MASCULINITY AND EDUCATIONAL PERFORMANCE: ENGAGING OUR BOYS IN THE CLASSROOM

EDUEXCHANGE E-DISCUSSION SUMMARY

Date of Discussion: April 12-14, 2011

Dr. Christopher Clarke, Vice Principal of Shortwood Teachers' College, was the moderator of the Jamaica Partners for Educational Progress EduExchange, held between April 12 and 14, 2011. Members were invited to identify factors that contribute to continued underachievement of boys, examine if boys are negatively impacted by having limited number of male teachers, and identify strategies that have or are likely to improve boys' performance. The full discussion is available on the Jamaica Partners for Educational Progress website.

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PARTICIPANTS

We received twelve comments during the discussion, for which we thank the following persons:

- o Janet Brown
- o Ruth Chisholm
- o Hyacinth Evans
- o Elaine Foster Allen
- o Novelette McLean Francis
- o Dotlyn Minott
- o Merris Murray
- o Kenneth Russell
- o Jennifer Silvera
- o Claire Spence
- o Lorna Thompson
- o Susan Walden

Contributors belonged to the following organisations:

- Ministry of Education
- National Council on Education
- Parenting Partners Caribbean
- Shortwood Teachers' College
- UNICEF/Jamaica
- USAID/Jamaica Basic Education Project
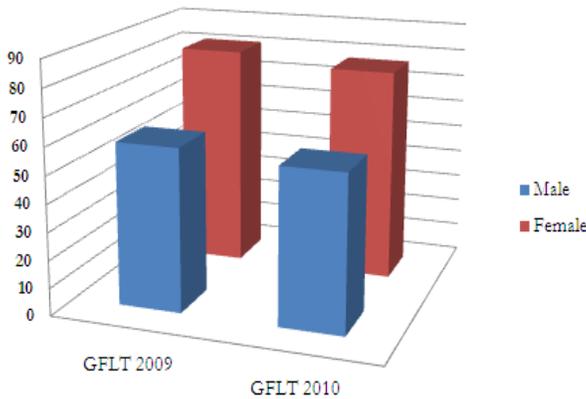- USAID/ Jamaica Mission

BACKGROUND

The underperformance of boys in the schools is a serious problem that has been documented extensively both in Jamaica and internationally over the last two decades. There is a consistent gap between the performance of boys and girls in critical national examinations, and under representation of males at the tertiary level. Furthermore, boys are more likely to achieve lower grades than girls, exhibit more disciplinary problems, repeat a grade, and be placed in special education (Kenneth Russell, April, 2011). In 2010, only one-quarter of the graduates of the University of the West Indies and one-third of those from UTECH were males. This issue is not unique to Jamaica. Throughout western education systems, boys are threatening to become a permanent underclass, and are achieving at slower rates and at lower levels than girls. Educators and social scientists have argued persuasively that there is a link between the formation of a masculine identity and educational performance. The argument runs like this: education and doing well in school are seen as feminine and hence are rejected by boys who want to fit in and be a man (Christopher Clarke, April, 2011).

Having identified the negative which we wish to change, we will also discuss how we will design and implement programmes to change these negatives and create an environment in which our sons can flourish and grow to a new type of manhood. And lest we consider this phenomenon a side issue, I want to remind us that our collective future is inextricably bound to the socialization and educational performance of our boys. Therefore, over the next three days I hope that as a community we will help to put this matter front and centre on the national educational agenda and keep it there until we fix it.

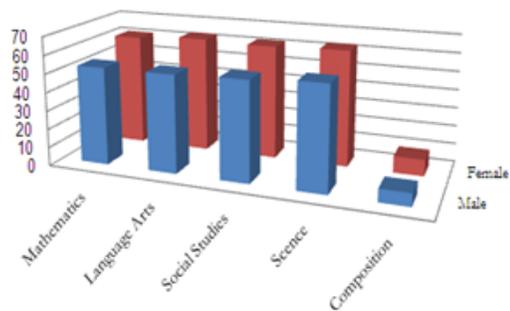*(Moderator's Welcome Post, April 12, 2011)*

Girls outperform boys in Grade Four Literacy Test

Source: Ministry of Education

Girls consistently perform better than boys in GSAT subjects in 2010

	Mathematics	Language Arts	Social Studies	Science	Composition
Male	53	53	54	56	7
Female	61	63	62	63	9

Source: The Sunday Gleaner, April 26, 2011

FACTORS PROMOTING BOYS' UNDERACHIEVEMENT

Members of the education community identified several factors that contributed to the persistent gap in achievement by gender. It was agreed that gender identity played a major role in the continued underperformance and under-participation of boys. To this end, gender socialization fostered the development of boys who:

o are ill-prepared to exhibit the discipline required for the school environment

o believe that doing well academically is incongruent with being men.

