

**boys' achievement, progress,  
motivation and participation:  
issues raised by the  
recent literature**

**Annette MacDonald,  
Lesley Saunders  
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## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

In 1997 the Education Department of Islington Council commissioned the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) to undertake a research project investigating boys' underachievement. The main focus of the investigation was on the need to identify barriers to boys' learning and, by extension, better strategies to motivate boys towards learning and help them succeed. A variety of activities was undertaken to contribute to the evidence base, including a literature review.

This report constitutes a stand-alone version of the review, and the NFER is grateful to Islington Council Education Department for permission to reproduce it.



## 1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The team reviewed the recent research literature on boys' underachievement with a view to:

- ♦ assessing the reliability and relevance of what the literature has to say about gender and achievement;
- ♦ compiling a brief annotated bibliography on the subject: this is given as Appendix A at the end of the report and provides a range of research articles, journalistic features, substantive reports and guidance documents, all of which might be useful for staff to refer to in informing work on raising achievement with particular reference to the needs of boys.

The starting point for this review is the fact that 'every local education authority which responded to a request for information reported that boys' standards of achievement fell below those of girls.' (Arnold, 1997.) An overview of the relative standards achieved by boys and girls over time in different subject areas and at different stages of their education is given in OFSTED and EOC, 1996. In some subject areas boys have apparently been underachieving relative to girls since, and possibly even before, GCSE was introduced. Raising the level of boys' achievement is now amongst the main priorities for action in most LEAs and schools, and – although one might argue that the concern to explain, and to remedy, boys' underachievement has lagged rather behind the facts – boys' underachievement is now one of the major foci of attention in current research literature.

Distinguishing the various contributory factors in boys' underachievement is unlikely to be an easy task, however. As Bray *et al.* (1997) state in their booklet '*Can Boys Do Better?*' the possible factors affecting boys' underachievement form a '*complex web [including] genetic, social, attitudinal and contextual aspects*'. A wide and disparate range of factors have been hypothesised as contributing to the difference between boys' and girls' educational achievements, and the debate is likely to continue for some time to come.

Evidence was found in a number of sources (Arnold, 1997; Bray *et al.*, 1997; Pickering, 1997, for example) to suggest that from the beginning boys lag behind in the linguistic aspect of learning. Genetic differences were suggested by Bray *et al.* (1997) from the pre-birth stage (for example, that female babies in the womb respond better to sound and intonation patterns than males). Wragg (1997) stated that, from the age of six, boys were shown to be behind girls on NFER-Nelson reading tests:



'*They start down and they remain down.*' He cited later maturation and differences in the way the brain functions in boys and girls during language activities as being important factors. OFSTED and EOC (1996) also stated that girls mature physically earlier than boys and this is usually mirrored in their personal and social behaviour. Different rates of maturation have, *prima facie*, implications for progress in learning.

On the other hand, however, Powney (1996) quoted evidence to suggest that differences between boys and girls in mathematical ability had diminished over the past 25 years. OFSTED (1993), too, was unable to find firm evidence that the differences between boys' and girls' performance in English reflected differences in innate linguistic ability. Pickering (1997) quoted work that showed that differences between boys and girls on such measures were actually smaller than differences within groups of boys and groups of girls.

So far as this review is concerned, therefore, **we have limited the discussion to those aspects which schools can properly consider it part of their task to influence.** We are not concerned to elaborate on the many and interesting discussions which attempt to establish exactly what the differences are between the sexes, nor whether these are innate or acquired. Indeed, there are dangers for educationists in pursuing such arguments too far: as Arnold (1997) notes, generalisations about sex differences may be true at the aggregate level (although there are few enough of these upon which people seem to agree), but they may be unhelpful – and untrue – at the individual pupil level. The risk of a generalisation (a description) being turned into a stereotype (a prescription) is a real one, and was debated at length in the 1980s in the context of raising girls' expectations and achievements.

We are interested, therefore, in exploring whatever evidence there is to suggest that some gender-related attitudes and/or aptitudes – whether innate or acquired – militate against educational achievement; in any evidence which suggests that the learning needs of boys and girls may not be being met on an equitable basis, perhaps because of gender stereotypes; and in evidence which suggests practical ways in which schools can more effectively respond to and/or compensate for boys' capacities as learners. In exploring these issues, it is as well to bear in mind the research quoted by Powney (1996) which shows that differences between the sexes in academic performance may be attributable to other factors instead of or as well as gender, such as class and ethnicity. In any initiative designed to raise boys' achievement, therefore, the necessity to target *particular groups of boys* may be paramount.

The review proceeds by focusing on four areas of schooling, as follows:

- ♦ curriculum and assessment (Section 2);
- ♦ teaching and learning (Section 3);
- ♦ organisational factors in schools (Section 4);
- ♦ personal and social development, including the role of language in boys' achievement (Section 5).

The review concludes by summarising the suggestions made in the literature for strategies to raise boys' achievement (Section 6).

References used in the text are listed alphabetically at the end of the report; the annotated bibliography (Appendix A) groups the books and articles thematically, and appends a brief commentary on each.

## **2. CURRICULUM AND ASSESSMENT**

The issue of curricular and assessment-related factors affecting boys' underachievement relate mostly to the issue of access. Is the fact of boys' underachievement a function of limited access to the curriculum (for example, in terms of their being more likely to be placed in bottom sets) and to examination entry, or is it as a result of their low levels of achievement that they then have restricted access to these opportunities?

### **2.1 Curricular Factors**

In the time allowed for this review, little evidence was found of differential experiences of boys and girls relating strictly to the curriculum. However, access to the curriculum was one factor sometimes attributed to the underachievement of boys, and Bray *et al.* (1997) attributed the instigation of the National Curriculum as having had an effect on access for both boys and girls. Two findings are reported, both relating to the achievement of boys in English:

- ♦ OFSTED (1993) found that in some schools as many as 25 per cent of the boys in Year 11 were not entered for any GCSE examination in English. As they said, '*Such proportions were never approached for girls*'. If the boys are doing so badly that they are not entered for examinations, this has clear messages about access and entitlement to a balanced curriculum.
- ♦ English, it was stated (Wiltshire Education Support & Training (1996)), was perceived as a feminine subject, as a result of the emphasis on literature, personal response, discussion and reflectiveness, all of which were thought to favour girls' biological make-up. Boys were found to be better at IT, drama, non-literary reading, media, and language study, all of which are under-represented in English schemes of work, exacerbating the other areas of difference.

OFSTED and EOC (1996) also made the point, however, that the decline among girls post-16 in subjects such as science and technology is still a cause for concern, and that any work done on gender-specific strategies for addressing issues of access to the curriculum should take into account the needs of both sexes.

### **2.2 Assessment-Related Factors**

There has been much discussion about the effects of GCSE on boys' and girls' performance, and some conflicting evidence. The evidence reported on here deals solely with results at GCSE. On the one hand, Elwood (1995) has provided evidence

that suggests that the coursework element of GCSE has not provided girls with an unfair opportunity to excel over boys, and reported that there were a host of other factors which would have to be taken into account in explaining why girls were performing better. Arnold (1997) and Bray *et al.* (1997) backed this up, the latter pointing out that even with the subsequent reduction in coursework in the GCSE, girls were still outperforming boys in almost all National Curriculum subjects.

However, there are a number of other sources which still subscribe to the idea that coursework favours girls, and that the current examination structure has advantages for girls over boys. Pickering (1997) stated that due to the emphasis in GCSE examinations of a sequential and analytical approach to learning, girls have the advantage in that these are qualities that are purportedly biologically inherent for them. He also made the point that whether or not this apparent advantage for girls did exist, because both pupils and teachers were aware of the assertion, it could still have an effect on the performance of both boys and girls. Stobart *et al.* (1992) reinforced this by stating that mode of assessment is only one factor in attainment, and that the different experiences and expectations of both pupils and teachers also play significant parts, as has been noted in earlier sections.

