



Boys – Talk to Them!

Currently girls out-perform boys in all thirteen categories of the Foundation Stage profile, in Maths and English at Key Stage One in English (particularly writing), at Key Stage Two, in English at Key Stage Three and in every subject at GCSE. Looking for the root cause of many boys' underachievement and subsequently the simple answer, or "Quick Fix" has become something of a preoccupation over the past few years. It is my belief that neither of these particular tasks can ever bear fruit. By **Gary Wilson**

With barriers to boys' learning ranging from a lack of independence prior to starting school, to the perception of many boys that reading is a female province, not forgetting the fact that most boys are significantly less developed linguistically, boys in the early years of schooling already face several major barriers. There are many messages here for parents that need to be expressed to them very clearly in order that, for example, we no longer see boys standing arms akimbo in the cloakroom at the end of their first few days in school, waiting to have their coats put on!

Early language development often manifests itself, as one reception teacher told me, "If he wants something from another pupil and he can't talk he can't negotiate, if he can't negotiate then he can't get what he wants. If he can't get what he wants then he grabs it." The fact that girls, we are told, have superior listening skills even in the womb, and the fact that they use between ten and thirty times as much language in their play, doesn't just mean that they beat boys hands down

from the foundation stage to English A level, it impacts in many other ways too.

A significant barrier to many boys' learning, that begins at quite an early age and often never leaves them, is the perception that most writing that they are expected to do is largely irrelevant and unimportant. How can this possibly be, you may protest? Well, the NUT study in recent years that highlighted the fact that up to 60% of writing done in schools is copied from boards or from books could be a contributory factor. As indeed might the now well understood need for boys in particular to know the big picture. Why are we writing this? What is the purpose and what is the audience? As with virtually every other classroom based activity clear learning outcomes for boys are absolutely vital. As a colleague of mine (Wendy Bradford, co-author of *Getting it Right for Boys and Girls*) says "Boys are the best barometers of good teaching." Very often, if a boy doesn't see the sense and purpose in doing something then he blooming well won't engage with it at all. Moreover, if he doesn't have

the opportunity to talk through and share ideas before he puts pen to paper, he will find the task extremely difficult.

Gender bias in everything from resources to teacher expectations has the potential to present further barriers to boys learning. None more so than the gender bias evident in the ways in which we talk to boys and talk to girls. We need to be ever mindful of the frequency, the nature and the quality of our interactions with boys and our interactions with girls in the classroom.

A potential mismatch of teaching and learning styles to boys' preferred ways of working continues to be a barrier for many boys. Of vital importance in this area is engaging boys in dialogue about how they learn, as well as ensuring that a balanced approach is incorporated in the classroom. It is not just about simply stereotypically labelling all boys as kinaesthetic learners and attempting to teach them all that way.

The process of reflection is a weakness in many boys, presenting them with perhaps one of the biggest barriers of all. The inability of many boys to, for example, write evaluations, effectively stems from this weakness.

Opportunities for reflection need to be created throughout any lesson. "Multiplenaries", as I choose to call them, are important for all learners, but absolutely vital for boys.

Low self-esteem is clearly a very significant barrier to many boys' achievement in school. If we were to think of the perfect time to demotivate boys, when would that be? Some might say in the early years of education when many get their first unwelcome and never forgotten taste of failure, being taught to read and write, when they are far less ready than the girls in their class. Others might say Year 7 or 8 might be a good time... bang them in sets for at least half the week! Create sink groups of boys then pretend to them that they have a real chance of moving upwards through a "flexible" system. They might believe in the system... and themselves, for a while, but not for long. Addressing issues of self-esteem are vitally important and yet not a regular feature of many schools' daily activities.

Peer pressure, or the anti-swot culture, is clearly a major barrier to many boys' achievement. Those lucky enough to avoid it tend to be good academically, but also good at sport. This gives them a licence to work hard as they can also be 'one of the lads'. A cracking sense of humour can also help. I find manifestations of this culture, endemic in most of our high schools for many years, now appearing as early as Year 2 in schools. To me one of the most significant



elements of peer pressure for boys is the impact it has on the more affective domains of the curriculum, namely expressive, creative and performing arts. It takes a lot of courage for a boy to turn up for the first day at high school carrying a violin case. A major concern indeed, as it is precisely these areas of the curriculum that help us to create a more caring masculinity. Turning out decent young men really ought to be at least half of the focus of the work we do with or for boys. Finding ways of dealing with peer pressure, through for example, peer befriending, peer mediation, and through policy and practice, has to be a top priority in schools.

There are many barriers to boys' learning (I'm currently saying 31, but I'm still working on it!) and an ever-increasing multitude of strategies that we can use to address them. I firmly believe that a close examination of a school's own circumstances is the only way to progress through this maze and that the main starting point has to be with the boys themselves. They do know all the issues around their poor levels of achievement. Talk to them first. I also believe that one of the most important strategies is to let them know you're "on their case", talking to them provides this added bonus.

In Issue 10 of **TEX**, I will be writing more about the whole school development approach to raising boys' achievement. **TEX**

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