

# **Raising Boys' Achievement: Interim Report**

## ***Introduction***

This is an interim report, prepared at the end of the third year of a four-year research and intervention project due to complete in November 2004, sponsored by DfES, and based at the University of Cambridge Faculty of Education. The Raising Boys' Achievement Project is focusing on the strategies employed by specific schools which appear to be effective in raising boys' achievement and reducing the gender gap, without affecting adversely girls' academic performances. After an initial pilot stage, the project team has spent six terms working on interventions with twenty-four primary schools and twenty-eight secondary schools.

During this intervention stage, schools worked in 'triads', each formed around an 'originator' school and two partner schools. Schools were selected from databases of Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 4 data for 1996-2000 supplied by the DfES. The focus was on average points scores, in all subjects at Key Stage 4, and in English at Key Stage 2, and the purpose was to select schools where the gender gap had been reduced year on year over the four-year period - though not at the expense of girls. In essence we were trying to identify schools where both girls and boys had improved, but where boys had improved more than girls. In fact, very few schools across the whole of England met these criteria, suggesting that it is very difficult to sustain a closing of the gap over even a few years, and the initial criteria had to be relaxed slightly in order to find enough schools to work with. Statistics were not only the starting point: the team also looked at Ofsted reports and talked to Local Education Authorities and Headteachers about the kinds of strategies the schools had put into place to raise boys' achievement. At the same time we tried to get a geographical spread of schools across contrasting catchments, and schools at different levels of achievement.

Each triad was assigned a member of the research team to work with it to identify one or two strategies in the originator school which seemed to be contributing to an improvement in boys' achievement. The aim was then to explore ways in which the strategies could be transferred and adapted to the contexts of the other two schools, and refined and further developed in all three. Four categories of approach were identified by the research team: pedagogic, individual, organisational and sociocultural. These are discussed below.

## ***Approaches and Strategies***

### **Pedagogic Approaches I: Raising achievement in literacy**

Pedagogic approaches have their emphasis on classroom-based strategies. Among the primary triads three have focused on activities related to literacy, with two concentrating on writing and one on reading. Writing is the aspect of literacy where differences between girls and boys are most apparent, so that in Key Stage 2 national curriculum tests in 2002, 68% of girls obtained level 4 or above in writing, but only 52% of boys. Even in high-achieving schools, writing can be a relative weakness, and low achievers tend to be boys. Interviews with around two hundred 'underachieving' primary school boys at the beginning of the project showed overwhelmingly that the boys disliked writing. It was the mechanical aspects of writing they found most difficult, and they also had problems in ordering their ideas and translating what was in their heads onto paper. Such findings are reflected in a range of literature relating to boys and literacy, and one of the challenges of two of the triads has been to address these issues.

#### **Becoming a writer**

In an outer London triad literacy issues are being addressed through an overall strategy which has focused on moving from 'learning to write' (technical skills) to 'becoming a writer' (understanding the meaning and other dimensions of writing). It aims to develop a coherent and integrated approach to literacy in its broadest sense - reading, writing, speaking and listening - not as separate components, but as inter-related. The approach has been wide-ranging, with a cross-curricular focus, an emphasis on talk, and more oral preparation for narrative, with explicit discussion of character, plot, setting, structure and vocabulary. As a recent Ofsted report<sup>1</sup> points out, oral work is rarely planned for, but in these schools, talk is explicitly built into medium-term planning. There is the deliberate use of the visual as a source of inspiration and writing for a range of purposes. Risk-taking is encouraged through positive feedback, and boys are enabled to experience writing without the initial constraints of secretarial features. In the originator school, where an emphasis on talk had already been identified as contributing to good results in boys' writing, each curriculum area was aligned with a specific genre as designated by the Literacy framework, and thus consolidated teaching writing of specific genres through cross-curricular approaches.

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<sup>1</sup> *The curriculum in successful primary schools*, Office for Standards in Education, 2002.

