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Emma Smith

School of Education, University of Birmingham, Edgbaston, Birmingham, B15 2TT, UK

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Underachievement, failing youth and moral panics

Emma Smith*

School of Education, University of Birmingham, Edgbaston, Birmingham B15 2TT, UK

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This paper considers contemporary ‘moral panics’ around the underachievement of boys in school examinations in the UK and America. In the UK, in particular, the underachievement of boys is central to current ‘crisis accounts’ about falling standards and failing pupils. ‘Underachievement’ is a familiar word to those who work with young people, however, the term itself is not unproblematic. Indeed, for such a widely reported phenomenon, it is perhaps surprising that different perspectives as to the nature and importance of the concept exist. It is these different perspectives on a seemingly well-established discourse, along with an examination of the concept we call ‘underachievement’ that form the focus of this paper. The importance of ensuring a fair and equitable schooling experience for all students is implicit in many societies, and a consideration of current moral panics surrounding the underachievement of boys provides a useful case study to help us consider what it is that we can reasonably expect from our schools and exactly which (if any) groups of young people are being let down by our education system.

Keywords: accountability; achievement; equality

Introduction

Today, underachievement is a synonym for much that is perceived to be wrong in today’s society, from low scores on international children’s reading tests to the social consequences of underachievement, such as criminal behaviour, social exclusion, and unsuccessful relationships and marriages (Bentley, 1998). Increased scrutiny of examination performance as the most tangible outcome of schooling has led to sections of the school population being labelled as failing or underachieving. The emergence of sophisticated international comparative tests such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) have enabled nations to look critically at the achievement of their students in the international arena. This has led to many nations re-examining their education systems in light of perceived failings in these comparative assessments. In some countries, this has been used to further justify dissatisfaction with the domestic school system and has led to accusations of underachievement and a ‘crisis account’ of falling academic standards and failing pupils (Francis & Skelton, 2005; Phillips, 1996).

In the USA, a long tradition of what has been perceived as mediocre performance on international tests such as TIMSS, has contributed to a re-focusing
of educational priorities away from policies that have attempted to resolve the inequities faced by poorer children, for example by increasing access to education, desegregating schools and reducing achievement gaps, towards ones concerned with more testing, more accountability and market driven systems of school choice (Orfield, 2000). Here, systems of high stakes testing epitomised by the ‘No Child Left Behind’ (NCLB) legislation have been put in place in order to raise standards in schools and to help propel the USA up the international education league tables (Popham, 2004; West & Peterson, 2003). Even so, much of what is set out in NCLB is praiseworthy; the Act is essentially equitable for it ensures that schools pay due regard to the progress of those sections of the school population who have traditionally done less well academically in school. That is, students from economically disadvantaged homes, as well as those from ethnic minority backgrounds, those who have special educational needs and who have limited proficiency to speak English (US Department of Education, 2002). However, as we often see with such moral panics around the underachievement debate, there is another perspective on this seemingly equitable piece of legislation, which suggests that unproven systems of testing, coupled with punitive accountability measures, can do much to reinforce inequities and label many otherwise good schools as failing (Linn, 2003; Smith, 2005a). In the UK, unfavourable international comparisons have contributed to the assertion that the performance of certain groups of students is characterised by a ‘long tail’ of underachievement (DfES, 2001). As in the USA, recent UK Government policy has its focus firmly on raising standards and eliminating all forms of underachievement. As a result, we have a system of national testing and target setting that is of unprecedented scale.

Within this context of national ‘crisis accounts’ of falling standards and failing students sit contemporary moral panics about the purported failure or under-achievement of large sections of the school population. In the UK, the focus has been mainly on failing boys (for example, Bleach, 1998; Epstein, Elwood, Hey, & Maw, 1998), with some commentators raising concerns about the relative attainment of certain young people from ethnic minority groups (for example, Gillborn & Youdell, 2000; Mac an Ghaill, 1988), and, to a seemingly lesser extent, the attainment of young people from the least wealthy homes (for example, Gore & Smith, 2001). In the USA, concern has tended to focus on the academic achievements of young people from African-American and Hispanic backgrounds (for example, Flanagan & Grissmer, 2003; Lee, 2002). In the next section, I look more closely at the problem of ‘underachievement’ as it relates specifically to the performance of boys in schools in the UK; and consider both the evidence and the explanations that are often given for their relatively poor achievement in school examinations.

