Raising Boys' Achievement
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with

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The 'Raising Boys' Achievement Project' (RBA) was a four-year project (2000-2004) which focused on issues associated with the apparent differential academic achievement of boys and girls at key stage 2 and key stage 4 in schools in England. This report highlights some of the dilemmas which are implicit within the debate, explores different interpretations and perspectives about boys' 'under-achievement', and challenges some common misconceptions.

Working with over fifty primary, secondary and special schools in England over four years, we have endeavoured to identify strategies which appear to have the potential to make a difference to boys' (and girls') learning, motivation and engagement with their schooling, and consequently to raise levels of academic achievement. These strategies have been analysed in different school settings through time, in an attempt to identify their essential characteristics, so that they might be transferred to other schools in similar socio-economic contexts.

The process of transfer of these intervention strategies has involved schools working together in learning triads (each triad consisting of one Originator School and two Partner Schools), with a total of seventeen triads studied, to introduce, refine and consolidate these strategies. The project team has worked with triads throughout this process, supporting, exploring and analysing the process of innovation transfer. In so doing, we have aimed to clarify further the essential characteristics of each intervention strategy, and to identify essential pre-conditions which appear to need to be in place if the potential of the strategy is to be maximised.

'Boys' 'Under-Achievement' ?

The debate, about whether, and to what extent, boys under-achieve academically in English schools has been high profile since the early 1990s, and it is clear from national data that there is legitimate concern over the achievement levels of *some* boys throughout their schooling. Rather more boys than girls fail to achieve level 4 in English national tests at the end of key stage 2; rather more boys than girls fail to achieve the 5A*-C benchmark grades in GCSE examinations taken at 16+. These patterns of academic achievement are evident in most schools in England.

It is crucial, though, to situate the debate carefully:

- Achievement levels in primary and secondary schools, as measured by national tests at the end of each key stage, are rising through time. In some schools and LEAs, this has widened the 'gender gap', at least in the short term, as girls' performances have 'taken off' at a more dramatic level than those of boys. Overall, however, evidence suggests that the gap has stabilised, against a background of a rising trajectory of achievement for both girls *and* boys.

- There is diversity of gender constructions which indicate that generalisations about 'boys' and 'girls' conceal as much as they reveal. Many boys continue to achieve extremely well at school, both academically and in community, extra-curricular and sporting fields; equally, there are some girls whose needs are not recognised within schools and who under-achieve. The core of the issue in many schools revolves

around a minority of pupils, rather than a majority; the 'problem' needs to be carefully contextualised, both in scale and in response.

- Although issues of image and status are crucial in impacting upon boys' notions of masculinity, as they search for acceptability and respectability amongst their peers, there *are* boys who devise coping strategies that enable them to achieve academically. These boys preserve their positions and their masculinity within the legitimised local cultures whilst at the same time meeting their own high targets.

Nevertheless, the continuing gender gap in key stage 2 English results, particularly in writing, where the performance ratio suggests that less than 80% of boys perform at the same level as girls, suggests that a stubborn problem remains to be tackled. The situation is mirrored at key stage 4, where the improved performances of girls in science and mathematics have not been matched by a comparable improvement of boys' performances in subjects such as Modern Languages, English and the Humanities.

Intervention Strategies

Initial research with Originator schools (schools which appeared to have strategies in place which were improving the academic achievement of boys without impacting negatively on girls' performances) suggested that strategies could be grouped into four different areas:

- Pedagogic: classroom-based approaches centred on teaching and learning
- Individual: essentially a focus on target-setting and mentoring
- Organisational: ways of organising learning at the whole school level
- Socio-cultural: approaches which attempt to create an environment for learning where key boys and girls feel able to work with, rather than against the aims and aspirations of the school.

Although this classification was a useful device for analysis and identification of the essence of the different strategies, it is clear that these strategies are not self-contained and independent. As our work in special schools suggested, there must be an integration of different approaches if their impact is to be maximised. It is equally clear, however, that socio-cultural approaches are of central importance if schools are to be successful in challenging images of laddish masculinity and ladettish femininity, and getting peer leaders 'on side' and engaged with their schooling.

