

## **Abstract**

**‘Can an enquiry based literacy project better engage low-attaining boys in single-sex English lessons?’ L. Brookbanks, Sheffield Hallam University, February 2010.**

The ‘Gender Gap’ between girls and boys has been a concern for educational policy for the past two decades, particularly that of boys’ underachievement. There are clear differences in the ways that boys and girls learn, with boys preferring a more ‘active’ way of learning and motivated by practical activities such as role-play, competition, the use of ICT and investigative work. Girls on the other hand are more passive in their learning and are compliant to sitting quietly and engaging in longer and more creative writing activities. This study focuses on a group of eighteen low-attaining year 9 boys, who as part of a pilot study in the English Department at Swindon Academy were being taught in a single-sex class from September 2008. The intention of the pilot study was to enable boys ‘active-way’ of learning to be better catered for, however by December 2008, based on teacher observations had sought only to disengage the boys further in their English lessons. In January, 2009 the boys became a focus group for improvement and a five-week action-research project was developed to re-engage the boys in their learning in English. Based on action-research principles each of the five teaching weeks in the project became an action-reflection cycle whereby teachers worked collaboratively to determine the strategies that best engaged the boys in their learning and rule out the strategies that were leading to disengagement. Through the use of systematic observation, teacher and pupil questionnaires, weekly-review minutes and pupil interviews the success of the change activity was analysed. Results to the study showed that the general attitude, behaviour and social interaction skills of the students improved. Weekly review minutes and pupil questionnaires revealed two major conclusions which were an improvement in students’ ability to learn collaboratively with each other and an improvement in the way they behaved in lesson. Attitude to homework, the frequency of students shouting out in class and the way students spoke to each other were areas that were improved marginally and therefore remain as an area for further action. Limitations to the study include the ‘Hawthorne Effect’, researcher bias and the use of percentages to express numbers based on small population sizes and must be taken into account when relying on results to this study. Dissemination of findings were on many levels including the English Department, Advanced Skills Teachers and Teacher Leaders, the Senior Head of Learning and Secondary Teachers at Swindon Academy. There are future plans for dissemination to other Lead Teachers within other academies within the United Learning Trust and United Church Schools Trust group.

**Key words: Gender, single-sex, low-ability, action-research, literacy, English, engagement.**