



Thomas More Institute

Symposium: Dangerous Schools for Boys

<http://thomasmoreinstitute.org.uk/events/dangerous-schools-for-boys-winning-hearts-and-minds-symposium/>

Developing the curriculum and the arts (with boys in mind)

Will boys always be boys?

In the media we often see language that reflects some of the assumptions we make about boys' and girls' behaviour and attitudes – such as 'laddish' or 'tomboy' or 'girlie' – but in education it's just not that simple. The achievement of boys in schools relates to more factors than that they are boys. Social class and ethnicity are more significantly correlated to success than gender. Having said that, there are schools in which boys are more successful than others which have a similar social profile. Boys' success in mathematics and science is broadly similar to that of girls, but in other subjects, for example English, many boys do not achieve as highly. In the arts many boys choose not to continue with the subjects in upper secondary school, but when they do they are often very successful.

It is important to see the variations in boys' achievement and for schools to investigate which boys are not succeeding and why. There are boys who from an early age form the view that they will not benefit from education given the employment prospects and life chances in their area. This view is more related to social and economic factors and is often reinforced by the peer group. Schools then need to be aware of these gender norms in the communities they serve and consider how to respond. It's not about being 'boy friendly' but about using strategies which reduce stereotyping and so help both boys and girls.

What makes a difference for boys?

The basis for any education which is successful for boys is the school's general ethos and expectations about a range of matters:

- Behaviour – establishing an expectation of high levels of self-discipline, supported by prompt attention to misdemeanours and by responding in a consistent way to issues of behaviour
- Valuing diversity and equal opportunities – through curriculum content, how classrooms are organised, the range of school activities, challenging gender stereotypes and taking strong action to counteract bullying and discrimination
- Fostering pride, effort and achievement – ensuring pupils have a pride in their work, effort and behaviour, and high expectations of responsibility and independence, with a staff who show they care

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- Pupil involvement in the life of the school – making many different opportunities and ensuring that as many pupils as possible are active in a variety of ways

Overall the school and those in it need to share values and aims which are open and consistent, and which permeate all the work of the school.

What about the classroom?

If these are the elements of a whole school approach which supports success for all, then there are ways to conduct the classroom which will reflect these values and enable all pupils to develop the repertoire of ways to learn and grow.

An early publication by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, (QCA), *Can Do Better* (1998) suggested that boys do better when

- there is clarity about the task to be done and what they need to do to progress
- they can tackle information and argument rather than the affective domain
- a full range of activities is available and achievement across the range is valued
- the status of arts subjects is actively promoted throughout the school
- they have a good relationship with the teacher

This also suggests that a consistent whole school approach is needed, including what is taught, how it is taught, and what is recognised in assessments.

The curriculum and the arts in school

The basis of the national curriculum until now has been that all pupils should have access to a broad range of subjects in the first 9 years of schooling, so that their options are open and they can follow different paths having experienced what all the subjects can offer.

One of the areas where schools may need to take specific action is that of the arts. There is a clear pattern of fewer boys opting for arts subjects as soon as they have the choice. The general school approaches need to be backed up by looking at these options and considering whether there are actions which may help some boys move beyond a stereotyped view of subjects.

Arts in schools – the current picture

Art and Design

Girls more likely to choose Art and Design at GCSE and get better grades (Ofsted 2012). Line drawing is a perennial debate in the curriculum for Art and Design, but Ofsted suggested that boys are put off in secondary schools, when lessons are too focused on drawing and painting rather than computer design, photography and use of graphics packages. Boys are more motivated and make better progress when given more practical opportunities and topics that challenge them to use their imagination.

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Music

In music there are different participation rates between boys and girls (Ofsted 2012). In primary schools, one in three girls take part in extra music activities, compared with one in seven boys. There are criticisms of music teaching in primary schools, with too many non-musical activities in lessons hindering practical demonstration and helping pupils make music. This is likely to put off both girls and boys.

