

Boys' Underachievement in Schools **Literature Review**



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In his review essay in *Gender and Education* (2009) Zyngier highlights that Amazon lists 100 current titles in relation to boys education; Google lists over 54,000 separate website results for 'boys education' and Google Scholar has over 2,000 academic articles. We are therefore not short of material in this review.

In an attempt to make sense of this substantial literature we have gone for a thematic approach rather than a time-sensitive one. As the reader will notice the busiest period of policy, literature and even initiatives was between the mid-1990s and the early 2000s, so to go for a recent approach of, for example, the last ten years would seriously limit this review.

We have divided this review into four sections: statistics; the context for boys' underachievement; why boys are underachieving; and what initiatives and school-based practice has developed. While there is some overlap between these sections, this basic structure will help the reader make sense of this weight of material.

Statistics

Younger & Warrington (2005) suggest that it has been since the early and mid-1990s that the discourse has changed. This change has evolved from 'some boys underachieving' to a general focus on boys' 'underachievement' and the gender gap and the apparent failure of boys to perform as well as girls in academic examinations at crucial transition points in their primary and secondary education.

In their own analysis of the relative performance of girls and boys they highlight a gender gap that has been apparent since the introduction of the National Curriculum tests and teacher assessments at Key Stages 1, 2 and 3 (Warrington *et al*, 2003). So for example a comparison between 1997 and 2004 highlights the following gaps:

2004 English	Boys	46	64	+20
	Girls	66	77	+11
Mathematics	Boys	60	72	+12
	Girls	60	74	+14
Science	Boys	61	65	+4
	Girls	59	67	+7

(Key Stage 3 performance, % of boys and girls achieving Level 5 or above)

Going through a broad range of academic attainment measures they found a consistent gap between boys' and girls' results at GCSE level and, while there have been periods where the attainment levels have been lower, Gorard *et al* (2001) found that it has stabilised at around 10 percentage points.

However, the analyses of the figures have been interpreted in different ways and authors have arrived at different conclusions. The DfES in 2004 highlighted that 96.6% of girls and 94.9% of boys achieved at least one A*-G GCSE grade or the GNVQ equivalent (Younger and Warrington 2005, p33) which probably only highlights the limitations of the more generalised statistics.

In her analysis of the gender gap within different subjects Madeleine Arnot found that 'some subjects remain male-dominated while others remain female-dominated and that whereas boys secured only modest improvements ... in their performance ... in various subjects in comparison with girls, girls achieved sizeable improvements, particularly in science and mathematics' (Arnot *et al* 1998).

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comparison with girls, girls achieved sizeable improvements, particularly in science and mathematics.¹

The other significant factor in the figures overall, is that achievement has been steadily increasing for both boys and girls. So, looking again at the KS3 Level 5s (above), while girls have moved two points ahead of boys in mathematics over the seven years, boys have increased by twelve points. These results have been reflected in most achievement measures and have led some to conclude that the gender differences are less significant than the 'gender lobby' have suggested.

Younger & Warrington (2005), through their analysis of the GCSE results in an East Anglian Comprehensive School, have also highlighted how over a ten-year period within a stable school the gender gap can fluctuate hugely. In some years, when the gap is lowest, it is often girls' performance that has decreased rather than boys' (for example in 2001 girls returned figures of 80% with boys at 58% while in 2002 girls were at 60% with boys showing 61% and in 2003 girls were up to 79% and boys at 66%).

Gillborn & Youdell (2000) have been highly critical of the debate about achievement being focused on exam and test results and particularly GCSE grades (referred to as the 'A-C economy'). They suggest that this leads many schools to focus resources and effort on a small number of borderline students, which usually contain significant numbers of boys and refer to this process as a form of 'educational triage'. This obviously dovetails with (in England) the local league tables which, they imply, give added emphasis to the targeting of borderline students.

This has led to some questioning (see James, 1998) of whether GCSEs are the most effective way of measuring achievement, with a range of other modes of assessment being suggested and used. Value-added measures (Fitz-Gibbon, 1996 and DfES, 2004) have been developed and some commercial packages are available, but these are not generally used. Many of these attempts to measure students' potential have raised some important questions about the wider underachievement debate and definition (see Smith, 2002). Some will use the term

¹ Arnot M, Gray J, James M, Rudduck J, with Duveen G (1998): *Recent Research on Gender and Educational Performance*, The Stationery Office
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'underachievement' synonymously with 'low achievement', but Smith points out that if a measure of potential can be used, then it is more likely to highlight individuals who are doing reasonably well (in terms of five A*-C grades), but are not living up to their potential thus their hidden underachievement can be exposed.

So, already we can see that we are in a contested area. The analysis of the statistics is contested and there have been some important differences in the way that authors have then interpreted what the statistics are telling us.

Bleach (1998) quite rightly suggests that we should be wary of portraying boys as an homogeneous group of under-achievers who are all 'victims of the education system in terms of pedagogy and practice'.

Archer & Francis (2007) argue that issues of race and ethnicity have moved away from 'inequalities', which naturalise the differences in achievement between ethnic groups and therefore 'place the responsibility or blame for achievement differentials with minority ethnic individuals'. These differences and social class 'have been eclipsed by the 'boys' underachievement' debate.

Archer and Francis go on to suggest that 'this focus has meant that gender has dominated debate on achievement whereas other aspects of social identity have been marginalised from it. As we have seen, for the majority of pupils in Britain ethnicity and social class continue to be stronger predictors of educational achievement than gender.'

Moore (1996), referenced in Arnot (1999), highlights the common but problematic habit of discussing relative achievement, with 'one group always being constructed as "the problem" or, even worse the "victim" of the system.' This too often leads to simplistic comparisons that cover a range of variations which of course make strong assertions difficult.

Arnot, David & Weiner (1999), in their thorough analysis of the statistical evidence, attempt to unravel what they believe to be a complex picture. Referencing Teese, Davies, Charlton & Polesel (1995) they highlight that girls' achievement is not uniform and that social class remains a critical factor in educational success. Teese *et al* found that in Australia 'working class boys were more likely to depress the overall scores for boys in

literacy and in language more generally’, while ‘working class girls had higher rates of failure in English than other girls, and also that working class boys over-enrolled in mathematics and physics.’

Mac an Ghail (1994) highlighted the importance of the local labour markets. If the local market does not require high levels of academic achievement this impacts on young people’s motivation and achievement levels. He and others have questioned whether school achievement can be seen in isolation of the broader context of how young people lead their lives.

Connolly (2004) analyses achievement in relation to gender, social class, race and ethnicity in an attempt to identify the degree to which gender plays a part. Interestingly social class is the most straightforward and predictable variable, where differences between boys and girls are sustained. So within like-for-like social class groupings a consistent 10% difference is apparent (see below). In turn, social class also shows the broadest difference between all boys (46 points) and all girls (45 points). Within ethnicity and race the variables are at their most extreme, with Chinese boys’ performance more than double that of black boys. In fact the gap between boys and girls of Chinese, Indian, Bangladeshi and black origin are significantly wider than that of white and Pakistani.

We can conclude from Arnot *et al* (1999) and Connolly (2004) that all three play a significant part in achievement, with social class being the most dramatic variable, gender the most predictable and race and ethnicity the most unpredictable. These statistics start to help identify variables and groupings where achievement is lowest and gender significant. Connolly concludes that the rhetoric and moral panic have been at the root of boys’ underachievement, and that those generalisations about boys and girls are unhelpful.

Proportions of boys and girls in England and Wales gaining five or more GCSEs grades A*-C in 2000/01 by social class and ethnicity.

Category	Total	Boys	Girls	No. of boys Per 100 girls
Social class				
Higher professional	77.1	72.1	82.6	87.3
Lower professional	64.5	58.9	70.1	84.0

Intermediate	51.8	46.7	56.6	82.5
Lower supervisory	34.9	29.5	40.8	72.3
Routine	31.8	26.1	37.4	69.8
Ethnicity				
Chinese	68.9	67.4	70.5	95.6
Indian	59.6	51.3	67.8	75.7
White	51.6	46.6	56.7	82.2
Bangladeshi	41.5	33.9	50.0	67.8
Pakistani	40.2	35.7	45.1	79.2
Black	36.3	32.0	40.2	79.6

Source: Based upon secondary analysis on the Youth Cohort Study, 2002 (reproduced from Connolly, 2004).

Northern Ireland statistics

(Available as another file)

Boys and Underachievement – Context

Ideology

The strongest discourse about boys' underachievement hinges on ideology. Whether the issue is about standards (as it was in the UK); social justice (as in Australia) or indeed 'boys in crisis' (in the USA – Martino, Kehler & Weaver-Hightower, 2009) authors question the basis of the whole boys and underachievement project.

Much of the debate has been seen as a 'backlash' against feminism and its focus on girls, any gains that had been made for women generally and in girls' education in particular.

There are of course some blatant examples of this 'backlash' especially in the USA. Authors such as Dobson (2001) advocated a return to Christian sex roles and God-ordained gender differences, while Sommers (2000) put the blame squarely at 'misguided feminism'. But for some the focus on boys' education is an anti-feminist move attempting to maintain the patriarchal order (Mills, Francis & Skelton, 2005).

