

*Theme(s):* Gender

## **Challenging underachievement in boys**

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### **How do effective schools raise boys' attainment?**

In recent years, attempts by schools to promote greater involvement of girls in further education have been linked with a significant increase in girls' success in education. At the same time it has become increasingly evident that there is a long established and near universal pattern of academic under-performance by boys relative to girls. This study focuses on a specific attempt to address this relative under-performance through various means. It also examines differences in approach towards black and white boys in school.

The study identified a number of factors which proved to be helpful in overcoming relative underachievement. The key factors identified are curriculum organisation, performance monitoring, school ethos (high expectations and inclusiveness), and staff providing positive role models, and involvement from parents. The study found that there is no single educational model which can guarantee success in improving performance among boys of any ethnic or social background. However, it did identify two distinctive approaches. These two approaches can be broadly distinguished by:

- an emphasis on targeting weaker groups and pupils; or,
- a more universal commitment to treating all groups equally.

**Keywords:** United Kingdom, Secondary schools, Pupils, Gender, Boys, Attainment, Ethnicity, Curriculum

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### **What strategies did the study suggest were most effective?**

The study makes it clear that no single approach was found to exist in schools which were successful in raising achievement for boys. Instead these schools combined a number of strategies.

When looking at curriculum organisation, the study found that a broad, diverse curriculum was universally considered to contribute strongly to success with targeted groups. Also helpful were a wide range of options for 14-16 year olds, and making the curriculum as relevant as possible to pupils. ICT was found to be of particular interest to boys.

Data monitoring, of attendance, performance and, in one case punctuality, were important for all schools. Performance monitoring was nonetheless more prominent in schools which pursued the targeting approach. Monitoring enabled staff easily to identify underachievers and provide additional support. Besides pupil-level monitoring, school-level monitoring was also used in some schools, enabling them to make appropriate whole-school policy decisions.

These schools had high, but realistic, expectations of their students. They also placed emphasis on achievement in extra-curricular areas and displays and rewards were used to celebrate achievement. There was a strong emphasis on behaviour management, combining discipline with genuine concern for pupils. Competing for awards had a particularly marked effect on boys' motivation.

The high proportion of staff from ethnic minorities ensured that the make-up of staff in a school adequately reflected the local community and was felt to have made a significant difference. Schools which were particularly successful in raising achievement were, nonetheless, found to be those which placed emphasis on the role of all staff in providing positive role models and links in both the school and local community.

A strong ethos for the school was found to be particularly important. Ethos, in this context, was used to mean a positive and inclusive pervading attitude, stressing the importance of education for all, from the headteacher down through the staff, to inform all the decisions made in the school community. This included an emphasis on the "school as community" and was described as a key element in all schools. This ethos was strongest at both the school-wide and individual level, with a focus less on looking at particular groups and more on the school as a whole. Inevitably the role of ethos was strongest in the schools adopting a "universal" approach.

All schools demonstrated strong connections with, and expectations of, partnership with parents; they recognised the interdependent nature of education between the school and home environments. The involvement of male parents or carers in the academic achievement of boys in the schools really mattered too. A variety of strategies were used to involve male parents and carers in this way, and in general these proved effective. These strategies included sports coaching, storytelling and participation in various events.

The main point underlined by the study is that successful approaches are specific to particular contexts. For example, in some, mainly white schools trying to raise attainment universally rather than targeting specific groups has proved more successful in raising achievement from Black Caribbean, Indian and Pakistani groups; much more successful in fact than such approaches have proved in more multi-ethnic school contexts.

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### **How was the study designed?**

The research design included comparing actual and expected outcomes for pupils taking into account prior achievement, eligibility for free school meals, stage on the Special Education Needs code of practice, proficiency in English and date of birth. Data were analysed to identify which schools within the local authority were achieving higher than expected for different groups of boys. The design and interpretation of data were carried out through a partnership between the research team and the local authority scrutiny team; a form of "democratic" research engagement. Three primary and secondary schools were selected as having

evidence of “adding value” for one or more groups of boys. These formed the sample of schools examined in the study.

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### **What were the implications of the study?**

In completing this digest the authors began to ask the following questions about implications for practitioners:

- the research found that the effective practice involved a mix of universal and targeted approaches tailored to different contexts. Does the universal or targeted approach seem most helpful for your classroom settings? Do you think this would be different in different subjects or for different aged pupils?
- the learning ethos emerged as a strong factor in success. Would you find it helpful to explore your pupils’ perceptions about the ethos in your classroom? Do they experience individual lessons as contributing to the experience of the school as a whole as a learning community? Do boys and girls experience this in different ways?

In completing this digest the authors began to ask the following questions about implications for school leaders:

- the learning ethos emerged as a strong factor in success. Would you find it helpful to involve teachers and students in reflecting on your current school ethos? How consistent are reassurances about the positive potential of all students as learners?
- the research found that the effective practice involved a mix of universal and targeted approaches tailored to different contexts. Does your school use a universal or targeted approach to the achievement of boys and of boys from different ethnic groups? Does your approach match closely your vision for the school ethos? Is this reflected in the make up of your staff and the expectations you have of student potential and achievement?

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### **Where can I find out more?**

For another TRIPS digest which looks at ethnicity, you might be interested in: ‘Internalising and externalising problems in middle childhood: A study of Indian and English children living in Britain’

<http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/research/themes/Ethnicity/problemsinmidchildhood/>

If you would like to read another TRIPS digest about gender and achievement, see: ‘Making the grade but feeling distressed: gender differences in academic performance and internal distress’

<http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/research/themes/gender/ThuNov270956532003/>

To learn about a DfES funded project which looked at raising boys’ achievement across a range of schools, see the project website:

‘Raising boys’ achievement’  
<http://www-rba.educ.cam.ac.uk/index.html>

If you would like to find out more about the ‘gender gap’ in attainment and the gender differences across a range of educational markers see ‘Gender and education: the evidence on pupils in England’

<http://www.dfes.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/RTP01-07.pdf>

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