The Gender Agenda
Final Report

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The author

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1. Introduction

The *Gender Agenda* was a DCSF initiative which ran from March 2008 to June 2009. Its purpose was to investigate, identify and disseminate practical ideas for improving the learning, motivation, involvement and attainment of underperforming groups of boys and girls.

In essence, the initiative was a response to the concern over the past two decades about the ‘gender gap’ in achievement, specifically boys’ underperformance when compared with girls. This led to calls for strategies and interventions aimed at raising the achievement of boys, as well as improving their attitudes and motivations towards schooling. This was misleading as some groups of boys achieve highly at school and some groups of girls do not. One main purpose of this report is to recognise this and to ensure that the interplay with the dimensions of social class and ethnicity are also taken into consideration when identifying strategies and approaches to tackle underperformance.

In any discussion of gender and achievement, whilst it is important to state that some groups of boys achieve highly at school and some groups of girls do not, it is also important to know that achievement gaps for social class and ethnicity are often wider than those for gender, and it is the interplay of these factors that together impact on the performance of girls as well as boys (see Table 1 and Table 2 below).

**Table 1: KS4 points score by ethnicity, class and gender**

Similarly, it is sometimes assumed that girls outperform boys across the curriculum, whereas boys broadly match girls in mathematics and science. The one area of the school curriculum where boys do tend to underachieve is in English, and this is evident in all stages of schooling from Early Years Foundation Stage to the end of Key Stage 4. The mean attainment of girls in English is higher than the mean attainment for boys. However, again this is not true for all boys and it is important to state that there is much greater variation between schools in the levels of attainment that pupils achieve in English (some schools, particularly in the primary phase, do not have a gender gap in English, and boys and girls both achieve highly in the subject).

Pupils’ access to and understanding of all subjects in the curriculum is dependent on them having good literacy skills and, for that reason, the Gender Agenda was more focused on addressing ways to improve literacy and English than on other subjects, because to do that would also have an impact on pupils’ competence and performance in other subjects.

A variety of reasons and arguments have been offered to explain gender differences in achievement, including: natural differences between the sexes; gender differences in learning styles; the ‘feminisation’ of schooling and gender-biased assessment procedures. These have been considered and have been challenged by counter-evidence in one of the publications to come out of the Gender Agenda, Addressing Gender and Achievement: myths and realities (See DCSF 2009a). From a review of research evidence there appear to be two key areas for educators seeking to improve boys’ engagement with and attainment in literacy, the construction of gender difference, with the associated challenging of gender stereotyping (Francis and Skelton, 2008; Jackson, 2006; Francis 2000; Alloway et al 2002) and the organisation of the English and literacy curriculum (Moss, 2007). Both of these are addressed in the second publication to come out of the Gender Agenda, Gender issues in school – What works to improve achievement for boys and girls (See DCSF 2009b). This publication provides guidance for senior leaders and teachers in schools who are seeking to improve boys’ and girls’ achievement, particularly in English and literacy and is a companion piece to Addressing Gender and Achievement: myths and realities (DCSF 2009a).

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### Table 2: Summary – attainment gaps at age 16

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gap</th>
<th>Total points score (standardised)</th>
<th>5+ A*-C incl. English and maths</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnic group</td>
<td>0.61</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socio-economic class</td>
<td>1.29</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Aims of the Gender Agenda
The aims of the Gender Agenda were to:

• Raise awareness of gender and achievement issues in schools.

• Identify and disseminate good practice in schools and classrooms which improves the achievement of boys and girls.

• Engage the research community to contribute and participate in increasing knowledge of effective practice in raising the achievement of groups of boys and girls.

• Identify and disseminate current and relevant research about gender and achievement issues in schools.

• Encourage, promote and support emerging and new classroom practice to improve the achievement of boys and girls.

• Advise policy makers and agencies of research and good practice to improve the achievement of boys and girls.

• Maintain and extend good practice in schools.

The stakeholders
It can be deduced from these aims that one main purpose of the initiative was to engage not only communities of policy makers and practitioners, but also those in the research community who are involved in gender issues in education, to identify and explore a wide range of understandings and perspectives which would lead to robust, evidence-based guidance and support for schools, practitioners and others involved in improving the achievement of underperforming girls and boys. The main groups were:

• school staff

• local authority (LA) officers

• researchers involved in gender and education

• policy makers.

To be effective required a high degree of cooperation and collaboration and a participatory model based on the sharing of research outcomes and practices was developed to give all stakeholders a voice and an opportunity to contribute to the initiative. This model proved to be successful in motivating and enabling cooperation and collaboration among stakeholders through a variety of activities which will be discussed later in this report.
2. Research activities

There have been three main research activities:

- initiating and supporting action research projects by practitioners
- carrying out research in the field
- gathering and analysing recently published research.