Boys in the classroom

Jamaican boys have increasingly resisted schooling as "girlish". This 'hard' image which has been embraced by the Jamaican male not only contributes to the resistance to school but is also directly linked to the creole language which is generally spoken by males. This practice has placed the boys in an increasing disadvantageous situation given that English is our instructional language. According to Figueroa these values are not only internalized by children but they also structure their worlds of school, home, work and the community. There is also the tendency for boys to internalize these expectations; accepting that certain roles and treatment are in keeping with them being boys.

Merris Murray,
National Council on Education

Gender socialization

Gender socialization's contribution to this problem can be traced to several agents. As the members of the community point out, traditional parenting practices of "tie the heifer and loose the bull" or male privileging, popular culture that is reinforced through the media, and lower expectations and unfair treatment of boys within school all play part in shaping boys' gender identity.

CoP members highlighted studies (Chevannes and Brown, 1998; Davis, 2002; USAID, 2004) that were conducted in Jamaica which explain that boys have been treated differently from girls. In the home, girls are more supervised and given tasks while boys are expected to "go play" and not as closely monitored. It is thought that "socialization in the home and school community teaches girls obedience, cooperation and other skills that help them to fit into the school routines while boys are allowed and expected to fend for themselves and be active, thus they are less suited for strict school" (Chevannes and Brown, 1998, cited by Merris Murray, April, 2011). In other words, these gender socialization practices within the home have shaped a gender identity that is incongruous with maintaining an academic identity, which is requirement of academic achievement within the school system.

Gender Stereotyping and Teacher Expectations

This is compounded by the poor treatment of boys in the school system, which is largely resulting from gender expectation (Evans, 1999). Research and the discussion confirmed that teachers tend to have lower expectations of boys, which can negatively influence student motivation and result in self-fulfilling prophesy. Other factors include:

- o Streaming

- o Socio – economic status

- o Physiological and developmental differences between boys and girls

- o Failure to take gender into account when teaching

Discussants agreed that the sex of the teacher does not play a major role in promoting boys' underachievement and the contention that boys are being marginalized is unsubstantiated. However, CoP members drew attention to the fact that while boys consistently performed worse than girls, neither were performing at expected levels. It was noted that not all boys are underperforming, which makes the question "*which boys?*" even more relevant, and possibly insightful as the education community designs interventions to tackle the apparent belief that masculinity and educational achievement are incongruous (Hyacinth Evans, April 2011).

STRATEGIES

The target areas of the strategies identified by participants were gender, the learning environment, teaching and learning, and professional development.

*While there are many factors that influence boys' under-achievement, I want to speak briefly to the point made by Dr. Clarke and others--that not only pedagogy is important but **EXPECTATIONS**. I have done the following exercise many times in different groups with similar results, but the one that is the starkest illustration in my mind was with a group of Masters' degree students in early childhood education; virtually all the women (no men) in the group of over 20 came from years in the classroom shaping young minds. I asked as a warm up for participants to give me one word "off the top of their heads" which they associated with Jamaican girl child, Jamaican boy child, Jamaican mother, Jamaican father, and a couple of other associations. Of the 25 words associated with boy child 17 were negative (troublesome, challenging, rude, etc.); of the 24 responses to girl child, 22 were positive (sweet, loving, more focused, etc.) and the other 2 more neutral than negative…I cannot say whether these seasoned and well-educated teachers **ACT** on these expectations or simply were reflecting what are strong cultural associations. But, (this is) still how they see very young boys and girls "off the top of their heads". Children generally live up (or down) to what others expect of them.*

Janet Brown,
Parenting Partners Caribbean

Gender

Polly Ground Primary School and Jericho Primary School were noted as case studies of schools that have successfully implemented gender based interventions. Specific gender strategies highlighted by discussants include:

- o Increasing the presence of male role models in the school environment

- o Male teachers as mentors

- o Single gender classes

- o Ensuring that teaching and learning materials reflect positive messages about boys and girls

- o Resocializing boys through popular culture to re-shape what it means to be a man

However, discussants cautioned that further marginalization of boys is possible if problem solving efforts are characterized by "'too much' targeting" (Ruth Chisholm, April, 2011).

