

# Teaching modern foreign languages in single-sex classes in a co-educational context – review of a project in a North Yorkshire comprehensive school

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## ABSTRACT

A co-educational comprehensive school in North Yorkshire, concerned at the gap between boys' and girls' performance in French and German at GCSE, opted to teach Year 8 languages classes as single-sex groups. 2003-04 was to be a pilot year, at the end of which pupils' performance, motivation and attitude, as well as the experiences and views of teachers would be reviewed. The outcome of this review would determine whether or not the teaching of French and German in single-sex groups would continue.

It was felt by the Head of Languages that the review of the pilot should be informed by an on-going evaluation of the learning and teaching experiences of pupils and teachers throughout the year. The review could be the first of a number, depending on the outcome of the pilot and on decisions made about how long the single-sex teaching should continue.

This article places the pilot in the context of other research conducted in the area of single-sex teaching in co-educational contexts and offers some tentative suggestions about the value of this approach and the lessons which can be learned from this North Yorkshire school.

## INTRODUCTION

In the course of the summer term 2003, the modern foreign languages (MFL) department at a North Yorkshire co-educational comprehensive school decided to teach two French classes and two German classes in Year 8 as single-sex groups, starting in September 2003. The reasons for this included the following:

- it was felt that boys could and should be performing better;
- there was a perception that boys' motivation in MFL was not as high as it might be;
- girls might feel less inhibited in a boy-free group;
- articles in the educational press and in academic and professional journals suggested that single-sex teaching had considerable benefits for both boys and girls;
- there was money available in the school to support such a project.

A researcher was invited to review the outcomes of the pilot over the course of one academic year.

## BACKGROUND

Death and taxes are much-quoted certainties. The month of August has traditionally provided two further certainties. Performance at A level and GCSE will have improved and the gap between boys' and girls' performance will have widened. This has applied not only to languages but to just about all subjects:

... girls are outscoring boys in almost every subject at every stage in the educational system (except for first-class degrees at Oxford and Cambridge). (Pyke, 2004: 11)

It has applied not only to the UK but to just about all countries participating in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) PISA study: "The gender gap is an international phenomenon." (DfES, 2003: 2) August 2004 bucked the trend. Although a gap between boys' and girls' performance persisted, it was not as wide as it had been in previous years: "Boys are finally closing the gender results gap" (Mansell, 2004: 4).

Is it just a question of gender? Surely not. Just as not all boys are failures or underperformers, there are many girls who underachieve (DfES, 2003: 1). To pin the performance-discrepancy on the gender of pupils is to ignore a host of other factors:

There is a complex interrelationship between social class, ethnicity and gender in underachievement... There are no simple explanations for the gender gap in performance nor any simple solutions. (Arnot *et al.* 2001: 2)

## FACTORS INFLUENCING DIFFERENCE IN PERFORMANCE

Arnot (1998) identifies a tangled web of factors contributing to the gap in performance between boys and girls. These may be biological, school-related, and social. Slater and Mansell (2003) and Halpern (1992, in Callaghan, 1997) identify differences in the way that the brains of boys and girls work, in that

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girls have language functions represented in both cerebral hemispheres while boys have them in only one. They disagree, however, on the extent of the influence that this biological difference might have. Slater and Mansell feel that the brain difference may be a more important factor than the in-school experience. Halpern argues, however, that “given that the biological research is inconclusive, it is the different socialization processes and differential out of school experiences which are the causes of the distinct linguistic abilities of boys and girls”. This view is supported by Gipps *et al.* (1994). Indeed, the impact of socialisation processes is unlikely to be limited to linguistic abilities but has implications for a whole range of behaviours. Do boys and girls behave in particular ways because of nature or nurture?

Social factors which may determine perceived differences in behaviours and performance between boys and girls are complex and manifold:

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Factors affecting young people’s attitudes and motivation include the nature of employment opportunities within the locality of the school, traditional expectations in the community about patterns of ‘male’ and ‘female’ employment and perceptions of the relevance of education to the future lives and life chances. There is also evidence of a strong ‘macho’ peer culture that affects some boys’ attitudes to schoolwork and homework. (Arnot *et al.*, 1998: 90)

Barton (1997: 12) points out how peer pressure, the need to look cool and the emphasis on image may lead to disruptive behaviour amongst some boys. This may be reflected in aggressive, physical behaviour and an unwillingness to listen. Barton then links this to the challenge of behaving appropriately in the modern languages classroom: “It is easy to see how the language lesson makes demands of a male pupil which are inconsistent with the linguistic role normally expected of him by society” (Barton, 1997: 12).

