Background

Over the last two decades, girls have been performing increasingly well at GCSE level. Their achievements at this level now exceed those of boys in all core subjects (MacInnes, 1998; Barker, 1997), excluding some minor yearly fluctuations. This development has been widely discussed in the media and in the academic press (e.g., Panorama, 1994; The Guardian, 1998; Barker, 1997; QCA, 1998), constructing a new discourse of ‘boys’ underachievement’ (Epstein et al., 1998). This notion is contested, and many researchers have debated the extent of the apparent ‘gender gap’ at GCSE level (Yates, 1997; Weiner et al., 1997; Gorard et al., 1999). However, it is certainly the case that girls have recently been matching boys in even the most stereotypically masculine subjects at GCSE level, while continuing to out-perform them in other areas (Epstein et al., 1998; Arnot et al., 1999).

Much non-feminist work on gender and achievement at GCSE level tends to suppose that boys’ comparative underachievement can be attributed to their needs not being met in the classroom. For instance, that education is not sufficiently appealing to boys, or that a predominance of female teachers will favour or appeal to girls rather than boys (e.g., Clark, 1998; Barker, 1997). However, a large body of evidence suggests that the school curriculum has always reflected and favoured the interests of boys at the expense of girls, and that a far greater proportion of teacher time and attention is spent on boys than on girls (see, for instance, Spender, 1982; Howe, 1997; Younger et al., 1999). This evidence was used by feminist researchers in the early 1980s to explain girls’ lack of educational achievement in comparison to boys. Yet two decades on, research shows that girls’ educational achievement has improved despite the continuing male-dominance of the classroom, curriculum content (for example, History’s focus on the lives of men) and greater demands on teacher time (Skelton, 1997). This implies that the actual cause of the change in gendered levels of achievement may be found elsewhere.

Researchers such as Pickering (1997), Younger and Warrington (1996) and Salisbury and Jackson (1996) have found some evidence to suggest that boys’ constructions of masculinity as ‘macho’ and anti-school, and the pressure applied by male peers to conform to these constructions, are the primary reason for boys’ underachievement at GCSE level. The study reported sought to explore this possibility, and to reflect on why girls’ achievement has improved so dramatically over the last two decades.

Despite the improvement in girls’ achievements at GCSE, pupils’ subject choices for post-compulsory education remain starkly and traditionally gendered (Whitehead, 1996). This gender divide is also evident in post-compulsory training, with far more male students opting for vocational training than females, and a clear gender division in the types of training undertaken (Rees, 1999). Males tend to take up technical courses, while females opt for courses geared to the caring or service sectors. And in the academic subject areas, females tend to take up arts and humanities courses, where males are typically concentrated in the sciences (Thomas, 1990; Rees, 1999). This reflects an ‘arts/caring - female; science/competitive - male’ dualism which is a facet
of the gender dichotomy (Francis, 1998a). These subject choices hold implications for student’s futures in the adult workplace. Rees (1999) describes the continuing demand for engineers and IT specialists across Europe, and how these and other scientific/technical jobs are particularly highly remunerated. However, as Rees observes, fewer women than ever are training for such jobs. On the other hand, the service sector is expanding. This sector incorporates many jobs which require skills and attributes traditionally perceived as ‘feminine’ (such as communication skills, empathy, etc). The manufacturing sector, in which many jobs relied on ‘masculine’ traits such as physical strength, has been in decline (Arnot et al, 1999). Thus the (gendered) choices that students make about their education/training directions have strong implications for their future lives.

The study, then, sought to explore pupils’ constructions of gender, learning, and their future aspirations concerning post-compulsory education and work.