The same authors argue that if boys are the new victims, then feminists or girls must be the perpetrators; that mytho-poetic politics and other non-progressive notions are working their way through the boy's educational discourse.

This perspective raises some important questions; with such a narrow focus on achievement (and especially GCSE results) we can easily miss the fact that girls may achieve more but do less well in the workplace both in terms of wages and job status (Yates, 2000).

It is also argued that the boys and underachievement discourse moves education away from a social justice and an equality model, thus reducing the task simply to one of standards which will not result in transforming education more significantly (see Skelton, 2002; Yates, 2000 and Mills, Francis & Skelton, 2005).

Girls' achievement in single-sex schools

The general view is that girls do better in girls schools and boys in co-educational, but the research over time has not been quite that straightforward. Haag (1998), reviewing the research on single-sex education, concluded that while single-sex was not 'better' than co-educational schools for either girls or boys, there were some noticeable benefits for girls. Girls viewed the single-sex classroom as more conducive to learning; as more orderly and that single-sex contexts foster views of subjects that are less stereotypical.

Elwood & Gipps (1999), reviewing the research a year later, found that girls schools did well in exam league tables, but they concluded that these schools had clever pupils and that the results were not due to their single-sex status. They found that social class, ability and the history and tradition of the schools had a much greater impact on the results girls achieved and concluded that 'girls' schools in both the independent and state sectors are well-placed in the performance tables because girls do better than boys generally in examinations at the end of compulsory schooling.'

Sax (2007b) identified several areas in which single-sex education appears to produce favourable outcomes for female students, especially in terms of their confidence, engagement and aspirations, most notably in areas related to mathematics and science. Thus, while the benefits of single-sex education were fairly small, they tend to be in areas that have historically favoured men and therefore represent a potentially effective vehicle for impacting on longstanding gender gaps. However, Sax also acknowledged that we cannot draw unilateral conclusions about single-sex education, as such determinations depend on which populations are studied, which student and school characteristics are considered and which outcomes are examined.

Wallis (2009), again reviewing the data, concluded that girls did get better results at single-sex state schools. Wallis suggests that 'away from the distraction of boys and free to shine in science and maths, girl's race ahead of those who learn alongside boys in secondary school.' Interestingly this was particularly the case for the lowest achievers, who Wallis believes suffer most from mixed education.

Boys' achievement in single-sex schools

While there are some very strong advocates of single-sex boys' schools, such as the International Boys' Schools Coalition (see note 2) and authors such as Sax (2007a), who have carried out investigations that concluded that boys' schools benefit boys, these are at odds with many others. Most reviews conclude that single-sex schools do not improve exam results, but that there are other related benefits. This has led to an interest in single-sex classes in co-educational schools.

So some of the benefits for girls (and boys) highlighted above can be re-created in the mixed school environment. Younger & Warrington (2005), through the Raising Boys' Achievement Project (see note 3), concluded that students who had experienced single-sex teaching were generally supportive. They found that boys were resistant until they found that they were more able to concentrate; found it increased their confidence; and they got more involved and were more willing to ask questions. Boys reported less pressure to be 'cool', that their hormones were more in check and that their teachers were more relaxed and friendly.

This project confirmed findings and observations from Australian studies such as Rowe (1998) and later of Watterston (2001), who was more cautious, highlighting the importance of teaching, style, approach and process, and stressing that it is not just about putting boys and girls in separate classrooms and delivering the same.

Younger & Warrington (2005) also ask a range of questions about the form that single-sex classes take and raise concerns about whether single-sex classes for boys reinforce 'laddishness' and 'hegemonic forms of masculinity' and the attendant risks of bullying and homophobia for 'non-macho' boys.

A number of authors (for example Martino & Meyenn, 2002 and Roulsten & Mills, 2000) have argued that the complex way that teachers teach is much more important than whether the classrooms are single-sex. Jackson & Salisbury (1996) and Mac an Ghaill (1994) have argued that the task for teachers is to challenge the hegemonic forms of masculinity which are the problem, with the gender make-up of the classroom being almost irrelevant.

While Younger & Warrington (2005) acknowledged 'the reality that homophobia is usually perpetuated by boys against other boys' and the

risks of exclusion and antagonism against some boys, they found that these boys in particular felt a 'sense of inclusion and less vulnerability than in some other mixed sex classes.'

Teachers' expectations

Studies suggest teachers' expectations are not consistently differentiated by gender. 'Teachers do treat boys and girls differently in the classroom, but student behavioral patterns drive some of these differences' Black (2007).

Girls' conforming to gender stereotypes are thought to influence girls' underperformance especially in male gendered subjects such as maths and science. 'Boys have been found to have more interactions of all types with teachers, including being called on, receiving more complex questions and accorded more and different criticism, whereas girls are more often rewarded for quiet and obedient behaviour' (Black, 2007). Some evidence suggests that, primarily, criticism is directed towards girls because of a lack of ability and towards boys for lack of effort or poor behaviour.

NI summary here (including the lack of ideology, single-sexed schools, strong investment in mixed especially in the integrated sector)

Drivers for boys' underachievement

The media in the mid-'90s were concerned about 'lost' boys, and rescuing the weaker sex (see Shelton, 2007) as a response to both the yearly results and government concerns. In 1996 Ofsted published *The Gender Divide*, which highlighted the gap between the performances of girls and boys (Ofsted, 1996).

This situation of boys lagging behind girls continued with the Secretary of State saying that 'we face a genuine problem of under-achievement among boys, particularly those from working class families. This under-achievement is linked to a "laddish culture" which in many areas has grown out of deprivation and a lack of both self-confidence and opportunity.'²

² David Blunkett MP, Secretary of State for Education, 2000
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The publication of *The Gender Divide* was followed by a series of DfES and Ofsted documents including a review of research (Ofsted, 1998), policy and practice guidance (DfES / NPDT, 2003) and more targeted documents such as looking at the attainment of black Caribbean boys (2004).

However, this government concern was not taken up by the academic community. In fact, the media moral panic and the statistics and conclusions of the DfES became the focus of a more ideological debate (see Yates, 2000, Mills, Francis & Skelton, 2005 and Younger & Warrington, 2005 for examples). This ideological critique has continued and hinges on the view that the focus on girls, equal opportunities and equity in education has been lost in the emergence of the recognition of boys' underachievement. See Myers & Taylor (2007) for a more recent reflection on this critique.

Northern Ireland – Boys and underachievement – context

In his review of research evidence Gallagher (1997) concluded that boys 'apparent' underachievement was probably as a result of testing and assessment and a 'possible' anti-school culture among boys. Drawing heavily from Murphy and Elwood (1996), Gallagher highlights gender differences in, for example, styles of writing and the way these are then assessed as accounting for some of the gender gaps in exam results and recommends a review of the examination and assessment systems used in Northern Ireland. Gallagher goes on to suggest that girls more positive attitudes towards school has a distinct advantage and some boys "anti-school subcultures and peer-group pressures" is a possible barrier to achievement. We were unable to find any evidence of these recommendations being acted upon.

Guidance from the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) were produced on maximising boys' achievement (DENI 1999), which (I have been unable to find these. I would like to comment if we can get a copy from DENI).

A further brief review of literature was produced for the Northern Ireland Assembly (2001) looking at the "gender gap" and looking to "prevent underachievement amongst boys". This drew from a random selection of studies from England, Scotland, and New Zealand and suggested a range of issues including the lack of male teachers; gender stereotyping by teachers; assessment favouring girls; boys rejecting authority and girls co-operation as contributing factors in boys underachievement. Again, no evidence could be found to suggest these recommendations were acted upon.

Boys and literacy had been an focussed concern for the Northern Ireland Audit Office and House of Commons Public Accounts Committee since 2006 (see NIAO, 2006) and DENI had mentioned boys as a priority, but not made a specific recommendation within its Literacy and Numeracy strategy and action plan issued in March 2007 (DENI, 2007).

DENI (2008) then commissioned PricewaterhouseCoopers to analyse, and make recommendations to address the 'long tail' of underachievement in Northern Ireland schools and highlighted boys as a specific target group in the brief. Interestingly, while the 48

recommendations concentrated on both a systems and a school level, the only recommendation that mentioned boys was “identify **appropriate male role models for boys**, internally and externally, to promote the concept of reading for pleasure.

More recent papers addressing Literacy and Numeracy (see DENI, 2009 and DENI, 2010) have highlighted boys as a specific target, but again failed to address them specifically in action.

Interestingly, the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland (2008) in its Equality Commission Statement highlighted “research commissioned by Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (2001) concluded that the educational non-progressor was most likely to be a Protestant working class male. A more recent report commissioned by the Department of Education (2007a) found that lower than expected (LTE) performing schools were clustered mainly in Belfast, and often in areas that were more than 75% Protestant in terms of community background. The Belfast schools in the LTE group at Key Stage 3 English had free school meal entitlement levels of greater than 50% and at least 1 in 5 pupils with Special Educational Needs”.

In June 2010 Eurydice (2010) highlighted the same issue without reporting any progress. While boy’s underachievement has, since 1997, regularly been raised as a problem, the solution has continually been incorporated into a generalist approach, rather than a targeted one.

