

## Boy-Friendly RE

### Introduction

The DCSF, in its Personalised Learning Strategy, believes that, 'Developing personalised learning in schools is critical in working towards a society where a child's chances of success are not limited by their..... gender' but also that 'personalising learning must be for all' Much of what is written below applies to some girls as well.

There is no such thing as 'a' preferred learning style for boys. Boys have different learning needs. A minority will be happy to learn by reading, making notes and extended writing. Many are visual or auditory learners but kinaesthetic learning is particularly associated with boys, but not all boys. Kinaesthetic learners are typically those who can't keep still, play with pens and tap rhythms on the desk. These are the boys who tend to be thought of as difficult to teach and disenchanted with their learning.

In our Agreed Syllabus, we refer to *bodily/kinaesthetic* – the ability to use hands and body well; these thinkers can manipulate objects with skill' and kinaesthetic learners (37% of people) like the physical and emotional sensations associated with learning. They learn best by doing.'

### The Problem

QCA's 2004/5 annual report on curriculum and assessment relating to Religious education reported that, at key stage 3, negative views towards RE were often linked to the quality of teaching and learning. A minority of boys did not enjoy RE, as they felt teaching methods were too narrow.

*'I really liked RE in my primary school. We used computers, did plays and visited three places of worship. Here I spend too much time just copying facts from worksheets. We don't use ICT, because the rooms are always in use, and there have been no visits.'* (David, age 14)

*'It's important to understand different beliefs, but we seemed to just be learning from books and not actually thinking about why people belong to a religion or whether religion matters in today's world.'* (John, age 13)

GCSE results in 2007 revealed that:

- fewer boys than girls select the full course as an optional subject
- the percentage of both boys and girls gaining A\* - B grades is higher for the full course. This may be a result of less time proportionately given to teaching the short course or to the less positive attitudes of pupils taking it as a compulsory subject, or both
- the proportion of boys awarded A\* - B is lower in both courses.

Nicola Price found that *'GCSE grades confirmed that for 4 of the last 5 years boys were significantly underachieving in RE especially those in the C/D range who achieved a C grade in English but D or below in RE.'*

This is not just confined to RE. Hilary Wilce found that *'Boys now do less well at every level of GCSE than girls, and less well in English from the age of seven onwards. They are less conscientious about homework, less organised about bringing the right books to class, more likely to get into trouble with their teachers, and four times as likely to get excluded from school.'*

## Reasons

Barbara Wintersgill suggests that there are two particular reasons why pupils underperform or underachieve in any subject:

- disregard for the qualification
- lack of interest in the subject

Both of these factors are instrumental in boys' underperformance in RE.

She observes:

*'Over the last twelve years I have spoken with several hundred boys about RE. When asked for suggestions as to why they do less well than girls at GCSE, boys frequently replied that it was not a qualification they particularly valued because it would enhance their chances of employment. These views, they said, were often supported by their parents who would rather that they should devote their revision time to 'important subjects'; i.e. those that are valued by employers and universities.*

*'Given the time devoted by so many RE specialists to publicising the career potential of RE and its equal footing as a university entrance subject, this is depressing. But it does not necessarily signify the failure of that campaign.*

*Girls are generally more aware than boys of both the career and academic value of RE, but this may be because the subject has greater currency for careers which attract more women, such as teaching, social work, nursing and so on.*

*'Like many subjects, RE may not have a direct relevance for specific careers or university courses but the challenge now is to persuade boys that education generally and RE in particular has an important role in preparing the individual for life beyond work or university. Boys who appreciated this were most likely to speak highly of the subject to the extent of taking it in the 6th form. For example, I met a 17 year old boy taking AS in Maths (x2), Physics, Chemistry... and RS to 'broaden my mind'.*

The question of social class and peer group culture is prominent in a Teacher Training

Agency-funded research study by Keith Shipman and Keith Hicks, teachers in a London school:

*'The most important factor that prevents the motivation of boys, identified by the pupils and teachers alike, was the boys' peer group culture. The presence of friends in the group made the boys work less hard. The peer group observed in school was not an anti-work but a pro-social group. ... Within the peer group the boys worked to establish their self-esteem through social interaction not academic performance.'*

Speaking at a conference *'Making RE Work: Principles to Practice in Curriculum and Professional Development'* at Homerton College in 2000, Sue Ward said that, although the difference between girls and boys is centuries old, the current curriculum is more appealing to girls. In RE, 'spirituality' seems rather 'girlie' and boys' peer pressure is to keep the 'cool' mask. Girls may read and ponder, boys often want to press button and go.

