



7:GENDER ISSUES

What do we mean by gender issues?

When carrying out a review of gender issues in your school, first ensure that colleagues have a shared understanding of what is meant.

INTRODUCTION

The term 'gender issues' in the context of education refers to the differences, both real and perceived, between boys and girls, and their relative achievements and opportunities. It is vital, if equality of opportunity is to be assured, that schools be well informed of all the factors at work. With detailed background knowledge, the school is better able to take careful account of:

- the patterns of achievement of males and females over their lifetimes, and not just their educational lifetimes
- pupils' self-perceptions, motivation and ambitions insofar as these seem to be influenced by their gender
- the risks of boys and girls being gender-stereotyped in school, in terms of their subject specialisms, learning capacity, etc.
- the danger of their underachieving, at least partially on the basis of their gender.

Schools need to have plans in place which enable them to recognise the gender differences that do exist, to counter any disadvantage that may arise to either gender, and, where useful, even to exploit the differences to the advantage of both. In short, the focus should always be upon striving for equal opportunities for both genders.

WHAT ARE THE KEY ISSUES TO CONSIDER?

The disparity of achievement between boys and girls has come in for a great deal of attention in recent years, and has been the subject of much research. The suggested causes for the disparity can be grouped under three main headings:

- inborn differences between the sexes
- acquired characteristics and self-perception, and social and economic influences
- the influence of the school and teachers' attitudes.

Inborn differences are an undoubted factor, but one that is most at risk of encouraging a deterministic outlook. Medical evidence has been adduced to suggest that boys are more vulnerable prenatally and during the process of birth, where they are more likely to suffer anoxia (oxygen starvation) and other complications. It has also been suggested that boys are less well endowed than girls with verbal reasoning and analytical skills. Girls have been said to be more sensitive to sound and to be able to detect intonation patterns at an earlier stage, to the obvious advantage of the growth of their language skills. Another theory is that there may be differences in the development of the junctions of brain hemispheres, and that language development follows a biological maturation 'timetable', where girls have a faster rate of progress than boys. There is said to be a greater proportion of boys among hyperactive children and among those with language difficulties. Boys who show behaviour problems in the pre-school years have been observed to persist in them to a greater extent than is the case with girls.

Biddulph (2000) draws attention to boys' motor skills and asserts that boys have a greater percentage of muscle than do girls. This, he argues, makes them less able to sit still and concentrate on tasks for sustained periods, at least in the early years. These are helpful pointers, and they illustrate well the factors that the school has to take into account, but Bassey (1994) sounded a useful warning note. He referred to a review of a large number of studies which identified three statements the reviewers considered to be 'fairly well established'. These were that teenage girls have greater verbal ability; adolescent boys excel in visual-spatial ability; adolescent boys have great mathematical ability; and males of all ages are more aggressive than females. Bassey remarked that generalisations of this kind, whatever other uses they may have, are not of much use to the individual teacher. They could, indeed, lead to the teacher making wrong predictions about the likely achievements of particular students. This could have especial significance in the case of gifted and talented students.

The topic of **self-perception**, and social influences upon it, is a wide and complex one. It ranges from deep-seated stereotypes, and how children acquire

them, to the effects of new economic trends. The subject of early conditioning has been too well aired to need summarising here. Examples that have been cited include marked differences in the praise and criticism, physical affection, and rebuke that boys and girls receive. It is generally accepted that children tend to behave in accordance with sex-role stereotypes from an early age, and there are ample research findings to indicate that this is evident in two- and three-year olds. Certainly, these modes of thinking are well established by the time the pupils reach secondary school, where they are reinforced. Warrington and Younger (1996) interviewed pupils, teachers, and parents about study habits and attitudes. Boys appeared to be concerned with preserving an image of reluctant involvement or of disengagement. For many, it was not acceptable to be seen to be interested in academic work or stimulated by it (see also Jackson 2003). They were 'in direct conflict with the ethos and aspirations of the school, an antagonist against whom their own masculinity was frequently tested'. Paradoxically, it is the experience of many observers that far from suffering a sense of hopelessness boys tend to complacency and an overestimate of their abilities and prospects. The point made by Licht and Dweck in 1983 still seems to hold, despite the economic changes since then:

'Girls are more likely than boys to attribute their failures to ability, while boys are more likely to view their difficulties as stemming from insufficient effort Girls tend to underestimate their chances for success - given their level of past achievements and given the performances that they subsequently display. In contrast, the expectations of boys are inclined to be overestimates.'