## LEARNING STYLES

The recognition that boys and girls, broadly speaking, may be different in their attitude and approach to school work is nothing new:

Even in the 1920s, the Board of Education concluded that the two sexes were of the same intellectual ability and deserved the same curriculum, but that girls were more conscientious. Boys were described as prone to ‘healthy idleness’. (Pyke, 2004: 11)

The 1980s provided an interesting difference in opinion between HMI and other researchers. In their report, *Boys and Modern Languages*, HMI suggested that, “Boys do not on the whole need to be catered for in a different way from girls” (DES, 1985: 21). Batters (1987: 78), however, identified differences (grossly generalised though they may be) between boys’ and girls’ behaviours, depending on the nature of the classroom activity. Girls invested more

concentration in ‘attentive’ activities (listening to the teacher, the tape and other pupils; observing and reading) whilst boys favoured ‘oral and participatory activities’ (speaking to the teacher, to other pupils in the target language and mother tongue; group work or demonstration and showing spontaneity). If both boys and girls were to reach their potential, then surely their differing learning styles and needs would have to be met. It must be recognised, however, that this conclusion is based on sweeping generalisations. Teachers must take account of ‘difference’, whether this relates to gender or other factors such as sexuality, class or ethnicity and beware of the dangers of stereotyping (Whitelaw, 2004). HMI (2003), more recently, have acknowledged that boys respond differently to girls depending on the nature of the learning and teaching experience:

- they are less tolerant of indifferent teaching;
- they respond positively to well-structured lessons and activities;
- they respond positively to work with clear objectives, set in real-life contexts;
- they prefer short-term tasks with quick feedback.

Girls too appreciate the above features but are more likely to cooperate and learn, even when they are absent.

Within the MFL context, Place (1997) and Harris (1998) provide useful strategies to cater for boys’ learning styles, covering the following areas, amongst others:

- providing experiences of success in the early stages of learning;
- giving activities real value and relevance to the pupils’ reality;
- providing activities with an element of competition and movement;
- giving boys support in organising their work;
- sharing vocabulary-learning strategies;
- sharing revision strategies.

The cocktail of factors above can lead to a very challenging teaching context for some teachers and a differentiated learning experience for some boys and, of course, the girls in their class:

- Girls are just as likely as boys to volunteer answers in class, but boys are much more likely to call out the answers. (Kelly, 1988: 29)
- Boys attract 60% of teacher attention in mixed classes, regardless of socio-economic status, ethnic origin, gender of teacher, age of pupil or curriculum area. (DfES, 2003: 2)
- When praise is given it is usually for academic performance rather than behaviour, so if boys are not performing academically, then they receive less praise. (DfES, 2003: 2)

In the light of the above evidence, it is hardly surprising that some schools have looked at their structural arrangements in order to meet the differing needs of boys and girls more effectively and to bolster the perceived weaknesses of each gender group.

## STRUCTURAL ARRANGEMENTS

Younger and Warrington (2003) carried out research in schools which were endeavouring to enhance provision for boys without disadvantaging the girls. In co-educational settings this took the form of boy-girl seating, single-sex teaching or changing lesson structure and pace to facilitate short-term activities and accommodate five-minute 'breathers' for the boys. Their findings were inconclusive: in some schools the strategies helped; in others they made no difference, or made the situation worse.

Boy-girl seating generally gets a mixed review. Pyke (2004: 13) reports on research carried out by Edinburgh University which concludes that boy-girl seating does reduce disruption. Girls, however, dislike the arrangement because they are denied the opportunity to sit next to their friends. Why should they be exploited in this way to temper the behaviour of the boys?

Single-sex classes in co-educational contexts may date back to 1997. (Single-sex physical education classes, of course, go back very much further than that.) Most evaluations concur with Place: "Segregation on its own may not be sufficient to improve the performance of boys" (1997: 3).

A case may be argued for single-sex classes giving teachers the opportunity to cater for boy- and girl-specific needs. This assumes, however, that all boys and all girls have the same learning needs, likes and dislikes (Suknandan, 2000: 89; see also the findings of HMI, (DES, 1985:21)). Suknandan (2000) identifies the temptation of teachers to concentrate on boys' or girls' strengths as opposed to giving attention to their perceived weaknesses. Single-sex classes offer a limited social dimension and deny pupils access to the views of the opposite sex. A single-sex class is not necessarily an easy option for the teacher. Boys' poor behaviour can become even worse. Girls' classes too can be challenging. It is reported (Elwood and Gipps in Pyke, 2004: 13) that single-sex groupings lead to increased confidence in girls but can contribute "an unhealthy, 'spiteful' aspect to the competitive atmosphere."