### **Improving writing through drama**

In a West Sussex triad, where the principal aim again is to improve boys' writing, the approach is confined to work within the literacy hour. Here too the approach includes reading, writing, speaking and listening, but drama is the mode of integration, and there is shared planning across the schools, incorporating drama explicitly into medium-term planning of literacy for years 5 and 6. In reading, drama is being used:

- to display and reinforce understanding of the text;
- to gain empathy with characters;
- and to work through higher order reading skills.

In writing, it is being used:

- to provide children with first-hand experiences and other ways of planning their writing;
- to enable children to work collaboratively on written tasks;
- to stimulate imagination and lead into descriptive writing;
- and to enable children to link writing activities to real life scenarios that boys feel are purposeful and relevant to the community in which they live.

In speaking and listening, drama is used

- to enable children to discuss texts with their peers and teachers;
- to allow the children to talk about what they are going to write;
- to formulate / plan compositions.

In these schools, therefore, drama has become an integral part of the literacy hour to teach children to write and interpret fiction and non-fiction. As well as confronting those aspects of writing that boys find difficult, the strategy explicitly tries to build on boys' strengths, since evidence shows that boys are more likely to write from firsthand experience and by sharing ideas with others. Thus through drama language is given meaning, and writing is given a purpose and audience.

### **Peer support for reading**

Early investigations in another triad, this one in inner London, found that in contrast with national trends, boys' achievements in reading were lower than their writing scores. Questionnaires to families suggested that male family members were less committed to school

literacy than females, even though some men enjoyed home-based reading. Interviews with boys who were underachieving in reading found that it offered them little or no satisfaction, even in their early days of schooling. In response to these findings, the triad schools adopted a range of ways to raise boys' engagement with reading, aimed mainly at encouraging a wider view of reading, with emphasis on what is involved in 'being a reader'. They extended provision of texts which included boys' preferences and introduced buddy systems where older boys mentored younger readers. They also introduced reading groups led by members of the school community who were not teachers, the purpose of such groups being to share the pleasures of reading, rather than any overt 'teaching' of reading. Reading journals were used as reflective space, allowing pupils to respond to texts through choice, and homework was set which specifically encouraged pupils to read all kinds of texts. In addition, explicit attention was given to teachers modelling ways of responding to the meaning and content of books, rather than just decoding text.

### **Evidence of change**

Early indications are that these approaches have been highly effective in raising boys' achievements and changing their attitudes towards reading and writing. Evidence of quantitative change in the form of Key Stage 2 results is unavailable at the time of writing, although teacher assessments do suggest real improvements. Qualitative evidence *is* available from in-depth interviews with focus groups of boys across a two-year period. In one triad school, for example, most of a group of eight boys initially said they disliked writing, and their view of writing was mostly focused on the technicalities of spelling and handwriting. In final interviews at the end of year 6, however, all of them referred to satisfaction about writing and were much more able to talk precisely about how to write. This represents a genuine shift in interest and understanding. Overall the boys had become much more assured in talking about writing; they were able to talk explicitly about the requirements of different types of writing, they knew about how to make decisions about when to write in a particular way and all showed awareness of the needs of a reader.

### **Pedagogic Approaches II: Raising achievement through teaching and learning styles**

One primary and two secondary triads have embarked upon intervention strategies focusing on teaching-learning interactions within the classroom environment. In part, these triads have been responding to research evidence that there are differential gender interactions within the

classroom between boys and girls, and that girls are more likely than boys to have a good grasp of effective learning strategies. A major thrust of the work which has evolved has been in the context of pupils' preferred learning styles and multiple intelligences.

In the primary triad, based in Suffolk, and in one of the secondary triads, consisting of East Anglian and East Midlands upper schools (with students aged 13-19), research has focused on ascertaining students' preferred learning styles in terms of visual, auditory and kinaesthetic. Research findings in the secondary triad revealed that although there was little differentiation in preferred learning style between boys and girls, there was a marked preference for kinaesthetic modes of learning amongst those boys identified either as potential under-achievers or as posing a potentially disruptive presence in the classroom. Subsequent research within the triad thus focused on developing kinaesthetic approaches to teaching across all subjects. Evaluations are focusing on assessing the engagement and achievement of specific boys in subjects where these kinaesthetic approaches have become more high profile.