Powney (1996) reported the following aspects of assessment-related explanations for gender differences in attainment:

- ♦ Changes in the population being assessed: With the onset of the National Curriculum, access to courses for boys and girls was expanded. As Pickering (1997) noted, this both opened boys up to competition from girls in traditionally male subject areas, provided girls with an opportunity to excel at hitherto largely inaccessible areas of the curriculum, and also required both boys and girls to study subjects they did not necessarily like for a longer period of time. It could be argued that this was to the boys' detriment to a greater extent than to girls' because of their already higher levels of disaffection with school-based learning.
- ♦ Assumptions about homogeneity: Much research in this area has, according to Powney (1996), focused on average performance rates of boys and girls. Evidence was found that boys had a greater range of variability than girls in a number of areas. Powney (1996) notes that this pattern is complicated by difference patterns of variance regionally in the UK.
- ♦ Potential bias in assessment: Bias has been shown in research quoted by Powney (1996) to have an effect on outcomes.
- ♦ Differences relating to modes of assessment: A number of studies noted by Powney (1996) showed that boys tended to be favoured by multiple choice questions, and girls by essay and coursework (although the latter was apparently refuted by the work of Elwood (1995) (see above). Powney (1996) stated that this (Elwood's research) was a rare finding).

- ♦ The changing nature of what is being assessed: GCSE examinations, (as noted by Pickering (1997) above), rely on a sequential and analytical approach to learning, contrasted with the more fact-based traditional styles of examinations, and as such represent a huge shift in the nature of what is being assessed. As Stobart *et al.* (1992) stated, *'[The change to GCSE does not represent]... simply a matter of 'diligence' being rewarded, but a new emphasis being placed on process as well as output, on research as well as recall'*.

Differences in behaviour patterns among girls and boys were also considered to be of relevance to examination success. Powney (1996) stated that girls were less likely to guess than boys, and to be less confident than boys. She stated that some (assessment) tasks may measure students' levels of confidence as opposed to the actual content of the task or the skills needed to undertake it. She found evidence to suggest that the relative experience and expectations of boys and girls in terms of their abilities and familiarity with the method of assessment had been seen to have an effect on outcomes at GCSE. She also found evidence to suggest that boys were more willing to take risks and responded well in unfamiliar situations. This is contradicted by Wiltshire Education Support & Training (1996), wherein it was stated that *'boys are less inclined to take risks, and prefer to avoid failure'*.

OFSTED (1993) stated that although girls do better than boys in public examinations in English, and more generally in tests of written English and reading comprehension, other research suggests that there is little difference in performance of tests in spoken English.

### 3. TEACHING AND LEARNING

#### 3.1 The Learning Styles and Preferences of Boys and Girls

Pupils' own preferences and propensity to respond to particular modes of delivery are thought by several commentators to be important to their likelihood of achieving academically. There was some conflict in the findings presented by the various commentators in relation to these aspects.

Younger and Warrington (1996) found that girls appeared to be more committed and better organised than boys in homework and coursework, and to have a more realistic grasp of what was required for success at GCSE. OFSTED and EOC (1996) also noted differences in the way girls and boys planned and organised their work. Warrington and Younger (1996) found that boys had less positive views of school work and homework than girls, were much less attentive in class, had lower standards of behaviour, and were more reluctant to embark upon extra work. Pickering (1997) found evidence to suggest that boys were more focused than girls on simply passing examinations, not on excelling or even doing well.

OFSTED and EOC (1996) found evidence showing that girls tended to underestimate their abilities in mathematics. SCAA (1996) found that in technology, girls' designs often lacked innovation and vigour, attributed by the authors to possible differences in patterns of playing when they were small. Powney (1996) found evidence that girls and boys had different approaches to learning mathematics.

A number of writers found evidence that boys were less enthusiastic than girls about reading (for example, Millard, 1997; Powney, 1996). Wragg (1997) highlighted the issue that some early books do not engage boys and so from the beginning it seems that boys have less reading matter available to them to be enthusiastic about. OFSTED (1993) found that in all year groups girls read more fiction books than boys and tended to have different tastes in reading. Bray *et al.* (1997) stated that boys, for example, prefer to read factual accounts, while girls prefer to read stories. Boys' choices of reading tended to be influenced greatly by what they saw other people reading, particularly their fathers. SCAA (1996) cited evidence which pointed out that boys had more negative views towards reading than girls. They had narrower experiences of fiction and as a consequence wrote more predictably. Yet OFSTED (1993) found that few teachers monitored differences in boys' and girls' reading experience.

However, Pickering (1997) provided evidence to suggest that preferences varied from school to school, and that there might actually be quite small differences between boys and girls in their reading preferences.

OFSTED (1993) found that boys' performance in English improved when they had a clear understanding of the progress they needed to make in order to achieve well. Wiltshire Education Support & Training (1996) reiterated this by noting that in English boys needed to know why they were doing something. Wiltshire Education Support & Training (1996) also stated that boys were less inclined to take risks, and prefer to avoid failure. However, Pickering (1997) found contrary evidence that boys tended to be risk takers, while girls were more consistent and diligent. SCAA (1996) reported that National Curriculum assessments suggested that girls were more successful than boys in some of the more reflective aspects of work.

In her review of gender and classroom practice, Howe (1997) found that boys dominated the classroom, making longer, more elaborate and more frequent contributions to whole-class and teacher interactions, but considered that this could be due to the fact that they were more likely than girls to misbehave or had a reputation for misbehaviour, and that therefore teachers were more aware of what they were doing and more likely to try to keep them engaged. Many of the findings in OFSTED's report on boys and English (1993) mirrored the findings of Howe (1997). Interestingly, Wiltshire Education Support & Training (1996) came up with a different view, claiming that girls were more likely than boys to become powerful in the classroom, being more likely to assist with classroom routines and organisation. Girls were thought to know how to create positive learning relationships between themselves and the teacher.

Howe (1997) decided that boys' dominance in the classroom did not appear to help their academic performance, although she made mention of research that showed pupils in single sex classes doing better in terms of academic standards. Classroom interactions can affect pupils' attitudes, however. She suggested that girls may be 'put off' IT and science because of physical dominance by boys, quoting research which showed at the age of five there were no differences between boys and girls in their attitudes towards computing. Another study found that girls' dislike of work with computers grows rather than diminishes with familiarity. Howe (1997) concluded that girls did not enjoy their classroom experience generally as much as boys did.

### **3.2 (Pupils' Perceptions of ) Teachers' Attitudes**

Various sources (for example, Younger and Warrington, 1996; Warrington and Younger, 1996; Wiltshire Education Support & Training, 1996; Wragg, 1997) have noted that teachers' attitudes to masculinity and femininity influenced classroom interactions between teacher and learner. Research showed that students thought teachers paid more attention and gave more support to girls, and that teachers seemed prepared to be more lenient and tolerant with girls than with boys (Younger and Warrington, 1996; Wiltshire Education Support & Training, 1996). Pickering's work (1997) showed that girls perceived boys to be reprimanded more by the teacher, and to a degree of severity not thought consonant with their behaviour. Differential effects were also noted in the attitudes of teachers towards boys' and girls' skills; teachers rated boys' ability to concentrate, their determination when facing difficulties, their productivity in class, their self-esteem and social skills all less highly than those of girls (Pickering, 1997).

Evidence also emerged (Warrington and Younger, 1996) that in some school contexts, teachers underpredicted boys' and overpredicted girls' performance at GCSE, in comparison with students' own estimates and their ultimate results. In the same study, few staff acknowledged that they treated pupils differently. Further, Warrington and Younger (1996) stated that teachers commonly perceived boys as reluctantly involved or disengaged within the classroom. Their work suggests that teacher attitude, classroom interactions and environments might all contribute to male underachievement.

