

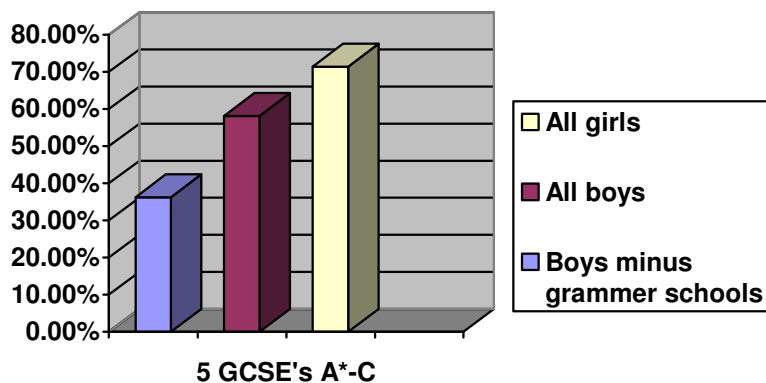
What some Schools say about Boys and Underachievement

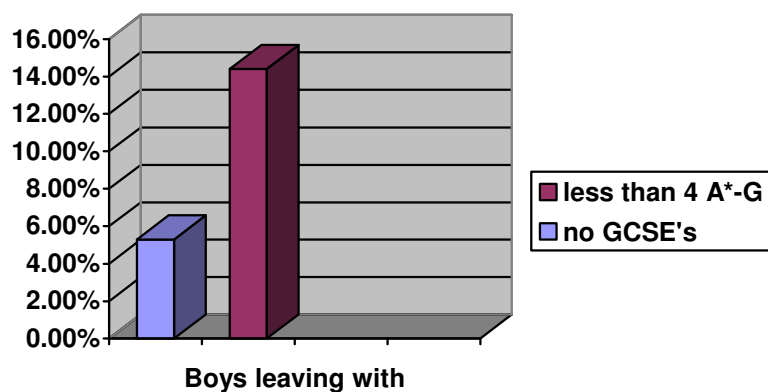
This small scale study investigated boy's underachievement in Northern Ireland with Heads of Year 10 in six schools. The study was carried out by the Centre for Young Men's Studies as part of its ongoing research with young males.

While year on year, and compared to other regions, GCSE achievement in Northern Ireland continues to improve from a relatively high base, this conceals some more concerning statistics about boys' underachievement.

Five GCSEs at grades A*-C has become the standard level set, with 58.2% of young men leaving Northern Ireland schools with at least this (2006-07). Therefore 41.8% of boys are below this standard, which compares to only 28.5% of young women at the same age.

While the percentage of those leaving school with no GCSEs has decreased from 5.8% in 2001-02 to 3.9% in 2006-07, within this figure twice as many are boys as girls (5.3% of boys and 2.5% of girls). If we then add in those who received one to four A*-G grades the figure goes up to 11.3%, but 14.4% if the assessment is of only boys.





Interestingly, there are a significant number of underachieving boys who are close to the five-plus A*-C standard, where a relatively small improvement would push them over the required standard.

When comparing Catholic and Protestant schools, there is little difference in the levels of underachievement (no figures are available for the differentiation between Catholic and Protestant pupils).

If we remove the grammar schools, only 36.3% of boys achieve at least five or more A*-C grades (down from 58.2% for all boys).

Introduction

The evidence that shows there is an issue with boys' underachievement is strong, even though it is clearly not a simple gender issue (not much can be said about 'all boys'). The evidence has been there for some years now and at various times there have been calls for initiatives and strategies to combat this problem. This small study aimed to identify schools' understanding, strategies and ways of approaching boys. More specifically we aimed to:

- a) Identify what schools are doing and thinking about how to engage young men and increase achievement;
- b) Help us understand what teachers see when they look at boys;
- c) Discover workable strategies (in the classroom and across the school as a whole);
- d) Discover what schools do to get the best out of boys.

We carried out semi-structured interviews with Heads of Year 10 in six schools (see Appendix 2). Those schools were:

Ashfield Boys School	boys	Controlled
Ballyclare High School	mixed	Controlled
Christian Brothers School	boys	Maintained
Lismore School	mixed	Maintained
North Coast Integrated	mixed	Integrated
St Malachy's High School	mixed	Maintained

Interviews ranged from one to one and a half hours and all teachers were very experienced (with at least ten years teaching – usually in their current schools). Four were male heads of year and two were female. The main findings include quotes from Head teachers in three of the schools.