Evidence for boys’ underachievement

In the UK, the underachievement of boys has occupied a prime place in the educational discourse for many years (for example, Francis, 2006; Gorard, Rees, & Salisbury, 1999; Smith, 2005b). Theories have evolved to explain the phenomenon and costly programmes have been put in place to try and ameliorate the issue. The moral panic surrounding the academic achievement of the nation’s boys has come about largely because examination results, especially for the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE),¹ suggest that the performance of girls has overtaken that of boys. Evidence for the purported underachievement of boys is readily
available. For example, Table 1 shows the proportions of students who achieve 5 or more GCSE passes at grades A*-C, as well as the proportions of those who achieve at least a grade C in English language. In both sets of results, the performance of boys is consistently lower than that of girls. Trends such as these are often used to suggest that, ‘boys have failed to build upon their performance at the same rate as girls in recent decades’ (Arnot, David, & Weiner, 1999, p. 23). However, notice also that the scores of both boys and girls have risen throughout the past decade and that the overall rate of improvement is faster for boys than for girls (Gorard, 1999).

Despite the trends in Table 1, relatively little attention has been paid to the improvements in the achievement levels of girls and the fact that the attainment of all pupils has risen steadily over the last 30 years is barely mentioned unless it is to decry falling standards and a ‘dumbing down’ of the school curriculum (Smithers & Ward, 2004). In short, boys have fallen behind in this one crude measure of success and the dominant view is that something has to be done about it. Numerous feminist researchers have drawn attention to this ‘backlash’ (see for example, Epstein et al., 1998; Francis & Skelton, 2005; Salisbury, 1996) and have made it clear that any attempts to raise the achievement of boys must not lose sight of the work done over the last three decades to improve the lot of girls in school. However, according to Raphael Reed (1998, p. 60), focusing on male ‘underachievement’ is not a case of debating whether this ‘underachievement’ exists because ‘its reality is a measure of its productivity in shaping educational policies and practices’. Indeed, there are a plethora of explanations for the apparent ‘underachievement’ of boys and three of the most prevalent are discussed below.

### Changing masculinities

One explanation frequently offered for the apparent underachievement of boys is that there are innate, natural born differences between the sexes: boys are more likely to suffer from oxygen starvation at birth, they have poorer verbal reasoning skills, they mature later than girls, their parents do not talk to them as much as they do to their sisters and so on (for example, Arnold, 1997; Cohen, 1998). However, according

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>5+ A*-C grades</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>Girls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

to some authors, these theories are based on ‘crude versions of cognitive psychology’ and have little basis in published research (Raphael Reed, 1998, p. 61). Mahony (1998, p. 42), on the other hand, links much of the ‘hysteria’ surrounding the underachieving youth or ‘public burden number 1’ to a fear among the male elite that men will lose ground to women in the workforce. In the UK, the collapse in the post-war boom of heavy industry and the replacement (particularly in some working-class homes) of the male as the main family breadwinner, have led to what some researchers would call a change in the gender regime of these communities and another explanation for the poor performance of young men in our schools (Arnold, 1997; Connell, 1994; Francis, 2006; Jackson, 1998; Spendlove, 2000; Yates, 1997). This has resulted in, ‘traditional working-class masculinities being deconstructed by impersonal forces whether men like it or not’ (Connell, 1994, p. 312). The influence of the peer group appears to be central to the role boys adopt in school. There are many examples in the literature of boys resisting working hard in order to avoid being seen as ‘gay’ or ‘spoffs’ (Connell, 1994; Measor, 1999), or Mac an Ghaill’s (1988) so-called ‘academic achievers’, behaviour that was evident even in the primary school where no label was worse than that of being called a ‘girl’ (Renold, 2001). As Epstein (1998, p. 97) points out, ‘the rejection of the perceived “femininity” of academic work is simultaneously a defence against the charge of being gay’.

**Assessment and the school curriculum**

Another reason often cited for the apparent relative failure of boys in today’s schools is the nature of the curriculum and the assessment practices that are currently adopted in schools. For example: the manner in which children perceive questions is said to be different – boys in isolation, girls in context; girls express themselves in a more reflective way than boys – which may advantage them in subjects like English and the humanities but less so in science and maths; the types of questions are perceived differently – boys preferring more multiple-choice styled responses (Murphy, 1988). Millard (1997) explores the notion of a gendered curriculum where the non-fiction reading practices preferred by boys have no place. She sees this as disadvantaging boys in the long term, as the narrative practices encouraged by the school curriculum have little relevance in the workplace. One of the most contentious methods of assessment has been coursework. Coursework is seen by some researchers to favour the hardworking methodical girl (Arnold, 1997; Elwood, 2005; Murphy, 1988; Pirie, 2001; Sammons, 1995; Spendlove, 2000; Younger & Warrington, 1996), to such an extent that the high coursework element of English was reduced in the early 1990s in an attempt to reduce girls’ lead in the examination stakes.

