Gender and Education: 'Gapbusters'

Schools that close or narrow the attainment gap between boys and girls in English

Contents

Introduction

This paper reports on research carried out during spring 2008 into seven primary and nine secondary schools in England that had consistently closed or narrowed the attainment gap between boys and girls in English.

There has been a persistent gap between the attainment of boys and girls in English for over ten years. In 2008, at the end of Key Stage 2, that gap was 1 percentage point in favour of boys for mathematics; 2 percentage points in favour of girls for science and 9 percentage points in favour of girls for English. At Key Stage 4, the gap for attainment of 5 or more GCSEs, grades A*-C, was 9 percentage points in favour of girls.

The main research question which was;

- If there are schools that have consistently closed or narrowed the gender gap between boys and girls in English, what are the factors that have led to their success?

The sample

The sample of schools selected for this research was identified through analysis of attainment data for the years 2002 – 2007. For Key Stage 2, that data was the end of key stage test results for pupils attaining level 4+ for English; for Key Stage 3 data for pupils attaining level 5+ for English and for KS4 data for pupils attaining grades A* – C for GCSE English. The schools had to have closed or considerably narrowed the gap for the past five years. In addition, to ensure that the schools chosen were representative of the great majority of schools in the maintained state sector and not highly selective in their intake or where their success with boys was to the disadvantage of girls' attainment, the data were filtered so that the selected schools were shown to have the following features:

- the number of pupils on free school meals was near the national average

- the number of pupils with special education needs (SEN) was near the national average

- girls' performance in English was above the national average

- pupils made at or above the expected two levels of progress for the key stage.

This led to 15 primary schools being identified that had closed the gap for the past five years and 17 secondary schools where the gap had been narrowed to between 4 and 8 percentage points at KS3 and between 4 and 11 percentage points at KS4. In six of the primary schools, they had also managed to close the gap for pupils achieving level 5 or above, and the number of both boys and girls attaining level 5 or above was higher than national average. Similarly, boys and girls in all but one of the secondary schools attaining level 6 or above at Key Stage 3 was higher than national average and the gap between boys was slightly narrower than average but never closed. All of the schools were asked if a researcher could visit and six primary and nine secondary schools replied and were duly visited.

The boys who were interviewed in each school were a sample of those who the school deemed to be of average ability in English, not the highest attaining or most articulate. The interviews were with the boys in groups of between four and six. In all, 79 boys were interviewed.

Methodology

All of the sixteen schools were visited and in each, the following methods were used to gain evidence:

- Interview with the headteacher
- Interview with the literacy co-ordinator (primary schools) and English subject leader (secondary)
- Interview with a group of boys.

All of the interviews used a standardised set of prompts.

In addition, in some schools it was possible to observe an English lesson and in some, other teachers who had some responsibility within the school for literacy or teaching and learning were also interviewed.

Summary of main findings

The boys' views of English

The boys who were interviewed said that English was fun and the main approaches they liked and found helpful included:

- speaking and listening activities used with reading and writing

- drama activities to open up texts

- group work to aid discussion of texts and writing tasks

- choice and negotiation of books, research and writing tasks

- teacher modelling of reading and writing

- having a range of tasks for writing

- having a wide range of books.

The rest of the findings from the school visits have been grouped largely under a series of headings that were first used by Mike Younger, Molly Warrington and colleagues (2005) in reporting their 'Raising boys' achievement project' and are commensurate with evidence in this research.

1 Whole school success factors

There were a number of whole school success factors which were identified as contributing to boys' success in English:

- an emphasis by all staff on teaching and learning

- a school ethos that values respect for others, taking responsibility for actions, success for all and independence

- a system for praise and rewards that acknowledges boys' academic effort and achievement as well as their sporting and behavioural success

- processes and actions that promote pupil safety and well-being

- opportunities to engage with and respond to pupil voice

- promotion of risk-taking and responsibility by both teachers and pupils

- enrichment of the curriculum, for example through pupil visits out of school and visitors coming into the school to work with pupils

- staffing to employ high quality teachers and to match teachers to pupil learning needs.

2 Pedagogy

The main success factors associated with pedagogy in English were:

- including speaking and listening in lessons as a way for boys to prepare for writing and to explore texts

- modelling of both reading and writing to assist boys' understanding and skills

- using ICT to engage boys particularly with their research and presentations.