**Theoretical approach**

According to Davies (1989, 1993), at a very young age children come to see that in the wider society people and many objects and behavioural aspects are labelled according to gender. The construction of a gender identity therefore becomes integral to their sense of social identity and ability. In order to clearly delineate their gender identity, children draw on dominant gender discourses and stereotypically gendered modes of expression. Francis (1998a) examined these processes in the primary school. She found that by drawing on a dichotomous discursive practice which genders all behaviours, children in primary school constructed the genders as oppositional and adopted oppositional behaviours in an attempt to increase their sense of gender identity. The dominant construction of femininity (‘sensible, selfless’) involved being well-behaved, selfless, mature and diligent in the classroom. The masculine position (‘silly, selfish’) involved being immature, selfish, disruptive and competitive. The children by no means adopted these modes consistently; yet Francis (1998a) showed how they often constructed themselves as behaving according to these gender constructions, even when apparently behaving very differently (see also Skelton, 1997).

The construction of femininity as selfless, well-behaved, mature and diligent fits easily with school culture and with the approach required for learning. Walkerdine (1990) and Belotti (1975) have shown how primary school girls often attempt to position themselves as pleasing the teacher or, in Walkerdine’s (1990) words, as ‘quasi-teachers’. Previous research has shown that such behaviour has tended to be taken for granted in girls, or even despised, by the teacher (see Stanworth, 1981; Walkerdine, 1990; Claricoates, 1980). Walkerdine (1988) argued that Piagetian ‘child-centred’ approaches which became the educational vogue in the 1970s positioned ‘feminine’ traits such as diligence and conscientiousness as repressive (as the child was supposed to develop through creative play and experimentation). Instead, the child-centred approach encouraged and rewarded ‘masculine’ traits such as individuality and boldness.

Because the masculine behaviour of boys embodied these traits, teachers were found to credit boys with high educational ability, despite apparently poor written performance (Walkerdine, 1988, 1990). However, Francis (1998a) argues that during the 1980s and ‘90s a new discourse of ‘the basics’ (stressing the importance of presentation, spelling, effort, and ‘the 3 Rs’) took precedence over child-centred notions. This new educational discourse rewards ‘feminine’ traits
of diligence, maturity and conscientiousness and penalises 'masculine' disruptiveness and immaturity. Thus primary school boys' dominant construction of masculinity conflicts with the school culture and with contemporary discourses delineating the proper way to learn. Francis suggests that such constructions may consequently contribute to boys' lesser rate of educational success in comparison to girls.

The hypothesis forwarded in my research proposal suggested that if it is indeed the case that boy's dominant constructions of masculinity involve a rejection of 'feminine' educational values, strategies such as altering learning materials or teaching styles to suit boys' masculine tastes (as suggested by Government ministers and some of the works listed above) would represent superficial gestures. They would fail to alter boys' approaches to learning as they do not engage with the issue at the root of boys' behaviour - their construction of masculinity.

I do not mean to suggest that all boys construct masculinity in the same way (or that girls construct femininity in the same way either). Work by researchers such as Walkerdine (1990), Skelton (1997), Phoenix et al (forthcoming) and Mac an Ghaill (1994) have demonstrated that pupils' constructions of gender differ depending on factors such as social class and ethnicity, as well as the various resources available to them. However, as Francis (1998a) and others have shown, 'dominant' or 'hegemonic' constructions can be identified.

Objectives

Hence, in addition to the main objectives referred to on page 4, the specific objectives were to:

i) explore how secondary school pupils' constructions of gender develop or differ from those in the primary classroom

ii) investigate how these gender constructions impact on approaches to learning

iii) examine the similarities and differences between discourses drawn on by male and female pupils concerning education

iv) Analyse pupils' subject preferences and future post-compulsory education and career aspirations according to gender, and explore the ways in which their constructions of gender appear to impact upon these.

These objectives were unchanged during the research, and are addressed by turn here. I begin with the main objectives stated on Page 4 of this form.

1) The theories of gender construction and 'symbolic gender cultures' (Francis, 1998a), were developed during the data analysis, in order to explain the students' differing gender positions. The 'analysis of discourse' approach to data analysis (using the methods set out in Francis, 1999a) was employed and developed during data analysis. These developments were discussed in ensuing publications.

