

DRAFT: WORK IN PROGRESS – NOT TO BE QUOTED

Gender and Achievement in Special Schools

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Introduction

This paper is based on the work of the four special schools involved in the Raising Boys' Achievement (RBA) project. Teachers in special schools commonly attend closely to pupils as individuals, drawing on detailed observations of each pupil's pattern of difficulties in learning and behaviour, often linked to sensory, physical, medical and social factors. It can be difficult or apparently irrelevant for special school teachers to focus directly on broad trends like gender differences when the pupil population in most special schools is so diverse. However, previous research has indicated that gender is a key factor in relation to assessment, curriculum choice and resourcing for pupils with special educational needs (SEN) in mainstream and special school settings, and there have been longstanding concerns about the numerical over-representation of boys in different areas of special education.

One of the aims in working with teachers in special schools was to establish with them the extent to which gender is an issue to be addressed in relation to teaching and learning in their own contexts, and consider relevant interventions in the light of wider concerns about boys' and girls' educational achievements. The schools identified target groups of boys (and girls) and focused variously on such factors as self-esteem, motivation, writing progress, reflective talk, learning styles, independent learning, staff and pupil expectations, and whole-school development.

We would say at the outset that the research was challenging for the schools involved. It required all those involved to:

- define relevant concepts (such as the meaning of 'achievement', 'success' and 'progress' in the special school context)
- decide on a meaningful research focus and research question
- implement initiatives within the school context over a period of time, usually in specific phases of action and review
- identify relevant strategies for raising achievement, often to be used in combination
- select and use appropriate techniques for data collection
- engage in data analysis and critical reflection on the findings, with collaboration between school staff and the University of Cambridge Faculty of Education research team

In this paper, the general findings about strategies, processes of change and relevant contextual factors are discussed in terms both of their general application to all schools and the distinctive 'special school' aspects which may apply.

Gender, special educational needs and special schools

Why ask about raising boys' (or girls') achievement in special schools? In special schools the pupils represent a particular and very mixed population who for one reason or another are seen to need special educational provision that is different from the mainstream education provided for most children and young people. Gender may help to explain in general terms why some pupils enter special schools (e.g. boys' classroom behaviour is often more socially disruptive than girls', resulting in earlier referral to support services). However gender in itself does not explain why individual pupils enter special education. Some of the boys who achieve less well in mainstream schools will enter special education, but not all of them. So the special school element of the Raising Boys' Achievement project offers some specific challenges and potential insights for special and mainstream schools.

One of the first areas for consideration is the existence of a continuum of 'boys' achievement' issues in education ranging from concerns about the boys who achieve well but perhaps could do even better, to those who fall seriously behind their peers. With regard to very low achievement, we might ask why some boys but not others find themselves assessed for special educational needs and special school placement, and how various support structures affect this process. We would also want to know what is in store for pupils once a decision is made to transfer to special school. Boys are also boys in special schools, often with full social lives outside school hours. So how do 'mainstream' influences and practices apply to them? Alternatively, are there any special school teaching strategies which match and perhaps extend the approaches for raising achievement being developed in mainstream schools?

What are the 'gender issues' in special education?

One of the main gender issues in relation to special educational needs is to do with whether special educational provision is equitable for boys and girls. In many special schools there are relatively high numbers of boys, even 100% in some classes and schools for pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties. It should be noted, however, that gender balances in number and achievement change from year to year in special schools, partly in response to changing local circumstances and LEA criteria for assessment. It is difficult to gather reliable and valid evidence of overall gender differences in provision, and it should be noted that any use of quantitative data in this field raises significant technical issues about categorisation, measurement, completeness and accuracy (Florian et al, 2004). However, research has suggested that gender variations do exist between schools in the ways that SEN budgets are allocated and in the implementation of SEN procedures and support (Daniels et al, 2000). Croll and Moses (2000) note that the overall gender ratio (more boys than girls) for pupils in Key Stage 2 (7-11 years old) identified with SEN did not change substantially between 1981 and 1998 in spite of growing concerns about 'male underachievement' in the 1990s. However they did find an increasing proportion of boys regarded as having emotional and behavioural difficulties in that time.

