

News release

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Closing the gap between boys' and girls' attainment in schools

Schools need to focus on improving boys' literacy skills in order to close the gap between boys' and girls' attainment levels, says a report published today by Estyn, the education and training inspectorate.

Inspection reports for 2005-2007 show that girls' results are significantly better than boys' in just over 30% of primary schools, whereas boys perform better than girls in only 6%. In the same period, inspection reports for secondary schools show girls getting better results than boys in around 85% of schools. Boys performed better than girls in only 5% of secondary schools.

“Schools in Wales have achieved a great deal over the last two decades and pupils' attainment levels have improved considerably. At the same time, improvements in the attainment of girls have outpaced those of boys in almost all subjects in the National Curriculum”, says Dr Bill Maxwell, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education and Training in Wales.

Because more boys have trouble with literacy than girls, they also experience problems in accessing the wider curriculum. This affects progress not only in subjects that are highly language-based, such as Welsh or English and history, but across the whole curriculum, because reading and recording skills are important in all subjects.

The organisation of the secondary school day, with its frequent changes of teachers and subjects and numerous demands for homework and coursework, can also be a particular challenge for those boys who are already struggling with reading and writing.

Another factor which can affect boys' learning is negative peer pressure. For some boys there is tension between being good at school and gaining status with their peer group. Boys are more prone to show off and less likely to follow instructions relating to what they do and how they might do it to best effect.

Estyn's report recommends that schools need to make better use of learning, teaching and assessment approaches that appeal more particularly to boys. These can include increasing opportunities for discussion, more competitive activities, and using a wider variety of learning opportunities including using ICT, and homework and study skills clubs.

A small number of schools have been successful in significantly raising boys' attainment levels over a relatively short period of time. They have made progress by promoting positive values and behaviours, challenge stereotypical attitudes of masculinity, and giving boys more opportunities to exercise control, responsibility and choice.

A frequent phrase used by schools who had been successful in raising boys' attainment was that they set out to 'make learning and achievement 'cool' for boys. Mentoring schemes can be particularly helpful in promoting the value of academic success amongst boys. This is especially the case when it also involves people from outside the school environment, for example local business people or sportsmen and women, to whom boys can often relate better.

The issue of differences between boys' and girls' attainment is not a recent phenomenon, nor is it confined to Wales. The gap is broadly consistent across the developed world, especially in English speaking countries. The type of school pupils attend, including mixed or single-sex schools, and the gender of their teachers does not seem to affect this attainment gap and single-sex classes have been shown to have inconsistent outcomes.

Some current initiatives in Wales, such as the Foundation Phase, the raising achievement in standards in education (RAISE) programme, Learning Pathways 14 19, and the Welsh Baccalaureate Qualification, offer the potential to raise boys' attainment while not adversely affecting the standards girls achieve.

Notes to Editors:

- Estyn, the office of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education and Training in Wales, provides a high quality inspection and advice service.
- Estyn's report, 'Closing the gap between boys' and girls' attainment in schools', has been commissioned by the Welsh Assembly Government.
- Full copies of inspection reports are available on Estyn's website at www.estyn.gov.uk
- In 2006-7, girls attained better results than boys in 6% of primary schools in all core subjects. Inspectors reported there was no consistent pattern in a further 8% and no significant differences in 42%. In the remaining 14% boys did better than girls in maths and science but not in language subjects.
- Boys attained better overall results than girls in just less than 5% of secondary schools inspected in 2006-7. Girls got better results than boys in around 85% of secondary schools. In the remaining 10% or so there was either no consistent pattern or no significant differences or boys did better than girls in maths and science but not in language subjects
- The findings in this report are based on:
 - an analysis of the inspection outcomes of over 600 primary and secondary schools;
 - inspection visits to 23 schools (11 secondary and 12 primary schools);
 - further evidence from other visits being made to schools and telephone conversations with heads and deputy heads of five additional secondary schools;
 - information gained from discussions with LA officers;
 - scrutiny of documentation and performance data provided by schools and LAs; and
 - a review of recent research.

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