

# Introduction

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Welcome to this resource. We hope that you will find it challenging, informative and practical in guiding your work around gender with children and adults in education. The text and learning resources draw upon our collective experiences over a number of years of working alongside, and learning from, young people and educational practitioners in a range of educational settings.

Gender aspects of education raise some of the most significant and challenging issues facing us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century – and it is the intention of this book to offer thought-provoking insights into how to understand these issues and practical strategies to guide the response of staff and learners in 5-13 education. This text looks beyond a narrow focus on just the relative achievement, and under-achievement, of boys and girls in measurable tests and examinations. It addresses concerns about gender and achievement, but within a perspective that prioritises the creation of gender-fair classrooms and schools, where principles of social justice, respect for diversities and inclusion are manifest. What this means in practice we hope will become clear.

From the moment we enter the world, to the moment we leave it, our experiences are shaped by gender. The first question on the birth of a new baby is usually, 'Is it alright?' and the second, 'Is it a boy or a girl?' From that point onwards our identities, our life chances and our experiences are filtered through the lens of gender. Gender shapes the language we use, the concepts we develop and the games we play. It affects our sense of selves and relationship to others, our family dynamics and our educational and employment histories.

It is worth from the outset defining what is meant by the term 'gender'. Like many words with complex and sometimes controversial interpretations, it means different things to different people. While one's 'sex' is primarily biological, and usually ascribed as male or female on the basis of genitalia at birth, 'gender' refers to the social construction of masculinities and femininities. Such gender constructions imply expectations, attitudes, behaviours and opportunities defined as gender appropriate – though what is considered gender appropriate varies between social classes and cultures, and changes over time (Connell 1995). Gender constructs are also relational and tend to be polarised, ie. 'masculinity' is usually defined as oppositional to and different from 'femininity'.

In addition, gender is not just something ascribed to us as passive objects nor is it a fixed and immutable construct. Gender identities are something we actively construct, define, regulate and contest. Gender is something we 'do', not just something we 'have'. For example, the boy in tears after a fall from his bike who is told by his parents that 'boys don't cry', or the girl who enjoys football but is ridiculed by her peers, are both exerting their right to construct and contest gender preconceptions, yet at the same time are being regulated by others in an attempt to maintain some degree of gender conformity.

Mac an Ghaill (1994) begins his book *The Making of Men* with an insightful vignette that illustrates this point well.

In one secondary school that I taught in, a male student, after hearing that he had passed his exams, gave me bunch of flowers in the school playground. Within a short period of time, the incident was common knowledge in the staffroom and the male teachers responded with heterosexist jokes. At the same time, the student got into a fight in defending himself against homophobic abuse. The headteacher asked me to report to his office, where he informed me that I had gone too far this time. I began to defend myself, claiming that I could not be held responsible for the fight. The headteacher interrupted me to ask what I was talking about. Suddenly I realised the symbolic significance of our playground performance: the exchange of

flowers between two males was institutionally more threatening than the physical violence of the male fight. (p1)

## How gender issues are presented today

A concern with gender in education is not new (Arnot et al: 1999). During the 1970s and 1980s, the focus of concern was on the educational experiences of girls, and in particular, their marginalisation in areas of the curriculum. Certain educationalists, working from a feminist perspective, explored how interactions and language in schools and classrooms disadvantaged girls (Arnot and Weiner: 1987; Mahoney: 1985; Spender and Sarah: 1980; Weiner & Arnot: 1987; Walkerdine: 1989). Gender aware strategies at the time attempted to re-shape the curriculum and approaches to teaching and learning to embrace the interests of girls as much as boys for example the Girls into Science and Technology (GIST) initiative.

Such approaches were intended to diversify the aspirations of girls and challenge narrow gender assumptions. As such, they were concerned with broad issues of gender identity and not just attainment in tests and examinations. Whilst there was some interest in applying the same 'anti-sexist' approach to working with boys (Askew and Ross: 1988), concern about the educational experiences of boys was limited, as were studies or strategies that focussed on gender and ethnicities, or gender and special educational needs.

The introduction of the National Curriculum in 1988, and the growing significance of league tables in ranking schools according to their success in standardised assessments, revealed the extent to which girls are outperforming boys in a range of subject areas and throughout all key stages (Arnot et al: 1999). Differential aspects of educational performance between girls and boys have been with us for a very long time (Cohen: 1998). Indeed, the 11+ exam introduced post-war operated with a virtual quota system to ensure that equivalent numbers of boys passed and that girls were not over-represented in grammar schools. What is new is the significance of this information for schools and their reputations. This has led to a situation where the primary focus on gender issues in many educational establishments has shifted dramatically from a broader concern about gender cultures and their effects, to a much narrower and specific focus on the underachievement of boys in measurable tests and related qualifications.

### Concerns about attainment

This contemporary focus on the 'underachieving boy' was first articulated publicly by Chris Woodhead, the former Chief HMI. In his annual OfSTED report in 1996 he wrote:

The gap between the GCSE achievements of girls and boys remains wide. In 1985 some 27.4% of girls and 26.3% of boys were awarded 5 or more grades equivalent to GCSE grades A to C. More recently the equivalent figures have been, respectively, 38.4% and 30.8% in 1990, and 47.8% and 39.1% in 1994, and the provisional figures for 1995 are 48.1% and 39%.

The gender gap at the end of Key Stage 4 was mirrored by a gap in all other key stages. Such statistics have precipitated a flurry of activity aimed at raising the attainment of boys, especially in those subjects with a pronounced gender differential (English, Modern Foreign Languages, the Humanities; Art and Design and Technology). Equal opportunities projects with a broader focus on gender identities and cultures, associated in many cases but not exclusively with concerns about the educational experiences of girls, have been replaced by more instrumental action plans to improve the standard of boys' performance by whatever means necessary (Myers: 2000).

Publishing houses and policy organisations have generated a plethora of texts focussing on the issues from predominantly a male perspective (Bleach: 1998, Frater: 2000, Noble et al: 2001, OfSTED: 2003a, OfSTED 2003b, Wilson: 2003). The DfES have established a website dedicated to issues of gender