3 Individual pupil approaches

These are approaches that have connections to personalised learning and are devised to respond to and support the learning needs of individual pupils. It appeared that the most effective individual pupil approaches to enhance and develop boys' learning and literacy were connected with aspects of assessment for learning and various forms of mentoring.

4 Socio-cultural approaches

As with 'whole school', one of the most significant socio-cultural approaches was that of ensuring that there were systems and opportunities to gather pupil voice.

Findings

The boys' views of English

The basis of the interviews with the boys was to ask them what they thought was good about English in their school, what they liked and what helped them develop their reading and writing. Similar to this report's previous analysis, their responses can be categorised under the headings of:

- pedagogy
- enrichment
- individual student approaches
- staffing.

Pedagogy

Overall, pupils thought English was fun and the main pedagogic strategies that they liked included:

- speaking and listening
- drama
- choice
- modelling
- range of tasks for reading and writing
- group work.

It is significant, but possibly not surprising, that all of these strategies were also identified as successful by the headteachers and teachers. What was surprising was that a few boys in two primary and two secondary schools said that what they liked about English was that there was often more than one answer and that in English there was ample opportunity to stretch their thinking. As one boy put it, 'the teacher doesn't always give us the answer – we have to work our brains.'

Interestingly, what the boys mentioned most commonly as helping them with their writing was reading, both in terms of identifying subjects, information and ideas for the content of their writing, and also, through discussion of a particular text type, identifying the main features and structure for a particular piece of writing. The boys also indicated that the following helped them with their writing:

- teacher modelling
- guided group work
- talk partners
- planning
- using Point Example Explanation (PEE).

As for reading, the boys mentioned the following as being most helpful:

- reading aloud
- personal reading

- the library

- research.

Reading aloud

When the teachers read aloud the boys found that passages were easier to understand and often more interesting or exciting. When boys themselves read aloud they found that the act itself helped them to understand what they were reading and they felt it improved their ability to read. In two primary schools the pupils had reading partners in their class who they would read and listen to reciprocally and they found this improved their reading too. A number of primary pupils said that having been taught different ways to read earlier in their schooling (eg the searchlight approach) continued to help them.

Personal reading

Both primary and secondary boys said that being able to choose books to read that appealed to them was important – as was having time in school to read them. Connected with this was their appreciation of book recommendations and guidance that their teachers gave them.

Library

Only the secondary pupils mentioned the school library as helpful with developing their reading, whereas (and this reflects the different resourcing contexts) primary boys more often mentioned the useful stock of books in their classrooms.

Research

Again, more secondary boys than primary mentioned the value of carrying out research in developing their reading, in particular the

guidance from their teachers on how to research books and the internet.

Enrichment

The boys valued both the school visits (to the theatre in particular) that they had undertaken, saying that this added to the fun of English, but also to their understanding of particular plays and texts that they were studying.

Individual student approaches

Both secondary and primary boys said that the written and oral feedback that their teachers gave them on their work was much appreciated and contributed to their development as readers, writers and speakers.

One group of primary boys found that the personalised checklists that each of them had for their writing, which were revised regularly, were particularly helpful. Another group of primary boys said that being asked to make suggestions about subjects, authors and titles of books for their classroom and school library was a good idea (particularly when one of the suggested books appeared on the shelves), and they clearly felt proud at being asked.

Staffing

Which teachers the boys had for English was the single most mentioned factor by both primary and secondary boys when responding to questions about what was good about the subject and what they liked about it. The following were what the boys identified as features of good English teachers:

- involved all pupils in the lesson

- helpful

- approachable

- humorous

- fair

- enthusiastic

- encouraging ('they don't let you give up')

- in control

- modelled reading and writing

- used examples of pupils' work to help understanding

- have high expectations.

Whole school factors

In this section, 'whole school factors' is taken to mean those factors that transcend the classroom and specifically English and which involve the majority of the staff in the school and its wider systems and organisation.

The following were the main whole school factors that were identified by headteachers and teachers in the primary and secondary schools interviewed as contributing to their success with boys in English:

- emphasis on teaching and learning

- school ethos

- system for praise and rewards

- knowing pupils well

- pupil safety and well-being

- pupil voice

- promotion of risk-taking and responsibility

- enrichment of the curriculum

- staffing.

