New Times Old Panics: The Underachievement of Boys

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ABSTRACT In this article we argue that much of the current debate around the underachievement of boys is misconceived. As a consequence, key questions concerning the role of schools in the social construction of masculinities are omitted, the practices and consequences of different masculinities in relation to women become invisible and the effects on different groups of boys of the internal orderings of masculinities are obscured. In addition the role ascribed to men in the call for more male primary teachers is not a progressive one. The ‘problem’, we argue, is not new even though it has been given a new significance.

Introduction

In view of the level of panic expressed by the media and policy makers in recent times, one might be forgiven for believing that the ‘underachievement of boys’ is a both new phenomenon and one confined to the UK. In fact it is neither. Therefore we begin by pointing out the historical nature of the concern and its international dimensions. We then move on to explore some of the underlying themes and anxieties underpinning the current UK debates and to explore the negative consequences of some of the proposed solutions.

Times and places

Michele Cohen (1998) traces the discussion of boys’ ‘inferior achievement’ back at least as far as John Locke’s Some Thoughts Concerning Education published in 1693. She notes that throughout history, boys’ educational failures have generally been externally located in pedagogies, teaching methods, curriculum materials and/or teachers, while success has been located in innate brilliance, intellect or natural potential.

The opposite has been true for girls. Educational success has been historically accounted for by external factors or devalued altogether as the consequence of lower order abilities such as neatness or obedience (Clarricoates 1980). Biological arguments have also been invoked throughout history to explain failure, located variously in the inferior female brain, the state of the womb or the secretions of the ovaries underlying the female tendency to emotion and hysteria (Ehrenreich and English 1979).

By the 1920s, even though it was being claimed that girls and boys were of equal academic ability, biology was again invoked in a way which turned boys’ negative attitudes to academic study into a positive feature of masculinity and girls’ positive attitudes into a threat to the future of the nation.

‘It is well known’, concluded the Report on the Differentiation of the Curricula Between the Sexes in Secondary Schools (1923), ‘that most boys, especially at the period of adolescence, have a habit of ‘healthy idleness’. Girls are much more industrious and conscientious.’ The Report argued that from the point of view of intellect, girls were just as able as boys, and there was thus no reason to differentiate the curriculum according to sex. There
was however, the question of girls' physiology, because of their tendency to overwork which made them liable to overstrain...girls were ‘over-conscientious’ and would use up all their energy on intellectual matters, starving their reproductive organs with dire consequences for motherhood and the nation. There were no such worries about boys. A boy ‘rarely allows himself to be completely absorbed by his work’ and his ‘breezy attitude to life in general successfully secures him from morbid concentration on the acquisition of knowledge’ (Cohen 1998 forthcoming).

Gendered accounts of female and male achievement lived on in the structure of the education system in England until the 1970s when the 11+ examination, the mechanism used for selecting children for different types of secondary schooling, was deliberately skewed in favour of boys. This was to prevent more girls than boys being selected for academic schooling because, so the story went, the slower maturation rate of boys would mean that they would be unfairly disadvantaged.

Such a history is also alive in the present. In a recent project one hundred and thirty fourteen year olds were asked about their attitudes to school subjects and their ambitions for the future (Frith and Mahony 1995). Biological accounts of achievement figured highly amongst the boys, as being a matter of ‘natural’, gendered ability whereas girls were more likely to cite ‘hard work’ as providing the route to success. There was also a greater tendency amongst the boys to locate failure either within the nature of the subject itself (‘food science is unsuitable for me. I can’t boil water without burning it’) or with the teacher. While it was important for students of both sexes that teachers should ‘treat them as a person’ both within and outside lessons, male students expressed more resentment towards teachers ‘telling us what to do and not treating us as equals’. Boys considered that a good relationship with a teacher might encourage them to try hard at a subject but negative teacher responses were cited as causing bad behaviour in class. The possibility that teacher disapproval could be a consequence and not the cause of their behaviour or that relationships are constituted by a dynamic for which both parties have some responsibility, did not figure in the focus group interviews.