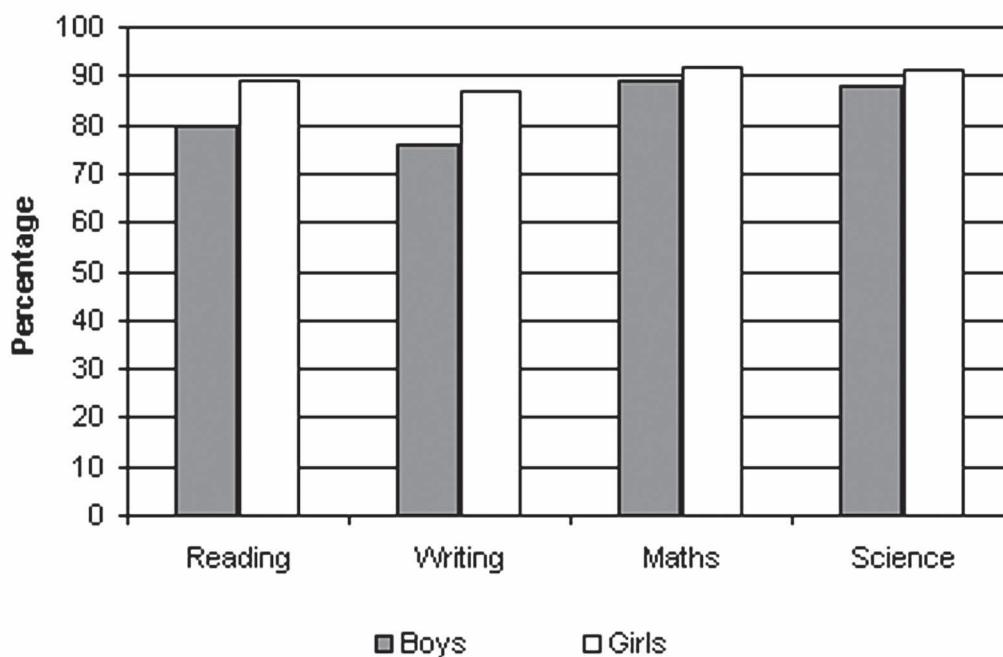
and achievement (<http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/genderandachievement>) and commissioned a four year Raising Boys' Achievement Project. This project has researched practices in schools where the gender gap was not evident or was narrowing, and developed inter-school interventions through learning triads bringing groups of primary, secondary and special schools together (Younger et al: 2005a, <http://www-rba.educ.cam.ac.uk>).

Despite all such effort, and notwithstanding the improved results overall, the gender gap has remained fairly constant – indeed, official national statistics claim a slight widening of the gap, (<http://www.dfes.gov.uk/trends/>) although others have pointed out that proportionally, the rate of improvement for boys is slightly higher (Gorard et al: 2001).

Recent educational statistics reinforce concerns about the national gender gap in attainment at each of the key stages.

## Key Stage 1

### Percentage of pupils achieving level 2 or above in the Key Stage 1 teacher assessments by gender, 2005

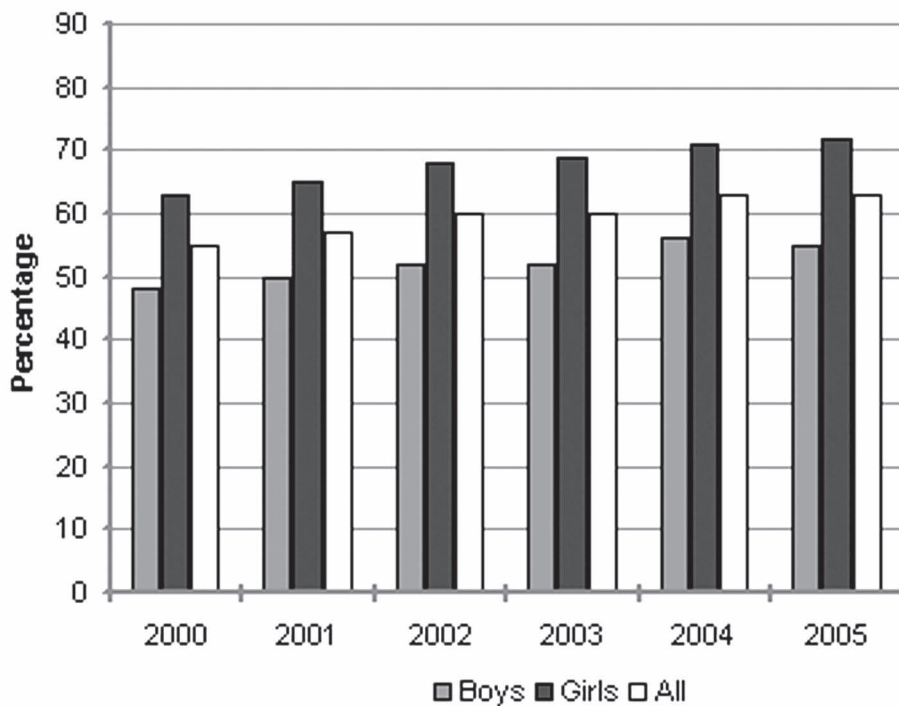


Source: DfES

At Key Stage 1 there is a clear gender gap in performance with a higher percentage of girls achieving the expected level of attainment or above in all subjects than boys. According to teacher assessments, the difference in the proportion of girls and the proportion of boys achieving level 2 or above in 2005 was greatest for writing – 88 per cent of girls compared to 77 per cent of boys. Differences were less significant in science and mathematics. Indeed, at the higher levels of attainment a higher percentage of boys than girls attained level 3 in maths and science.

## Key Stage 2

Percentage of pupils achieving level 4 or above in the Key Stage 2 writing test by gender, 2000 to 2005

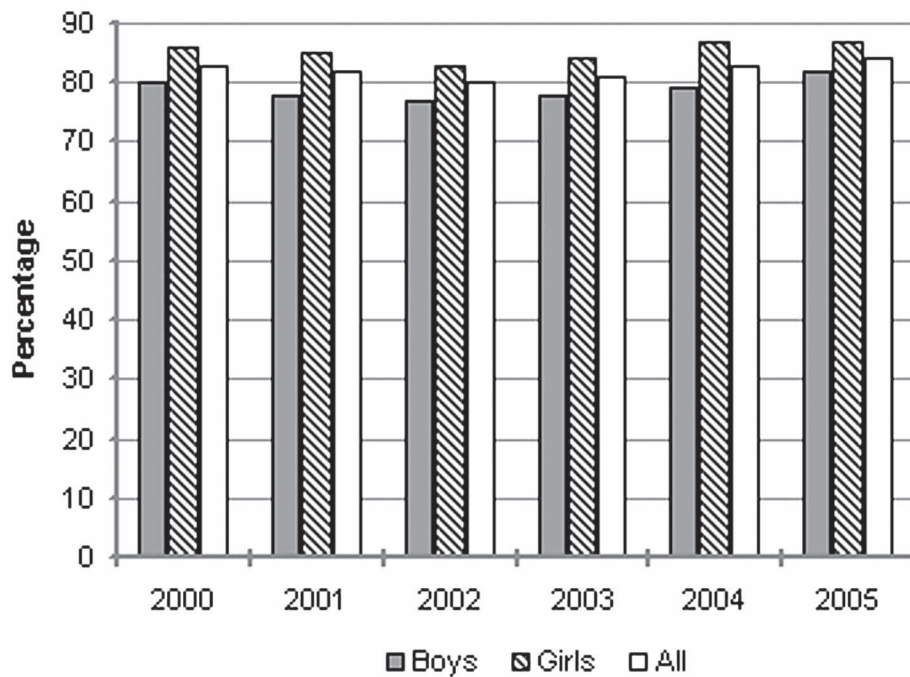


Source: DfES

At Key Stage 2 the levels of attainment overall have risen over the six year period from 2000-2005. However, the difference between the percentage of girls and the percentage of boys achieving level 4 or above in the writing test increased by two points in 2005 to reach 17 percentage points. The proportion of boys achieving level 4 or above in the writing test fell by one percentage point to 55 per cent in 2005, while the proportion of girls achieving level 4 or above in the writing test increased by one percentage point to 72 per cent.

