Challenging conceptions of boys as reluctant readers: improving boys’ achievement in English
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Aims
- To explore boys’ perceptions of English and reading
- To investigate English teachers’ perceptions of boys in relation to reading and underachievement in English
- To design an intervention to improve boys’ engagement with English and enhance attainment

Rationale
Boys’ underachievement in English is a well-documented and widely debated issue, according to Ofsted, ‘When boys enter secondary school they are already well behind girls in English […] Except in a small number of schools, the gap does not close during the secondary years. Boys continue to achieve less well than girls in Key Stage 3 tests and GCSE examinations’. (Ofsted, 2003:3) This is reflected in my school context and can be identified through a range of data.

At KS3, over a 3 year period, the CVA score for boys achieving level 5+ is 4.9% whereas for girls this score is 6.59%. Over the same 3 year period, whilst the gender gap between boys and girls achieving level 5+ at KS3 has fallen from 23% in 2009, to 15% in 2010 and 12.4% in 2011, it remains significant.

The gender gap at KS4 over the same period has in fact been widening between the percentage of boys and girls achieving A*-C in English: In 2009, boys achieved 4.03% below girls, In 2010 this rose to 8.39% and in 2011 there was a sharp increase in the gender gap to 18.71%.

It is also interesting to note the gender ratios in both the intervention groups at GCSEs, aimed at supporting students at risk of missing their C grade predictions, and the top set groups. Over a 5 year period, the intervention groups are consistently ‘boy-heavy’; this year one group is 82.4% male. This is in direct contrast to the top sets which are consistently ‘girl-heavy’, over the last 5 yrs on average only 35% of each top set classes is made up of male students.

Student Surveys

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Views of the subject</th>
<th>1 love English</th>
<th>2 I like English</th>
<th>3 I don't like English</th>
<th>4 I hate English</th>
<th>5 I enjoy reading at school</th>
<th>6 I enjoy reading at home</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What do you read?
- Most popular with boys (data reflects percentage of boys who read text type EVERY DAY or 2-3 times a week): 86% websites, 83% computer games and 69% social media.
- Least popular with boys (data reflects percentage of boys who NEVER read text type or once every few months): 83% poems, 66% graphic novels, 55% comics

What puts you off reading? (answers presented as a word cloud – font size represents frequency of each word’s usage)

Intervention
I designed a scheme of work around ‘The Hunger Games’ in order to create situational interest as it has become a hugely popular text in my school with both girls and boys, including reluctant readers.

I used the plot of ‘The Hunger Games’ itself as the basis for the scheme of work – students were divided into groups (self-chosen) who then worked as teams competing against one another to complete various reading and writing challenges.

Challenges were designed according to the following criteria, which were developed through analysing student interviews and literature:
- Group work to enable collaboration and social learning
- Interactive tasks
- Short, snappy tasks
- Discussion to support reading and writing
- Increased use of technology
- Regular use of AFL, both self assessment and teacher feedback on clear, regular targets

Research Outline

- Student Surveys with Yr 9
- Teacher Interviews
- Investigate boys = English
- Identify issues
- Create situational interest
- Use group work
- Create interactive and ACTIVE reading tasks
- Use computer-based texts
- Design intervention

Student interviews key findings...
What subjects do you like and why?
- PE, MUSIC, RS, TECH, ART, SCIENCE, ENGLISH
- active, fun, sport, interactive, different, not in classroom, not just sitting down and writing different, creative, own opinions, like making things and creating stuff, drawing, practical, drama, think a lot

How could English lessons be improved?
- Let us decide for ourselves who we want to work with so we can help each other
- More acting
- More posters
- Group work
- Sometimes mixed ability groups, sometimes group according to ability

Conclusions, next steps
- Using pupil voice through regular feedback forms at the end of lessons, it appears students are enjoying and engaged with the scheme of work.
- This data, along with the target tracking sheets also suggests that students are benefiting from working in groups through students’ discussions creating Zones of Proximal Development for one another.
- I will use the students’ end of KS3 test results in order to assess whether the SOW has enhanced their achievement.
- I will also use surveys and discussions to review the SOW.
- I will share the findings and SOW with colleagues with a view to the faculty teaching the SOW next year.

Teacher interviews
Why do boys underscachieve in English? (answers presented as a word cloud – font size represents frequency of each word’s usage)

Perceptions of boys as readers – suggests teachers see a cycle of factors which influence boys’ attitudes towards reading.

- GENDER STEREOTYPES
- PARENTS TREAT GIRLS & BOYS DIFFERENTLY
- READING BECOMES NEGATIVE EXPERIENCE

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References