

**Heroes or Zeroes? The discursive  
positioning of 'underachieving boys' in  
English neo-liberal education policy**

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## **Heroes or Zeroes? The discursive positioning of 'underachieving boys' in English neo-liberal education policy**

**Abstract:** The moral panic concerning 'boys' underachievement' is well established in the UK and Australia, and is spreading to other countries. Feminists have articulated concerns that this debate has reflected a 'poor boys' discourse with negative permutations for girls' schooling; and there is much evidence to support this claim. However, it is argued here that as a result of the location of underachievement in the individual rather than with social structures by neo-liberal policy movements, in England certain groups of 'failing' boys are increasingly being problematised rather than valorised. Boys generally are presented as vulnerable and 'at risk'. The 'poor boys' discourse position these boys as in need of help and attention. But within these practices certain groups of boys beginning to be demonised for their apparent wastefulness of resources and failure to take responsibility for their own achievement. The article draws on work by Bauman and Foucault as well as feminist theory in order to tease out some of the complex inter-weavings of gender and neo-liberal discourses at work in English educational policy.

### **The 'boys' underachievement' debate**

The debate around 'boys' underachievement' is well established in UK and in Australia, and is rapidly developing in many other OECD nations, including in

the US (Hayes and Lingard, 2003; Francis & Skelton, 2005). In Britain a concern at boys' apparent underperformance in mainstream education was precipitated by the introduction of school 'league tables' in 1992 which showed pupil performance at GCSE exams (the exams which mark the end of compulsory schooling at 16 in the UK), and which included a breakdown of results according to gender. These statistics suggested that overall girls were catching up with boys at maths and science (and by the mid-1990s they had caught up), and were out-performing boys in almost every other subject area. These findings caused a furore in the national media, with journalists speculating wildly about the supposed size of the 'gender gap' and about the various explanations for this apparently sudden turn of events (Epstein *et al*, 1998). (In fact, as Arnot *et al* [1999] discuss, girls had been outperforming boys at a majority of subjects prior to the introduction of the 'National Curriculum' in 1988, but because they tended to pursue less prestigious subject areas this point went unnoticed. The introduction of the mandatory curriculum forced girls to pursue science subjects to GCSE level for the first time, leading to a rapid improvement in their performance in science subjects that was not matched by a simultaneous improvement at language subjects among boys). The size of any 'gender gap' has been debated, and has been argued to be inflated by the reporting and sometimes misinterpretation of statistics (Gorard *et al*, 2000; Arnot *et al*, 1999; Connolly, 2004). As many feminist researchers have pointed out, in England ethnicity and particularly social class continue to have a greater

bearing than gender as predictors of educational achievement (Griffin, 1998; Epstein *et al*, 1998; Lucey, 2001; Reay, 2001; 2002). These feminists observe that not all girls are achieving, and not all boys underachieving: for example, in Britain working class white girls continue to be out-performed by middle class white boys. However, what is certainly clear is that, across OECD nations, girls of all social classes and a majority of ethnic groups markedly out-strip the achievement of their male counterparts at language and literacy (OECD, 2003; Francis & Skelton, 2005).

The concern at 'boys' underachievement' has been spreading internationally (Yates, 1997), and the publication of the OECD PISA report on 'gender gap' has extended the debate even to countries where the achievement of both genders is very high in comparison with other OECD nations (e.g Finland). According to Hoff-Sommers (2000), educationalists in the United States have been slow to join the debate around boys' attainment. The dramatic inequalities in attainment according to ethnicity in the US means that attention has tended to be focused on ethnicity rather than gender (Luttrell, 2005), with particular attention to the performance of black boys (e.g. Polite & Davis, 1999; Majors, 2001; Ferguson, 2000; Conchas & Noguera, 2004). However, since the late 1990s a host of American authors are now beginning to write on 'boys' underachievement' as a generic issue, and to demand that educationalists focus on the issue (see e.g. Pollack [1998]; Gurian [1996; 2002]; Hoff-Sommers [2000]). The issue is beginning to impact at policy

level: the recent surge of support for single-sex education in US policy is built on an (unevidenced) supposition that single-sex schooling may raise boys' attainment (TES, 2004).

Feminists have been extremely sceptical of, and often hostile to, concerns about boys' educational attainment. When the claims about boys' underperformance first hit the headlines in Britain during the mid 1990s, feminist academics engaged closely with the debate, producing key works in the area (such as Epstein *et al.*'s *Failing Boys*, 1998). These works raised concerns that the 'moral panic' around 'boys' underachievement' in the media and educational policy was: a) masking the continuing problems faced by girls in schools; b) reinforcing male privilege by justifying a greater focus and expenditure on meeting boys' needs (at the expense of girls); and c) deflecting attention from the larger achievement gaps according to 'race' and social class<sup>i</sup>. But as the debate maintained its vigorous momentum, apparently impervious to feminist critiques, many feminists disengaged from the discussions (Francis & Skelton, 2005). This paper will argue that it is imperative that in spite of the [significant] deterrents, feminists maintain their engagement with the debate about gender and achievement, and their critique of the epistemological framing of this debate.