## Key Stage 2

### Percentage of pupils achieving level 4 or above in the Key Stage 2 reading test by gender, England, 2000 to 2005



Source: DfES

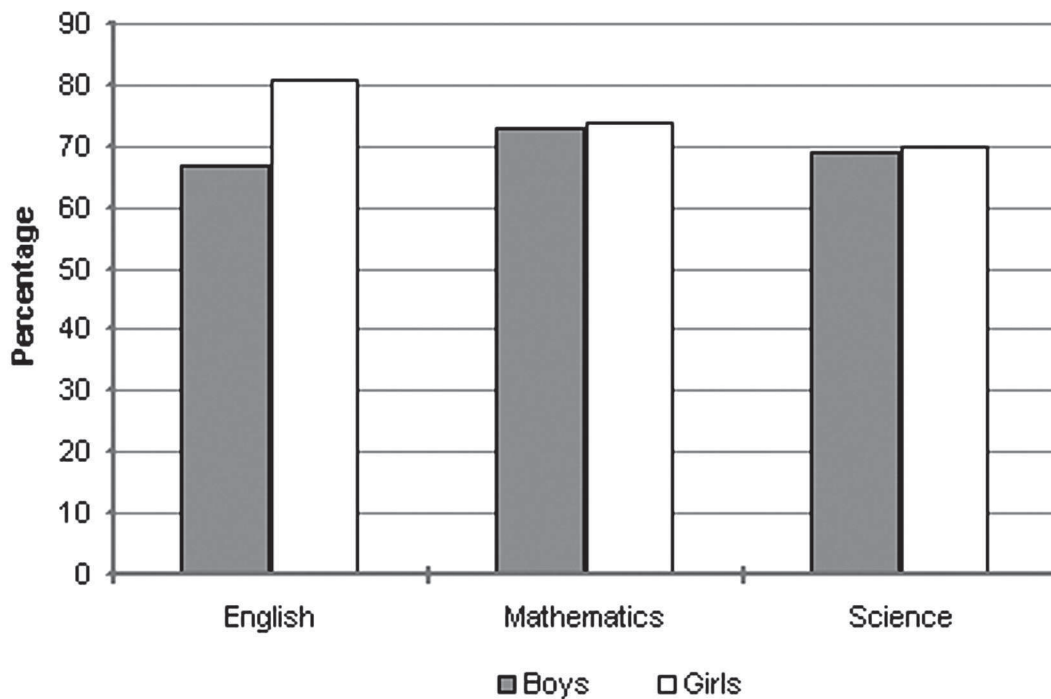
In reading at Key Stage 2 there appears to have been recent narrowing of the gender gap. The proportion of pupils achieving level 4 or above in the Key Stage 2 reading test increased by one percentage point in 2005 on the previous year to 84 per cent. The difference between the percentage of girls and the percentage of boys achieving level 4 or above in the reading tests fell by 3 points to 5 percentage points in 2005. The proportion of boys achieving level 4 or above in the reading test increased by three percentage points, to 82 per cent in 2005, while the proportion of girls achieving level 4 or above in the reading test remained at 87 per cent.

In mathematics and science at Key Stage 2 equivalent percentages of boys and girls achieved the expected levels, although, again, at the higher levels of attainment boys slightly outperform girls in these subjects.

At Key Stage 3, similar patterns are again in evidence. The percentage of girls achieving level 5 or above was 14 percentage points higher than that for boys in the English tests - the same difference as in 2004. The percentage of girls achieving level 5 or above was one percentage point higher than that for boys in both the mathematics tests and the science tests in 2005.

## Key Stage 3

**Percentage of pupils achieving level 5 or above in the Key Stage 3 tests by gender, 2005**



Source: DfES

In teacher assessments for non-core subjects, girls outperformed boys in all subjects except in Physical Education. These results were again within a context of overall improvement of performance.

## Key Stage 3

**Percentage of pupils achieving level 5 or above in the Key Stage 3 teacher assessments in non-core subjects by gender, 2005**

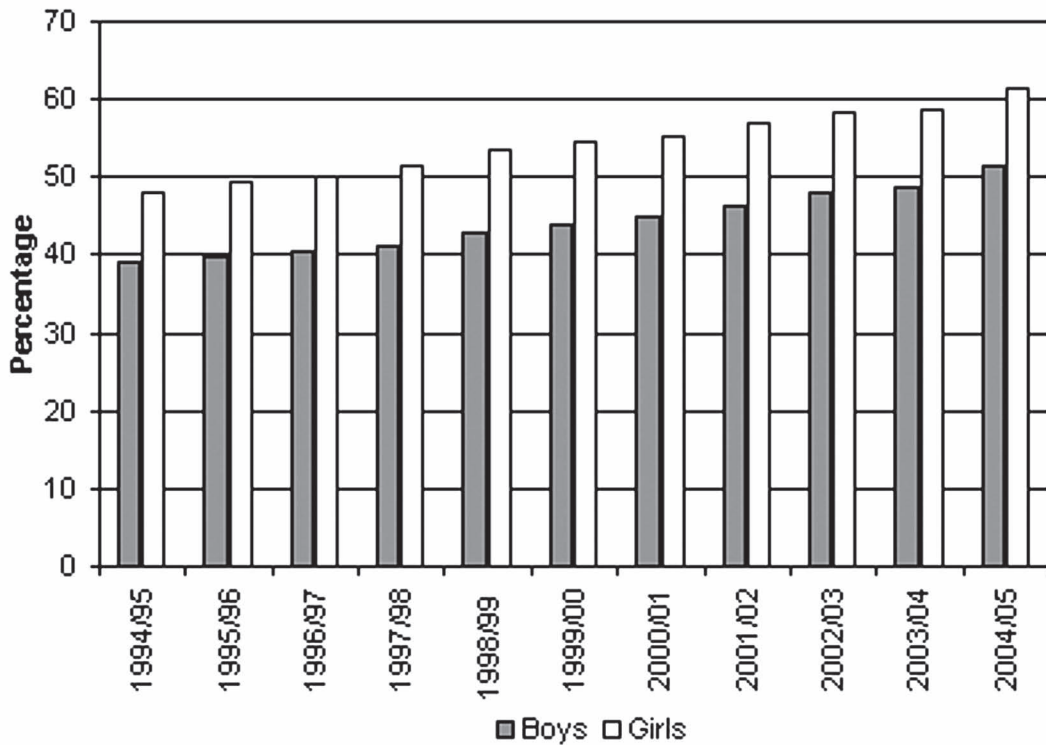
Subject	All	Boys	Girls
History	70	64	76
Geography	70	65	75
Design and Technology	73	66	79
ICT	69	65	74
Art and Design	75	67	83
Music	69	63	75
Modern Foreign Languages	52	44	60
Physical Education	76	77	75

Source: DfES

Such patterns of attainment from Key Stage 1-3 set a trajectory that is sustained through Key Stage 4 and beyond.

