Underachieving boys: Problems and solutions

VIVIENNE HOLLAND

The question of underachievement amongst boys has recently been the subject of much media hype. There is now no subject area in which girls do not appear to outperform their male contemporaries. Vivienne Holland examines the background to this and focuses on an investigation into her own school. This provides a particularly interesting insight into boys’ culture and attitudes. She also offers some useful suggestions for combating this phenomenon.

Take a seat in any school staffroom in the country and at some stage, the conversation is bound to come around to the pupils. No matter how hard we might try to avoid the subject, we simply cannot stop ourselves. They might be the light of our lives or the bane of our existence but they are, nevertheless, our raison d’être. They are our reason for sitting in the staffroom in the first place.

From personal experience of many such conversations over the years I have observed that the names of pupils that crop up most often in these discussions, who are frequently perceived to be making little effort, and who are usually regarded as those who could do a lot better, belong to boys. Sometimes I wonder why we bother. Is it really worth getting worked up about ‘Gareth’s` poor behaviour in science this morning, or over ‘Thomas’ who, for the third week on the run, has not done his geography homework? What will the umpteenth detention, reprimand or letter home actually achieve with these kinds of boys? It is unlikely they will ever change, so why should we place our mental health in jeopardy if it’s not going to make a difference? They are what they are – your typical male underachievers. They’re not interested in school. They want to be outside with their mates kicking a ball around the streets, not cooped up in a stuffy classroom learning the perfect tense of a language they will probably never use from a country they will probably only ever visit on a day return to a European Cup match.

The thing is, whether we like it or not, we do concern ourselves with these boys, albeit sometimes for reasons of self-preservation. Underachievement is a very important issue to teachers not simply because we want to get the best out of our pupils but also because of its association with behavioural problems. Pupils who don’t remain on task are potentially disruptive influences in the classroom who can impede the learning of others and so contribute to the underachievement of their peers as well as to their own. Furthermore, dealing with disruptive pupils can be a significant factor in the incidence of stress within the profession and as such, is to be avoided whenever possible.

I have no doubt that many would agree that underachievement among boys is not a particularly new phenomenon and yet in the last couple of years it has become an increasingly topical issue about which the media has devoted air time as well as a substantial number of column inches in both the popular press and the more academic educational journals. So why this burst of interest? Why are boys suddenly receiving all this attention now? Has the gender seesaw tipped too far in favour of girls and so someone with a degree in political correctness has decided it is time to redress the balance? Perhaps no one decided. Perhaps the evidence spoke for itself?

The evidence …

A quick peek at some of the growing data in relation to the extent of boys’ underachievement is both alarming and depressing. Nor does it confine itself to a particular stage in their development – it can begin early and be ongoing. For example, the Equal Opportunities Commission’s report Research Findings (1996) cites the conclusions arrived at by M. Arnot, M. David and G. Weiner based on the evidence of Standardised Assessment Test statistics. These indicate that girls seem to be outperforming boys at Key Stages 1 and 2, especially in subjects such as English. The lead that girls assume at primary level continues into secondary (Sweetman 1997), where they are even doing better in subjects that boys are supposed to be good at. For example, at GCSE level, Wragg (1997) provides figures to show that something like 48.6 per cent of girls achieve a high grade in design and technology, whereas only 33.1 per
cent of boys achieve these grades. Morris (1996) also refers to the findings of the National Consortium for Examination Results, which revealed that in 1996, in 115 local education authorities, 45.1 per cent of girls achieved five or more A–C grades and only 34.7 per cent of boys achieved them.

Failure to achieve academically can be an important reason for increasing disaffection among male pupils (Connell 1989) and this disaffection can become a cause in itself for further failure, not just in school but in later life. We know from experience that disaffection can manifest itself in different ways in school, classroom disruption and truancy being the most common results. However, there are other more disturbing effects of disaffection. For example, Morris (1996) claims that boys constitute ‘the vast majority of truants’ and she cites the results of a Home Office survey which connects truancy with the incidence of youth crime. A greater number of boys than girls are excluded from schools and Bradford (1996), drawing on a study by Imich in 1994, revealed that in one local authority, male school exclusions amounted to some 80 per cent. She also cites the 1994 findings of Hymas and Cohen, which showed that boys outnumber girls in schools for children with learning difficulties, with as many as six boys for every girl in special units for pupils with behavioural or discipline problems. Most distressing of all, however, is the increasing evidence of suicide among boys in their teens and early twenties (Tate 1995).

### Just some of the research findings …

Why is this happening? Can the problem of male underachievement be explained away simply by saying that it is self-inflicted? That boys are lazier than girls? One would suggest not, for while there may be some truth in this assertion, current research provides a myriad of different reasons, ranging from biological factors to those linked with the home and the community at large.