Action research projects
The reasons for underperformance among groups of boys and girls are complex and involve interplay with ethnicity, class and deprivation dimensions. It is therefore important that schools try to discover their own solutions to such underperformance through investigations of their own context aligned to interventions based on evidence from research and good practice which is carefully monitored and reviewed. Action research is a proven and effective way to carry out such investigations and interventions. As part of the Gender Agenda, two gender-related action research projects in schools were initiated or supported; one project focused on gender issues specific to individual schools and the other focus was on accelerating girls’ progress in all-girl schools.

Accelerating girls’ progress action research
The DCSF supported the Innovation Unit from September 2007 with an action research project focusing on accelerating girls’ progress. It involved four all-girl secondary schools, acting as hubs and working with twelve other schools, to investigate specific ways to improve the achievement of girls in their schools. Two of those investigations are summarised below:

- The Students As Researchers (STARS) project took place at Central Foundation Girls’ School. The project aimed to enhance classroom challenge for the girls, particularly in the core subjects, and to promote their sense of agency through their role in the project as researchers and planners. The schools found that the girls who underwent some interview and research training and who undertook interviews with peers and teachers, improved in confidence, particularly in speaking and listening in classrooms and other settings and, not surprisingly, that their skills as interviewers improved. As a result of their experience, the school has planned that they and other girls will be involved in co-constructing with teachers more challenging lessons for lessons in the core subjects.

- At Ursuline High School, their project, A Global Curriculum for Anytime, Anywhere Learning (AAL), brought together a new competency-based curriculum in year 7 and AAL, (laptops for girls in years 7 and 12 and a Virtual Learning Platform). These strands were combined to complement each other and to improve girls’ use of IT and achievement while helping to embed the school’s focus on independent and personalised learning. The pilot scheme was introduced in year 7 and was evaluated as successful in helping students
to develop their competency as independent learners. The global curriculum has moved into year 8 and plans for a further roll-out are already underway.

The outcomes from these and the other schools involved in the project were reported at a seminar in Sanctuary Buildings in September 2008, at the Association of Maintained Girls’ Schools annual conference in York in October 2008, and at the National Teacher Research Panel (NTRP) conference in London in November 2008.

Gender issues action research
At the beginning of the summer term 2008, 25 teachers from 12 schools were recruited to carry out a year of action research into gender issues directly relevant to their schools and classrooms. They chose a variety of focuses including:

- the impact of a ‘boys’ curriculum on girls’ achievement
- boys’ writing in Year 1
- teachers’ perceptions of reasons for underachievement in middle-ability girls
- study skill problems for boys and girls starting A level studies.

The teachers were supported throughout by three colleagues with substantial active research experience from DCSF, NFER and one local authority (where four of the schools were located). The teachers began by collecting the data and evidence necessary for them to try out classroom interventions, which in turn were monitored and evaluated. Throughout the year, teachers from a number of the schools presented their work in progress to a variety of audiences including the NTRP annual conference and to the final DCSF Regional Research Seminar. At the end of the project, they carried out an analysis of their work before sharing it with each other and presenting it as a case study for further dissemination, a couple of examples of which are summarised overleaf.
Case Study: Boys’ Writing at Key Stage 1

Introduction
The issue of boys’ writing was chosen because in the last SATs seventy per cent of boys got 2c or below for writing and this had never happened in the school before.

Hatfield Peverel is in an infant school 50 miles north of London. It has 165 children on roll, 7 full-time teaching staff and a part-time SENCO.

Research Hypothesis
Do boys do less well in writing because they are developmentally behind on entry into the Foundation Stage?

Research Methods
Assessment data collection
Data was collected on three cohorts (2005-2008) from colleagues and the school’s assessment records for all the EYFS areas of learning.

Family written communication survey
A survey about communication in the home was sent out to all the 110 families in school.

Discussions with Year 2, Year 1 and Reception children
Over the course of the project, approximately 150 children discussed life at home and school.

Findings
Assessment data
It was in the area of Physical Development that the widest gaps were found, with the boys being three Foundation Stage points behind the girls (children are expected to make one point progress per term in the Foundation Stage). For each cohort, the boys were generally weaker in their physical, social and creative development. In all other areas the girls consistently out-performed the boys.

Family written communication survey
The results for the survey about family communication indicated that:

- The most common forms of written communication in the home were texting, followed by e-mails, cards and lists.
- All parents thought handwriting was becoming rare out of the school environment.
- Some children do not see any males writing at home or at school (currently the school has no male teachers).
Discussions with pupils
Clear gender patterns were discovered. The boys talked about their various electronic games machines, whereas the girls talked about their friends, family, bikes and dolls.