Main findings

Boys were underachieving

In all of the four mixed schools boys were present in the top bands, but were increasingly visible in the lower and lowest bands. In Year 10 in one school there were three boys and seventeen girls in the top band and twice as many boys as girls in the lowest band. While this was exceptional, the gender ratios were noticeable in all of the mixed schools.

'We have a higher proportion of girls in band one, while in band two we have as many as twice as many boys as girls.'

'The Year 10 top class has twenty pupils with only three boys, but there are always more girls than boys, and in the lowest stream there are more boys than girls.'

All of the schools interviewed had a test on arrival and a banding principle, but this seemingly strong gender issue was not dealt with as such in three of the mixed schools. Heads of Year 10 said that the individual was addressed but, even though there were a disproportionate number of boys in the lower bands, gender was not thought to be significant enough to address.

'Here pupils are taken as individuals. Targets and support are for boys and girls, not just boys.'

'As a whole school we don't believe in single-sex teaching and so we take each child individually and this is the way to raise achievement.'

'Strategies in the school tend to focus on those who need help; this isn't gender based. We offer mentoring to those who need a bit of extra help (this tends to be boys, but not exclusively).'

Interestingly, for some, there appears to be a reaction to a false perception of 'gendered teaching', where single sex classes are seen as the only approach or if gender is a consideration then individuality disappears. Of course in a country with such a strong single gendered tradition still very much alive, taking gender into account must sound a worrying return to the past for those in the gender-mixed sector.

However, in two of the mixed schools this interview itself was an eye opener for the heads of year being interviewed, where the gender statistics had not really been identified as significant.

'You asking questions have brought the issues back to the surface. The day to day of the classroom too often means that we forget what we know.'

Reasons for boys' underachievement

We heard a number of reasons for boys' underachievement. The most common we have grouped into outside and inside school influences:

Outside school

1: *Family breakdown and changes* – while there was an acknowledgement that there have always been one parent families most said that they thought the increasing number was having a significant impact on young people's lives. While not gender specific most thought this had a disproportionate impact on boys because it was usually the fathers who had left and most also suggested lack of male role models at home had its impact. (Experian in their study of 2004 found that 18% of all households were headed by a single parent).

'We are seeing a lot of boys whose fathers are not at home and are therefore without role models. Sometimes teachers have to be more active in this way.'

2: *Boys being 'mammied'* – some went further to say that the relationships between boys and their mothers impacted on boys' attitudes and behaviour. It was suggested that some boys lacked independence and responsibility when arriving in school; when boys found school life difficult they wanted to get their mothers into school to sort out problems. It was also suggested that some boys came into school and treated female teachers as they did their mother (expecting them to respond in the same way) and this often caused difficulties for some female teachers.

'The first year boys are terribly 'mammied'; they are not independent and are always running to their mummy. We ask them to sort out a problem and they want to get their mummy. They are always having things done for them. Too many parents want to be their son's friend and not their parent. They don't manage the boundaries, don't tell them NO and try to keep them happy. The boys then just bring this into class and push your buttons or want you to do everything for them.'

'The teaching staff is about two-thirds male and some of the boys will try to put it on the female teachers. We put this down to these lads not having a male role model at home and many of them being 'mammied'. They think they can treat female teachers the same way as they do their mums or, if they fall out with their mums, they can come in and take it out on female teachers.'

3: *Social and mental health services involvement* – one school reported a significant increase in their involvement with Social Services because of non-school difficulties experienced by pupils. While again this was not gender specific, it was suggested that boys often found this more disruptive to their education. One school said that over 10% of their current Year 10 was in families where Social Services were actively involved.

'Bands two and three have a significant number of children where Social Services are involved or there are at-risk concerns or mental health

problems (eighty-three – over 10%). Twenty-nine are currently seeing a counsellor.'

4: *Primary schools* – all but one school was of the view that the last three to five years had seen a change in the basic skills and attitudes of significant numbers of boys coming from primary schools. There is lower literacy and numeracy levels, poorer communication skills, emotional expression and, as already mentioned, lower levels of independence and responsibility. There is no research evidence to support these assertions that we could find, but teachers could be highlighting an important area of investigation.

'We are getting more boys coming to our school from primary education with problems, especially over the last five years. They are arriving less able to express themselves, less able to concentrate for longer than a few minutes and have poorer literacy and numeracy skills.'

