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Review of Strategies to Address Gender Inequalities in Scottish Schools

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Review of Strategies to Address Gender Inequalities in Scottish Schools

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Aims of the Research

The *Review of Strategies to Address Gender Inequalities in Scottish Schools* had two main aims:

- (i) To undertake a substantial analysis of relevant literature on gender-related inequalities, of various forms, in order to establish current views on underlying causes and related factors, and to identify possible strategies to address them.
- (ii) To gather evidence from local authorities and schools across Scotland on policy and practice with regard to gender, in order that these might be evaluated against the findings of the literature review.

An abbreviated literature review has been included in the final report of the study, while a fuller version is available as a separate document from the Scottish Executive website (www.scotland.gov.uk) as well as the websites of the Universities of Strathclyde (www.strath.ac.uk) and Glasgow (www.gla.ac.uk).

This Insight describes how the study was carried out, the key findings from the literature and the case studies, and sets out some of the issues which arise from the analysis of the evidence from both.

Research Methods

The study was carried out in three phases:

- (i) The team conducted a substantial review of the literature.
- (ii) They sought information from key personnel in the local authorities who were asked to describe policy and practice within the authority in relation to addressing gender issues in their schools. In addition, they were asked to identify a number of examples of good practice from nursery, primary and secondary schools that might be followed up as case studies.
- (iii) A sample of good practice examples were subsequently investigated in some detail, using qualitative methods. Representatives of key groups of stakeholders were interviewed including management teams, teachers, parents and children.

The evidence gathered has been analysed, providing the basis for the conclusions drawn and the recommendations generated.

The literature on gender-related issues is very extensive and the account given in the report is necessarily an abridged one. The full literature review will be published separately by the Scottish Executive. This summary is presented in terms of the themes identified in the literature and, subsequently, in the fieldwork.

Policy on gender in Scottish local authorities

While most, if not all, authorities had an equal opportunities employment policy, this rarely seemed to extend to cover learning and teaching. Some policies did make reference to expectations of general behaviour in relation to characteristics such as ethnicity, race, social class and gender. Many of the responding local authorities expected that schools would have policies in place that made reference to gender,

Does your school have a policy that makes specific reference to gender as a factor in inequality?

To what extent does the school policy reflect the various factors that contribute to inequality of opportunity in school?

Literacy amongst boys is a key area of concern; is your school taking action to address the observed differences in achievement?

possibly as part of a wider inclusion policy. This was not, however, reflected in the responses from schools, where there were few instances of written, school-focused policies. Even in those schools identified by authorities as examples of good practice and who had adopted specific strategies to address gender inequalities, it was unusual to find a written policy in existence. However, some schools reported the existence of 'informal' or implicit policies and an awareness of gender issues in relation to schooling.

While most of the authorities contacted reported that staff development in respect of equal opportunities had taken place, few had undertaken staff development specifically to support the gender-related initiatives identified. There were some instances of good practice where school staff, on their own initiative, had accessed research and/or attended sessions by consultants and other experts which informed developments.

In several instances, the implementation of gender-related strategies was at the instigation of individual 'champions' or leaders within the school or authority. However, where this is the sole driver of a strategy, it is unlikely that it will be embedded in the practice of the institution/authority or sustained long term.

Issues within and across sectors

There was a clear recognition that gender-related differences in behaviour and performance were apparent in the **pre-5 or early primary years**, and the team encountered some good practice in addressing these. The literature highlights these differences as particularly marked in the areas of literacy and personal and social development and it was in these areas that the team saw the best practice. Here, there were several coherent and successful strategies to counteract gender inequalities, in particular the underachievement of boys. Schools that used strategies such as 'story sacks' or 'bags of books' and/or involved fathers in activities designed to tackle stereotyping or culturally imposed constraints on gender specific role models, seemed to be successful in a number of ways. Benefits included the raising of literacy levels, improved relationships and increased bonding within families, improvements in social skills and, finally, enhanced motivation to learn. Some of these tactics were also fruitfully deployed in nursery schools and classes.

The team was less aware of similar initiatives in **secondary schools**. In these schools there was little evidence of deliberate attempts to address gender stereotyping in option or career choices. The use of single gender classes was in evidence in several authorities, however. In the main, these had been introduced to address boys' underachievement, although issues of behaviour and choice were also identified by schools. Views on the effectiveness of this as a strategy were varied. In some instances boys-only classes exacerbated behaviour problems, heightening 'laddish' behaviour.