Emphasis on teaching and learning

The emphasis on teaching and learning is one where the school at all levels values and discusses aspects of teaching and learning in a variety of forums, such as senior leadership meetings, department and staff meetings. It includes discussion of pedagogy, curriculum structure, content and resources. It relies on up to date knowledge of individual pupils, their parents and teachers and takes account of how these factors impact on and influence the curriculum and pedagogy. The schools interviewed felt that the knowledge they had of their pupils and its regular updating was crucial in helping them to design an effective curriculum.

Primary headteachers and teachers placed more emphasis on knowing and involving parents as a factor of their success than did their secondary counterparts. This may be because they perceived and believed there was more need to involve parents in supporting their child's education at home and in school at a younger age. As a rule, there was also more opportunity and desire for parents to become involved directly in the school. Some of the primary schools actively identified and involved parents from ethnic minority communities through such activities as organising a weekly bi-lingual parents' meeting, or having newsletters printed in different languages (only one secondary school did this). Although parents' newsletters were common in both phases, there was only evidence from some of the primary schools that pupils themselves contributed to its creation. Another activity that one primary school

did to attract and involve more parents in their child's education, in this case their reading, was to devise activities for parents to use with any book that their child was reading at home, whilst another invited parents into the school to read both to and with their children.

School ethos

The school ethos that the headteachers from both phases talked about embodied a value system which they believed was shared by themselves, teachers, pupils and parents alike which leant a consistency to behaviours and operations in the school. Whilst there were some differences in ethos between the different schools, the common factors included respect for others, taking responsibility for actions, success for all (through high expectations) and independence.

System for praise and rewards

The celebration of success and an effective system of rewards were seen as key success factors which generated a positive response from pupils. There was concerted action to praise and reward good behaviour, effort and achievement, particularly for boys, for whom this may not always have been the norm. In targeting boys for praise and rewards connected to academic effort and achievement, three of the secondary schools and one of the primary schools were deliberately combating the stereotypical attitude held by a number of pupils that it wasn't cool for boys to be seen to be working and achieving in school. There was evidence from the responses of the boys interviewed in those schools that the message was getting through.

Knowing pupils well

All headteachers, teachers and pupils reported they felt they knew pupils well. The headteachers and teachers made use of a wide range of performance and other data in order to understand the achievement and attainment of individual pupils and groups and to plan for subsequent teaching and intervention. This data on individual pupils was supplemented by further information gleaned through such means as discussions with parents and pupils and through classroom observations and this too was used in discussions to plan a curriculum and resources that were responsive and relevant to the needs of pupils.

Pupil safety and well-being

When an emphasis on knowing pupils well was combined with a concern for pupil safety and well-being, through, for example, the need for an orderly and disciplined environment, it was seen as a means to counteract macho attitudes and behaviour that can lead to bullying and intimidation of boys labelled as 'swots' or 'squares'. It can help to reduce aggression and conflict and lead to a more positive climate conducive to learning. At the heart of schools' 'disciplined environment' was often a rule-bound system for pupil behaviour which was shared with and agreed to by staff and pupils and enacted consistently by all staff. The boys who were interviewed readily supported such a system, saying that it helped them to know where the boundaries were and what the consequences were for stepping over them; they saw the system as just and fair.

Pupil voice

Connected to the previous factors was the prominence given in most of the schools to pupil voice. Every school had a democratically elected school council in one form or another and took the concerns and voices of the council members seriously. Many of the school council suggestions were acted on, from school environment issues to curriculum matters and bullying, and schools had devised ways to disseminate the achievements of the council to the rest of the school, to parents and to governors. Other examples included regularly sending out questionnaires on particular issues to pupils, and using pupils from the school council to interview other pupils about aspects of school life. They were means by which pupils and their views could be seen to be valued and were instrumental in changing aspects of school life for the better.

Promotion of risk-taking and responsibility

The factor of promoting risk-taking and responsibility can probably only effectively happen if the other aforementioned factors are also there as they provide the secure foundation particularly for risk-taking to take place. Both risk-taking and responsibility reflect the emphasis that these schools put on creating challenges for the boys. Risk-taking included activities such as asking pupils to teach something to another pupil, group or class of pupils, or to create and present information, following research of a subject. The risks for the boys would be ones of public, rather than private, failure, something that adolescent boys in particular might fear. The teachers interviewed were aware of the risks but were also

prepared for it and would provide support where appropriate within an environment where failure often led to learning from mistakes. The examples given of risk-taking are also examples of where pupils were given responsibility for their learning, but there was evidence in some school of boys being given or offered other responsibilities. These tended to be roles that demanded some caring or responsibility for other pupils in the school, such as being a reading buddy. In one primary school there were pupil mediators in each class who were trained by the teachers to intervene and quell any disputes or cases of bullying that might arise. These responsibilities clearly reflected the given ethos of the school.