In a second secondary triad, involving inner city schools in the West Midlands, more emphasis has been given to developing teaching and learning approaches - in English and Mathematics - within the context of Gardner's work on multiple intelligences. Early data revealed that potentially under-achieving boys showed a predominance of inter-personal, mathematical / logical, and musical intelligences. The intervention strategies focused on ways of affecting and transforming classroom practices to take account of these 'preferred learning styles' - not simply on an individualised basis, but in terms of teaching strategies and approaches which might be appropriate for whole class activities.

Research is ongoing in all three contexts, and although in the secondary schools implementation of the intervention strategies focused on Year 9 students who will enter their GCSE year in September 2004, early outcomes are encouraging, with some positive impact upon students' performances in Year 9 National Curriculum tests. In addition, it is clear from interviews that targeted boys in most schools in the three triads are expressing more understanding about, and more engagement in, their own learning.

In virtually all of the schools the intervention strategy has been implemented in a context of raising awareness about how learning takes place. Keynote presentations to staff **and** pupils have emphasised the nature of work on preferred learning styles and accelerated learning, and this has been consolidated and elaborated in the secondary schools through PSHE programmes focusing on study skills, and through the identification and open acknowledgement of

teachers' (frequently visual) and students' preferred learning styles. The crucial aspect of each intervention strategy, however, has involved active discussion of the notion of learning preferences with students, so that students can come to understand what the issues are for their own learning and study, and an acknowledgement by staff that lessons need to be planned which explicitly address a variety of different learning styles.

The pre-conditions for successful implementation of this approach appear to be threefold:

- A strong commitment amongst key staff, taken on board by all, that this approach **can** make a difference;
- Ensuring that students have a much better understanding of themselves as a learner, that (in the words of a Wolverhampton boy), *'teaching is not about teachers doing things to us, but about us understanding how we learn and how we can get better at it ... means that lessons aren't always taught in our preferred learning style, but we know what the learning style being used by a teacher is, and we can adjust and pay close attention when we're not good at it'*;
- A direct focus on teaching and learning, requiring teachers in department units to think specifically and quite deeply about pedagogy and how it affects learning and how learning might be made more accessible to students.

Early evidence suggests that an intervention strategy which focuses on learning and teaching in this way can impact positively upon the learning of all students, but in particular it supports those learners who need more help in structuring their learning, in understanding how they learn, and in offering active and varied support for learning, and these are more often boys than girls. Such an approach has the potential – where staff believe in it and it is supported by an active professional development programme – to offer such students access to a range of learning styles. It is important to stress that this approach is not simply about identifying and subsequently teaching to the dominant learning style within the class; it also enables teachers to highlight explicitly to students the learning styles to be used in a lesson and enables teachers to become much more reflective and analytical of their own teaching and children's learning. In the emerging experience of these triads, it has opened up lessons even more for students: not only do they know what the objectives are and what the intended outcomes might be, both in themselves key features of assessment for learning, but also how the teacher is helping them to get there; it therefore emphasises the processes of learning. In the words of a Year 10 boy:

*'This is a great school ... the teachers are really helpful, we know they are using multiple intelligences and they know our preferred learning styles to support us and our learning ... they work ever so hard to help us.'*

### **Individual Approach: Target-setting and mentoring**

Individual approaches to raising boys' achievements centre on the individual student. Two secondary triads, one in outer urban contexts in North-East England and one in inner city areas in the West Midlands, have focused on target-setting and mentoring in an attempt to raise achievement in individual pupils. In both triads, the originator school had a well-established and tightly structured strategy, some aspects of which were adopted and adapted in partner schools. Target-setting and mentoring are a well tried combination, which can take a number of different forms; in both the originator schools within these triads, mentoring is acknowledged as being very influential in transforming the achievement of students, notably of boys identified as potential under-achievers. Thus in both schools, GCSE results showed a remarkable surge in terms of the overall levels of achievement of both girls and boys, and a significant narrowing of the gender gap. It is too early to assess the sustained impact on the partner schools, although there are indications that performance levels are beginning to rise as a result of the overall approach to mentoring and target-setting.