The adoption of Every School a Good School (2009) has confirmed this. Taking a social justice and equality approach, and underpinned by an understanding based on the link between disadvantage and educational outcomes, most group-targeted strategies have been replaced by issue-based approaches, such as ‘tackling barriers to learning’.

The downside to this approach, maybe a lack of focus on targeting and engaging particular groups such as underachieving boys. Interestingly, Australia pursued a similar approach, but incorporated a group targeted approach, when appropriate (see Martino, Kehler & Weaver-Hightower, 2009).

The most recent Chief Inspector’s Report (2010) on 2 years development made little mention of boys except to say:

“The improvements in the opportunities for learning outdoors in general, and for the development of physical and energetic play in particular, benefited the learners through the development of healthy lifestyles, greater opportunities to engage with the natural environment and the increased motivation and engagement of boys”. (Within nursery provision).

“There is little evidence within the 14-16 cohorts in particular, that the literacy and numeracy requirements of learners are being adequately addressed. More work needs to be done to include mentoring, work-related learning, pastoral support and personal development as essential elements through which learners develop the skills necessary to enhance their employability”. (Within post-primary provision).

“There needs to be a continued focus on raising further the standards of literacy and numeracy. The learners achieved good or better standards in English in two-thirds of the schools inspected; the proportion of schools in which standards were less than satisfactory has increased to one in ten”. (Within post-primary provision).

In this brief review of the context for Boys and Underachievement, three points are of significance:

1. Boys Underachievement has been of concern since the mid-90's with a number of reviews, papers and recommendations being written and made.
2. When recommendations have been made, they tend to be of a general and issue-based type (such as 'tackling barriers to learning').
3. The social justice model adopted by the Northern Ireland Assembly has been defined in such a way that 'group targeting' is less likely.

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Wider trends about young men

Boys' underachievement cannot be viewed just within the school environment; a range of issues impact directly on boys and young men and in some cases men in general. We review a number of these that have a bearing on this review.

Changes in the workplace

There have always been significant numbers of boys who have underachieved. However, since the decline of industry and manufacturing the workplace has been much less accepting of them (DENI, 1997). It is the changes in the workplace that have raised concerns about boys' underachievement, primarily because of the mismatch between young men and the growth in areas where either young women are more in demand (such as service industries), and / or pay is lower than young men expect (Lloyd, 1999).

Unlike the 1970s there is now a direct correlation between low qualifications and both joblessness and being trapped in low pay and unskilled work. Since the 1980s girls' achievement has equalled and subsequently passed that of young men, which has left significant numbers of boys at the wrong end of the labour market or out of it completely (Lloyd, 1999).

Limited opportunities for school leavers (at 16), especially with the stiff competition from students and others as well as the recent encouragement to stay in education (in 2007/08, 89% of 16- and 17-year-old young men stayed on in education and training compared to 63.1% in 1999/2000) have all compounded underqualified young men's entry and movement in the workplace (Northern Ireland Assembly, 2006).

School exclusions

There were almost 7,000 permanent school exclusions in the UK in 2008/09. While there has been a steady decline since 2003/04 this has been as a result of government policy making it harder for schools to exclude pupils (see National Literacy Trust).

However, there are some who have argued that schools have continued to exclude similar numbers, but using different ways of 'sending pupils home' to hide those exclusions (Munn, Lloyd & Cullen, 2000).

While there has been some interesting research reviewing the 'invisibility' and lack of concern for the girls in this group (see Osler, Street, Lall & Vincent, 2002), boys make up four-fifths of all exclusions, which has not changed. Black Caribbean pupils are three times as likely to be permanently excluded as white British pupils.

Statistics (Scottish Executive, 2002) show that the single most important reason for exclusion was general or persistent disobedience (23.7%), followed by verbal abuse of members of staff (16.6%), physical abuse of fellow pupils (13.2%) and then by aggressive or threatening behaviour (9.7%). The second and fourth categories here indicate that about a quarter of exclusions (26.3%) are the result of verbal abuse of teachers and aggressive and threatening behaviour (Kane, 2007).

Boys are more likely to be excluded (both permanently and for a fixed period) at a younger age than girls, with very few girls being excluded during the primary years. The most common point for both boys and girls to be excluded is at ages 13 and 14 (equivalent to year groups 9 and 10); around 54% of all permanent exclusions were of pupils from these age groups (DCSF, 2008).

Link between crime and low educational attainment

While direct causal links between crime and low educational achievement are hard to establish (Rutter & Rutter, 1993), numerous studies have found a range of school-related factors that heighten the risk of young people getting involved in anti-social and criminal behaviour.

A Home Office (2005) survey of 'young people, crime and antisocial behaviour' found a strong association between being male, a disruptive school environment and personality traits such as 'hyperactivity, impulsivity, sensation-seeking, poor concentration and risk-taking' with those individuals prone to antisocial behaviour.

Links between poverty and educational achievement

The causal link between poverty and low educational achievement is much stronger and well established. Goodman & Gregg (2010) report 'that educational deficits emerge early in children's lives, even before entry into school, and widen throughout childhood.' Even by the age of three there is a considerable gap in cognitive test scores between children in the poorest fifth of the population compared with those from better-off backgrounds. This gap widens as children enter and move through the schooling system, especially during primary school years. 'Analysis of the Millennium Cohort Study showed big differences in cognitive development between children from rich and poor backgrounds at the age of three, and this gap widened by age five. There were similarly large gaps in young children's social and emotional well-being at these ages.'

Morris, Nelson & Stoney (1999), in their review of literature, found that it was the cumulative impact of risk factors, which included poverty, low achievement and poor school attendance that led to poor outcomes for young people.

In *Learning to Labour*, Willis (1977) showed how the boys in his study were actively constructing social class relations during the last two years of schooling and doing so in terms of their gender and social class identities. Their anti-school behaviour as they moved towards the end of schooling was interpreted by Willis as preparation for the 'resistance within accommodation' that they would practice as workers within an industrial capitalist economy. Arnot (2004) notes criticisms of *Learning to Labour*, including the charge that it commits the reader to a 'highly romanticised, celebratory view of the working-class lads.' In spite of such criticisms, the influence of Willis's work has been lasting.

Arnot, in reviewing the impact of Willis's study, notes that Willis had shown the ways in which different masculinities were created, regulated and reproduced within the school setting; an area explored by a number of researchers through the 1990s and into the present decade. Arnot quotes *Shaun's Story* (Reay, 2002) and showed how Shaun's white, working-class masculinity was shaped by two compelling and conflicting influences – his family and his peer group at school. Shaun's conflict required heroic efforts to secure his continued approval by both groups.

Moral panic about boys

Some have seen the re-emergence of concerns about boys' underachievement in the '90s as linked with a longer term 'moral panic' about boys and young men. Classic works such as Willis (1977) and Robins & Cohen (1978), focussed on social class and being male. The media hysterics, reincarnated in headlines such as 'The Failing Sex' (The Guardian, 1996) and 'Classroom Rescue for Britain's Lost Boys' (The Independent, 1998), were common. Authors pointed out that the '70s panic about working class boys translated to boys generally by the late '90s (Foster, Kimmel & Skelton, 2009). These same authors argue that this was at least in part because of the move from an education system that aimed to promote social justice to Conservative notions of 'freedom of choice', with decentralised and complex assessment / league table driven systems that brought to light the gender gap and in turn the moral panic about underachieving boys.

Masculinities

While statistics have provoked a broad concern about boys and underachievement, there has been a longer discourse about boys in schools which goes back as far as the mid-1980s. Askew & Ross (1988) reflected an 'anti-sexist perspective' that saw boys' sexism as a reflection of the school as a patriarchal institution. By the mid-'90s this perspective had developed into a broader approach that had masculinities at its heart.

Salisbury & Jackson (1996) suggested that 'secondary schools aren't just mirrors that reflect the macho values of the social world outside, although they are partly influenced by them ... school is a place where masculinities are actively made, negotiated, regulated and renegotiated.' The authors went on to suggest that there should be a whole-school approach that would need three different levels. The first of these would be the *institutional level* where styles of leadership, discipline methods, school culture and ethos as well as teaching styles were to be reviewed and changed. Then the *hidden curriculum level* which would look at the interactions between boys, boys and girls, boys and teachers and with the school itself, so sexist jokes, name-calling, sexual harassment as well as physical and psychological aggression and ways that boys asserted their power over each other, over girls and even over staff. The third was the *official curriculum level* which would seek to

provide teaching styles, lesson content and ways both to contain boys and to provide them with 'alternative perspectives'.

Salisbury & Jackson were not alone at the end of the '80s and into the '90s in developing approaches that aimed to challenge the core of boys' and young men's masculine behaviour and beliefs, with Mac An Ghail (1994) deconstructing boys attitudes and behaviour in schools particularly in terms of sexuality and homophobia. A parallel approach had also developed in Australia with Bob Connell and his colleagues, best illustrated through Connell (1989) and Connell *et al* (1992).