Conclusion
• Boys are developmentally almost a year behind girls in their physical development on entry and, to a lesser degree, in social development too.

• Boys appeared to be significantly behind in their gross motor skills and this had a direct result on the fine motor skills needed for handwriting.

• Boys’ weakness in social development could impact on their ability to communicate, particularly with talk, which in turn could impact on their reading and writing skills.

Action Plan and Recommendations
Recommendations
• Children in the Reception Unit need more physical play in their first year.

• The EYFS should concentrate on developing children’s gross motor skills.

• A daily physical education lesson would help to improve gross motor skills.

Dissemination in school
• All staff are aware of the research and the recommendations for action are discussed at all performance management reviews.

Actions
• The improvement of boys’ writing is a whole school target.

• The school has purchased the ‘Start to Play Scheme’ from The Youth Sports Trust.
Case Study: Gender differences in preparedness for Post 16 study.

Introduction
A review of Government and Politics A Level results led to the school considering whether students were developing the necessary reading skills for Post 16 studies. King Edward VI School in Suffolk is a 13-18 voluntary controlled Church of England school, with 1339 students on roll.

Research hypothesis
Are there gender differences in students’ preparedness for Post 16 study?

Research Methods
23 students (15 girls and 8 boys) starting AS Government and Politics were involved in the research.

Reading test
The reading test devised was similar to tests used with younger students but with a more age appropriate text.

Survey
The survey was devised to examine students’ reading habits, their access to reading material and their attitudes to reading.

Interviews
Semi-structured group interviews were conducted with single sex groups of students.

Findings
Reading test
The English Language GCSE result does not seem to be an accurate indicator of students’ reading ability and it has raised questions about how to support students to develop reading skills for Post 16.

Survey
• All students read a newspaper or online news at least once or twice a week.
• The most common reading was of text messages, social networking sites and websites.
• Students had lots of opportunity to read at home.
• More than half rarely borrowed books from public or school libraries.
• Only one student did not enjoy reading.
Interviews
The girls felt they had been able to get away with not reading at GCSE and could not get away with it at A Level, whereas the boys were more concerned about the amount of reading. Girls perceived a lack of support from teachers in developing independent reading skills, whereas boys were more confident in their reading ability. Both the boys and girls experienced difficulties organising their notes and their time.

Overall, both boys and girls mentioned a range of skills they felt they lacked at the beginning of the course. However, boys seemed more confident of their ability to overcome this, whereas girls were more anxious. This in turn seemed to have led the girls to consider more strategies for how to improve.

Conclusions
There appears to be a skills gap, common to both male and female students, between GCSE and AS Level. Attitudes to overcoming it, and anxiety about it, fall along gendered lines, with boys being more blasé.

The main impact of the research has been explicit teaching of reading approaches to the sample group. This resulted in improved confidence, evidence of wider reading and test scores improving.

Actions
• Several areas for development have emerged to boost students’ engagement, self-esteem and attainment.

Impact of the action research projects
The projects have led all of the teachers to insights about the learning and achievement of pupils at their schools, and discoveries about some interventions and classroom practices. In addition, both projects have motivated the schools and teachers involved to share their practice and findings, and, in a number of cases, to continue to develop their own action research after the project ended.

The value of the dissemination has been twofold. First, it involved other researchers and educators in the content and methodology of the action research, so that they were able to review their own research methodology and to consider the relevance of the findings for their own practice and context. Second, it offered practitioners a straightforward model for carrying out their own action research on gender related topics.

Research in the field
Gap Busters
Nationally, for over ten years there has been a persistent gap between the attainment of boys and girls in English. This research, Schools that close or narrow the attainment gap between boys and girls in English (DCSF 2008), popularly termed ‘Gap Busters,’ was an investigation into seven primary and nine secondary schools that consistently close or narrow the gender gap in English.
Analysis of the findings indicated that the boys from these schools enjoyed English and the main approaches they liked and found helpful included:

- speaking and listening activities used with reading and writing
- drama activities to open up texts
- group work to aid discussion of texts and writing tasks
- choice and negotiation of books, research and writing tasks
- teacher modelling of reading and writing
- having a range of tasks for writing
- having a wide range of books.

In terms of pedagogy, the main success factors were:

- including speaking and listening in lessons as a way for pupils to prepare for writing and to explore texts
- modelling of both reading and writing to assist pupils' understanding and skills
- using ICT to engage pupils, particularly with their research and presentations.

It also appeared that the schools used a number of effective individual pupil approaches to enhance and develop pupils’ learning and literacy, and that these were connected with the elements and process of assessment for learning and with various forms of mentoring.