Warrington and Younger (1996) noted the suggestion that more time was spent by teachers helping girls, and the boys were assumed to know what they were doing. Elsewhere, Howe (1997) noted some research which showed that girls were more likely to ask for help than boys, a pattern that was apparent from a very early age. Perhaps the fact that boys were assumed to know what they were doing was because they were less likely to ask for help, and girls were helped more because they asked for it, or vice versa.

Two documents (Wiltshire Education Support & Training, 1996; OFSTED, 1993) noted that teachers' expectations of boys were lower than those for girls in English, and it was suggested that this was a key issue in their continuing underachievement in this subject. OFSTED (1993) found that the crucial factor in boys' attitudes to English and their performance in the subject was the influence of the teacher.



OFSTED (1993) also found that when reading was taught well and pupils' private reading successfully encouraged by the teacher, the distinctions between girls' and boys' reading interests were less sharp than usual. Pickering (1997) noted also that the influence of the teacher was one of the most important factors in encouraging boys to read, and in steering the choice of what they read.

OFSTED (1993) suggested that awareness of the issue of boys' underachievement was an important aspect in preparing the ground for addressing the issue in English, but this could apply to all subjects.

Pickering (1997) found evidence that pupils talking to teachers about their future was thought by the pupils to be important. Indeed, he argued that human relationships within the classroom, of all aspects of classroom practice, most influenced pupils, and particularly boys. Pickering (1997) also found that many girls believed that boys' learning was more affected by their relationship with their teachers and the quality of those teachers than their own learning was.

Teachers' attitudes to different ethnic groups was also noted in some texts. Wrench and Hassan (1996) reported that young Afro-Caribbean males felt strongly that teachers had negative stereotyped views of them. This idea was explored in more depth in Sewell (1997), where the issue was discussed with teachers, some of whom admitted to being afraid of Afro-Caribbean boys because of their physical presence and typified them as being more likely to cause trouble. White boys were also thought by teachers to be uninterested in school work and liable to disrupt the class. Asian boys, on the other hand, were thought to be the best pupils to teach out of all the ethnic groups because they were seen as obedient and dedicated to their work. It is not hard to see how such 'generalisations' could run the risk of becoming embedded as stereotyped attitudes on the part of some teachers.

## 4. ORGANISATIONAL FACTORS IN SCHOOLS

Although many writers and reviewers considered that the classroom was the key focus for raising boys' achievement, there were some aspects of the school as a whole which it was thought could impinge on boys' learning, such as arrangements for setting and banding or systems set up to support the learning of particular at-risk groups. Other factors about the school's make-up were also thought to have an effect, for example, that it was a single sex school or had a selective intake. The sub-sections below look at aspects of school organisation in turn.

### 4.1 Pupil Grouping and Criteria

Hallam (1996) has done much research in the area of pupil grouping (though not specifically in relation to underachievement in boys). She states in her review of the evidence on grouping pupils, *'On the basis of the research undertaken in the UK to date [on pupil grouping], it is impossible to draw firm conclusions, although the issue of access to the curriculum is clearly important'*.

Many schools have implemented setting and banding arrangements as a means to raise the attainment of pupils. However, this strategy needs to be pursued with some caution. OFSTED (1993) found that when pupils were grouped by ability in English, there tended to be more girls in the high attaining groups and more boys in the lower attaining groups, and suggested that this might be a contributory factor in boys' underachievement in that subject.

Warrington and Younger (1996) reinforced the OFSTED (1993) findings from the point of view of the whole curriculum. They stated that grouping pupils can make them feel labelled from an early stage which sets up expectations on the part of both pupils and teachers, and can contribute to working patterns and modes of behaviour which become self-fulfilling prophecies. They also stated that early setting can have a negative effect particularly on boys, as it reinforced feelings of failure and led to the situation where boys were more likely to be in the lower sets. This in itself could exacerbate patterns of behaviour unconducive to learning, in that negative peer pressure might be brought to bear.

OFSTED (1993) noted, too, that in some instances teachers' lower expectations of pupils appeared to result, *'almost inadvertently'*, from the grouping arrangements. Imbalances in the numbers of boys and girls in lower attaining classes sometimes led

to differences in curricular experience which in turn made it less likely that boys would take English literature as an examination subject in Years 10 and 11. This ties in with Hallam's comment (1996) on the effects of pupil grouping on access to the curriculum. No evidence was found of the effects of using other criteria for grouping pupils academically, for example, using a range of ability indicators instead of simply exam success (using verbal skills as well as written, or using 'effort' as opposed to attainment).

OFSTED (1993) found that within most English classes boys and girls actually tended to work separately. In some cases it was noted that 'clear opportunities for profitable work in mixed groups were missed'. There seems to be the implication that working in mixed groups is beneficial for boys, although it is not stated why.

Another way of grouping pupils that was suggested by some of the commentators was forming single sex classes for literate subjects, although there was little evidence to be found on the effectiveness of such groupings. Findings already noted by Howe (1997) appeared to show that there were indeed '*gender-related differences after gender-differentiated classroom sessions*'. However, the results were not consistent.

### **4.2 Whole-School Factors**

Warrington and Younger (1996) reported that one possible reason for boys' underachievement was that what they considered important (sporting prowess, physical aggression and sexual conquest, according to the authors) did not match with what the school considered important (academic success). This theory was backed up by some research they had done that showed that for boys school represented a '*hostile authority combined with meaningless work demands*'. Pickering (1997) reinforced this by observing that, '*It is well documented that boys' attitudes are clearly anti-school by the end of primary school*'. Boys' attitudes and their desire not to stand out from other boys evidently creates a tension with the school's aims.

Pickering (1997) also reported that many teachers do not consider it important for pupils to be involved in school development planning. Yet, as he says, '*it seems hard to believe that pupils would not have some useful insights about what might help them improve their learning*'. It might also be hypothesised (and indeed has been by Pickering, 1997) that even if the insights of the pupils were not helpful in themselves, the very process of eliciting views from pupils might provide benefits to their self-esteem and make them take more responsibility for their learning, both aspects of the

pupils' learning experience that have been thought crucial to the raising achievement process.

Bray *et al.* (1997) noted that another school-level factor which may have a bearing on boys' underachievement was the increasing feminisation of the teaching force. This feminisation process was, however, only the case among the lower echelons of the teaching force. OFSTED and EOC (1996) quoted work which found that in mixed secondary schools men tended to predominate in governing bodies and in the senior levels of school staffing structures. Pickering (1997) quoted research from the Caribbean which suggested, however, that male teachers tended to *'reinforce attitudes which contradicted the academic ethos of the school and that some perpetuate stereotypical attitudes about gender learning identity'*.

The type of school that pupils attended might also be thought to affect their propensity to learn. OFSTED and EOC (1996) reported on the differences between single sex and mixed schools. They suggested that the quality of education in single sex schools reflected well-established differences in the performance and attitudes of girls and boys (i.e. that girls in girls' schools were more positive and performed better than pupils in other types of school). However, they noted that more recently, some boys' schools appeared to be achieving greater success than adjacent girls' schools with similar intakes. OFSTED and EOC (1996) decided that the research in this area was not conclusive, compounded as it was by numerous uncertainties. They suggested, however, that boys' schools were singularly well-placed to raise achievement among boys, as they could tailor their strategies directly to the needs of boys.

The improvements noted in the performance of boys in some boys' schools recently may account for the findings noted by OFSTED and EOC (1996), that both girls and boys in single-sex schools now achieve slightly better GCSE results than girls and boys in mixed schools, after account has been taken of available socio-economic data including free school meal entitlement. They observed, *'Research studies in the past have tended to indicate that it may be a function of other factors such as parental support, social class and the attainment of pupils on entry to the school that make girls' schools better'*.