The second point in relation to context is the international dimension of the debate. It would not be an overstatement to say that much of the world is in a panic about boys. Judging from recent publications on the subject, there is an alphabet of countries which have a problem over boys—Australia, Barbados, Canada, Denmark, England, Germany, the Grenadines, Jamaica, Japan, New Zealand, Norway, St.Vincent and the USA to name but a few. Within what has become a mountain of research, there is some confusing and conflicting evidence all gathering under the banner headline—the Underachievement of Boys. Put together it suggests that when we are told that the problem is the academic underachievement of boys, there are several senses in which this is misleading. To summarise arguments which have been put elsewhere (Mahony 1997), across the various countries, different groups of boys have been identified in different subject areas and at different ages as constituting ‘the problem of boys’ and, to confuse matters further, the very same data that in one country was once cited as demonstrating the underachievement of girls is now being used in another as evidence that boys are underachieving.

In England a group of statisticians have produced data which show that on almost all educational measures boys and girls are both improving. The biggest gap, it has been argued, is not a gender gap at all but ‘between the top and bottom quarters of the ability range, both male and female’ (Baker 1998 p. 23). From this evidence, it comes as no
surprise to learn that there is a high correlation between low achievement and poverty. To refer to boys as uniformly underachieving fails to do justice to the real issues for in England, it is not the boys destined to become high court judges, university vice chancellors or consultant surgeons but boys from low-income homes who underachieve relative to other groups in terms of the academic demands of the school. Given that this situation is hardly new and entirely in keeping with the structuring and perpetuation of the social class system in Britain, questions have to be asked about why the panic and why now?

Some elements in the UK panic

In recent years the focus on academic achievement in England has become something of a national obsession, as though schools have no other purposes but to enable students at the end of their compulsory schooling to gain as many ‘A’ grades as possible. In pursuit of global competitiveness, school effectiveness has been directly tied to a National Curriculum with school performance in national assessments published in the form of league tables. Schools are also subject to external inspection and the reports are published. In a context where ‘parental choice’ has been used to ‘lever up standards’ and where schools compete for students (or at least for those who will maintain or boost their position in the market), academic achievement becomes highly visible and heightened. No wonder that explanations of and solutions to underachievement proliferate, as schools compete to outshine their competitors.

Individual students or groups of students thus become highly visible in determining the overall academic performance of schools, geared to the demands of the competition state. The demands of the global economy have become one of the new determinisms in England to such an extent that even the education of our pre-school children (under-five) is centrally prescribed within a framework of ‘goals for learning’ (School Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 1996). Such an initiative has been criticised as utilitarian and based on a ‘joyless, “input-output” model’ (David, 1998 p. 62) and the formality of particular English pre-school settings are regarded by some of our European colleagues as incredible if not cruel when compared with the more creative and child-centred European contexts (Channel 4 1998). Similarly, in primary schools, the introduction of a Literacy Hour and a Numeracy Hour have been seen by some as marking not only the latest in a long line of government interventions into what should be taught, but the first clear signal that in the frenzied pursuit of higher standards, the government is even prepared to claim that it knows, for example ‘how to teach children to read’ (Hinds 1998 p. 6). Here we are not disputing that children need to become literate and numerate nor that the dominant discourse of standards and accountability cannot be interpreted in progressive ways but we would question whether the policies put in place to achieve this (including the public ‘naming and shaming’ of ‘failing’ schools) are either effective or, in relation to the impact on the students attending such named schools, morally defensible (Tomlinson 1998).

We would also question whether the relationship between education and the global economy is quite as straightforward as policy makers’ certainties might suggest when they claim that:

The country’s economic and cultural future depends on high academic standards being achieved in our schools (TTA 1997, p. 2).
First, drawing on international data, Ashton and Green (1996) challenge what they call the ‘simplistic consensus’ from which ‘policy debates and much scholarly discussion begin’ (p. 3) that more and better skills necessarily lead to improved economic performance. Second, the interim report of a study being conducted across five countries says that:

...There is no direct and causal link between pedagogy, attainment in literacy and national economic competitiveness...Professor Alexander...said that the dominant values underlying Britain’s obsession with literacy and numeracy targets were the same now as they were in the 1870s—economic instrumentalism, cultural reproduction and social control...(Budge 1997, p. 17).

What these studies therefore suggest is that:

globalization works as an ideology just as much as it refers to direct empirical effects. Thus there is a way in which governments argue that certain policy developments are the only possible options in response to global imperatives. This is a hegemonic policy device...(Lingard & Rizvi, p. 3).