Interestingly, with the 'boys' underachievement' discourse developing, a broad strand of the literature evolved which was sympathetic to the challenging of boys' model. This was particularly consolidated 'in opposition' when some authors began to put the blame for boys' underachievement at the door of feminism, feminised schools and female teachers.

Recuperative masculinity

In sharp contrast to the challenge of masculine behaviour as described above, another response to boys has been what Lingard & Douglas (1999) have called 'recuperative masculinity'. This is where traditional boys' interests are harnessed and made part of the curriculum. In early years this might be 'superhero play' which has traditionally been banned (with gun play) because of the view that it led to aggression and violence.

While the research has been mixed, 'superhero play' has re-emerged as a way of engaging boys (see Holland, 2003). Holland and others suggest that if children (boys) are allowed to construct weapons and enact goodies / baddies and superhero scenarios with sensitive adult guidance, it would provide an entry point to imaginative play and social development rather than the beginning of the slippery slope towards anti-social behaviour.

Within primary education this may take the form of ensuring that there is an action book option for boys. A study by Smith & Wilhelm (2002) found that while boys valued school-based reading in theory, they often

rejected it in practice because this reading did not reflect their interests outside of school.

Blair & Sanford (2002) tracked a group of Canadian elementary school boys over three years. They conducted interviews, classroom observations and observations of the classroom literacy activities in which the boys were engaged. Analysis of the interviews with the boys in this study revealed five themes around which their literacy practices were constructed: **personal interest, action, success, fun, and purpose**. They concluded that if boys are to be engaged in literacy, then these are the elements that teachers need to incorporate into their teaching and learning activities.

It has been suggested that this approach is positioned in 'opposition to feminist strategies' (Ailwood & Lingard, 2001), at least in part because it is seen by some to be a reaction to the notion of 'feminisation of school'.
Feminisation or masculinisation of schools

There are strands within the literature of those arguing that schools are over-feminised and others that schools are too masculine. These tend to split in terms of early years and primary education being over-feminised while secondary education is deemed as being too masculine.

The first theme raised as evidence of the feminising of primary schooling is that of the proportion of female teachers. In spite of previous government targets the number of male teachers is on the decrease. In 1990, 18.8% of primary teachers were male and by 2000 this was down to 16.4% (DfES, 2001) while this number shrank to 12.9% by 2009/10 (General Teaching Council, 2010). However, Skelton (2001) highlights the fact that even though at classroom level males are outnumbered, they make up 40% of head teachers. This means that while one in four male teachers will become a head, only one in thirteen females will do the same.

The second theme is that the effect of this 'feminisation' leads to a favouring of girls over boys through daily routines and practices; types of discipline; social interactions; low expectations of boys; and even styles of assessment (see Delamont, 1999). Skelton (2002) suggests that there are those who spread the blame for boys' underachievement across genetics; changes in the family and society as a whole; and the

'feminine' in school organisation and practice (see for example Noble & Bradford, 2000), while others who lay the blame squarely at the feminisation of teaching (see, for example, Gurian, 1998).

Skelton and others have argued strongly against this perspective and go on to argue that management regimes; competition; and the primary focus on public testing reflect the masculinising of primary schooling (also see Haywood & Mac an Ghail, 2001). Skelton also goes on to highlight (after quoting Haywood & Mac an Ghail) that this feminisation argument suggests that the 'masculine and feminine functions of teachers' roles are not characteristics or properties of male and female bodies. Rather, they are masculinised and feminised discourses, which are woven into current policies on and practices of primary schooling.'

Anti-school masculinities

A number of attributes and behaviours have been consistently highlighted as barriers to boys' achievement and different authors interpret and understand these in different ways.

Shipman & Hicks (1998) have suggested that 'the most important factor that prevents the motivation of boys, identified by the pupils and teachers alike, was the boys' peer group culture. The presence of friends in the group made the boys work less hard. The peer group observed in school was not an anti-work but a pro-social group... Within the peer group the boys worked to establish their self-esteem through social interaction not academic performance.'

Younger & Warrington (2005) suggest in 'schools many boys strive to construct and mould themselves into this version of masculinity, to become 'a real man', 'a typical lad', 'one of the boys'' and go on to argue that these boys need to feel accepted by other boys; act within 'peer group norms' and have a sense of belonging.

This is not of course new, Willis (1977) described the 'lads' and Connell (1984) 'cool guys' as groupings that usually saw themselves as separate and often in conflict with teachers and the school as a whole. 'Laddish culture' and 'laddish behaviour' re-emerged in terms of drinking, anti-social behaviour and within schools as behaviour that impacted negatively on everyone within the classroom and became

shorthand for a predominantly working class masculine identity. Similar notions but with different descriptions that cut across race and culture, with Major (2001) coining the phrase 'cool pose'.

Jackson (2002) suggests that boys employ a number of strategies to avoid failure such as 'procrastination, withdrawal of effort and rejection of academic work,' while Epstein *et al* (1998) suggest a more subtle variation where boys avoid the appearance of working, in an attempt to achieve while at the same time maintaining their status with the 'lads'.

A number of authors have highlighted how subject matter can reinforce masculine and un-masculine identities. West (1996) has suggested that football has such high status for many boys that not liking football is enough to exclude or marginalise some boys. Anything from working hard, doing as a teacher asks, liking English or indeed reading are all activities that are seen by some boys as feminine or gay (see Martino, 1995 and Mac an Ghail, 1994).

Wider Trends about Young Men (Northern Ireland)

Many of the contextual issues outlined in the section above are reflected strongly in Northern Ireland. There has been a similar decline of industry and other full-time traditional male jobs and an increase in the retail and service sectors. 'While the number of manufacturing jobs in Northern Ireland fell by over 13,500 (13.7 %) in the pre-recession period between 2001 and 2006, the ten year period from 1996 saw a 30% increase in the number of jobs in the service sector. The result was that in 2007, four out of every five jobs (79%) in Northern Ireland were in the service sector. Just over one in ten jobs (12%) were in manufacturing and 6% in construction.' (Gray and Horgan, 2009).

The Labour Force Survey (LFS) shows a rise in youth unemployment to 20% in Northern Ireland (NI), which is more than double the overall unemployment rate. The Equal Opportunities Review (2010) suggests that there are long lasting consequences lying in wait for young men (and women) such as lower wages, underemployment and a higher chance of future unemployment throughout their lifetimes as well as damage to confidence and self-esteem.

Within the United Kingdom, Northern Ireland has the lowest employment rate for the age group (16-24). In part this can be attributed to the higher numbers of young people staying on at school or college, but Northern Ireland also has a significant number of young people not in education or training. In Northern Ireland it is estimated that 15% of all sixteen- to twenty-four-year-olds and 12% of sixteen- to eighteen-year-olds are not in education or training (NI Assembly Debates, 18/11/2008). Overall, in 2008, the UK ranked 23rd out of 28 in the OECD's league table of young people not in education, employment or training (Department for Enterprise, 2007?).

The proportion of male young claimants in NI is approximately 2.9 times that of females, which compares to a UK average of 2.2 males to every female (Bennett, 2010).

The impact of poverty on educational attainment is well documented. (Department of Education, 2001) Northern Ireland assessment data for 2002/03, illustrates a link between social disadvantage and education performance. There is a gap between the performance of pupils in the

most advantaged schools as compared with the most disadvantaged schools and between pupils eligible for Free School Meals (FSMs) and those not eligible for FSMs. International evidence demonstrates that these disparities are found across all developed countries (UNICEF, 2002).

Northern Ireland has a much lower level of school exclusion than Wales, England or Scotland. For example in 1994/95 there were 12,458 school exclusions (0.159 per cent of school population) in England, compared to only 62 (0.018 per cent of school population) in Northern Ireland for the same period. While the number in Northern Ireland has increased, England still has nine times (0.01% compared to 0.09%) the proportion of Northern Ireland (Parsons, 2010).

The majority of the pupils expelled were male. All expulsions involved pupils of post-primary age, eight of whom were in Key Stage 3 and fourteen in Key Stage 4. The three most common reasons for expulsion were physical attacks on staff which accounted for 22.73% of expulsions, physical attacks on other pupils (22.73% of expulsions) and substance abuse (DENI, 2011).

Barr, A, Kilpatrick, R & Lundy, L (2000) suggest the very low numbers in Northern Ireland was down to the smaller number of schools and smaller class sizes which made the negotiation of problems easier and in turn prevented exclusions. Interestingly, an earlier survey carried out by the Department of Education for Northern Ireland (1999) found that most schools did not identify the behaviour of pupils as a problem.

The National Association of Schoolmasters Union and Women Teachers have suggested that exclusions were 'linked to a rise in violence in schools, particularly violence directed at teachers, and [they] defend the use of exclusion as a necessary tool to deal with this threat to teachers. There is a feeling that the use of suspensions or exclusions is becoming increasingly used as a means of control – many teachers simply feel there isn't an effective alternative.' (Torney, 2003).