2) Regarding the development of knowledge of the ways in which pupils construct their
gender in interaction, and the impact on their learning and future aspirations, see objectives i), ii), iii) and iv), addressed below.

3) It is hoped that the study has contributed to educational policy and practice, as the findings have been disseminated to research users and education professionals. Many teachers and policy makers have contacted me as a result of this dissemination and requested research outputs (publications or presentations).

i) This was addressed through a comparison of the classroom observation data with my findings from a previous study of gender constructions in the primary school. See page 6, and the 'Results' section, for elaboration.

ii) This was achieved through classroom observation and interview. The classroom observation revealed the ways in which gender constructions impacted on learning and study in the classroom. The interviews asked pupils directly about their views of, and approaches to learning, and responses were analysed according to gender. Again, these findings are discussed further below (p. 6-7) and in the 'Results' section.

iii) The 'analysis of discourse' approach was applied to the data, and pupils' use of different discourses was analysed and compared according to gender.

iv) Pupils were asked about their subject preferences and future post-compulsory education and career aspirations in the interviews. Their responses were then analysed according to gender, and the apparent impact of gender (for example, on achievement) was discussed in the analysis and dissemination. (see p.8).

Methods

The study involved research in three different London secondary schools. Classroom observation was used to record the classroom interaction and student behaviour during lessons (see, for example, Lloyd and Duveen, 1992; Younger and Warrington, 1999). Individual interviews were used to ask students directly about gender issues in the classroom, gender and learning, and the student's post-compulsory education and career plans. (While Kelly [1989] has demonstrated that the occupational choices student's make at school are not usually those they eventually take up in the adult workplace, their answers do illustrate the jobs which they see as open to them, and which appeal to them, according to gender). I aimed to use the observation to witness gendered classroom interaction first hand, and the subsequent interviews to ask students their opinions and interpretations of that interaction.

The three schools were all mixed-sex comprehensives, representing inner-city, semi-suburban, and suburban areas of London. The schools differed somewhat concerning the proportions of students from different ethnic groups, but at all three schools the great majority of students were working class. My sample, then, contained few middle-class pupils, and as a result any comparative analysis of the impact of social class on pupils' gender constructions was not possible.

The research involved students from Years 10 and 11 (the 14-16 year old age range). At this age pupils are involved in making important decisions and choices that affect their direction in terms of future education and career paths (Young and Spours, 1998). They are also studying for their GCSEs. Approximately one third of the pupil sample were of Afro-Caribbean origin, a third were
white, and a third were from other ethnic groups. This representation of ethnic groups is typical of 
South London, but not of the UK more broadly. The nature of the sample, then, somewhat limits 
the ability to generalise findings.

The observation was conducted in English lessons (a traditionally feminine subject) and Maths 
lessons (a traditionally masculine subject), both of which are deemed important for acceptance to 
certain levels of post-compulsory education and for future employment. A top set and a lower set 
lesson in each age-group was observed at each school, so four lessons were observed at each 
school (12 classes in all). The class teacher explained my presence in the classroom.

The methods of classroom observation broadly followed those set out in Carspecken (1996). It is 
recognised that the longer a researcher spends in a particular environment, the less impact they 
have on the interaction taking place (the participants become accustomed to the presence of the 
researcher; see Carspecken, 1996). Each class involved had three lessons observed, which is 
admittedly a short period. My intention was to conduct a broad-scale study in a relatively short 
space of time. Therefore I felt that covering a large sample of pupils in a number of different 
schools was more important than spending a longer amount of time with a smaller sample. The 
interviews were used to probe the pupils’ constructions more deeply. However, the limited 
amount of time spent observing each class is one of the limitations in my approach. Another 
limitation of the classroom observation was an inability to faithfully record all the interaction, due 
to the sheer noise levels in some of the classes.