**The classroom, the teacher, teaching and learning**

Claims about the feminisation of the school curriculum have come hand-in-hand with the criticism of female teachers for imposing female values on our pupils; these claims, according to Delamont (1999), have a long history and little basis in fact. Nevertheless, they are reworked as an explanation for the relatively poor performance of boys and in calls for an increase in the number of male teachers in our schools (Hayes, 2002; Platten, 1999, see also Mills, Martino, & Lingard, 2004). The different behaviours and learning cultures of boys and girls are well documented (for example, Barker, 1995; Holden, 1993; Measor, 1999). Boys are frequently considered
to be ‘more concerned with preserving an image of reluctant involvement or
disengagement’ (Younger & Warrington, 1996, p. 303), while girls are increasingly
portrayed as being the ‘ideal student’. In the classroom, it is the boys who command
the ‘lion’s share’ of the teachers’ attention and receive a disproportionate amount of
the teachers’ time compared with the girls. Boys can bring another agenda into the
classroom, asserting themselves as jokers and as risk-takers, with a noisy approach to
their work and a dislike of the tedium of writing. As a result, they are frequently the
focus of classroom activity, whereas the girls are ‘marginalised’ on the edges. Some
researchers claim that this behaviour has a detrimental effect on the boys’ learning;
boys react against work they see as inappropriate and find open-ended tasks
involving discussion or collaboration difficult (Elwood, 2005).

Thus, there are three dominant explanations for the apparent ‘underachievement’
of boys in schools: the conflict of masculinity in contemporary society, the
curriculum and its assessment, and finally the every-day experience of both students
and teachers within the classroom. In response to concerns about male under-
achievement, a plethora of strategies and initiatives have emerged. These range from
experiments with single sex teaching to networks of sports clubs aimed at
encouraging ‘failing’ students to do better in school (for example, Arthur, 2004;
DfES, 2004; Henry, 2001). However, the absence of rigorous trialling means that the
efficacy of some of these strategies remains largely unproven (Smith, 2005b).

What is underachievement?

One thing that the above explanations for male underachievement have in common is
the tacit acceptance of a common meaning for the term ‘underachievement’. Underachievement is a familiar word to those in education; it has been described
as probably the ‘predominant discourse’ in education in recent times (Weiner, Arnot,
& David, 1997, p. 620). However, underachievement is a term over which there is little
consensus (Smith, 2003a). For example, how do you define underachievement and
how do you measure it? Simply labelling one group of students, such as boys, as
underachieving compared to another group, such as girls, tells us nothing about
which boys may be in need of additional support in school and nothing about what
the nature of this support might be. Frequently, the terms underachievement and low
achievement are conflated and the subject becomes even more complex if you were to
ask yourself what any underachievement might be relative to. Is it related to some
kind of innate ability on the part of the individual or is it achievement relative to that
of a larger group? In addition, the underachievement label is not only confined to
describing the relative achievement of groups of students, or also indeed individual
students; it is frequently offered as an explanation for the relatively poorer academic
performances of schools and of nations. Questions and confusions such as these are
fundamental to our understanding of the moral panics surrounding the under-
achievement discourse.

The wider perception of what is understood by the term ‘underachievement’ has
been further complicated with its adoption by the media as a synonym for much of
what is perceived to be wrong with education. In this guise, the term ‘under-
achievement’ is frequently confused with that of low achievement. For example, when
we read that smaller numbers of boys are achieving minimum proficiency levels
compared with girls, it is often suggested that the boys were ‘underachieving’. Whether these pupils were underachieving or not is not evidenced by these results;
what the results might tell us is that the achievement of boys on this particular measure was lower than that of girls. This conflation of underachievement and low achievement is important, as I have argued elsewhere: underachievement and low achievement are not the same thing (Smith, 2003a). Consider for example the student who, despite their best and most sustained efforts, fails to reach minimum proficiency levels on a given assessment. In the current climate of high stakes testing, this individual might arguably be labelled a ‘low achiever’ but, given their hard work and sustained effort, he or she is surely not an ‘underachiever’? Consider another student, whose past achievement has suggested them to be academically very capable but whose relative lack of interest or effort has secured them a B grade, rather than a top scoring A grade. Arguably this individual is ‘underachieving’ but is surely not a ‘low achiever’? Conceptualising underachievement and low achievement in this way has led us to re-examine what it is that we mean by the terms underachievement and low achievement and so to identify groups of students who may be underachieving or who may be low achieving (Smith, 2003b). Our results suggest that underachievers are a relatively heterogeneous group of individuals who, when they do appear to underachieve, do so for a range of reasons, some transient, others more profound. The results also provide limited evidence that working-class boys, for example, are any more likely to underachieve than their peers from other social groups. This is not to say that social class is not an important factor in educational attainment. On the contrary, the low achievers in our study were a clearly defined group of students who came from the poorest homes and who were more likely to be disadvantaged in the school assessment system, in aggregate terms, at every level.