Enrichment of the curriculum

Both the primary and the secondary headteachers and teachers placed importance on activities that enriched the curriculum. These were activities that enlarged and enriched the experience of the pupils and tended to fall into one of two categories; either visits out of school or visitors into school. All of the schools took many of their pupils on visits out of school such as theatre visits, but also included residentials for a whole class or year group. The latter was more common in the secondary schools, particularly with new Year 7 pupils, but one of the primary schools took its pupils on residentials from Year 2 onwards. Another enrichment activity was where one secondary and one primary school looked for and found opportunities for its pupils to write and be published for audiences outside school, through letters or on websites or in local publications.

Staffing

The secondary headteachers gave much importance to the recruitment of high quality English subject leaders not only to lead and monitor teachers in the English department, but also to introduce curricular and pedagogic changes to improve the attainment of pupils. Primary headteachers also spoke of the importance of their literacy co-ordinators but additionally about the importance of all of their teachers, many of whom would not be English specialists, having a passion for English and literacy so that they could enthuse and motivate pupils. Both sets of headteachers and the secondary subject leaders said that teachers having high expectations of what pupils could achieve in English was important.

Pedagogy

For the purposes of this paper 'pedagogy' refers to the strategies that teachers used to improve teaching and learning in English.

There were a number of strategies that teachers and pupils in all phases saw as important:

- Speaking and listening
- Teacher modelling
- ICT

Speaking and listening was viewed by all as an important precursor to and preparation for writing; a means to enable pupils, often in pairs or small groups, to discuss and try out their ideas and plans for writing. In one primary school each pupil had a writing partner and they worked together using talk to generate ideas for writing, to plan together and to comment on each other's writing at different stages. Speaking and listening was also used with reading as a means for pupils to explore meaning and character. Again this would often take place in pairs or small groups and included guided reading, hot-seating and other drama-related activities.

Teacher modelling was seen as helpful for teaching both reading and writing. Pupils mentioned that it was particularly helpful in helping them understand new or unfamiliar text types.

ICT. There were two aspects of ICT that were regarded as most effective; that of pupils researching and pupils creating and giving presentations (often using PowerPoint). Both of these connected with boys expressing a liking for 'making' in English, by which they included such activities as PowerPoint presentations, posters and comics and books.

Underlying all three strategies was the emphasis placed on teachers planning to include these activities in their schemes of work and lessons. Pupil choice and negotiation also appeared as important factors within that planning and were particularly appreciated by many of the boys interviewed.

Another strategy that underpinned these strategies was the organisation of pupils into pairs or small groups, particularly for speaking and listening work but also for research, presentations and occasionally writing.

Other strategies that were deemed successful with boys were:

- teachers' questioning skills
- structuring lessons
- finding real audiences for pupils' writing
- using a range of activities to generate interest

- using a range of resources for reading and writing

- visualisation.

Teachers' questioning skills. This included targeting pupils for questions (rather than a reliance on hands up) to ensure that all or as many as possible were included in the discussions and learning.

Structuring lessons. This was seen to inject and ensure appropriate pace and, through use of initial learning objectives and outcomes and plenaries to review learning, to give boys a sense of purpose and direction for their work and learning.

Real audiences. Some schools were keen to find audiences other than their teachers for their pupils' writing, saying that they found it to be a real motivator for boys and that boys tended to take more care when writing for other audiences. Examples of such writing included regular articles or features in the school newsletter, entries for national competitions, letters to local newspapers and writing for other pupils in the school or a neighbouring school.

Range of activities and resources. Primarily, ensuring a range of both resources and activities for reading and writing was seen to be a means to interest and motivate boys and prevent boredom and disaffection. It also connected with an expressed awareness by headteachers and teachers of the need to maximise the relevance of learning tasks and materials for pupils.

Visualisation. In both primary and secondary, some teachers planned schemes of work and lessons to include activities for pupils to develop their visualisation for writing and reading purposes. This ranged from drama activities to develop awareness and understanding of character, to cognitive and practical activities to help pupils visualise scenes in plays, poetry and novels.