Of particular interest here is the work of Harris, Nixon and Ruddock (1993), which explores the influences on masculinity and femininity of the school, community and peer group ‘regimes’. The suggestion is that collectively, these regimes are incompatible: while gender stereotypes may be being challenged within one regime – for example, the school – it may not be happening in others, such as the community. It is further suggested that boys tend to have fixed views about what work, especially homework, should be done and that these views are the product of their social upbringing. The evidence, based on interviews with a variety of adult males in three different communities, revealed ‘men traditionally maintaining a clear distinction between time at work and time off work when they relaxed, were looked after by their women folk, and enjoyed the company of other males’.

Harris, Nixon and Ruddock (1993) also observed the difficulty that students were having in establishing a sense of self within this set of overlapping regimes, a problem which is also pursued by Askew and Ross (1988), who suggest that young males are very much affected by the common view of men as expressed through the media, which depicts them ‘as being tough, strong, aggressive, independent, brave, sexually active, rational, intelligent and so on’. Such possibly conflicting characteristics are unhelpful in giving boys a sense of direction and, as Askew and Ross (1988) state, are ‘obviously damaging and prevent young men from developing their full potential’.

The changes in the last twenty years in the way in which industry operates and the devastating impact they have had on traditional male routes into the workforce have done little to help clarify this male sense of self. In the past, the availability of manual work meant that there was still the possibility of a job for those boys who were less able or who simply did not work hard at school (Morris 1996). Now that situation has changed and the demoralising effects of unemployment on some communities may well have served as a disincentive to young boys to strive at all at school because they were already able to predict the futility of their situation.

Connell (1989) noted the significance of the school’s role through the process of streaming in determining different kinds of male behaviour, different levels of power and, ultimately, different levels of achievement. For example, those who fail to achieve power by academic means assume a different sort of power. They are the cool guys who use bullying and intimidation to hold on to their status. The swots and wimps or Cyrls follow a more academic, and therefore feminine, route through school and were likely to be sneered at by their more macho peers. Accepted characteristics of male behaviour are implied in comments such as ‘he’s got to learn to take it like a man’ (Askew and Ross 1988) and ‘thou shalt not tell’ (Phillips 1993), and serve in their own way to uphold the bullying, to reinforce anxieties among the weaker boys and to prevent them from confiding in others, since to do so is seen as a weakness. Is this why some boys are experiencing ‘higher levels of disenchantment with and alienation from school’ (Bradford 1996)?

The male stereotype is responsible in other ways for holding boys back and depriving them of different learning experiences. For example, Connor (1996) notes that ‘boys are active and practical so that studying and reading are not reconcilable with a cool or macho image’, nor is playing the kind of games normally associated with girls (Green 1987, cited in Phillips 1993). Assertive and aggressive characteristics which help make up this stereotype are apparent in the classroom where boys have a reputation for being noisy (Cullingford 1993) and, as a result, are prone to receive a far greater portion of teacher time than girls (Kelly 1988, cited in Phillips 1993), albeit for purposes of reprimand. However, Cullingford (1993) reveals that boys observe the way they are treated differently to girls and they feel that they suffer more as a result: ‘they do less well academically, are more punished, have fewer privileges, and are “picked on” far more’.

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This presents an interesting paradox. Boys may be vocally assertive in class for reasons which are directly related to their masculinity – that is, their competitiveness and struggle for hegemony within their peer groups. However, for the very same reasons, they are barred from talking about the kind of things that may be really important to them – for example, their private fears and concerns related to their achievement at school and their hopes for the future. They may want to be heard but are so conditioned in the ways of the male psyche which are constantly reinforced by peers, community and school, that to do so would alienate them from all that is considered ‘normal’. Boys appear to be caught in a trap and they cannot break free (Connell 1989).

**The study**

In the context of this article, it has only been possible to look at a very small portion of the research. The larger picture of the causes of male underachievement, however, is still unable to provide a complete explanation as to why it was happening to boys in the school in which I work. On the other hand, one simply did not have the wherewithal to undertake a broad study investigating the boys’ experience in the community at large. This was one reason why the boys’ experiences in relation to the school became the focus for the investigation to see whether we, as an organisation and as a small community, were responsible in any way for their underperformance. A second reason was the belief that as teachers, we are far better placed to put our own house in order rather than the houses of every underachieving child in our care.

Thus, the study aimed to give boys that opportunity to talk, at first on an anonymous basis through a questionnaire and later, if they agreed, in group interviews, in order to extend and clarify the original data. An important aim was to identify causal factors among boys of all abilities and so it was decided to put together a sample population taken from year 8 that included pupils from the top-, middle- and lower-ability groups. The findings were illuminating, to say the least. For example, when asked how well they thought they were doing at school, 48 per cent of the group felt that they were doing okay, while another 14 per cent felt they were actually doing well. Given that many of these boys are perceived to be seriously underachieving, it is possible that their unrealistic view of their performance could be contributing to a sense of complacency and an opinion that they do not need to improve.