HMI published the results of a survey of single-sex classes in 2003. Again the findings were mixed. It was reported that the strategy benefited girls slightly but not the boys. In one school the experiment had to be abandoned as a result of boys' behaviour deteriorating and results worsening (HMI, 2003: 27). It was felt that boy-girl seating worked better, because teachers had control of classroom arrangements and could exploit activities to help boys and girls learn from each other (HMI, 2003: 5). They concluded:

Overall, boy-only groups and pairs within classes were generally less effective than mixed-sex groups and pairs in terms of output, their contribution to the lesson and the complexity of the language they used. (HMI, 2003:8)

Younger and Warrington (2003: 10) are rather more positive in their findings on the impact of single-sex classes. Boys and girls felt more comfortable; there

were fewer distractions; both sexes felt more able to question and to explore issues related to learning; they could take part in discussion without fear of ridicule or embarrassment; boys in particular felt less pressurised to perform or 'showboat'; they felt able to produce better quality work. The objective of narrowing the gap between girls' and boys' performance was nevertheless not achieved in one of the survey schools:

In one partner school, it appears that the initiative has impacted positively upon the achievements of both girls and boys in English, although differentially so in favour of girls, so that the gender gap has widened rather than narrowed in this subject. (p.10)

However, if both boys and girls are getting closer to realising their potential, surely this should be regarded as a positive rather than a negative outcome.

Younger and Warrington (2003: 12) also identify some risks attached to single-sex teaching. Like HMI above (2003: 27) they conclude that, in a class consisting exclusively of boys, there can be a danger of behaviour deteriorating, if it is not managed appropriately. Shy, reticent boys can be overwhelmed by the 'laddish' atmosphere and retreat further into their shells. They also draw attention to the need for teachers to give careful consideration to the gender-specific teaching strategies to be implemented. It is not just a matter of teaching the class as if it were mixed:

...it is clear that these advantages will only be fully maximised when different teaching and assessment approaches for girls' classes and boys' classes are explicitly explored and implemented, and when schools have considered what is *particular* in the classroom context about teaching boys: it is not simply a case of taking advantage of a single-sex context and teaching 'normally'! (Younger and Warrington, 2003: 11)

## TEACHER AS THE MAIN FACTOR

How much influence do structural arrangements really have? To what extent do girl-boy seating, single-sex groups or mixed groups with single-sex seating impact on the learning of the pupils? What about the teacher and the teaching? The link between positive motivation and performance is well established (Chambers, 2001; Dörnyei, 1998) and many studies have identified the teacher as the most important factor in influencing pupils' motivation (HMI, 2002; OFSTED, 2002; Chambers, 1999). Sunderland's (1998: 62-63) findings on classroom discourse reflect how teachers' interactions with boys differ from those with girls: they spend more time praising, supporting and facilitating girls; they have higher expectations of girls; they are more likely to respond to boys in an admonishing manner, even when they are making subject-related comments.

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In schools where boys' performance has improved more sharply than the national rate, high expectations, good teaching and close support are the most powerful explanations. (OFSTED, 2002: 37)

This view is supported by HMI (2002: 17), who identify common characteristics in schools where boys succeed: "a non-macho culture: a strong sense of community; an ethos that values achievement, where teachers provide prompt, detailed responses to pupils' work, and where the teaching is enthusiastic and delivered with humour."

In the single-sex context, Younger and Warrington (2003) also stress the importance of good pupil-teacher relationships and the need to go beyond 'good practice'. This includes investment of time and effort in establishing "a sense of togetherness and of common purpose with boys," by, for example, engaging when appropriate in conversations about sport, music or fashion. This has the potential to sustain the credibility of the teacher and lead to "a relationship of shared respect and commitment between teacher and boys." (p. 11)

## SEX OF THE TEACHER

Do pupils prefer to be taught by a teacher of the same sex? Findings on this issue have been inconclusive. Powell and Batters (1986) suggest that pupils prefer to be taught by a female. Clark and Trafford (1996) conclude that it is the personality of the teacher rather than the gender which influences pupils. Stanworth (1983) reports that boys think male teachers are best whilst the girls remain evenly divided between male and female. Most of the boys suggest that they feel better able to contribute in classes taught by men, while all but one of the girls report being "more attentive, more at ease and more likely to participate with a female teacher" (in Callaghan, 1998: 3).

Given these inconclusive findings, rather than endeavouring to match male teachers to boys' classes and female teachers to girls' classes, those responsible for timetabling should allow teachers to teach those classes with whom they have a healthy relationship, taking into consideration teachers' competence in classroom management. This is much more a question of a teacher's capacity to challenge gendered stereotypes rather than her/his 'bottle' or 'machismo'. In this way, teachers and pupils are more likely to have a positive teaching and learning experience. Admittedly, this is pure idealism. Rarely does the timetabler have this amount of latitude. More often than not, who teaches which class in a given slot is determined by which teacher is available at that time.

Gender is a complex issue, and it is not simply a matter of gender; there are many different interconnecting variables at work. Recognition of the network of variables and their implications for the learning and teaching experience should have an impact on planning and preparation for MFL lessons and practice in the classroom.