Research within these triads (together with experiences in a Norfolk primary triad), does suggest, however, that target-setting and mentoring have considerable potential to raise achievements for boys:

- when they are framed within a tutorial system which exists with a clear remit to address academic issues;
- in a context where staff and students are becoming data literate so that target-setting is carried out with students and for students;
- and where protected time exists for tutorial work and mentoring, to enable involvement in tutorial work and mentoring to be taken very seriously as a high priority activity by **all** staff.

In its most effective form there is detailed monitoring of performance data year-on-year by senior staff and within departments, to inform and facilitate target-setting and rigorous mentoring. This has enabled staff to develop confidence in the data, based upon recent trends within the school, so that realistic predictions of ultimate achievements can be made. This

identification of realistic targets, which are achievable rather than cautious or pessimistic, and based upon previous years' experiences with similar students, has proved to be of crucial importance in helping to transform the expectations and confidence levels of students **and** staff. Where this does not happen, there is the danger of establishing a self-fulfilling prophecy of lower expectations and under-achievement.

The detailed approach to target-setting and mentoring has varied across the triads, and indeed within the triads, since the distinctiveness of approach in one context has not always been seen to be most appropriate and transferable to other contexts. In the primary and secondary triads, active mentoring currently starts in year 6 and year 10 respectively, although some schools in the secondary triads have explored approaches to mentoring in years 8 and 9 where, it is argued, more positive impact can be made, particularly on the longer-term attitudes and achievements of boys. In whichever years the approach is implemented, it is clear that there are a number of essential aspects of a successful mentoring system. These include committed mentors, able to establish rapport with the students, and regular mentoring sessions which are well-defined and with the clear aim of raising expectations and motivating students. Mentoring sessions need to be structured around reliable, frequently updated information in order to inform real and meaningful dialogue.

In triad schools where mentoring and target-setting have had most impact, specifically on the achievement of a significant number of boys (and a minority of girls) identified as potential under-achievers, there is a very strong sense of commitment to the scheme, and a pervading belief that it enables the school to fulfil its responsibility to boys who *need* to achieve to transform their life opportunities. Finding time for mentoring is thus a high priority, enabling mentors to communicate with and offer feedback on students to subject teachers, and – crucially – following up with subject teachers issues of concern which students have raised. This view of mentoring has a strong interventionist element, which is made explicit to staff and students. Students *know* that their mentors will mediate on their behalf with their teachers, exploring issues, acting as a facilitator and on occasions as an intermediary with those who teach them. To some degree, this is an unusual aspect of mentoring, but it is one which is high profile in one triad, and seems to be accepted by teachers because it is seen to impact positively on academic outcomes. To students, it is a crucial aspect of the scheme, since it acknowledges that the mentor is taking seriously their own concerns and perspectives on their learning, and mediating where appropriate on their behalf.

There is another side to the ethos of mentoring, however, because it is acknowledged that a minority of students, mainly boys, respond less positively than others to this collaborative approach. For these students, the mentoring process may change in tone and emphasis in the second half of Year 11, with an increased intensity of demand and more emphasis placed on short-term interventions. Such boys may well be engaged in a more confrontational style of mentoring, with mentors issuing more direct and more regular challenge, and monitoring outcomes vigorously. This is another directly interventionist approach, and an aspect of mentoring which some partner schools have found inappropriate. In the originator school, however, it is seen as a vital component of successful mentoring for some boys, inasmuch as it offers boys a means whereby they can reconcile their laddishness and their macho image with the need to work to achieve academic outcomes. Expressed starkly, mentoring at this stage - for a small minority of boys - replaces dialogue with direction; such boys are given a way **not** to opt out, because their mentors are deliberately monitoring them tightly. They are given a justification to use to their peers, enabling them to continue to work in pursuit of realistic targets. The school is thus giving them a reason not to be laddish: it is a face-saving device to enable them to work.