It would seem that because they have this false view of their ability (57 per cent felt they were in the wrong teaching set), they tend to blame other factors such as a lack of revision rather than a lack of aptitude for their failings or the usual standby – ‘can’t be bothered working – it’s boring’. It is notable that a significant number seem unprepared to assume any responsibility for their own learning. For example, they assume that they would achieve more in a higher set, the inference being that they would be made to work harder. The fact that the work is too easy in a lower set seems to absolve them from making any extra effort, the inference being because they are not sufficiently motivated to do so. So who are they blaming now? The teacher?

Eighty-one per cent of the group agreed that girls worked harder than boys and so were doing better at school. The reasons why they felt this was happening were not to do with girls being cleverer but because they are better behaved. When asked why this was so, the responses echoed Green’s (1987) findings, cited in Phillips (1993), which showed how boys tend to monitor each other’s behaviour for what is acceptable male behaviour and what isn’t. For example, one boy said:

> If you have people beside you who are talking its like peer pressure because they will then get at you for not talking. If you’re writing away, they will tell you to stop working and … girls usually tend to have an occasional chat but don’t spend the whole time just sitting back where some of the boys just do.

Conforming to those characteristics of male stereotypes noted earlier may lead boys to believe that it is all right to be boisterous and assertive and to mess about in school because that is what is expected of them. By living up to the old adage ‘boys will be boys’, they may well be opting for the easy way out.

Seventy-six per cent admitted that name-calling of hard-working pupils happens in school and although they were able to rationalise why it happened (for example, through jealousy), it was clear that they found it both worrying and upsetting. This was particularly evident when they were asked how they thought other pupils would react to name-calling. Some said that pupils would ‘stop achieving to avoid teasing’, or would be ‘very upset’ or ‘take it very badly’. Others said that pupils would ‘feel hurt and ashamed’ and one boy’s answer was especially distressing: ‘not very nice. Some people kill themselves because everyone is having a go at them.’

It was interesting to note though that while it was acceptable for the boys to be candid in their responses as to how other pupils might cope with name-calling, nearly half the sample group said it would not bother them if it happened to them. Perhaps they were simply playing out the macho, stereotypical role and not admitting to their true feelings or did their responses at interview give them away: ‘cos, like, when boys, like, are working hard, some people are, like, calling them swots and that, but most girls, like, don’t do things like that, but boys, like, when some are working, they slag them off and they (the workers) don’t like to be like that’.

There was an interesting contradiction between the boys’ expressed belief in the importance of homework and the actual time they admitted to spending on it. (Eight-one per cent spent less than an hour per night, of which 57 per cent spent less than half an hour.) When asked why they thought it was important, their answers were vague and indicated...
that they did not know. Later, at interview, they admitted that homework was not high on their list of priorities, whereas being out with their friends was. Others echoed current findings, suggesting that work should be done at school and not at home. Responses regarding the quality of homework produced and whether they were satisfied with it were unexpectedly confident given the short time awarded to the effort. This confidence extended to the point where they would decide whether or not to do the homework at all, regardless of the consequences:

- ‘In some subjects, like maths – I’m good at maths and so get good marks for it. In most subjects I’m okay … (I’m) a bit erratic really; some weeks I’ll get good marks and other weeks I’ll probably not do it (homework).’
- ‘… depends on the subject. If it’s maths or science I will make more effort because they are more important subjects. But in some subjects like RE, I don’t really bother.’

While the boys recognised that more time needed to be spent on homework if they were to progress, it also had to have a meaningful purpose, as implied here: ‘the only reason you do it is to get it out of the way!’

Questionnaire responses about parental involvement in school work were initially promising, with some 90 per cent of the boys saying that their parents provided help and encouragement. However, closer inspection of their answers revealed a different picture, for although the pupils believed parents are involved with homework, their main role seems to be reminding them that it needs to be done. After this, there appeared to be little active or constructive commitment.

Lesson style can be a crucial factor in underachievement and the boys revealed that they can spend anything from 25 per cent of the teaching day (1 hour and 16 minutes) to 70 per cent of the teaching day (3 hours and 36 minutes) passively listening to the teacher. While they qualified their answers by saying it depended very much on the teacher, they also stated their own preferences which included lessons which have a practical element to them. This did not confine itself to subjects which traditionally have practical constituents such as technology and science. The boys also expressed a strong liking for lessons which included a range of activities such as personal research using books and computers, group work, discussions and debates. Similarly, while 62 per cent of the boys felt that teachers did enough to help them at school, it was clear, from their answers to a later question, that there may be a lot that we are not doing which we assume we are doing. In the interests of clarity, it might be more useful at this point to note all the suggestions made by the boys as to how teachers could help them to do better academically:

- Not shout as much
- Give me more confidence
- More fun things to do
- Go through work again
- Smaller groups
- Less time on easier parts, more time on hard parts
- Explain work better

Most of the group (86 per cent) admitted that they did not do everything possible to do their best at school but when asked how they could help themselves to do better, they had only the vaguest notion as to how to go about it. For example, phrases such as ‘more effort’, ‘should talk less’ and ‘spend more time on homework’ were used. However, they were unable to go beyond this and specify actual strategies for self-improvement.