Pickering (1997) noted evidence that suggested that a lack of resources is not necessarily a barrier to developing effective strategies for raising achievement.

## **5. PERSONAL AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT, INCLUDING THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE IN BOYS' ACHIEVEMENT**

Writers on the issue of boys' underachievement were often in agreement that boys' home circumstances and the effects of society at large had a crucial impact on their attitudes and propensity to learn.

Bray *et al.* (1997) ascribed importance to the influence of parents, noting recent findings which suggested that boys were more affected than girls by the negative aspects of having a mother who worked, as well as being adversely affected by the lack of a male role model which happens in many single parent families. The latter assertion, although widely found in the literature, did not seem to be reinforced by any evidence we found.

Powney (1996) presented evidence which showed that high social class, greater level of parental experience of education and qualifications, what she described as '*cultural capital in the home*', and membership of certain ethnic groups (unspecified), as well as gender, have all been found to be associated with higher attainment. Other work (also in Powney, 1996) showed that a variety of home factors made pupils more likely to underachieve: entitlement to free school meals, coming from a large family or a single parent family, having parents who were engaged in manual occupations or were unemployed, ethnic origin (although it was not specified which ethnic groups were at most disadvantage) and level of fluency in English. The research showed, for example, that only 11 per cent of pupils in the lowest verbal reasoning band were not suffering from one of these factors, while 92 per cent of those low scoring pupils were affected by all seven.

Along with parental influence and the effects of home circumstances, changes in the labour market were thought to contribute to boys' increasing disinclination to learn. Bray *et al.* (1997), among others, noted a decline in male employability in traditionally male sectors, and changes in the patterns of employment which favour females more than males. Pickering (1997) noted that these labour market changes were occurring at precisely the time when the effects of equal opportunities policies made their presence felt (in terms of women seeking jobs in a wider range of sectors), and so there has been something of a '*double whammy*' for the boys. (Pickering, (1997) also quoted a study which showed that working class men were less likely to move away from the traditional attitudes of their parents and grandparents, in the face of such societal and labour market changes.) It is not clear from the evidence

presented in these works, however, just how far boys are actually aware of these changes and to what extent such awareness might then affect their propensity to learn at school, although Wiltshire Education Support & Training (1996) among others, suggest that there is a possible link.

Peer group pressure was also thought to be a contributory factor in the underachievement of boys. Pickering (1997) found evidence that boys themselves were aware of peer group pressure, but argued that it was not a consistent entity, and seemed to be influenced by other factors, such as the perceived importance and quality of the work they were being given to do. This would indicate, as Pickering (1997) suggests, that peer group pressure in itself does not account for underachievement and that other factors are implicated.

Another societal factor thought to be contributing to boys' underachievement was their relative reluctance to read compared with girls. Bray *et al.* (1997) identified the increasing prevalence of videos and computers as being particularly erosive to boys' propensity to read. Bray *et al.* (1997) also noted that there were differences between teenaged girls and boys in their patterns of behaviour, suggesting that girls were more likely to have social lives that revolved around discussion and communication, while boys were still more likely at this age to have social lives that revolved around play. The increasing use of solitary computer games, more favoured by boys than girls can only exacerbate these differences. Patterns of behaviour outside school could either contribute to girls' greater ease with language, or be a reflection of it.

Whatever the case, 'large numbers of boys can be said to fall into the category of "underachieving readers", in the sense that they can decode print but cannot read in a sustained and flexible way, using a variety of contextual clues to extract meaning in the fullest possible sense' (Arnold, 1997). This has obvious relevance for increasing the involvement and achievement of boys in all aspects of the curriculum, and the review now draws together the key points which have emerged from the literature about strategies schools can use.

## 6. KEY MESSAGES FROM THE LITERATURE: STRATEGIES FOR RAISING BOYS' ACHIEVEMENT

We would single out three reports for special mention in this context, since each is concerned to help schools make progress, and would make a good basis for INSET sessions at whole-school, department and/or year group level.

- ♦ *The Gender Divide* (OFSTED and EOC, 1996) concludes each of its chapters with a section called 'What schools can do';
- ♦ Arnold (1997) has a ten-page chapter on 'Initiatives for raising boys' levels of achievement';
- ♦ *Can Boys Do Better?* (Bray *et al.*, 1997) adopts a **case-study approach** for most of its content.

Much of the literature we have interrogated has specifically research-based objectives, concerned to establish the nature and extent of boys' underachievement. Other literature is of a more overtly developmental kind, and offers guidance for schools and teachers – although without always providing hard evidence that 'it works'. The messages we have brought together below are therefore couched in the form of questions and suggestions rather than prescription. First of all, we summarise the key findings.

### 6.1 Key Findings

- ♦ The literature reviewed in this review has mostly indicated that gender differences in performance are not a biological given; they can be minimised and/or compensated for. It is hard to quantify the role played by genetic and social factors as distinct from educational factors in this, but most commentators agree that the education system and its schools can either inhibit or reinforce some of the social factors which are associated with boys' underachievement. Home circumstances, although also crucial in providing a bedrock of support for reading and education in general, are not the only or main influence on pupils' learning behaviour, and many commentators started from the view that schools have a crucial role to play in redressing the gender imbalance that the various factors had conspired to create.
- ♦ There is more variance to be found *within* groups of boys and girls (e.g. related to ethnic group and/or social class) than there is between boys and girls as a whole. It is suggested that the most successful strategies for raising achievement are those which are targeted on the individual, or at least on particular groups of underachievers of either sex. (As some of the documentation has highlighted, there is still cause for concern over girls' achievements post-16, and in particular the issue of their access to science and technology.)

- ♦ Even so, literacy and language have been emphasised as key in raising attainment, and boys have been shown to be behind girls in this crucial aspect of learning from a very early stage.
- ♦ It has been suggested that recent changes in curricular design and assessment practices tend to favour the traditional strengths of girls. However, the literature reviewed indicates that this is not unequivocally the case.
- ♦ The role of the teacher was particularly highlighted in influencing boys' propensity to read as well as their choice of reading. Teachers' attitudes more generally may diminish or increase the problem of underachievement. The role of the teacher is crucial in helping pupils develop a positive attitude to learning. The key question here is: do teachers' attitudes and practices reinforce or contradict the negative stereotyping predominant in some social contexts?
- ♦ School organisation is also an important factor, particularly the use of setting and banding; again, the question is: do school practices inadvertently label some pupils (particularly some groups of boys) as low achievers from an early stage?
- ♦ It may be that boys' schools have a particular role to play in devising teaching and learning methods tailored to the ways boys learn best and in preparing them for their changing role in society.

### 6.2 Strategies for Raising Boys' Achievement

The following points – presented in outline only – are those which we have found to be made with reasonable consistency in the literature; they are not necessarily based on objective evaluations of 'what works' in terms of being able to link particular strategies to improved academic outcomes, but rather on practitioners' views of what has been helpful to try out. It is noted by several commentators that most of these strategies would be relevant to raising the attainment of all pupils, i.e. not exclusively for boys.

#### *Establishing perceptions and giving pupils a voice*

- ♦ Too many strategies are put in place based on untested assumptions about what boys think, do and feel. Surveys and/or interviews with groups of boys can be extremely useful, both to establish how they view and experience school as a place for learning and to give them a sense that their views matter.
- ♦ Schools councils are an important way of ensuring, first, that pupils' views are voiced and secondly that pupils learn how to represent and be represented by others.



