

# **‘She doesn’t shout at no girls’: pupils’ perceptions of gender equity in the classroom**

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Based on a larger, cross phase study investigating underachieving boys, this article explores pupil’s responses to a single interview question inviting pupils to articulate their perceptions of whether teachers treat boys and girls the same. The article records that the predominant perception is that teachers treat boys more negatively than girls, and that this perception increases with age. Pupils speak of teachers’ expectations of boys and girls as being different, more being expected of girls both in terms of achievement and behaviour. Unsolicited, the pupils make reference to the gender of the teacher as pertinent, female teachers being perceived as less influenced by gender expectations. The article raises concerns as to the role of education in amplifying society’s stereotypes rather than challenging them and aiming for a climate of gender equity in the classroom.

## **Introduction**

Well before the current focus on boys and underachievement, Michael Marland (1983) presented evidence to suggest that teachers treated boys and girls differently and that in doing so schools amplified society’s stereotypes. The identification of gender discrimination in the classroom has been a cause traditionally taken up by feminist commentators. The feminist position, however, has moved on from seeking to provide evidence of female disadvantage and gender discrimination to articulating a value system and practice that promotes sexual equality while acknowledging the differences within gender groups. From this changing perspective feminists have argued that while biology creates sex differences, femininity is culturally constructed (Weiner, 1994) and more recently masculinity is similarly described as socially and discursively constructed (Mac an Ghail, 1994) This is not to say that people are passively shaped by society, in line with sex-role socialization theory, but rather that everyone is active in taking up the discourses through which he or she is shaped. It

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becomes pertinent therefore if pupils themselves see, and can articulate, evidence of inequity in the classroom.

The perception of gender identity as forever shifting and evolving goes counter to the understanding of gender identity as ahistorical, and as producing universal and unchanging categories. Gender identity is no longer perceived as a given, but as belonging to a social context. Schools are one of the social contexts in which gender appropriate behaviour is defined and constructed. Schools can either reproduce the dominant gender ideology of the wider society or be a potential site for developing non-traditional gender identities. Mac an Ghail (1994) describes schools as 'active makers of a range of femininities and masculinities' (p.9). The predominant discourse in education that makes reference to this dynamic of evolving identities is the underachievement debate. Within the literature that seeks to account for differential achievement by gender, the genders have been variously polarized: boys have been pictured as victims and girls as winners within a feminized education system (Hannon, 1996; Patten, 1999). Alternatively girls are constructed as the good student while boys are viewed as the interesting person (Kruse, 1992).

Underachievement itself is not an uncontested term. The piloting for the study from which this article is drawn revealed that teachers conflated the terms underachievement and low achievement, an incident that chimes with Smith (2003) who observes a similar misconstruction amongst teachers. Underachievement can be used to describe the performance of one group relative to another: the working class and the middle classes, boys and girls, or to describe the performance of an individual relative to their perceived ability: the 'could-do betters'. It was this latter, psychological, framework that informed this study. While children can be grouped as high, average or low achievers, based on test scores, underachievers, those whose performance is viewed as not commensurate with their ability, could come from any of these groups. In this sense underachievement might be viewed not as a negative: a failure to achieve, but as a positive: the potential to achieve. In the current international context of differential academic achievement by gender (Johnson, 1996; Collins *et al.*, 2000; Greenfield, 2000) the relationship between boys and underachievement, and the actions and expectations of their teachers both to gender and any assumed potential, remain salient.

Many teachers are strongly committed to the idea of gender difference (Arnot & Gubb, 2001), believing that it influences attitudes to school, motivation, maturity, responsibility, behaviour and identification with the school ethos. Boys are seen as more negative and as needing competition, discipline, structure and support; girls, as lacking confidence and losing out on teacher attention due to the demands of boy behaviour on teacher time. Arnot and Gubb conclude that schools tend to recognize and comply with gender difference rather than identifying ways in which it could be reduced or removed. In Warrington and Younger's (1996) study, few of the teachers acknowledged that they treated boys and girls differently. But their attitudes to gender and behaviour reveal that they view girls as working harder, having better motivation, being more cooperative in the classroom and being better organized about homework.