Another element of ‘UK Ltd’s’ drive to be competitive in the global economy has been to reduce public expenditure. In a world of efficiency, effectiveness and economy—aggressive, competitive, entrepreneurial, individualistic, stand-on-your-own-two-feet masculinities are privileged. Public spending, for example on unemployment benefits, is no longer seen as an entitlement of citizens involving the responsibilities we have for each other but as an unproductive cost—a drain on the public purse. Here the call for an efficient and effective labour force connects with the demonisation of the ‘work shy’ in the need for an increased inculcation of the work ethic. The slide between two very different notions—‘unemployed’ and ‘unemployable’ easily passes unnoticed giving rise to the presumption that the conditions creating both are the same. Today’s underachieving boy stands at the brink of tomorrow’s unemployed (or unemployable) youth in the form of public burden number one and at this point, the passing of the male breadwinner raises the spectre of the ‘traditional’ heterosexual nuclear family being made unstable by the ‘underachievement of boys’.

However, and here we begin to notice a slide from the underachieving boy to the ‘poor boy’, the labour market has changed. The displacement of the ‘masculine’ manufacturing base by the ‘feminine’ service sector has meant that an increasing proportion of casualised work is being carried out by white and black working class women in the UK. Such employment as is available for groups of young working class people exists largely in the service industries, which require high levels of expertise in ‘feminine’ qualities such as ‘warmth, empathy, sensitivity to customers and high levels of interpersonal skills’ (Devereux 1996). The simple solution would be to enable boys to develop these so-called ‘feminine’ qualities but as we shall see later this is not a popular suggestion so we wring our hands and alternately blame boys and pity them. In the popular imagination, things are not what they used to be and ‘poor boys’ have no place in how things are. Aided by some recent television programmes this may be conveniently understood as the latest round in the sex war where women are ‘getting their own back’ both at school and in the world of
work, and ‘males are in great danger’ as they become ‘outsiders in a woman’s world’ (BBC 1, 1995). In the nostalgic laments over the demise of the male breadwinner, few choose to remember that for successive generations of working class men the reality meant (at least for those lucky enough to escape death or maiming on the battlefields), a life of hard labour spent in the lethal environments of coal mines or factories. Leaving aside the sentimental and romanticised reconstructions of the past, there is a problem in the present. In the study referred to earlier of one hundred and thirty fourteen year olds, it was the working class boys who wanted to leave school and get a job at sixteen and they who were unclear about the future. Where they had them, the ambitions of the white working class boys clustered simultaneously round two poles of the male labour market. On the one hand they aspired to enter the middle class professions, on the other, perhaps being aware of the mechanisms of exclusion operating in the professions, they nearly always proposed alternatives such as ‘getting a practical job’, ‘a physical job’, ‘a job using my body’, or ‘driving a big lorry’. Not one of them wanted to work in the service industries, a common aspiration for the girls and none predicted that they would find employment there. In fact few were certain of finding employment anywhere. In any case an interesting feminist dilemma is whether a solution would lie in the reskilling of working class boys so that they can displace working class girls at the edge of the labour market.

One more fear lurks around the stereotype of the underachieving/unemployed youth. It bubbles behind the fulminations of the tabloid press and the increased sensitivity towards household security. When expressed bluntly this particular nightmare runs something like this: while he’s not working hard at school—(or not working, period) he’s out and about in his gang ‘smashing the place up’. This of course would not be a problem if he were an Oxbridge undergraduate because such behaviour would be defined as ‘high spirits’. Neither would the issue receive such a high profile if these ‘marauding gangs’ kept to their own housing estates but they sally forth to thieve and burgle from middle class homes. Something has to be done to stop such behaviour, something has to be done to tackle its root cause, something has to be done with the parents, the single mothers, the teachers and the schools (all of whom have variously been cited at different times as responsible for the demise of the civilised world as we have re-imagined it). Rarely is it pointed out that the majority of theft is committed by the same small group of males, not all of whom are unemployed or unqualified and few of whom are daft enough to announce their presence by inviting along a gang. Burglary is not new and the evidence about who does it and how, hardly justifies a national panic about boys as a group per se.

This leads us on to ask what else is going on that could account for the current panic over boys? For on the argument so far, whether dealing in myth or reality, one obvious place to start would be to explore the contradictions between the all-pervasive images of hegemonic masculinity which mark the daily experience of young men (see Pam and Rob Gilbert in this volume) and such alternative modes of masculinity as are better suited to the demands of the next millennium. Why, in all the proposed solutions does this not appear to have occurred to policy makers and media tycoons?