Music is central to the lives of most secondary school age boys but music education is a marginalised area of the school curriculum, decreasing in popularity as students approach senior school and succumb to pressures to choose subjects perceived to be more useful in the 'real world'. This is common for both boys and girls, but the drop-off is greater among boys. Opportunities are lost to draw on the cultural implications of globalisation, media and music technology and capitalise on diversity.

Dance

In 2009 a survey showed that 96% of schools were offering dance. Entries for GCSE went up over 3 years from around 10,000 to nearly 18,000 (still only a tiny percentage of the total number of students) and BTEC performing arts dance awards almost doubled. One third of these pupils choosing dance were boys, pointing to the influence of role models such as Darren Gough, England cricketer, as first male winner of *Strictly Come Dancing* or a male ballet group called *Ballet Boyz* which has changed some young people's perceptions of boys and ballet. Teachers reported that boys involved in sports such as rugby make good dancers due to their strength and fitness levels. The inclusion of a wider range of dance forms, e.g. street dance, non-Western styles, contemporary dance and provision for work with professional dancers, choreographers and dance companies makes a difference to both boys' and girls' attitudes.

Drama

The situation in Drama is very similar – many more girls than boys opt for drama at GCSE and A level, though boys do enjoy drama lessons more generally. Similar issues exist - most drama teachers are women, the choice of relevant plays and source material matters, and in drama opening up emotions, discussing them and communicating them is integral to learning and may be less easy for boys. For example, feisty, edgy, more 'streetwise' material and content may be of more interest to boys, with the focus on the relevant content first rather than highlighting the emotional aspects immediately.

Extracurricular time

Participation in arts activities beyond formal curriculum time can clearly make a difference to the attitudes of participants and to those who watch performances. The activities show what a school values and promotes. It can make a big difference if the student leaders of opinion not only play football but also sing in the choir. These activities can make a major contribution to school life and to the status of the arts, but they are no substitute for the arts as part of the formal curriculum, since those participating in extracurricular activities are not necessarily those who would benefit most from such engagement. Boys in particular need to learn the arts as any other subjects, or they will find themselves unable or unwilling to participate in cultural life beyond school.

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Arts & cultural industries

Despite the greater levels of participation by girls at school, the British major national arts institutions are still largely dominated by men. Think of the directors of our art galleries, theatres, conductors of orchestras – nearly all the ones we can remember are men. Recent figures show that fewer women work in the sector and they are likely to earn less than their male counterparts. Women are more likely to be in managerial positions in cultural agencies and publishing and are better represented in cultural heritage and visual and performing arts, although they are still less likely to progress to director-level positions. But boys could be attracted to the sector given that those with talent, determination and an entrepreneurial spirit are often able to make their way in the world of arts and culture.

The arts curriculum - teachers' choices

All arts subjects involve

- knowing about their forms and traditions
- learning through making
- critical understanding of performance and product

This means the arts are a great mix of knowledge, skills and understanding. What affects students are decisions about

- which knowledge (eg classical or modern music),
- which skills (eg careful manipulation of body and instrument or IT based composing),
- what must they understand (eg how special effects are made or what can be achieved in an ensemble).

The choices teachers make about what to include in their lessons is crucial.

In arts subjects what makes the difference to boys' interest and commitment are:

- Role models
- Valuing students' out-of-school experience of arts
- Emphasis on skills and creating, as well as knowing
- Using modern trends in arts and culture
- Extending the repertoire of what's included for both boys and girls
- Promoting excellence

What are the implications for the development of the curriculum as a whole?

The construction of the subjects is important in deciding attitudes. It's not just a decision about classroom teaching activities.

Some recent discussions about the curriculum seem to assume that knowledge is inert and to be acquired as a pre-formed package which can only be understood in one way. Knowledge is not inert

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information, it is dynamic in at least three senses: it is ever changing and developing; it can be re-interpreted from different perspectives; and it is only 'known' when learners have understood it within their own frame of reference and can use it for themselves in different circumstances. This is particularly significant for boys who generally favour investigative and active approaches which challenge them and mean they can question and argue.