In general boys are much more likely to be regarded by teachers as having SEN, but this does not seem to be a simple matter of gender stereotyping and categorisation. There are strong, complex connections between pupils' classroom behaviour, learning and achievement, and Cline and Ertubey (1997) found that giving teachers more contextual information helps to reduce the impact of gender on teachers' judgements about individual children. The boundaries between different areas of SEN are not clearcut. For example, different rates of SEN referral for learning difficulties can arise via observed differences in classroom behaviour which are exacerbated by peer pressure, cultural clashes and psychological processes of motivation and 'self-worth protection' (Jackson, 2002). A consequence of the acknowledged difficulties with 'boys' behaviour' in schools can be that while girls may be numerically under-represented in special schools, those that are identified as having learning or behaviour difficulties are likely to have more severe problems than the boys in the same setting. They may even have their special needs as young women ignored altogether (Malcolm and Haddock, 1992). From the boys' point of view, the problem can be one of undue assumptions about learning difficulties on the basis of difficult classroom behaviour. For example, Daniels et al (2000) found that boys are given proportionally more and higher status SEN support in mainstream settings, but they may not receive support clearly matched to their needs (e.g. being given additional reading instruction as a response to inappropriate behaviour).

Skårbrevik (2002) suggests the need to take into account the phase of education in examining gender differences and SEN, proposing that genetic or biological differences come to the fore in the pre-school years while later identifications depend more on social factors and pedagogical mismatches. There is a widespread view that boys are generally more vulnerable to adverse biological experiences, including genetic syndromes like Fragile X (Freides, 2001), and many more boys than girls fall into categories or syndromes associated with SEN such as autistic spectrum disorders. Gender has been put forward as a key factor in children's resilience over

time, although evidence now suggests the existence of gender *differences* in responses to childhood adversity rather than, as previously thought, a protective or compensatory effect of being female rather than male (Fergusson and Horwood, 2003).

The key point in all of this is that 'special educational needs' are inevitably complex and multifaceted in nature, varying also as a function of ethnicity, cultural practices, social class and the contexts of teaching and learning. Yet these are also 'real' issues for the pupils involved, with a lifelong dimension. In special schools there can be significant problems for male and female pupils in developing gender identity, experiencing relationships and benefiting from sex education – particularly for pupils with the most severe learning, physical and emotional difficulties. There are also implications for post-school experiences, lifelong learning and employment (Riddell et al, 2001).

In addition to the conceptual difficulties in carrying out research in this area, there are some significant methodological and ethical issues to be taken into account. These relate, for example, to the small numbers, the diversity of research participants, the problems in communicating with pupils with certain types of SEN, the difficulties which can arise in gaining informed consent, and questions about hidden agendas and wish fulfilment. The school-based research presented in this chapter intended to tackle some of these problems by working with teachers to establish close links with their professional practice, and by embedding the research in their current professional concerns and aims.

The key gender issues for special schools: an early view from the schools involved in this project as they move towards research questions

At the start of the RBA project representatives of the six special schools involved at that stage came together to discuss questions about gender in special education and consider what their own research questions might be. Three of the schools were for pupils with severe, profound and multiple learning difficulties and three for pupils with moderate learning and behaviour difficulties, although all six schools included a mix of pupils with various types of SEN. Their list of ideas about some key areas for research and development is reproduced (with minor editing) in Figure 1.

Figure 1 Gender in special schools: A list of areas for research and development produced by special school representatives at the start of the RBA project

- refining and extending ways of measuring progress, both quantitatively (e.g. P Scales) and qualitatively (e.g. techniques for interviewing children with communication difficulties)
- specific gender-related issues (e.g. gender identity; physical care; particular conditions; sexuality and personal relationships). Note also additional cultural issues in these areas
- issues arising from the over-representation of boys in special schools (e.g. one girl in a class of boys)
- issues common to special and mainstream schools, but exacerbated for the boys in proportionally high numbers transferring from mainstream (e.g. sense of failure; low self-esteem; writing; work experience)