In summary, then, it seems that target-setting and mentoring have potential to raise achievements for boys when:

- boys understand and 'buy into' the reasons for target-setting and when they come to feel in control of their own learning profile;
- they are encouraged to make a comparison between their past self, present self and their aspirations for their future self as learners;
- potential data are used to create realistic expectations of what is possible.

### **Organisational Approach: Single-sex teaching**

Organisational strategies are whole school approaches, with schools attempting to develop an ethos and culture where achievement in many different areas is celebrated, and accepted as the norm. One triad has been developing approaches to teaching boys and girls in single-sex classes; in the originator school, this involved middle-set GCSE classes initially in English, but subsequently in Mathematics, Science and French, and in the partner schools higher-set classes in English or Mathematics. The initiative was implemented following the success of this mode of teaching, in conjunction with other whole school organisational strategies, in the

originator school, where GCSE results had been transformed over the last decade, within the context of a relatively stable student intake.

In the short-term life of the Project, the impact in each school of single-sex teaching on students' achievements has given cause for cautious optimism. In the originator school, the positive impact of the initiative on boys' academic achievements has been sustained, particularly in English and French, such that close to 80% of the student body has achieved the 5A\*-C benchmark grades, with a narrow gender gap which differs, in favour of boys or girls, from year to year. In one partner school, it appears that the initiative has impacted positively upon the achievements of both girls and boys in English, although differentially so in favour of girls, so that the gender gap has widened rather than narrowed in this subject. In the other partner school, the initiative has sustained and improved the levels of performance of both boys and girls through time in Mathematics.

Interviews with focus groups of students, questionnaire returns from whole year groups, classroom observations of single-sex teaching and staff interviews in each of the three schools suggested that single-sex teaching was seen as having a number of distinct advantages for learning. Many boys and girls maintained that they felt more comfortable in such classes because of the lack of distraction of the other sex, and that they were more able to question, to explore issues related to learning, and to take part in discussion without fear of ridicule or embarrassment. Others felt less pressurised to perform, to 'showboat', if the other gender were not present, and crucially, agreed that they felt able to produce better quality work in such contexts.

In English and French in particular, some boys went further than this, arguing that single-sex classes allowed them more freedom to work harder without worrying about stereotypical expectations and their own image, particularly if they were 'not supposed' to enjoy these subjects. Boys spoke of being able to talk about feelings and express opinions about books and poetry, to target coursework without feeling intimidated by girls, and to study and enjoy the romantic texts: *'... we don't just do war poems and Macbeth, we do Wordsworth too ... it's a challenge, in a way, which Mr X sets us to show the girls we're capable of doing it ... but I couldn't talk about these things if there were girls there!'*

Research in this triad does suggest therefore that, in certain contexts, single-sex classes can bring advantages in enabling a classroom environment to be created which allows girls *and* boys to learn with less distraction and disruption, and in enabling students to develop as more

confident learners, willing to risk more in such contexts. Equally, however, it is clear that these advantages will only be fully maximised when different teaching and assessment approaches for girls' classes and boys' classes are explicitly explored and implemented, and when schools have considered what is *particular* in the classroom context about teaching boys: it is not simply a case of taking advantage of a single-sex context and teaching 'normally'!

Work within the triad therefore attempted to identify and refine through time the essence of good practice, with guidelines giving clear advice on timing, on pace and variety, of the need for teacher presence and for high expectations, the need for tight parameters but within a context of persuasion and identification with the boys. This is particularly the case when teaching all-boys' classes, for it is obviously here that the challenge is greatest. But there is a further factor which relates to the wider issue of boys' achievement at school. In all three schools, the most effective teachers went beyond 'good practice' pedagogic strategies, to establish a sense of togetherness and of common purpose with boys, with informal references – often linked to sport, music or fashion - which helped to sustain the credibility of teacher and to sustain the collaborative sense of working. Humour and informality were used to motivate boys and engage them in learning, to generate collaboration and a sense of team spirit, and to consolidate a relationship of shared respect and commitment between teacher and boys.