The conclusion that teachers may have differing and inequitable expectations of boys and girls is a repeated finding of research, though at different times and in different contexts, it can be either boys or girls who are disadvantaged by these expectations. Thus, when girls' underachievement in science was the focus of scrutiny, teachers' low expectations of girls in science was cited as a contributory factor (Walkerdine, 1989). In the contemporary climate of concern for boys' underachievement, the evidence has tended to note teachers' low expectations of boys' potential for academic attainment. In 1993, the Ofsted report *Boys and English* suggested that, in general, teachers had low expectations of boys. Younger and Warrington (1996) made a similar assertion, demonstrating that teachers tend to under-predict boys' and over-predict girls' GCSE results. Interviewing secondary aged children and their teachers about classroom interaction, Warrington and Younger (1996) concluded, perhaps unsurprisingly, that students respond to high expectations, and that they attain more highly when they feel valued as an individual. Arnot and Gubb (2001) report that students believe that teacher expectations about gender influence their practice, claiming that boys are discriminated against by teachers. In curriculum areas, such as English, where boys' examination success is significantly lower than that of girls, teachers' stereotypical expectations of boys' ability create a classroom climate where male underachievement is legitimated and condoned. Janet White (1996, p. 109) questions why it is 'acceptable in so many classrooms that "English doesn't matter for boys", so their poor performance can be excused, or that because girls are "naturally good" at English, their considerable achievements are taken for granted, or even downplayed?' and she argues that 'only by changing the set of expectations' can the outcomes be altered.

Whilst teacher expectations of academic achievement might contribute to differential educational outcomes for boys and girls, gendered expectations of behaviour establish a further dimension of inequity being played out in the classroom. Recalling a classroom observation in a comprehensive school in Sheffield, Jackson and Salisbury (1996) drew attention to the way the disruptive behaviour of two boys dominated the teacher's attention. They controlled most of the events and blocked any serious learning from taking place, and the teacher seemed resigned to accepting this behaviour as typical of many posturing adolescent males. Jackson and Salisbury argue that this exemplifies the weariness of teachers, who feel that there is nothing they can do in the face of what seems to be inevitable: 'boys will be boys'. Pickering (1997) suggests that teachers are more likely to see boys behaving badly and girls behaving well, regardless of what is actually happening in the classroom. Pickering also records girls acknowledging that boys are reprimanded more than girls, but notes that the girls often qualified this assertion with the comment that these reprimands occurred more often than the behaviour of boys warranted. In their interviews with secondary aged children, Warrington and Younger (1996) point out that both boys and girls perceive that teachers treat boys more severely than girls for similar offences. Boys frequently suggested that teachers expected more from girls, and felt themselves to be undervalued by teachers. Whilst many boys admitted that they wished they had worked harder sooner, boys still felt they were stereotyped as

lazy, badly behaved and immature because they were boys. Smith and Gorard's (2002) survey of perceptions of equity in school across several European countries revealed that UK pupils felt significantly more strongly than their European counterparts that teachers treated girls better than boys. Indeed, perceptions that boys are reprimanded more than girls and empirical evidence that these perceptions may be true recur throughout the research literature (Wing, 1997; Younger *et al.*, 1999; Francis, 2000).