Individual pupil approaches

Individual pupil approaches are those that have connections to personalised learning and are devised to respond to and support the learning needs of individual pupils. They include aspects of assessment for learning, intervention and mentoring.

In both the primary and secondary schools many of the individual pupil approaches came under the umbrella of assessment for learning. For example, many of the headteachers and teachers said that an important success factor with boys was in guiding them to know what were their strengths, in terms of skills and abilities; what were their areas for development and what they then needed to do to improve. Associated with this was an emphasis on the marking and responses to pupils' work (written and spoken), including identification of and praise for success (often in relation to previously set targets), and identification of areas for development with suggestions for improvement. Equally connected were approaches that involved pupils in either self- or peer-assessment of their work, for example through using response or writing partners or reading buddies. Self- and peer-assessment would usually be underpinned by success criteria to enable pupils to make sound judgements of their own or other's work. In one secondary school they had adopted the practice of peer teaching in English

whereby teachers would pair one pupil who had a good grasp of a subject or skill to teach another who hadn't. This benefited both the learner and the pupil as teacher, as the activity was seen to reinforce the learning in the peer teacher requiring sophisticated cognitive and metacognitive skills.

As has already been mentioned, the use of pupil reading partners and buddies was a successful approach and this is often part of a whole school approach to mentoring and buddying in general – both for reasons of pupil well-being as well as for academic reasons. Concerning the latter, it is interesting to note that in three of the secondary schools they had recently introduced 'assertive mentoring' whereby specially trained teachers (often including members of the senior leadership team) would mentor selected underperforming pupils on a regular basis to discuss their progress and to set new targets. An interesting development in one primary school was the development of teacher-pupil conferences where the teacher would meet with each individual pupil at least once a term (but more often with pupils who were underperforming) to discuss their work and progress and their self assessment of their work. The boys in that school spoke highly of the process. Underlying this approach to mentoring was a dissatisfaction with mentoring approaches that the schools had previously tried and were

seen to be 'too soft' and ineffective in moving pupils' learning forwards. In addition to using staff, some schools would also use other, often older, pupils in the schools as mentors or buddies.

This use of pupils as buddies or mentors draws attention to another individual approach that some schools employed, which was to identify particular responsibilities for individual pupils again in order to challenge them, to meet their aspirations and to support their move to independence.

Socio-cultural approaches

Socio-cultural approaches are those that address the issues of boys' disruptive behaviour and macho image protection and would include strategies to tap into boys' voice and to find and use key-leader pupils.

The most common approach discovered in this investigation was for schools to have systems for encouraging and collecting pupil voice, most often through school councils in one guise or another.

Only a couple of schools, one primary and one secondary, deliberately identified key-leader pupils, the boys who other boys deemed 'cool' but who were also relatively successful in their learning, to work with and motivate other boys in the schools in an attempt to counteract attitudes such as 'boys don't write' or 'learning isn't for boys'.

Conclusion

In the schools used for this research, the vast majority of boys who were interviewed enjoyed English because it met many of their needs and stimulated their learning and development of skills. From this piece of research it appears that, in order for schools to be successful in narrowing the gap between boys and girls in English whilst also maintaining a high level of attainment for girls, they need to attend to whole school factors as well as classroom and pedagogic.

The implications for the senior leadership team are that it needs to develop the ethos of the school to encompass respect for others, taking responsibility for actions and independence; a commitment to teaching and learning; risk-taking within a safe environment, and an active willingness to seek and listen to the views of pupils.

Teachers with responsibility for organising, planning and teaching English, may need to review whether speaking and listening is used in classrooms to prepare pupils for writing and exploring texts; the extent to which they model reading and writing to assist pupils' understanding and skills; their use of ICT to engage boys (particularly with research and presentations) and the extent to which they offer boys some real choice of tasks and texts.

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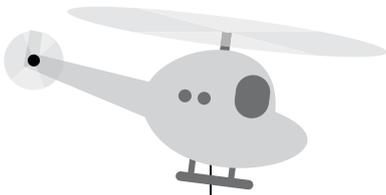
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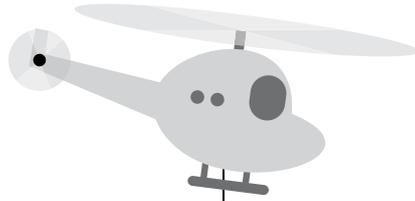
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