In addition, a number of whole school success factors were identified as contributing to boys’ success in English:

- prioritising teaching and learning
- developing a school ethos that values respect for others, taking responsibility for actions, success for all and independence
- strengthening the system for praise and rewards to acknowledge academic effort and achievement as well as sporting and behavioural
- ensuring staff know the pupils well
- developing processes and actions that promote pupil safety and well-being
- maintaining a strong emphasis on seeking and listening to the views of pupils
- encouraging risk-taking and responsibility by both teachers and pupils
- enriching the curriculum, for example through pupil visits out of school and visitors coming into the school.
Recent research
Two recent Department publications on the subject of gender and education, *Gender and education: the evidence on pupils in England* (DfES 2007) and *Raising boys’ achievement* (Younger and Warrington, DfES 2005), identify and discuss many of the key pieces of research into gender and education. It is not the intention of this report to repeat the messages contained within them. Instead, what follows are key messages from other recently published research (much of which supports those contained in the two aforementioned publications) in the areas of:

- English and literacy, where the achievement gap between boys and girls remains the widest
- the construction of gender difference and stereotyping
- role models.

English and literacy
As mentioned earlier, there has been a particular concern for many years about the gap in English, where, overall, girls achieve more highly than boys at all stages of schooling. What follows is a summary of some of the recent research into English and literacy, particularly reading. Most of it has a specific gender dimension, but some points to practices and pedagogy that may improve the learning, motivation and performance of all pupils, for as other research has discovered (e.g. Younger and Warrington 2005) what works for boys has often been seen to be equally effective for girls.

Gemma Moss’s research into practices in reading in the primary school has drawn attention to the way that primary school teachers group children according to their skills at reading and teach them accordingly (Moss, 2007). She suggests that this creates distinctions between pupils in class which become highly visible, and that boys and girls designated ‘poor readers’ react differently to this designation. Boys designated ‘poor readers’ are more likely to react against their perceived low status in class than girls and in an effort to bolster their standing with their peers, this group of boys may avoid spending much time on a task they find difficult. Girls reading at the same level are more willing to be seen reading ‘easy books’ and are happier to receive help from other more experienced readers. These strategies mean that girls labelled as weak readers continue to practise their skills. By contrast, by spending less time on the task, boys labelled as weak readers fall further behind their peers, so compounding their difficulties. She suggests that to alleviate this problem, primary schools and teachers should consider alternative ways to organise the English curriculum and the resources for reading, and devise more opportunities for boys to network with each other about their reading.
Reading behaviours, pupils’ attitudes to reading and perceptions of themselves as readers

Focusing on independent reading, the research by Topping et al found that girls at all levels read more, were more accurate in their reading and read more fiction than boys (Topping, K. Samuels, J. and Paul, T. 2008). This last point should not be read as ‘boys prefer non-fiction’, for there has been much research to show that boys who read, read and often prefer fiction (e.g. Moss 2007, Hall C. and Coles M. (1999).

Research carried out by Sainsbury and Clarkson for NFER (2008) found that boys’ and girls’ confidence and enjoyment of reading has held steady since 2003 but that girls are more positive about reading than boys. And research into girls’ and boys’ perceptions of themselves as readers by the National Literacy Trust found the following:

- More girls than boys saw themselves as readers.
- More girls than boys read magazines, emails, blogs and social network sites.
- More boys than girls read newspapers, comics, graphic novels and manuals.
- Girls see readers as clever/intelligent.
- Boys see readers as geeky nerds.
- More boys than girls believe reading is more important than TV and listening to music.
- More girls than boys believe reading is more important than sport.
- More girls than boys indicate friends are readers.

(National Literacy Trust 2008)

Overall, the evidence from these pieces of research suggests that fewer boys than girls, particularly reluctant and weaker readers, are attracted to reading for a variety of reasons. This lends support for more effort and resource being channelled into approaches to motivate boys to read (both at school and independently). Many of these approaches can be found in Gender issues in school – What works to improve achievement for boys and girls (see DCSF 2009b).
Pedagogy

Early intervention
The Every Child a Reader scheme supports the bottom five per cent of children aged five and six who are struggling to learn to read. The principal element is Reading Recovery – a specialist one-to-one intervention. The latest evaluative study (Burroughs-Lange, S. and Douëtil, J. 2008) concentrated on the impact of Reading Recovery on children in London and deliberately focused on the achievement of children in disadvantaged urban areas. It compared children who received Reading Recovery and those whose schools provided them with a range of other interventions.

The key findings were that:

- The children who had received Reading Recovery in year 1 were achieving within or beyond their chronological age band at the end of year 2, and were roughly a year ahead of children in comparator schools where Reading Recovery was not available.