An alternative account of boys’ underachievement

In this section, I will re-examine some of the evidence often presented for the underachievement of boys and consider some of the contradictions and inconsistencies that underpin the discourse. In the previous section, I summarised several of the explanations often presented for the ‘underachievement’ of boys. Given the complexity of the gender debate and uncertainties over what it is that we actually mean by the term underachievement, it is not surprising that an alternative account of the underachievement phenomenon also exists. For example, Delamont (1999, p. 13) contends that, ‘it is pointless to be swept away by a moral panic about “failing”, anti-school working-class boys. This is not a new problem’. Schools, she argues, have never been able to deal with the working-class boy. According to Delamont (1999, p. 3), the whole standards debate is surrounded in a ‘discourse of derision’, compounded by a lack of understanding of the academic gains made by all pupils, and coupled with the media’s resistance to hearing good news. That ‘underachievement’ is not a new phenomenon has also been demonstrated in an historical study by Cohen (1998). She noted the seventeenth-century academic John Locke’s consternation that young men found it difficult to succeed in Latin, while their younger sisters would ‘prattle’ on in French having had little or no formal instruction. The standard of the young men’s English also gave him little joy. In England and Wales, concern over falling standards is well established, with influential government-commissioned reports having a long history of criticising school standards as being in crisis. For example the Black Papers, published in the late 1960s, reported that achievement in reading was lower than in previous years, older children did not know their tables, examiners were appalled at the poor levels of
English and the standard of the 11+ intake into grammar schools was in decline (Cox & Dyson, 1969). For example, in the 11+ examinations in Wales, the results of boys and girls were adjusted to ensure equal proportions would be successful and so gain entry to the grammar schools. If the top 40% had been selected for these schools regardless of sex, two-thirds of the pupils in grammar schools would have been female (Rees & Delamont, 1999). Gorard (2001) also disputes the fact that boys have ever attained higher grades than girls in compulsory education at any time over the past 25 years. However, underlying these concerns about gender bias in the way that students are assessed is the assumption that our assessment system is gender neutral and that boys and girls ought to achieve the same levels in school examinations. This is a key issue when considering gender equality in examination outcomes. If researchers are writing about how gender differences are encouraged by social conditioning (Millard, 1997), how they can be reinforced by schools (Delamont, 1990) or, more controversially, how they can arise from innate differences in the structure and development of the brain (Gurian, 2001), is it still realistic to cling to the notion that despite everything that happens in schools, the examination system should somehow remain gender neutral?

As we say above, one important piece of evidence supporting the underachieving boys claim is the differential performance of boys and girls in English and language examinations. In the next section, I will consider student performance data in literacy-based subjects. Evidence from three sources will be presented: national tests in English in England and Wales over a 30-year period, nationally representative longitudinal assessments of reading in the USA and the results from international comparative tests. The acquisition of literacy skills is important and is sometimes seen as a highly gendered activity. For example, research tells us that throughout school, girls are the keener readers who are more likely to be ‘devoted’ to their books (Elwood, 2005; Millard, 1997). When boys do read, their favoured genres – action and adventure and non-fiction – can leave them disadvantaged in the school curriculum, where narrative accounts that emphasise personal responses are favoured. However, although the English curriculum may well disadvantage boys, there is little correlation between achievement in English examinations and success in later life (Millard, 1997), but as success in English examinations can act as a gateway to education and employment opportunities, the disadvantage that boys have in acquiring the ‘right’ literacy skills can be compounded.

