

1.Introduction

In recent years in Northern Ireland there have been reports into the underachievement of boys' at both primary and secondary levels in schools and the reasons why boys' underperform compared to girls'. This perceived gender gap has arisen through general attainment levels increasing over time. Gallagher (1997) cites that the rate of improvement for girls' tends to be higher than that of boys'; however it should be noted that there are other contributing factors on performance in schools other than gender including social class, religion and ethnicity (Grubb). It should also be acknowledged that not all boys' are underachieving and it is important to identify with care the particular boys' with a lower performance. The underachievement of boys' in primary education can be highlighted in

Attainment by gender in Northern Ireland 2005/06		
	Boys (%)	Girls (%)
Key Stage 2 English (L4+)	72.7	83.4

DENI's (2008) research showing that in the school year 05/06 showing that 72.7% of boys' met level 4 or above in literacy compared to 83.4% of girls'. Comparing these figures with numeracy it appears that boys' perform less well in literacy.

Key Stage 2 Maths (L4+)	78.0	82.0
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Based on these statistics I have chosen to complete my research on the reasons boys' underachieve in schools across Northern Ireland and some of the strategies that can be implemented from a whole-school perspective and from a teachers perspective to combat the gender gap. My research will be carried out in a primary school in Poleglass which in many ways can be seen as a disadvantaged area of Belfast. The school in which the research will be carried out is a co-educational school and so through liaising with the staff of this school, mainly the principle and the SENCO, I hope to ascertain the underlying problems to the underachievement of boys'.

Here are the questions I would like to investigate:

- What are the main reasons behind boys' underachievement in this school?
- Is there a difference between boys' and girls' underachievement in literacy and numeracy through all the primary years?
- What are the strategies employed by this school and by its teachers to combat the gender gap?

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that the average period of playing games for boys' is 13 hours a week. Of course, for some parents there may be a feeling of being given a period of pleasant respite thanks to gaming, since the child is playing quietly alone when playing on a games machine. "The activity itself can be addictive and when taken to an extreme can inhibit not only performance in schools but performance in extra-curricular activities" (Gentile et al, 2004).

Gender-stereotyping by teachers is an area well researched. It has been argued by Younger et al (1999) that many students prefer female students, as they are better organised and more confident when it comes to learning. Ofsted (2003) argue that boys' are more likely than girls' to become disruptive or give up when faced with a teacher they do not respect. Freedman (2003) cites the Canadian National Longitudinal Study on Children finding that teachers rated girls' better at literacy in the early years in relation to their verbal ability. Early assessment is regarded as a key issue and a study by QUB in Belfast discovered "if problems with literacy and numeracy are not tackled early in schooling, it becomes increasingly difficult to improve" (QUB 2001) this is also an area which relates closely into the lack of male role models both in the home and in the early years of school.

Learning styles is a very contemporary issue in the education system. It is known that boys' and girls' can respond to different teaching styles and strategies. The work of the Ofsted report into boys' achievement found that boys' responded better where they carefully structured work in lessons. Alongside this, the response towards working was better when teachers integrated an element of fun. The revised curriculum for Northern Ireland (2007) tries to fuse this through the idea of topic based teaching where children can take control to a certain extent of what they will be taught. Attitudes towards learning in both boys' and girls' is another important issue to be addressed by the education system. Overall there is a general consensus that there is a greater disaffection from learning amongst boys' than girls'. "boys' report less positive experiences of schooling than girls' in terms of enjoyment at school, perceived curriculum usefulness and teacher responsiveness" (Australian Government, 2002). Powney 1996 found that girls' have more positive attitudes towards reading and writing than boys' "boys' consider the literacy experience as female from an early age"

Peer pressure and discipline issues are the final areas to affect boys' underperformance. Alder (1992, cited by Gallagher, 1997) states that it is during the middle elementary years when boys' attitudes to learning shifted towards viewing academic achievement as a "stigma" and begin to orientate themselves towards their peer group as opposed to academic work. Girls' on the other hand derived status amongst peers from performing well in school. In addition Rowe (2000) suggests that boys' are more likely to exhibit behavioural problems such as restlessness and lack of attention. It is stated in this report that a greater proportion of boys' suffer from Attention-Deficit Disorder and Attention-Deficit/Hyperactive Disorder meaning that from the start it will be harder to engage boys' in lesson content.

The reasons that boys' underachieve are varied on a scale. Teachers must constantly think of ways to raise standards of boys' in the classroom and keep them motivated and on task. Freedman (2003) states that the best ways to engage boys' include discovering their specific interests and aspirations through class discussions. Teachers must be aware of this and plan accordingly to suit the specific needs of boys'. DENI (2008) highlights four types of initiatives in order to raise attainment amongst boys'.

- Individualised approaches
- Pedagogical approaches
- Whole-school approaches; and
- System-level approaches

Individualised approaches such as target setting and mentoring are useful strategies that are practical for all schools. CCEA recommends individual target setting for those pupils with poor literacy scores. Younger et al (2005) state that target-setting can have a positive impact on performance but that it needs to be realistic and challenging to the pupil. Alongside target-setting, mentoring is a process to help teachers engage with underachieving boys'. Mentoring is used to give boys' direction and to let them know that there are certain expectations of achievement placed on them.

"Mentoring provides a specific form of feedback to the student in the context of them engaging in learning: "I am here for you", "I believe in you", and "I will do my best to help you achieve". (MacCallum, Beltman & Palmer 2005)

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