- The children who had received Reading Recovery were able to correctly spell twice as many words as the comparator group.

- The gender gap that is normally noticeable between low achieving girls and boys is not evident in Reading Recovery schools.

- Over 86 per cent of children who received Reading Recovery in year 1 went on to meet national expectations (level 2+) in reading at the end of KS1, in comparison to 84 per cent nationally (Burroughs-Lange, S. and Douëtil, J. 2008).

The Every Child a Reader scheme seems to show that with the right resources, it is possible to overcome literacy difficulties that mar many children’s development and lives.

Engage pupils by tapping into their interests and giving them choice in reading
There is evidence in a number of studies (e.g. Clark and Foster, 2005) where pupils, particularly reluctant readers and boys, have commented on the difficulty of finding texts that interest them. In Interesting choice: The (relative) importance of choice and interest in reader engagement (Clark and Phythian-Sence, 2008), the authors suggest that linking a pupil’s interest to text selection may be a more powerful influence to engage readers than just offering them a choice of texts to read. They do not discount choice, however, and add that ‘pupils should be educated in how to make choices based on interest and readability, and supported to develop an interest in reading in general.’
The construction of gender difference and stereotyping

At the heart of discussions about gender differences in education is the conception of how gender and gender differences are constructed, particularly in schools. Gender differences are constructed and may be reinforced in schools by staff and pupils consistently associating or attributing certain behaviours and characteristics to one gender over the other and then acting accordingly. Key points shown by research (Jackson, 2006; Francis 2000; Alloway et al 2002) indicate that:

- Boys and girls produce constructions of gender (masculinity and femininity) that ‘fit’ social norms in the peer group and in wider society. These gendered behaviours ‘are deep-seated, and children enact these without being unconsciously aware of them...’ (Skelton, Francis and Valkanova 2007) but they vary depending on the child’s social class and ethnicity.

- Constructions of gender difference by teachers and pupils produce different behaviours which impact on achievement. The ‘gender gap in achievement’ can be removed by challenging notions of gender itself.

- The peer group is of central importance in reinforcing gender stereotypes.

Research by Hargreaves et al into pupils’ stereotypical attitudes to mathematics and English has shown that stereotypes prevail among pupils, with most believing that maths is a boys’ subject where boys do better, and English a girls’ subject where girls do better (Hargreaves, M. Homer, M. and Swinnerton, B. 2008). Where gifted girls perform as well as gifted boys, their confidence in maths is lower than their performance suggests.

Becta’s recent research into gender and ICT in education has also contributed to the discussion, with the key messages as follows:

- In formal settings, teachers have perceptions of gender stereotypes around ICT and this impacts on both the perceptions and actual competence that young people demonstrate in their use of technology for learning and living.

- Practitioners need to consider gender as one of a number of factors that influence technology for learning. They should not assume they know which technologies learners are using in informal settings and should make use of enquiry-led and learner voice approaches in order to challenge their own assumptions and preconceptions.

- Prior experience and parental influence are crucial in young people’s use of technology for learning.

(Becta, 2008)
Schools which attempt to alter the curriculum to make it ‘boy-friendly’ not only exacerbate gender stereotypes, but their actions have been shown to be ineffective. In playing to gender stereotypes, they reinforce the idea that only some activities and behaviours are gender appropriate, and thus limit rather than enhance pupils’ engagement with the curriculum. Rather, what is required to address such attitudes is a whole school approach to challenging gender cultures, which covers the school’s ethos, its teaching practices and its organisation. “It’s in schools where gender constructions are less accentuated that boys tend to do better – and strategies that work to reduce relational constructions of gender that are most effective in facilitating boys’ achievement.” (Francis and Skelton, 2008).

Some whole school factors to support boys’ achievement, which were identified in aforementioned DfES publications (DfES 2007, Younger and Warrington 2005), particularly the praise and rewards for achievement and valuing pupil opinions, can be seen to be about raising boys’ self-esteem and responding to their needs; success factors to which Skelton and Francis (2006) have also drawn attention. Ofsted, in its 2008 report about Boys from low income backgrounds, also point to a number of these as features of successful schools, particularly the ethos and pupil voice.

**Role models**
Over the past few years, there have been sporadic cries in the media to address boys’ underachievement by recruiting more men into the teaching profession. While there is perhaps an argument for more men being represented in the profession to indicate to pupils that teaching is a profession for males, there is no evidence that the gender of the teacher influences pupil outcomes on any attainment measure for boys or girls – or that it improves boys’ engagement with school. Recent research (Carrington, Tymms and Merrell, 2008 and Francis, Skelton, Carrington, Hutchings, Read and Hall, 2008) has shown that pupils prioritise the abilities of the individual teacher.
3. A participatory model

To meet the main aims of the Gender Agenda and to gather and harness the insights, knowledge and practices of those communities that have an interest in gender and education in schools, a participatory model of working with stakeholder communities in the key areas of practice, policy and research was developed. In particular, it involved working with the research community, school staff, LA officials and policy makers.