As it turned out, all the schools later involved in the research were concerned in some way with the first point about gathering data on pupils' progress. The final point was also central to the research in the three schools presented in this paper – focusing variously on boys' writing, self-esteem, expectations and engagement in learning in Years 9-11. The pupils involved included some who had transferred from mainstream schools and some concurrently involved in inclusion programmes with neighbouring secondary schools. The fourth school (not presented in this paper) also focused on issues common to special and mainstream schools in looking at the

learning needs of primary pupils identified on the autistic spectrum. In this case the teaching approach adopted connects with 'mainstream' differentiated responses to pupils' learning styles and preferences. The specific pupil group involved in this research had rather severe and complex needs, but pupils with similar types of difficulty can be found throughout the mainstream and special system. More specific gender-related issues such as gender identity, physical care and particular conditions did not emerge strongly in the schools' research. However social integration and personal relationships were seen as key factors in all the attempts to raise pupils' achievement.

At the same time as the special school staff were considering areas for their own research, discussion showed that there was a consensus among them about the reasons why the gender differences seen in mainstream schools are less obvious and clearcut in special schools (see Figure 2).

Figure 2 Why are the gender differences seen in mainstream less clearcut in special schools? A list of possible reasons produced by special school representatives at the start of the RBA project

- extensive use of multisensory and practical teaching approaches
- flexible timetable, curriculum and grouping
- emphasis on small steps of progress and positive reinforcement
- small size of school, small classes and strong focus on individuals – with holistic emphasis on personal and social development
- overview of whole-school life and pupils' development over time (e.g. 2-19 years) – a long-term view
- collective approach and flexible use of staff expertise
- liaison with parents, and 24 hour care in some schools
- many visitors and multi-agency work – providing a variety of adult role models
- difficult behaviour considered in relation to pupil's condition (ie. identified SEN)

The list in Figure 2 is helpful in explaining the challenge for the special school staff taking part in the RBA project. In discussing these various 'preventative' factors found in special schools there was no desire to pre-empt the findings of the RBA project as a whole, but with all of this already in place then why would research on raising boys' achievement be relevant to them? From the special schools' perspective, involvement in the RBA project required willingness to ask whether enough of the right sort of work is being done to raise boys' (and girls') achievement in a setting where it could be argued that the whole focus is on supporting pupils whose achievement is low compared to their peers. Asking about boys' achievement could therefore be seen as a rather radical question about gender bias in special schools, which are commonly perceived as environments where boys and girls are somewhat detached and protected from the ordinary social pressures (although special school staff may know differently). For the RBA project, with its focus on sharing strategies between schools and working together, the list in Figure 2 provides insight into what the special schools perceived to be 'special' about what they do and what may be usefully shared with mainstream colleagues. An example of the latter is the first point about extensive use of multisensory and practical teaching approaches in special schools, acknowledged as one of the fruitful pedagogical approaches for raising boys' achievement in mainstream education.

Investigating gender in special schools – dealing with multiple perspectives

The schools' research experiences and findings give an indication of the multiple perspectives involved in each research project. It is interesting to see how much diversity emerged in the schools' interpretations of the research focus and their approaches to the RBA project – highly influenced by the specific features, interests and needs of each school context. Different staff perspectives can be seen in each case – a class teacher and English co-ordinator in Case 1; a deputy headteacher in Case 2; a headteacher in Case 3; and a deputy headteacher and KS4 co-ordinator in Case 4.

Case 1 – Arden school, in rural East Anglia: focusing on teaching and learning English in Years 10 and 11