## RESEARCH METHOD

The method adopted for the evaluation in this North Yorkshire comprehensive was determined largely by financial constraints, the school timetable and the availability of staff. The question areas investigated were informed largely by the literature reviewed above. Data were collected at three points in time:

- September 2003 – one-to-one interviews with the Head of Department and each of the two available class teachers (French single-sex groups); group interviews with ten pupils from the boys' French class and ten pupils from the girls' French class. Pupils were selected by the class teacher to reflect a representative range of ability and motivation.
- February 2004 – one-to-one interviews with the Head of Department, each of the two available class teachers (German single-sex groups) and one Year 8 form teacher; questionnaires filled in by boys' and girls' French classes.
- July 2004 – one-to-one interviews with the Head of Department, one of the teachers of a French single-sex group (also interviewed in September 2003) and one of the teachers of a German single-sex group (not previously interviewed); group interviews with ten pupils from the boys' French class and ten pupils from the girls' French class, that is, the same pupils interviewed in September.

This method offered the following benefits:

- regular access to the manager of the project (Head of Department);
- access to each of the teachers involved in the project, one on more than one occasion;
- access to a form teacher with a sample of the pupils (boys and girls) in her form;
- access to the same sample of ten boys and ten girls at the beginning and end of the project (and in the middle, given that they were members of the classes filling in the questionnaire) to see any development and/or change in their views;
- access to all pupils involved in the project taking French in the questionnaire phase;
- the mixture of group interview and questionnaire helped avoid participant-fatigue amongst the pupils, a potential problem, given that the areas of questioning on each of the three visits were broadly the same;
- two phases of group interviews and one phase of data collection by questionnaire allowed a balance of in-depth questioning as well as a broader accessing of views.

The method, therefore, gave access to a very wide range of views and provided insights into how these developed and changed, in some cases, in the course of the year.

The method was not without limitations, however. Ideally, the research would have included all of the pupils involved in the project, that is, those in the French groups and the German groups. This would have doubled the number of days to be spent in the

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school, which would not have been financially feasible. It was therefore decided to focus on the French classes, whose timetable allowed optimal use of the time available. It was also originally intended to interview all of the teachers involved in the project on each of the three visits. Regrettably this was not possible as a result of maternity leave and sickness.

## **FINDINGS**

### **CONSULTATION ON WHETHER THE PROJECT SHOULD BE UNDERTAKEN**

Initial consultation on the project took place amongst MFL colleagues. Support for the proposal was unanimous. This was followed up with consultations with the senior management team, represented by the Deputy Head. He too was keen for the proposal to be implemented, not least because so few other schools had taken this route in MFL. Governors, parents and pupils were not consulted. It was felt that liaising with parents at an early stage might lead to issues being raised which could delay implementation of the proposal; any problems identified by parents could be addressed post-implementation.

### **EXPECTATIONS**

It was hoped that the boys' performance would be improved, although this was by no means certain (see comments on behaviour below). It was felt that the girls' performance would also improve, given that they were less likely to feel constrained to volunteer and contribute and that teaching would be interrupted less frequently by boisterous or loud behaviour. There was evidence of some apprehension with regard to both boys' and girls' behaviour: a group consisting exclusively of boys might be noisier and more disruptive in the absence of "the levelling influence of young ladies" (Head of Department); there was also the risk that some girls, uninhibited by the presence of boys, might take on the role of "naughty boys".

### **INTRODUCTION OF PROJECT**

The introduction of the project was very low key. The aim was to avoid debate at this stage. The pupils were given no information in advance of going to their first French/German lesson. Feedback from teachers suggests that some pupils even failed to notice the difference, once in the lesson. The teachers outlined the background to the project. Pupils' reaction was minimal.

### **REVIEW PROCEDURES IN PLACE**

The project was to be reviewed by a researcher from the University of Leeds. Feeding into this were the discussions at numerous informal, ad hoc meetings between MFL colleagues, most commonly on the theme of behaviour issues and sometimes attainment. Contrary to original intentions, regular, formal internal reviews of the project involving teachers and

pupils did not take place. Comparative data from Year 7 for those pupils involved in the project and for their peers who were not involved would be examined by the department in the September following the school examinations taken in the summer.

### **INITIAL REACTIONS – TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS (SEPTEMBER 2003)**

The first visit to the school took place two weeks into the first term of the project. The teachers reported that the pupils were very enthusiastic about their single-sex teaching in MFL. Non-MFL colleagues' interest (insofar as they knew about the project) was lukewarm. Some wanted to be informed about the outcomes as the project progressed. This low level of interest came as little surprise, given the low-key introduction of the project. This is exactly how MFL colleagues wanted it. To implement the project with a fanfare could lead to a huge let-down, in the event of the outcomes being unfavourable. At this early stage there had been no feedback from parents.