The key ones and the progress made are as follows:

**The research community**

In the field of education, and particularly gender and education, policy makers and the research community have not always been comfortable partners, with suspicions on both sides about each other’s motives and ideologies at the forefront of that discomfort. However, if the combined knowledge, resources and insights were to be harnessed to address underachievement and underperformance of children and young people in schools, it was seen as vital that the two communities should cooperate as well as possible.

One of the first strategies that developed to engage with the research community was the establishment of regional research seminars whereby the latest research and policies on gender issues could be aired and discussed openly. This was with the expectation that seminars would act as catalysts to further research and enquiry and help to identify research and practice that could be used in advice and guidance for schools.

It was decided to hold three rounds of seminars, one in each term, in three regions (north, midlands and south). It was important to hold the seminars in universities rather than in DCSF buildings or neutral settings in order to signal the importance of research and knowledge that underpinned the Gender Agenda.

About 170 delegates attended each round of the seminars and overall their evaluations of the events were positive – including such comments as ‘thought-provoking’, ‘interesting and stimulating’ and ‘the events provided good opportunity for discussion and information sharing, and especially networking for those in the research community’. There were some less positive comments and a few adverse responses to the first London seminar, where suspicions about the overall purpose and intentions of the Gender Agenda were raised, but these were not apparent from other venues’ evaluations.

The evaluations from each round were taken seriously and changes to subsequent seminars were made. For example, the first round of evaluations suggested that the length of the day was too short. A number of delegates were critical of too many ‘policy’ inputs, and felt that there was too little time set aside for discussion and inputs from the research community. In response, for the next seminar, the day was lengthened to the first round evaluations, where the length of the day was deemed to be too short and where a number of delegates were
critical of too many ‘policy’ inputs, too few inputs from the research community and a lack of discussion time, the day was lengthened and the number of research community inputs and time for discussion increased. Following the second round, where there were pleas for more inputs and involvement from teachers, there were inputs from teachers who had or were currently carrying out their own action research into gender issues in their schools. The improvement in evaluations increased round by round.

The main impact of these seminars has been:

- an improved understanding, communications and dissemination between the research community and DCSF. In March 2009, the Gender and Education Association (representing an international community of feminist and pro-feminist researchers, teachers and practitioners in education) in a response to the Gender Agenda said that:

  ‘The Gender and Education Association (GEA), welcomes the Gender Agenda initiative as a unique opportunity in England…’ and ‘wishes to work collaboratively with the DCSF to advance the issue of gender equality, relating to diversity, and provide pedagogic resources for teachers.’

- that teachers engaged in action research have been able to share their work with, and learn from, the wider research community

- that some LAs (e.g. Hartlepool, Suffolk and Nottingham), where officers attended, have focused their attention more closely on addressing gender issues in their schools.

Policy makers
The policy makers who were involved in the Gender Agenda included the DCSF and other government departments who were connected with education and gender issues, for example the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS) and the Government Equalities Office (GEO). They also included a range of government-supported agencies, such as Becta, the National Strategies, the Training and Development Agency for Schools (TDA) and the National College for School Leadership (NCSL).

What follows are brief examples of the involvement of some of those agencies with the Gender Agenda:

- **Becta**
  DCSF and Becta organised and held a joint workshop on gender and ICT in July 2008. The workshop involved 20 practitioners from all phases who had been using ICT to address issues of gender in their schools. Their work was shared and each participant planned ways to extend their practice. Two of the practitioners were chosen to present their work, under the banner of the Gender Agenda, at Becta’s annual conference in November 2008, which was attended by over 300 ICT advisors and practitioners.
Teacher Training Resource Bank (TTRB)
A strong and mutually supportive relationship was developed with the TTRB (a consortium supported by the TDA) which provides access to the research and evidence base informing teacher education, to assist the dissemination of the Gender Agenda information (including events, reports and recent research) via their website for the ITT and beginner teacher audiences.

National Strategies
The relationship with the National Strategies (NS) was also positive and effective. Discussion and dissemination of the Gender Agenda key messages and guidance were established through both the Ethnicity, Social Class Gender and Achievement (ESCGA) Programme Board and the English Board Reading sub group to inform NS programmes where appropriate. In addition, the NS became the new host for the updated Gender and Achievement site, will also translate appropriate case studies from the Gender action research project to go onto the popular What Works Well site and will add useful links for teachers from the Addressing Gender and Achievement: myths and realities (DCSF 2009a) and Gender issues in school – What works to improve achievement for boys and girls (DCSF 2009b) to specific curriculum materials and guidance.