Pedagogic approaches

A main pedagogic approach followed by the RBA project in primary schools focused on **literacy**, essentially because many boys do less well than girls in reading and particularly in writing. In identifying pedagogy which helps to support pupils' reading and writing, however, it became self-evident that these strategies are most effective within a holistic approach, which assimilates opportunities for reading, writing, speaking and listening into an integrated whole.

Thus the aim in one triad became concentrated not so much on a concern about *teaching reading,* but on a need to encourage boys to become *successful and satisfied readers.* This involved having a wide range of texts available to stimulate and sustain pupils' interest and to build confidence through paired reading schemes. Crucially, however, this objective

was only achieved when teachers were prepared to take the pedagogic decision to give pupils space to talk and reflect about their reading, to share ideas about the text and what was enjoyable in it. When this happened and teachers had the confidence to develop an integrated approach to literacy, the standards of reading of many boys improved markedly, sometimes by twice that expected within national test parameters.

In two other primary triads, developing children's writing was given more prominence. In pedagogic terms, more emphasis was placed upon strategies such as paired and group talk, oral preparation for narrative, hot seating and drama and role play. These classroom approaches encouraged pupils to discuss their story lines more explicitly with each other in collaborative contexts, to explore aspects of character, plot, setting and vocabulary, and to write in role, freed from their immediate surroundings. In both these triads, subsequent analysis of boys' writing showed marked improvements in the pace and structure of their story writing, in their character depiction, in their creation of atmosphere within stories and in their use of dialogue as a narrative device. Significantly, too, the performance of many of these boys in National Curriculum tests showed marked improvements, over and above those expected in value-added terms.

We would suggest that gains can be made in primary literacy, particularly in the levels achieved by apparently under-achieving boys, when:

- a variety of interactive classroom activities are adopted, with a 'fitness for purpose', so that both short, specific focused activities and more sustained, ongoing activities are used, as and when appropriate
- acknowledgement is given to the central importance of talk, to speaking and listening as a means of supporting writing.
- the advantages to be gained through companionable writing with response partners and through group work are recognised
- teachers are prepared to risk-take to bring more creativity and variety to literacy
- more integrated use is made of ICT so that quality presentation can be more easily achieved, and drafts amended with more ease.

The project has also focused, in one primary and two secondary triads, on exploring work related to *preferred learning styles*, and on associated teaching strategies such as mind mapping, physical and practical activities, role play and creative design activities. A number of caveats about such approaches have emerged from our research. We have found little evidence, for example, to support the notion that the dominant learning style of boys differs from those of girls, and that more boys (than girls) favour kinaesthetic learning. Equally, it is often difficult to analyse classroom activities in terms of specific learning styles because many pedagogic activities engage different modalities.

Nonetheless, this emphasis on teaching and learning styles can be effective when:

- such an approach is implemented carefully and holistically
- the emphasis is placed on developing an understanding, with teachers *and* students, of how learning takes place, through keynote presentations to teachers *and* students about different modes and styles of learning
- students understand that, as individuals, they have different learning styles, some of which (e.g. visual, auditory or kinaesthetic) may be more prominent than others,

but that to be effective learners, they must be able to access different learning styles at different times

- teachers are able to plan lessons which encompass different learning styles, and thus become more creative in their teaching, planning and assessing.

Work on preferred learning styles is misconceived if it simply tries to identify and teach to students' dominances within their learning profiles; such an approach misses opportunities and narrows learning. Rather, it is important to locate any discussion of teaching-learning styles within an ongoing staff development agenda, which addresses explicitly issues of classroom pedagogy, because work on preferred learning styles must be translated into teaching style. In this project, most impact on students' achievement took place when teachers explicitly discussed teaching and learning with students, and made them aware, in a collaborative context, of the ways in which they were trying explicitly to change their teaching styles.

Individual approaches

Individual approaches, based on a coherent and integrated approach to target-setting and mentoring, have been very important in some schools in transforming and sustaining improvements in achievement. There are challenges in implementing such an approach, particularly in the need to avoid focusing scarce resources on a minority of students, usually boys, who hover around the 5 A*-C grade benchmark at GCSE, or around level 4 in key stage 2 English. Equally, some mentoring schemes fail because they become oppressive and demotivating for students, or because mentors do not prioritise the time to give credibility to the process.