### **PUPILS' VIEWS IN SEPTEMBER 2003**

Pupils were interviewed in single-sex groups of ten. The opening questions related to their general attitude towards modern languages and their expectations for the year ahead.

All pupils were generally positive about languages and their importance for their future as members of the European Union and travellers of the world and for their careers in particular. There was a perception amongst the boys that languages were more difficult than most other subjects. Interestingly and contrary to other research findings (Barton, 2003; Pyke, 2004) and the views of their teachers, the boys and girls articulated no differences when asked about the activities in MFL they liked and disliked.

The pupils provided some interesting data regarding their expectations for the forthcoming year. Initially they commented on how they liked their current teacher more/less than the teacher they had had the previous year. Surprisingly, perhaps, neither of the two groups mentioned the possible impact of the single-sex project until prompted. Boys expected the teacher to be more strict; behaviour would be better; performance would be better – boys based this on the previous year's experience when girls tended to dominate proceedings in class, leaving little opportunity for boys to contribute. (This confirms the views of Sunderland (1998: 68) but contradicts the view of teachers, the girls in this survey and other research findings e.g. Barton (2003) and Pyke (2004).)

The girls were glad that the boys were no longer present in MFL lessons. Boys caused embarrassment, laughed, showed off, fooled around and generally behaved immaturity: "Boys take longer to settle down and we can concentrate harder without the boys' noise." (Year 8 girl). In spite of this unanimous welcome of single-sex teaching, however, they

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would not like the project to spread to all subjects: “I wouldn’t like it in every lesson. It would be strange – like in an all-girls school” (Year 8 girl). The pupils seemed to have taken the project in their stride. It was not a big deal to them: “I think the reason it’s not a big deal is because we do PE just girls” (Year 8 girl).

Most pupils claimed not to have told their parents about the project. They had no concerns about the change at this early stage. They were happy to be in single-sex groups; they did not feel advantaged or disadvantaged by being part of the project. In the final analysis, it appeared that the composition of the class was not the most important factor but rather the teacher: “It depends what teacher you have. If you have a good one or a bad one” (Year 8 boy).

### TEACHERS’ VIEWS IN SEPTEMBER 2003

The two teachers interviewed on the first visit to the school shared the pupils’ enthusiasm for the project. Boys and girls were volunteering more; motivation appeared to be enhanced, although there was some doubt as to whether this would continue into Years 9 and 10.

Expectations regarding boys’ behaviour were generally being realised: they were loud and disruptive. Girls’ behaviour, in the case of this French group, was better than predicted, in that they were less silly and giggly than had been expected.

The teachers interviewed had not done any gender-specific research or preparation in advance of the implementation of the project. They claimed to adapt their teaching, however, to accommodate gender-specific needs (see Younger and Warrington, 2003: 11.) One of the teachers provided examples of girl-specific activities:

“Different things appeal to different sexes. I’m thinking along the lines of having to do less physical games and spatial activities than I would with the boys because I think the girls’ powers of concentration, this is my expectation anyway, will be sustained for a long period of time.” (Year 8 teacher)

Had the project not been conducted, the MFL classes would have been setted. The single-sex groups contained pupils representing a range of ability. Was this likely to present the teachers with difficulties? Neither teacher thought that this was a cause for concern at this early stage. It was recognised, however, that the new academic year had only just started; classes had been taught in mixed-ability groups in Year 7, so this was nothing really new for the pupils or the teachers. No problems were apparent for the moment but it was felt that they might arise in the future.

The teachers did not articulate any real concerns regarding the project. Their main hope was that boys’ performance would improve as well as the girls’. Were this not to be the case, then they would question the benefit of the project and its future. (This was an issue in one of the schools researched by Younger

and Warrington, 2003: 10).

Neither teacher had had any feedback from parents.

### PUPILS’ VIEWS IN FEBRUARY 2004

On the second visit to the school, 47 pupils from the single-sex groups (French), 21 girls and 26 boys, filled in a questionnaire relating to their views on languages in general and their perceptions of the impact of the single-sex project in particular.

77% of pupils noted a difference between this year’s and the previous year’s MFL lessons. The difference was positive in the majority of cases and related to the single-sex project. Pupils felt more confident, less embarrassed and experienced more fun. 60% of the pupils (71% girls; 50% boys) enjoyed lessons more than they had expected. The few negative comments were provided by the boys and related to the increased noise-level in lessons.

Pupils were fairly evenly split (53% yes; 47% no) on whether they now enjoyed French more than the year before. The teacher and the teaching style were often identified as influential factors. There were also references to enhanced confidence, the benefits of the absence of boys/girls and a perception that French was easier than the year before.

In keeping with the data provided by the September interviews, French occupied a mid-table position in the pupils’ league-table of most popular subjects. There was a considerable difference between boys’ and girls’ responses, however: 90% girls and 42% boys placed French mid-table; 46% of boys put French towards the bottom of the table, in contrast to only one girl.