These three agencies, and the others mentioned earlier in this section, were crucial to the success of the Gender Agenda in two respects. First, because they provide important and strong links with practice in schools and often with the research community (for instance, TDA’s Teacher Training Resource Bank), as well as training for teachers. Second, because they can provide stability to ensure that the developments and guidance, the legacy of the Gender Agenda, can continue beyond the scope of the initiative.

Schools and Local Authorities
As has been mentioned earlier, schools and Local Authorities were both involved in the action research projects, looking into gender issues specific to their contexts. In addition, both were represented at the Regional Research Seminars, as delegates and presenters. Their involvement in the seminars led some LAs and schools to focus more attention on gender issues with, for instance, Suffolk LA running a seminar series on narrowing the gap and inviting members of the DCSF to attend. The Gender Consultant from Hartlepool LA attended the seminars and gave an input about her work with schools at the final seminar; overleaf are her views of the strength and effect of the Gender Agenda’s participatory model.
An LA’s perspective on the Gender Agenda’s participatory model

As the Gender Consultant for Hartlepool LA, becoming involved in the Gender Agenda has been both timely and a very positive experience. It has allowed me to develop some important and fruitful contacts in the field of Gender Education which otherwise I might not have been able to find and establish. This has allowed me to explore some of the wider issues that the research in this field encompasses, and in ways that have helped me support the communities of teachers I work with to begin to understand how and why they need to engage with what research into boys’ achievement is telling us. By bringing researchers, LAs, teacher practitioners, and the Strategies together to reflect on key themes, this approach has been an opportunity for us all to learn from each other and, importantly, see some of the complex issues more clearly with the insights that sharing our thinking has allowed us to do. This approach could well be a good model for other big themes or issues to be explored by bringing wide ranging expertise together in this way.

To summarise, the main impact of the participatory model described above are:

- leading gender researchers have worked with DCSF to generate clear messages about effective teaching and learning, rooted in evidence, that can counter gender-related under performance
- researchers, e.g. through the Wider Benefits of Learning DCSF centre, have considered implications of their work regarding gender and have offered useful messages
- some LAs are focusing more on narrowing gender gaps
- improved communications and dissemination between research community and DCSF
- teachers engaged in action research have been able to share their work with, and learn from, the wider research community.
4. Communication and dissemination

The success of the *Gender Agenda* and its participatory model depended on good communications (particularly about events) and effective dissemination of ideas, policies and publications.

The main routes and means for both were a through a mixture of websites, events and publications, and a summary of those follows.

**Websites**

Three main websites were used during the initiative, *Teachernet, National Strategies* and *TTRB*.

The *Gender Agenda* pages were introduced and launched in *Teachernet* at the start of the *Gender Agenda* to give details of the initiative, its activities and events (together with relevant and recent research), to school and teacher audiences. The number of hits on the site increased month by month, peaking in March 2009 at over 1,000.

What is now the *Gender and Achievement* section of the *National Strategies* site was originally on the DCSF Standards site, where it had been since 2000, but much of the material was out of date. It was transferred to the National Strategies site in October 2008 and has now been considerably updated to include the latest information and research, and to provide a link to the *Gender Agenda* pages of *Teachernet*. The strengths of the pages on this site are that the audience is primarily schools and teachers, and the pages sit within the area of Inclusion and so can be seen to be associated with issues such as ethnicity and social class. Since its launch in September, there have been over 2,500 views for the *Introduction and key issues* pages and about 1,000 for the *Resources* page.

The *TTRB* website hosts information about the *Gender Agenda* and provides links to recent and relevant research about gender and education that is held on the site. Its primary audience is beginner teachers. To date, of the eight separate pages on the site relating to the *Gender Agenda*, each has received approximately 200 hits per month.

**Events**

During the course of the *Gender Agenda* initiative, seminars and workshops were organised for a variety of audiences, for example the Regional Research Seminars described earlier in this report, a joint workshop with Becta focusing on gender and ICT, and seminars to present the findings of specific gender-related research.

In addition, presentations about various elements of the *Gender Agenda*, such as the publications *Schools that close or narrow the attainment gap between boys and girls in English; Addressing Gender and Achievement: myths and realities*; and *Gender issues in school – What works to improve achievement for boys and girls*, were given at a range of external conferences, including the 2008 annual British Educational Research Conference (BERA), the annual National Association of Teachers
of English (NATE) conference in March 2009, the Leading Aspects Verifiers conference in October 2008 and, abroad, at a European seminar for exchanging good practice in gender equality in education. Some presentations were given to staff from LAs and some of them (e.g. Nottingham and Camden) will be furthering this work with their own schools as a result.