## **Subject Content**

In 2005 Ofsted's RE subject inspections focussed on boys' achievement. It emerged that boys generally do not have a negative perception of RE. When asked to rate RE in terms of its interest level the most common response was that it rated as being of above average interest compared with other subjects. Boys were generally less interested in RE at Key Stage 3 than at Key Stage 4, where the curriculum was more heavily weighted towards ethical and philosophical issues.

In *'Dangerous RE'* in RE Today Spring 2009, Kathryn Kane observed, 'Sometimes I think RS lessons are too 'nice'. We spend a lot of time looking at the teachings of religious leaders that stress love, service, compassion, which although necessary for society to live in harmony, are sometimes just a little bit pink and fluffy. GCSE RS is a

little grittier, with issues such as marriage and divorce, birth and abortion, crime and punishment on the menu, but for some 15-year-old boys these are still perceived as 'girls' issues'.

She explained, 'In many ways it can be a lot easier to stick to the 'nice stuff' in RE and yet every day the news raises the 'scary stuff'.

'We looked at the persecution of Christians around the world. Jesus said some very dangerous Words to his followers about being willing to lay down their lives and pick up their crosses. In the UK the church has an image that is not at all dangerous, one of old ladies and tea-drinking vicars, but in other parts of the world it can be very dangerous to be a Christian.

'The Open Doors website is very useful for up-to-date information on the persecuted church ([www.opendoorsuk.org](http://www.opendoorsuk.org)). This led to some very lively discussion regarding who and what students would be willing to die for, and whether vicars should tell would-be converts to Christianity about Jesus' dangerous words as well as all the love and promise-of-heaven ideas.

'In addition to these we explored the persecution of Jews in Nazi Germany, ancient Egypt and twelfth-century York, and acts of bravery by Jews and Gentiles at times of persecution. We also explored the dangers of being a Hindu widow in India in 1828 and in rural India in 2006 (BEC News website has a report on sati in India) and knife (kirpan) carrying Sikhs, the defence of the weak, the struggle between the temporal and the spiritual (miri-piri).

'Fear and danger are always just a little exciting: the rides that make you scream at a fairground are always more popular than 'fish for a duck'. The students enjoyed the discussion that these dangerous religions raised. They wrestled and empathised with the beliefs and decisions that the adherents to these religions wrestled with, and during the course of this work they became more aware of how religious issues were reported in the news.'

Lucinda Neall, in 'Engaging Boys', believes that: To succeed with boys we need see the world through their eyes. Listen to your boys' conversations to find out what they are into. When playing they may imagine they are knights slaying a dragon or part of an invading army. Use this information to get them interested in the classroom. Capture a boy's imagination and you capture his attention. Unless you are telling them a good story, boys don't like to listen for long - they prefer to get on with the action. So break work up into small tasks, make instructions concise and give short timescales. Choose your words and tone to make tasks sound exciting: "I'm setting you a challenge. You've got three minutes to do this, starting...now!"

### **Classroom management**

HMI in Wales undertook a survey of schools in 1996. Among the findings were:

In more than two thirds of the lessons observed, teachers gave too little attention to where boys and girls sat in the classroom. Overall, boy-only groups and pairs within classes were generally less effective than mixed-sex groups and pairs in terms of output, their contribution to the lesson and the complexity of the language they used.

In just over a fifth of lessons, where the quality of teaching was unsatisfactory, girls appeared more able or willing to rise above the indifferent teaching, or at least to extract from it what was of benefit to them. Boys tended to respond more negatively, either through disengagement and indifference or through disruptive behaviour.'

In 'BOYS' ACHIEVEMENT IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS - A Summary of Ofsted Report – HMI 1659, *July 2003* observed:

The importance of a clearly defined disciplinary framework is especially marked for boys. Boys respond best when there is a consistent and fair-minded approach to discipline, backed up by effective pastoral systems and learning support.

- Good teaching and classroom management are major factors in all pupils' achievement. Features of good teaching include clear objectives, careful planning that builds on earlier learning, a variety of activities, a sprightly pace, materials that engage all pupils, questioning that promotes understanding, and the appropriate use of praise.
- Boys tend to respond well to teachers who set clear limits and high expectations, direct work strongly, show enthusiasm for their subjects, use humour and reward good work. There is evidence that boys are rather less inclined than girls to learn from indifferent teaching.
- Although there is nothing as clear-cut as a boys' learning style, many schools have found certain approaches to be particularly helpful. For example, although many boys are willing to contribute orally, they can be helped to become more reflective in their replies. Their motivation can be enhanced by giving them greater access to computers for interactive learning or to help them improve the presentation of their work.
- Boys often respond better to lessons that have a clear structure and a variety of activities, including practical and activity-based learning, applications to real-life situations and an element of fun and competition. Many boys find it helpful to be given short-term targets and feedback that focuses on how they can improve.
- Boys in particular seem to value individual attention and tend to work harder when they know they are being monitored closely. They respond well when given help to organise their coursework and to plan their revision. In schools where anti-learning peer pressure is a major barrier to boys' achievement, close monitoring can give boys 'an excuse to succeed'.
- Examples of effective support seen by inspectors include academic reviews by tutors, learning mentors, learning support units, study centres, homework clubs, revision classes, programmes of study skills, access to information and ICT, residential programmes and opportunities for work-related learning.