Classroom discourse is another arena in which gender inequities can be appropriated and maintained. However, the research is not consistent in its conclusions: some contest that boys are unfairly treated because they are reprimanded and disciplined more often than girls, while others argue that boys dominate the classroom, in terms of teacher time, attention and levels of interaction, and that as a result of this girls are marginalized (Bousted, 1989). One strand of these studies focuses upon boys' domination of classroom discourse and teachers' acceptance of this. La France (1991), after reviewing research into the different classroom experience of boys and girls, suggests that with all types of communication, positive and negative, teachers interact more with boys than with girls. Not only do boys dominate the classroom, but their shouting out and interrupting is tolerated more than girls' (Sadker & Sadker, 1985). Male voices are listened to more than female, and in general males tend to listen less to female voices than to male (Robinson & McArthur, 1982). Through many strategies, conscious and unconscious, female verbal participation is kept low and this renders them peripheral: 'In most encounters between women and men, the men do the talking and the women do the listening' (La France, 1991, p. 5). Sadker and Sadker (1985) showed a film to teachers and asked who talked most, overwhelmingly both male and female teachers said that girls did, but in truth boys did with a ratio of 3:1. La France argues that teacher management of classroom discourse positions females as silent and patient, and that verbal involvement by girls is positioned as less important than their being attentive. Thus teachers use classroom discourse to assist male and female students in an unequal way.

Contrasting perspectives on gender inequities in classroom discourse are offered by those who argue that rather than marginalizing girls, patterns of interaction reinforce positive views of girls and negative views of boys. Pickering's (1997) classroom observations found that whilst boys were indeed reprimanded more than girls, girls' misdemeanours often passed unnoticed or ignored. Younger *et al.* (1999) suggest that while boys may dominate teacher-student interaction, teachers may be increasingly defining their 'ideal student' as having female characteristics: 'Some teachers may be increasingly prone to take for granted the 'normality' or even inevitability of increasing gender differentiation in girls' favour. In such cases their behaviour towards boys may all too easily generate a self-fulfilling prophecy' (p. 327). This research echoed the results of their earlier work and demonstrated that teachers perceived girls as better organized, with more sophisticated communication skills, more articulate, more confident and far better at independent learning (Barber, 1996). Teachers' comments on how girls interacted in the classroom reveal

that they believed that girls asked for help more, sought reassurance more, and responded more readily to advice. Teachers saw many girls as 'self learners', being rigorous planners of their time and able to anticipate and conform to the demands of school (Head, 1996). Younger *et al.* conceded that the time-consuming management issues with boys meant that the needs of some girls were rendered invisible. On the other hand girls asked more questions of the teacher, and regardless of the subject, girls interacted more inquisitively, participated more in the enquiry process and showed more intellectual curiosity. Younger *et al.* concluded that boys receive more negative attention than girls, and that there is more conflict between teachers and boys than with girls.

The impact of the gender of the teacher on gender relations in the classroom is less fully explored in the literature, although current policy initiatives for teacher recruitment place considerable importance upon attracting male teachers as role models for boys. Skelton (2002a) argues that policy-makers believe that the presence of male teachers will overcome anti-school cultures of masculinity, thereby improving boys' behaviour and attainment. Yet there is remarkably little empirical research into the effect of gender of the teacher upon classroom relationships and interactions and the conceptualization of teachers as role models has been challenged as problematic by Skelton and Carrington (2003). Both Miller (1996) and Mac an Ghaill (1994) contest the idea of the feminization of school: Miller draws on feminist discourses to highlight how current concerns position boys as 'sacrificial victims' of feminized classrooms, whilst Mac an Ghaill observes how schools are a site for the reproduction of social values, including those of gender. Exploring the perceptions of students in teacher training colleges, Johnston *et al.* (1999) found that male primary trainees believed that men made better secondary teachers, a finding which the authors ascribe to an internalized perception of the primary school as feminized. However, there is some evidence that the gender of the teacher can be a factor in the playing out of gender inequities in the classroom.