The Learning Environment

- o Create a learning environment that:
    - Is positive
    - Is non-confrontational
    - Conveys high expectations
    - Has a sense of challenge

- o Improve student motivation

- o More child friendly schools; more discipline and less focus on punishment

- o Clear, fair, and consistently applied rules

- o Strengthen collaboration among principal and teachers to create a challenging and supportive learning environment

- o Implement mandatory participation in co-curricula activities to foster strong relationship between students and adults

- o Include all stakeholders in decision making

- o Ensure accountability

Teaching and Learning

- o Activities should:
    - Inform students about what they are doing and the purpose
    - Ensure that students are actively engaged and required to think
    - Provide a "creative student centred ways of getting it done" (Susan Walden, April, 2011)
    - Provide them with regular, positive feedback
    - Be "assigned in bite sized digestible pieces" and time bound
    - Have a brisk, well paced format with an obvious direction

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What can we do differently?

i. Assessment of boys needs to be different and attention given to their developmental stage. This should inform how they are taught.

ii. Get them reading early, especially those who are poor. Poor boys who do not read by grade three are unlikely to finish high school.

iii. There is a need to better understand, and treat accordingly, chronic learning disorders and separate them from behavioural problems. While related, it is important to address the root cause.

iv. There are also a lot of psychosocial issues that we do not give enough attention. For eg. counseling for children traumatized by violence – experienced directly or just living in communities where gunshots are the norm...While these affect all children, boys are less likely to seek help (because of their socialization) and so we have to have a system that seeks to help them.

v. Teaching practices, teachers, teaching material… As importantly, let the children see themselves reflected positively in the material used. Make the learning process an experience interactive, engaging…unforgettable. And guess what, this works for girls too.

vi. Increase the presence of male role models in school environments. If we cannot have them as teachers, principals and other school personnel, they may be brought in from the community. However, let us go beyond one off talks and workshops to deep engagement of community members as positive role models.

(Kenneth Russell, UNICEF)

- Be action oriented – e.g. role plays, debates, field trips, use of ICT

- Be based on an understanding of how the brain works

- Include an element of competition

- Include time for review and reflection at the end of each lesson/ assignment

- Involve an analysis of the concrete aspect of a text followed by analysis of one's emotional response to it

- Show gender sensitive approach to teaching

- Be relevant and connected to students' experience and knowledge

- Involve using multiple literacy strategies

- Include assessment that matches developmental stage. Boys are noted to mature more slowly than girls.

Professional Development

Ongoing Professional development is viewed as critical. One member cautioned that workshops are "not effective in bringing about change" (Dotlyn, Minott, April, 2011). She noted that research on professional development of teachers conducted in Jamaica found that teachers who were passionate about the subject they teach, tended to be "very concerned about their students' welfare and success, experimented to find the best strategies to teach" and cater to students with different needs. Thus, it was suggested that these teachers would be an asset in *induction/ mentorship/ coaching programmes* for new teachers and other teachers towards the development of skills and attitude.

Canaries in a Coal Mine

'Boys are our "canaries in the mine", our early warning system for lager systemic problems. They are failing quicker but that does not mean that it is an issue with them only; it is about the system in which we put them. While less adversely affected, girls are also under-achieving and so the system does not help boys or girls to reach their full potential." Ken Russell, UNICEF

While boys' underperformance in schools is a continued concern and has implications for the whole society, it was agreed that efforts should be made towards improving the process of and environment for teaching and learning to benefit both boys and girls.

Above all, I now ask, has the child – boy or girl – been exposed to quality teaching most of the time? I often go into primary schools and am struck by the instructional practices that I see. Much of what I see today is similar to what I saw in classrooms in the early 80's when I started doing research on teaching – the teacher spending an inordinate amount of time writing on the chalkboard while the children wait or write what is written. There is very little interaction or student thinking evident. In the name of teaching, students are given 'work' which is often completing the blanks. I am told this is widespread though thankfully not all teachers teach in this manner.

So in my view, it is more important to think about good practices in classrooms – especially at the primary level. And when teachers use good instructional practices, we will see that both boys and girls will benefit.