Speaking of boys who 'drop out, who do not identify with our aspirations for them', Younger et al (2002) argue that:

'It is not that these boys lack self-esteem, rather that their self-esteem is grounded in behaviour, achievement and power which is defined within the peer group and the expectations of local community. It is as though the school and the laddish peer group speak totally different languages. Here is the major challenge facing English schools in the first decade of the twenty-first century, for as the social self-esteem of these boys rises, so their self-esteem as learners gets lower and lower.'

The extent to which teachers have different attitudes to boys and girls has come in for much attention. It has been argued that the messages conveyed by common stereotypes influence teachers in the way they respond to their pupils, and that this happens from an early stage in the process of education. One factor that influences them is general attitude to work, and the effort that pupils put in to preparing for it. Among older primary pupils, girls spend more than an average time on homework projects, and the differences in commitment to homework are particularly marked in secondary schools. Ofsted inspections have confirmed the

belief that boys and girls have different approaches to planning and organising their work. It is not unnatural that teachers should respond more warmly to pupils who are co-operative in furthering their own learning and take some responsibility for it. The important thing is for teachers to be explicitly aware of the nature of their responses and how far they are likely to lead to a solution or get in the way of one. In a paper produced for the London Borough of Merton, Pankhurst (1994) posed some interesting questions for teachers to ask themselves, for example:

- 'To what extent do teachers' expectations reinforce the process of underachievement?
- Following the extensive research into classroom interaction, is there a growing sense of expecting boys to misbehave, talk down female colleagues, and attempt to dominate the social context?
- Have the stereotypical images of boys, freely presented in the analysis of classroom and school behaviour studies, become embedded and now precede the occupants of the classroom?'

There is, however, another aspect to teachers' expectations and one that appears to operate in the particular case of gifted and talented children. Eyre (1997) states that, in the early years, more boys than girls are identified as able. Similarly, Freeman (1996) 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. Research by Walden and Walkerdine (1985), described by Freeman, indicated that even when girls achieved highly in mathematics, they were seen by teachers as doing so by using inferior skills, such as by 'plodding' and showing persistence rather than brilliance. Some studies have found that highly able girls are not necessarily as aware of their strengths as highly able boys, or that they can suffer from 'learned helplessness', attributing success to luck rather than to their own attributes.

The possibility of gender stereotyping in the choice of subjects also needs to be kept under constant review. In some GCSE subjects, more boys are to be found than girls, for example in physics, CDT, economics, chemistry, computer studies, technology and science. Conversely, more girls than boys opt for certain other subjects, such as English literature and biology. Another influence on stereotyping may arise from the gender balance of teachers, other staff and other adults within the school. Freeman (1996) instanced the general dominance of men in senior school positions and in educational administration. She also remarked that 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 at secondary school level. The predominance of female primary school teachers is also well known.

It may be that the school's policy on **pupil grouping** has a bearing on gender issues. For example, if large numbers of boys are found in bottom sets they can become disaffected, with a self-fulfilling downward spiral of underachievement. A case is sometimes made for 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. There is increasing evidence, however, that flexible groupings, sometimes by gender, can boost achievement and motivation. This will depend on the teaching and learning context. For example, there are some situations where girls say that they feel intimidated by boys' superior confidence, such as computer work or some sciences, but there are other situations where mixed grouping can be a positive factor in the quality of learning.

If inborn differences, self-perception, and the influence of schools, are among the reasons for differences in achievement between boys and girls, what is the extent of those differences? The most recent statistic, and one that caused much concern, is the relatively poor performance of boys in the 2006 Key Stage English tests. In writing, 59% of boys attained level 4, compared with 75% of girls. The differences in achievement in reading were not as great, but they were still significant. Level 4 was attained by 79% of boys and 87% of girls. Commentators pointed out that this would mean 77,100 boys and 44,700 girls starting secondary school in 2006 'having failed to reach even the lowest of the three grades which make up the level four target in English.' However, the differences in achievement are by no means a recent phenomenon. In Key Stage 3 English in 1998, 26% of girls reached level 6 or above compared with only 14% of boys. Three years later, in 2001, 73% of girls were achieving level 5 as against 56% of boys, and the disparity has persisted. Ten years ago, Ofsted and the Equal Opportunities Commission published 'The Gender Divide: Performance Differences Between Boys and Girls at School' (1996). They remarked: 'Girls are more successful than boys (in terms of achieving GCSE grades A* to C), or broadly more successful, in almost all major subjects'. Five years later, in 2001, 55% of girls gained at least five grades A* to C, compared to 44.6% of boys, and the differences occurred in all subjects.

