

Possible factors in underachievement of males within education education essay



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Sociological studies with regard the ' underachievement of males', throughout the British education system, appear to be dominated by the analysis of three central phenomena; the idea of bias and inequality which flaws the educational system, the prevalence of a modern day, ' laddish anti-learning culture' (Byers, S. 1998, " Never mind theories, under-achieving boys need practical help, _The Independent_, 5th January 1998.") and lastly, the psychology of the male mind. Each of these three interlinked themes will be reviewed within this document, which will focus solely upon the reasons which may held accountable for the identified ' underachievement of young men', most notably, at a General Certificate of Secondary Education Level (G. C. S. E) throughout the British education system, and internationally, around the world.

The use of the term ' underachievement' is widespread throughout educational discourse, and is predominately used in explaining " a perceived failure to reach a given potential". Scott . J. & Marshall . G. (2005: 3).

Sociologists, whose area of expertise lies within this particular field, tend to view low academic attainment in terms of factors such as prior attainment or socio-economic disadvantage, however in doing so, they acknowledge the danger of pathologising the underachiever, when in fact, responsibility may lie within the educational system itself. The term ' underachievement' although widely used, appears to be problematic; masking ideological assumptions that concern socially constructed, subjective and relative matters, which concern the group understudy. The underachievement of young men within the education system is undoubtedly an immensely complex and contested field. Irrespective of these issues, the British

education system has continued to make use of the term with a combination of ubiquity and confidence.

Gillies, D. (2010). Educational potential underachievement and cultural pluralism. Available: http://www.abdn.ac.uk/eitn/display.php?article_id=39. Last accessed 16th Feb 2011.

Historical Background

The 'underachievement of young men' within the education system has appeared as a continual problem throughout the last decade. Dramatic illustrations from the media and speeches given by the relevant government bodies have created in a sense 'a moral panic' which has come to characterise many of the debates that surround the complex issue. Evidence from newspaper articles would suggest the underachievement of boys began in 1995. During this time the main professional newspaper, The Times Educational Supplement carried headlines declaring school work was 'Not for wimps' Haigh, G. 1995, "Not for wimps", _The Times Educational Supplement_, 6th October 1995 and later asked 'Where did we go wrong?' Bleach, K. 1997, "Where did we go wrong?", _The Times Educational Supplement_, 14th February 1997. Education correspondents for broadsheet newspapers similarly headlined articles which discussed 'The Failing Sex' and called for schools to provide a 'Classroom rescue for Britain's lost boys'. Foster et al. (2001) 'What about the boys?' An overview of the debates, in Martino . W. & Meyenn . B. What About The Boys, Issues of Masculinity in Schools. Open University Press.

Acknowledgement of the underachievement of boys within the education system can also be seen in Stephen Byers 1998 speech. The School Standards Minister, said: " We should not simply accept with a shrug of our shoulders that boys will be boys." Speaking at the 11th International Congress for School Effectiveness and Improvement in Manchester, Mr Byers warned: " Failure to raise the educational achievement of boys will mean that thousands of young men will face a bleak future in which a lack of qualifications and basic skills will mean unemployment and little hope of finding work." He disclosed new statistics on the standards of education at the time that had been reached by boys and girls. For example, in addition to girls far outperforming boys at a General Certificate Secondary Education level (G. C. S. E), National Curriculum assessments at seven, eleven and fourteen years of age also highlighted boys underperforming, within English Language in particular. Byers then went on to make an attack on what he described as the prevailing ' laddish anti-learning culture. (Byers, S. 1998, " Never mind theories, under-achieving boys need practical help, _The Independent_, 5th January 1998.") In response to Stephen Byers identification of male underachievement, Ted Wragg also published an article in the Times Educational Supplement, The Times Educational Supplement Editorial. 1997, " Keeping Balance on the Gender Agenda", _ the Times Educational Supplement_, 23rd May 1997.