Hyacinth Evans,
Jamaica Basic Education Project

RELATED RESOURCES

Clarke, C. (2007).*Boys' Gender Identity, School Work, and Teacher and Parents' Gender Beliefs*. Available
from http://jamaica.kdid.org/library

Clarke (2007) conducted a multi-case ethnographic study that examined the gender beliefs of thirty (30) boys
between the age of 8 and 10 years, two teachers and twelve parents. This research aimed to answer the following
questions: 1) What are boys' perception of their gender identity? 2) What beliefs do teachers hold about gender? and
3) What beliefs do parents hold about gender? Through observation, interviews, and focus group discussions Clarke
found that "boys identify strongly and early with the dominance of masculinity and the subordination of women"
(p. 16). Boys' gender identity was defined by the avoidance of feminine behaviours and "less by what they do". The
study found that boys did not want to be girls and policed the behaviours of their peers by informing those in
breach that they "act like a girl" (p. 17).

Based on self report, the teachers either had a gender equitable treatment approach, which facilitated more
opportunities for an 'at risk' group or an equal treatment approach, which ensured that students receive the same
opportunities for access and participation". Regardless of the philosophy regarding gender in the classroom,
teachers were rougher on boys, tended to describe boys more negatively and did not accommodate the male
learning style in their lesson activities though they acknowledged a difference by gender.

Parents tended to have traditional beliefs concerning gender (except for career choice), which was evident in their
male privileging socialization practices. The author notes that though parents had high expectations of their sons,
the socialization practices were incongruous with ensuring that boys did well in school.

To address the issue of differential treatment and achievement of boys, Clarke makes the following
recommendations: 1) a clearly enunciated gender policy for each level of the education system 2) the re-examination
of teacher education programmes with a view to deal with gender issues and the inclusion of "a standalone course
on Gender in the Classroom" 3) the examination of ways in which popular culture can be engaged to change the
current image of manliness and 4) a national discussion concerning the nexus of gender/ masculinity, academic
achievement and hard work.

Christie, G. And Bailey, B. (n.d.). *Gender: Mini – Guide for Teachers.* Available from
http://jamaica.kdid.org/library

The Expanding Educational Horizons Project developed a mini – guide for teachers concerning gender. The guide
focused on the basic areas of gender sensitization, with special emphasis as it relates to the gender regime of the
school. The broad areas addressed include:
- Gender Socialization / Gender Identity Acquisition
- Role of School/Teachers in Gender Socialization
- Characteristics of the Gender Regime in Schools

DeLise (n.d.) In search of evidence-based policy and best practice: Addressing gender differences in schooling within the English Speaking Caribbean. Available from http://jamaica.kdid.org/library

DeLise provides an overview of theoretical approaches used to explain the gender achievement gap and classified them in four categories: sociological – structural, feminist structural, education and institution focused and equity oriented perspectives. He maintains that despite "intense theorizing on gender issues in the Caribbean, there are few well developed local interventions targeting the achievement gender gap" (DeLise, p. 6). This paper examines the process by which Trinidad and Tobago developed their gender policy and implemented the Single Sex Conversion Project that sought to convert 20 co-educational schools into single sexed institutions beginning in 2010. The author urged small states to "adopt intelligent policy making" by generating and using contextualized knowledge.

Evans, H. (1999). *Gender and achievement in secondary education in Jamaica*. **Kingston: Planning Institute of Jamaica**

Evans presents research findings that assist with understanding the factors underlying the gender gap in achievement. Specifically, findings suggest that boys were more likely to attend school less frequently than girls and by the end of the primary school period their academic performance were worse than girls. In grade 5 and 6, boys were displaying "major dysfunctions in attitude to, and interest in work, quality of work they produced and their academic performance".

It was found that the majority of grade 5 and 6 teachers thought girls did better work. In addition, grade 5 boys were over represented in the lower streams and more likely to report that that they were beaten regardless of the stream they belonged to. Girls in single sex schools did not report getting beaten at school, whereas 6.5% of girls in co-ed institutions, 6.3% of boys in single sex institutions and 18.1% of boys in co-educational schools. Evans concluded that boys, regardless of whether they attended single sexed or co-educational schools, were more likely to have negative experiences than girls. More boys did not believe in the utility of education, as expressed by their agreement to the statement "you don't need to be good at school work to make it in life" or go to college to be successful.

With regards to single sex versus co-educational schools, it was found that gender differences were not statistically significant in terms of academic identity. However, boys in single sex schools had more positive academic identity than boys in a co-educational setting. Evans (1999) suggests that this may indicate that "boys in single sex schools had learned to reconcile peer group pressures and the demand for scholarship". It is noteworthy that though girls were committed to their school work and achieving good grades, they retained "stereotypical notions of boys' academic behaviour" (p. 74).