Williams (1993) argues that men who enter predominantly female occupations have their masculinity placed under scrutiny and in response often emphasize it by acting out ways of being 'properly' masculine. One of the ways they might do this is to redefine their contribution as somehow different or better than that of female teachers (Oyler *et al.*, 2001). The status of early years and primary teaching is linked in the public mind with child rearing and thereby with women, and as a career it has relatively low status. For male primary teachers this is off set by the expectation that men achieve well in primary education, acquiring a disproportionate number of senior leadership and management posts. Thornton and Bricheno (2000) report that men within the primary school are more likely than women to seek promotion, even though male and female teachers are not differentially qualified. Thus, the school becomes a site where not only pupils but also their teachers are constructing ways to be appropriately masculine or feminine. That there are different ways for male teachers to be masculine within the primary school is evidenced by Skelton's (2003) report on the attitudes of male and female student teachers to the likely influence of

the gender of the teacher in the classroom. She observes that male students working in the younger primary sector were more inclined to see gender as irrelevant and were keen to demonstrate that they possessed the necessary skills and dispositions to work in a traditionally female domain. It may be that these men were more comfortable with their masculinity and less threatened by it being compromised by their career choice than was true for men in the upper primary group. Skelton concludes, however, that while student teachers may have doubts as to whether their pupils identify more readily with teachers of their own gender, they nevertheless support the idea of the male role model as crucial for boys.

The establishment of discipline is another area in which masculinity can be played out. Jackson and Salisbury (1996) suggest that to be manly, male teachers need to control: they are often over-authoritarian and some boys resist this. In parallel, with this, Francis (2000) found that some male teachers flirted with adolescent girls, whilst Younger *et al.* (1999) observed that male teachers were often uncertain about how to handle girls, an uncertainty which some girls exploited using 'feminine wiles' to their advantage. Skelton (2002b) reports on observations with two male schoolteachers working in primary classrooms. The two male teachers frequently adopted a 'laddish' tone when relating to the boys in their class which revolved around athletic prowess; especially their mutual support for the local football team; having a laugh; not looking smart; and having a good time with mates. One of the teachers described his own relationship with the girls in his class as 'gently flirtatious'. The girls in the class were placed in the position of having to negotiate their position with him, and with the other girls in the class. Some were clearly rendered powerless, by seeming embarrassed and uncomfortable, others responded in pseudo masculine ways by hitting him (generally playfully). The one girl who was most aggressively resistant to his 'style' was seen by the teacher as difficult and by the other girls as aggressive and unfeminine. Skelton identifies these characteristics as the need for male teachers to find an appropriate discourse for their male identity, rather than deliberate attempts to promulgate discriminatory practices. But also that the 'male gaze' begins to define for the girls what it means to be acceptably female and for one of the girls the risk of being seen as an outsider.

Becoming a 'normal schoolgirl'... was worked out within the male gaze and although some of the girls developed strategies, which provided them with some degree, of power it was ultimately constrained and they were unable to challenge the prerogatives of power. (Skelton, 2002b, p. 29)

Having a greater gender balance amongst primary schoolteachers may be a desirable outcome, but not on the grounds of gender role modeling, particularly if male primary school teachers are concerned about and representative of traditional images of masculinity.

### **The study**

This article explores a cross-phase sample of pupils' perceptions of gender inequities in the classroom. It draws on data collected as part of a larger research study

investigating the underachievement of boys (Project JUDE). The complete sample comprised a Schools' Academic Pyramid in the West Country, and included 15 first schools, three middle schools and one high school, although for the systematic data collection the first school sample was narrowed to six. The social geography of the area meant that the sample represented both rural and urban schools, and included schools with predominantly middle class catchments and those with less advantaged catchments. Although the region was largely White and middle class, economic deprivation and rural isolation were significant factors for some schools. Thirty-six classes were chosen as the focus for the research, six each from Years 1, 4, 5, 8, 9 and 10. This represents two year groups in each of the first, middle and high school phases and deliberately included the two year groups on either side of the transition from one school phase to another (Year 4 and 5; and Year 8 and 9). The original intention had been to use Year 11 not Year 10, but public examinations made this problematic.