### ***Staff expectations***

- ♦ The school's values and attitudes should be evidenced in teachers' own behaviour; schools may need to explore how this can be encouraged in practice.
- ♦ High expectations should be made explicit at all times, combined with 'high order care' (Bray *et al.*, 1997); again, practical workshop sessions maybe necessary to help staff with the implementation.
- ♦ Senior staff need to consider more precisely the extent to which gender is a factor influencing pupils' progress; they need to help subject and pastoral staff identify, and respond to, patterns of strength and weakness in both sexes' confidence and achievements.
- ♦ Stereotypes need to be challenged rather than accepted, leading to 'the destruction of the "what can you expect from these kids?" mentality' (Bray *et al.*, 1997).
- ♦ A consistent, firm behaviour management policy needs to be established throughout the school.

### ***Curriculum***

- ♦ Schools should evaluate their curriculum provision in order to judge whether it meets the declared aims, and prepares all pupils equally well for adult and working life.
- ♦ Option choice patterns need to be monitored, to ensure that non-stereotyped choices are genuinely available (rather than some options being unofficially seen as boys' or girls' subjects).

### ***Support for learning***

The following items all emerge as being important:

- ♦ Focus on support for literacy across the curriculum.
- ♦ Highly structured lessons.
- ♦ More emphasis on teacher-led work.
- ♦ Clear objectives and detailed instructions.
- ♦ Consistent homework policy based on variety and quality.
- ♦ Clear and firm deadlines.
- ♦ Short-term targets.
- ♦ Explicit criteria for presentation.
- ♦ Assessment and monitoring systems which identify underachievement in key skills across the curriculum as well as in individual subjects.
- ♦ Regular personal interviews for the purposes of target-setting.

- ♦ Planned programme of differentiated personal and social development.
- ♦ Meaningful work experience placement programme aimed at informing pupils about changing roles in adult and working life.
- ♦ Early diagnosis and intervention (e.g. mentoring) for those at risk of dropping out/failing.
- ♦ Positive reinforcement: immediate and credible rewards for good work, increased effort and/or improved behaviour.
- ♦ Involvement of parents through formalised and intensive links.
- ♦ Opportunities for extra tuition/revision.

### *School organisation*

Two aspects of school grouping practice lend themselves to experimentation and development, namely:

- ♦ *Ability groupings.* Should pupils be grouped by ability, effort, potential, propensity to disrupt others? On what basis should their 'ability' be judged? Would these groupings tend to favour boys or girls?
- ♦ *Grouping by gender.* Should pupils be taught in single sex or mixed sex classes? In all subjects or just some? Would this arrangement tend to favour one sex over another? What are the cost/resourcing implications?

Liaison with primary schools is also an important area to work on, so that the best possible diagnostic information is available to assist with the identification and remediation of learning problems.

### *Boys' schools*

OFSTED and EOC (1996) note that 'boys' schools should pay particular attention to the general underachievement of boys in word-centred subjects, and to boys' perceptions of themselves, their future roles in life, and the skills they will need if they are to fulfil their potential.'

### **6.3 Suggestions from the Islington Project**

Finally, two areas emerged from the fieldwork carried out for Islington Council which seemed to have importance. These can be summarised as follows:

*The importance of pupils' views.* Whilst some schools treat seriously the need to take account of pupils' views, this is not true of all schools. The further step of incorporating pupils' views into school improvement strategies – via student councils, etc., – is easy to pay lip-service to, harder to do in reality, in such a way that young people feel genuinely empowered within the institutional setting. In some schools there can seem to be a sense of an embattled culture, with pupils largely ranged on one side and staff on the other. It is important to tackle this aspect of schooling at least as much as level of achievements and aspirations.

*The need to review curriculum, pedagogy and ethos from the perspective of the pupil.* The boys who spoke to the NFER research team had a good deal to say about their experiences which suggests that various issues – including the length of lessons and/or the school day, criteria for setting, effectiveness of lesson planning and structure, relevance of work activities, consistency, helpfulness and regularity of marking, provision and support for study skills, fairness and consistency of disciplinary action, conduciveness of the physical environment, and, interestingly, more support for teachers, whom they saw as often under enormous pressure – could all benefit from being reviewed.

A chart summarising boys' views of what makes a 'good teacher' is presented opposite.

From what was said to the NFER research team, it was possible to construct the characteristics of a 'good' teacher from the pupils' point of view:

### A 'good teacher':

- ◆ is welcoming and friendly
- ◆ talks to pupils as a person, another adult, not as a child
- ◆ has a sense of humour
- ◆ has the patience to explain when pupils do not understand, gives clear explanations
- ◆ gives the impression that he/she respects the pupils
- ◆ gives praise
- ◆ has high expectations
- ◆ knows when to be strict and when to be lenient
- ◆ shares a sense of fairness with the pupils
- ◆ is aware of what is going on in the classroom
- ◆ gives lessons which show progression and offer opportunities for achievement
- ◆ regularly marks homework
- ◆ is well organised
- ◆ listens to the pupils
- ◆ speaks politely to the pupils
- ◆ gives examples of how to do the work
- ◆ gives pupils a second chance to get things right
- ◆ gives criticism that is constructive, not destructive
- ◆ helps pupils when they need help
- ◆ can and does answer every question (and never says that it is not part of the work)
- ◆ checks that the pupils understand and never just repeats the question again
- ◆ visibly makes an effort to help, which makes pupils work out of gratitude and respect
- ◆ gives pupils the benefit of the doubt if they are late
- ◆ does things for pupils in his/her spare time

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**APPENDIX A**  
**Annotated Bibliography**



Appendix A presents a list of the articles, books, reports and conference papers which were looked at by the team. Under each reference is a brief summarising statement of the document, where possible noting the team's view of the rigour of the research.

The Appendix is split into two main sections. Section A.1 contains documents which deal specifically with gender issues in education, many of which have a bearing specifically on boys' underachievement. Section A.2 contains documents that relate to raising achievement or school improvement in general, with no or only fleeting reference to gender-related issues, but which might be of use in continuing to develop whole-school strategies for raising achievement. Within these two main sections, the following sub-headings further categorise the literature:

- ♦ Overviews of research and practice
- ♦ Case studies and particular examples
- ♦ Guidance documents and handbooks
- ♦ Literature on specific under-achieving groups.

**Section A.1 Documents relating specifically to gender issues in education**

♦ **Overviews of research and practice**

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

A summary report discussing boys' underachievement and related school improvement issues. Based on information from 32 LEAs, discusses work done on the reasons for underachievement among boys and the various initiatives undertaken by LEAs to address the issue. Has a useful reference list.

ARNOT, M., DAVID, M. and WEINER, G. (1996). *Educational Reform and Gender Equality in Schools* (Research Discussion Series No.17). Manchester: Equal Opportunities Commission.

A research report which considers educational reforms and gender equality in schools in England and Wales in the period 1984-1994, assessing whether the changes in education since the late 80s have strengthened or interrupted previous trends and /or generated new trends towards greater gender equality. Based on analysis of national performance data, national surveys of primary and secondary schools, and case studies in seven LEAs.

BISHOP, K.N., BULLOCK, K., MARTIN, S. and THOMPSON, J.J. (1997). 'Students' perceptions of coursework in the GCSE: the effects of gender and levels of attainment', *Educational Studies*, **23**, 2, 295-310.

An article reporting on an analysis of data on current and post-GCSE students' perceptions of coursework, in light of the argument that coursework favours girls. The article argues that the results suggest that this is a grossly over-simplified argument.

CARVEL, J. (1997). 'Girls outclassing boys', *Guardian*, 26 November, 1.

An article highlighting differences in girls' and boys' achievement exemplified in figures published by the government. It is argued that access to sitting exams at 16 for girls has increased since the introduction of GCSE, and their expectations have been raised.

DOWNES, P. (1995). 'Bridging the gender gap', *Managing Schools Today*, **4**, 4, 5-6.

An early article discussing possible causes of boys' underachievement and how some schools are tackling the issue.