## Key Stage 4

Percentage of pupils aged 15 achieving 5 or more GCSEs or equivalent at grades A\* to C, England, 1994/95 to 2004/05

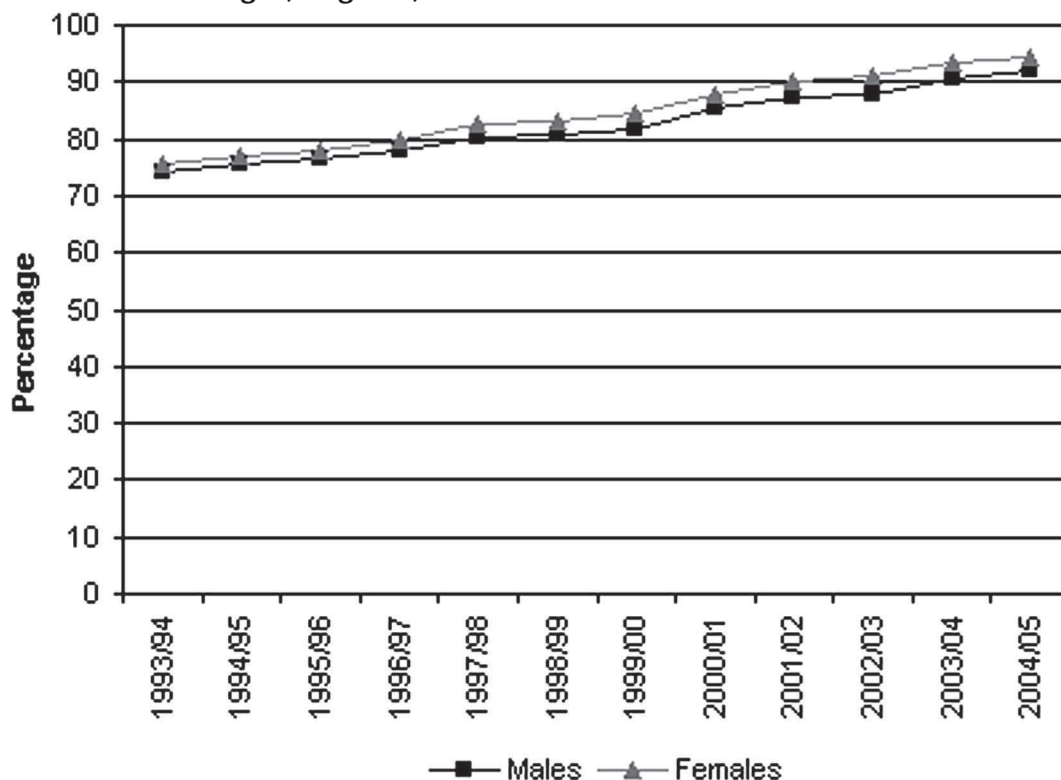


Source: DfES

The percentage of pupils achieving 5 or more GCSE and equivalent grades A\* to C, in England increased from 43.5 per cent in 1994/95 to 56.3 per cent in 2004/05. During this time the percentage of girls achieving 5 or more good GCSEs or equivalent has increased by 13.3 points, while the percentage of boys has increased by 12.4 points. Approximately 61% of girls currently achieve 5 A\*-C or equivalent, compared to 51% of boys.

## Post-16

### Percentage of 16-18 year old candidates achieving 2 or more GCE A level passes in schools and FE colleges, England, 1993/94 to 2004/05



Source: DfES

In 2004/05 there were 277,600 16-18 year olds taking GCE/VCE A/AS level examinations in schools and FE colleges in England. 93.2 per cent of these achieved two or more 'A' level passes, compared to 76.2 per cent in 1994/95. Of these, 94.2 per cent of 16-18 year old females achieved two or more passes, compared with 92.0 per cent of males. The gender gap among 16-18 year olds has widened over the last decade.

Such statistical patterns are reinforced by the fact that more boys than girls leave compulsory education with no qualifications at all, and fewer young men stay on in education or training post-16. The majority of applicants and entrants to Higher Education are also now women (HEFCE: 2005).

### Concerns about behaviours

The other way in which the current debate about gender and education is framed relates to concerns about 'challenging behaviours' and the extent to which formal and informal exclusion from education is gendered. Boys are more likely to be reprimanded for their behaviours than girls and to receive fewer rewards or positive affirmations (Warrington et al: 2006; Younger et al: 2005b). Approximately 80% of fixed term and permanent exclusions from secondary school are male with almost all primary exclusions being boys (DfES SFR 23/2005). Boys are over-represented in Special Educational Needs (SEN) provision, with higher levels of learning difficulties and emotional and behavioural needs identified, including specific syndromes, e.g. Attention Deficient Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and Asperger's Syndrome (OECD: 2000). In 2004/05, more than twice the number of boys than girls in



schools had statements of SEN and about the double the number of boys than girls were identified as having SEN. Boys outnumber girls in SEN units and special schools (DfES SFR 24/2005).

The trajectory of disaffected behaviours through from primary to secondary schools means the vast majority of pupils who truant are boys and there is a strong link between truanting and crime. Youth Justice Board statistics show a highly gendered pattern of youth offending (Bowles et al: 2005). This includes a worrying statistic that 15% of boys in high crime neighbourhoods report carrying a knife to school (compared to 4% of girls). In a Bristol study, over 75% of 11/12 year old boys believe women should be hit if they make men angry. In July 2000, The Racial and Violent Crime Task Force set up after the Stephen Lawrence enquiry, found that of 8000 incidents of violence dealt with each month, 76% were domestic, 22% racial and 2% homophobic. Recent reports about antisocial youth, gangs wearing 'hoodies' and the issuing of Anti-social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs) has tended to characterise, and demonise, groups of teenage boys in particular.

Finally, statistics about rising suicide rates for young men have been widely reported. For men aged 15 to 24 the suicide rate has doubled in the last 25 years, now standing as the most significant single cause of death of men in this age group – approximately a quarter of all cases. Conversely, the suicide rate for young women is considerably lower and has remained relatively stable over the same period ([www.statistics.gov.uk](http://www.statistics.gov.uk)), although suicide attempts are far more common amongst women than men – especially in the under 25 age group. Male suicides appear to be more impulsive and frequently are not foreshadowed by prior discussion or calls for help. In addition, they are often enacted through more violent means. Suicide risk is clearly linked to mental health and self-esteem issues, unemployment, marital breakdown or relationship problems, homophobia and other forms of bullying, drug or alcohol abuse. In addition, the pattern of male suicide indicates some connection with the difficulty many men feel in expressing feelings of inadequacy, exposing vulnerabilities and managing a sense of powerlessness (Coleman: 2004).

A focus on the mental health issues facing men is part of a growing concern about the challenges associated with encouraging men to engage proactively in their own health care and well-being. Testicular cancer, for example, the commonest cancer in men aged 20-34, can have an 85% chance of cure if caught early enough, but young men's resistance to self-examination persists. Reflecting this new concern, a Parliamentary Committee was set up in 2001 – the All Party Group on Men's Health.

