

## **Addressing Boys Underachievement**

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### ***Introduction***

These notes are designed as an informal guide to addressing some of the issues around boy's underachievement (in schools). This is not designed to be an academic paper or a blueprint for classroom management. Despite many people's wishes, there is no magic wand when it comes to dealing with some of the issues that we are currently facing but as the old adage says – 'If you always do what you have always done, you will always get what you have always got' and that to keep doing the same thing and expect different results is the surest sign of madness.

Passing a colleague's classroom one morning I heard him bellow 'Every day I shout, every day you never listen – Why!' I didn't dare go in and tell him but sometimes the sheer stress of the demands placed upon us stop us looking for viable alternatives and 'just getting through the day' seems to be the motto.

### ***What is all the fuss about?***

Are boys really underachieving and if they are so what? The main issues are that many boys (not all) are not responding to the educational message available in our schools. Boys as a group are not fulfilling their potential (i.e. actual grades versus predicted or possible) and more worryingly the gap between boys and girls achievement is constantly widening.

Could it be that girls, finally freed from the shackles of male tyranny are at last coming into their own and proving their true worth? Unfortunately no scientist has proven one way or the other any link between gender and intelligence.

The strongest correlation is actually between parental income and achievement.

It is the cost of these disengaging or disengaged boys which is the problem. Unfulfilled and frustrated they are disruptive within school and short of options after school become prime fodder for the next set of crime statistics. Suicide is also becoming one of the biggest killers of young men aged 16 – 25.

I am always very clear when I am working with groups of boys that the reason I work with them is that I would like all of them to be happy and successful, in great jobs, earning lots of money and paying lots of tax which keeps paying my pension rather than being unhappy and unsuccessful with no job, burgling my house and stealing my car!



## ***So, what is happening and why?***

In terms of looking for things to blame there is certainly no shortage whether it be poor or no role models, shortages of male teachers in primary school, a feminised national curriculum, too much coursework, a lack of 'proper' jobs, too much TV and junk food and so the list goes on. Without doubt there are a vast number of societal ills which fuel the situation however it is probably going to take another two generations to turn some of those ideas around and we need to take action now.

### ***The basics***

During the sixties and seventies it was widely felt that all differences between boys and girls behaviour were generated by societal expectations. I.e. we treat boys and girls differently and therefore they responded differently so it was seen that all pupils should be treated the same.

During the late eighties and early nineties with the increased use of PET brain scans some scientists began to suggest that boys and girls brains were differently 'wired' and therefore the differences in behaviour were innate not learned. The main proponents of this were 'Jessel and Moir' with their books entitled 'Brain Sex'.

Their suggestion was that the 'maleness' or 'femaleness' of your brain was determined by the amount of testosterone present in the womb at critical stages as the foetus was developing. Rather than being one or the other it was suggested that we all exist somewhere on a spectrum from a very male brain right through an overlap area in the middle (potentially male brained females and vice versa) to overtly female brains on the other end.

Sadly some people have seized on this and used rather spurious connections to create all kinds of ideas. The most common one is that of measuring the relative sizes of your ring finger and index finger. The longer the ring finger is than the index the more male your brain is supposed to be. The closer in length they are the more female your brain.

From this we were supposed to be able to predict the next set of football stars and your true sexuality. If only life and humans were that simple!

### ***What differences does this supposedly create?***

According to the research those with the more male brains showed

- Higher levels of aggression and competitiveness
- A greater dominance in the right hemisphere
- A better ability to handle space and shape
- A desire to know the 'big picture'
- Greater impulsiveness
- Shorter attention spans
- Love of (or near addiction to) risk
- Preference for learning through experimentation
- A more random and impulsive attitude to tasks
- Capacity for working on one task at a time



Those with the more female brains showed

- Higher levels of passivity and greater tendency to co operate
- A greater dominance in the left hemisphere
- A greater capacity for language and early use of words
- A more systematic approach to tasks
- A preference for detail
- Better longevity on tasks
- A reduced ability to handle shape and space
- A capacity to multi task

Mention has been made here of left and right hemispheres of the brain. Again there are as many arguments for this idea being true as false. As with so many things it only becomes a problem if it is seized upon as the 'holy grail' of learning or used to determine behaviour such that people start using it as an excuse for not being able to do something.

All it does is give you clues as to what might be going on for someone in a certain situation and therefore possibly be able to help them out of it.

I tend to find that under pressure hemispheric dominance shows itself in that those on the right can easily become overwhelmed whereas those on the left will tend to go through lists of options. Often neither will help!

***So, given that boys and girls can be wired differently how do we teach to accommodate that and can 'boy friendly' teaching adversely affect the girls?***

The strategies here can be at two levels.

- a) Structural/Pastoral
- b) Subject/Classroom

Structural/ Pastoral

At this level some of the important features of boys social groupings can be used to good effect.