In a Teacher Training Agency-funded research study by Keith Shipman and Keith Hicks, teachers in a London school it was noted:

Inspectors noted a number of features that helped to motivate boys in particular:

- lessons were well planned and organised, often with clear achievable aims and short-term targets
- lessons included a variety of activities including practical work, activity-based learning, the positive use of competition and good use of ICT
- lessons were made interesting and relevant by the use of 'real' situations
- teachers set high expectations and taught pupils to think for themselves and work independently, putting an emphasis on study skills
- teachers directed work strongly, but without stifling creativity and imagination
- questioning was quick-fire, lively and varied with the teacher ensuring that all pupils had a chance to participate
- pupils understood how current work built on earlier learning
- humour was used to good effect
- behaviour was well managed, discipline was fair and rewards and praise were used frequently
- teachers directed the seating arrangements
- writing frames, templates and discussion frames were used well
- teachers selected a fair proportion of texts, both fiction and non-fiction, that were likely to appeal to boys
- feedback focused on how work could be improved by specific steps.

They saw teachers who:

- encouraged boys to think and reflect on their first answers because, although boys answered willingly, their responses lacked depth
- encouraged pupils to plan and record their ideas using spider diagrams and charts
- used good examples from pupils' work to show boys and girls how to improve their writing
- made effective use of writing frames and other scaffolding to help weaker pupils to interrogate texts and draw conclusions
- explained and reiterated the lesson objectives and gave boys specific information on their strengths and weaknesses
- organised pupils into mixed groups of boys and girls and planned tasks so that pupils had to listen to each other and work together to gather information they needed.

Barbara Wintersgill talks of 'Permission to fiddle!

'For pupils who can't sit still / keep their hands still / leave things alone...

- having something to squeeze or hold
- cutting / pasting sequence of notes
- moving to different places for different tasks e.g. different points of view are to be found at separate desks (could be named as planets, islands, ships etc.) and pupils move around tables to find the information they need.
- Shuffling key work cards
- Treasure hunts for the answers to problems i.e. from walls, display area, stuck below desks.

*'Most boys like discussion, especially the opportunity to give their opinions. However, when asked what they found difficult about RE the most common response was 'learning what other people think'. In particular several boys say that they get confused between the teachings and beliefs of different groups.'*

### Teaching and learning styles

Barbara Wintersgill observed that: Where boys disliked RE, displaying all the symptoms of disengagement (fidgeting, moving around, throwing things, off-task talking and sometimes general disruption), their problem with the subject was less likely to be the subject's content as the way it was taught. Most boys were clear about their preferred learning styles.

They disliked:

- Text books
- Being told to 'read this and get on with the questions' ('this' being a text book or work sheet)
- Copying from the board or books
- Making notes while watching a video
- Listening to a teacher talking, at length
- Drawing (easy but a waste of time)
- Unnecessary writing (see below)
- Working alone
- Lessons that are always the same
- Not having enough time to do the work
- Not having a chance to ask questions
- Having to work in silence

They liked:

- Teachers who:  
tell their pupils what to do and follow it up with sufficient support to enable them to do the work well  
are enthusiastic about their subject and make it fun  
explain things well  
make the subject relevant to everyday life
- Being made to think
- High quality and varied resources
- Role play, acting and hot seating
- Group and pair work
- Games and competitions
- Visits and visitors
- Use of video
- Use of ICT
- More 'demonstrations' e.g. with food
- More practical activities, e.g. trying out the positions for prayer in Islam
- Opportunities to use their imagination
- Discussion - the opportunity to find about the views of others in the class and to develop own views.

### **Work-related learning**

Nicola Price, in 'Practical steps to raising boys' achievement' noted:

*In future I want to develop ways of showing all pupils that the skills they learn in RE are valuable, not only for life, but for jobs outside the professional level. At the moment careers advice for the use of RE is limited to the Law and related careers. I also want to investigate underachievement of boys in our feeder primaries and see where the problem starts.*

Barbara Wintersgill suggests 'Work related writing.'