Within this article Professor Ted Wragg warned unless the achievement of boys was improved significantly society would witness immense problems that would continue throughout the 21st century. The then Chief Inspector for Schools, Chris Woodhead too believed the failure of boys, in particular

working class boys to be one of the most disturbing problems faced within the entire education system. As a result of such media hype education ministers called for all academic institutions to challenge the 'laddish anti-learning culture, (Byers, S. 1998, "Never mind theories, under-achieving boys need practical help, *The Independent*, 5th January 1998.") which had been allowed to develop. Taking such media build up and government vocalizations into consideration, it would appear something significant entered public consciousness during this time.

Despite media and government claims of boy's underachievement being a recent phenomenon, problems concerning boys and academic schooling has, in fact, been a longstanding priority with regard to educational studies. In particular the English philosopher John Locke, among others expressed great concern with regard the problems boys faced in language and literacy, in the 17th century. Similarly literature on schooling throughout the 1960s and 1970s cautioned teachers against grouping boys according to their academic ability as it resulted in less academic boys developing negative attitudes towards education and schools. Foster et al. (2001) 'What about the boys?' An overview of the debates, in Martino . W. & Meyenn . B. *What About The Boys, Issues of Masculinity in Schools*. Open University Press.

The introduction of the National Curriculum alongside the induction of complex assessment and reporting procedures, many believe, was what initially highlighted the problem of male underachievement in today's society. From 1991 onwards students have been made to complete Standard Assessment Tasks (S. A. T. s) at the ages of seven, eleven and fourteen.

Responsibility lies with the educational institutions at this time to ensure <https://assignbuster.com/possible-factors-in-underachievement-of-males-within-education-education-essay/>

pupils achieve the expected standards. Additionally schools undergo rigorous inspection; such inspections appear to be central to the Educational Schools Act 1992, which introduced the implementation of National League Tables. These tables rank schools according to their pupil's performance in the Standard Assessment Tasks (S. A. T. s).

Many believe such a procedure was what set the scene for the emergence of the ' boy's underachievement' debate. In order for schools to survive they had to attract clients in the form of parents, and they could only attract parents if they were able to demonstrate they provided and delivered a high standard of education. Schools were judged to be efficient by the national league tables according to their success in getting pupils to reach the required standards at the ages of seven, eleven and fourteen.

In 1996 the Equal Opportunities Commission and the Office for Standards in Education produced a joint report on performance differences between boys and girls in school. Their findings included girls being more successful than boys or broadly as successful in almost all major subjects. They reported girls tended to be more reflective than boys and also better at planning and organising their work. Reactions to these findings that boys are doing less well in school and are also suffering in other respects, such as the disproportionate degree of unemployment, as mentioned previously have varied. Some have identified what they see to be a crucial social problem of the 21st century. Others see it as solely a symptom of a male backlash, creating a sense of moral panic, aimed at clawing back the gains made by women in recent years. In light of such diverse view points, when

researching this area for myself it would appear necessary to maintain a sense of balance before finishing upon any such conclusion.

Official statistics on the academic performance of pupils in Northern Ireland, England and Wales indicate girls have been performing increasingly well compared to boys in terms of their attainment at General Certificate of Secondary Education (G. C. S. E) level examinations in most subjects. As mentioned previously, this development has been the focus of considerable debate in both the 'popular' media and the academic press, with regular pronouncements from politicians and government policy makers. The obvious heated debate over 'boys underachievement' throughout the 1990s and into the 21st century is not solely connected to Britain, figures suggest male underachievement is a problematic issue in Australia, Canada, The United States of America, parts of Western Europe and Japan. Epstein. D. Et al. (1998) *Educating Boys, Learning Gender*. Open University Press.

Focusing upon the underachievement of boys within the context of the United Kingdom, Northern Ireland in particular, I plan to focus upon Symbolic Interactionism as the basis of my own theoretical research. I plan to consider Symbolic Interactionist debates over 'Britain's Lost Boys' and the undoubtable underachievement of boys compared to girls in certain subjects, predominately at General Certificate of Secondary Education level (G. C. S. E). Symbolic Interactionists, unlike functionalists and conflict theorists, tend to limit their analysis of education to what they directly observe happening within the classroom. Their main focus is on teacher, pupil relationships and the interaction processes that occur within the classroom.