#### Have pupils’ views of French lessons changed since September?

	All pupils (%)	Girls (%)	Boys (%)
Yes	49	52	46
Partly	32	38	27
No	19	14	23

Generally the yes/no split was fairly even, although the girls tended to provide more positive grounds for their response than the boys. They felt that the behaviour in class was better, although their standard of work was much the same. Their concentration was better and they enjoyed the novelty of the single-sex teaching. Both boys and girls felt more confident and less embarrassed (these changes were mentioned repeatedly). Whilst boys enjoyed the exclusive company of their male friends, they recognised that the increased volume of noise made concentration difficult.

Pupils did not identify any real change in teaching style. The few changes mentioned included increased strictness, increase in target language use and more writing. Whether these factors relate to the single-sex project or to the normal teaching approach of the teacher is not clear. Some pupils articulated

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frustration at having three different teachers in the course of this year up to this point.

Boys and girls were refreshingly frank regarding their perception of pupil-behaviour. Girls (70%) felt that behaviour in their lessons was better; 85% of boys felt that behaviour in their lessons was worse. It is interesting that some girls felt that they chatted more in lessons but at an acceptable noise level. Boys too chatted more but seemed incapable of chatting quietly.

Was the quality of learning better this year than last? Pupils were fairly evenly split on this issue, although there was again a big gender difference. 62% of girls thought that their learning had improved, whilst 65% of boys thought that the opposite was the case for them. Grounds for this related to single-sex classes (less embarrassment, enhanced concentration, fewer distractions etc.) as well as pupils' perception of how good their teacher was in comparison to the previous year.

Pupils, regardless of gender, thought that the project was a good thing and would rather not return to mixed-sex classes. In the few cases where a return to mixed classes was considered positively, the reason related to the social dimension or the boys' wish for the calming influence of girls in lessons.

By February, 90% of girls but only 50% of boys had told their parents about the project. Only a few of those who had not told their parents, provided a reason why:

"It's no big deal."

"They won't be bothered."

"They haven't asked."

"They wouldn't like it."

## TEACHERS' VIEWS IN FEBRUARY 2004

The Head of Department and three teachers were interviewed in February: the teacher of the boys' German group; the teacher of the girls' German group; a Year 8 form teacher, who happened also to be a member of the MFL team. The two French teachers were not available for interview on this occasion.

Girls were generally regarded as easier to teach, more confident and willing to contribute in lessons:

They'll stand up and do role-plays. It takes a little while to get the volunteers out but they will stand up and do things. If I think of them in a mixed-sex situation, they probably wouldn't put their hands up because they're not so confident.

They could have their 'bad' days, however, when "girly behaviour" was a feature. They could also be quite malicious in their dealings with each other. Boys tended to be more challenging because of the volume of noise they created and their tendency to disrupt. One teacher, however, pointed out how boys reacted differently to girls when they were reprimanded for misdemeanours:

They [*boys*] don't react badly to you when you tell them off. I think that's a boy thing, whereas the girls get a bit uppity and hold it against you.

These teachers had not changed their teaching style, in spite of their initial intentions to do so. This change of mind was driven by the increasing awareness (in line with views provided by pupils above) that both girls and boys enjoyed games and competition:

When you do things with a mixed group, it's the boys who get excited, but equally if the girls have the freedom to do that because there's no fear of the boys, they get as involved and excited.

As was the case in interviews with teachers in September, mixed-ability teaching was still not a problematic issue. Again these teachers felt that it could become an issue at a later stage when the degree of difficulty in learning German (a subject just started by Year 8 in September) increased.

One point on which the teachers disagreed was the significance of the sex of the teacher. One teacher felt that girls were more relaxed with a female teacher whilst her colleague felt that the personality of the teacher was more important than the gender:

I'd say they [*the boys*] feel comfortable with me. I don't think the fact that I'm young and female has anything to do with it. I get on with them very well. I did feel like I was a male PE teacher in there. I think it depends on the personality of the teacher.

At this stage, no change in attainment had been identified.

All teachers, including the Head of Department, were keen for the project to continue.

Strangely, little interest had been shown up to this point by senior management, (see Younger and Warrington, 2003: 15, who stress the importance of the role of senior management), staff in other subject areas or parents.

## PUPILS' VIEWS IN JULY 2004

The views of the pupils changed little over the course of the year of the project.

