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Mind the Gap: Encouraging boys to read

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Abstract

This paper begins by establishing the veracity of the perception that boys underperform relative to girls in literacy attainment. A discussion of the reasons for this disparity follows, considering biological and societal arguments. The paper goes on to discuss approaches that can combat these issues and improve outcomes for boys in literacy. It is argued that selecting texts and media which affirm male readers' validity will increase investment from male learners. The paper concludes by commenting on the gender imbalance of the early years workforce, and its impact on the attainment of male learners.

Introduction

This paper will critically examine the perceived trend in the underperformance of boys in literacy development. It will seek to first establish whether this underperformance does indeed exist, considering counter-arguments, before proceeding to discuss possible causes for this anomaly. Finally, this paper will consider strategies that can be employed by primary school teachers to mitigate the effects of those causes.

Putting Gender on the Agenda

Reading is a pre-requisite of success in school and society (Ozturk et al, 2016). Good readers are better students in every subject area (Fisher & Frey, 2012; Landt, 2013) and literary aptitude is one of the most significant indicators of achievement educationally, socially and economically (Scottish Government, 2010; Henry et al, 2012).

PISA has reported that the underachievement of boys is a global trend (Smith, 2012), which affects all OECD countries (Clarke & Burke, 2012; Harrison, 2012; Helbig, 2012). In the US, girls outperform boys in all fifty states (Cassidy & Ortlieb, 2013) and in Australia, boys represent the majority of pupils who struggle with literacy (Henry et al, 2012). This long-term, international trend affects reading, writing and reading for pleasure (NLT, 2012).

In the UK context, this issue affects all social classes (Bradshaw et al, 2016; Moss & Washbrook, 2016) but the gap widens for pupils eligible for free school meals (Adcock, Bolton & Abreu, 2016). The trend also permeates all ethnic groups (Adcock, Bolton & Abreu, 2016) but most significantly affects white working class boys in the UK (Sharples et al, 2011). This is in contrast with the US where black and Hispanic boys are the worst affected (Landt, 2013).

The majority of schools in the UK have reported a gender imbalance in reading (NLT, 2012). Scotland's attainment gap is smaller than the OECD and UK averages (Boyling, Wilson & Wright,

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2013; Scottish Government, 2013). Tymms, Merrell & Buckley (2015) found that boys are around five developmental months behind their female counterparts by Primary 1.

Driessen & van Langen (2013) argue that the so-called gender gap is both overstated and generalised, however they fail to account for the aforementioned statistical trends identified by multiple researchers. While they are correct that class and ethnicity are more influential indicators, that does not justify overlooking the impact of gender. The oft-repeated claim of sceptics that troubleshooting treats boys as a homogeneous group (viz. Driessen & van Lagen, 2013; Scott, 2014; Tarrant et al, 2015) seems wilfully to ignore the identified trend and implies that it should not be corrected. Nor is it a “backlash” against women or “remasculisation” of society (Tarrant et al, 2015, p.67); this feminist perception of a misogynistic approach falsely assumes that the betterance of boys must necessarily be at the expense of girls (Moss & Washbrook, 2012).

Between the Lines: Why gender matters

The rate, sequence and degree of brain development differs between genders (Senn, 2012) which causes girls and boys to think and act differently (Watson & Kehler, 2012). The frontal lobe and cerebellum, required for language skills, in a five-year-old boy is equivalent to that of a three-year-old girl (Senn, 2012). Girls always use a common language network in the brain when reading, however boys use a network dependent on the mode of delivery (Ihmeideh, 2014). Moreover, the prevalence of reading difficulties is higher in boys, alongside ADHD and autism diagnoses which as much as quadruple (Moss & Washbrook, 2016). For these reasons, it is incumbent on the class teacher to recognise possible differences in the requirements of their pupils and to tailor their teaching methods accordingly.