One answer would seem to lie in the perceived threat to the patriarchal ordering of society, posed by the partial feminist gains of the 1980s. Our Chief Inspector for Schools, for example would be one who in claiming that much current education research is useless, would prefer some questions not to be asked. Apparently unaware that some studies might be aimed at showing the social and cultural complexity of the teaching process, he both taps into fears of homosexuality and derides those academic studies not directly related to teaching effectiveness:
Do we really need research into ‘how schools as patriarchal institutions that are ideologically and culturally heterosexual ... exercise a level of control over the private lives of lesbian teachers’? (in Durrant 1998, p. 3).

In Denmark the problem of boys is not even focused on their achievement but on the alleged psychological damage done to them by women. Anne-Mette Kruse describes the arguments of a number of prominent men in the following terms:

[S]chool is a terrible place for boys. In school they are trapped by ‘The Matriarchy’ and are dominated by women who cannot accept boys as they are...men teachers are not a lot better off, over-run as they are by women and female values, which undermine their masculinity and self-esteem. (Kruse 1996, p. 439).

The demise of the ‘Real Man’ is a source of considerable anxiety and has led to calls:

that boys ought to be allowed to be more 'macho'...Projects aimed at and for boys are being initiated in kindergartens at a rate unheard of up to now, because the predominantly women staff have been exposed to a good deal of male criticism...Furthermore there is a call for more men teachers. In Viborg the head of a preschool teachers’ training college has advertised not only for men or for qualified men, but for 'Real Men' to his school (Kruse 1996, p. 438).

We have our own versions of both strands of the Danish position—the concern to recruit more men and the assertion that we need more ‘real men’ in teaching. First, framed within the terms of an under-representation argument, it has been national policy in recent years to try to get more men into teaching along with ‘ethnic minorities...people with disabilities’ (TTA 1998, p. 8) and this is set to continue until the year 2001. However, though superficially similar, calls for more men are not of the same order as demands for more women head teachers or more minority ethnic teachers or more teachers with disabilities since the issue is not simply one of ‘under-representation’ of numbers but of the distribution of institutional power. One element for example of challenging racism is to increase the power and influence of those most oppressed by it. Increasing the numbers of men in teaching does not challenge patriarchal power especially when their positioning within the career structure is considered. As can be seen from the table below, at primary and secondary levels, the number of men who are headteachers is grossly disproportionate to their numbers in the profession.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Primary</th>
<th>Men (%)</th>
<th>Women (%)</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Heads</td>
<td>10,257  (48.8)</td>
<td>10,779 (51.2)</td>
<td>21,036</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deputies</td>
<td>5,713   (31.5)</td>
<td>12,418 (68.5)</td>
<td>18,131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom Teachers</td>
<td>16,812 (10.2)</td>
<td>148,064 (89.8)</td>
<td>164,876</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>32,782 (16.1)</td>
<td>171,261 (83.9)</td>
<td>204,043</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This however is not how the problem has been constructed. Until recently there has been no acknowledgment of the low proportions of women appointed to headship, instead as Anthea Millett, Chief Executive of the Teacher Training Agency has said:

Teaching in primary schools has always been strongly dominated by women. But the position is now worse. (In Pyke 1995, p. 8, our emphasis.)

Such comments provide one of a number of examples where, if it is discussed at all, gender becomes subsumed into a discourse which reinforces the status quo.

Second, the call for ‘real men’ has also found its Danish counterpart in the popular press. Stephan Shakespeare, writing in the Daily Mail (5.1.98) under the headline ‘Consign the cissy culture to history’, said:

The progressive revolution brought in a cissy culture which suited girls better than boys...we need more men primary teachers and we need to let them strut across the classroom as figures of authority, not nannies.

Shakespeare went on to explain how boys need men who will not:

attempt unnaturally to eradicate their essentially masculine natures. They need authority, discipline and competition...cross-country runs where possible—and what remains of boys’ aggressive instincts are channelled properly into contact sports such as rugby.

This presents a very narrow, traditional heterosexual version of masculinity. There is no recognition that gender identity is learnt over time and from boys and girls, men and women and that masculinities are organised and ordered differently (Redman and Mac An Ghaill, 1997).

Assertions about what boys need if they are to grow into ‘real men’ are not new. Alison Oram explains how, in the period after the First World War, when nationalistic sentiments, militarism and masculinity were strongly linked, it was thought that ‘the nation’s future manhood would be damaged’ if women were responsible for teaching boys (Oram 1987, p. 108). According to Oram, basic instruction but not education could be undertaken by women but if boys were to become ‘real men’, especially as they got older, they had to be taught by men. Such arguments, both past and present, hinge on particular conceptions of the culture and modes of masculinity into which boys have to be inducted as well as assumptions about what women signify and represent (Pepperell and Smedley, 1998). Predictably, this is often negative as Frank Redwood’s call to arms which appeared in The Sunday Times (27 October 1996):
Men! your classroom needs you

The solitary man taking tea in a staffroom full of women presents a less-than-exciting picture...