## **What such perspectives conceal**

Overall then the terms of the current debate, both in the public eye, and underlying many contemporary educational interventions, have defined a certain construct – the 'underachieving boy' – that commands our attention in a particular way. Indeed there are powerful discourses at play here that shape what we perceive, how we interpret what we see, and how we respond (Raphael Reed: 1999). Some have argued that the current gender discourses around the underachievement of boys represent a contemporary 'moral panic' that acts to channel anxieties relating to changing gender and youth cultures (Epstein et al: 1998).

The concept of discourse is a useful one. Associated with the work of Michel Foucault (1926-1984), discourse refers to the way that knowledge is constituted and inter-related with power, not just at the level of theory (how we think) but also at the level of practices (how we act). In this context, contemporary discourses associated with the 'underachieving boy' are influencing what gets noticed in relation to gender and education, and are shaping the interventions in response. By extension, the dominant discourses exclude or hide certain issues from view.

## **So what do current perspectives tend to conceal?**

Firstly, the focus on the gender gap in favour of girls misrepresents remaining issues of gender and performance for girls in some curriculum areas. A recent Leverhulme longitudinal research study into

numeracy development shows a decline in mathematical performance for lower attaining girls since the implementation of the National Numeracy Strategy, with some indication that increased levels of competition, public performance, and mental arithmetic with a focus on the 'right answer' have disadvantaged them (Lucey et al: 2003). Even in curriculum areas where girls are seen to be achieving, for example, in literacy or English, there are some concerns that their compliant engagement with schooled literacies may conceal a lack of confidence at manipulating and deconstructing multimodal texts (Browne: 1999).

Secondly, whilst the dominant construction of the underachieving boy suggests that everything in the garden is rosy for girls and young women, and that the 'future is female' – further enquiry reveals that there are still significant gendered patterns and barriers that impact upon female life chances and opportunities.

A closer look at educational progression post-16 and employment opportunities reveals some interesting patterns. Whilst the gender differentials discussed from KS1 through to post-16 and beyond are apparent, the picture post-16 is more polarised than the generalised statistics suggest. Though more girls are staying on into post-16 education and account for over 50% of 'A' level entries, the gender gap in favour of girls is relatively small. At 'A' level and 'AS' level boys gain very high or very low point scores more often than girls. For boys and girls with similar GCSE point scores, boys appear more likely to achieve high 'A/AS' point scores – particularly candidates with high GCSEs. At degree level there are also some interesting patterns. A slightly higher proportion of men achieve first class degrees than women, but many more graduate with a third class or ordinary degree. At some elite universities such as Oxford and Cambridge, men are twice as likely as women to get firsts, with a higher proportion of women getting lower second class degrees, despite similar grades at intake.

Traditional and differentiated subject choice by gender is still evident when option choices are made. At post-16 boys favour physics, chemistry, maths, economics, geography, design and technology; girls favour sociology, French, English Literature, biology and art, even when they have done well in science and mathematics at GCSE. In vocational subjects, there is a rigid gender divide with males predominating in construction and engineering courses, and girls in health and social care.

Despite the fact that the Sex Discrimination Act was passed 30 years ago, there is also still evidence of a significant 'glass ceiling' operating for women in employment, and low female representation in traditionally male spheres. One area of particular concern is the low representation of women in ICT based careers. Just 33% of managers and 14% of company directors are women (EOC: 2005). Only 32% of head teachers in secondary schools are women – whilst at the same time there is a concentration of women in the less well-paid roles of early years practitioner and learning support. A focus on the underachievement of boys may have affected women teachers' career prospects.

Although female employment in many areas outstrips men, this is frequently in low-paid and part-time work which men are often unwilling to do. A recent report from the EOC confirms that the full-time gender pay gap is 17.1% in favour of men, and the part-time gender pay gap is 38.4% (EOC: 2006). Gender cultures within the family, the interplay between work-home responsibilities, and the long hours culture in the world of work in Britain, still results in women taking the main responsibility for unpaid domestic caring roles combined with part-time employment – although there is an increasing demand from both men and women to be able to strike a healthier and more equitable work-life balance (Women and Work Commission: 2006). Women returning to work after starting a family face the highest 'employment penalty' of any group in society (The Equalities Review: 2006).

Thirdly, current debates tend to characterise boys as a homogenous whole – suggesting all boys are underachieving or disadvantaged. This is far from the case. Undifferentiated figures by gender conceal important differences in achievement by social class. Middle class boys tend to do better than working class girls (though the educational experiences of working class girls have never been high on the policy agenda (Plummer: 2000) notwithstanding current rates of teenage pregnancy amongst the highest in Europe). While social class remains the single most significant contributor

to educational outcomes and life chances (Ball et al: 2000), there are also complex and dynamic interplays between other factors as a 'basis for chronic, persistent and unjust inequalities' (The Equalities Review: 2006).

Pupils of Indian and Chinese heritage show a pattern of high attainment compared with other ethnic groups. Pupils of Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Black African and Black Caribbean heritage perform as a percentage below the national average, with Travellers of Irish heritage and Gypsy/Roma pupils achieving extremely poorly. If one takes value added measures into account, the attainment gap does narrow to some extent during compulsory education for some ethnic groups (predominantly Bangladeshi and to a lesser extent Pakistani and Black African) – especially for groups with high proportions of EAL speakers. Black Caribbean pupils have lower value added scores and their performance declines relative to other groups from age 7 onwards (DfES: 2005).

Once intersected with gender, the gender gap is largest for the following four minority ethnic groups: Black Caribbean (15%); pupils of Mixed White and Black African heritage (16%); pupils of mixed White and Black Caribbean heritage (15%) and Bangladeshi pupils (14%). Overall, the educational experiences and outcomes for Black Caribbean boys remains a cause for concern in many local authorities, despite the fact that their rate of improvement in GCSE is currently twice that of White boys.

Exclusion rates are not only gendered but also differentiated by ethnicity. The disproportionate rate of permanent exclusion for minority ethnic pupils has fallen considerably over the last six years. However, Black pupils and pupils of Mixed ethnic origin remain at greatest risk of exclusion, being twice as likely to be excluded from school than White pupils (DfES SFR 23/2005) with Black Caribbean pupils excluded at three times the rate (Parsons et al: 2005).

Whilst there is some correlation between educational outcomes, ethnicity and class – young people from some ethnic groups buck the trend showing little difference in performance between children on Free School Meals (FSM) and others for example, those of Chinese and those of Bangladeshi heritage (The Equalities Review: 2006).

Fourthly, a narrow focus on achievement and examination results underplays other elements of gender experience in schools. The experiences of those young people whose sexual orientation or gender identity challenges the dominant or hegemonic forms of masculinity and femininity are marginalised. Lesbian and gay adults report having been subject to high levels of homophobic bullying while at school with over half contemplating self-harm as a result. A Stonewall survey found that 82% of teachers were aware of incidence of homophobic bullying but only 6% of schools had anti-bullying policies that dealt specifically with these issues (Warwick et al: 2004). Children as young as Key Stage 1 use the term 'gay' pejoratively to regulate the behaviours of others (Browne: 2004).