Critics who claim there is no evidence of neurological differences in boys (NLT, 2012) or dismiss what evidence there is as “myth” (Hamilton & Jones, 2016, p.250) do so on the grounds that this makes gender differences inevitable. However, to accept neurological differences is not necessarily to condemn male learners to a disadvantage; it provides an opportunity to refine practice to suit the needs of the learner. While it is accepted that some boys achieve great success in literacy, this does not mean there is no developmental distinction between genders, as suggested by the Boys’ Reading Commission (NLT, 2012, p.2). Rather, it is to suggest that developing a greater understanding of such distinctions can improve the learning experience of both girls and boys. Counter-arguments that the literary gender gap varies by time and country (Driessen & van Langen, 2013) do not stand up to the scrutiny of the foregoing discussion, which demonstrates a worldwide, long-lasting trend.

The trends above may be exacerbated by entrenched social practices. For example, parents are shown to have the biggest influence on a child’s literacy skills from birth to age three (Scottish Government, 2010), the years which are “key to outcomes [...] in childhood, adolescence and adult life” (ibid, p.7). It is significant to note differences in the assumptions, treatment, and perception of girls and boys amongst parents.

Parents may assume that reading is less important for boys in the first place (Ozturk et al, 2016). There can also be assumptions about what constitutes literacy itself, such as privileging printed books over other forms of literacy (Harrison, 2012). By not recognising examples of literacy in its broadest sense, parents may overlook important developmental opportunities and occasions to celebrate success.

There is evidence that suggests parents differentiate treatment of children based on the child’s gender in the first year of their life through the choices they make concerning names, clothes, toys and hobbies (Moss & Washbrook, 2016). Evidence shows mothers will develop their daughters’ literacy more than their sons’ by talking to them more (Ihmeideh, 2014), and teaching the alphabet

more (Moss & Washbrook, 2016). Girls are more likely to be bought books, taken to the library, and more likely to be given books as gifts (NLT, 2012). It is important to engage parents in boys' literacy, especially as fathers' reading habits are of particular influence to boys (Watson & Kehler, 2012; Henry et al, 2012; NLT, 2012). Boys with fathers who read to them, or who are involved in their daily care, are more likely to be able to draw a recognisable face at a younger age, have a higher IQ, and be more socially mobile (NLT, 2012).

Perceptive disparity occurs when parents, perhaps erroneously, rate the literary abilities of their daughter higher than another parent would of a similarly-performing boy (Baroody & Diamond, 2013). This could be due to a perception that there is a "fixed trait" that boys are less able readers (Ozturk et al, 2016, p.713).

A child's gender identity is formed before starting school, largely based on modelling adult behaviours (Hollis-Sawyer & Cuevas, 2013). Children take cues from parents' lifestyles and, from as young as four, television (Moss & Washbrook, 2016; Galman & Mallozzi, 2015). Boys are almost twice as likely to have fallen behind before they start Primary 1 (Adcock et al, 2016). Children with poor literacy at the outset are likely to remain behind (Mattall, 2016; Moss & Washbrook, 2016).

On reaching school, pupils may face further bias from their teachers relating to their gender (Hamilton & Jones, 2016). Based on preconceptions, teachers may also rate equivalent performance as higher in girls (NLT, 2012; Baroody & Diamond, 2013). Conversely, the assumption that boys will underperform may result in teachers being less troubled or inclined to act when such underperformance is manifested (Moss & Washbrook, 2016).

Scottish schooling features a high proportion of left-brain processes, such as fine-motor skills, sequence, letters and words, sitting down and listening for extended periods: all of these favour female learning styles (Hamilton & Jones, 2016). Behaviours in accordance with such expectations are more often evident in girls (Driessen & van Langen, 2013; Moss & Washbrook, 2016) as early as Primary 1 (Tymms, Merrell & Buckley, 2015). In England, Ofsted notes boys do significantly better on multiple choice assessments while girls outperform in extended composition, irrespective of subject (NLT, 2012).

