

TES JUNE 2005

How disappointed The Homerton team must have been with the publicity thus far afforded to the eagerly awaited and vitally important report of their four year DFES sponsored research into boys underachievement. Within hours of its publication, the oh-so predictable headlines began to emerge. Eager to know The Answer - the Quick Fix, teachers across the country received their answer on Bank Holiday Monday as they relaxed with the papers, "Boys only classes will improve lagging results, says report" - The Guardian and "All Boy lessons boost results" The Daily Mirror, whilst the Scotsman ran with "Single sex classes needed to help boys learn." Newspapers across the world chimed in with "Boys better in single sex classes" – The Daily Times, Pakistan and "Study backs single sex classes" – The New Zealand Herald. Indeed wherever the report was written about, the subject of the story was the same.

So much impact from so little evidence! Following on from a telephone survey of 31 schools, which "revealed a confused scene," the report refers only to the findings in THREE schools. Yes, just three schools provided the evidence for this particular section of what is generally an extremely significant and useful report. All three were high schools in the same type of socio economic setting, all white it would appear. At one school the experiment was only in mathematics and all the boys were "very negative" about it. Whilst the report does include some positive comments from some pupils and teachers, it does cite:

"the concern that aggressively macho behaviour was exacerbated simply through a concentration of numbers, with a subsequent worsening of boys' behaviour."

"Raising Boys' Achievement: Mike Younger and Molly Warrington" DFES 2005

A few of the articles, and it is only a few, refer to the report's serious health warning about all boy groups: "There are obvious dangers here, [as we indicated earlier] of the creation and perpetuation of stereotypical macho environments".

To me this is more than a health warning, this is a reason not to go down that road at all. Schools are thankfully beginning to listen more and more to pupils on this issue. One high school I'm aware of, using a commercially available piece of software (PASS) that explores attitudes to school, discovered that girls in the school had a more negative attitude to school than boys. The attitudes were measured in 9 areas of school life. The school's response was to teach core subjects in single sex groups. After a few weeks, their attitudes were measured once more. Girls' attitudes improved in 7 of the 9 areas, in some fairly significantly. The attitudes of the boys in all 9 areas plummeted virtually off the scale.

"Single sex lessons are backed by academics" (The Independent), scream the headlines, so how much notice will be taken of the rest, now that the world appears to have been supplied with the answer it has been so keenly anticipating? How many will read of the ideas related to the effective use of shared reading?(peer tutoring to enhance self esteem and develop reading

skills, developed in Kirklees and used to great effect since 1993). How much notice will be taken of the idea of using peer leaders (key leaders) to actively promote positive learning behaviours? How many will miss the wide reaching evidence, supported by much recent work, for the need to engage boys in speaking and listening activities such as partnered talk and drama based strategies, prior to getting them to write? Where will the headlines be about the need to engage boys in talking about and reflecting upon their reading? The vital need to address the impact of peer pressure on boys is given coverage in the report, will it receive coverage elsewhere? All of these issues I can heartily endorse from my own experience and all I can hope is that they will be given wide consideration and hopefully, even, headlines of their own

The problem with the boys' achievement issue is that everyone has been seeking a simple cause and a straightforward answer. The bottom line is that the causes of boys' underachievement are not simple or straight forward, neither therefore can there be an easy solution. In my work over the last twelve years, I believe that I have identified around thirty significant barriers to boys' learning, inappropriate pupil grouping is just one of them (setting). Perceptions of the use and value of writing, lack of independence prior to starting school, the presentation of a tough male macho male stereotype by some schools or by their local community are a few more. Add peer pressure, perceptions of reading as a female activity, a lack of positive male role models, the influence of street culture, teacher expectations, and a lack of parental awareness of the issues and you begin to see the complexity of the problem.

Single sex grouping is neither new nor is it the answer. Some schools have been virtually running these for years anyway, it's called setting, one sure-fire method of switching off significant numbers of boys. Hands up who wants to teach the bottom set year eight humanities group on Friday afternoon? Often three quarters full of switched off, disaffected boys, they're a group nobody relishes. If we're going to have a debate about pupil grouping and achievement let's have that one, shall we? How much longer must we continue in education to be so arrogant as to think that young people learn only from adults, or that it's okay to put the linguistically most deprived in the linguistically most deprived environment? As far as the single sex grouping issue is concerned, do we really want to start along a slippery slope which leads to a worsening of the so called "laddish culture" that we all despise. Following this path may significantly lessen the possibility of developing a more caring masculinity in our boys, something many of us have been toiling to produce for some time considerable time now.

Let us please focus on the massively useful elements of the 'Homerton' report, but first, I'm afraid, we'll have to deal with the universal clamour for the Quick Fix, that the media is telling us that we have found.