ELWOOD, J. (1995). 'Undermining gender stereotypes: examination and coursework performance in the UK at 16', *Assessment in Education*, 2, 3, 283-303.

This article presents the main findings of a study which looked at the changing gender-related performance issues in GCSE examinations, examining and challenging the current assumptions about gender-related performance. Teacher and pupil expectations, entry policies and emphases within syllabuses seem to be more significant factors when accounting for the differences, which were found to be apparent as early on as in National Curriculum tests for seven year olds and were also in evidence at university degree stage. Based on a comprehensive, large-scale body of evidence.

HOWE, C. (1997). *Gender and Classroom Interaction: a Research Review* (Using Research Series 19). Edinburgh: SCRE.

A review of the evidence of gender differences in boys' and girls' experiences in the classroom. In particular, it explores issues relating to whole-class teaching, work in groups, group work round computers and oral assessment. Identifies gaps in the research and suggests careful monitoring to avoid reinforcing gender divisions.

KEMAL, S., LEONARD, D., PRINGLE, M. and SADEQUE, S. (1996). *Targeting Underachievement: Boys or Girls? Conference Papers, Workshops and Panel Discussions*. London: University of London, Institute of Education, Centre for Research and Education on Gender.

A collection of edited transcripts and speaker's notes from the one day conference *Targeting Underachievement: Boys or Girls?*. Reviews research that was current at the time and gives examples of good practice in this area.

MacERLEAN, N. (1997). 'Where have all the young men gone?' *The Observer*, 11 May.

Article highlighting the problems facing young men once they leave the school sector and enter the job market.

MacLEOD, D. (1997). 'What makes girls and boys see things differently?' (Education Guardian), *The Guardian*, 17 June, 3.

Article on the findings of a survey undertaken by Patricia Murphy of the Open University and Jannette Elwood from the Institute of Education on the choices in terms of behaviour and play that children make from the earliest ages (see Murphy and Elwood, 1997 below). No information on the basis on which the research was carried out.

MILLARD, E. (1997). *Differently Literate: Boys, Girls and the Schooling of Literacy*. London: Falmer Press.

A book which combines practical research with theoretical debate on why boys are underachieving relative to girls. It looks at gender differences in reading and writing, attitudes of pupils to their reading abilities, and the reading choices made by boys and girls at home. Based on work done by the author both qualitatively on a small scale and quantitatively on a large scale over the past ten years and drawing on national research in the area.

MORRIS, E. (1996). *Boys Will Be Boys? Closing the Gender Gap*. London: Labour Party.

A consultation paper which looks at the effects of boys underachievement both from the point of view of the issues it raises for classroom management, but also from the point of view of the impact this will have on the shape of society to come. Challenges the complacent view that 'boys will be boys' as actually damaging to boys' achievement. Draws on a range of research sources such as OFSTED, NCET, Kings' College and Keele University, as well as providing some case studies of individual school experiences.

MURPHY, P. and ELWOOD, J. (1996). 'Gendered experiences, choices and achievement - exploring the links.' Paper presented at the 23rd Annual IAEA Conference 'Equity Issues in Education and Assessment', Durban, South Africa, 9-13 June.

Discusses gender differences in interests and pastimes outside school, and what lies behind the choices boys and girls make. The effects these choices have on achievement are also examined. In addressing this, the sources and nature of gender differences are examined and how they are related to learning both inside and outside school. Concludes by looking at the way achievement is defined in subjects, how these definitions shift between the phases of education and the consequences of this on pupil and teacher perceptions.

OFFICE FOR STANDARDS IN EDUCATION (1993). *Boys and English: 1988-1991* (Report No.2/93). London: DFE.

Reports on inspections of boys' work in English in the secondary sector undertaken in the course of normal inspection activities, with the aim of identifying teaching approaches which improved boys' attitudes towards English and their performance in the subject. Also looked at identifying features in the organisation and teaching of English which contributed to unhelpful differentiation between boys and establishing to what extent schools sought to reduce this differentiation. Based on visits to 51 secondary or middle schools and one sixth form college, and all school types were represented. Groups of boys were interviewed about their likes and dislikes in relation

to English. Impressions from teachers were also considered. Undertaken some years ago, but thorough and informative.

OFFICE FOR STANDARDS IN EDUCATION and EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMISSION (1996). *The Gender Divide: Performance Differences between Boys and Girls at School*. London: HMSO.

A joint discussion paper based on inspections and EOC casework. The paper contributes to the ongoing debate on the effects of gender on educational achievement, and examines some of the issues surrounding underachievement by boys and raises the question as to whether progress still needs to be made with girls. Practical suggestions on what schools can do to eliminate discrimination are included.

ORBACH, S. and SCHWARTZ, J. (1997). 'Playing the gender game' (The Week), *The Guardian*, 14 June, 13.

An article discussing the results from a study based on parents' perceptions of their children's propensity to behave in certain, possibly gender-related ways. Are these tendencies to behave in certain ways as a result of genetics or socialisation? No conclusive answers are provided.

POWNEY, J. (1996). *Gender and Attainment: a Review*. Edinburgh: SCRE.

A review document which considers the performance of boys and girls in public examinations in Scotland. Addresses the issue of formal and actual access to educational resources and opportunities which promote educational achievement. Identifies and thoroughly explores, through a discussion of existing research, areas of continuing concern in relation to gender and attainment, which are found to include home circumstances, teaching approaches, assessment practices and teacher and pupil attitudes and perceptions. A very thorough and comprehensive document.

SCHOOL CURRICULUM AND ASSESSMENT AUTHORITY (1996). *Boys and English*. London: SCAA.

A collection of articles and information to help teachers start to think about boys' achievement in English in their schools and some ideas for practical approaches in the classroom. Based on groups of teachers working together looking at the National Curriculum Orders for English in relation to issues of equality of access and entitlement. The pack does not attempt to propose definitive solutions. Instead, it offers some starting points for discussion and action. Includes a short bibliography.



SHORT, J. (1997). 'Help at hand for underachieving boys', *Managing Schools Today*, **6**, 9, 9-10.

An article reporting on some of the methods that have been adopted over the past few years to counter boys' relative underachievement. For example, single sex groupings, a positive school ethos, elements of classroom practice. No information as to the basis for the evidence which is brought in to support the theories.

STOBART, G., ELWOOD, J. and QUINLAN, M. (1992). 'Gender bias in examinations: how equal are the opportunities?' *British Educational Research Journal*, **18**, 3, 261-76.

An article exploring the issue of whether examination boards should work towards creating equal outcomes for boys and girls given that the assessment techniques used in examinations may differentially affect girls' and boys' performances, as evidenced by objective tests and coursework. However, the authors argue that type of assessment is only one factor and that the different experiences and expectations of both pupils and teachers also play significant parts. Based on interrogation of performance data and drawing on a range of research studies. Written some time ago, but does highlight what continues to be an important debate.

STOBART, G., WHITE, J. and MASON, K. (1992). *Differential Performance in Examinations at 16+: English and Mathematics. Final Report*. London: SEAC.

Based on an investigation of differences in the performance of girls and boys in GCSE English and mathematics, this report claims to have broken new ground both in the range of issues it has covered and the techniques it has used to evaluate gender differences in performance. Deals with the issue of fairness of examinations. Based on the application of techniques developed by the Assessment Performance Unit (APU) to interrogate data on the GCSE performance of over four thousand pupils, complemented by analyses of national statistics, work with Chief Examiners, questionnaire surveys of schools and case studies in twelve schools. No practical guidance, but some recommendations are made to help raise boys and girls aspirations at examinations.

THOMAS, S., SAMMONS, P., MORTIMORE, P. and SMEES, R. (1997). 'Differential secondary school effectiveness: comparing the performance of different pupil groups', *British Educational Research Journal*, **23**, 4, 451-69.

