

Two investigations

As the Stand Out Boys Project (SOBP) was developing, we carried out two investigations to fill gaps we thought were essential for us to understand. The first was to see if we could identify the characteristics that boys, who were underachieving (or were low achievers) by year 6, were showing. We did this by tracking back to reception and seeing what their teachers said about them and which characteristics may have contributed to their under / low achievement.

The second was a review of children's levels as they worked their way from reception to year 6 (this was possible because the data collection methods had remained the same).

These were investigations and not research as such, mainly because we were looking at such small samples, and we were more interested in the practical outcomes we could use to inform the SOBP intervention.

These are summaries of the two investigations.

Boys Development Project

Project Name: **Do Boys Catch-up**

Author: Trefor Lloyd

Background

Within early years, there is a commonly held belief that while boys come into school behind girls (particularly in terms of communication and fine motor skills), they catch-up by year three or four. Thought to be a gender difference in brain structure (from the same "girls talk" and "boys read maps" theory). One reason why many schools have waited, rather than intervened with boys as they come into reception.

Project objective

To see whether boys catch-up with girls as they make their way through primary school, and whether girls and boys take the same academic routes through their primary years.

Project scope and exclusions

Year 6 had 59 children, with 31 girls and 28 boys, while year 5 had 55 with 25 girls, and 30 boys, making a total sample of 114, with 56 girls and 58 boys.

What we did?

We analysed one school's levelling data for years 5 and 6 (year 1-5 and 2-6). The current collection format has been in operation since 2009, and provides 5 years of comparable data.

Findings

1. At year 5 and 6 the top 20% of achievers had even numbers of girls and boys, while the bottom 20% contained more boys (significantly more in the year 5 cohort). This is reflective of the national picture where the top 20% are even numbers of boys and girls, and the bottom 20% are three-quarters, boys.
2. If girls started low (year 1), they generally progressed at the expected levels (6 sub-levels per subject), while the boys who started low were more likely to remain low and/or make erratic progress. For the bottom 20% there were some large leaps forward (3 sub-levels) followed by a sub-level backwards, and standstill was quite common, especially in years three to four. Whether this is related to the teacher levelling (some discrepancies would be expected), children liking the teacher, or something else is difficult to determine.
Boys are thought to 'catch-up' with girls in year three or four, but within this cohort, there was little evidence of this occurring.
3. FSM, EAL and SEN were prominent in the bottom 20%. No real surprise there, but the combinations of boy, FSM, EAL and SEN were significant. In the year 6 cohort, the number of girls receiving FSM was very high (almost half), and this may have cancelled out much of the gender differences.
4. Most boys and girls who started their schooling in the top 20%, or the bottom 20%, remained there throughout their primary years. This suggests that the school added value similarly in both the top and bottom 20%.

Conclusions

There is little evidence to suggest that boy's catch-up in years three and four as the literature suggests there is little evidence to suggest most boys catch-up at all.

The target for improving boys achievement may need to be focused on the bottom 20% and possibly the bottom 40% and as early in their school career as possible, rather than wait for them to catch up. This might be particularly the case if FSM, EAL and SEN also play a part.

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Project Name: **Trackback low achievers**

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Background

Our 'Stand Out Boys' project (SOBP) aims to prevent underachievement by targeting those boys (as they come into reception) who show characteristics that will prevent them settling into their learning. Within early years, in particular, there is a commonly held belief that while boys come into school behind girls (particularly in terms of communication and fine motor skills), they catch-up with girls by year three or four.

This is thought to be a gender difference in brain structure for some, and better-developed parts of the brain (from the same school of thought where girls talk and boys read maps) for others.

This has in part been one of the reasons why schools are not over-concerned about boys being behind when they come into reception. The neuroscience of the last 8 or 9 years has questioned the significance of gender difference and development literature (especially hard-wired brain differences).

Project objective

To identify children in year six who were under, or low achievers, and by looking at their reception and year 1 reports (and where possible talk with the teachers involved) to see whether common characteristics, could be identified.

Outcomes

To identify characteristics that may have contributed to their under, or low achievement, so that children who have these characteristics can be targeted and replaced with more school learning characteristics.

Project scope and exclusions

We wanted to identify those children, but boys in particular, who by year 6 were in the bottom 20% of their classes, but not diagnosed with SEN issues (such as ASD).

Project limitations

For ease of access, only schools that knew the investigator were approached (schools in Lewisham). No outside school events were taken into account (for example, bereavements, re-housing and family changes).

What we did?

Identified twenty boys in the bottom 20% across 5 schools, where their behaviour was thought to be a strong contributor to their underachievement.