The methodology for the study was grounded in the critical paradigm, with the intention of effecting change at the end of the study, rather than simply describing the status quo (Popkewitz, 1984). The researchers had been invited by the schools to investigate boys' underachievement—they owned the problem and wanted to move towards a solution (or solutions). Thus the research design deliberately involved both teachers and pupils as stakeholders in the process. Giving the pupils a voice was at the heart of the research design, both because of a philosophical commitment to valuing children's perspectives and because 'pupils are observant and have a rich but often untapped understanding of processes and events' (Rudduck & Flutter, 2000, p. 82). Forty teachers and 144 pupils were interviewed: the pupil interview sample comprised four pupils from each of the 36 classes—a high-achieving boy and girl; and an underachieving boy and girl.

A semi-structured schedule was used for the interviews and both the teacher and pupil interviews were designed to explore the same constructs—perceptions of learning; of behaviour; and of achievement in relation to gender. This permitted comparisons of pupil and teacher perspectives. The pupils were interviewed in mixed-gender, same ability pairs in an effort to remove the spotlight from individual children and to make the interviews more discursive and exploratory. Lewis and Lindsay (2000) suggest that interviewing in this way 'allows for the possibility that discussion between individuals will spark off new ideas, criticism or developments' (p. 52). The interviewers were alert to the possibility that one individual might dominate, and took the opportunity to encourage equal participation as far as was possible. A pilot study had found that mixed gender pairings were more productive than same sex pairings which seemed to create more pressure to conform to gender stereotyped viewpoints.

### **Perceptions of gender inequity: the findings**

The findings reported here all arise from one question in the interview schedule: set in the context of a series of questions or prompts designed to elicit perceptions of

Table 1. The sample

Year	High-achieving boy	High-achieving girl	Under-achieving boy	Under-achieving girl	Total children	Teachers
1	6	6	6	6	24	6
4	6	6	6	6	24	6
First school	12	12	12	12	48	13
5	6	6	6	6	24	6
8	6	6	6	6	24	6
Middle school	12	12	12	12	48	13
9	6	6	6	6	24	10 English
10	6	6	6	6	24	4 Non-English
High school	12	12	12	12	48	14
Total	36	36	36	36	144	40

classroom practices was the question: Do you think boys and girls are treated the same? The strength of feeling in response to this question was surprising, and this question prompted many of the interviewees to offer a rich set of further elaborating responses. Almost without exception, the pupils' comments related to issues of classroom behaviour and discipline, and across the whole sample, there was a strong and significant perception that teachers treated boys more negatively than girls. Of the 136 comments on this issue, 84 (62%) claimed that boys were unfavourably treated by teachers, whilst only 8% felt the reverse was true. The remaining 30% believed they were treated the same.

Table 2. How pupils see gender influencing how teachers treat them

	High-achieving boy	High-achieving girl	Underachieving boy	Underachieving girl
Boys treated negatively	20	14	13	8
Girls treated positively	7	6	11	15
<i>Total girls favoured over boys</i>	27	20	24	13
Boys treated positively	0	2	0	2
Girls treated negatively	0	5	0	2
<i>Total boys favoured over girls</i>	0	7	0	4
<i>Boys and girls treated the same</i>	10	11	8	12

Overall, the data reveals that teachers are seen as treating boys less favourably than girls by all four focus groups. The view is expressed more strongly by boys with 61% of the responses claiming negative treatment coming from boys. However, the fact that 39% of the assertions of negative treatments of boys comes from girls suggests that this is not simply a male perception. Of the four groups, it is the underachieving girl who is least likely to see girls as being favoured over boys, and only girls (albeit a very small number) who feel that boys receive more favourable treatment than girls.