This continuing pattern has been commented in a number of research studies and reviews (Arnot et al 1998, Younger et al 1999, and Francis 2000), but the picture is not a simple one. Younger and his colleagues (2002) remarked: 'Despite high level achievements at GCSE and in KS3 NC tests, fewer girls take up maths and science at A level and some girls are still entered for lower level tiered papers at GCSE, strikingly in some schools in science and maths, and some schools remain heavily male-dominated institutions and cultures, in the classroom, in the playground, in the staffroom.' The emphasis has to be on the word 'some', and it goes without saying that the practice in individual schools can and does differ from the broad picture thus described. Indeed, generalised statements about boys' or girls' achievements over the whole curriculum need to

be approached with caution. Both boys and girls are likely to be found at *all* levels of performance. Within school, trends of achievement in particular subjects, and even in elements of some subjects, for example measurement and computation in mathematics, need to be constantly examined.

Another aspect of the question is the extent to which the two sexes show improvement over time. Arnot et al. (1998) found that, nationally, girls had made greater academic progress than boys between the ages of three and 16, while boys had made greater academic progress between 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 adult intelligence level of girls can be better predicted between the ages of three and six than it can for boys at the same age. Freeman maintains that the IQ levels 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'. . There is evidence to suggest that despite their accomplishments in school, many girls 'underachieve' when they have left, sometimes opting for opportunities below their ability. It follows that the review of patterns of improvement and achievement within a school needs to be a rolling process, a longitudinal study that follows students into further education or employment.

WHAT MIGHT WE DO IN SCHOOL?

At whole school level, it is valuable practice to monitor closely any differences in educational performance and social development between male and female students. To this end, avoid acquiring information by 'snapshots', instead, build up a picture over time.

In pursuing this information, the school should:

- compare numbers of girls and boys who have been identified as highly able across the school
- compare numbers of girls and boys who have been identified as highly able in individual subjects, and/or aspects of subjects
- compare numbers of girls and boys achieving at different levels and/or grades in individual subjects in KS3 tests, GCSE, A/AS level
- track and compare girls' and boys' rates of progress in different subjects at different ages
- identify underachieving boys and girls in ability groupings and subjects, and compare numbers
- compare your school's data with that from other local schools and the local authority
- sound out the views of students, by questionnaire and interview, to assess attitudes to achievement, different areas of the curriculum, high ability, etc, in terms of gender

- audit the school's staffing at senior management level, within subject departments, and amongst ancillary staff, and analyse the extent, or otherwise, of the gender balance.

The school should also:

- review procedures for identifying more able pupils, asking such questions as 'Are there preconceptions on the basis of gender in terms of the able student in relation to some subjects?'
- examine careers advisory systems. Is there any implicit or explicit bias in advice and information given?
- examine the pattern of staff recruitment. Could the school do more to seek adult helpers, or experts, who will act as gender role models to enthuse and support pupils in some subjects?
- discuss and publicise issues of gender stereotyping, for example through school assemblies and school posters. Use these to promote the fact that you have no 'sex-limited' subjects.
- ensure that all whole-school documentation uses non-sexist language.
- promote and celebrate high achievement, by all students, of both genders, in all subjects, for example with certificates or other award systems, and in assemblies.
- if appropriate, hold discussions with cultural groups, for example particular groups of parents, who may have different attitudes to experience and achievement in certain subjects in respect of different genders. Sensitivity is obviously the keyword in the quest for common ground.
- consider the school's policy for student 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, and the advantages of mixed-sex groupings in others.
- examine whether there are enough 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 in such activities in order to improve their sense of independence and self-worth.
- consider mentoring or counselling programmes for especially vulnerable gender groups. This may be subject-specific or at the general, pastoral level. Mentoring seems to work well for highly able girls, for example, not only improving their 'subject confidence' but having positive emotional effects. They might spend time with 'role model' adults or older students, perhaps with specialist expertise, for example in a laboratory. Counselling, which can work with boys and girls alike, may take the form of a series of sessions. You might consider carrying out some action research in class to support such programmes and to ascertain what effects they are having.