So what does this mean for the curriculum? In my experience the contentious aspects of any curriculum proposals are the *what* of content coverage – where is Churchill, why aren't children required to learn the rivers of the world, memorising the times tables is vital etc. This kind of debate is often encouraged in the media. It seems to be rooted in the debates of the 19th and 20th centuries where knowledge was a much more marketable commodity in itself and it was possible for a person to know a much greater percentage of the total knowledge available.

There have been a number of attempts in recent years to respond to this challenge. These attempts often emphasise generic skills which will enable young people to tackle all kinds of knowledge and experience in a fast moving world. One book (Trilling and Fadel, 2009) identifies these skills as

- Critical thinking and problem solving
- Creativity and innovation
- Collaboration, teamwork and leadership
- Cross-cultural understanding
- Communications, information and media literacy
- Computing and ICT literacy
- Career and learning self reliance, including flexibility, adaptability, initiative

Many of these resonate with the aspects which appeal to boys, such as active problem solving, thinking out new ideas, and using ICT to source and frame ideas.

These skills in themselves are an incomplete account of a curriculum. Knowledge is fundamental to progress in the world, and a curriculum must seek to integrate such skills with knowledge. Through this a curriculum should ensure that young people know enough to make a start in life and have a thirst for more, and that they also have the skills to understand, evaluate and use what develops around them on a daily basis.

What does this new curriculum look like?

In the classroom a mix of approaches, presenting a cohesive view of the complex of knowledge, skills and understanding which is a subject, is important. A recent survey among English teachers asked about what is now at the heart of the subject (Looking for the heart of English, 2012). According to the teachers, these are the principles which are fundamental and relevant to much of the curriculum:

- *Creative thinking and development* Creativity in talk, writing and other forms, and active, imaginative responses are essential. Young people need to make connections, solve problems, take new directions, explore possibilities, question their own and others' assumptions. This is a recurrent theme in discussions about boys – creativity which is not about expressing feelings but about constructing ideas, products and communications which are using subject disciplines as a means to creativity

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- *Widening horizons* Children and young people, and especially boys, need to move beyond their immediate experience to wider issues and ideas, to universal themes and current concerns. The curriculum can be a gateway to different views of the world, highlighting experience across time and place, different perspectives and cultures, developing empathy.
- *Linking to the world beyond school* Particularly for boys, learning becomes meaningful when linked to the real world. Understanding the arts in different contexts gives meaning to the acquisition of skills which matter, particularly for employability. Young people need the skills to understand, question and use the volume of information now available through the internet. Interaction with the world beyond the school gate enables explicit links to purposes for study and exploration of issues which matter, so that young people are able to work out what they think and why - part of defining themselves in relation to the world.
- *Contexts and connections* Young people want to see how their learning fits together, making connections within and across subjects. It is also important to make connections with contexts so that, for example, young people to see the place of arts across the world, evolving to meet the needs of many different communities globally.
- *Pupil participation, independence and choice* Young people's commitment to and enthusiasm for their learning are key to success, so they need a sense of ownership, an understanding of the significance of their work, with outcomes which are tangible and worthwhile. Motivation is developed by purposeful activity, where choice, exploration and personal response are open to students. The arts are ideal subjects to achieve this.

A curriculum for all – with boys in mind

A curriculum based on these principles would, I think, be very different from the one currently in many schools. Focusing on the fusion of skills and knowledge, using teaching approaches which invite and reinforce active engagement with what is being learnt will lead to more effective learning for all.

So where does this lead us in relation to boys and the curriculum? Equity demands that the curriculum works for as many students as possible. This is not to suggest that we need to change the curriculum subjects in order to give boys a fairer chance of success. We need to be more radical in thinking about the curriculum on offer so that boys and girls alike see it as more meaningful, relevant and useful.

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