Following the observation period, all pupils were given notes asking for their parents’ permission 
to participate in the research should they so wish. A list of students allowed and willing to 
participate was then drawn up, from which a random sample of four girls and four boys was 
selected in each class (thus eight pupils from four classes at each school). An extra two girls and 
two boys were chosen in one class, bringing the total interview sample to 100 pupils. The semi-
structured interviews were usually between 15-25 minutes duration, and were audio-recorded.

Content analysis and analysis of discourse (see Macnaghten, 1993; Francis, 1999a) was applied to 
the interview data, and answers to the generic questions were analysed numerically in order to 
show that the qualitative data used is representative of the whole sample, that the study 
demonstrates its validity (Silverman, 1993). The data was primarily analysed in terms of gender. 
The majority of the students in the study were from working class backgrounds. However, many 
different ethnic groups were represented. While a report of the findings in terms of ethnicity as 
well as gender is beyond the scope of this report, students’ interview responses were analysed 
according to ethnicity as well as gender, and findings concerning ethnicity reported in resulting 
publications. Pseudonyms have been provided for all participants.

Results

The study findings have demonstrated the consequences of gender constructions for classroom 
interaction. The students’ efforts to delineate their gender often led to the adoption of very 
different sorts of behaviour in the classroom. Many boys used physicality (in terms of dominance 
of the classroom space, violence, or threatened violence), homophobia and misogyny, shows of
heterosexuality and masculine-typed interests to demonstrate their gender allegiance and construct themselves as masculine. In turn, girls used interest in feminine-typed subjects such as appearance, and behaviour such as chatting and laughing quietly in groups, to construct their femininity. The achievement of constructions of masculinity and femininity potentially held considerable benefits for students, sometimes endowing status (and, consequently, power) among peers, and allowing a construction of oneself as ‘normal’, and ‘not deviant’.

There was much continuity in the dominant constructions of gender that I found in my studies of primary and secondary schools. In secondary school, the ‘silly’ construction of masculinity, which included boys’ messing about, horse-play, verbal banter and abuse, physicality, humour, and ‘cheeking the teacher’, continued to predominate in boys’ behaviour. Moreover, there were also many examples of girls taking on the opposite, ‘sensible’ construction, as in the primary school. However, ‘sensible’ and ‘silly’ were no longer the terms used by pupils, who talked instead of boys’ behaviour as ‘immature’ or ‘having a laugh’, as girls’ behaviour as ‘mature’. The boys’ ‘silly’ constructions also aided girls’ constructions of sensible maturity, and vice-versa, as these are built in relational opposition to one another - thus the contrast between ‘silly’ boys and ‘sensible’ girls aids the establishment of gender difference. As in the primary school, the girls’ constructions of themselves as ‘sensible’ often meant them taking a back seat in the general classroom interaction, while boys’ constructions of masculinity as ‘silly’ and competitive meant that they dominated both classroom space and teacher time. In this sense it is arguable that in some respects the girls’ constructions of femininity lead to their abdication of power to the boys; although these processes were less overt than those I had observed during the role plays in primary school.