The first discussions with staff at Arden school helped to identify an area of interest in pupils' writing, particularly in pupils' understanding of writing and what they perceived as 'good writing'. Interviews were carried out with pupils in Years 5, 8 and 10 which suggested that many pupils tended to focus on the technical aspects of writing as the basis for evaluation - e.g. emphasising neatness rather than content. However, the interviews also showed that pupils recognised that they were involved in writing across the curriculum and outside school, which was promising for developing their motivation and learning in all aspects of writing in the future. The research was taken forward with the aim of investigating: *What teaching approaches will support improvement in boys' writing?* There were two classes involved over two years. The pupils involved were described as having a range of emotional, health and learning difficulties and at the beginning of the first year of the project none of them was achieving higher than Level 2 to 3 in English. Most of the pupils took a cautious approach to writing, unadventurous with vocabulary or spelling in case they made mistakes. The class teacher, Jo, takes an integrated approach to teaching English, including careful scaffolding of tasks over a period of several weeks leading to a specific genre outcome. She caters for diversity in the pupils' learning preferences by using visual and aural approaches, making learning objectives explicit and aiming to help pupils develop self-evaluation strategies. In the first year it was found that all of the pupils had made significant moves in their approach to writing, their independence, pride and assurance as writers, their abilities to talk about knowledge of the writing process, and their attainment levels. This continued as they went into Year 11. In the second year, however, the new year 10 group did not replicate last year's experience or progress. The discernible progress in the writing was only in terms of handwriting and control of sentences and paragraphs. The boys in the second cohort did not move very far towards greater independence as learners or writers, although importantly, the girls made very significant gains both in assurance and independence and in writing levels.

Case 2: Arden school, in rural East Anglia: focusing on whole school development

Arden school was one of the first to be invited to be involved in the RBA project because of the progress they had already been making in using the P Scales in assessment and target setting under the guidance of Delia (who was promoted to deputy headteacher within the project timescale and acted as RBA research co-ordinator at Arden). After attending one of the early RBA conferences with primary school colleagues, Delia noted that some of areas talked about such as self-esteem, PSHE, use of role play, etc. were already happening at Arden, so she could see the benefits of sharing expertise with mainstream school colleagues. This case example highlights the questions arising for special schools about *how to understand and respond to the topic of gender differences in attainment in the special school context*. The integration of the RBA research focus with other initiatives in school was prompted and facilitated in part by Delia's increasing whole-school responsibilities for professional development, curriculum and assessment.

Several different strands of activity merged for Delia as the RBA project continued:

- her involvement in implementing the school improvement plan, performance management and school self-evaluation
- her participation in NPQH training courses
- her role in planning professional development for staff

- her involvement in refining the uses of the P Scales in school and developing software for data management
- her responsibility for writing the Learning and Teaching Policy

The implementation of the Learning and Teaching Policy came to include discussion between staff about aspects of 'good teaching', the broad nature of 'achievement' and the notion of 'pupil voice', as well as Delia's ongoing attention to the factors of gender and patterns of SEN in evaluating pupils' achievement and progress. The development of an 'Arden type of lesson' draws attention to certain features of learning and teaching, including: attention to learning styles; clear objectives; giving time to think; reinforcing new learning; providing activities to promote learning; and a plenary to review and look towards the next lesson. However the lesson plan is facilitating rather than directive, and Delia believed that its successful use depends on teachers' understanding of the underlying principles. Delia remarked at the end that involvement in the RBA project had supported a wider and deeper view of gender in teaching and learning. She felt that the school was more able to take account of gender factors, but she would still ask 'do we?'. She would also ask more about ethnicity and other factors cross-cutting with gender with a view to demonstrating non-discrimination in school.

Case 3: Greenway school, in the West Midlands conurbation - focusing on boys' self-esteem and engagement in learning

Greenway School was involved in the RBA project under the guidance of Mark, the headteacher. The starting point at Greenway was the headteacher's observation that in the last few years the school had received a large influx into Year 7 of pupils (mainly boys) who might be described as 'not typically MLD', but who are streetwise, disaffected and somewhat resentful of their placement at Greenway when their primary friends had gone to local secondary schools. The focus of research was on the progress of a small group of boys in Year 9 initially. These pupils showed notably good sporting prowess, but other academic attainment levels were not significantly different from other pupils in school. Observations of the pupils' general behaviour and attitude to school, together with the assessment of the educational psychologist, supported Mark's view that low self-esteem and disaffection were significant factors for these pupils. The broad research question asked *whether the current ethos of the school and the learning/teaching environment offered enough to effect a change in these pupils' attitudes and self-esteem to significantly change academic and social achievement as time went on.*

The research involved identifying strategies, continuing support and evaluating progress rather than introducing a specific intervention for the research group of boys. Support strategies were identified at different levels – some directly with individual pupils (e.g. counselling), some embedded in the school practice (e.g. Good Work assemblies) and some at the wider family and social context (e.g. parent liaison; appointment of School Welfare Officer). The aims were variously directed at behaviour management (e.g. rewards for appropriate behaviour), social relationships and role modelling (e.g. working with headteacher; buddy system), metacognitive understanding of learning aims and expectations (e.g. target setting and visible evidence of progress; clear expression of expectations to pupils), emotional support (e.g. counselling; calm, positive discussion of feelings), self-concept and motivation (e.g. sports activities).

