

Mind the gender gap

England

In 2009 under the old Foundation Stage Profile the proportion of boys in England reaching a Good Level of Development (46.8%) was below the national average of 55.6% and the gap in achievement between boys and girls was 18.2%. The same % difference was seen in 2010 with a similar story continuing year on year.

The introduction of the new Early Years Foundation Stage Profile in 2013 showed 60% of girls and 44% of boys achieving a Good Level of Development (GLD)

Ealing

In 2013 63% of girls and 50.2% of boys achieved a GLD. An achievement gap of 12.8%. Overall 56.5% of all children in Ealing achieved a GLD.

In 2014 although the % of children attaining a GLD has improved for both girls and boys, the gender gap has widened with 72.9% of girls achieving a GLD compared with 55% of boys. This has resulted in Ealing having an increased gender gap of 17.9%.

The big question is - why is the gap widening in Ealing? This has resulted in Ealing's gender gap being higher than London and England.

Boys did less well in all areas of learning but particularly poorly in Expressive arts and design, Literacy and aspects of CLL and PSE. Their highest performances were in mathematics and understanding the world. This mirrors last year's results.

HMCI's report 2012/13 on Early Years published in 2014 shows Ealing to be the 8th highest performing LA in relation to the number of children on free school meals achieving a GLD (49%).

Another question is – if Ealing is so successful in raising attainment for one group of children – why is the cleverness of boys so hard to see?

Reasons why?

Is it that within the confines of our educational system that the energy, exuberance and imagination is rarely recognised or rewarded as a positive thing? In fact, more often than not, it is these very qualities that seem to get boys into 'trouble' all the time. What must it feel like to be constantly reprimanded for doing what comes naturally?

Although girls can be lively as well, because of their more developed impulse control they do find it much easier to comply when asked to sit quietly and listen.

When thinking about how to improve outcomes for boys it is vital that staff teams spend time discussing their own attitudes and expectations in order to define what they want to achieve. Early years teaching is a female dominated profession with a female orientated perspective on the world. Boys interests and behaviour can be seen as challenges to be overcome.

Do we realise the value of free-flow play? Free flow is not about just about letting children run where they want, when they want. It is well planned focus teaching outside and inside that matches children's age and stage of development with challenging provision planned for both environments. This enables children to access high quality learning experiences wherever they choose to work. Adults will of course direct children to activities for teaching within the free flow play situation. Within a free flow organisation boys are calmer and will spend more time at activities, they no longer all rush outside when the door is open, free flow mirrors 'at home' experiences for many and boys will naturally self-regulate their physical movements and energy if given the chance.

Evidence shows that many boys are interested in movement – of themselves and other things – exploration of the world around them and in vigorous fantasy play, often involving superhero characters. In addition boys like an element of competition incorporated in their play. All of these things may not be immediately valued in our schools.

The EYFSP results show that there is the smallest gap in understanding the world. If this is an area where boys do well why not use it as a platform on which to engage their interest and develop their skills in all other areas of learning? Eg to hook boys into reading (and some girls) a range of non-fiction texts engage boys more effectively as they are often not as interested in narrative based texts.

How can we reduce the gender gap?

These are some successful strategies that have been planned and responded to differently to boys and girls to maximise their learning. Adults plan and observe in order to catch the learning of boys.

- Super-hero play supported with a range of story sacks, role play and other resources to interest both boys and girls. Super hero ID cards, job descriptions and maps really draw in children to get involved. Writing up good deeds for the day is valuable too. Define the area for super hero play eg an area of PE mats outside where super hero powers come alive. Once off the mat then powers die.
- Provide different scales indoors and out eg lego inside, big construction blocks outside.
- Make challenges with guttering, pipes, tubes, funnels on frames around the water/sand trays to encourage collaboration, team work and develop persistence and resilience in learning. Pose questions – can you find a way to move the water from one end of the outside area to the other?
- Using bikes for a purpose linked to role play will encourage problem solving, mathematical language and sharing. Equipping the area with materials to make lists, notices, labels, catalogues, maps, memo pads by the phone eg the garage, building, emergency services.
- Using scientific resources when on mini beast hunts such as magnifiers and clipboards to record tally sheets. Encourage imagination during activities eg eco warriors on 'save the mini beast expeditions.
- Track journeys made by mini beasts across large pieces of paper.
- Use technological such as woodwork, found materials to draw a design and then make a model – record and refine.

- Use programmable toys that move, resources for exploring magnetism, forces and electricity.
- Start with an active game of catch and chase involving Ben Ten characters which can lead into Ben Ten pendants and watches
- A deconstruction area with old clocks and machines, screw drivers and spanners to deconstruct, magnifying glasses to help see what to do – will support the development of concentration and interest.
- Having den making sessions on a large or small scale with natural and found materials, small world figures, fabric and blocks.
- Develop a digging area and spaces to grow plants. The process from cultivation, planning, caring for and harvesting encourages patience and a deeper level of engagement and motivation is increased by knowing that each day the plants require water.
- Small collections of artefacts of recent historical use eg flat iron, box camera, roller skates to explore and theorise about.
- Other collections such as locks and keys, nuts and bolts, spoons of different sizes and for different purposes, connectors such as Velcro, hooks and eyes, to use to develop fine motor and reasoning skills whilst developing descriptive language.
- Messy mark making with out of date partially cooked spaghetti to make patterns, letters and shapes which, if left out to dry on card, covered by glue can be painted to make textured large name cards.
- Name making with nuts, bolts, screws and nails covered in tacky back plastic
- Mark making in mud, paint or cornflour with plastic cars or on a larger scale bikes.
- Baskets, bags, back packs, tool belts equipped with resources including a note pad and pen.
- Introducing a range of make role models – site manager, male teaching and support staff, visitors.
- Having an office or writing areas outside with a signing in and out list for bikes or equipment, a tally chart for skittles or laminated speech bubbles to record children's views and comments.
- Squeezy bottles of paint and a large wall or floor space covered with paper or water pistols with a tin can or chalked targets holds boys interest and supports hand eye coordination.
- Going out on environmental walks looking for letters, numbers etc Role play being letter and number explorers.
- Getting into a project that interests eg photography, magnets.
- Developing a Forest Schools approach within the school grounds or using the local parks more effectively. Small group trips out are more effective than whole class experiences. By engaging parents/carers in small trips the adults are also modelling effective use of language and behaviour management strategies.

Questions

- Does your own school data reflect the LA's and/or national data?
- How does your provision promote equality of opportunity for all children?

- How are you supporting your staff to understand the cleverness of boys and to understand how they learn and how they demonstrate their learning? Eg boys creativity in block play.
- Do your staff spend time where boys play?
- How does your approach to observation, assessment and early intervention help ensure that all boys and girls get the right support?
- How are you supporting all parents to really engage with their children's learning at school and in the home?