At subject departmental or year group level, the school 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 within school
- plan a consistent, long-term strategy for raising such groups' awareness of gender issues. For example, ensure that sexist, gender-biased and gender-stereotyped materials are not used, and in appropriate lessons discuss the principles on which these have been excluded. Include in PSHE the discussion of 'gendered peer pressure', and in English and biology in particular the discussion of gender roles.
- reach a common agreement among staff on what they believe to be indicators of high achievement in students, for example confident oral contributions, or well organised written work. Examine these indicators honestly to reduce the possibility of gender bias. Make the indicators known to students; review them, and celebrate examples on a regular basis, integrating them into planning, target-setting and assessment.
- review provision for the highly able, and discuss it with the students. Does one gender find it more generous or attractive than the other? Do girls and boys for whom educational provision for the gifted is made achieve equally well? If not, enlist gifted students in evaluating why this might be. Try to revise provision accordingly, at departmental level, and ask students to help monitor the success of any changes.

Within subject departments, or at classroom level, the school could:

- record the proportion of interactions between teacher and boys and teachers and girls in lessons. Are boys offered more adult support? Are boys chosen to answer questions more often than girls? Are they allowed to interrupt more often? Analyse the results of these observations. Any imbalance can best be redressed by debating with students themselves what justification there could be for favouring one sex at the expense of the other.
- Review the extent to which, if at all, girls and boys are encouraged to take intellectual risks to the same degree, and also any differences in the expectations and confidence levels of boys and girls. If there are discrepancies, reflect on why. In accordance with the findings, take steps, where necessary, to revise planning, pupils' chances for adult support, **extension** opportunities, and so on.

REFERENCES AND RECOMMENDED READING

Arnold, R. (1997) *Raising Levels of Achievement in Boys*. Slough: NFER

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

Ayles, R. (1992) 'Gifted girls: A case of wasted talent'. In: Monks, F.J., Katzko, W., and van Boxtel, H.W., ed. *Education of the Gifted in Europe: Theoretical and research issues*. Amsterdam: Swets and Zeitlinger.

Bassey, M. (1994) 'Pedagogic research on the relative merits of search for generalisation and study of single events'. In: Bell, J., Bush, T., Fox, A., Goodey, J. and Goulding, S. (Eds) *Conducting Small-scale Investigations in Educational Management*. London: Paul Chapman Publishing.

Biddulph, S. (1998) *Manhood*. London: Hawthorn Press.

Bleach, K. (1998) *Raising Boys' Achievement in Schools*. Oakhill: Trentham Books.

Csikszentmihalyi, M., Rathunde, K. and Whalen, S. (1993) *Talented Teenagers: The roots of success and failure*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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

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

Freeman, J. (1998) *Educating the Very Able: Current international research*. London: OFSTED/Her Majesty's Stationery Office.

Jackson, C. (2003) 'Motives for laddishness' at school: fear of failure and fear of the 'feminine' *British Educational Research Journal* 29:4 (August 2003).

Licht, B.G and Dweck, C. (1987) 'Sex differences in achievement orientations'. In: Arnot, G. and Weiner, G. (Eds) *Gender and the Politics of Schooling*. London: Hutchinson.

Office for Standards in Education and Equal Opportunities Commission (1996) *The Gender Divide: Performance Differences Between Boys and Girls at School*. London: HMSO.

Pankhurst, B. (1994) *Working with Boys*. London Borough of Merton.

Pickering, J. (1997) *Raising Boys' Achievement*. Stafford: Network Educational Press.

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.

Warrington, M. and Younger, P. (1996) 'Gender and achievement: the debate at GCSE' *Education Review*, **10**, 1, pages 22-27.

Younger, M., Warrington, M. and McLellan, R., (2002) 'The 'Problem' of 'Under-achieving Boys': some responses from English secondary schools' *Journal of School Management and Leadership*, Vol 22, No.4, pages 389-405.

SEE ALSO LAUNCHPADS ON

Cultural issues
Extension and differentiation
Pupil grouping
Underachievement