As time went on the pupils' experiences of inclusion in local secondary schools for certain examination courses demonstrated both social and academic progress, however there was evidence of ongoing behavioural and attitudinal difficulties within the research group – partly exacerbated by the difficulties of transfer from Year 9 to Year 10 (curriculum, class size, teaching style, etc). From previous experience Mark expected the pupils' confidence, behaviour and attitudes to recover as they saw evidence of their examination achievement in Year 11 – a key goal for pupils and teachers in Key Stage 4.

Case 4: Bailey school, in an expanded new town community – focusing on expectations and inclusion

Bailey school focused on a group of pupils with similar needs to those identified in Arden and Greenway above. The deputy headteacher, Tom, found in a whole-school review of core subject

attainment using P Scale data, that certain boys in the upper school (Y9/10) emerged with a distinctive (comparatively high) profile. Tom wondered whether some pupils in school come to expect too little of themselves in academic terms in a context where they are provided with the necessary emotional and social support to avoid exclusion. At the time a small number of individual pupils were successfully joining the local secondary school for specific subjects (e.g. art) in an informally developed inclusion programme. The identification of this group of Year 9/10 pupils raised the possibility of developing a more active inclusion programme for a larger number of pupils – potentially 10% in school (approximately 10 pupils in the year group). The key goal was to evaluate *the effects of inclusion on raising pupils' expectations and achievement*.

It was clear from the start that there would be a number of implications and requirements for developing the inclusion programme in the upper school. These were seen to include not only the financial implications of implementing a more formal and extensive connection with local secondary schools, but also the motivation and justification for doing so. Inclusion might be justified on several grounds, but there may also be sticking points – including parents' views and preferences. It was seen as vital here to understand the pupils' own perceptions and opinions as well as other people's. To this end, Julie the Key Stage 4 co-ordinator took responsibility for introducing a more systematic discussion with pupils at regular interviews, using an 'attitude to school' questionnaire format. Tom and Julie tackled the inclusion programme developments at different levels, including work with pupils, parents, local school contacts, resources and practical issues, and funding. As time went on they saw improvements in attainment (e.g. 4 boys taking GCSE courses), pupils' self-esteem, staff-pupil relationships, home-school relationships, attitudes of other pupils, and raised staff expectations. There was growth in the local inclusion network of mainstream and special schools, and increased LEA funding. However, there were also costs to weigh up in considering the ongoing time investment, financial difficulties and practical demands of managing inclusion, with one of main issues for future consideration being adequate staffing levels for teachers and LSAs to facilitate what is seen to be a good way forward in school.

Some general conclusions from these case studies

We can see from the above case examples that the special schools had been concerned with various aspects of 'raising achievement', including questions about boys' and girls':

- self-esteem as learners and their aspirations and expectations for future
- engagement in learning, and independence in the classroom
- confidence and assurance as writers, and their understanding of the writing process
- levels of literacy and other areas of achievement
- behaviour towards others and self
- relationships with other pupils

The schools' research also highlighted the broader implications for:

- home-school relationships
- pupil group ethos and expectations
- classroom arrangements and resourcing
- relationships with colleagues in neighbouring schools
- links with other school initiatives, including curriculum development
- transitions (primary/secondary; Key Stage 3/4)

Some key questions emerge from the schools' concerns and research findings:

1) Does the learning-teaching environment and the ethos of special schools offer enough to develop positive attitudes, enhance pupil self-esteem and effect change in academic and social achievements, especially for boys (and girls) who are likely to have 'failed' in mainstream schools?