*'She doesn't shout at no girls'*

There were subtle differences between the three phases that are not revealed by these overall results. The tendency to see teachers treating the different genders unfairly increases with age, probably in line with developing awareness of gender identity. In the first schools, children were most likely to espouse a view of equitable treatment by their teachers, regardless of gender, a view which became less strongly expressed as children became older. As early as Year 1, however, there is a perception that teachers treat boys in a less positive way than they treat girls. The boys tend to frame this in terms of injustice, whereas the girls are more inclined to blame the different treatment on boys' poor behaviour. Verity and Ted discuss how teachers shout at boys more than girls: Verity says 'she doesn't shout at no girls' while Ted thinks this is 'the boys' fault for being silly'. Underpinning Ted's response is a notion that differential treatment of boys is attributable to boys' bad behaviour—in other words, boys deserve to be told off more. This perception is a recurrent theme: Megan claims that 'the boys are a bit naughtier than the girls', implying perhaps their different treatment is their own fault. Likewise, Bill thinks teachers treat boys 'worsen' than girls 'because they're always silly' but, in an act of dissociation, he adds 'but I'm not one of them'. However, Bill does also suggest that not all of the negative attention is justified, claiming that sometimes boys are unfairly reprimanded. He attributes fault directly to the teacher, 'because we didn't actually do it but she blames us that we did'. A different perspective on the same theme is offered by Emily, who thinks girls suffer because the boys are naughty, but in an attempt to be fair the teacher blames the whole class:

Quite a lot of the boys are silly, so if the boys are all bad, they put the girls into it as well, even though most of us are quite good. We shouldn't really get done, but they have to treat us fairly really, because otherwise it would be unfair on the girls or boys.

Although the emphasis of most of the first school responses on differential treatment relates to behaviour, there is also evidence that these children are developing an awareness of different expectations of girls and boys. Darren suggests that teachers think of girls in feminine and compliant terms: 'girls are supposed to be more dainty and don't push anybody', constructing an early association between femininity and good behaviour. That teachers not only recognize this but respond differently to girls is implied in Emily's comment that teachers are gentler with girls; 'it's the way they smile at girls and talk softly'. These comments are at the heart of a perception that girls are favoured in the classroom, which is clearly articulated by

Chris and confirmed by Amy. Chris thinks that some teachers prefer girls and he gives the example of last year's teacher: 'all the girls were liked by her and all the girls liked her and of course it wasn't fair on the boys. They were getting told off and chucked out to go to the library'. Amy agrees and talks about her being the teacher's pet. In tandem with this perceived preferential attitude towards girls is a sense that boys are sometimes disenfranchised by classroom practices—Darren claims that 'boys are not always given a chance to say what they want to say'.

Two points emerge from these very young children's views of teachers' treatment of boys and girls. Firstly, even in Year 1, there are pupils who think boys and girls are treated differently. The boys tend to frame this in terms of injustice, whereas the girls are more inclined to blame the different treatment on boys' poor behaviour. Secondly, there is already an emerging expression of a perception that teachers have different expectations of girls and that girls are the preferred gender. The perception by pupils that teachers view girls as needing to be treated gently while boys need to be treated more firmly, might be seen as one way in which teacher pupil interaction reproduces social stereotypes.

*'Well, that's a bit sexist really isn't it?'*

The middle school sample reveals a significant shift in perceptions from Year 5 where there are more pupils who feel teachers treat both genders equitably than those voicing a view of differential treatment, to the Year 8 pupils who believe strongly that teachers treat boys less favourably than girls. The middle school sample is effectively split between the Year 5 group who offer broadly similar views to the first schools and the Year 8 group whose views are closer to the high school perspectives. One difference is that the girls in this age phase appear to be more explicitly conscious of the way boys are treated. Abi thinks it is not so much boys' actual behaviour which is the problem, but with teachers' expectations of boys: 'People don't expect girls to be naughty... so girls get away with being naughty more'. These girls are more likely than their younger counterparts to appropriate equal opportunities discourses to account for their experiences. Olivia suggests that 'It seems that teachers do treat boys in a different way to girls. Like some teachers say stuff like "Oh what a racket, I notice there's only boys' talking" ... well that's a bit sexist really isn't it?' whilst Lucy observes that 'some teachers are really sexist ... they will tell off a boy just like that, but girls not so easily'. The association between feminine behaviour and teachers' treatment of girls is touched on by Natasha who agrees that 'teachers do tend to be lighter on girls': she articulates a view that this is attributable to teachers' constructions of girls as more emotional: 'I think it's because they think that girls are more sensitive, and therefore can break down in tears or something'. The boys are more blunt in their descriptions of unfair treatment. Abraham claims that 'boys are given the hard end and girls are normally given the lenient end', while Alex complains that his teacher 'tells us off more and she makes us do everything last, like after the girls'.