Not surprisingly what discussion there has been about masculinities, has been contextualised within the conflict and 'troubles'. Harland (2000) found that the fourteen- to sixteen-year-old Belfast young men he interviewed 'clung desperately to narrow and contradictory

interpretations of masculinity, believing that men should be powerful, strong, brave, intelligent, healthy, sexy, mature, and in control of every aspect of their lives. In reality, however, their lives were full of contradictions as most young men felt powerless; feared the threat of daily violence; were labelled stupid in school; did not pay attention to their health needs – particularly their mental health; had limited sexual education; rarely asked for support; and felt they were perceived by adults as being immature.’ He goes on to argue that ‘appreciating these contradictions is important to understanding internal pressures that many young males feel in regard to how they construct their masculine identity and what it means to be a man.’ (Harland, 2009).

Other publications (see for example Harland, 1998, YouthAction Northern Ireland, 2002 and Lloyd, 2003) have all constructed their descriptions of boys and young men within the context of masculinity.

Horgan (2007) interviewed 220 children aged four to eleven in advantaged and disadvantaged schools in Northern Ireland, and talked to parents and teachers and found a strong link between poverty and school experience.

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Why are boys underachieving?

Not surprisingly the most hotly contested part of the literature (after 'Are boys underachieving?') is 'Why are boys underachieving?' One of the most articulate of these is Epstein *et al* (1998), who suggested that there were three dominant discourses. These and others are described below.

Epstein's first discourse suggests that there are a range of arguments 'which blame women for the failure of boys. If it is not women teachers, it is mothers, if not mothers, it is feminists; most often it is a combination.' This theory is entitled 'poor boys'.

Epstein's second discourse is that of a failing school. Rather than individualising the problem in boys themselves, these arguments sit within the argument that it is down to the school to get the best effectively from its pupils. If a boy leaves with few or no qualifications then it is the school's fault.

Finally Epstein's third discourse is built around biology, psychology and traditional notions of masculinity. This is a much broader perspective than Epstein suggests and can be broken down even further.

Biological and hormonal differences

Early years and primary education have always understood gender differences as biologically and physiologically based. However, there has also been a commonly held view that girls had an initial cognitive advantage due to their reaching physical maturity at an earlier age, but that boys overtook girls in the teenage years (Shelton, 2007). Brain size; right side and left side of the brain; differences in bridging structure between left and right; communication, special awareness and fine motor skills; different rates of maturation; differences in language development; hormone differences and brain development and bursts of testosterone (for boys) have all been highlighted as gendered (see Gurian, 2001 and Macoby, 1998).

Within early years in particular these biological understandings have tended to be taken as 'truths' leaving practitioners with a view that nothing can really be done about boys' general slow development

except wait for them to catch up. So when virtually all children who have speech delay are boys, this is just taken as biologically based and therefore something that will change eventually. However, Browne (2004), highlighting the dramatic changes that have led to greater understanding of how the brain works and develops and also looking a little harder about the strength of the science in some of the previous studies, has found that most are not quite as we believed.

The view within education for example has usually been that males have a fixed level of testosterone and those who have high levels are more aggressive and show more masculine traits. Browne, however, suggests that the evidence tells us it is a more complex picture:

‘A study of 28 pre-school children, both boys and girls, aged four and five years old has revealed some interesting patterns in testosterone levels (Sanchez-Martin *et al*, 2000). When children were playing amicably testosterone levels were low, but being on the receiving end of aggression raised the testosterone levels of both girls and boys. However, when the testosterone levels of the girls and boys are looked at separately it would appear that there is a positive correlation in boys between testosterone and serious aggression in social situations, but not for playful fighting. This pattern was not observable in the girls in the sample.’

Anecdotal and early co-relational evidence suggests that higher levels of circulating testosterone in men are associated with increases in male-typical behaviours, such as physical aggression and anger. However, much of this research has been observational, retrospective and / or cross-sectional in nature, making it difficult to render conclusions about the causal relations between testosterone and male behaviour (Archer, 1991 and O’Connor *et al*, 2002).

Browne concludes from her review of the science that ‘research findings not only highlight the complex way in which hormones and behaviour are linked, but also demonstrate how ‘plastic’ the brain is, in that it continues to develop and change in line with life’s experiences. In view of this, the evolutionary theory begins to look somewhat simplistic.’

Boys’ learning styles

Extensions on the biological perspectives are those of gendered learning styles. If boys and girls are brain-different, and therefore develop and in turn learn at different paces and in different ways, some learning styles will suit boys and others will suit girls.

Some have argued strongly that children go to school too early, offering the Scandinavian model as a more appropriate one (see note 1), but early years assessments have also highlighted that girls often take to the school environment quicker and more easily than many boys. Some authors have suggested that boys' slower development in fine-motor skills and cognitive skills generally suggest that seven is a much more appropriate starting age (Bidulph, 1998).

The literature based on gendered learning styles is extensive (see for example Noble & Bradford, 2000 and Bleach, 1998). In fact many of the school-based strategies for addressing boys' underachievements have relied heavily on boys' learning styles. The view that boys are predisposed to learning in particular ways – and therefore if we get out of the way and let them learn everything will be fine – has some merits.

But it is also a view that suggests gender is determinist in nature and often leads to a limited approach that appears to many as over-gendered. Reducing boys to only kinaesthetic learners by introducing lessons that are activity-based, competitive with activity books, and ICT focussed with short-term targets, may all have an impact, but it risks narrowing boys' underachievement to a 'quick-fix' of teaching and learning styles. Interestingly, in an analysis of both teachers' and students' learning styles Younger & Warrington (2005) found that boys and girls could not be neatly characterised by the traditional learning styles of 'visual', 'auditory' and kinaesthetic and concluded that learning was most successful when teachers used a mix of all three styles and planned lessons 'which provide variety, activity and interactions, to access different modalities of learning.' This confirmed Coffield *et al* (2004) and their review of learning styles.

Children as active and passive learners of gender

An important, but relatively unexplored element, is how exactly do boys and girls learn about gender? MacNaughton (2000) coined the phrase 'sponge model of identity' where young people are thought to 'soak up

social justice and equity messages through non-stereotypical materials, activities and resources.’ Based on role modelling theory developed by Bandura (1977) this still has a surprising amount of currency and suggests that young people soak up what is offered; but the question remains from where? Gilligan (1982) suggested that the process was more of a dialogue than a soaking or mirroring. This is where young people are much more active participants in discussing issues and accepting some while rejecting others and thereby developing an identity. The teacher’s role in this is in helping the child to ‘gain voice’.

An alternative view quoted here from MacNaughton is that of Gherardi (1999) who suggested we ‘learn identity through several inter-related theatrical processes: telling stories, playing roles, critiquing our performances and being critiqued by others. We reshape our stories and our roles as we interact with others and with ourselves.... This allows us to think of our identity as personal to us, but at the same time socially situated and negotiated. Identity is not merely absorbed, but has to be worked at with others who are actively engaged with us.’

Thorne (1993) in her well observed study of gendered play, saw gender differences as situational. She suggested that boys and girls were able to turn off and on how gendered their play was and was interested in the times, for example, that children referred to each other (and the form of play) as individual or gendered. There were times when a girl might say ‘let’s chase the boys’ and others when she might say ‘let’s chase Ryan,’ suggesting that this reflected a more consciously gendered set of boundaries. At other times (in the classroom, for example) the focus of gender was almost non-existent. Connell (2002), concludes from his reading of Thorne that:

‘They [boys and girls] are not passively ‘socialised’ into a sex role. They are, of course, learning things from the adult world around them: lessons about available identities, lessons about performance, and – regrettably – lessons about hatred. But they do this actively, and on their own terms. They find gender interesting and sometimes exciting. They move into and out of gender-based groupings. They sometimes shore up, and sometimes move across, gender boundaries. They even play with and against the gender dichotomy itself.’

Of course these four brief descriptions lead to quite different ways of approaching aspects of what we might do. From the simplistic 'sponge model' through to the much more complex situational (and often contradictory) model offered by Thorne, they make our understanding of the gendered, and in turn the educational, process quite different.

Absence of boys' voices

Most of the time boys have been the object of studies rather than the subject. The current literature suffers to a very large extent by the absence of boys and young men's voices, although there are some very significant exceptions. Willis (1977) will always be the benchmark for anyone studying working class boys. Willis observed, interviewed and generally engaged with a group of 'lads' for the last two years of their school careers and into their first few months of employment. His work in a Midlands school and community highlights the world from the young men's perspective. His critique of school, teachers and of what is important posed quite a challenge to schools, but tracks of dialogue highlight some critical themes about the school, but also boys and young men's attitudes and motivation (or lack of it).

So, for example:

'What will they have to look back on (referring to boys who study and work hard)? Sitting in a classroom, sweating their bollocks off, you know, while we've been.... I mean look at the things we can look back on, fighting on the Pakis, fighting on the Jas [Jamaicans]. Some of the things we've done on teachers, it'll be a laff when we look back on it.'³

A range of themes raised by Willis has been ever-present in the boys and underachievement debate. None of these are more obvious than the culture that some boys bring into school, which is in direct conflict with school authority, ethos and values. In terms of the almost non-existent motivation for these 'lads' to make an effort, their transition into work does not require qualifications therefore this makes their time at school an irrelevance to the workplace. While this has changed significantly much of Willis's research is as relevant 34 years as it was when it was written. So influential has Willis been that his book has been revisited by

³ *Learning to Labour p14*, Willis, P: Saxon House (1977)

Dolby & Dimitriadis (2004), and Arnot (1999) in particular brings strong themes of the 'anti-school culture' masculinity as oppositional and 'laddish', which she and other authors in the volume contextualise into a multi-cultural and race environment.