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Symbolic Interactionists see the education system as playing a vital role in shaping the way students see reality and themselves. Interactionists such as Howard Becker see school settings as creating serious difficulties for students who are “labelled” as less academically able than their peers. He believed such students may never be able to see themselves as “good students” and move beyond such labels. Teacher expectations play a huge role in student achievement from an interactionist’s point of view and this is a point I would be interested in investigating further with regard to my own research.

Labelling theory, was developed predominately by Howard Becker who in *Outsiders* 1963 argued “underachievement to be created by society, in the sense social groups create underachievement by making the rules whose infraction constitutes low attainment and by applying those rules to particular persons and labelling them as such” Scott . J. & Marshall . G. (2005: 341) Becker and Lermert initially developed Labelling Theory, Hargreaves et al showed how it could apply within school settings and Rosenthal and Jacobson suggested that it could create a Self Fulfilling Prophecy in school, such that children defined as bright would in fact live up to such expectations.

In education, despite the Rosenthal and Jacobson study, labelling-based self-fulfilling prophecies usually operate to the disadvantage of students. Specific categories of students, based on gender, ethnicity or indeed social background, may be written off as incapable of achieving, setting up a frame of reference in which their failings are noticed and their achievements discounted. Individual students may also be labelled by being told they will

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never amount to anything, or for example they are no good at a particular subject. Internalised, these labels are carried into new situations, including further and higher education, as a result many believe the failure of the student to be inevitable.

Robert Rosenthal and Lenore Jacobson conducted a land mark study for this approach in 1968. Firstly, they examined a group of students in accordance with standard IQ tests. The researchers then identified a number of students who they said would likely show a sharp increase in abilities over the coming year. They informed the teachers of these results, and asked them to watch and see if this increase did occur. When the researchers repeated the IQ tests at the end of the year, the students identified by the researchers did indeed show higher IQ scores. The significance of this study lies in the fact that the researchers had randomly selected a number of average students. The researchers found that when the teachers expected a particular performance or growth, it occurred. This phenomenon, where a false assumption actually occurs because someone predicted it, reinforces the notion of a self-fulfilling prophesy. Rosenthal . R. & Jacobson . L. (1992) *Pygmalion in the Classroom, Teachers Expectations and Pupils' Intellectual Development*. Crown House: Publishing Limited.

Ray Rist conducted research similar to the Rosenthal and Jacobson study in 1970. In a kindergarten classroom where both students and teacher were of African American origin, the teacher assigned students to tables based on ability; the so called " better" students sat at a table closer to her, the " average" students sat at the next table, and the " weakest" students sat at the farthest table. Rist discovered that the teacher assigned the students to <https://assignbuster.com/possible-factors-in-underachievement-of-males-within-education-education-essay/>

a table based on the teacher's perception of the students' skill levels on the eighth day of class, without any form of testing to verify such a placement. Rist also found that the students the teacher perceived as "better" learners came from higher social classes, while the "weak" students were from lower social classes. Monitoring the students through the year, Rist found that the students closer to the teacher received the most attention and performed better. The farther from the teacher a student sat, the weaker that student performed. Rist continued the study through the next several years and found that the labels assigned to the students on the eighth day of kindergarten followed them throughout their academic journey. Rist, Ray (1970). " Student Social Class and Teacher Expectations: The Self-Fulfilling Prophecy in Ghetto Education. Harvard Educational Review 40, 3, 411-451.

While Symbolic Interactionists have undoubtedly analysed this self fulfilling process, they have yet to find the exact way in which teachers form such expectations of students. Irrespective of such an issue I feel the Self Fulfilling Prophecy may be a crucial determining factor with regard to answering my own research question.