There was another dimension of this mutuality of understanding, however. The most effective teaching of boys in single-sex classes also took place when common expectations had been clearly established and were accepted by all, when it was understood that learning required high standards of behaviour, work and commitment, and that disruptive behaviour or failure to complete work, especially homework and coursework, would not be tolerated. Teachers prepared to create a collaborative atmosphere for learning also made demands of the boys to cooperate with the learning and identify with the objectives and intended outcomes of the lessons. This mutuality of understanding was sustained within a context of high expectations, and particularly a climate in which boys could perform without fear of undermining their own image or losing face with their friends. Teachers used a balance of collaboration and engagement, on the one hand, with persuasion and requirement on the other, establishing a learning environment which boys could use to justify their behaviour and cooperation to each other, to enable boys to associate with and publicly acknowledge the aspirations of the school.

There are words of caution, however; emerging practice within the three schools emphasises that some boys can be intimidated by the atmosphere in an all-boys' class and become reluctant to contribute, and there is also a danger, if these classes are not carefully handled, that laddishness may escalate if not challenged. Research in this triad tends to suggest, however, that single-sex teaching of boys is most effective when a number of distinct challenges posed by such classes had been identified and explored by a committed group of staff in the school, and when strategies had been explicitly defined to meet those challenges. The process of defining differentiated teaching approaches and resources must be visible, owned by a proactive group of committed staff, and supported actively by senior management. Where single-sex teaching was most successful within these three schools, staff were energised by the challenge, and were committed to its success, and both students and all staff within the school understood the reasons for the introduction of this mode of organisation. Crucially, too, single-sex teaching was seen as one of several strategies, designed and implemented to maximise students' achievements, and contributing coherently to the culture of achievement within the school.

### **Sociocultural Approaches**

Socio-cultural approaches are those which attempt to challenge within school the dominant images of laddish masculinity held by the peer group, or perhaps the family and community, and to develop an ethos which helps to eradicate the 'it's not cool to learn' attitude amongst boys. In many ways, sociocultural approaches underpin other approaches, so rather than being something different and separate, they are an integral and foundational aspect of other successful strategies. Thus schools which are successfully challenging the gender gap are those that do get boys on board; they are schools that are particularly sensitive to the sociocultural contexts of which they are a part, and their whole school ethos embodies that understanding. The aim, in the words of one headteacher, is to attempt to 'reframe the students' view of school so that academic success is valued, aspired to and seen to be attainable'.

Three of the primary triads and one of the secondary triads are addressing sociocultural issues, and although the approaches are different, the main thrust in each is to find ways of engaging children who are disengaged, who find it difficult to conform to the school environment. These students are often boys: their self-esteem is measured in terms, perhaps, of the trainers they wear, or their prowess at sport. A number of them come from homes where academic work and

formal achievement have little value, and where boys gain in self-esteem by challenging, rather than conforming to authority.

### **Creating a school culture in secondary schools**

In the secondary triad, in inner Manchester, it is felt that the key issues threatening achievement relate to the street culture of the local community. The originator school (originally a pilot school) has challenged this by creating an alternative culture within school, arguing that if a school is starting with a population where the majority of students hold values contradictory to achievement, much work must first be done in managing behaviour and getting the focus on learning. This requires the implementation of strict uniform and homework policies, and, crucially, a strong focus on pedagogy to stimulate enthusiasm for learning. Once the school had made headway in these areas, and a critical mass of students was on side, it began to tackle the minority of students who still held values that conflicted with academic achievement. This was undertaken through a policy of befriending key student leaders and offering role models to get them to work with, rather than against, the culture and aspirations which the school was attempting to establish. To this end, the school identifies specific individuals (usually but not always boys) within a year group, who are seen to influence and lead peer group image and attitude, because it believes that if it can get these students on side, their followers will follow. The Key Leader scheme is supported by effective monitoring and target-setting, so that students know where they are and what is expected of them. Key leaders are then encouraged to take on a peer mentoring role with younger students.