Reconsidering the gender gap in literacy-based subjects

That boys underachieve in literacy-based subjects is of fundamental concern to those engaged in the ‘underachieving boys’ debate (for example, Francis, 2000). Here the evidence from three assessments will enable us to consider achievement gaps between male and female students in literacy-based subjects across time as well as across different cultural and educational settings.

England and Wales: achievement in English at age 16

Figure 1 shows the achievement gap between the number of 16-year old male and female students who gained a grade C or above in national tests in English between 1970 and 2006. The results for English show a steady achievement gap in favour of the girls, but it is a gap that has hardly changed since the early 1970s. There is little
evidence here of any differences over time in the relative performance of boys and girls in English; indeed the current gap is the smallest since the early 1980s.

Similar trends have also been noted for other subjects. For example in History, French and Welsh, the performance gap has consistently been in favour of girls, with little fluctuation for almost 30 years. Mathematics was one subject that has seen a decrease in the achievement gap. From favouring the boys in the 1970s and 1980s, the trend changed in the early 1990s and both groups now enjoy almost equal success. What caused this change to a well-established trend is not easy to uncover, but it does appear to coincide with the introduction of compulsory coursework in mathematics during the early 1990s (Smith, 2005b). Similar patterns emerge when trends in the proportions of students achieving grades at C or above in more than one GCSE subject are considered (Gorard & Smith, 2004).

**USA: achievement in the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) at age 13**

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) is a large-scale national test that is used to monitor achievement trends in the USA. Also known as the ‘Nation’s Report Card’, NAEP has been undertaking nationwide annual assessments of student achievement in various subjects since 1969. In addition, the NAEP long-term trends assessment has been administering the same set of tests to 9-, 13- and 17-year olds since 1971 in reading and since 1973 in mathematics, so making it possible to track educational progress over extended periods of time (NCES, 2005). Table 2 below shows the trends in average reading scores for 13-year old students between 1971 and 2004. The same pattern in male/female attainment in reading occurs here as in national examinations at age 16 in England and Wales, and reflects an achievement gap in favour of female students that appears to have existed over the last three decades.

**International: the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)**

The PISA is a series of international comparative tests which are designed to, ‘assess student performance and collect data on the student, family and institutional factors that can help explain differences in performance’ (OECD, 2001, p. 14). To date, there have been four waves of PISA: the first, in 2000, focused mainly on reading; the second, in 2003, focused on mathematics; and the most recent wave, in 2006, focused on science. The latest wave of PISA was scheduled for 2009 and again focused on reading. As our concern in this discussion is with differential attainment in literacy,
I have presented data from the 2000 wave of PISA. As you can see from Table 3, girls are performing consistently higher than boys in the PISA reading assessment: a trend that is replicated not only across all countries presented in Table 3, but also across all countries participating in PISA 2000.

Notwithstanding the technical and conceptual problems of comparing test data across different years, cohorts and nations (for example, Bracey, 1996; Newton, 2005; Prais, 2003), it does appear that achievement gaps between male and female students in literacy-based subjects are relatively well established across time, as well as appearing resistant to various cultural and educational settings. This constancy might make us re-consider some of the explanations given for the apparent underachievement (or perhaps differential attainment might be a more apposite term) of boys in literacy-based assessments.

### Table 2. Average reading scores among 13-year-old students, according to sex.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Gap between male and female students</th>
<th>Total students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>261</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>255</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1975</td>
<td>262</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>256</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>263</td>
<td>254</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>258</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>262</td>
<td>253</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>257</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>263</td>
<td>252</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>257</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>263</td>
<td>251</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>257</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>265</td>
<td>254</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>260</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>266</td>
<td>251</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>258</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>264</td>
<td>251</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>258</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>265</td>
<td>254</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>259</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>264</td>
<td>254</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>259</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


### Table 3. Student performance on PISA combined reading assessment, according to sex.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Mean score (boys)</th>
<th>Mean score (girls)</th>
<th>Mean difference (boys and girls)</th>
<th>Mean score (all pupils)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>513 (4.0)</td>
<td>546 (4.7)</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>528 (3.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>388 (3.9)</td>
<td>404 (3.4)</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>396 (3.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>519 (1.8)</td>
<td>551 (1.7)</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>534 (1.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>520 (3.0)</td>
<td>571 (2.8)</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>546 (2.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>490 (3.5)</td>
<td>519 (2.7)</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>505 (2.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>468 (3.2)</td>
<td>502 (3.9)</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>484 (2.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>507 (6.7)</td>
<td>537 (5.4)</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>522 (5.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Korea</td>
<td>519 (3.8)</td>
<td>533 (3.7)</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>525 (2.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>411 (4.2)</td>
<td>432 (3.8)</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>422 (3.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK</td>
<td>512 (3.0)</td>
<td>537 (3.4)</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>523 (2.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USA</td>
<td>490 (8.4)</td>
<td>518 (6.2)</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>504 (7.1)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Standard error values are given in parentheses.