The following are the critical areas that Evans (1999) noted as in need of urgent attention:
- The nature of teacher – student interaction and teacher bias against boys
- School practices such as corporal punishment and insults, which discriminate against students of either gender
- The negative effects of streaming and the negative experiences which correlate with being assigned to a low stream
- Gender coding of appropriate student behaviour and subject choice. She notes that stereotypical notions of male and female behaviour were held by students and teachers alike and were reinforced by school practices, routines and rituals
- Boys were more likely to hold gender stereotyped notions than girls and were more harshly treated for violating the gender code than girls.

- Student academic identity – particularly for boys who desire to present themselves as "not interested in academic work; not organized",
- Curriculum and teaching methods alienated boys. Limited observations revealed that boys became interested in academic work if the topic were of interest to them.
- Boys' ability to read was problematic.
- The over-emphasis on testing and screening at the primary level, which may encourage "a very formal , academic curriculum" with teaching methods that teacher directed, and less emphasis on "exploration of ideas, problem solving and co-operative learning activities"

Recommendations include:
- Teachers need to be made aware of their school practices and their effects through interventions such as human relations training, teacher development workshops
- Guidelines on creating a gender fair environment
- More effects at the local school level to make the topics in the curriculum more in line with the interest of boys
- Review of the policies on streaming

Figueroa, M. (1996). *Male privileging and academic performance in Jamaica.* Available from http://jamaica.kdid.org/library

Figueroa (1996) puts forward the view that academic underperformance of boys manifest because of "historical privileging of the male gender". Gender socialization practices is said to result in deficiencies in the skills needed to survive in the education system. The paper provides an overview of the statistical evidence, gender socialization issues and the process occurring in the schoolroom that may be contributing to the problem. He notes that the "extreme gendering of Jamaican children" involves the notion that boys are naturally bad and misbehaviour is expected from them, and girls are naturally good and are expected to "conform to a rigid code". Figueroa posits that the gender socialization practices, which gives a lot of freedom for males compared to females, means that boys have "less exposure to tasks that build self discipline, time management and a sense of process". Thus females, who are monitored more closely and expected to do chores, have an advantage when it comes to applying self discipline in the academic contexts.

Lindsay, G. and Muijs, D. (2006). Challenging underachievement in boys. *Educational Research***, 48 (3), p. 313 – 332.** Available from http://jamaica.kdid.org/library

Lindsay and Muijs (2006) identified primary and secondary schools that were successful in overcoming underachievement in black Caribbean, black African and white UK born boys. The research findings, which are based on interviews with head-teachers, teachers, and pupils, found that there was no singular successful approach. However, the approach taken by schools either emphasized the insistence on equally high standards for every student (whole school) or targeting underperforming groups for interventions (targeted). Six factors that have been noted as positive influences are related to: the curriculum, performance monitoring, high expectations, staffing, inclusive ethos and parental involvement. With regards to the curriculum, the strategy of successful primary schools was to "optimize interest" and emphasize the importance of "relevance and connectedness". "Talk and chalk" was avoided and the use of ICT was found to motivate boys in all schools involved in the study. One teacher noted that computers may be perceived a "non-judgmental", which made students more willing to risk making mistakes as they would not fear criticism. Another curriculum based intervention that was deemed useful is literacy programmes that target boys with low levels of literacy upon entry to school. The use of data was prioritized in all schools, and

performance data and other indicators were used to develop individually tailored intervention and indentify challenging yet realistic targets for underperforming boys. Additionally, research carried out by some schools facilitated decision making. One school collected data from parents/ caregivers on factors like reading habits, which countered previously held assumptions and helped in the development of more relevant, and likely effective approaches. The schools generally had high expectations for all students. It is noted that achievement is "celebrated through displays and rewards" and there is a strong emphasis on behaviour management where "genuine concern and caring for pupils" along with "strong discipline" is expressed and reinforced. The research found that schools emphasized that sanctions need to be clear and fairly applied.