Boys tend to move in large loosely bounded social groups with definite hierarchies which can stretch right across the school. These groups are lead by very powerful opinion leaders who can sway the entire opinion of a whole year group.

Status in groups can be conferred by the obvious attributes of being 'hard', cool, good at sport, musical, weird (in a clever kind of way) or the great get out for the weaker – being funny.

Some schools have been very successful at asking primary or middle schools to identify all their 'clowns, stars and rebels'. These students are then identified and given early responsibility within the school. Much like walkie/talkies and hi viz jackets or epaulettes and braid this plays up to boys love of status and places within hierarchies.



Allied to this is the wide ranging nature of competition within these hierarchies and the ever changing place or desire for change within them.

As Heads of Year (remember those?) or Key Stage managers create as many largely publicised league tables, competitions as you can. Don't just make them academic or sporting. Make them for anything. Best joke, slowest walk from the English block to science and enrol the other kids in the monitoring and adjudication to avoiding calls of favouritism.

Boys love benchmarks, trivia, numbers and leagues. Set homework that is trivia related which involves asking their parents. It gets them to do homework, gets the parents interested and gets them to the lesson on time to find the answer. If 'extreme ironing' can be such a craze what about 'extreme homework' (with it's own set of important rules)?

Remember it is small boys that collect and trade 'Pokemon' cards and love fantasy league football – they don't differ much with age.

Without doubt peer mentoring, peer coaching, student peer led action teams, vertical tutor groupings, ability driven classes across year groups all work as such things such as apprentices and the guild structure always did. - learning from those around and above you.

Short of role models? The world is full of them we just never think to ask. This isn't restricted to premier league footballers. Anyone from someone's Uncle or Aunt to any of the rescue services, former pupils, the Army or Police, Health groups or local companies. They normally have good props, plenty to talk about and good stories to tell.

Relative scoring schemes also work very powerfully. I.e. where you are within your group is of infinitely greater importance than against some national average. See the 'broadsheet' scheme pioneered by Our Lady of St. John in Blackburn.

Lots of fun, spurious prizes work well too.

Boys also like to 'belong'. Short of giving them anything else to belong to they will find their own groups which are often negatively driven. Whilst D of E, Scouts, CCF, Football clubs, after school clubs etc can soak up some desire it can also help to have a school 'ethos'.

This doesn't have to always be as corporate mission statement as it sounds. I worked hard for a headteacher of a tough boys school where his only ever refrain was 'This will be a civilized place to be'. It worked.

I also did some work with a school in Cornwall who created the possibility of being - 'a school whose corridors ring with laughter'.

You could become the greenest school in town or whatever and allow that ethos to permeate every lesson and every action.



## Classroom

The dividing line therefore between structural and classroom is not as clearly defined as it may seem.

It is worth sometimes reflecting on what our role is. As civil servants our task is to

- get students to come to school
- get students to come to school every day
- get students to come to school every day on time
- get students to come to lessons (every day on time)
- get students to behave in a civilized fashion when in school
- teach them something useful

What we realise is that teaching them something they perceive as useful may actually get them to come to school so the list may be circular rather than linear.

This then illustrates one of the fundamental tenets of intrinsic motivation – knowing WIIFM (What's In It For Me).

Each time you are faced with a choice your brain asks this question and in doing so it looks at two sides of an equation. It tries to work out how much risk or effort is required and what the 'payoff' might be.

Sometimes it is the satisfaction (or not) of (a) primary physical needs e.g. access to food, drink, toilets etc and (b) primary ego needs e.g. feeling safe, being listened to and heard which can have a big effect on reducing stress such that you can begin to teach.

Remembering that one of the biggest 'risks' reported by boys in a classroom situation is the fear of being praised (especially by a female) and that the most important 'payoff' is the effect on his perceived status within a group you can see what a fickle mechanism this can be.

I often like to tell students that if you make the 'Why' (bother) big enough the 'How' (do I do it) will look after it's self or fall into place.

Some scientists suggest that this system also works more powerfully for male brains than female but is harder to trigger. I.e. tell a group of students that if they don't listen they might fail – some of the girls will automatically perk up but for most boys their retort will be – 'And....?'

If somehow you could show them a choice and consequence chain that they thought was realistic which led to greatly diminished status later in life (and that is not just about money, cars and jobs) they would switch on. It may seem primeval – it is!

Always remember 'you can take man out of the stone age but you can't take the stone age out of the man!'

Remember too that the link with the risk and effort side is to failure and looking a fool (everyone's worst nightmare). Make it seem that might happen and you engage the very primeval if not Neolithic 'fight or flight' function and you have real trouble on your hands.



Watch the interview 'Parky' once did with Mohamed Ali if you are not sure what it looks like. (It was a long time ago but memorable TV).

