Let's Hear It from the Boys

What boys really think about school and how to help them succeed

Gary Wilson

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‘When a single boy underachieves in his exams, it is a failure of the individual. When a million boys underachieve in their exams, it is a failure of policy.’

Ally Fogg (2018)

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Introduction

A freedom of information request to the Department for Education in 2015 asked what policies or initiatives the department had undertaken specifically to address the underachievement of boys. The short answer was this: 'The Department for Education does not fund any initiatives that specifically focus on the underachievement of boys.' Given this complete lack of interest and attention from those at the very top, I propose that we ask the real experts: the boys.

Writing a book like this was tricky because I don't want people hanging onto my words; I want them to hang onto the words of the boys – the real experts. It is well documented that across the entire developed world most girls continue to outperform most boys at every stage of education and (in the UK) in all subjects with the exception of maths at Key Stages 2 and 4. Not all boys underachieve, of course, but of those who are underachieving, at the bottom of the heap are white, working-class boys. My experience of working on the issue of raising boys' achievement since 1993 is that it is a crime that it is not on the national agenda. And why isn't it? Is it precisely because it is working-class boys who are most affected and they don't matter in the scheme of things? Or is it because people are concerned that if we focus on the boys then that will mean the girls will suffer? I call the former a distinct possibility and I call the latter sloppy thinking.

Anything that we do that looks at the behaviour, attitude and performance of boys is bound to have a positive knock-on effect for girls because it can be boys sometimes who behave in ways that are detrimental to everybody's learning. In addition, in all of the books that I have written on the subject, I present strategies that hit all of the buttons for boys without disadvantaging girls. And moreover, if all schools are helping to turn out decent young men, then that surely is also to the benefit of all. It is defined in the title of my first book: *Breaking Through Barriers to Boys' Achievement: Developing a caring masculinity*.

For anyone who is still unsure, can I make the point that there are two areas where boys are massively in the lead? One: 76 per cent of young people who are permanently excluded from school are boys (Department for Education, 2020), and two: in 2019, 96 per cent of the prison population was male (House of Commons Library, 2020). I don't know what that does to anybody else but what it does for me is to get me out of bed first thing in the morning because that's what this work is all about. If our boys do become disaffected or do become disengaged, there is a well-worn path ready and

waiting for them and that's the last thing they need. Yes, we know that for men and women there are countless examples of inequalities, so our query might be: do we really need to do things for boys? After all, they're probably going to end up in the top jobs anyway, and if they end up in the same top job as a woman, they may well get 30 per cent more salary. The first thing I'd say in response to this is that the boys we are discussing are far too rarely scaling the heights towards those jobs. The second thing I'd say is that we know such iniquitous situations exist, and that's because we live in a sexist society. There's only one way to change it and that's through education, and it's why many of us came into education in the first place. Developing a caring masculinity can go some way towards combating sexism and making things better for everyone: boys and girls.

This book is not an academic treatise but rather an account of a journey beginning with my own school days as a white, working-class boy who left school without qualifications. This was a journey that continued as a teacher working with countless working-class boys in a number of challenging schools in West Yorkshire for almost 30 years, culminating in life as a consultant with the single aim of engaging schools, local authorities and the government in raising the achievement of these boys, turning them into decent young men and giving them the words to help them unclench their hearts.

So, I begin **Part 1** of the book by telling my own story of the challenges I faced in school, and how I later became a teacher and started to work on the issue of raising boys' achievement at a local and then national level. You'll discover some of the techniques I used to put this issue on the agenda and to start doing things better for boys. I then invite you to do the same thing in your school, through analysing what works and what doesn't work for your male pupils, the barriers they face when it comes to achievement, and crucially, how to *listen* to the boys themselves in order to determine an action plan for improving their experiences of education.

Part 2 of the book considers 15 specific aspects of life in secondary schools from the perspectives of the boys themselves, from what makes a good teacher, to rewards, academic setting, peer pressure, homework and more. You'll hear what boys *really* think about these issues – what helps, what hinders and what we can do to raise their achievement and improve their experiences of school.

Part 3 of the book brings everything together. It raises some further issues for consideration when focusing on boys' achievement, such as getting all teachers on board and the influence of street culture, social media and mental health. I explore in depth ideas for how to run pupil voice projects and group mentoring to successfully listen to the boys in your own school about what matters to them and how to improve your provision in ways that will make a difference. The book concludes with a case study of an inner London school, in which I helped to turn things around for boys.

Throughout the book, you will find the following features that I hope will help you to reflect on your provision for boys, what you are already doing well and what could be improved, and help you put what you are reading into action:

- **What I'd like to see:** Short quotes from boys I have spoken to across my career about changes they'd like to see in their school. These quotes aim to inspire you to think about raising boys' achievement from the perspective of the boys themselves and to focus on doing things differently in your setting.
- **Think:** Reflective questions to encourage you to think more deeply about the issues raised and what this means for your own teaching. Use these to develop your thinking or stimulate discussion with colleagues.
- **Act:** Action points for you to complete in your school to put the suggestions I make into practice.
- **Practical exercise:** More complex, long-term projects you can undertake to listen to the boys in your school and bring about change. These are best completed at a department or whole-school level.

I hope the chapters that follow will help you to think more deeply about boys' achievement in your school and make a difference.

Part 1

Putting boys' achievement on the agenda

Chapter 1
My school days

Overview

- A working-class boy goes to grammar school
- Teacher training college
- My first job in teaching
- Trying to make a difference for boys

As the only boy from the estate to pass the 11-plus and get to a particularly good state grammar school in my village, I was bullied at school for being from the estate and I was bullied on the estate for wearing a grammar school uniform. I also had the experience of being bullied by a PE teacher who, for example, when presented with a note from my mum to say that I had bad hay fever and asthma, would sit me in the long grass to watch cricket instead of play. Incidentally, with regard to the latter, I'm on a mission, and I mention it every day: 'Please take this personally,' I say. Young male PE teachers are undoubtedly the most important male role models a lot of our boys are going to get. See more about this on page 50.

For me, grammar school was a miserable time. It represented one humiliation after another – never anything particularly major, just a steady flow of constant reminders that I was punching above my weight. My first art homework was to redesign a car dashboard. There were no cars in our street. An early project in woodwork was to carve an Easter Island statue out of a bar of soap. It was a real education, but at the same time ultimately depressing. It was an education in so far as I was encountering for the first time the wonderful fragrances of Pears, Palmolive, Lux, Cussons, Camay, Wright's Coal Tar and Imperial Leather. It was depressing as I was the only boy to arrive with what I was (begrudgingly) given by my mother: a half-brick-sized slab of Fairy household soap. It was the only soap that I had ever encountered, a decidedly unsophisticated and rather more industrial product used for scrubbing Dad's collars, cleaning the doorstep, washing up and bath time (but not to wash hair with, oh no, we had Omo or Daz for that).