Reports on the results of an Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) funded study which focuses on the differential academic achievement of different groups of pupils. Reports on the size and extent of school effects over three years (1990-1992) for different groups of pupils (classified by gender, eligibility for free school meals, ethnic group and prior attainment). A 'value-added' approach is taken, using sophisticated statistical techniques. Prior attainment and ethnicity were identified as the strongest factors affecting achievement, stronger than gender. A discussion of the

implications of the findings on the wider debate about publishing examination results is also included.

WARRINGTON, M. and YOUNGER, M. (1996). 'Gender and achievement: the debate at GCSE', *Education Review*, **10**, 1, 21-7.

An article based on research undertaken by the authors, consisting of interviews with groups of students and staff and questionnaires to parents (although there is no information on the representativeness or size or range of any of these samples). The research looked at attitudes of pupils towards schoolwork, approaches to underachievement, which included: student mentoring and support, dynamics of the classroom, teacher attitude and student image, student attitude and student image, setting and banding, goals and aspirations, homework and coursework. Findings included student perceptions that teachers' actions in the classroom varied according to the sex of the pupil(s) involved, and differing attitudes towards schoolwork between boys and girls.

WRAGG, T. (1997). 'Oh boy!' (TES2), *Times Educ. Suppl.*, **4220**, 16 May, 4-5.

A transcript of a lecture given by Professor Ted Wragg on the challenge presented by boys' underachievement to educators. Highlights the fact that underachievement among boys can be identified as early on as Year 2, and looks at the possible factors that could account for this. Notes a number of research studies as well as one he has been involved in, but there is no information given as to the rigour of any of these studies.

YATES, L. (1997). 'Gender equity and the boys debate: what sort of challenge is it?' *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, **18**, 3, 337-47.

An article which assesses recent public and policy discussions about gender equity in Australia, where possible drawing parallels with the situation in the United Kingdom.

### ♦ Case studies and particular examples

BAILEY, S. M. (1996). 'Shortchanging girls and boys', *Educational Leadership*, **53**, 8, 75-9.

A discussion document exploring gender differences in education provision and outcomes in the United States, looking at barriers to equality in education, lessons to be learned from all-girls' schools, and three practical suggestions as to how to eliminate the barriers.

BARKER, B. (1997). 'Girls' world or anxious times: what's really happening at school in the gender war?' *Educational Review*, **49**, 3, 221-7.

An article reporting on the results of a research study in one school. Based on staff interviews, a student questionnaire and lesson observations. The study identified a male agenda ill-adapted to public examinations, as well as some ideas to help boys succeed academically. Discussion is also included of the literature on girls' disadvantage and worries about an unskilled male underclass. It is argued that perceptions of gender-related behaviour may be shaped by hidden social and political anxieties.

LAWRENCE, M., DEMPSEY, S., GODDARD, S. and CLARKE, P. (1997). 'Committed to the best results', *Times Educ. Suppl.*, **4228**, 11 July, 12.

An article detailing strategies employed by one secondary school in closing a twenty per cent gap in boys' and girls' achievement in terms of five A\*-Cs at GCSE within the space of a year.

THOMAS, K. (1997). 'In a class of their own', *New Statesman*, 5 September, 26-7.

An article highlighting the work done in one Birmingham school which is experimenting with single sex classes as a way of raising achievement among boys. Positive reactions from staff, parents and both girls and boys, although there is no formal evaluation strategy in place. Some anxiety is voiced that the 'novelty factor' of single sex classes may wear off and boys will be no better off.

WARREN, S. (1997). 'Who do those boys think they are? An investigation into the construction of masculinities in a primary classroom', *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, **1**, 2, 207-22.

A research paper which uses theoretical approaches based on understandings of identity formation to analyse data collected during a research study in one primary school. It argues that male identities are neither normative nor biologically or socially reproduced, but are fractured and shifting.

YOUNGER, M. and WARRINGTON, M. (1996). 'Differential achievement of girls and boys at GCSE: some observations from the perspective of one school', *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, **17**, 3, 299-313.

An article focusing on the differential achievements of girls and boys at GCSE over the years 1991-1994 within the context of one secondary school. Looks at some of the factors that may contribute to these differential achievements, such as boys' attitudes, teacher and pupil interaction and learning preferences. Based on an analysis of questionnaires to all students in Years 10 and 11, interviews with groups of students from these year groups, 'a number' of teachers and Year 10 parents. The article

identifies a number of issues which schools might want to consider in addressing this issue, such as looking closely at pupils' motivations and how their aspirations might be raised, the ways in which the school contributes to and can influence the self-image which the pupils develop, as well as a renewed focus on the dynamics of the classroom and differentiation.

### ♦ Guidance documents and handbooks

BRAY, R., GARDNER, C. and PARSONS, N. (1997). *Can Boys Do Better?* Leicester: Secondary Heads Association.

A booklet which summarises work done by the Secondary Heads Association (SHA) Council to collect data and collate examples of research and strategies employed by schools to correct gender imbalances in achievement. Schools which had no imbalances in achievement were also discussed. A summary of what the research suggests causes boys' underachievement is also included. No evaluation of their effectiveness is attempted by the authors.

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

A handbook for teachers which explores the causes of boys' underachievement and suggests tried and tested strategies to raise standards of achievement. It helps teachers to devise solutions based on research with individual boys, and stresses the importance of not relying too heavily on commonly-held broad generalisations. Provides practical suggestions on action research, 'real' solutions and case studies to support the planning and implementation of strategies to raise achievement, and stimulus materials and research findings to inform a wide range of school-based activity. A very good resource.

WILTSHIRE EDUCATION SUPPORT & TRAINING (1996). *Boys & English: Discussion Documents, INSET Materials and an Account of Development Work in Three Wiltshire Schools*. Trowbridge: WEST.

A resource pack for teachers which consists of discussion documents, INSET materials and an account of development work in three Wiltshire schools, focusing on the issue of boys and their performance in English. The pack documents the work done in the three schools, which examined the nature and pattern of boys' underachievement in English, and identified and then trialed specific strategies to improve their performance.

### **♦ Literature on specific underachieving groups**

SEWELL, T. (1997). *Black Masculinities and Schooling: How Black Boys Survive Modern Schooling*. Stoke on Trent: Trentham Books.

An ethnographic study of one inner-city boys' comprehensive school, examining the attitudes and experiences of both pupils and teachers. Concludes that the rules, values and teacher interactions at the school, along with the influences of the music/fashion culture outside the school, have led some boys to reappropriate racist and sexist perceptions of black masculinity. Limited in scope, and not related specifically to boys' underachievement, although does highlight some possible factors in underachievement among Afro-Caribbean boys.

WRENCH, J. and HASSAN, E. (1996). *Ambition and Marginalisation: a Qualitative Study of Underachieving Young Men of Afro-Caribbean Origin* (DfEE Research Studies 31). London: The Stationery Office.

Research report on work undertaken to explore the factors giving rise to the situation of the prevalence of young Afro-Caribbean men among the unemployed and the fact that they tend to perform less well in education compared with Afro-Caribbean girls and pupils from either sex from other ethnic groups. Detailed qualitative information was gathered from 50 Afro-Caribbean men within the labour market who reflected the above situation. Scope is limited by the small sample, but presents useful pointers as to the factors contributing to this situation.

## Section A.2 Documents on raising achievement generally

### ♦ Overviews of research and practice

GIPPS, C. (1995). 'What do we mean by equity in relation to assessment?' *Assessment in Education*, 2, 3, 271-81.

An article reviewing the concept of equity in relation to assessment by considering issues of equality of outcome and equal access, with particular reference to performance assessment. Discusses approaches to developing assessment practices that ensure equal access and outcomes for all. Draws on a range of research done in the US, Australia and the UK in recent years.