The real importance of Rosenthal and Jacobson's findings at Oak School relates to the potential long-lasting effects of teachers' expectations on the scholastic performance of students. It is of interest to explore some later research that examined the ways in which teachers unconsciously communicate their higher expectations to the students whom they believe possess greater potential. A study conducted by Chaiken, Sigler, and Derlega (1974) involved videotaping teacher-student interactions in a classroom situation in which the teachers had been informed that certain children were

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extremely bright (these bright students had been chosen at random from all the students in the class). Careful examination of the videos indicated that teachers favoured the identified brighter students in many subtle ways. They smiled at these students more often, made more eye contact, and had more favourable reactions to these students' comments in class. These researchers go on to report that students for whom these high expectations exist are more likely to enjoy school receive more constructive comments from teachers on their mistakes, and work harder to try to improve. What this and other studies indicate are those teacher expectancies, while their influence is not the only determinant of a child's performance in school, can affect more than just IQ scores.

Due in large part to Rosenthal and Jacobson's research, the power of teachers' expectations on students' performance has become an integral part of our understanding of the educational process. Furthermore, Rosenthal's theory of interpersonal expectancies has exerted its influence in numerous areas other than education. In 2002, Rosenthal himself reviewed the literature on expectancy effects using meta-analysis techniques. He demonstrated how " the expectations of psychological researchers, classroom teachers, judges in the courtroom, business executives, and health care providers can unintentionally affect the responses of their research participants, pupils, jurors, employees, and patients" (Rosenthal, 2002, p. 839).

Martino . W. & Meyenn . B. (2001) What about the Boys, Issues of Masculinity in Schools. Open University Press.

What about the Boy's, Issues of Masculinity in Schools is a book which attempts to develop further understandings about masculinity. Such a piece of literature is timely given the continued moral panic that persists about boy's disadvantaged status in comparison to girls. Throughout this book the view boys are victims and are attributed with a disadvantaged status remains throughout. Research undertaken with boys spanning Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States is brought together in this collection. The focus for each of the contributors is addressing issues of ' what about the boys' in relation to their own research and informed perspectives on boys and schooling.

Many focus on what boys (and girls) themselves say about their experiences of schooling and sexuality and use their voices as a basis for drawing out what the implications might be for those working in schools. In this regard the chapters are written with a broader audience in mind – particularly teachers and administrators in schools with the view to using research to illuminate the effects of masculinity in the lives of boys and girls at school. All of the contributors are concerned to highlight the impact and effect of certain forms of masculinity on the lives of boys at school, but locate their research and/or discussion within the context of the boys' education debates outlined by Foster, Kimmell and Skelton in the introductory chapter. Many have also indicated what the implications of their research are for daily practice in schools and classrooms. In this sense, the research documented

here has major implications for the professional development of teacher's in schools and for student teachers in tertiary institutions.

Sociologists like Bob Connell (1987, 1995) have been particularly influential in drawing attention to how social, cultural and historical factors have influenced the various ways in which 'masculinity' comes to be defined and embodied by boys and men. We see the contributors of this book building on this work. They highlight that there are many forms of masculinity that are played out in the context of a complex set of power relations in which certain types of masculinity are valued over others. Many also draw attention to the role of a dominant form of masculinity, which comes to be defined in opposition to femininity, and highlight that association with the feminine for boys can often lead to other boys questioning their sexuality (see also Frank, 1987, 1993). Other factors such as race, class, ethnicity and geographical location are also taken up to develop an understanding of the various ways in which boys

learn to relate and behave in certain social situations and within particular educational institutions. In this sense feminist educators and theories also inform the perspectives on boys and schooling elaborated in this book. Such perspectives have contributed significantly to producing valuable insights into the links between gender and power (Davies 1993; Steinberg et al. 1997), specifically in terms of illuminating boys' social practices and ways of relating at school.

All contributors recognize that schools are important arenas of power where masculinities and femininities are acted out on a daily basis through the dynamic processes of negotiation, refusal and struggle (Giroux and McLaren 1994). In other words, these papers illustrate that there are indeed social constraints and power imbalances in educational sites, but that gender regimes are more shifting and contradictory than theorists supposed in the seventies and eighties (Jackson and Salisbury 1996; Kenway et al. 1997). In this sense, each chapter included in this collection builds on studies into boys at school which have been undertaken by Kessler et al. (1985), Walker (1988), Mac an Ghail (1994) and Epstein (1994).