Our research with two secondary triads suggests that target-setting and mentoring can be successful when there is mutual understanding and shared commitment to all aspects of the process within a school staff, and a common belief and conviction in the system which is held by teachers and students. There are crucial pre-conditions, we suggest, if students' achievements are to be changed in this way:

- Target-setting needs to be both realistic and challenging, not simply based on historic data within the school, but based upon higher expectations and detailed analysis of contextualized value-added data at the individual level.
- Teachers within subjects departments need time and support on a regular *and* frequent basis, to set targets for individuals within their classes, and to engage in professional dialogue about learning at the level of the individual child.
- Mentoring needs to be developed within an ethos which accepts that mentors will mediate and negotiate with subject teachers on behalf of 'their' student, and subsequently challenge 'their' student to achieve more.
- The mentor needs to be credible to individuals, collaborative and supportive on the one hand, offering strategies, advice and encouragement, but crucially, also assertive and demanding on the other, so that disengaged students have the opportunity to protect their own image and use their mentor's pressure to excuse their own involvement in academic work.

When these pre-conditions are in place, our experiences during the course of this project confirm that target-setting and mentoring have the potential to change the aspirations and

engagement of many students, particularly those previously disenchanted and disengaged. Many boys, in particular, have achieved far better than predicted on the basis of previous performances, because they have developed a sense of self-belief, and come to realise that they can reconcile academic work with the self-image which they wish to promote.

Whole school organisational approaches

Within the area of whole school approaches, we have focused on single-sex classes as a mode of organization in co-educational schools. There is emerging evidence, despite the reservations of those who feel that comprehensive schools should be co-educational in all respects, that many girls and boys feel more at ease in such classes, feel more able to interact with learning and to show real interest without inhibition, and often achieve more highly as a result.

As with other intervention strategies, however, there is the need for some caution in any analysis. Such single-sex classes are not a panacea in themselves; in some schools, boys'-only classes have become very challenging to teach, or stereotyping of expectation has established a macho regime which has alienated some boys. Even in the most successful schools, both boys and girls have consistently said that they do not want to be in single-sex classes for *all* lessons.

Evidence in favour of the development of single-sex classes for some subjects, from both students' voices and from an analysis of levels of academic achievement, is nonetheless persuasive. Again it has been possible, through an examination of good practice, to identify a series of pre-conditions for successful implementation. These include:

- The use of a proactive and assertive approach in the classroom, which avoids the negative or confrontational, conveys high expectations and a sense of challenge, and uses praise regularly and consistently.
- The development of a team ethic, to establish a class identity, supported by humour and informality on the part of both teachers and students, to identify with their interests and enthusiasms, but without reinforcing stereotypes.
- Senior managers who give high profile and active support to single-sex classes, and see them as a central plank within the achievement ethos of the school, rather than simply allowing them as an 'experiment' which might succeed or fail.
- Promoting the intervention actively to governors, parents and carers, and all staff, so that single-sex classes can be promoted and sustained through time.

Where these pedagogic and organizational pre-conditions have been in place, in selective but carefully targeted subjects for specific students, there has been a positive effect on achievement, particularly in relation to boys' performances in modern languages and English and girls' performances in sciences and mathematics.

Socio-cultural approaches

It is self-evident, not only in secondary, but also in primary schools, that some boys go to considerable lengths to protect their macho image and their sense of self-worth by indulging in a range of non-conformist behaviour which frequently prevents them, and others in the same classes, from achieving well. Such disruptive behaviour, seeming lack

of effort and apparent disengagement has the effect, too, of protecting such boys from possible failure. These boys are frequently key players in affecting the tone and engagement of the whole year group, and on occasions they hold considerable sway amongst their peers, both male and female.

Schools which have successfully addressed these challenges have adopted a range of socio-cultural strategies to integrate these boys more fully within school life. During the project, we have worked with, and evaluated, a number of such strategies:

- Citizenship initiatives in primary schools, linked to Schools Councils, team-building clubs, circle time and a 'You Can Do It' programme.
- A central focus on the Arts across primary schools, with artists-in-residence schemes, poetry weeks, dance sessions run by professional dancers, and drama productions which allocated lead roles to disengaged boys.
- Paired reading schemes between year 3 and year 5 pupils, with the explicit rationale of promoting self-esteem amongst the year 5 'experts'.
- A key leader and key befriender scheme in secondary schools, targeting and supporting particularly those students (usually more boys than girls) whose physical presence, manner and behaviour exerted considerable power and influence within the peer group.