At this point, we have begun to move away from looking at how and why the problem of boys is being discussed and into a consideration of the effects of current discourses around boys.

One effect has been, we have suggested, to privilege the contribution which men in general and ‘real men’ in particular can make to the education of boys. Another has been to create a ‘sex war’ mentality expressed each year in media headlines such as ‘Girls trounce the boys in examination league tables’ (*The Times* 19 June 1994), ‘Male brain rattled by curriculum oestrogen’ (*Times Educational Supplement* 15 March, 1996), ‘Girls on top of the learning curve’ (*Guardian* 19 October 1996) and ‘Girls outclassing Boys’ (*Guardian* 26 November 1997). Such a mentality fuels the claim that ‘girls have had their way for long enough, now its time for the boys’ (Barber 1994) and inflames the call for ‘reverse discrimination’ (Smith 1995). Furthermore, we are under pressure to change classroom practice in ways which benefit boys. Although Stephen Byers, School Standards Minister, has urged us not to shrug our shoulders and say ‘boys will be boys’ (quoted in Lepkowska 1998, p. 8), there is much exhortation to treat boys and their interests as ‘natural’ categories. Extra resources are being poured into boys’ projects, discussion documents and packs of materials proliferate (for example, *Boys and English*, 1997, SCAA) and we are urged to choose curriculum texts such as Henry V or Macbeth for their ‘robust male themes’ (*Sunday Times* 27 October 1996). We need to pause at this point and within a recognition of the wider moral, social and political dimensions of schooling, ask ourselves where an uncritical preoccupation over boys’ motivation might lead. At what point should teachers challenge boys’ ‘preference for violent subjects’ (Office for Standards in Education 1993 p. 3)? Have we again to rehearse the arguments of the mid 1980s when in England it was suggested by a group of male teachers on one gender project that in order to really get boys motivated they needed to study pornography (Mahony 1985)? Would the line be drawn at the suggestion that a little neo-Nazi literature might grab the interest of the embryonic racists? At what point do we stop to recognise that in the making of literacy we are making the future in ways that benefit some at the expense of others? Not yet it seems for when Chris Woodhead, Chief Inspector of Schools claimed that, ‘the failure of boys and in particular white working class boys is one of the most disturbing problems we face within the whole education system’ (quoted in Pyke 1996 p. 2), he was virtually unchallenged. This suggests that there is either widespread ignorance of or indifference towards the evidence on racist violence (Troya & Hatcher 1992), sexual violence (Mahony 1989) and homophobic violence (Trenchard & Warren 1984) in schools.

What’s to be done?

Thought needs to be given to what education in its widest sense might mean were it to be geared to the future rather than the past and how we as adults live the values we claim to espouse in the present. As matters currently stand, it is not unusual in England to be greeted with incomprehension if one suggests that the ‘what about the boys’ debate could be understood as a radical invitation to look critically at masculinities and femininities and to treat some as problematic. This is hardly surprising given our experience of one and a
half decades of a particularly hard version of economic rationalism in which, unlike the policy framework in Australia, social justice and equity issues have been explicitly excluded from the agenda.

For the debate to move forward and begin to address the real problems in progressive ways we need to stop operating between the polarities of the underachievement of boys one decade and girls the next (if we’re lucky). The terms of the debate need to be shifted so that they are not based on simplistic, essentialist assumptions about women and men but rather take account of what we have learned about gender construction and the part schools play in it. This may mean being prepared to repeat the arguments over and over again that boys and girls do not just naturally grow up to be different in the neutral environment of the school; they constantly revise their gender identities and try out new ones from the range made available to them and school processes are active in enforcing or challenging these. The range of femininities and masculinities which young people inhabit are not fixed but neither are they limitless; they change over time, in relation to region and nationality and they are ordered in hierarchies through racism, homophobia and class prejudice, producing a complex web of power relations. Schools may decide either to reinforce or to challenge these, more or less superficially. Either way they cannot remain neutral, a point so obvious that it is difficult to believe that policy makers are not fully aware of it.

REFERENCES