We looked at their levelling data (for all years from reception to year 5) and their end of year reports written by their class teacher, when in reception and year 1.

We also, where possible interviewed their teacher when in reception and year 1, this was possible in three-quarters of all cases (15/20).

Findings

Coded language in reports

Most of the teachers' reports were positive and reassuring, and full of coded language. Statements such as "he is a very active boy, loves to be in the outside play area, and is starting to learn how to share with others". Translated this meant, "is fine outside doing what he wants until another child wants the bike, ball or toy".

Teachers, when asked about their meaning, were much more direct, and to the point. They usually wanted to put a more positive spin to reassure parents. This often meant that unless there were incidents where parents had been contacted directly (major hitting, or biting), parental reassurance was as at least as important as child behaviour problems. Reception teachers often said they were hoping the behaviour would settle down as children became used to the structures and routines, while year one teachers were often hoping they would settle down to the more formal structure. Hope too often dominated their strategy.

Recognisable characteristics

There were some common themes highlighted by the teachers (in retrospect) and decoded from their reports. These were as follows:

1. Children (usually boys) who were **over-physical**. Those that found sitting on the carpet difficult, and preferred to be outside and more active.
2. Children (usually boys), who found instructions difficult to follow, tended to be those that either had too much "NO" in them, or would move away when instructions were given (such as at tidy-up time).
3. Children (usually boys), who had little or no language and poor communication skills. This didn't necessarily mean EAL, in fact, those children that were strong in their mother tongue often picked up English very quickly.
4. Children who found conflict easy and social relationships difficult, but these were often those children who had a combination of 1, 2 and 3 (above). So, for example, those children who were physical in their play and had lower language were more often than not likely to grab a toy back rather than ask for it. Children who had little or no language either played on their own or were drawn to other low verbal and often physical children who played physical activities and more likely to fall out.
5. Children with higher than average emotional levels. Again often a combination of 1 to 4, and usually they would reach a tipping point (anger or tears), very quickly and struggled to self-regulate these outbursts.

Managed or changed

There were several reasons why these issues were not addressed effectively:

- A. Teachers often thought (hoped?) they would grow out of the behaviours. Maturity and "boys settling later" were common thoughts.
- B. At 4 and 5 teachers were reluctant to "label" young children and also some of these children had strong redeeming features such as "he made us all laugh", "he had such big eyes and smile, it was hard to tell him off".
- C. Sometimes the teachers said they tried to keep the child calm, so often treated them differently (let behaviour go, or let them sit, for example, with a toy in their hand). This created more problems than it solved, as some of these children expected to be able to get away with poor behaviour.

- D. Especially for reception teachers, they had 30 children all getting used to the structures and routines of reception, with only themselves and a Teaching Assistant to manage behaviour, leaving them stretched if only one child “kicked off” let alone if it was more. Teachers often talked about the atmosphere being “different” when certain children were off sick and how some children “sparked” others.
- E. Some teachers mentioned the difficulties they had with some of the parents of the track-back children. Sometimes they didn't want to raise concerns because they didn't know how parents would react, and sometimes they said they were "scared" to raise concerns. Others didn't want to increase parents concerns and anxieties, and while incidents might occur, they were not serious enough to raise with parents.

Conclusions

Common characteristics were not surprising (physicality, language, non-compliance, conflict, emotions and low social skills). Too often a low verbal, physical and high emotion boy in reception was the same, but bigger, in year 6. For those 'tracked-back', maturity, and getting used to structure and routine did not seem to work.

Interestingly, for most of the children did not have year-on-year struggles, but had some good years. Digging a little deeper (but not systematically), some teachers were either able to get them to focus on their learning (and behaviour was less disruptive), or they seemed to find ways to manage their behaviour. Not enough to change it, but enough to manage it. This is worthy of more investigation.

Certain characteristics could be identified, suggesting that early intervention could be an effective way of catching low/underachievement before it gets started. This may mean that some children would be targeted that might "grow out of it", but this "track-back" exercise suggests it would be worth the investment.

Whilst carrying out this study in 5 schools, there was some discussion about the time taken up by these individual children, with only limited impact. Teacher time, school senior management time and meeting with parents and sometimes outside agency started to look like a poor investment.

Teachers feeling either ill-equipped, or reluctant to raise concerns with parents, suggests a training need. Some teachers quite rightly said "start and end of the day" are difficult times to talk to parents, who are often

looking for a "thumbs up", or it means a conversation in front of other parents (difficult for both teacher and parent).

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(Investigation carried out in April 2013, but this summary written in February 2015)