Girls may be seen to be succeeding at examinations but they are still the recipients of a significant amount of sexual harassment and bullying by boys, as are marginalised and vulnerable boys who do not conform to the dominant 'macho' forms of identity. Girls often find boys' behaviours distracting and observations of classrooms demonstrate continued male domination of space and of teacher time (Francis: 2000). Teachers continue to excuse problematic gender behaviours in the classroom through drawing on a 'boys will be boys' narrative (Kenway and Willis: 1998).

The focus on the underachieving boy can also blind us to considering problematic aspects of girl experiences for example, increases in self-exclusion, poor relationships with teachers, psychological bullying, eating disorders, self-harm and abuse (Besag: 2006; Lloyd: 2005; Osler and Vincent: 2003). The achievement culture itself produces penalties, with increasing evidence that high achieving middle class girls, even at a very young age, experience worrying levels of stress and self-doubt (Lucey: 2001; Walkerdine et al: 2001).

In addition, the disciplinary and punishing effects on young bodies of certain forms of hegemonic masculinity, even for those boys and young men who appear to 'succeed' in such terms, is also

of concern. Eating disorders and body image problems affect boys as well as girls – with a link between male eating disorders, athletic prowess, body-building and the quest for physical power and perfection (Langley: 2005; Patterson: 2004).

Finally, the over-determining focus on the achievement of key outcome targets by whatever means necessary leads to a distortion of educational practices. Reputations of schools and Local Authorities in educational league tables mean that teachers tend to prioritise teaching to the test – and commit limited resources to those students on the borderline in a form of ‘educational triage’ (Gillborn and Youndell: 2000). Other students at this point lose out. While this is most especially pronounced at the end of Key Stage 4, the pattern is replicated at other critical assessment points. There is also some evidence of the increase in authoritarian management and ‘poisonous pedagogies’ in some settings as pressure and ‘zero tolerance’ of failure rises (Raphael Reed: 1998a).

## **Making sense of the issues**

Before exploring in more detail what a more inclusive and socially just perspective on gender issues in education might entail, it is worth pausing to consider the implications of some of the most influential paradigms and theories drawn upon to ‘explain’ current outcomes. This is not about abstract theories – these perspectives for ‘making sense’ of the issues, inform and influence the practices of policy makers and practitioners alike; they seep into our consciousness and underpin our behaviours. Returning to the concept of discourse, we need to recognise the ‘regimes of truth’ sustained by such discourses, and make explicit, interrogate and evaluate both taken-for-granted assumptions and critical theories. How we understand the nature of the issues informs the strategies we employ to engage with them.

## **Biological and psychological perspectives**

Ideas of essential natural differences between men and women form one end of a continuum in the ‘Nature versus Nurture’ debate. This includes an increasing fascination within the general public and mass media with ideas of fundamental differences in the male and female brain. Some claim gender difference in brain hemisphere dominance with left hemisphere functions (associated with logical, visual-spatial and rationalist thought) more developed in men and right hemisphere (associated with language, empathy and intuition) in women. Some argue that women’s perceived greater ability to multi-task arises from a more developed corpus callosum facilitating cross-hemisphere functions. Others claim biological difference on an aggression-competition (male) versus compassion-collaboration (female) spectrum based on primitive hunter-gatherer drivers or exposure to testosterone before or after birth. Such ideas resonate with common-sense beliefs rooted in observable behaviours from the early years to beyond (Biddulph: 2003; Gray: 1992; Gurain: 2001; Hannan: 1999).

There are a number of problems with these perspectives. More circumspect reading of the ‘seductive science’ literature related to essential gender differences reveals contradictory evidence and assertions based on small amounts of data (Browne: 2004). Janet Shibley Hyde (2005) undertook a detailed review of 46 meta-analyses of the literature on gender difference and found overwhelming support for a ‘gender similarities hypothesis’, ie. males and females are similar on most, though not all, psychological variables and that such variables are profoundly affected by context especially where gender expectations are evident, for example girls in one study who knew they were individually identifiable while playing a war scenario computer game dropped few bombs, but those who felt they were not identifiable dropped more bombs than the boys. She also argues over-inflated claims of gender differences carry substantial costs for both male and female in education, the workplace and relationships.

A more contextualised approach emphasises the impact of nurture and ongoing expectations for cognitive style and learning preferences – without resorting to essential difference. From birth onwards girls and boys are often handled, spoken to and interacted with differently, and are given different toys to play with and books to read. Such differentiated experiences are to some extent reinforced by schools. Paechter (1998) points out that neural connections are strengthened as a result of experience, so given the different experiences that girls and boys are having from birth, some differential impact on cognitive development is likely.

Head (1997) discusses the relationship between gender identity and cognitive style – where boys tend to develop field-independent preferences (such as learning for more abstract, technological and non-relational contexts and purposes), while girls develop field-dependent preferences (such as learning for more embedded, moral and relational contexts and purposes). He also references gender differences in attribution for success and failure, with boys tending to attribute their success to themselves and their failure to others, while girls tend to do the opposite. This is mirrored in social learning theories about 'locus of control' (Rotter: 1982).

Such ideas resonate with contemporary fascination about 'preferred learning styles' (Smith: 1998) and multiple intelligences (Gardner: 1999). In this book, while we urge awareness of strategies that draw upon a range of modes of mediating meaning and engaging learners – and classroom contexts that value attributes across a range of 'intelligences' – we also caution against using these concepts uncritically (Coffield: 2004) or as fixed and reified constructs that 'pigeonhole' learners in the ways that older ideas about IQ and ability have done before (Hart et al: 2004).

Fundamentally this relates to underlying beliefs about learning. If one adopts a predominantly developmentalist approach, associated with the ideas of Piaget, then this implies that children and young people (provided the context is stimulating enough) will unfold through 'natural' stages of development. If one adopts a more social constructivist approach, associated with the ideas of Vygotsky, then this implies a key role for social interaction and intervention to shape and transform children's learning (Wood: 1998).

In relation to gender and learning, the developmentalist approach has a long history of reinforcing gender restrictive expectations, especially in the primary and early years (Walkerdine: 1983) – in part through the tendency to characterise boys as 'bright but naughty', and girls as 'diligent and compliant'. Browne (2004) argues that ideas of 'normal' child development tend to be modelled on white middle class boys with everyone else by implication carrying some deficit. She also argues that even highly regarded approaches to early years education for example, the Reggio Emilia pre-school provision in Italy, fail to engage pro-actively enough with gender oppressive behaviours in children. By contrast, a social constructivist perspective demands that as educators we do not just observe gendered behaviours and preferences, but we engage with them through dialogue and actions to disrupt restrictive patterns and extend the development of the learner.

