.

Arnold, R., 1996. *Raising Levels of Achievement in Boys*. Slough: National Foundation for Educational Research, Educational Management Information Exchange.

Arnot, M., Gray, J., James, M., Rudduck, J. with Duveen, G., 1998. *Recent Research on Gender and Educational Performance*. London: OFSTED/HMSO

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Eyre, D., 1997. *Able Children in Ordinary Schools*. London: David Fulton.

Freeman, J., 1996. *Highly Able Girls and Boys*. Northampton: NACE.

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Gaine, C. and George, R., 1999. *Gender, 'Race' and Class in Schooling*. London: Falmer Press.

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Portwood, M., 2000. *Understanding Developmental Dyspraxia*. London: David Fulton.

Spender, D., 1982. *Invisible Women: The schooling scandal*. London: Writers and Readers Publishing Cooperative Society.

Teare, J.B., 1997. *Effective Provision for Able and Talented Children*. Stafford: Network Educational Press.

Whyte, J., 1983. *Beyond the Wendy House: Sex Role Stereotyping in Primary Schools*. York: Longman for Schools Council.

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