

## TEACHING & LEARNING JOURNAL - EDITION 32

### Progress of Boys

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The 2019 GCSE results highlighted that the science department is not immune from the national trend of female students outperforming their male counterparts. Addressing this gap became a key focus for my CPD this academic year.

I decided to read literature around the topic and was recommended the book 'Boy's Don't Try' by Pinkett & Roberts (2019). The book was engaging and full of useful tips and strategies to inform future practice. This was further supplemented via a live webinar with one of the authors of the book in May 2020.

My views on engagement myths were challenged. Boys like competitions, with only one winner do boys see failure as a protection strategy and does it reinforce stereotypes? I have certainly tried to engage boys by making learning more 'boy' friendly and relevant. However, this is naïve as not all boys are the same, they will soon get bored and do these approaches decrease opportunities to develop cultural capital? On reflection, I would also consider the impact on engagement, of asking students to read aloud test scores or displaying marks visually for all to see. Low stakes assessments with high success rates are far more likely to motivate. I will strive to enthuse students by displaying the enjoyment I have of my own subject and the enjoyment I receive from excellent student work.

Does setting negatively impact upon disadvantaged boys? 'Bottom' sets packed full of disengaged boys fuels a self-fulfilling prophecy. Instead, all students should have access to the same rich curriculum, with movement between sets based on regular assessment. Also, the department's strongest teachers should not be reserved for top sets and the quantity/quality of home learning should not be reduced.

Does making tasks optional promote engagement? This may appear on the surface to be in direct conflict with Academy policy of setting diamond challenge tasks. However, setting appropriate tasks that provide enough challenge that allow students to work in the 'stretch' zone fits amazingly well with this concept.

Whilst difficult to accept, do teachers hold non-conscious stereotypical views or have low expectations of boys? Research on the Pygmalion vs the Gollum effect featured in the book was thought provoking. Boys will soon learn which teachers have low expectations and in which lessons they can 'get away with it'. Teachers that create an ethos of excellence, have high expectations and those that enforce behaviour expectations are more likely to be successful with all students, especially boys.

In January, when I joined the 'progress of boys' CPD group, I had the opportunity to discuss ideas and to listen to the views of others. My initial focus was a group of five boys in 11x/Sc1. I focused on the group during lessons through regular live marking and maintaining high expectations in terms of the standard of work expected. I also recognised that boys don't always respond to praise in front of others, to this end, after two weeks of focusing on the group, I made phone contact with parents to praise their increased engagement in the subject and suggest further ways to improve. This continued and the regular dialogue with students and parents was showing promising signs until global events with Covid-19 interrupted the study. However, this seemingly simple and obvious strategy is something I will maintain in future.

Moving forward, the topic of rethinking masculinity is high on my agenda. Many of the ideas discussed are focussed on breaking down and removing gender stereotypes. I for one will be considering the language that I use and the resources that I share, to ensure that I avoid promoting 'toxic masculinity'. As a teacher, I have a pivotal role in promoting a more tender version of masculinity through my actions and expectations of what boys can achieve.