While authors such as Robins & Cohen (1978) brought the views of boys and young men, they approached this through description rather than dialogue. While they still focussed on working class young men in the inner city, their observational study focussed on community issues such as conflict, violence, territory, authority (particularly the police), football and gangs.

A five-year educational research project in New South Wales, Australia drew strongly from observations and interviews, resulting in a series of publications, culminating in *Making the Difference* by Connell, Ashenden, Kessler & Dowsett (1982). A close inter-weaving of theory and dialogue made this a highly influential book in developing the more 'social justice'-based approach to the boys and underachievement debate and practice in Australia.

Another decade passed before Mac an Ghail (1994) drew heavily on interview material to describe three groups of working-class heterosexual males: the 'Macho Lads', the 'Academic Achievers' and the 'New Enterprisers', as well as the middle-class group of 'Real Englishmen' he encountered in one predominantly working-class school.

We jump then to 2002 before a 'voices'-driven volume about boys and young men appears, written by Frosh, Phoenix & Pattman (2002). In this study a significant number of boys describe how they try to build their identities somewhere between Willis's 'lads' and 'geeks', where they do well at school but don't appear to, where they are popular but also get on with their work. The authors argue that one strategy to enable them to do this was to make a much stronger distinction between themselves and the girls; the stronger the gender divide was the less they would be perceived as being not the right kind of male. This was a theme highlighted by Mac an Ghail (1994).

Connolly (2004) builds a complex analysis of class, ethnicity and gender around a series of interviews with five- and six-year-old working and middle class boys and argues that the combination of social class and the

specific forms of masculinity constructed by these boys determines who achieves and who does not. Connolly uses these interviews to highlight significant differences in boys' perceptions of gender differences, perceptions of school and levels of engagement and motivation. He characterises middle class boys as being 'fish in water' where they understand what school is for (learning, getting jobs) and enjoy the content (reading, writing, computer work and making things), while working class boys as defined as being 'fish out of water'. These boys focus on the peripheral issues (PE, playtime and activity) and they identify much of the core activity as 'boring'. Connolly, in the same way as Willis, allows the words of boys and young men to inform the theory and analysis.

While the numbers of studies that have been based on observations and interviews with boys and young men have been few, their influence has been significant. Willis, along with Connell, Ashenden, Kessler & Dowsett have impacted on policy and practice maybe because of the way they have allowed boys' and young men's voices to be heard in the way we approach boys underachievement.

The absence of men in schools

A common refrain since the mid-'90s has been 'where are the male role models?' The absence of men in childcare and primary schools, coupled with the concerns about boys' achievement, led to a government target being set (in 2001); the aim was to have a 6% male presence in the early years workforce by 2004.

As far as childcare is concerned, it is argued that children need to see both men and women in caring roles – to challenge the stereotype that caring is women's work. However, it is not always clearly defined as to what male role models are. Are they simply about enabling children to spend time with both men and women? Is it that male role models are meant to counteract the stereotypic male, by showing that men have a caring side? Or is it that men are meant to counterpose more stereotypically masculine characteristics in an almost exclusively female environment? If we pile up the absence of men in nurseries, primary schools and other male-free environments this has been seen as a major contributor to the problems that boys have.

In a study of male workers in family centres, Ruxton (1992) noted that, 'the vast majority of the staff recognised the importance of positive male role models which help to challenge the stereotypical view of men as "breadwinners" alone, and to validate their role as "carers". On the other hand, Murray (1996), in a study of childcare staff, found that 'in the childcare environment men are often sought after as workers because of the perceived need to have male role models for children.' This is seen as 'doing truck play with the boys.'

Albert Bandura (1977) argued that people learn from observing role models in day-to-day life. Closely observing '*others and forming an idea of how new behaviours are performed,*' enabled them to use this '*coded information as a guide for action.*' He suggested that '*learning from example, they are spared needless errors.*'

Bandura also suggested that we learn in this manner through television and social groups, the later being also about human interactions. He stressed our ability to remember the observed model, as well as mentally organising and rehearsing the behaviour. Finally, and importantly, we need to be motivated to re-enact behaviours and fall back on reward and punishment.

So, for example, if an *EastEnders* character does not use a condom, the storyline might have him acquiring a sexually transmitted disease. Bandura suggested that the reward / punishment factors are important in bringing the audience's attention to the behaviours. The second hand nature of this learning increases the learning experience.

Later, in 1986, Bandura refined this theory into a much more dynamic one, where the person is a much more active participant, moving away from the more passive 'sponge' approach of role modelling. The learner is able to be more selective, more critical and more questioning of the observations. So the observer would need to identify with the person being observed; the response would need to make sense and would need to be seen as appropriate by the observer.

This notion of 'role model' is at least two generations old and even academia let go of this model in the late 1980s. More complex descriptions of how boys 'learn' to become men have replaced this

'disease' model (learning how to become a man is something 'transmitted' to a boy from an adult man).

Pepperell & Smedley (1998) suggest that 'concepts of role model and socialisation theory are widely challenged in the literature on gender, but used rather unproblematically in the 'common-sense' comment around teacher recruitment in the press.' This appears to be one of those ideas that has gained momentum regardless of the absence of evidence.

There are clearly concerns. More than a quarter of England's primary schools do not have a single male teacher, it has emerged, with 4,587 school staffrooms populated solely by women (Simpson, 2009). The Training and Development Agency for Schools (TDA) surveyed 1,000 parents of primary age children and found:

- One in four were concerned that their children did not have enough interaction with male teachers;
- 26% were worried that their children would lack a male perspective on life;
- 22% were concerned their children did not have enough contact with positive male figures of authority;
- 47% did not have any contact with male teachers.

There are in fact very few studies that look at gender role modelling and its effectiveness. What studies there are, are inconclusive. For example Carrington *et al* (2005) looked at 9,000 11-year-olds and found that a 'teacher's gender has no impact on pupils' attainment or their attitudes to specific lessons' while an American study of the same year (with Year 8s) found that 'the middle-school teachers in most academic subjects at this level amplify boys' large underperformance in reading while attenuating the more modest underperformance of girls in maths and science.'

What studies there are tend to conclude that male teachers do not have a significant impact on boys' achievement. Of course all this might mean is that it isn't their maleness, but a set of attributes that the studies don't identify, let alone measure. The lack of evidence does not, of course, prove it is not of significance, but maybe proves the need to test and evaluate the importance of gender role-modelling!

Family context

There is conclusive evidence that parental involvement makes a difference to both pupils' engagement and their achievement (The Scottish Office, 2003). Usually within the same 'role modelling' debate is the absence of fathers and the impact on boys in particular.

Research indicates that active father involvement results in a positive child outcome, which include academic achievement (Hobcraft, 1998). Father-involvement in children's education at age seven predicts higher educational attainment by age 20 (in both boys and girls) and positive attitudes to school (Flouri *et al*, 2002). There is also strong evidence that early father involvement protects against delinquency in later life, especially for boys (Hobcraft, 1998).

Goldman (2005) marshals the research evidence that suggests active involvement by fathers in their children's education makes a significant impact, but that there are some barriers that exist within schools to fathers' involvement.

Why are boys underachieving? Northern Ireland

While gender difference is used to differentiate within statistical analyses of achievement, it has rarely been used as a primary factor in policy or practice in Northern Ireland. Type of school (grammar and secondary), religion and poverty are all seen as more significant in understanding boys' underachievement.

Connolly (2004) in his analysis of primary schools in Belfast looked at the interplay between social class, deprivation and gender, while Purvis (2011) stressed the interplay between religion, class and gender. Previous research commissioned by the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) (2001) looking at participation rates in further and higher education in the Belfast Education and Library Board (BELB) area, identified links between gender, religious background and economic status. This resistance (and strength) to a one-dimensional analysis is a common theme within studies related to Northern Ireland.

Interestingly, Epstein (1998) suggested that there are a range of arguments 'which blame women for the failure of boys. If it is not women teachers, it is mothers, if not mothers, it is feminists; most often it is a combination.' These arguments have not really claimed any footing within Northern Ireland. This may well be in part because other factors (religion and streamed school system) are much more dominant, but also the strength of the women's sector has probably meant that work targeting boys has been within a gender equality framework rather

than a 'poor boys' approach (for example the gender unit at Youth Action NI).

While biological and hormonal differences have been a prominent part of the boys and underachievement debate, this has not been the case in Northern Ireland. In fact Northern Ireland has much more in common with the Australian equality view of gender than what is often an essentialist discourse in the USA and, on occasions, Britain.

“The concept ‘gender’ is used for social constructions of femininity and masculinity, hence gender inequalities are inequalities that arise from the particular constructions of men’s and women’s social roles in any given society. That is, they are not inequalities that are inherent in biological differences between the sexes in themselves, though they have often been thought of as such.”

Breitenbach, E & Galligan, Y (2004).