The observation in classrooms broadly supported the findings of researchers such as Stanworth (1981); Howe (1997); Pickering (1997) and Younger et al (1999), that although not ‘all boys behave in the same way, the classroom space and teacher-student interaction tends to be dominated by boys. (This was true in eight of the twelve classes. Of the other four, two classes were dominated by girls, and two had equal representation). Hence the assumption that girls are out-performing boys because boys’ needs have been marginalised in the classroom, implicit in some commentry on ‘boys’ underachievement’, would seem a misguided one. Also, boys tend to be noisier than girls, and are therefore disciplined more frequently. The findings confirm that such loud, physical, and sometimes aggressive and or disruptive behaviour is an integral expression of many boys’ constructions of masculinity. Although it is beyond the ability of a study such as this one to identify or establish a direct link between the classroom behaviour of such boys and the slightly lower GCSE results which boys achieve in comparison with girls, it does seem clear that boys who are spending large proportions of their time in class messing about are impeding their chances of high achievement. It is important to remember, however, that the learning they are impeding is not just their own: the behaviour of loud and disruptive boys also distracts their male and female classmates. Further, the time which the teacher spends disciplining such boys detracts from the time given to teaching the class. Hence it could be said that such behaviour disadvantages all students, although obviously it is likely to have a particular effect on these boys' own progress.
A construction of masculinity as ‘laddish’ appears the most accepted one among 14-16 year olds, certainly in the largely working class schools in which I conducted the research. A laddish persona appears able to incorporate more of the traits which are traditionally seen and valued as masculine than can other constructions: for example, interest in masculine-typed activities such as football, the objectification of and sexual activity with females, physical strength, boisterousness, bravery, camaraderie, daring, an irreverent and rebellious attitude to authority, and ‘having a laugh’. Values such as the latter three mean that classroom disruption and resistance are integral facets of the laddish construction. Boys’ constructions of themselves as laddish or ‘having a laugh’ could significantly enhance their prestige and power in the classroom. According to the pupils’ accounts, this status was derived mainly from their male peers. However, as some of the pupils’ reports, and my classroom observation, shows, such ‘laddish’, ‘having a laugh’ behaviour often also provided entertainment for the class as a whole. Many girls and some teachers seemed to derive amusement from these boys’ behaviour, and even to find such boys particularly appealing or attractive. I was also implicated in these processes as a researcher. This raises the problematic point that the attributes of the ‘lad’ are highly valued in popular culture, and are imbued with desire, although they may have negative consequences for learning.

Hence educational achievement appeared somewhat incongruous with the ‘laddish’ construction of masculinity. The majority of pupils themselves argued this point: when asked to respond to ex-education minister Stephen Byers’ claim that ‘laddish’ behaviour is impeding boys’ achievement at school, two-thirds of students (including over half of the boys) supported this argument. The majority of these students drew on discourses of female superiority and social construction to argue that it is boys’ with to appear tough and to be accepted by their peers (i.e. their collective constructions of masculinity), which causes this behaviour.

These dominant constructions of gender were not applicable to all boys and girls. There are many different strategies for ‘doing’ gender, and my findings show that most students took up different constructions in different environments. It is also important to note that of the twelve classes I observed, in two, girls were louder and dominated classroom interaction more than boys, again demonstrating the danger of complacently generalising concerning male and female behaviour. Some boys took up ‘sensible’ positions or behaved in ways which are traditionally perceived as feminine; and some girls took up ‘silly’ positions or behaved in other traditionally masculine ways. There was some evidence, however, that such students were consequently vulnerable, or potentially vulnerable to, policing by other students. There was some evidence of difference in construction of gender according to ethnicity (for example, Afro-Caribbean boys appeared more likely to draw attention to themselves to demonstrate their heterosexual masculinity), but far more similarity that difference. This might to some extent have been linked to the nature of the sample, where the majority of students were of Anglo or Afro-Caribbean origin, and were predominantly working class.

Questioning the students about learning revealed the extent to which perceptions of gender and studentship have changed since the first seminal feminist studies of classroom interaction two decades ago. Where the male student used to personify all that was seen as right and proper in a learner (Walkerdine, 1988), students now largely presented an egalitarian view of students as equally able at all subjects. Students’ favourite subjects are also now slightly less gender
stereotypical than they used to be (though a gendered pattern continues to exist, reflecting the gender dichotomy, see Francis, 2000). This shift in students’ perceptions about gender was particularly highlighted by the fact that, of those students who said that one sex or the other tend to make better learners, or be better at various subjects, the majority said that girls are better. The issue of masculinity and peer pressure was revisited here, as many of the students whom maintained that boys are not such good students as girls cited male peer pressure as the explanation for this.