These intervention strategies have been challenging to transfer to Partner schools. In the secondary contexts, the key leader / key befriender scheme has only been successful where:

- it has been possible to identify accurately the key leaders in the year group, who will also respond positively to initiatives the school puts in place
- key befrienders are willing to work with disengaged and challenging individual students, and who are credible, able to establish rapport, use persuasion and model non-stereotyping attitudes and behaviour
- the school has been able to mould expectations and change aspirations, through the creation of a school 'house' style, with emphasis on uniform, on regular attendance and responsive behaviour monitoring, and on the school day as a time of learning rather than social activity.

In the primary contexts, achievement and aspirations have been transformed in those schools where:

- headteachers acknowledged under-achievement and used familiar curricular activities creatively and imaginatively to target it
- teachers were willing to take risks to engage individual pupils in roles where they were actively supported to make choices and to achieve success
- staff were fully committed to create opportunities to give pupils space to articulate their feelings and emotions
- pupils were offered challenge but also activities which individually they could excel in.

When these preconditions are in place, it has been possible to generate a sense of inclusiveness for under-achieving students, improving their engagement, developing an

increased sense of responsibility, and contributing to an increasing sense of confidence and positive self-image, as well as enhancing academic achievement.

Interventions within Special Schools

Many of the intervention strategies developed within the context of special schools are similar to those developed in the mainstream context. These included:

- an integrated approach to boys' writing, through visual and aural approaches, and scaffolding of tasks
- the development of pedagogy which took account of work on learning styles and active learning
- evolving whole school approaches which responded effectively to pupils with low self-esteem, and their developing disaffection because of a placement in special schools which separated them from their peers at primary-secondary transfer.

Two differences in emphasis, however, were:

- in the context of small classes, an overriding concern with the social and personal well-being of the individual child, as well as with their academic achievement
- the need for tight integration of different approaches (pedagogic, individual, organizational and socio-cultural) within a holistic whole school framework .

Despite these differences, the evidence emerging from the project does not support the case for a separate special education pedagogy, but rather for an integration of approaches to develop inclusive pedagogy.

The Broader Issues

Whilst preceding discussion has focused on specific strategies, broader findings also emerged from the project.

The triad structure allowed schools to work positively together in a non-hierarchical relationship, to evaluate, refine and develop different strategies, to transfer them to other contexts and to share good practice.

The project also highlighted the importance of school and community contexts, where there are different routes to achievement, and alternative ways forward. Successful strategies emerged that schools found appropriate to their own particular contexts; these were implemented through collaboration, rather than through imposition.

In addition to the pre-conditions necessary for the successful development of specific strategies, we identified a further set of more generic preconditions necessary before *any* strategy could succeed. These included leadership support and commitment by all staff, a clearly articulated ethos where high expectations were the norm, a culture which celebrated achievement in its widest sense, and an emphasis on pedagogic practice.

Conclusion

We are confident that these intervention strategies, developed by participating schools in contrasting socio-economic environments across England, can be effective in raising boys' achievement.

Such strategies also have the potential to raise girls' achievement, and so in many instances the gender gap - at least in the short term - is perpetuated. We are not unduly concerned about this, since we do not find it acceptable to promote intervention strategies which, whilst supporting boys' learning, are detrimental to girls in either an academic or a social sense.

A recurring theme in these policy initiatives, whether related to pedagogy, forms of organisation or strategies which focus on the individual, is the fundamental importance of context and of whole school approaches. In each case, however, the strategies are no panacea: they cannot be implemented successfully without regard to the necessary preconditions which we have explored in the main report.

In addressing issues of under-achievement it is crucial that intervention strategies address issues linked to students' attitudes and image, their expectations and aspirations, tackled at the core. To be fully effective, these strategies must be developed systematically through time, and subsequently evaluated and refined in the light of experience. We have no evidence to suggest that *short-term* strategies are likely to impact positively upon students' achievements in sustainable and ongoing ways.

Finally, our research does not support the notion that there is a case for boy-friendly pedagogies. Pedagogies which appeal to and engage boys are equally girl-friendly. They characterise quality teaching, and as such are just as suitable and desirable for girls as for boys.