This discussion paper was followed, in 2006, by the publication by the OFMDFM of its *Gender equality strategy: a strategic framework for action to promote gender equality for women and men 2006-2016* which provided a framework of objectives by decision-makers and policy-makers in government to promote gender equality. The Department of Education produced a 'Gender equality action plan for women 2008-2011' and, in November 2008, the Equality Commission published *Every Child an Equal Child*, which highlighted that boys leaving school tend to

be less qualified than girls and are less likely to progress to higher education.

While it could be argued that an equality and more complex analysis can water down the gender component, on occasions (but not within education) more one-dimensional studies come through. Rugkasa et al (2003) explored ways in which ten- and eleven-year-olds in Northern Ireland expressed perceptions of gender ideology while discussing the topic of smoking. The authors concluded that 'in order to deliver successful health promotion interventions, it is crucial to understand and address differences based on gender as it may partly explain differences in smoking experimentation and prevalence.'

This maybe highlights the strength in researching one dimension (gender), and provide help as it could to identify details useful to the policy maker and practitioner in ways that the equality framework may fall short.

Lloyd (2009), in a series of interviews with heads of Year 10 in Northern Ireland secondary schools, generally found an absence of an understanding of gender within strategies tackling underachievement. While interviewees recognised the predominance of boys in their lower sets, they generally did not take this into account in terms of learning styles or teaching approaches. There was a separation between identifying the problem and what strategies could be used to solve it.

Apart from Connolly (2004) there are very few examples of studies that focus on how children learn about gender in Northern Ireland. Again this is probably as a result of other factors taking priority, rather than a view that it has no significance.

There is also an absence of boys' voices in the underachievement literature. Interestingly, within such a major study as DENI (2008) where PricewaterhouseCoopers was commissioned to analyse and make recommendations to address the 'long tail' of underachievement in Northern Ireland schools, they did not talk directly to young people. This is not uncommon in statutory-based investigations; it is more often left to the voluntary sector. Whether this is because statutory services see the voluntary sector as nearer and more able to do this task more effectively is difficult to gauge, but the result is that the voices of boys in particular have only been heard through investigations by the Centre for Young Men's Studies, and Youth Action NI. Having said that, there are of course other statutory agencies such as the Health Development Agency that have developed strong practical initiatives on the basis of extensive interviews with young people. Also, of course, there is the Young Life and Times (YLT) project and a range of other 'voices' projects and initiatives, all of which makes the absence of young men's views about underachievement even more surprising.

In the British literature the absence of men in schools and the importance of fathers' active involvement in their children's education has led to a call for more men in primary education in particular (whether male teachers or fathers). Maybe as a result of the role model

debate (boys need men), and strong advocates such as the Fatherhood Institute who have driven a number of initiatives, that has not really been seen in Northern Ireland.

However, figures released by the Department of Education (2010) found that there are 244 primary schools in Northern Ireland with no male teachers and that men make up only 15% of teachers employed at primary schools. This announcement led to SDLP South Antrim MLA Thomas Burns calling on Education Minister Caitríona Ruane to make primary school teaching '*more attractive*' to men. He went on to say: '*It goes without saying that all staff must be recruited fairly and equitably, so it is up to the Minister of Education to make the profession more attractive to men.*

'It is important to avoid stereotypes, but it is undeniable that the profession has long been dominated by women and we can't really say why.

'A mixed staff with strong authority figures and good role models right across the board would be ideal.'

However, this was not the first time this call had been made. Stranmillis University College launched a 'Males into Teaching' project aiming to promote teaching among the male student population which involved events and opportunity to shadow teachers in their work.

This initiatives were as a result of 'government, teaching unions and parents becoming increasingly concerned at the small number of male teachers in Ulster's school.'

Interestingly, the involvement of fathers has been a much more recent issue in Northern Ireland, and has not really entered the underachievement debate. However, The Millennium Cohort Study Third Survey (2008) found that:

‘61 per cent of Northern Irish mothers reported reading to their five-year-old child daily, compared to 50 per cent of mothers in Wales. The equivalent figures for England and Scotland were 52 per cent and 56 per cent. Also, fathers in Northern Ireland appear to be slightly more likely to read to their five-year-olds every day. More than one in five (21 per cent) said they did so, compared to 20 per cent of Scottish fathers and 15 per cent of fathers in England and Wales.’

In this brief review of the reasons for Boys Underachieving, two points are significant:

1. Boys’ underachievement has consistently been understood within an equality and complex framework. This has its strengths, particularly in terms of a consistency of approach, and little argument (or distraction) from a common target. It also means that gender is seen as one dimension of a complex story.
2. While this model has its strengths, it also has its weaknesses. The complex story also means that important learning about boys’ underachievement, which is required to put policy and strategy into practice, is not always available.

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School strategies and approaches

Arnot *et al* (1998) have suggested that 'the overwhelming message from research is that there are no simple explanations for the gender gap in performance or any simple solutions; in any one context several factors are likely to have an influence.

'Research also shows that what happens outside school can affect boys' and girls' performance in school. Factors affecting young people's attitudes and motivation include the nature of employment opportunities within the locality of the school, traditional expectations in the community about patterns of 'male' and 'female' employment and perceptions of the relevance of education to future lives and life chances.'

Sukhnandan *et al* (2000) advocated caution about standardised approaches such as simplistic notions about learning preferences and instead recommended an approach that matched the context of the school and local community.

Younger & Warrington (2005) pick up the same theme advocating a nuanced approach. They advocate an 'achievement for all' approach, and, while acknowledging that more boys than girls underachieve, they argue against any strategy or approach that creates a backlash against the girls. They go on to distance themselves from a 'homogeneity of gender' which stresses 'one size fits all'. Not all boys are 'emotionally neutral and competitive; they ask for a recognition of boys' individuality and a broad range of perspectives on masculinity. They go on to say 'that the issue of 'underachievement' does not affect all boys and that an uncritical view of boys as underachieving because of a laddish masculinity ignores the fact that, in many schools, boys are achieving high levels of success in academic, community, sporting and artistic domains.'

Lloyd (2009) suggested five distinct groups, when addressing the issue of underachieving boys:

1. *Able and behaved* (boys who are academically focussed and generally well behaved);

2. *Able with attitude* (boys who are academically able, but too often get into conflict with teachers or other boys and end up off point – they are often poor communicators);
3. *Able but distracted* (boys who are academically able, but have their priorities elsewhere, such as being social, playing sport, being carers at home or who are generally focussed anywhere other than at school);
4. *Less able and behaved* (boys who struggle because of poor basic skills or a learning difficulty, but have a willingness and motivation to learn);
5. *Less able with attitude* (boys who struggle with their work, who become unengaged in class and are quite able to disrupt others and get involved in conflict with teachers and peers and are usually poor communicators).

He argues that 'each of these groups will require different approaches and strategies and will impact on the school community in different ways. Targeted support on sub-groups 2 and 3 would have a significant impact on school achievement rates, as many of those not quite achieving five GCSE grades A*-C are likely to fall within these groups. Group 4 may require a significant input in terms of their work, while group 5 may require a significant input on their behaviour as well as work related support, in order to enable them to move out of these groups.'

While we will not group strategies and approaches in this way, we would suggest that these grouping are borne in mind as the strategies and approaches are considered.

Given the size of the literature it is surprising how little of it concentrates on doing something about the issue. In our review of strategies and approaches we have been surprised by how few initiatives have been delivered and evaluated. We have drawn almost exclusively from two publications, Younger & Warrington (2005) and the Ofsted review of boys' achievement in secondary schools (2003).

Younger and Warrington draw from the DfES-funded project on Raising Boys' Achievement, which delivered and evaluated a range of different methods and approaches in 28 secondary and 24 primary schools between the years 2000 and 2004.

The Ofsted survey was based on 53 school inspections and a further review of school data to identify the elements that contributed to 'boys' results improving faster than girls.' While these elements were not evaluated as such, the regularity of their presence makes them of interest.

Whole school approaches

Ethos

Ofsted (2003) also reported that the most effective schools in their survey 'created a positive learning environment where peer pressure worked for them. Pupils responded positively to an ethos that encouraged and stimulated high standards.' A positive attitude to all pupils, a close partnership with parents, a strong sense of belonging to the school community, pastoral and learning support, a broad range of extra-curricular activities, a consistent approach to behaviour and clear boundaries and encouragement rather than sanctions were all seen as important elements of the school ethos.

Younger & Warrington (2005) also found that an 'achievement culture' was a pre-condition for success. They found that even a 'minority of staff who had low expectations of underachieving boys, who were willing to support motivated students who were engaged in learning, but did not see it as their responsibility to offer positive opportunities to those that were anti-learning' could negatively impact on the school ethos.

Management

Ofsted (2003) found the role of the senior management team was critical. If they were not actively involved then there was not a 'whole-school' focus to the issue. It is important to provide training opportunities for staff; gendered data collection and a range of other initiatives and investment of resources.

Behaviour management

Ofsted (2003) reported that 'a feature of the schools where boys were doing well was the consistent approach to behaviour, which was very clear to staff and pupils alike.' However, it was thought to be the

combination of high expectations and learning rather than just behaviour management that made these schools effective.