Alongside what appeals naturally to learners, there is a degree of peer pressure. Female peers welcome pro-learning behaviours, while masculinity can be seen to avoid effort (Hamilton & Jones, 2016; Ozturk, 2016; Sarroub & Pernick, 2016). As such, Galman & Mallozzi (2015) and Walker (2014) argue that school does not feminise learners, but it is masculinity which impedes success; it is wilful non-conformity from boys that disadvantages them, rather than that with which they do not conform. This position absolves the teacher of blame, but in doing so ignores their fundamental responsibility to inspire and engage every learner in a tailored curriculum. Boys are less interested in pleasing the teacher (Serafini, 2013) and children recognise that the (predominately female) teachers like to read (Fisher & Frey, 2012). Both sexes agree that reading is more for girls (NLT, 2012); one-fifth of boys would be embarrassed if friends witnessed them reading (ibid). The fact that boys have accounted for between 78% and 79% of exclusions from Scottish schools every year for over a decade is, in part, due to the "increasing feminisation" of schools (Scottish Government, 2013, p.8).

A New Leaf: Improving boys' literacy

The UK has been engaged with the gender gap for longer than other countries such as France or the Netherlands (Driessen & van Lagen, 2013). In Scotland, the gap is both narrowest and closing fastest out of the UK nations (Machin, McNally & Wyness, 2013). Generally, the Scottish Government privileges literacy in initial teacher education (Donaldson, 2010; Scottish Government 2010) and the

Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) has an expectation of tailoring the learning experience to suit the individual (Scottish Government, 2010). Education Scotland inspections have found that CfE has broadened the range of texts, and improved performance, quality and confidence with regards to literacy experiences (Scottish Government, 2015). Other recent initiatives from the government include the Bookbug scheme, which has “success[fully]” helped parents in underprivileged families to engage with books” (Scottish Government, 2015, p.8) and the PlayTalkRead buses, which have also enjoyed considerable engagement (ibid.).

The selection of texts is an important factor, but on its own insufficient to address the wider issue (Harrison, 2010). Teachers substituting reading schemes with handpicked titles showed success in North Lanarkshire (Christie, Robertson & Stodter, 2014). Though Korman (2013) describes the books boys like as “unfathomable” (p.164), numerous researchers have identified common themes that provide the necessary “spark of interest” in a story or character that motivates completion of the book (Landt, 2013, p.2). However, commercial pressures have resulted in reduced availability of such titles, as publishers of children’s books have a tendency to produce material preferred by girls because it is more commercially successful (NLT, 2012; Sarroub, 2016). The fact that boys have the most remedial lessons is not generally factored into text production and selection (Ortiz, 2014). Teachers have insufficient knowledge of the boy-appropriate texts (NLT, 2012) and dissuade boys from reading by making what they enjoy off-limits because teachers may find the subject matter personally distasteful (Senn, 2012; Serafini, 2013; Ortiz, et al 2014). Scott (2014) found that many books lack authentic dialogue which accurately reflects the way boys speak, and those that embrace such vernacular are avoided by teachers who wish to promote correct grammar instead.

Henry et al (2012) strongly criticise such practices because in their view it is essential that boys see themselves as represented in the book. Indeed, gender roles are reinforced through literacy and boys look for characters who match their own aspirations (Roper & Clifton, 2013; Sarroub & Pernick, 2016), informing those views and becoming role models (Scott, 2014). That said, teachers should be wary of endorsing sexist depictions (Wohlwend, 2011; Hollis-Sawyer & Cuevas, 2013). Male protagonists like Harry Potter and Percy Jackson have been successful because they are “not depicted as perfect but [have] believable flaws” (Ferris, 2009 in Senn, 2012, p.217).

Much fiction relies heavily on character development and the exploration of feelings and relationships, romantic or otherwise, which are not generally of interest to male readers (Henry et al, 2012; Senn 2012; Serafini, 2013). Plot-driven and funny prose is much more likely to be engaging (Henry et al, 2012; Senn, 2012; Serafini, 2013; Ortiz et al, 2014; Educational Journal, 2016). Moreover, boys read a significant amount of non-fiction and this should not be overlooked (NLT, 2012; Ortiz, 2014). Yeung & Curwood (2015) encourage the inclusion of popular culture. Senn (2012) also found exciting cover designs, easy to read text, large areas of white space, photos, illustrations, and short page counts to be positively received by boys.