### Discussion

Several issues arise from our re-examination of some of the issues surrounding recent moral panics about the underachievement of boys. They lead us to question whether boys are actually underachieving and challenge the very nature of the term...
‘underachievement’. Indeed, one of the enduring ‘myths’ about standards in education has arisen from ‘moral panics’ about the perceived underachievement of boys in school examinations. This ‘moral panic’ has come about largely through interpretations of examination data which suggest not only that girls are outperforming their male peers, but also that the performance gap between them is widening. But, as some of the evidence presented here has shown, the reality is not so clear-cut. There is no evidence to suggest that the gap in male/female performance is increasing, that girls are becoming more likely to achieve higher grade passes than boys or that boys are underachieving in school examinations. What is clear is that the achievement of all students continues to rise and, in addition, what achievement gaps do exist between the performance of male and female students appear to have existed for some considerable time and appear resistant to different cultural and educational settings. In fact, the very constancy of achievement gaps in literacy-based subjects over time and place suggests that it is a phenomenon that transcends cultures, curricula and education systems. This historical focus on male ‘underachievement’ is interesting. As these results suggest, it may well be the case that girls have outperformed boys for some considerable time. However, the changing function of education in today’s society and its relationship with work and family life has arguably meant that, from a male perspective at least, the stakes of educational failure are now much higher.

That boys are performing less well than girls in certain literacy-based subjects is indeed a cause for concern: ‘the issues surrounding boys’ achievement are real and should not be underestimated but the question of gender and performance is more complex, affecting different sub-groups of boys and girls in different ways and often reflecting the influence of class and ethnicity’ (Arnot, Gray, James, & Rudduck, 1998, p. 1). But the focus should be on which (if any) particular groups of pupils appear to be failing to reach their potential and why. This would herald a move away from the traditional binary notion of boys versus girls to include an assessment of other variables such as ethnicity and home background which may have a more profound effect on an individual’s learning. For example, if it is the case that boys are underachieving in school, then labelling boys as underachieving does little to help explain or remedy the issue – we cannot change the fact that they are boys. Another issue is the assumption that our assessment system is gender neutral and that boys and girls should achieve the same outcomes in school examinations. Of course, it could become gender neutral by ensuring equal success for boys and girls, in much the same way that places in grammar schools in England and Wales were allocated 40 years ago, but is that really what we want from our school assessment system?

In short, that boys are less likely to reach expected proficiency levels in literacy-based subjects should not be taken as evidence for their underachievement. As we have seen, notwithstanding the evidence presented above, underachievement is itself a concept over which there is much confusion and little consensus. This is not merely a semantic difference between how we use the terms ‘low achievement’ or ‘underachievement’. Both terms appear to describe a very different population: low achievers tend to be those who come from the poorest homes while underachievers represent a far more heterogeneous section of the school population.

Arguably, underachievement is a term that has probably outlived its usefulness. The lack of clarity in its use has led to multiple meanings that sometimes disguise the true nature of patterns of learning in schools. Its conflation with low achievement presents further complications and obscures the fact that there are clearly defined
groups of young people who fail to achieve minimum levels at each stage of their education; these of course are the young people who come from the poorest homes. Perhaps it is here that educational reform programmes ought to be targeted first.

Notes
1. GCSE is the national examination in England and Wales taken by the majority of students at the end of compulsory schooling (aged 15–16). Grades are awarded in the range A*–G, with C being the notional minimum proficiency benchmark grade.
2. The achievement gap is defined as, ‘an index of the difference in an educational indicator (such as an examination pass rate) between two groups (such as male and female)’ (Gorard 2000, p. 203). It is calculated by analysing the gaps in entry and in performance between two groups as shown in the equation below:

\[
\text{Achievement gap} = \frac{(GP - BP)}{(GP + BP)} \times 100 - \frac{(GE - BE)}{(GE + BE)} \times 100
\]

GP, number of girls achieving that grade or better; BP, number of boys achieving that grade or better; GE, number of girls entered; BE, number of boys entered.

References