### **Sociological and cultural perspectives**

Social role theories propose that we develop our sense of ourselves as gendered beings through modelling ourselves on the behaviours of others and responding to positive or negative reinforcement. This led to a raft of gender based interventions flowing from the liberation movements of the late 1960s and 1970s, aimed at altering the socialisation of girls and boys through the provision of alternative stimuli (for example, anti-sexist books, toys and tools). Since the 1975 Sex Discrimination Act, the Equal Opportunities Commission for example has produced many resources aimed at changing the landscape of gender in schools. From this perspective, encouraging girls to play with construction kits and boys to play with dolls should result in the development of non-stereotypical outcomes in childhood and adult life (Arnot et al: 1999). Sex role theories also underpin the call to increase the number of male teachers in primary and early years settings, despite the fact that

there is no sound evidence that male teachers necessarily have a more positive influence or that feminisation of teaching is the 'problem' (Ashley and Lee: 2003).

While sex role theories have the advantage of challenging assumptions that gender behaviours are just innate, the limitations of the sex-role socialisation thesis have become increasingly clear. From around the age of four, children exhibit strongly separate gender identities, groups of friends and styles of play. They also invest considerable energy in gender maintenance activities (Lloyd and Duveen: 1992). In light of this, new ways of thinking about the issues need to be explored (Skelton and Francis: 2003):

Many of the practices recommended in schools' equal opportunity policies today that are intended to redress gender inequalities have their roots in sex role socialization strategies. Yet ... these approaches have done little, if anything, to change the ways in which boyhood and girlhood is perceived and judged by adults as well as acted out by children ... The question has to be asked as to why this is the case. (p 13)

Children and young adults are not just passive recipients who can be moulded by the behaviourist interventions of others. Rather, they are active and dynamic subjects, formed in the interplay between self and others in specific cultural settings, attempting to exert agency over their own lives. They demonstrate complex and multilayered decisions and choices in terms of their actions, and these change over time and in response to context. More recent approaches to understanding gender formation and practices highlight the concept of multiple and relational gender identities (Blair et al: 1995).

### **Such ideas are useful for a number of reasons**

Firstly, they allow us to recognise that there are multiple versions and ways of being male and female – of 'masculinities' and 'femininities' – and that we should not reduce the experiences of all boys and girls to homogenised and stereotypical singularities (Epstein: 1994; Mirza: 1992; Sewell: 1997). Rather than representing gender identities in terms of simple binary opposites, it is more useful to see them on a continuum. Within this, there is the recognition that there are hierarchies of power that operate in and through various forms of gender identity; for example, some expressions of masculinity (referred to as hegemonic masculinity) assume and assert greater dominance and power than others (Connell: 1995; Mac an Ghail: 1994).

Secondly, they remind us to look carefully at the processes of interaction through which gender identities are expressed and by which they are sustained. No amount of non-stereotypical role models or anti-sexist materials are going to impact on the living interactions between children and young adults as they utilise gender as a tool in defining themselves and others and in making their mark on the world (Thorne: 1993). This includes children and young adults using gender through verbal and physical interactions to regulate the behaviour of each other and to maintain and defend a sense of self-worth. Indeed as Browne (2004) argues:

Since the binary gender divide is not 'natural' children have to learn the social practices and signifying systems in circulation in society as a whole that delineate 'female' and 'male' in order to position themselves and others successfully ... Adopting a fairly rigid view of what is gender-appropriate reduces the degree of uncertainty surrounding gender categories and in doing so upholds the essentially arbitrary categories that have been constructed through the dominant discourse (p 72).

Gender is also drawn upon in interactions between children and their teachers. Walkerdine and Lucey (1989), for example, describe how two small boys use sexually explicit language when defying their nursery teacher and in doing so seize power by positioning their teacher as a 'powerless object of sexist discourse' (p60). But how gender interactions happen varies significantly according to context

including aspects of context associated with social class and ethnicities (Ball et al: 2000; Connolly: 1998; Jackson: 2006; Martino and Pallotta-Chiaroli: 2003).

Successfully doing 'boy-ness' or 'girl-ness' has profound implications for relationships and educational biographies. In many contexts, maintaining one's gender identity effectively places one at odds with the ethos and practices of successful schooling. Indeed many have noted the psychic and physical effort and costs in balancing and negotiating conflicting demands and expectations from different quarters (Frosch et al: 2002; O'Donnell and Sharpe: 2000; Reay: 2002). One implication of this is that we need to listen more carefully and understand more fully what the issues are for children and young adults, both inside and outside schools, as they try to navigate their way through the world.

Thirdly, these ideas encourage us to understand that gender identities are not fixed and immutable, but that they are more fluid and open to change. The challenge in education is to promote effective ways of engaging with gender dynamics in schools and classrooms in such a way as to promote positive change for all (Davies B: 1989; Salisbury and Jackson: 1996). Developing effective interventions is not easy. Both adults and children have much invested in maintaining the status quo. Gendered play, for example, is a means of providing emotional satisfaction and rewards and allows children to explore some of the tensions and contradictions within their gender positions. As Browne (2004) argues:

Participating in children's role play in order to provide them with opportunities to explore 'alternative ways of being' requires a light and sensitive touch on behalf of the adult. Children will reject moves that require them to relinquish emotionally satisfying positionings. Many boys are also likely to react negatively to suggestions that involve surrendering their power, especially in there is no emotionally satisfying alternative position or version of 'masculinity' (p124).

In light of the challenges, and within the context that encourages a more narrow focus on educational tests, it is not surprising that many educators have begun to retreat from tackling these issues. What we need at this point, are practical examples of how to engage productively with the complexities of gender cultures in our schools and classrooms, and how to assist children in understanding and deconstructing the power of gender over their lives (Davies: 2003; Francis et al: 2002; McNaughton: 2000; Salisbury and Jackson: 1996). Such engagement, we would argue, requires educational practices that are ethical and critical – informed by the principles of inclusion and social justice.

## **Gender and social justice: an inclusive approach**

Rather than a narrow focus on the underachievement of boys in tests and examinations, in this book we are arguing for a broader and more relational approach to the exploration of gender identities and gender issues in schools and classrooms. In order to avoid some of the regressive and counter-productive strategies associated with discourses about the 'underachieving boy', an exploration of some key principles and perspectives on social justice would be helpful.

### **What do we mean by 'social justice'?**

As with the term 'gender', the concept of 'social justice' means different things to different people – and it refers to an inevitably complex tension between respect for difference and commitment to equality (Griffiths: 2003).

Distributive theories of social justice, associated with the ideas of John Rawls, stress the basic criteria of protection and promotion of maximal liberty for individuals, without infringing the liberty of others, and a commitment to fairness of distribution of social goods, adopting compensatory affirmative action measures to 'remove barriers arising from unequal power relations and preventing

equity, access and participation' (Rawls: 1971: p60). Such a perspective focuses attention primarily on 'who gets what' within a liberal individualist framework. Much of the current concern about the 'underachieving boy' revolves around a narrow definition of 'equity' in terms of the distribution of the 'social' goods of academic credentials – rather than a broader concern with the social dimensions of gender relations.