Some of the children reflect on the teachers' attitudes to gender with regard to their academic expectations of boys and girls. One cluster of comments reflects perceptions that teachers have different curricular expectations of boys and girls. Henry expresses the view that teachers view curriculum subjects in gendered terms: 'Usually girls are treated differently in that they're probably expected to do more stuff like drama or art and boys are expected to do more sport'. Similarly, Sarah associates teachers' responses to pupils with apparent gendered views of performance: 'sometimes in science the boys will be treated better because they know more about it, or in say art, girls can do better art and they like get better treated'. The dominant discourse underpinning one further cluster of responses is that of girls' superior academic ability. Nicky claims 'Some teachers have woken up to the fact that some girls are actually smarter than boys', suggesting that Nicky is aware of a time when more was expected of boys than of girls. Sarah suggests that girls are not reprimanded so much because 'they listen more so they understand it more'. Abraham is explicitly aware of the issue of boys' underachievement, and speaks of a discussion with a teacher on the relatively poor performance of boys in English, seeing this as having a negative effect and an example of teacher bias in favour of girls: 'It doesn't exactly boost your confidence if you're a boy and you're told that you're complete rubbish'.

*'Some teachers prefer girls'*

The perceptions expressed by pupils in the high school sustain the views expressed by their younger counterparts that girls receive more positive treatment than boys. Amongst the high achieving girls in particular, there is still the view that teachers are fairly evenhanded in their treatment of boys and girls. Perceptions of unfairness are not seen so much as teachers having negative attitudes to boys, as their having positive attitudes to girls. Stephanie says quite bluntly 'I think some teachers prefer girls', and apports this preference to the good behaviour of girls: 'they probably think girls wouldn't be as naughty maybe. I think they think girls are really good'. Matt sees the different treatment stemming from teachers' constructions of girls as more mature than boys with the consequence that 'some teachers treat girls more like adults than they do boys'. When asked if this is a problem with boys or a problem with teachers, he says 'I think it's a problem with teachers'. Conversely, Morris sees the issue as being about boy behaviour, not teacher unfairness. 'They are treated in the same way but of course if they are silly then they have to be prepared to face what the consequences are going to be'. He goes on to suggest that 'a key factor' is that 'boys are attracting more teacher attention'.

*'Female teachers are a lot more human'*

However, the most striking cluster of responses in the high school shift the argument about how teachers treat pupils according to their gender to a focus on the impact of the gender of the teacher upon gender relations. It is important to remember that

pupils were not asked questions about the gender of the teacher: any reference to the gender of the teacher, therefore, came unsolicited from the pupils. Even amongst the Year 8 children, views that the gender of the teacher might be influencing the way teachers treat boys and girls was beginning to be expressed. Patrick (Year 8 underachiever) believed that male teachers were more likely to have negative attitudes to boys, a view corroborated by Greg who suggested that male teachers meted out variable punishment according to the gender of the offender: 'I've noticed especially with male teachers it happens, if a girl forgets her homework they'll say "on my desk tomorrow morning and don't do that again" and if a boy forgets his homework ... there's a colossal shout session'. This advantage for girls with male teachers is not always appreciated, and Claire resists the inherent sexism in the way male teachers address boys and girls differently as 'male teachers can be a bit condescending calling you "love" and "dear" and everything and it's just really horrible ... and the boys are just like you know "mate" or something'. Both Patrick and Tracy (Year 8 underachievers) suggest that female teachers are more fair in the way they treat the different gender groups and less likely to be influenced by the pupil's gender. This perception of female teachers was also expressed in the high school. Job claims that 'female teachers are a lot more human'. Bart says 'if you've got a woman teacher she's more likely to be just the same with everybody ... she'll punish everyone the same, and treat everyone the same in learning'.