At Greenway, the perceived danger had been that pupils' experiences of failure in Year 6 and transfer to special school, compounded by difficulties in home life and early developmental experience, would produce low self-esteem and subsequent disaffection from school. The headteacher, Mark, believed that in these circumstances a pupil would not perceive himself as a

'whole, rounded person who had achieved to the best of his abilities.' Mark believes that 'for the type of pupil we cater for', then the Greenway ethos is enough – given the acceptance that time is still necessary for the ethos to strengthen and spread amongst all the school staff and for other incremental changes to take place. Mark also sees factors like the staffing and the curriculum balance (including the off-site college links for vocational courses) as raising longer-term issues for consideration. A key point here is that the focus is on particular pupils in a specific school context, not general policies for pupils with SEN in general. It is evident from Mark's work, not only that the evaluation of 'enough' has to be contextualised in the realities of school life, but that it is possible to judge success in measured way – acknowledging what is done well and what to do next.

2) How is the social and emotional support offered by special schools best accompanied by appropriately high expectations for academic and social behaviour, especially for vulnerable boys and girls who may find necessary protection in the special school setting?

This is the question that was at the heart of Bailey's inclusion programme, and the issue of balancing social and emotional support with high academic expectations was evident in all the schools. The multi-level approach to planning was important in helping the staff at Bailey to take account of multiple perspectives and concerns - including the those of the pupils, parents and staff – while keeping in mind the main aims of developing inclusion to help in decision making and setting priorities. It was clearly necessary to take a long-term, multi-level view in order to implement and maintain change in school, while also being sensitive to the interests and feelings of those involved (particularly parents in this case).

In the end the question points to how we understand 'achievement' in broad terms, and how that relates to the balance of support and expectation. The issue becomes crucial for pupils in Key Stage 4 looking towards life after school. Mark at Greenway held a wide view of 'achievement'. In talking about his pupils' progress he made a point of noting their involvement in football training, in organising tournaments in 5-a-side football and pool, and in unprompted 'acts of kindness', such as showing empathy to and comforting a bereaved pupil. The implication of Mark's practical use of a package of support strategies is that social, emotional and academic development are closely connected – an argument strongly supported in current psychological thinking. Although contextual factors (such as the KS3/4 transition at Greenway) means that progress in all areas is not necessarily smoothly co-ordinated.

The multi-level perspective and broad view of 'achievement' are clearly important in balancing social, emotional and academic support and expectation. However establishing the security and achievement of pupils must be weighed up against their day-to-day experiences of scrutiny and surveillance in the special school setting. Special schools are often small scale enterprises compared to other schools, with many staff around all the time. The close monitoring that helps many pupils to learn in mainstream schools (because it allows pupils to save face with their peers about making an effort to work), is likely to be experienced differently by pupils for whom close monitoring in a previous school experience resulted in detailed SEN assessment and ultimately special school placement. The perceived value of monitoring achievement very broadly needs to be examined in the light of pupils' actual experiences and their views of what it means for them.

3) How can initiatives be maintained and developed over time, given the cohort changes from class to class and year to year in special schools? What are the implications for teaching and learning policies, curriculum development and teachers' professional knowledge?

In the writing project at Arden school, the two groups differed not only in levels of achievement but also in their capacity to use a metalanguage to talk about the content and intentions of their writing. Where the boys in the first group noticeably grew in confidence and a sense of self-efficacy, most of the boys in the second group failed to thrive in these respects. The girls' improvements, however, indicate that it is likely that there were no great differences in the teaching approaches used, but that the nature of the learners and their needs is a key factor in

success. This is a strong indicator of the specialness of special education. Whilst some of the successful approaches used in mainstream education can be equally effective in both types of school, the special nature of the learners themselves means that initiatives to improve boys' writing need to take account of individual learning needs. This conclusion presents challenges for curriculum development and teaching. For example, the familiar mainstream strategy of focusing on the meaning of writing as the motivation for teaching and learning may have to be put aside where pupils' technical difficulties are overwhelming and 'success' has to be evaluated individually (at least in the short term). However the broad curricular aims for *all* pupils are not then abandoned – not least because some pupils in special schools could equally be in mainstream, and vice versa.