The contributors also suggest ways forward and beyond the popular and simplistic views which stress the need for boys to reclaim lost territory. There is a powerful discourse of neglect informing many of the popularist debates about the boys which continue to assert that provision for the educational needs of girls has been at the expense of boys (Yates 1997). Moreover, the idea or assumption that boys are somehow victims or 'losers' now competing with girls who have suddenly become the winners is also refuted strongly by the various positions that are taken up in this book.

Compounding such a position is the view that biology needs to be given equal consideration in developing an understanding of boys' behaviours and learning orientations. This argument continues to be promulgated within the context of these debates about the boys (see submissions to Australian inquiry into boys' education at <http://www.aph.gov>.

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au/house/committee/ewr/Epfb/sublist. htm) as if appeals to biological sex differences and essentialism are somehow outside the effects of certain power relations (see Fausto-Sterling 2000). As Peterson (2000) has illuminated, appeals to biological determinism have been used

historically to enforce a binary categorization of gendered behaviours always within the context of and in response to the perceived power gained by women. Moreover, as Lingard and Douglas (1999) have lucidly illustrated, the debates about the boys in the nineties have been characterized by a strong backlash against feminism and this continues to be the case as we enter the new millennium. If we are indeed to encourage diversity and citizenship in multicultural societies it is crucial that issues of opportunity, access and distributed success be grounded in debates about gendered educational outcomes. Collins et al. (2000) have addressed this in a recent governmental report on the factors

influencing the educational performance of males and females in school and their post-school labour destinations.

In line with the positions taken up in that report, we believe that policy formulation and curriculum development in schools must avoid the popularist tendency to assert a binary oppositional and 'competing victims' perspective on the factors impacting on the social and educational experiences of boys and girls. This will only lead to homogenizing and normalizing boys and girls on the basis of biological sex differences and, hence, reinforce the very versions of masculinity which the research

shows have detrimental consequences for both the former and the latter. This book, therefore, is offered as an attempt to provide a more informed perspective on the social practices of masculinity impacting on boys' lives at school. We hope that it will have the effect of moving the debates beyond the feminist backlash rhetoric which persists in casting boys as the 'new victims'. If anything, as the contributors of this book argue, the issue that needs to be addressed is the investment that many boys, men and schools have in promoting a particular version of masculinity which is to their detriment in the sense that it limits them from developing a wider repertoire of behaviours and ways of relating. Until a commitment is made, particularly by men and boys themselves, to addressing the role that sexuality, homophobia and misogyny continue to play in how many of them define and negotiate their

Masculinities, we believe that very little will change.

Connolly . P. (2004) Boys and Schooling in the Early Years. Routledge Falmer Press.

Boys underachievement in education has now become a international concern, prioritised highly b government bodies around the world. Boys and Schooling in the early years represents the first study of its kind to focus solely upon young men and their achievement within the education system. Throughout this book this is a powerful argument for the need to begin tackling the problem of boss lower educational performance in the early years. This proved entirely beneficial as it includes one of the most detailed analyses of national statistics regarding gender differences in educational achievement from the early year's right through until compulsory schooling.

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Together with original and in depth case studies which vividly capture the differing experiences and perspectives of 5-6 year old boys, this book sets out the nature of the problems facing young boys in education and highlights a number of practical ways in which they can begin to be addressed. This is entirely relevant as i am concerned about boys lower levels of achievement.

This book follows the sandwich model: for the filling, juicy case studies of two contrasting schools in Northern Ireland; and, around the outside, nourishing chapters of theorizing, a critical review of the rhetoric and reality of the problem, and a detailed discussion of the strategies needed to sort everything out. Of these, probably the most useful is the chapter that sets the factual record straight, dismissing some current “ explanations” of boys’ under-achievement: it’s not their brains, neurons or testosterone that are to blame; it isn’t a question of girls holding boys back, or the feminization of schools, or an epidemic of laddish behavior. Rather, Connolly argues, the key factor in boys’ poor educational performance relative to girls is “ masculinity itself” or, rather, masculinities.