The girls continued to feel more relaxed and confident in the absence of boys, although there was some evidence to suggest that they missed them on a social level. Behaviour issues related to their chattiness and "bitchiness about each other". (See the comments of the teacher below who confirms that this was a problem. See also Elwood and Gipps in Pyke, 2004: 13.) Half the group of ten enjoyed French more than the previous year; four enjoyed it just as much; only one enjoyed it less. Although the single-sex grouping had made a positive contribution to their enjoyment, the girls made it clear that the teacher and her teaching were more important factors. (See also HMI, 2002: 17; OFSTED, 2002: 37; Younger and Warrington, 2003: 11.) They felt that their learning and performance had been enhanced in the course of the year. They were keen for the project to continue, provided they could have teacher X or teacher Y. Ideally they would prefer to be taught by a woman: "Then you can tell your problems to the teacher without feeling

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**"Boys too chatted more but seemed incapable of chatting quietly."**

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embarrassed.” (See below where a teacher perceives this as a real distraction from teaching and learning.)

The boys too felt very positive about the single-sex groupings. They felt that they had more opportunity to speak in French because they were spared the embarrassment of speaking in front of girls. They could ask each other questions without feeling stupid. Eight out of ten boys enjoyed French more than the year before and, like the girls, they put this down more to the teacher than the single-sex class, although they acknowledged that this too was an influential factor. Although they recognised that their behaviour was worse than in a mixed-sex group, they felt that much of their chat was work-related and, as a result, they got more work done and performed better in tests. Boys too were keen for the project to continue and, unsolicited, one of the boys offered the following comment: “I think we’d be better with a male teacher.” (See also Stanworth, 1983.) This was supported by his classmates:

They might like the same things as us, so they might talk to us about it, like Mr X likes motorbikes. They can understand us more.

## TEACHERS’ VIEWS IN JULY 2004

Enthusiasm for the project was not as apparent as it had been on the previous two visits. Fears regarding behaviour had been realised. Boys were more disruptive and noisy in the single-sex groups:

I find it really hard work. It’s a large class of 30 boys... They get stirred up together and they’re difficult to control.

Girls were more chatty and teachers had to spend more time dealing with problems relating to malfunctioning relationships and general nastiness than was the case in mixed-sex classes:

I feel as though the relationship issues have almost detracted from the teaching... All these issues came into the classroom and there seemed to be a bigger concentration of these issues; in a mixed class you wouldn’t get such a high concentration of such personalities.

Test evidence did not suggest that the performance of boys or girls had improved as a result of the project: “They have performed broadly as they would have done, had they been in mixed groups.” (Test results were to be examined further and compared with results in Year 7 and with the results of mixed-sex groups in September 2004.)

Suknandan’s research findings were similar:

Although these initial, tentative assessments suggested that single-sex classes were having a positive effect on pupil achievement, they also revealed that these classes were not necessarily helping to reduce the gender gap as girls were benefiting as much as boys from being put into single-sex classes. (Suknandan, 2000: 39)

It was felt (although not unanimously) that findings on behaviour and attainment might have been different, had the department’s wishes for boys’ classes to be allocated to male teachers and girls’ to female teachers, been met:

... if you’ve got a group of boys, a male will be on the same wave length. I feel it’s like an alien culture. I think they respect a male more. In our culture the male has more authority and more weight.

To generalise from this teacher’s comment would be erroneous, as it may be a reflection of the school and/or cultural context within which this teacher works and lives. (See, however, Younger and Warrington, 2003: 11 on the desirability of the girls-female teacher/boys-male teacher arrangement.) It was reported that timetabling difficulties precluded the possibility of males teaching boys and females teaching girls. One female teacher felt that the sex of the teacher was irrelevant; more important were her/his personality and interests. She (exceptionally) was keen to teach a boys’ group:

Boys don’t talk about the girls like girls talk about the boys. I just don’t want to know all that peripheral stuff. With the boys you can talk to them for five minutes about football and then bring them back to work. You start engaging the girls and it’s harder to bring them back.

Mixed-ability teaching, which had not been an issue in September or February, was now acknowledged as a real challenge in the single-sex groups. The combination of a range of ability and “difficult personalities” within the same group resulted in a difficult teaching context. Differentiation posed a challenge not always taken up:

I don’t believe MFL is a subject that can be taught effectively through mixed ability. I don’t treat them as a mixed-ability class. They were on the timetable as set 1 and I try to raise expectations anyway, nevertheless I wonder if that’s why I feel I haven’t progressed. I’ve had to stop for people. Or you have the behavioural problems of someone from Set 3, like forgetting their textbook or not doing their homework.

There was also a suggestion that the mixed-ability factor might have had a negative impact on some pupils’ attitude and motivation:

Some of the more able ones have perhaps become a little bored or demotivated because I felt with one girl in particular, who was a high achiever that she’s rested on her laurels. She needed pushing but there was so much else going on.

I think that has been difficult especially to motivate the weaker ones. I think they’ve found it difficult to keep up.

Reaction to the project from staff in other subject

**“Mixed-ability teaching was now acknowledged as a real challenge in the single-sex groups.”**

areas was limited: “They have expressed polite interest but have more or less thought we were eccentric doing it.”