'It's always a great mystery to me that children can arrive after years at primary school with so few basic skills. Increasingly we are seeing children, although not documented, with such low literacy skills. The English teacher in me thinks that children are on computer games and ipods and don't read.'

Inside school

1: *Learning styles* – one school, during their initial tests, looked at pupils' preferred learning styles. They found that boys preferred kinaesthetic styles (learning best through a hands-on approach, actively exploring the physical world), while girls were more likely to be auditory learners, with both tending to learn visually as well. This general preference became more apparent further down the band scale (boys and girls in the top band were more likely to be auditory and visual, while those in the bottom band were kinaesthetic and visual). Most concluded that delivery in schools tended to be auditory, but this was seen as a difficulty rather than a potential opportunity.

'We have also noticed that as you work down the bands you will find many more kinaesthetic learners and that is a real challenge for us. You can't band child in terms of their learning style, but you have to take it into account.'

2: *Motivation* – all schools identified differences in motivation between boys and girls and its importance. The mixed schools were of course able to make comparisons.

'Girls are often much more motivated; they can want to please while having better social and communication skills and they don't rock the boat. In contrast boys are more confrontational and they do rock the boat. Home expectations also play a role. If expectations are low it also tends to impact on their motivation.'

'Motivation is dwindling. I don't know whether it is because they are seeing more and more siblings and parents not working, so they can't see where learning is going. Our achievers from Year 8 will often have an idea of what they want to be but, as you go down the bands, they have less of an idea.'

Schools saw the benefits of the change to a more practical curriculum because it allowed the pupils (particularly underachieving boys) to see the relevance of what they were doing. These pupils were therefore more motivated to learn. In fact most schools saw that keeping lessons immediately relevant and practical was a critical way to maintain some boys' motivation.

In one school, encouraging boys to make choices on the basis of what they enjoyed was seen as a good opportunity to keep lower-stream boys motivated.

'In Year 10 they are making their choices and we try to steer the lower ability students into subjects that they enjoy. This is because they are more likely to pass these subjects (which might be art, PE, or more vocational subjects such as motor vehicle studies) and they will then have career options.'

Some saw a possible reduction in lower-band boys' motivation as they went up through the school. They were often de-motivated on arrival (see below), again in Year 10 and then again as they worked through their GCSE years.

While all schools mentioned 'incentives' as a way of keeping boys' motivation, what they used as incentives varied enormously from merit books to world cups!

'Boys like the recognition of their work and some teachers would use a merit book.'

One of the six schools made incentives a central plank in the way that they motivated boys.

'Boys are introduced to a points system for attendance, punctuality, uniform, behaviour, work produced and points gained from additional tasks taken voluntarily (such as clearing the playground) and the absence of detention, behavioural incidents, late or no homework and suspensions. At the end of each month these results are posted in the classroom and, if boys achieve enough points, then rewards such as trips to go paintballing are on offer.'

3: *Boys take longer to settle* – schools often mentioned that boys took longer to settle when they arrived. Some said this was because they were arriving as failures (having failed their 11 plus), some because boys took longer to get used to the change in structure at secondary school and others that boys struggle more with the social side of secondary school life. All of these were seen as having an impact on boys' motivation.

'Boys do take longer to settle in the school, so we have an induction day in June so children get a chance to take a look at the school and who else will be in their class. As part of their induction we go on a class building outdoor pursuit exercise. For the first year there are sixth form monitors / buddies (two for each class) and these are pupils who will look out for the new arrivals.'

'When boys arrive here we keep them in a base classroom (same teacher for all subjects). When they do leave that environment they can find this difficult, both socially and academically. This base system tends to work because it provides an opportunity to concentrate on basic skills (particularly literacy). If we don't manage to increase literacy levels then the pupils struggle with every subject.'

4: *General communication skills and emotional expression* – all of the mixed schools mentioned boys' lower ability to communicate and show their emotions. Schools tended to describe communication and emotional expression as areas that cut across many of the other reasons for boys' underachievement. They described boys getting into more conflict because of a lack of talk-based strategies for resolving conflict. Boys were less willing to participate in classroom discussion, ask questions and generally participate if they thought they might look inadequate. Boys also didn't use the pastoral and support services as much as girls and this was, in part, put down to them being offered in a talk- and emotion-led form in which, again, boys felt less confident.