Martino, W.(2008). Boys' underachievement: Which boys are we talking about? *Research Monograph*, **12.**
Available from http://jamaica.kdid.org/library

Martino (2008) observed that not all boys are underachieving or 'at-risk', and maintained that "educators and policy makers need to address the question of which boys require help becoming literate and what kind of help educators need to provide" (Martino, 2008, p.1). He rejects the belief that learning styles are influenced by gender and that employing more male teachers will improve boys' academic performance, but that good pedagogical approaches and respectful relationships had greater influence on raising achievement among boys. Martino highlights the conclusion of Warrington , Younger and Baerne (2006) that schools that were able to raise the performance of boys used "strategies which work to reduce constructions of gender difference" (Warrington , Younger and Baerne, 2006, cited in Martino, 2008, p.3). He advises that educators need to get boys to think about what being a boy involves by:

1) "developing a critical literacy approach that encourages boys to question taken-for-granted / common – sense notions of what it means to be a boy
2) "using texts in the language arts classroom to raise questions about the effects of stereotypes"
3) "having an understanding of the social construction of gender to address the link between homophobia, sexism and the policing of masculinity"

Parry, O. (2000). *Male Underachievement in High School Education in Jamaica, Barbados and St. Vincent and the Grenadines.* Barbados: Canoe Press

In addressing the issue of male underachievement, the book challenges the popularly held assumption that boys fail because girls achieve. Rather than blaming Caribbean females for male underachievement, the book locates male educational performance in the historical context of Caribbean gender relationships, and structural constraints on the development of Caribbean gender identities.

UNICEF and the Institute of Social and Economic Research funded the research on gender and Caribbean high school achievement upon which this book is based. Odette Parry and her colleagues conducted extensive in-depth interviews and participant observation research at schools in Jamaica, Barbados, and St. Vincent and the Grenadines. After providing the research background and acknowledging the effect of the interviewers' cultural differences, Parry discusses key findings in the areas of gender expectations, verbal discipline, male role models, coeducation vs. single-sex schools, gender socialization, and sex/gender identity development." (Summary from Amazon.com)

Sax, L. (2010). Sex difference in hearing: Implications for best practice in the classroom. *Advances in Gender and Education*, **2,** p. 13 -21. Available from http://jamaica.kdid.org/library

This paper highlights previous research as it relates to sex differences in hearing and the implications for the classroom practices. Research suggests that girls are more sensitive to sounds than boys. Therefore, the "average

boy may need to speak more loudly" if he is to hear as well as girls. The article concludes that "Educators can accommodate these differences either by offering single-sex classrooms, or by providing selective amplification in co-ed classrooms. However, boys with auditory hyperacuity might be disadvantaged by being assigned to an all-boys classroom" (Sax, 2010, p.19).

Younger, M. and Warrington, M. (2005). Raising Boys' Achievement. Available from
     http://jamaica.kdid.org/library

This report is one outcome of the Raising Boys' Achievement Project, which operated in English primary and secondary schools between 2000 and 2004. The report highlights the challenges and strategies employed by these schools, which will have implications for the debate concerning the gap in achievement by gender. Schools that had strategies implemented, which improved the academic performance of boys without negatively affecting girls' performances, were identified and called originators. Based on research conducted with originators, strategies can be placed in four categories:

- o **Pedagogic**: classroom based approaches centred on teaching and learning
- o **Individual**: focus on target- setting and mentoring
- o **Organizational**: ways of organizing learning at the whole school level
- o **Socio-cultural**: approaches that attempt to create an environment for learning that facilitate the congruence between students' beliefs and attitudes, and the goals of the school

During the intervention phase, schools and originators formed triads. The triads implemented strategies of originators and the outcome was monitored. The main pedagogic approach focused on literacy. Strategies include the development of a 'reading buddy' scheme, and using drama to teach literacy. There was a focus on encouraging boys to become *successful and satisfied readers* by establishing a context in which boys wanted to read. This involved:

- o having a wide range of texts available, creating a space for talk and reflection about reading, and sharing ideas about the text and what was enjoyable in it
- o providing opportunities to choose interesting reading matter, and to discuss reading in a meaningful way

Research conducted during the project did not support the belief that the dominant learning styles of boys differ from those of girls nor the case of boy-friendly pedagogies, either in the context of mixed-sex or single-sex teaching. However, the authors noted a set of pre-conditions that seem essential in any attempt to implement single-sex classes for particular subjects:

- Teachers must use a proactive and assertive approach, which avoids the negative or confrontational, but conveys high expectations and a sense of challenge, and uses praise regularly and consistently.
- There must be the promotion of a team ethic, to forge an identity for the class of which the students can feel part, with humour and informality, and identification with students' interests and enthusiasms.

It is noted that "One of the essential conclusions we have reached through the RBA Project, is that 'under-achieving' boys and girls are not likely to engage with learning if schools simply concentrate on adopting narrowly focused and quick-fix solutions in isolation from the ethos of the whole school." Instead, the authors conclude that the characteristics of quality teaching are just as suitable and effective for both boys and girls.