The findings at Arden provide evidence of the complex ways in which initiatives may become embedded in school practice so that teachers can consider their pupils' progress within a broader context. The question of teachers' professional knowledge and expertise was high in Delia's mind in all her school development activities. She remarked at the end of the RBA project that part of her role was to help staff become aware of all the different projects happening in school, using staff meetings or professional development time for teachers to speak about their work. This can be seen as supportive of sustaining change in school by providing the 'drip, drip, drip...' of information and encouragement to the staff team, without necessarily knowing in advance how a project will develop. The idea is to share good practice within school, and Delia saw her own involvement in the RBA research, including her interviews and conference attendance, as a key contribution to her overall role in whole school development.

4) How can useful, reliable and valid evidence be gathered, given the small samples and wide individual variability between pupils? What is the best evidence, from a variety of sources, to be gathered about the broadening academic and social achievement of individual and groups of pupils with special educational needs?

The issue of measuring attainment in special schools loomed large in people's minds from the start of the RBA project – ie. how it is possible to measure, compare and evaluate the progress made by individuals and groups of pupils with SEN who are not necessarily following the standard route of assessment in national tests and public examinations. The quantitative use of curriculum-related measures of attainment like the P Scales was central to early discussions with the special schools. As time went on, though, all the schools became more concerned with gaining a wider picture of pupils' achievement and progress in school

Many different techniques were used to collect research data (see Figure 3), supporting this broad view of 'achievement'.

Figure 3 Techniques used for collecting data by the special schools in the RBA project

- Attitudinal questionnaire
- Individual and group interviews
- Analysis of pupils' writing
- Staff discussion
- Diary notes
- Meeting notes
- Classroom observation (including some video recording)
- Teacher reports and assessments
- Collection and analysis of P Scale data and other records of target setting and monitoring of pupils
- Attendance monitoring
- Records of behaviour incidents
- Records and other evidence of exceptional work and engagement in academic and social activities
- Parental views and observations

This range of data gathering approaches gives an indication that to look at 'achievement' is to look carefully at several different perspectives of the pupil in several different contexts. This supports the view that achievement and progress are the results of collaboration between pupils, teachers and other people in contact, not just reflections of pupils' personal effort and ability. Indeed, Mark, headteacher at Greenway, reflected at the end of the study that the research reinforced his beliefs about the importance of establishing a relationship with children in order to affect anything in their lives and learning – suggesting that efforts to raise achievement centrally involve this relationship and not just the pupil's own efforts and capabilities.

Final thoughts

At the start of this paper we raised certain questions about boys' achievement and progress in special schools. We wanted to know what is in store for pupils in special schools and how 'mainstream' influences and practices may apply to them. We also wondered whether there are any special school teaching strategies which match and perhaps extend the approaches for raising achievement being developed in mainstream schools. We acknowledged questions of value and equity in special and mainstream education which affect decisions about attempting to raise pupils' achievement. However, a simple 'gender' distinction fails to tell the whole story, especially when combined with the slippery definitions of SEN. As Daniels et al (2000: 64) remark:

....categories are analytical tools with which we understand the social processes we seek to monitor and ultimately change....We know that boys and girls are not treated in the same way. We do not know whether this is fair. It may well be that we should seek to establish new forms of difference rather than impose sameness.

Our research findings suggest that a gender impact on the achievement profile in special schools is almost inevitable given the social and biological factors involved, but it is complex, interactive and not easily discernible. It changes from year to year and it occurs for a number of different reasons. Without attempting to generalise too widely, it seems clear from our case examples in Key Stages 3 and 4 that while boys with learning and behavioural difficulties in special schools are in some danger of losing confidence and momentum in their learning, there are useful steps that can be taken over a period of time. Some of these steps match those found to be helpful in mainstream schools, but the variability of individual needs and intrinsic nature of certain areas or types of SEN adds a significant layer to the special school teachers' knowledge and decision-making. It is not clear, however, that this results in a separate set of 'special school' issues or practices. There are certain ways of understanding gender factors which apply to all pupils any educational setting, and deciding to examine these can have unexpected, challenging and rewarding results for all involved.

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