'On the pastoral side, girls are much more mature, complicated and their difficulties more complex. Boys let off steam and too often it involves conflict between boys. We have had feuds in the school that have started outside, but it is much more common for boys to let off steam and it is over. Boys here do access counselling, they are often reluctant to go, but once they are there they make good use of it.'

5: *Boys have middle band drift* – one of the mixed schools strongly suggested that their middle band boys 'drift a bit' and thought that it was common for boys' predictions to be significantly above their results.

'The CAT scores (prediction of five A-C grades) gives a 60% chance of forty-one boys and twenty-four girls, but this never works out. The girls always do better. The boys have the potential, but are less likely to follow this through.'

6: *Boys attendance is lower* – one school suggested that boys' attendance in school was generally lower, but also tended to reduce as they went further up through school.

'The attendance of boys is poorer than girls in every year group (or after Year 10). There is a tailing off of boys' attendance from Year 10. We often find boys have family work, or talk their mums into letting them take time off work.'

In one of the schools this was seen as directly linked with motivation and their ability to achieve.

'Over the last two years we have changed the KS4 curriculum to attract boys. If we hadn't they would have stopped coming in. We offer a list of subjects, that have more of a vocational leaning and boys opt into these. We are trying to offer courses in which they are more likely to achieve rather than setting them up to fail. If we get this right there is a distinct improvement in attendance and if we don't we have as little as 50%. The education department expects 85%, but we have some complicated home lives. This is a negotiated curriculum; if we don't compromise we have little chance of reaching the attendance let alone the achievement levels.'

7: Staff changes – most schools reported a recent change in staffing. Usually this was older male teachers leaving and being replaced by younger female teachers. This was often commented on as a significant gender issue that impacted on boys and girls differently. For some this was a discipline issue while for others it compounded the loss of male role models in the home. This was thought to impact on male pupils disproportionately. From 1997/98 (when the upturn in total teacher numbers began) the rise in the number of female teachers has continued and by 2004/05 has risen to 308,000. The number of male teachers has continued to fall, to 133,000 in 2004/05 meaning that for every one male teacher there are more than two females. (Source: Department for Education and Skills; Welsh Assembly Government; Scottish Executive; Department of Education Northern Ireland, 2007).

'We have about eighty teaching staff and twenty of these are male. This has changed a lot, with older male teachers leaving and younger females more likely to be employed. The younger female teachers are often more willing to try new things, but the loss of the male presence in school makes a difference. The boys sometimes push it more with some of the younger female teachers. Art and music are now all female departments and if boys are not taking these as an option there are more discipline problems.'

'The male teachers in our school tend to be older, while the female teachers are younger. Last year the head flagged up, that with male teachers the boys seem to do better in specific subjects.'

8: School approaches to discipline - All of the mixed schools used positive discipline schemes and these appeared to be very effective in keeping

discipline problems to a minimum, but some interesting gender slants were highlighted.

'We don't have so many strategies that are boy-specific; they are more trans-gender. We use a system of positive discipline that uses incentives (termly prizes such as winning a bicycle), but I am not sure whether this really gets to those boys who have behavioural difficulties.'

All of the mixed schools said that serious discipline was not a major problem. For those pupils who, for a variety of reasons found the classroom difficult, a clear series of steps were in place that usually involved behavioural targets backed up by closer school / home contact and a very close link with the pastoral system.

In the two boy's schools, discipline was an area that the school felt it had to concentrate on. Within one a 'zero tolerance' approach meant that teachers use a red and yellow card system within the classroom (warning and removal) and home is contacted at the red card stage, which tends to bring the required result. In the other boys school a restorative approach has been adopted.

*'We don't have enforced discipline or detentions; what is a boy going to learn from being kept in a class for an hour? We are very much into restorative practices; you might have a pupil who tells the teacher to f**k off and we know that if we can get the boy to apologise and to take responsibility for what he has done he is more likely to learn how to resolve conflict and, in time, be less likely to do it again.'*

9: School linked to the outside world of work, home and community - most highlighted the importance of school being linked to the outside world as a critical factor in engaging and motivating (especially lower band) boys. We have already mentioned the more practical curriculum, but schools often mentioned careers guidance (including a more realistic view of the workplace as it changes). Schools were of the view that the closer they were to parents and home life the better, although this is not always an area that goes smoothly, especially the further down the bands you go.