Research has strongly suggested that boys engage much more with reading when it is for a purpose (Fisher & Frey, 2012; Watson & Kehler, 2012; Serafini, 2013; Velluto & Barbousas, 2013; Sarroub & Pernick, 2016). Boys like to be ‘expert’ on topics which matter to them, and that will engage them to read (Sarroub & Pernick, 2016). Real-world contexts prove much more meaningful to male learners. Fisher & Frey (2012) discovered that is more often the use of the book than the book itself which is off-putting. Closed questions are not motivating because they serve no purpose other than to please the teacher (NLT, 2012; Sarroub & Pernick, 2016).

Purpose is closely linked to relevance. The use of mobile phones can make reading more “authentic and relevant” (Brosseau, 2014, p.18). Such literacy skills are much more likely to have been developed at home already (Brosseau, 2014; Watson & Kehler, 2012; Moss & Washbrook, 2016).

Schools privilege print text and do not give the literacy boys engage with at home a place in the classroom (Harrison, 2012). Indeed, digital literacy is important almost everywhere in modern life except the classroom (Rowse & Kendrick, 2013). As with *what* is read, so it is with *how* these texts are read: we return to the theme of validating boys' experiences and interests, and providing opportunities for them to recognise their place in the school curriculum. Integrating these "hidden literacies" (ibid, p.588) increases both the duration and quality of engagement (Henry et al, 2012; Moss & Washbrook, 2012; Brosseuk, 2014; Yeung & Curwood, 2015). While e-books have limitations for imagery, apps such as those from Disney or Dr. Seuss provide narration, sound effects, animations and other elements which can in some cases outweigh the value of traditional print text (Tilley, 2013). Particularly relevant to boys is computer gaming, for example, in which Ihmeideh (2014) identifies character analysis, plot prediction, and comprehension as key skills which can be developed.

Another key purpose of reading that can help engage boys is drama. A child's first exposure to books is often through oral stories and rhymes (Abbott, 2013). Role play and drama enhance motivation and promote language (Watson & Kehler, 2012; Gao & Dowdy, 2014). Used appropriately, they can deepen understanding, higher order thinking and vocabulary (Gao & Dowdy, 2014). Students can learn from each other and gain some control over the experience (Sarroub & Pernick, 2016). Moreover, kinesthetic learning is shown to keep boys' brains active (Senn, 2012). Techniques including role play, improvisation, mimes, simulation and tableau can all enhance literacy (Gao & Dowdy, 2014). A social element to reading is particularly important to boys (Watson & Kehler, 2012; Cassidy & Ortlieb, 2013; Mattall, 2016).

Lastly, the role of men in the classroom is critical to boys' literacy. As previously discussed, studies have shown that boys associate reading with female family members and female teachers (Harrison, 2012; NLT, 2012); and that male role models are essential to boys' perceptions of reading (Watson & Kehler, 2012). Many boys report that they have no such experience with men in their families (Senn, 2012; Serafini, 2013). Male teacher numbers have decreased post-devolution while female teacher numbers increased (Scottish Government, 2013). In Scotland, only 9% of primary school teachers are male (Scottish Government, 2016). Factors including a perception of low pay, low status, lack of promotion opportunities and inexperience with children were found to discourage male graduates in Scotland from pursuing teaching (Riddell et al, 2005).

While Hamilton & Jones (2016) are right to point out that not all female teachers will share the same approach, it is the male role model that is lacking, not the male teaching method *per se*. Galman & Mallozzi (2015) defensively reject accusations of "female teachers' ignorance", "failures" and their "inability" to adapt their practice of giving "preferential treatment" to girls (p.36) as culpable, however they defend a charge not levied. They fail to appreciate that female teachers' value and competence is not questioned, only their ability to single-handedly, adequately inform a gender role for the opposite sex (c.f. NLT, 2012).

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has demonstrated long-standing, international underperformance in boys' literacy. The research evidence suggests that biological differences between the genders are compounded by societal norms affecting parents, teachers and boys themselves which disadvantage male pupils early in their literary lives. Such trends can be combatted, the studies show, through an equally complex combination of approaches. These include selecting texts with which male readers can identify, a medium that is relevant and a purpose that is genuine and sociable. Moreover, this paper cites evidence that suggests boys do not see themselves reflected in the workforce that delivers this crucial training, and that encouraging male parents and teachers to support boys' development can be enormously beneficial.

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