Tracking

Ofsted (2003) found that effective schools collected assessment data by gender and were therefore aware of differences in the boys' and girls' results (even if they did not analyse this data to identify trends). These 'schools make the pupil data widely available, making teachers aware of the range of potential in their classes so they can plan more engaging lessons and set individual targets for pupils. Subject departments use prior achievement data to organise pupils into sets.'

Where pupils were seen to be falling behind in their coursework, attention and support was offered quickly and in these schools pupils valued this individual attention and it helped to solidify the relationship with a teacher. Boys were thought to work harder when they knew they were being monitored closely.

Learning Culture

Ofsted (2003) found that in schools 'where anti-learning peer pressure is a major barrier to boys' achievement, close monitoring can give boys an excuse to succeed.'

Myhill (2002) found that 'underachievers take little part in whole-class teaching episodes and that underachieving boys withdraw from positive class interactions very early in their school careers.' Meanwhile Ofsted (2003) found that early identification of disengagement was important and that it was crucial to put in place strategies that enabled boys to catch-up before they started to give-up and withdraw.

Classes for boys

Single gender classes have been shown to improve achievement (but not universally). However, they have been shown to be effective in creating a less pressured atmosphere conducive to learning where boys are more able to concentrate, feel more confident, feel more involved and are more willing to ask questions.

Younger & Warrington (2005) advocate single-sex classes, but with a number of caveats. They are enthusiastic because they believe single-sex classes for boys can 'offer opportunities to develop a more conducive classroom atmosphere for learning,' but at the same time steer away from the 'boy-friendly pedagogy'. The distinction is one of sexual stereotyping for the authors, so for example they believe that approaches built on generalisations about boys (such as they are all competitive or kinaesthetic learners) backfires on as many boys as it benefits, while a more nuanced assessment of the boys can 'establish and enjoyable environment for learning.'

Interestingly, Younger & Warrington (2005) found that 'boy-friendly' approaches such as 'acknowledging the interests of boys, involving boys in texts and materials, investing in ICT [and] having a 'Boyszone' in the school library' worked, but only when they were carefully contextualised within specific schools and when the impact on the girls was acknowledged and managed.

Mentoring

A survey carried out by HMIs in Wales (1996) found that 'most schools identify, and support through 'mentoring' systems, those pupils who are underachieving and who could achieve a C grade or above at GCSE. In most cases, significantly, more boys than girls have been identified in this way. Such approaches have a positive effect on boys' general attitudes to school life as well as the improvement of their examination performance.'

West (2001) advocated mentoring because boys are strongly influenced by peers. 'Males need a mate and ... boys want very much to be accepted by other boys.' He advocates paired writing sessions, bringing back former pupils and to 'use year 12 boys to mentor a younger boy who is underachieving.'

Challenge / reward and motivation

West (2001) has argued that 'boys are often disengaged from schooling; they need more incentives than girls to work well at school. Boys seem to need praise as much as girls, but get it less often.'

Lloyd (2009), in his case study of Ashfield School, found strong incentives offered to boys all the way through their school careers. But while this was an important element, incentives were only one part of the school's success.

Talk to boys about boys themselves

Wilson (2005) advocates 'engaging boys in dialogue about how they learn, as well as ensuring that a balanced approach is incorporated in the classroom.' Wilson is also concerned about boys' self-esteem and suggests that this is a significant barrier which leads boys to give up. Addressing this is advocated, but with no real definition suggested as to how.

Seating in class

A survey carried out by HMIs in Wales (1996) found that 'in more than two-thirds of the lessons observed, teachers gave too little attention to where boys and girls sat in the classroom. Overall, boy-only groups and pairs within classes were generally less effective than mixed-sex groups and pairs in terms of output, their contribution to the lesson and the complexity of the language they used.'

In the classroom

Teachers' approach

Ofsted (2003) concluded that 'while girls often manage to learn despite lacklustre teaching, the matter may be more critical for boys. There is some evidence that boys are more likely than girls to become disruptive or to give up when faced with a teacher they do not respect.'

A whole range of approaches were thought to be effective. They include carefully structured work in lessons; clear objectives; real-life contextual settings; well-focussed short-term tasks; quick feedback; elements of fun and competition; variety of activities; use of ICT; high expectations; clearly given teacher direction; quick-fire questioning and texts that appealed to boys. Boys were thought to need more help making their replies and answers more detailed and rich, which teachers need to draw out of them.

‘Effective teachers were able to encourage independent thinking, problem-solving and creativity while providing a secure structure for learning and giving clear guidance on the time-scales and standards expected.’

Learning styles

While the same authors have been somewhat sceptical of the learning styles debate about boys, Younger & Warrington (2005) do advocate the value of raising awareness of preferred learning styles, both for teachers and pupils. They found that when boys were aware of their own preferred learning styles they were able to use this to good effect. Teacher awareness, leading to more creative planning and assessment, coupled with a matching of pupil expectation, had a very positive effect on boys, especially as they progressed through the school.

Subject specific

Ofsted (2003) found that templates and discussion frames, with some ‘boy-friendly’ English texts (such as comparing Billy Liar and Blood Brothers) could be beneficial. While some of the approaches are similar to the list above, English teachers found that encouraging boys to think and reflect on their first answers helped boys achieve more depth in their answers; using spider diagrams and charts and good examples from other pupils’ work helped show boys how to improve their writing. The use of writing frames and other scaffolding helped weaker pupils to interrogate texts and draw conclusions.

Alternative curricula

For boys who had become disaffected there is evidence to suggest that they were re-engaged in education through an alternative curriculum to the usual GCSE courses. Ofsted (2003) found that the introduction of applied GCSE courses and the Increased Flexibility Programme (which funds vocational courses for 14- to 16-year-olds in colleges and training organisations), were particularly beneficial for boys who responded well to both the ‘greater vocational element and the more adult learning environment of colleges’ with increased motivation spreading from the college course back to the school.

Ofsted (2003) also raised some concerns about this development suggesting that ‘they can be seen as a reward for bad behaviour’ and that most courses were ‘very gender-stereotyped, with girls learning about hairdressing and childcare while boys took engineering, construction and motor vehicle courses.’

Outside school

Community and family aspirations

Younger & Warrington (2005) also found that schools in deprived socio-economic environments battled against ‘a long-standing lack of educational aspirations’ where the local community often saw the school unconnected with the ‘real world’, while the school had a view that ‘boys need to want to achieve more’. They suggested that a combination of a strong learning ethos in school and increased involvement of parents in their sons’ education could raise aspirations and achievement.

Fathers’ influence

West (2001) advocates harnessing fathers’ influence. There is strong evidence to suggest that children generally (and not just boys) achieve more when their fathers are actively involved in their lives generally and in their education in particular (ref xxx) more here

School strategies and approaches NI

While we have described a range of initiatives to tackle boy's underachievement, it is not possible to make comparisons with Northern Ireland in the same way as we have in previous sections.

In our web search and enquires to the Department of Education we have found no current initiatives addressing the issues in a similar way. This is mainly because the approach used within Northern Ireland to improve standards has been focussed around all school and non-specific approaches (see *Every School a Good School. A policy for school improvement*. April 2009).

This policy suggests that the characteristics of a successful school are:

- *Child-centred provision*
- *High quality teaching and learning*
- *Effective leadership*
- *A school connected to its local community*

The school improvement policy then centres on six specific areas:

- (i) Effective leadership and an ethos of aspiration and high achievement;
- (ii) High quality teaching and learning;
- (iii) Tackling the barriers to learning that many young people face;
- (iv) Embedding a culture of self-evaluation and self-assessment and of using performance and other information to effect improvement;
- (v) Focusing clearly on support to help schools improve – with clarity too about the place of more formal interventions where there is a risk that the quality of education offered in a school is not as high as it should be;
- (vi) increasing engagement between schools, parents and families, recognising the powerful influence they and local communities exercise on educational outcomes.

These areas then provide each school with a framework, within which they develop strategies. Looking at a few school inspection reports, these also reflect the generalities of the policy, reporting on such areas as: achievements and standards; learning and teaching; curriculum provision across a wide range of subjects with a particular focus in English, mathematics and science; and leadership and management at all levels across the school.

The Department has not chosen to go the route of gender-based guidance; encouragement of any specific interventions or even targets that are boy-based.

Notes

1. Compulsory education starts at six years old in Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic, Denmark (6-7), France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Spain, Sweden (6-7) and seven years old in Estonia, Finland, Latvia, and Lithuania (Source: Eurydice, 2008).

2. Founded in 1995, the International Boys' Schools Coalition is a not-for-profit coalition of independent, parochial and public schools from around the world dedicated to the education and development of boys worldwide, the professional growth of those who work with them, and the advocacy and the advancement of institutions that serve them.

<http://www.theibsc.org/page.cfm?p=2>

3. Funded by the DfES from 2000-04, the Raising Boys' Achievement project looked at exciting and innovative ways of raising achievement across a range of primary, secondary and special schools. Working with over 60 schools across England, the research team aimed to identify and evaluate strategies which are particularly helpful in motivating boys.

<http://www-rba.educ.cam.ac.uk/>

and

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