Reflecting on the data in the light of girls’ achievement at GCSE level, it seemed clear that the dominant construction of femininity as ‘mature’ was less incongruous with a learning ethos than were some constructions of masculinity. However, it was pupils’ responses to interview questions concerning their future aspirations, and any impact of gender on their lives outside school, which seemed to shed particular light on girls’ achievement. My findings show that girls are now far more ambitious concerning their future working lives than was the case in the past. In the 1980s various studies found that when asked what jobs they would like to do on leaving school, girls chose only a very narrow range of stereotypically feminine occupations (Spender, 1982; Gaskell, 1992). They often saw future occupations as a ‘stop-gap’ before marriage, or as simply providing ‘pin money’ (Spender, 1982; Gaskell, 1992). The choices of future occupation by the girls in my study were extremely diverse and ambitious, demonstrating a dramatic shift in their constructions of their futures. (Boys’ choices were equally ambitious and diverse, but this represents continuity rather than change).

Yet, when asked whether being male or female makes a difference to one’s life in any way, 21 of the 50 girls volunteered claims that gender discrimination remains practised in the adult workplace. They talked with concern about various manifestations of gender discrimination in employment, promotion, and interaction with colleagues. Many girls argued that women must be better than men in order to compete in the labour market on an equal footing. One of the most obvious ways in which they can demonstrate their ability and potential is via qualifications: both girls and boys displayed great faith in notions of meritocracy, and the benefits which qualifications bring in terms of ‘getting a good job’ (Elsewhere I discuss my concern that such faith may be somewhat naïve). Virtually all the girls and boys claimed to intend to pursue their education at FE level. Therefore, girls’ increased achievement at GCSE level may reflect girls’ increased aspirations, and their perception of qualifications as an insurance for success in future employment. Their changed levels of achievement may to some extent reflect their changed ambitions.

Activities

The findings of various facets of the research have been disseminated at a number of academic and professional conferences. These include the BERA conferences of 1999 and 2000; Gender & Education conference 1999; European Conference for Educational Research 1999; The British Psychological Society Education Section Annual Conference, 1999; ‘Educate ‘99’, SMILE 2000; and Association of Maintained Girls Schools conference 2000.
Outputs

The outputs from this research have included a book entitled Girls, Boys and Achievement: Addressing the Issues, (2000, Routledge/Falmer); a report sent to the Department for Education and Employment, the Equal Opportunities Commission, schools involved in the research, educational bodies and unions; and four journal papers. Findings have also been publicised through articles in the popular press and educational media, and through broadcasts such as Radio 4’s You and Yours. Datasets have been produced, though they were not required by Qualidata. (See REGARD for a full list of outputs).

Impacts

The dissemination of my findings appears to have had some impact in terms of user interest, as I have been invited to speak on gender, achievement and learning at a number of academic and professional conferences (examples of the latter include ‘Educate ‘99’; SMILE 2000, and the Association of Maintained Girls’ Schools’ conference, 2000). I have also talked through my findings with colleagues from the DfEE. As a result of conference and media dissemination I have been approached by a number of teachers and academics for further information about my research and publications.

Future Research Priorities

My findings suggest that pupils generally, but boys particularly, need to be educated about the potential consequences of their gender constructions for their educational achievement and future lives. The ‘laddish’ construction of masculinity is impeding classroom learning, and dominant constructions of femininity are silencing girls in the classroom. The findings of the study demonstrate that superficial stylistic or curriculum changes will be inadequate to combat boys’ underachievement, as the latter stems from boys’ constructions of masculinity. Students must be encouraged to deconstruct the gender dichotomy: in other words, to be enabled to take up a wider range of subject positions. For example, boys must be enabled to take up positions which allow an interest in academic work, diligence, sensitivity and conscientiousness; and girls those which allow confidence, assertion and speculation. Such ideas are much easier to suggest than they are to implement: further research is urgently required to identify and test effective strategies for getting students to reflect on their gender positions and their implications.

Further, the study demonstrated that further theoretical work is required to explore the construction of the self, and the constitution and construction of masculinity and femininity (for example, the implications of the argument that constructions of gender are not tied to sex).

References:


Panorama (24/20/94) ‘The Future is Female’.