HALLAM, S. (1996). *Grouping Pupils by Ability: Selection, Streaming, Banding and Setting* (Viewpoint No.4). London: University of London, Institute of Education.

A discussion paper which looks at the various arguments for and against grouping pupils by ability, drawing on evidence from research both nationally and internationally, from the point of view of its effects on academic achievement, self esteem and attitudes towards school. No specific discussion of gender differences, however.

KEYS, W. and FERNANDES, C. (1993). *What Do Students Think About School? Research into the Factors Associated with Positive and Negative Attitudes Towards School and Education*. Slough: NFER.

A report of the findings of a study on pupil attitudes to school. Based on a survey of about 1,000 students in both Year 7 and Year 9 in 43 schools in England and Wales, with a small questionnaire completed by 83 schools. Also includes a review of the literature on motivation towards school and learning. Nothing on gender specifically.

KEYS, W., HARRIS, S. and FERNANDES, C. (1995). *Attitudes to School of Top Primary and First-year Secondary Pupils*. Slough: NFER.

A research report building on earlier research by NFER (see reference above), which looked at the attitudes towards school of Year 6 and Year 7 in an attempt to ascertain at what stage negative attitudes towards school appeared. Over 1,000 pupils in each year group from a random sample of 79 schools formed the basis of the research. A follow-up study of the Year 6 group was planned for their first year in secondary school. Again, nothing specifically on gender.

LePORE, P.C. and WARREN, J.R. (1997). 'A comparison of single-sex and coeducational Catholic secondary schooling: evidence from the National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988', *American Educational Research Journal*, **34**, 3, 485-511.

An article discussing the effect of school-type within the catholic school sector in the United States on pupil outcomes. Based on nation-wide longitudinal data originally collected for another purpose, and including contextual information from parents, school administrators and teachers. Nothing specifically on gender. Based on data nearly ten years old.

RUDDUCK, J., CHAPLAIN, R. and WALLACE, G. (Eds) (1996). *School Improvement: What Can Pupils Tell Us?* (Quality in Secondary Schools and Colleges Series). London: David Fulton.

Book reporting on research done over 1991-1995 with 80 pupils, supplemented by data from other, smaller studies, examining pupils' thoughts and anxieties about their experiences in school. The authors hope that the book 'will help teachers gain an insight into pupils' perceptions of schooling and recognise their capacity for constructive analysis of their school experience'. Not specifically gender-related.

### **♦ Case studies and particular examples**

TIMES EDUCATIONAL SUPPLEMENT (1995). 'Improving schools' (School Management Update), *Times Educ. Suppl.*, **4245**, 14 November, 9-12.

A series of articles which look at different aspects of school improvement, including a number of case studies looking at the strategies employed by individual schools in raising achievement, a discussion of the role of the headteacher in an improving school, interviews with members of staff in schools where the GCSE scores have improved, and advocating strategies for improvement from these, and an article on the benefits of applying value-added approaches to looking at examination results.

### **♦ Guidance documents and handbooks**

GREAT BRITAIN. DEPARTMENT FOR EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT (1997). *Results of the 1997 National Curriculum Assessments of 14 Year Olds in England: a Summary for Heads and Governors*. London: DfEE.

Booklet containing information about end of Key Stage 3 results, comparing them with the previous year's results, looking at both teacher assessments and tests, in English, Maths and Science. Shows that girls did considerably better than boys in English, and slightly better in mathematics, with little difference in science.

HOPKINS, D. and HARRIS, A. (1997). 'Improving the quality of education for all', *Support for Learning*, **12**, 4, 147-51.

A discussion paper on improving quality in education generally, based on a school improvement and development project undertaken by the authors over the past six years with 40 schools over England. Highlights the importance of schools using the impetus of external reform to 'improve' or 'develop' themselves. Nothing on gender specifically.

MacBEATH, J., BOYD, B., RAND, J. and BELL, S. (1996). *Schools Speak for Themselves: Towards a Framework for Self-evaluation*. Glasgow: University of Strathclyde, Quality in Education Centre.

Main research report from a study involving ten Scottish schools, looking at school self-evaluation, developing a user-friendly but rigorous framework for school self-evaluation, and identifying the role of various players in this process. Practical examples of how to involve pupils in giving their views of the effectiveness of their learning experiences.

RIMM, S.B. (1997). 'An underachievement epidemic', *Educational Leadership*, **54**, 7, 18-22.

An article looking at ways in which teachers and parents in the United States can succeed in their efforts to ensure the success of their children. Defines underachievement, looks at its causes, identifies 'types' of pupils who underachieve, and ways to reverse underachievement. No information about the basis on which these recommendations are made. Nothing specifically on gender.

SAUNDERS, L. and STRADLING, B. with GALLACHER, S. (1996). *Raising Attainment in Secondary Schools: a Handbook for School Self-evaluation*. Slough: NFER.

Handbook which guides schools through various approaches to evaluating their strategies for raising achievement. Also gives pointers to the aspects of school provision and ethos that can usefully be targeted to raise achievement, for example; managing pupil motivation, reviewing the effectiveness of teaching and learning styles, providing feedback to pupils, and instituting 'early warning systems' for picking up problems that militate against achievement.



### ♦ Literature on specific underachieving groups

BARBER, M. and DANN, R. (Eds) (1996). *Raising Educational Standards in the Inner Cities: Practical Initiatives in Action* (School Development Series). London: Cassell.

Nothing specifically on gender differentials, but investigates strategies for combating the particular problems associated with inner city education. Emphasises the classroom level as being the key in-school factor in raising achievement.

MORTIMORE, P. and WHITTY, G. (1997). *Can School Improvement Overcome the Effects of Disadvantage?* London: University of London, Institute of Education.

A discussion paper looking at the place of social factors in school effectiveness. The paper discusses what disadvantage can mean for pupils, some of the strategies that have been adopted to combat it and evaluates the efficiency of these. The authors argue that previous efforts to compensate for disadvantage have been too limited in scope. Nothing specifically on gender.

RASEKOALA, E. (1997). 'Ethnic minorities and achievement: the fog clears. Part 1 (pre-16 compulsory education)', *Multicultural Teaching*, **15**, 2, 23-9.

A report of some research undertaken by the author on black underachievement, looking beyond the aggregated research and focusing on the issue of performance in the core subjects. On entry to formal education, Afro-Caribbean children are on a par with other ethnic groups, but as they progress through the system they fall further and further behind, particularly in numerate subjects. Discusses issues related to bullying, exclusion and behaviour. Based on assessment and other information provided by three LEAs in England. Nothing specifically on gender.

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## boys' achievement, progress, motivation and participation: issues raised by the recent literature

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Boys' educational achievements – or the lack of them – is of topical concern to government policy-makers and teachers alike. Every local education authority which responded to a request from the EMIE service for information on the topic reported that boys' standards of achievement fell below those of girls.

This report – which was originally commissioned by the Education Department of Islington Borough Council – reviews the recent literature on the topic. Key points to emerge include:

- Distinguishing the various **contributory factors** in boys' underachievement is not easy. Many disparate factors – genetic, social, attitudinal and contextual – have been claimed to contribute to the problem. But there is no firm evidence that the differences between boys' and girls' performance in English, for example, reflect differences in innate linguistic ability. Some work shows that differences between boys and girls on such measures may actually be smaller than differences *within* groups of boys and groups of girls. And such differences may be attributable to other factors such as social class and ethnicity.
  - So far as **schools' contribution** to raising boys' achievement is concerned:
    - Literacy and language have been emphasised as key in raising attainment.
    - The role of the teacher is particularly highlighted in influencing boys' propensity to read as well as their choice of reading. Teachers' attitudes more generally may diminish or increase the problem of underachievement. The role of the teacher is crucial in helping pupils develop a positive attitude to learning.
  - The report also summarises **strategies for raising boys' achievement**.
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