*'Some forms of writing can be modelled on work situations, although they are less likely to persuade boys who see their futures in manual work. Make sure you point out the work-related benefits of these tasks.*

- Conference procedures: pupils take turns to be the group scribe. Invariably this task falls to a girl - don't let this happen! In the manner of adult conferences, hand out flip chart paper and pens. The scribe makes notes on the group's decisions, which are read out by another member of the group.
- The topic for the lesson is a matter of social concern e.g. attitudes to teenage pregnancy. Two pupils act as speakers, putting forward opposite views. Another pupil in the chair suggests two or three questions for discussion. This



could lead to the group feedback described above. In addition each group had to decide who they represent from a list provided for the teacher e.g. teachers, youth workers, doctors, employers who regularly employ teenagers, political groups, religious groups etc. (Variations - the teacher tells each group who they represent - this could be set up at the end of the previous lesson). Each pupil has to prepare a brief report to their employer outlining the main arguments on both sides, their own view and recommended action (e.g. a letter to the press; ask for a meeting with MP).

- Committee secretary - similar to the above but one/two pupils prepares minutes for their group. The group read the minutes and discuss their accuracy.
- Petition - groups write a letter to a real (preferably) or imagined person on an issue of personal concern.
- Create a logo to represent the key values of the group.'

### Relevant activities

Barbara Wintersgill suggests the following to improve boys' listening skills:

- Pairs to fours - pupils work together in pairs. Each pair then joins up with another pair to explain and compare ideas.
- Listening triads - pupils work in groups of three. Each pupil takes on the role of talker, questioner or recorder. The talker explains something, or comments on an issue, or expresses opinions. The questioner prompts and seeks clarification. The recorder makes notes and gives a report at the end of the conversation. Next time, roles are changed.
- Envoys - once groups have carried out a task, one person from each group is selected as an 'envoy' and moves to a new group to explain and summarise, and to find out what the new group thought, decided or written.

She goes on to say, regarding writing activities:

*'Boys I speak to dislike what they call 'pointless' writing. This includes low level tasks such as copying or question and answer (they have a point!).*

*'I find that boys are more willing to write if they can be persuaded that it has a purpose; for example they need to practice writing to pass exams; writing is required in most jobs.*

Try the following:

- Reserve extended writing for model exam questions, e.g. at the end of a topic
- In between, set written tasks designed to develop thinking, e.g. mind maps, classifying ideas in columns or lists, and completing writing frames.

## Reading activities

- Variations on cloze: Hand out key words in the text written on cards. Pupils hold up their word as it is read
- As a variation of the above, pupils hold up pictures or symbols. These can be imaginary e.g. 'hold up your card if you think it represents a term read', such as prejudice. This can give rise to interesting discussion later about the graphic representation of concepts
- Hold up the right meaning as 'your' word is read
- Every pupil has a word on a card. As the text is read they come to the front in order to form a long line or arc. Starting at the beginning they reconstruct the text to include their word (variants - the next or previous word)

If the text is about people:

- Think of questions to ask a particular character. This could develop into hot seating.
- Identify with a character in the text and talk to the class as though you are that character
- Reconstruct text from stickers hidden around table/ or pasted randomly on walls (colour code if each group is reading a different section).

## For further information:

[http://news.reonline.org.uk/rem\\_art15.php](http://news.reonline.org.uk/rem_art15.php)

<http://www.gtcw.org.uk/cpd/pdf/Edition%2012/Edition%2012%20-%20Nicola%20Price.pdf>

[www.leicestershire.gov.uk/ks3\\_boys\\_ofsted.doc](http://www.leicestershire.gov.uk/ks3_boys_ofsted.doc)

[www.ofsted.gov.uk/content/download/1539/10760/file/](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/content/download/1539/10760/file/)

<http://www.aboutourboys.co.uk/docs/ENGAGING%20BOYS%20IN%20LOWER%20SCHOOL.pdf>

<http://www.aboutourboys.co.uk/docs/BOYS%20IN%20THE%20CLASSROOM.pdf>

<http://www.generationyouthissues.org.uk/research/underachievement.htm>

[http://news.reonline.org.uk/rem\\_art15.php](http://news.reonline.org.uk/rem_art15.php)

Kathryn Kane - Croydon Dangerous RE REToday Spring 2009

Engaging Boys - Lucinda Neall

Boys in the Classroom - Times Educational Supplement, November 2002 Lucinda Neall

Personalised learning: A Practical Guide – DSCF available at <http://publications.teachernet.gov.uk/eOrderingDownload/00844-2008DOM-EN.pdf>

2020 Vision: Report of the Teaching and Learning in 2020 Review Group available at <http://publications.teachernet.gov.uk/eOrderingDownload/6856-DfES-Teaching%20and%20Learning.pdf>