A more empowering set of ideas is found in the work of Iris Marion Young (1990) who argues for a more relational definition of social justice, i.e. not only 'who gets what' but also 'how people treat each other in the process'. She proposes a framework that looks at 'actions, decisions about actions, and provision of the means to develop and exercise capabilities' (Young: 1990: 16) within which, 'Oppression and domination ... should be the primary terms for conceptualising injustice' (pp8-9). Young defines five faces of oppression where 'the presence of any of these five conditions is sufficient for calling a group oppressed' (p64).

These five faces or dimensions are (pp 183-193):

- exploitation
- marginalization
- powerlessness
- cultural imperialism
- violence.

Using such dimensions to analyse and inform our practices, we can evaluate how far we are reproducing oppressive gender relations, and how far we are engendering social justice (Raphael Reed: 1998). Where learners are seen as a cypher for school success, one might call this exploitation, as we might also with the expectation that girls will help boys to be organized and on-task in the classroom. The invisibility and stigmatization of certain groups and individuals constitutes marginalization, as does the peripheralising of the emotional aspects of education in the pursuit of rationality. The lack of control that learners have over the curriculum, as well as the de-professionalisation of teachers in a culture of audit and accountability reinforces powerlessness. The use of white, male, middle-class values as established norms reflects cultural imperialism. Stress-inducing aspects of over-assessment, Assertive Discipline policies, child/adult bullying, racism, sexism and homophobia all reproduce conditions of violence.

Such ways of conceptualizing oppressive practices also allows us to recognize that individuals and groups may be both oppressed and oppressive to various degrees and at different times. This moves us away from labeling people as unacceptable, but rather encourages us to focus on people's behaviours and the impact of these behaviours on others.

Developing gender-fair strategies to counter the five faces of oppression requires the development of an inclusive participatory framework embracing staff, parents or carers and young people alike (Connell: 1993).



Such a framework entails:

<b>Gender-fair Strategies for Engendering Social Justice</b>	
Strategies to counter	Exemplars
Exploitation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• resisting attempts to distribute scarce resources by targeting them at learners who will bring greatest benefit to school reputation to the detriment of others</li> <li>• drawing attention to who is benefiting from the unpaid labour of others</li> <li>• encouraging responsibility for the consequences of one's own actions rather than attributing responsibility to others</li> <li>• challenging gendered employment practices where men may be over-represented in positions of power and privilege but women end up doing institutional housework..</li> </ul>
Marginalisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ensuring that the interests of all groups and individuals are equally respected including those that are frequently invisible or stigmatised, for example gay and lesbian students and staff, or those with disabilities</li> <li>• valuing parents/carers as true partners in the process of education and engaging in respectful dialogues and activities between home and school</li> <li>• addressing the emotional dimensions of schooling as central rather than privileging solely the development of rationality, and developing learner self-esteem..</li> </ul>
Powerlessness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• commitment by teachers and other adults to collaborative professional enquiry with a willingness to question taken-for-granted assumptions and an appreciation of the value of teachers' professional wisdom</li> <li>• listening to the voice of the learner; promoting consultation and self-evaluation and developing young people as researchers</li> <li>• empowering children to take control of their learning through effective learning strategies, negotiated curricula and aspects of personalised learning; making explicit and challenging gender dynamics that dis-empower and oppress others..</li> </ul>

Strategies to counter	Exemplars
Cultural Imperialism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• promoting a culture of participatory and critical democracy with gender-fair active citizenship and international awareness</li> <li>• challenging racism, sexism and homophobia in all its forms and developing mutually respectful relationships that value difference</li> <li>• demonstrating a commitment to inclusion – changing the over-determining power of 'normative' beliefs and practices, and fully differentiating approaches to learning..</li> </ul>
Violence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• resisting over-assessment and labelling of learners in terms of fixed abilities and learning styles</li> <li>• addressing issues of bullying in all of its forms through processes of restorative justice, conflict resolution and mediation</li> <li>• identifying and countering authoritarian management and pedagogic practices..</li> </ul>

An approach based on the above framework is fully compatible with expectations enshrined in the Children Act 2004 (the legal underpinning for Every Child Matters: Change for Children - the programme aimed at transforming children's services) and the Youth Matters Green Paper published by the DfES in 2005. It also supports the development of an ethos that would enable schools to take part in the new UNICEF 'Rights Respecting Programme' and to gain the UNICEF Rights Respecting School Award – a nationwide scheme launched in 2006 and complementary to the Healthy Schools Award and Eco Schools recognition. ([http://www.unicef.org.uk/tz/teacher\\_support/rrs\\_award.asp](http://www.unicef.org.uk/tz/teacher_support/rrs_award.asp)). Fundamental to the approach advocated in this book is the call to treat children as subjects and not objects, and to fully respect them and their human rights.

## How to use this book

In the chapters that follow you will find practical ideas and resources to aid you as a learning community to explore these issues. The chapters are organised around the following five topics:

1. Relationship to Self: Identity Issues
2. Relationships with Others: Social Interactions
3. Learning and Teaching
4. Communication, Language and Literacies
5. Families, Communities and the Wider World.

Each chapter follows the same structure, with: a brief introduction, a set of ten age-appropriate activities (5-8 and 9-13) with reproducible stimulus material, guidance on further references and resources, and some suggestions for follow-up reflections and next steps. There is no expectation that you will use all of the material, or in any set order. Please feel free to take and adapt the ideas to

suit your own circumstances. We would be very interested in receiving any feedback about how these ideas have been developed in practice to guide the ongoing development of this work in the future.

You will notice a number of recurrent themes throughout the book. The first is the importance of encouraging an inquiry-based approach to investigating the issues. This reflects our commitment to the continuing professional development of staff as critical 'reflective practitioners' (Ghaye and Ghaye: 2004) alongside engaging learners as co-enquirers in developing the learning environment and supporting self-evaluating schools (Macbeath et al: 2003a). At the heart of this process is the need to listen to children's voices – and to build learner agency and participation (Arnot et al: 2004; Kellet: 2005; Macbeath et al: 2003b; Rudduck and Flutter: 2004), moving beyond tokenistic attempts at pupil consultation (Fielding: 2004). This requires truly transformative dialogues – and the establishment of a context within which everyone feels safe to take some risks.

This latter point explains the second recurrent theme in the text: the centrality of developing emotional literacy and a sense of self-worth (Matthews: 2005). In our view, one of the most difficult aspects of developing mutual respect and gender-fair classrooms and schools are the defensive and resistant strategies used to avoid discussion of feelings or expressions of empathy. Such strategies themselves have a strong gender component, and affect adults and children alike. This has to change if we are to engender social justice in and through education.

Finally, a number of the suggested activities are not explicitly or singularly about gender per se – nor are they targeted differentially at boys and girls. This reflects our belief that gender issues are frequently embedded in wider cultural issues, including those associated with social class, disability and ethnicity, and that there are no immutable essential differences between girls and boys. Indeed, there are many common challenges shared by individual male and female learners as they struggle to develop their sense of a positive identity and their capability to participate ethically and democratically as active, global citizens in the complex and conflict-ridden world of today.

We hope that this book on engendering social justice goes some way towards supporting children in our schools in achieving these ends, and in creating healthy, inclusive and gender-fair learning environments for all.