Evidence that such an approach has a positive impact is clear from a significant and sustained improvement in GCSE results in the originator school over the past nine years, and a reduced gender gap. In one partner school, where the strategy is still in its early stages, there has been considerable improvement in A\*-G grades. There are other positive impacts in terms of improved attendance and fewer exclusions. In addition, interviews with key leaders found generally more positive attitudes towards school by the end of the year; all the boys in the originator school had clear post-GCSE plans, with all but one aiming for further education, and all were aware of the qualifications they needed and felt on course to achieve them. In a partner school, as the strategy became better established, the impact was felt on the culture of the year group as a whole, with fewer discipline problems and race no longer an issue, despite severe racial disharmony in the locality.

### **Involving and engaging boys in primary schools**

Whilst the dominance of an anti-learning culture is less obvious in primary schools, a number of boys begin to disengage with school at the approach of puberty, and so two of the primary triads are pursuing sociocultural strategies through organisational means. There are various approaches here, each chosen to reflect the particular context of each school, but the main aim of all of them is to promote greater involvement in school and develop boys' self esteem in learning. In a West Midlands triad, several activities have been introduced which allow boys to voice their thoughts and opinions and to become involved in improving their school environment, for example through a 'You Can Do It' programme, or a School Council. They are also given opportunities to make oral contributions when taking part in Circle Time and PSHE sessions, which aim to develop their sense of belonging to the school community as well as their self-esteem. A playtime buddy scheme is a further example of an approach which can give underachieving boys a sense of pride both in themselves and in the school. In a south London triad, a creative arts programme has been implemented to explore the extent to which music, dance and drama can break down some of the barriers to learning and enable underachieving boys to become more engaged with school.

The schools involved are generally enthusiastic about the impact of these strategies on the children, although some strategies are more embedded than others, making their impact easier to evaluate. Overall, the behaviour of almost all the underachieving boys has improved, and they have become more committed to school work. In the school where the creative arts programme has been most fully embraced, interviews with a target group of ten underachieving boys showed increased levels of concentration and self-control, more patience and self-confidence, greater self-esteem and ability to express themselves, as well as much more positive attitudes towards school and learning. The expectation is that these changes in attitude will impact positively on achievement at Key Stage 2.

Finally, in a Kirklees primary triad, sociocultural aims are being pursued through a focused pedagogic strategy. This involves a peer reading scheme between years 5 and 3, with the principal objective not to improve reading, but to improve boys' images of themselves as learners. Since some of the boys tracked by the researcher are identified as having low self-esteem, giving them the chance to help younger boys is one way of helping them to feel better about themselves. Others have been identified as peer leaders who have considerable influence on the rest of their cohort. Evaluation through questionnaires and interviews again shows very

positive results: the vast majority of boys really enjoyed shared reading, incidences of off-task behaviour were rare, the boys expressed pleasure that their partners' reading had improved as a result of their help, and they said shared reading had made them feel more positive about themselves. Some boys said they felt more confident, and they took pride in their status as experts who had received formal training.

### **General findings**

In addition to findings related explicitly to the strategies, the research is beginning to draw out other findings, of a more general, but no less important nature. We mention these briefly below.

### **Importance of context**

We are confident that all the strategies outlined above have the potential to be successful, but would emphasise that there can be no 'one-size-fits-all' approach. Where strategies have been successful, it is because schools decided they were appropriate for their particular circumstances, and because they have chosen to take them on board. The research team has worked with the schools through collaboration and not imposition, and schools have adapted strategies in the light of the particular cultural contexts of their environment.