'Work opportunities are important in terms of boys' motivation. We have many boys whose fathers are self-employed tradesmen and they see

themselves following their fathers. For these boys they don't think they need qualifications to do the jobs they have in mind, so where is the motivation?'

'We have a lot of difficulties communicating with parents. Too many of them don't see themselves as responsible for their son's education; they think it is only us. If there are problems with a student we have difficulties getting in touch when we need to. If there is a funeral or something it often isn't the parent we hear from, but the boy when he comes back.'

10: Schools awareness of Boys' underachievement - All schools were aware of the differences between boys' and girls' achievements, although some were not aware of the gap within their own school. Some were aware but, as already mentioned, the emphasis was on the 'individual' and their achievement and not on gender. This was understandable at one level; as there were boys in all bands, and therefore some were doing well, gender is not the only issue.

For at least two of the heads of year, the interview itself was illuminating while two others suggested it was 'a good reminder' of an issue that 'was on the back burner'.

'Boys' underachievement has been investigated over the last seven years. It is a live issue in school, but not to the level that you think it is. We have looked in our INSET days (at results and departmental development plan it will be a factor), but on a whole-school level it is in terms of underachievement generally. Here pupils are taken as individuals; targets and support will be for boys and girls, not just boys.'

For the boys schools you would have thought that gender was a very live discussion, but interestingly both the heads of year were focussed on 'what works' rather than what works for boys. Both were strong advocates for approaches that (literature would suggest) encouraged and enabled boys' achievement.

None of the schools interviewed had explicit strategies on boys' achievement.

Conclusions

All of the schools interviewed took boys who had failed their 11 plus. They were all streamed, all used entrance tests to decide which band pupils went to and all had a lot to say about boys, behaviour, motivation and had concerns about their futures.

All the schools we talked to were aware of the general statistics that showed that boys were behind girls in most secondary school measures.

All of the mixed schools, while acknowledging the statistics and their school's own gender differences, said that they did not take gender into account when they addressed under- and potential underachievement. They approached this on an individual basis. The two boy's schools of course had nothing to compare their boys to, but predictably saw more differences between boys in different bands.

Some of the heads of year were much too ready to confuse gender schooling with addressing boys' underachievement. For one of the year heads addressing gender meant single-gendered classes and another suggested a very narrow view of how a gendered understanding might be used within a mixed setting. While this is understandable, this might be more about how a gendered approach might be currently understood within secondary education.

When heads of year were asked for the reasons why boys were underachieving, some issues were seen as outside of the school's control. Family breakdown; lack of male role models in the family; low family aspirations; lower literacy and numeracy levels of boys coming from primary schools, higher involvement in pupils lives by social services and street and social lives as well as family involvement such as mother's being too active in their maternal role. While other reasons offered were school based, such as low motivation; learning styles; taking longer to settle and general communication although even these were not seen as in need of addressing as gendered issues.

Changes in general teacher profile were raised as an issue for the boys. While the average teacher was changing from the older male to the younger female concerns were raised by some that this would have a detrimental impact on boys, especially those without a male role model in the home. While there is little research evidence to suggest that this

does make a significant difference, it was seen particularly as an issue in terms of discipline styles and engaging with boys on an interest level.

Linked to this, but a different issue, was the change that had also occurred in the way that teachers were increasingly from outside of the school's catchment area. Some teachers will talk about their pupils as 'our young people' and while this can be a reference to religion it is also for some to do with geography. Where there is a stronger recognition from teachers in terms of seeing pupils as 'ours' the more likelihood there is that they will recognise their strengths as well as their weaknesses, which young men are likely to recognise and appreciate.

Discipline and boundaries was an area that is usually very problematic for schools in terms of lower band boys. However, in all of the schools, while boys did tend to appear more than girls in discipline structures they were not there in significant numbers. This suggests that the schools we interviewed are on top of discipline and that underachievement persists for other reasons. All of the mixed schools said they advocated a positive discipline approach and found that the three-stage contract with pupils worked on the whole. The two boys schools described their approaches in different ways (zero tolerance and restorative), but they tended to be structured well and used strong pastoral approaches in parallel.

A number of tensions arose during the interviews, especially with the mixed schools. Most described overload in terms of initiatives, structures, paperwork, approaches and ways of working. We concluded from this that another initiative; another strategy or another way of working would not be welcomed by the schools. However, there was a willingness to engage with approaches that would work with boys and ideas that had an evidence base that could be incorporated into already existing approaches. Investment that brought quick results seemed to be the request.