One of the things to do is to 'publish the payoff' of your subject. Too often we get this wrong by selling students 'features' not 'benefits'. It's great that your course is modular but that isn't going to excite the average fifteen year old. Try and think what benefits there are for them in their world and if you can't think of any, ask the students. You may be surprised what they tell you.

You can always use the 'I know my subject is boring but if it was exciting what would it be like?' question.

In a teaching context there are certain structural alterations that we can put in place to avoid some of the pitfalls of teaching in a manner which does not suit boys.

At this point I refer people to Mike Hughes's four stage lesson plan.

The four stages are

- The beginning phase (Activation)
- The teaching phase (Information)
- The learning phase (Assimilation)
- The review phase (Consolidation)

It is the beginning phase which can have a powerful effect on a lesson going smoothly or not.

To answer the question of whether teaching in a boy friendly fashion adversely affects girls the answer is 'No' and research has shown that the level and quality of boys learning is actually a good barometer of the quality of teaching and learning throughout the school.

### ***Phase 1 - Beginning Phase***

This beginning phase features a number of elements and can be a really good checklist for gauging the quality of a lesson start. Remember it is not about being funny or entertaining the students; it is about grabbing their attention, arousing their curiosity and getting them wondering what comes next.

- 1) Create a 'grab'.

The best grabs are anything which is competitive or slightly confusing (to them not you) or preferably both.

This can also help create

- 2) Rapid 'flash to bang' – Flash they enter and Bang they start work. Don't waste hours on the register and who has/has not done their homework. Get them going on something. Slight confusion works because it activates the wake up call to the brain. Remember we do mean confusion and not anarchy. That will produce stress.



- 3) Big Picture – many boys like to know the ‘big picture’. What it is all about. Many of us don’t think about this as we know the big picture and tend to dole out the lesson in bite size chunks of detail.
- 4) To do this you can follow the other important starter which is to make clear the objectives of the lesson (not copied from the National Curriculum preferably). Use the primary school system of WALT, WILF and TIB (different animals, in case you wondered) but standing for ‘What we are learning today’ (Maybe in their terminology not yours), ‘What I am looking for’ (as proof that you understand) and finally ‘This is Because’
- 5) Although these ideas are laid out in order you can actually use this last one to cover the whole range. It is to re connect the learning (ideally to the homework or last lesson). So three things you remember from last lesson done in a suitably competitive and curious style can generate all five points.

Remember if most TV programmes started like many lessons and many shops looked like our classrooms very few people would watch TV or go shopping – yet they do in their millions. Think about their openers and closers (especially EastEnders) and general layout of shops.

The remainder of the four stage lesson plan is laid out below. Remember that one of the most powerful ‘grabs’ which helps to create ‘the emotional climate for learning’ is to give students a perceived sense of ‘choice and control’.

Whilst personalised learning may address a lot of that; on a daily basis we can offer students choices which will give them a sense of control. Many of us are so scared of losing control that we teach in a ‘panic state’ of trying to squash all form of potential rebellion. It takes a consummate professional to let students have a sense of choice whilst directing a very powerful lesson. Yet this is the way forward.

Look at the use of hypnotic language patterns with clear rules and routines and the use of presuppositions. Simple techniques but very powerful.

## ***Phase 2 – Teaching Phase***

Whilst the new maxim for teaching is that ‘good teachers are seen to be the guide on the side rather than the sage on the stage’ there is still no replacement for actually teaching people. You probably know more about your subject than most of your students and they are there to benefit from your wealth of knowledge but it is the style in which you do it that matters.

Essentially we need to make sure that every lesson has the right balance of Visual, Auditory and Kinaesthetic activities. Unlike MI which can be spread across a scheme of work every lesson needs to contain these three elements of V, A and K – not only because for some children they have difficulty learning other than in their preferred learning style but also because we all learn most effectively when we have chance to see it, hear it and do it.

Go through your schemes of work with highlighter pens and highlight which activities in your schemes of work fall into the different categories. Check out for any imbalances (you will also



teach as well as learn according to your preferred learning style) and then think of new activities. If you are stuck for ideas – ask the kids.

Stick a poster at the back of your classroom with the letters VAK written on it to remind you – and maybe one of the four phase plan too. The Teaching phase should be the shortest bit. It very rarely is!

## Music

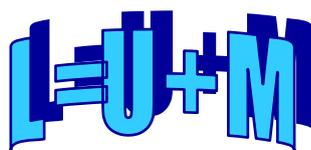
At this point it is probably worth mentioning the ‘strategic’ use of music and its influence on learning.