The most effective practice recorded was that of a **cluster of schools**, a secondary and its associated primaries, who were working together to provide continuity throughout a pupil's school career. Even there, the secondary school showed less engagement with the adopted strategies than did the associated primary schools.

Learning and teaching

The advice from the literature is that schools should accommodate gender differences through **gender-sensitive teaching** that provides tasks and activities to meet the needs of a wide range of learning styles and preferences, while avoiding the imposition of stereotypes. This was most in evidence in primary schools and pre-5 establishments, where the team observed several instances in which gender-related learning styles had

been taken into consideration. In particular, 'boy-friendly' aspects of learning and teaching such as active learning, time-limited tasks and oral questioning had been adopted and gender-related preferences had been considered throughout the teaching cycle, from planning and preparation through resourcing to assessment. However, a degree of caution should be exercised. There is evidence, both from the literature and the case study schools, that not all boys have needs or preferences that can be accommodated in 'boy-friendly' approaches. Quiet and reflective boys, for example, might well be more disadvantaged by such tactics, as might some girls. In the fieldwork phase of the study, there were examples of the provision of a range of learning opportunities for both boys and girls. Some of the best examples of teaching and learning were the result of attendance at courses or seminars on learning styles where gender differences were addressed as one dimension of learning and teaching, rather than on gender *per se*.

Pupils

Interviews with pupils of all ages were very revealing. Many pupils, including boys themselves, thought that girls were better learners, more interested in school and better behaved than boys were. However, boys also demonstrated – at both primary and secondary stages – an interest in school and in learning. When children were asked about whether they thought their schools were good schools, the vast majority stated that they were, and that in general they enjoyed being there. There were few perceptions by pupils that teachers favoured children of either gender, although some children felt that teachers were harder on boys, in terms of behaviour, than they were on girls.

Parents

Most of the parents who were interviewed were generally very supportive of their children's schools and satisfied with the quality of education that their children were receiving. Most parents stated that they were not aware of any gender bias in teaching and learning, although many were supportive of taking a harder line with boys. Parents often had firm views on how children should be treated, and felt that their views were generally considered and taken on board by the schools concerned.

How does your school try to ensure that boys and girls have equal access to all of the learning opportunities provided?

Classroom organisation

In **nursery and primary schools**, there was no specific tactic of classroom organisation for addressing gender inequalities. However, the team did observe some strategies, such as those intended to develop and address issues of emotional literacy, which tended to be targeted mainly at boys. Nevertheless, it has to be emphasised that activities designed to develop emotional literacy were available for both genders and not confined to boys. Rather, teachers were aware of a significant group of boys within classes who, it was felt, required greater support in this area. However, it is perhaps worth noting that in pre-5 education, where children are allowed to choose their activities, there was a perception amongst teachers that boys (and girls) tended to choose along gender stereotypical lines. Accordingly, resources such as 'dressing-up' clothes and 'home corners' had been selected to appeal to both boys and girls and to encourage children away from stereotypical patterns of play.

In **secondary schools**, the most visible gender-related strategy was that of **single gender classes (SGC)**. It should be noted, however, that the practice of teaching in single gender classes is not a commonly observed strategy in Scottish secondary schools but, rather, is by far the exception. Indeed, the team had to seek out examples of single gender teaching to include in the study. In some case study schools, the rationale for the introduction of these classes was the improvement of achievement, while in others

Some strategies challenge stereotypical roles in the home and wider society: how can schools address these when they are apparently formed very early and reflect attitudes within the wider community?

such approaches were felt to improve behaviour and to permit teachers to utilise classroom methods which were more suited to one gender or the other. However, it is important to note that single gender classes were used in a limited way in each of the case study schools and that these had been in operation for a comparatively short period of time.

One school had indeed withdrawn from the practice and resumed mixed gender teaching and learning. There was limited change in the curriculum to meet the needs of boys and girls and the initiatives were not supported by a strong staff development input. Moreover, there were mixed views regarding the benefits, or otherwise, of **SGC in specific subject areas**. For instance, it was felt that single gender classes in English provided opportunities for discussion about issues which would have been difficult to air in a mixed gender class, but there was less consensus on the benefits in mathematics. There were concerns about using SGC with groups of higher or lower achieving pupils, and also a feeling that the strategy was perhaps most valuable in S3 and S4, where behavioural issues were thought to be more in the foreground.