The proposal to give a presentation on the project to a meeting of staff had been postponed until September 2004, pending the analysis of Year 8 examination results and the publication of this review.

Reaction from the parents of pupils had been notable by its absence. This was a source of particular surprise to the Head of Department. In spite of the absence of information provided by the school to parents, there had been an expectation of some feedback, whether negative or positive.

Teachers articulated reservations about whether the project should continue or not. Some would be prepared to go on with it if men were to teach the boys’ classes and women the girls’. Some wanted some setting to be applied. There was some uncertainty amongst teachers about whether a decision had been made at that stage to continue single-sex teaching into a second year.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The project was something of a curate’s egg: good in parts. The pupils enjoyed working in single-sex groups and their enjoyment of French had not diminished. This may be regarded as a significant finding, given the research evidence (e.g. Chambers, 1999) which suggests that enthusiasm for MFL can be on the wane from the end of Year 7 onwards. These pupils felt more able to participate in oral activities, contribute in class and ask questions related to their learning. Pupils’ confidence levels improved. (This ties in with the findings of Younger and Warrington, 2003: 10.) Although the teachers suspected that some pupils’ motivation might have suffered as a result of the mixed-ability nature of the project, this was not reflected in the data provided by the pupils. Again, at least maintenance or preferably improvement of pupils’ motivation is an important factor, especially at this early stage of the learning experience.

The project had some downsides. Pupils’ behaviour, especially that of the boys, deteriorated. There is no evidence, at this stage, to suggest that attainment had improved. Teachers and, it is suspected, some pupils, struggled with the challenge of mixed-ability teaching. Particularly worrying was the tendency of the staff to regard boys and girls as homogeneous groups with common needs rather than individuals with specific needs.

Much has been learned in the course of the year about teaching MFL in single-sex groups. The following recommendations have been informed by the survey findings and by the researcher’s experience of conducting the survey in situ, interacting with pupils and teachers. It is hoped that the recommendations may be transferable to other contexts where a single-sex approach is being considered or has already been adopted:

- Timetabling – every effort should be made, in

this school’s context, to accommodate MFL teachers’ preference to teach boys or girls. Teachers’ teaching, pupils’ learning and the teacher-pupil relationship benefit from this.

- Staff development – teachers would benefit from enhanced awareness of the special challenges of single-sex teaching, possibly by accessing the experiences of colleagues in other schools. This may better inform their currently rather simplistic views of pupil differences. The data provide evidence to suggest that teachers assume that a given sex has certain needs/abilities/characteristics and so teach this group as if it were homogeneous. This has implications for maximising potential.
- Differentiation – if the single-sex classes are to be taught as mixed-ability groups, it is important that staff address the challenge of meeting pupils’ needs. Again, differentiation would be an important topic for staff development.
- Review – any such project would benefit from a more formal approach to review. Currently, reviews in the case of this school are carried out on a fairly ad hoc basis. Whilst much can be learned in the course of informal conversations, important exchange of information is not taking place in meetings at which, for example, review of the project might be the only item on the agenda. Reviews should be structured, frequent and regular. Pupils too have an important part to play. Their views should be sought in a more structured and regular manner.
- Parents – parents should be better informed about the project, its purpose, projected duration and intended outcomes. Their feedback, which could perhaps be sought at consultation evenings, could be helpful. It is also possible that the interest they might show could give MFL an enhanced profile in parent-pupil conversations and have a positive impact on the pupils’ attitude to their learning.
- Non-MFL colleagues – given the investment of time and energy in the project, the opportunity should be taken to share findings with other colleagues in the school. Again, helpful feedback may be provided and the profile of MFL could be enhanced. There may well be aspects of MFL provision from which other subject areas could learn. MFL may also learn from any subject areas in the school with are ‘bucking the trend’ of girls outperforming boys.
- The lack of apparent interest shown by senior management in the project is surprising, to say the least. The project has importance not only for MFL teaching and learning but potentially for all subjects offered by the school. Senior management has a role to play in the support of the project, the teachers and pupils involved in it and the dissemination of information to staff, parents, governors and others.

It is still too early to confirm whether or not single-sex teaching is the way forward for MFL teaching and learning. On the basis of the project at this North

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**“the tendency of the staff to regard boys and girls as homogeneous groups with common needs rather than individuals with specific needs.”**

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Yorkshire school, the benefits of increased enjoyment and confidence are counterbalanced by issues relating to pupils' poor behaviour leading to disruption in class. It is likely that successful learning and teaching are linked to many more factors than simply gender. More important, perhaps, than the creation of relatively homogeneous teaching groups, may be a commitment to meeting the needs of individual pupils. How such needs can be met in the reality of the secondary school teaching context where there are 25-30 pupils in each class remains a challenge still to be addressed satisfactorily.

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