Finally …

It was interesting to note again the boys’ unrealistic yet undaunted self-confidence when at the end of the questionnaire they were asked what career choices they were likely to make. Two thirds of the group had already made up their minds on jobs which included accountancy, journalism, medicine, law, teaching, university, the armed forces and the FBI!

Conclusions

The results confirmed research findings. Boys do appear to be locked inside a stereotype which appears to make them succumb to peer pressure and which inevitably impacts on their attitude to work. However, despite the obstacles posed by this, at heart they want success and are confident enough to get it. The problem is they don’t seem to know how to achieve it and even if they do, they don’t appear to understand what is needed to sustain that effort.

Secondly, the evidence showed very clearly that the pupils have an incorrect perception of their academic abilities and potential. There may be any number of reasons for this, including those suggested by Kerry (1982, cited in Wilcockson 1995), which is that underachieving pupils become ‘skilled at deception, teachers have too little time to seek them out’ and ‘diagnostic procedures are inadequate’.

However, in recent years, teachers have been told, particularly when reporting to parents, that it is good practice to accentuate the positive, to highlight what pupils can do and not what they cannot do. It may appear that these well-intentioned directives have backfired, for this may be a significant reason why the issue of underachievement has not come to light – or worse, has simply been ignored. It might also explain why some parents offer little constructive help since they have their (incorrect) perception through the boys’ eyes and the boys have their (incorrect) perception through the school. In this sense, the school could be held culpable for so many people being in the dark.
How can we combat this growing problem of male underachievement? Here are just a few suggestions.

1 Know thine enemy!
   - There needs to be a better understanding of the problem of underachievement, particularly of the current national situation in relation to boys. Whole-school INSET is one way of raising such an awareness.
   - The problem needs to be made public. Everyone on the teaching staff, together with the governing body, needs to be appraised of the causes and of the extent of the problem in their school so that it can be targeted for action from a variety of different perspectives within a whole-school plan.
   - Underachievers in each year group need to be identified and made known to all staff so that they can be targeted for help.
   - The school is likely to have a better chance of success in tackling the problem if someone on the staff is appointed to coordinate the school’s efforts.
   - Also one key person within each department could assume responsibility for raising achievement. Regular liaison between the coordinator for underachievement and the departmental representative could provide opportunities to develop and trial strategies within each department and monitor the progress of those underachieving pupils in specific subject areas.

2 Be up front!
   - School managements need to ensure that staff give children accurate and frank details about their performance and attainment. This could be built into the school’s assessment, recording and reporting policy and include simple strategies such as (i) making comments in exercise books more explicit in terms of identifying problems and setting targets for improvement and (ii) ensuring reports give accurate details of what a child knows, understands and can do.
   - Parents should be told that their child is underachieving and they should be provided with opportunities to discuss the nature and extent of the problem with staff at school and be involved in the programme for raising their child’s achievement.
   - Parents could be provided with information from the school telling them of the situation nationally with regard to boys’ underachievement. The information could also contain practical ideas for parents to help their children at home – for example, helping them to organise themselves, identifying realistic goals, and monitoring and managing homework.
   - As part of their involvement in the programme for improvement, parents could be asked periodically to monitor their child’s progress and to present any difficulties that emerge.

3 Tell them what to do!
   - Teachers need to tell pupils what the criteria for success are. We should show them what they have to do to complete an assignment successfully. This could include breaking a task down into clearly identifiable and manageable stages which the pupils can tackle on a step-by-step basis.
   - Pupils could be encouraged to monitor their own study and progress periodically in all curriculum areas.

In May 1996, as part of an attempt to examine the nature of equal opportunities in the school, an audit was carried out. In the report that followed, teachers’ concerns were noted about the underachievement of boys across the curriculum, and subsequent informal conversations with colleagues further revealed the presence of what was described as ‘academic intimidation’. This was the starting point for this particular study and at first the task of tackling it seemed daunting. However, now that problems have been identified, the school is beginning to develop and implement strategies to combat it. The process is still very much in its infancy and in many ways, it’s likely to be just as much a learning curve for us as we hope it will be for the boys.

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References


Correspondence

Vivienne Holland
78 Hampton Road
Southport
Merseyside PR8 6QD

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