A slightly more unusual event followed an invitation from the National College of School Leadership (NCSL) to host two Hotseats (March and September 2008) to discuss gender and teaching related issues with teachers. About 80 teachers took part on each occasion.

Together, these events provided a useful means not only for dissemination, but also for discussion of ideas and feedback. Through them, awareness of gender and achievement issues have been raised, through sharing recent research and effective school and classroom practice, with a wide and growing audience of teachers, researchers and policy makers.

Publications
In September, a paper on the field of research described earlier in this report was published – *Schools that close or narrow the attainment gap between boys and girls in English* (see DCSF 2008).

Two other publications to inform and guide senior leaders and teachers in schools, *Addressing Gender and Achievement: myths and realities* (see DCSF 2009a) and *Gender issues in school – What works to improve achievement for boys and girls* (see DCSF 2009b), were published in June 2009 and appear on the websites mentioned above.

Discussion with stakeholders of early draft versions of the latter two publications suggested that both publications would be popular with educators for raising awareness of gender issues in schools, challenging gender stereotyping among teachers and pupils, and reviewing practice.
5. Conclusion

The Gender Agenda initiative has harnessed insights from research, practice and policy to get under the headlines and make a more considered review of the evidence from both research and policy. The seminar series and the associated activities, events and publications have refined knowledge, enabled good practice to be shared, and set new directions for future work.

The initiative acted as a catalyst for other actions; for example some LAs launched collaborative projects with their schools on gender issues, and some researchers (including teachers as action researchers in schools) started new research.

The future

The Gender Agenda initiative has generated activity which will continue beyond its set time span. Some schools will continue or start action research into their own gender issues; Nottingham LA will be carrying out a two-year project focused on gender issues in their secondary schools, and Camden LA are intending to have a combined focus of gender, ethnicity and social class in CPD work with their schools.

Increasingly through the duration of the initiative, the importance when addressing pupil achievement of considering gender, together with the dimensions of ethnicity and social class, was seen. This integration and interconnection of gender, ethnicity and class/deprivation should continue in the DCSF’s future work, particularly in the Narrowing the gaps division.

Recommendations

Schools

The main advice on guidance for schools and teachers is contained in Gender issues in school – What works to improve achievement for boys and girls (see DCSF 2009b), but there are two related key recommendations for schools concerning gender and boys’ achievement:

- Schools need to look at underperformance in their own context, not assume that boys are always and only the ones in need of support.

- Schools should tackle issues of gender-stereotyping. It is too easy to cast boys as victims and then offer stereotyped solutions to all boys, when some may continue to do very well, and others may need attention that challenges rather than reinforces their view of masculinity and schooling.

- Schools should consider setting up action research projects, preferably with support and expertise from HEI researchers, to investigate gender issues.
DCSF and other policy makers
The initiative has had its ups and downs, and one of the challenges of such a participatory model was in managing the relationship between the DCSF and other organisations and communities. For example, engagement and collaboration with both the research community and schools sometimes resulted in new evidence and knowledge which conflicted with existing policy or practice. But, in the experience of this initiative, any tensions were worthwhile and led to the forging of new and more positive relationships, where the sharing and discussion of new ideas and practices could be carried out to the benefit of all.

- The DCSF and policy makers should consider adopting a multi-partner participatory approach for future projects and activities which would benefit from the breadth of discussions, evidence and ideas that could refine thinking and guidance for practice.

Research community
The initiative has greatly benefited from the cooperation of the research community; particularly in refining evidence and knowledge that led to guidance on effective practice in schools. It also contributed to supporting and improving the practice of teachers carrying out action research in schools. There seemed to be reluctance from some in the community both to cooperate with policy makers and to support action research in schools, hence the following two recommendations:

- The research community could more readily offer support to schools wishing to carry out action research into gender related issues.
- The research community should be more proactive in its engagement with policy makers, particularly in sharing new research on areas of mutual interest.
References


Becta (2008). How do boys and girls differ in their use of ICT?


DCSF (2008) Improving the attainment of white working class boys: a study of a small sample of successful secondary schools.

DCSF (2008) Schools that close or narrow the attainment gap between boys and girls in English.


DCSF (2009b) Gender issues in school – What works to improve achievement for boys and girls.

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Websites
Teachernet, Gender Agenda: http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/wholeschool/equality/genderequalityduty/thegenderagenda/

National Strategies, Gender and achievement: http://nationalstrategies.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/search/inclusion/results/nav:46260

TTRB: http://www.ttrb.ac.uk/
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