Girls and boys appear to favour inclusive learning practices: to what extent does your practice reflect such practices?

Some respondents were concerned about managing behaviour in boy-only classes. On the other hand, there was a feeling that SGC provided a structure for learning which increased motivation. Views amongst pupils were divided on the theme of single gender classes. While some pupils thought that they were good, others expressed a clear dislike of the strategy. For both boys and girls, their relationship with the teacher and the ability of the teacher to motivate them was more important than the form of classroom organisation which was adopted.

In general, these findings tie in with those of the review of literature. Specific findings that find echoes in the literature include, on the positive side, greater motivation and a more supportive context for the discussion of sensitive matters. On the negative side, there is a lack of impact where staff are not committed to the initiative and there is the likelihood of increased behavioural problems amongst boys, especially where pupil motivation and interest in school is low.

Implications for school management

Where gender-related strategies were in place and were successful, three **key characteristics** were observed. Firstly, each initiative had a **champion**, someone who was committed to the strategy, to the concept of gender equality as a part of social justice and inclusion, and who worked hard to monitor the success of the strategy and to sustain it beyond the first surge of interest. That champion was often – but not always – someone who had a management interest within the school, and occasionally this extended to a small group of people who, together, championed the strategy. This seems to be a requirement if such strategies are to make an impact. **Sustainability** requires that innovation becomes embedded in the culture and practices of the institution.

Secondly, **staff development** had been undertaken in line with the initiative. Sometimes this preceded the introduction of the strategy, while at other times it followed from the initial introduction. Most interesting and effective were those cases where staff had, often of their own volition and in their own time, accessed research and/or engaged a consultant. This was sometimes supported financially and in other ways by the local authority. Where primary and secondary schools worked together on a common strategy, there were apparent benefits to both.

Thirdly, it was also clear that **parental involvement** in gender-related issues made these initiatives more successful in a number of ways. It was important that schools promoted the parental role. Where projects were most successful (e.g. in the pre-5 and early years

What use does the school make of the data it gathers on performance and progress to identify if specific strategies might be necessary?

strategies in the study), parents were an integral part of the programmes and were often specifically targeted (e.g. fathers working with their sons on reading and literacy skills).

Once again, these findings are in line with the literature which argues that there is a fundamental need to raise awareness, to involve stakeholders and to monitor and sustain progress.

Vocational Education

The team observed no instances of strategies to address gender inequalities in vocational issues. This was true at all levels – policy and practice – and in all sectors.

Conclusions

The following represent the key findings of the study and their implications.

- There are significant gender-related inequalities in Scottish schools. For example, nationally available statistics indicate that girls, at all levels, are out-performing boys.
- Local authority policies relating to gender equality in Scottish schools are, in the main, couched within a broader approach to social justice and social inclusion. However, there is a danger that gender becomes lost or fudged within the broader inclusion agenda. Schools and authorities should check that, where necessary, specific attention is given to issues of gender in relation to learning and teaching. Indeed, this may be essential in the light of the forthcoming legislation on equality¹.
- It was rare to find schools with written policies on gender equality, even amongst those schools recommended to the team as worthy of study in terms of good practice. Schools should discuss this situation and move towards development of policies to address gender-sensitive matters.
- The most successful initiatives observed by the research team were in pre-5 and primary schools. This good practice could be more widely shared, and the implications worked into primary practice in general.
- Where development of a gender-related initiative was shared between schools, there was a greater chance of progression and continuity occurring. Primary and secondary schools should be encouraged to cooperate in the development of strategies to address gender inequalities with, ideally, national and local authority support through policy and staff development.
- The most successful practice engaged all stakeholders, particularly parents. Schools should discuss with their communities how parents and other stakeholders might be involved in the planning, development and implementation of strategies to address gender inequalities in Scottish schools.
- Where staff development was most effective, it was in situations where the staff had a degree of ownership and were supported by practical guidance and advice. Schools and authorities should encourage and facilitate staff development activities related to gender issues, and providers of staff development, such as authorities and universities, should be encouraged to enable this development to happen.

The research highlights the need for, at least, three things to be in place for any strategy to make an impact: how might your school implement a strategy to address gender inequality?

How ready is the school and authority to meet the expectations of the new Gender Equality Duty?

¹ Equality Bill - <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200405/cmbills/072/2005072.pdf>

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