Music can have a number of benefits

- 1) It is a great way to ‘grab’ attention
- 2) It can make very useful quizzes – especially related to memory
- 3) It can help create certain ‘moods’ related to the lesson
- 4) It can be a great timing device for exercises
- 5) It can be used to signal the end of an exercise
- 6) Played quietly it will quieten a class
- 7) Certain types of classical music namely baroque will influence the brain to be in its most receptive state for learning
- 8) Playing certain pieces at critical times can create powerful associations for memory
- 9) It creates a pleasant atmosphere for you and your learners

I refer to ‘strategic’ use because you need to ensure (a) it is seen as your music (b) it should never be used more than 30% of the time and (c) it is used at certain points for specific reasons not as a diversion, sop or time filler.

### ***Phase 3 – The Learning Phase.***



Learning = Understanding + Memory

(Mike Hughes – Strategies for Closing the Learning Gap)

## Understanding

This is the time when the students have the opportunity to make personal sense of the taught concepts.

Some of the most effective ways for them to do that are



- 1) Verbalise it – Explain it to someone else especially someone who may not understand.
- 2) Transform it – By turning the information into something else e.g a song or a rhyme.  
Try Mind Mapping it. Remove one of the ‘givens’ of the senses (seeing, hearing or doing)
- 3) Reduce it – Put a time limit on the explanation e.g . you have got two minutes in which to.....
- 4) Use a mixture of all three – You have two minutes to devise a method to explain sentence construction in German to a group of non hearing students, once you have done it you have thirty seconds to explain your idea to your neighbour before reversing roles and then giving each other marks out of ten for the idea. Go...

## Memory

Good memory is something you learn not that you are born with. Good memory has been seen to be a better guide to success at GCSE than high IQ . Teaching memory techniques seems to make an awful lot of sense.

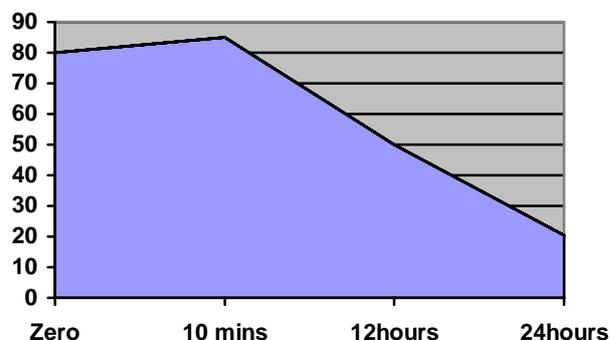
We remember best things that are Outstanding, Funny, Personal, Emotional, Sexual or involve our Senses.

We also remember stories, rhymes, poems or songs that contain any of those elements.

To remember well we must be able to fully REGISTER the information, then RETAIN it and lastly be able to RETRIEVE it.

By using all three learning styles and impacting the information in a memorable fashion we create a greater chance of us being able to register and retain the information but how well we can retrieve it is dependent on our last section.

### **Phase 4 – Reviewing Phase**



The Ebbinghaus Memory Decay Graph of percentage remembered against time



(without reviewing)

**‘Learning without reviewing is like trying to fill the bath with the plug out !’  
(Mike Hughes – Closing the Learning Gap)**

No matter how big the bath or how fast you turn the taps on, without regular reviewing we will all lose up to 80% of everything we have learned within a twenty four hour period.

Reviewing what you have learned 30 minutes, 24 Hours and one week after you have learned it can increase your retention and retrieval rates by up to 400%. This scientific gem by the way has been around since the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century !

This then dictates that for students to learn the most in our lessons they need to be reviewing what they learned in the lesson as the final item and then reviewing it again at the start of the next lesson. This may mean that you have to reschedule the time and manner in which you take the register and set the homework.

If we finish this section by mentioning that the last key to memory is that from anything we learn we tend to remember best the first and last part of it (the primacy/recency rule). It would seem a shame to waste all that valuable memory time on something as mundane as homework and the register!

### ***7 Keys to Motivation***

- 1) All work needs to be high challenge/ low stress. If learners are not challenged they are bored and if they are stressed then the last thing you can do is learn. Problem is that one persons challenge is another persons stress. It is a fine dividing line between the two and needs to be carefully managed on an individual basis.
- 2) The environment needs to be risk free – Free from physical and emotional risks.
- 3) Real Life – As far as possible relate as much of what you are doing to real life examples.
- 4) Positive Relationships – Someone once told me that teaching is 90% relationships, the rest is commentary. Make that figure 99.99% I think.
- 5) Control – Give students a perceived sense of control over their work. Offer them choices, give your lessons variety which they can influence and use presuppositions such as ‘would you rather have your test on Tuesday or Thursday’. By agreeing to the day they also unwittingly agree to a test.
- 6) Provide them with meaningful goals and targets
- 7) Always remember that motivation is a four letter word. Daniel Goleman in his book ‘Emotional Intelligence’ claims that this word is a more accurate indicator of someone’s future success in life than anything else. The word is HOPE.





(Ian Gilbert – Essential Motivation in the Classroom)