There was a distinct and strongly expressed cluster of responses which suggested that girls use their sexuality to manipulate male members of staff. Mo suggests that 'There's some girls in our year that like, they can get anything easy ... all they have to do is like wear a short skirt or something and wave their hair and he'll do anything for them'. Job agrees, claiming that male teachers can be:

... just generally sexist really, if they see a girl walking down the corridor they'll chat her up with a friendly conversation, but if they see a bloke you can see him just standing staring at you like 'Is his shirt tucked in, is he wearing trainers?

Bart suggests that male teachers are inclined to be more lenient with girls saying '...it's more likely that a boy would get stronger punishment. Not that the girl wouldn't get punished, but she wouldn't be punished as much'. Likewise, Kath believes that male teachers are 'very different with boys than girls, they're much kinder to girls, they let them off much easier'. By contrast, Job says that 'the female teachers know what some of the girls are up to, they can figure it out ... they're not as gullible as the male teachers'. There is a tacit agreement within education that boys need to experience more positive male role models amongst those who teach them. The comments reported here suggest that pupils are able to make judgements about the appropriateness of the gendered role models whom they meet.

## **Conclusion**

Teachers bring their beliefs and assumptions into the classroom with them, and these perceptions, consciously or unconsciously, manifest themselves in their own teaching practice. That teachers have lower expectations of boys both in terms of

academic achievement and their beliefs about behaviour and attitude is well attested in the literature. Boys are perceived as a problem, while girls are increasingly being constructed as the ideal student. Teachers speak of boys dominating their teaching time and attention within the classroom. Boys may receive more attention from teachers, but if performance tables are to be believed, this does not seem to have translated into an advantage for boys. Whilst the literature describes inequitable expectations of boys and girls, the evidence presented here would suggest that pupils themselves perceive that teachers treat boys and girls differently, and that this perception increases as children get older. Their perception is that girls receive more positive and less negative attention from teachers, whilst boys are reprimanded and monitored more. Thus in our schools, teacher pupil interaction is reinforcing the social stereotypes of female compliance and conformity and male challenge and individuality.

Teachers believe that their teaching needs to be aimed specifically at the needs of boys, while girls will 'just get on with it'. Pupils, by contrast, do not speak of an unfair attention or focus on boys, rather they speak of negative expectations and unfair treatment. These pupils articulate their perceptions in relation to how their teachers' behaviour is influenced by stereotypical gender expectations. Girls are too sensitive to reprimand, and are well motivated, while boys are likely to be a problem and need to be kept in check. Teachers are said to see the good behaviour in girls and the bad behaviour in boys in part because this is what they expect to see. It is perhaps ironic that pupils' perceptions in relation to the gender of their teachers also reflects this dichotomy, with female teachers receiving more positive comments in relation to their ability to be fair or being less likely to be manipulated by adolescent sexuality.

The emphasis on the underachievement of boys might result in focusing so exclusively on the needs of boys whilst overlooking or underestimating the needs of girls, resulting in the marginalizing of girls within the classroom. Listening to the voices of pupils, however, suggests that the gendered expectations of teachers may have resulted both in rendering the needs of girls invisible whilst at the same time, negative expectations and an anxiety about the behaviour, attitudes and achievements of boys may have been translated into a self-fulfilling prophecy that we call 'the underachieving boy'.

In response to the concern about the underachieving boy, much of the remediation has focused on working with gender difference, for example, calling for 'boy friendly' literature in classrooms (Osmont & Davies, 1987). An emphasis on discipline, competition and structure are seen as appropriate motivators for unmotivated boys lost in the 'feminized' world of education (Hannon, 1996; Platten, 1999). The call for more male role models in the classroom suggests that the mere presence of men will make a difference to motivating and encouraging boys. However, if pupils' perceptions of inequity of treatment according to gender are a true reflection of classroom practice, then there is a greater need to address social justice in the classroom and the gender stereotypes which underpin current inequities.

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