The most pronounced gender differences mentioned were:

- a. Motivation (especially boys in lower bands);
- b. Communication skills (boys in lower bands);
- c. Behaviour, with boys seen as more challenging (again in the lower bands) and
- d. Work presentation by girls was seen as consistently higher.

There were three areas in particular that we think schools could gain tangible results from:

1. Recognise the differences between the broad range of boys they have and the different needs that they may have (see appendix 1). Very little that teachers told us involved all boys and gender is probably not the primary factor, but it is often a significant secondary factor;
2. Understand what motivates boys and the approaches that exist that will enable boys' motivation to increase. While schools used incentives, although motivation is much more complex than a set of deal, the more schools understand this critical area the more they will be able to engage boys and raise their achievement levels;
3. Develop different ways in which boys can recognise that they are learning and different approaches that enable boys to see that they are building a skills as well as a knowledge base.

Trefor Lloyd
August 2009

Appendix 1 (for discussion)

DEALING WITH BOYS' UNDERACHIEVEMENT (WHO ARE WE TALKING ABOUT?)

Not all boys underachieve. All of the schools indicated that some were doing very well, but others were not. Schools were more aware of those who were in the lowest band who had behavioural issues as well as motivational and basic skills problems.

For the mixed schools, the avoidance of gender seemed to be as much about 'boys' underachievement' being too simplistic than a resistance to accepting the issue.

As a first step, we would suggest that we look at boys in at least five distinct groups:

Highest achievers	Able and behaved Able with attitude Able but distracted
Lowest achievers	Less able and behaved Less able with attitude

1. **Able and behaved** (boys who are academically focussed and generally well behaved).

2. **Able with attitude** (boys who are academically able, but too often get into conflict with teachers or other boys and end up off point – they are often poor communicators).

3. **Able but distracted** (boys who are academically able, but have their priorities elsewhere, such as being social, sport, carers at home or are generally focussed anywhere other than at school).

4. **Less able and behaved** (boys who struggle because of poor basic skills or a learning difficulty, but have a willingness and motivation to learn).

5. **Less able with attitude** (boys who struggle with their work, who become unengaged in class and are quite able to disrupt others and get involved in conflict with teachers and peers and are usually poor communicators).

Each of these groups will require different approaches and strategies and will impact on the school community in different ways. Targeted support on sub-groups 2 and 3 would have a significant impact on school achievement rates, as many of those not quite achieving five grades A*-Cs are likely to fall within these groups.

Groups 4 may require a significant input in terms of their work, while 5 may require a significant input on their behaviour as well as work related support, to enable them to move out of these groups.

Comment [TG1]:

Appendix 2

All the evidence says that girls are achieving more than boys. Is that your experience?

If it is why do you think that is the case?

If it is not your experience, why is your's different?

Have you seen changes in boys in the last three years? Five years? Ten years? If so what changes have you seen?

Do you see any changes in behaviour and motivation as boys go up through the school?

(This will provide a number of themes to follow up.)

How has the school adapted to these changes (school overall and in the classroom)?

What strategies does the school currently have in place to address boys' underachievement?

What do you think is working? What do you think isn't?

It is most schools' experience that boys spend the first half term (Year 1) finding their place in the playground. Is that your experience?

If so what do you do to assist this process?

In our recent research, boys consistently told us that school was the second safest place for them after their homes. Does that surprise you? (This may need some explanation.)

If we asked boys their definition of a good teacher, what would you expect them to say?

Do you think that would be different if we asked girls?

If we asked boys their definition of a bad teacher, what would you expect them to say?

What would you say would be the three things that would make the most difference in raising boys' achievement?

(Discuss these and others ideas that the teacher doesn't come up with.)

What support do you think schools need to address boys' underachievement?

Are there different strategies required for different groups of boys? (Such as those who clearly have ability, but are reluctant to use it; those who just do not want to be at school? Those who not only have bad days, but ones who get them into major problems.

Is there a place for other agencies to come into school?

Do you have those? Who are they? What other skills do you think would be useful?

What about parents? The evidence is that changes at home impact on school, but changes at school don't necessarily impact on home. Is that your experience?

Do you think that teachers are equipped during training to deal with boys?

What else is relevant, but I haven't asked you?

Trefor Lloyd
May 2009