This is the rationale for the case studies that follow: one school in an affluent, peaceful, middle-class area, and another in a seriously disadvantaged working-class area, riven by sectarian violence. It is also the starting point for the author’s research questions: what are the dominant forms of masculinity in the early years, and how do they influence boys’ attitudes towards schooling?

Between October 2001 and June 2002, Connolly spent a day a week in each of the two primary schools, observing five and six-year-old boys, and

interviewing boys, teachers and parents. In the middle-class school, dinosaurs are cool but reading is rubbish, while, on the other side of the tracks, resistance to school reaches dizzy heights. Boys in this school are not without enthusiasms, but these appear to be football, fighting, wrestling, pulling down girls' trousers and marching with the local loyalist flute band. The chapter on home-school relations in this school is even more depressing, as parents describe how the teachers discourage their children from even entering for the 11-plus.

Bad news all round then, including the research process itself: in particular, there are some dodgy interview questions that virtually invite the boys, across the class divide, to assert their innate superiority: "If you had a choice, would you want to be girls or boys?"; "Would either of you like to be a girl?" The boys' answers fall smoothly into the stereotyped trap prepared for them.

Nevertheless, this book asks some serious questions, not least of which is: why do we worry so much about gender differences when social class has a much greater impact on achievement? Furthermore, why are so many teachers apparently so willing to accept their pupils' low levels of achievement on entry as a sure and certain guide to the future? And, lastly, when are we going to learn what Bronwen Davies tried to teach us long ago (in *Frogs and Snails and Feminist Tales*) about the need to go beyond male-female dualism, so that we can position ourselves, and our pupils, as neither male, nor female, but human. I'm yet to be convinced that studies such as Connolly's are going to help us take this tremendous step forward.

Head . J. (1999) Understanding the Boys, Issues of Behavior and Achievement. Falmer Press.

Attention is given to general aspects of learning and assessment before examining the response of boys to specific subjects within the curriculum.

Personal, social and health education concerns are addressed. <http://www.dropshippers.co.za/>

This text aims to increase understanding of the potential causes of underachievement, violence and even suicide amongst teenage boys. Suicide has dramatically increased among young males and academic underachievement is common. The author argues that it is therefore important to understand the young male psyche. The text addresses questions such as: has male behavior in school worsened, or has media hype inflated the proportions of a “ good story”; what is at the root of male violence; and are biological or social explanations telling the whole story? The author shows that it is only by engaging boys in arenas of thought and feeling that we can understand and help overcome the difficulties faced by boys today.

The issue of boys work and behavior in school has created considerable public interest and has undoubtedly polarized opinion, with some claiming it is the greatest social problem of our time, while other asserts it is merely an expression of male backlash intended to divert attention and resources from the need of girls and women. The first of the two sections within this book contains a review discussion of the various explanatory models biological, social and psychological. Emerging message is schools and teachers matter in academic performance can be made and we need not see the failing or <https://assignbuster.com/possible-factors-in-underachievement-of-males-within-education-education-essay/>

difficult boys as inevitably trapped in their current position. Head believed the key to successful intervention was in understanding the boys and attempting to see things from their perspective.

Martino . W. et al. (2003) so what's a boy, addressing the issues of masculinity and schooling. Open University Press.

So what's a bay? is a timely volume. It comes at a critical point in the expanding debate regarding boys and schools. Juxtaposed against an increasingly strident and often times stark mass media, this book offers a sober and contemporary view of boys and their place in that confused environment called " school." However, not content to simply cite data and/or repeat refrains found elsewhere, the authors have avoided the " boy crisis" trap and raised the debate by taking an appealing, narrative approach. One can hear and appreciate the voices of boys (all kinds of different boys) through this volume!

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The book is divided into three, roughly equal sections. Part 1, Normalization and Schooling, sets the general scene and brings the reader into the lives of boys with discussions regarding body image, emerging masculinities, bullying/harassment, and friendships. The second part, Diverse Masculinities, delves into the central issue of how boys see themselves, their developing sexuality, cultural/home conditions, how they are seen by others, and how