### **Preconditions for success**

Whilst particular factors are necessary for the successful implementation of specific strategies, certain preconditions need to be in place before *any* strategy can succeed. Thus, while the preceding discussion paints a positive picture of improvement in the triad schools, in others one or more of the following preconditions were absent, inhibiting the full development of the strategy. These preconditions appear to include:

- leadership support: without the full commitment of the headteacher and senior management team, strategies can only be implemented on a limited basis. Heads need commitment, not only to the chosen strategy or strategies, but to the whole notion of raising *boys'* achievement (without, of course, jeopardising the achievement of girls).
- commitment shared by all staff involved: the project research has shown that enthusiasm from the Headteacher is insufficient if staff themselves fail to commit to the chosen strategy and to take it fully on board.

- ethos: it is important to create an ordered learning environment with clear boundaries and high expectations, where both staff and students feel valued and involved, and where there is a focus on the individual pupil.

### **Working together on equal terms**

Widespread discussions with triad schools after two years of working together are revealing the positive experience of schools working in collaboration rather than in competition, exchanging ideas and sharing good practice. Most partnerships have flourished: in some instances the initial originator plus partners model has been the focus and structure through which work has taken place, with one school leading the others, but always the approach has evolved into one of collaboration and a two- or three-way exchange and refinement of ideas. The dynamics of each triad have been decided by the group of schools, and not imposed from outside in a way that could lead to resentment or a sense of superiority or inferiority. As one headteacher recently said, *'The value of pursuing research of this kind within an established group cannot be understated. Sharing good practice, offering support, keeping to timescales and drawing up realistic action plans was all done with a dedicated and committed professionalism to the project and to one another'*.

### **Time for reflection**

Feedback received so far from several schools had highlighted an appreciation of being given an opportunity to reflect on the context of their own schools in relation to other schools they would not usually come into professional contact with. This has occurred through project conferences as well as triad meetings, and schools have also welcomed the rare opportunity to evaluate practice with the support of professional researchers.

### **Factors outside schools' control**

The project, working in everyday contexts, has had to take account of factors that frustrate the smooth working of the strategies. These include, for example, problems with the recruitment and stability of staff, and the extent to which staff have time to devote to the project in a situation where so much time is spent covering for unfilled vacancies - or on Ofsted inspections or implementing government initiatives. Different cohorts of students also change the situation, and schools that can seem totally on track in narrowing the gender gap can see their profile change abruptly with one or two 'poor' years. It is clear, too, that many of the schools we are working with have significant numbers of children with considerable emotional

problems relating to their home backgrounds, and that despite schools' best efforts, these can continue to affect achievement.

### **A longterm approach**

One of our contentions at the outset of the project was that schools are faced with too many short-term initiatives, so that strategies are often put into place for only a year, or even a term, and if little impact is apparent, the strategy is abandoned and another one initiated. The Raising Boys' Achievement Project has reinforced our belief in the need for in-depth implementation and evaluation over a sustained period: only then is it possible to get reliable evidence about what and how a strategy is working, and to understand the factors contributing to sustainability.

The project has a number of different strategies in place to assess such longer-term impact. These include quantitative measures of changes to pupil performance over the course of the project. Using national data-sets, evidence has been gathered on individual pupils' performance in the Key Stage assessments covering KS2 to KS3 and KS3 to GCSE. The data for summer 2001 are acting as a baseline for the project and will be compared with the data for summer 2003, when these become available towards the end of the year. At the same time, pupils in all the participating schools have answered attitude questionnaires with a view to establishing whether there have been any systematic changes over the duration of the project.

### **Conclusions**

Whilst the implementation of strategies has not been successful in every project school, we believe we are beginning to gather evidence of real improvements in boys' achievement as a result of the intervention strategies. Quantitative evidence in the form of Key Stage 2 and GCSE results is available for the originator schools, and we can be optimistic that this will follow in many of the partner schools, as the strategies become refined and embedded. We continue, furthermore, to gather qualitative evidence, through pupil and teacher testimony, of changes in attitudes and engagement with school from boys originally identified as 'underachieving'. Thus we see achievement in the broadest possible sense, with learning becoming an intrinsic goal for both boys and girls.