Adopting a Foucauldian discourse analytic approach (cf Foucault, 1980; Burman & Parker, 1993), Epstein *et al* (1998) identified three key discourses

mobilised in the debates around 'gender gap': 'boys will be boys', 'poor boys' and 'blaming schools'. The 'boys will be boys' discourse celebrated boys' masculinity and their resistance to a 'feminine' school ethos of diligence and discipline. The 'poor boys' discourse positioned boys as the 'new disadvantaged' (Mills, 2003), blaming the apparent 'feminisation of schooling' or a 'crisis of masculinity' for boys' underachievement. The 'blaming schools' discourse was driven by the contemporary policy drives around 'standards and effectiveness' where 'failing schools' were identified and vilified (Epstein *et al*, 1998; Raphael-Reed, 1998). While all these discourses were identified by Epstein *et al* as pernicious in various ways, it was the 'poor boys' discourse which was seen as particularly detrimental, as 'poor boys' discourses often blamed women teachers, feminists, and indeed schoolgirls, for boys' apparent underachievement. It was also this discourse that most obviously perpetuated the notion that resources should now be targeted towards boys (possibly at the expense of girls).

Recent analysis of gendered discourses emerging in education policy reveals that, while the 'boys will be boys' discourse and 'blaming schools' discourse are now less prevalent, the 'poor boys' discourse retains a powerful hegemony (Skelton, 2004; Francis & Skelton, 2005). Bleach's (1998) allusion to boys' 'shattered male egos', and Thompson's (2000) plea to protect the 'emotional life of boys' are typical of the discursive positioning of boys as defeated and damaged. Likewise, the Australian House of Representatives

Standing Committee on Education and Training's (HRSCET) (2002) citation of "the absence of fathers, the lack of male teachers, inappropriate curricula and teaching strategies, feminisation of curricula and assessment systems" (p.2) as contributing to boys' apparent underachievement is indicative of the way that females are blamed for boys' apparent plight. Writing in the *Daily Mail*<sup>ii</sup>, Cohen (2005) is even more direct in her invocation of the 'poor boys' position:

Imagine that your child has a teacher who has a grudge against him. Now imagine this teacher deliberately sets him work only in his weak subjects, never capitalises on the things he is good at, makes him feel inadequate and, eventually, leads him to give up on his education altogether. You'd protest, wouldn't you...Now imagine if it isn't a teacher who has it in for your son, but the school system itself. Where do you go now? The fact is that many parents and education experts alike now believe our school system is inherently prejudiced against boys.

(<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/pages/standard/article.html>)

The way in which the 'poor boys' discourse does indeed justify and facilitate the channelling of resources away from girls is illustrated by the HRSCET's (2002) suggestion that the establishment of a 'teacher connection with

individual students' is more important for boys ('particularly underperforming boys') than it is for girls (see p. 134).

This hegemony of the 'poor boys' discourse may be to some extent explained by contemporary policy movements.

### **Neo-liberalism in English education policy**

The rise of neo-liberalism and its infusion in educational policy in the West has been well-documented (e.g. Weiler, 1993; Fraser, 1994; Ball *et al*, 2000; Mahony, 1998; Mahony & Hextall, 2000; Giroux, 2002; Hayes & Lingard, 2003; Davies, 2003; Youdell, 2004; Olssen & Peters, 2005). Faith in the logic of human capital theory, where a highly qualified, flexible workforce is seen as security in a competitive global marketplace has resulted in a policy obsession with achievement (Ainley, 1998; Mahony, 1998; Mahony & Hextall, 2000). Within this movement achievement is extraordinarily narrowly-conceived – almost exclusively in terms of academic attainment measured by exam credentials. Hence Mahony (1998) explains the current 'obsession with academic achievement' as resulting from the rise of the 'competition state' (p. 39). In order to facilitate such achievement among their pupils, educational institutions must be focused on this overriding credentialist principle and on successfully driving children towards academic attainment. Hence tropes of *excellence* and *standards* pepper policy

documents and the speeches of education ministers, and a culture of 'rigorous' surveillance and testing prevails. Weiler (1993) documented the rise of concerns with educational 'standards' and testing in the US in line with neo-liberal social policy and the marketisation of education (see Giroux, 2002). These trends have spread internationally with neo-liberalism, and have had a profound impact in Britain (Ball *et al*, 2000; Mahony & Hextall, 2000; Youdell, 2004)<sup>iii</sup> .

The neo-liberal capitalist socio-economic model requires a highly flexible workforce (Beck, 1992), and a high rate of consumption among the population (Bauman, 2005). Workers in post-industrial societies can no longer expect 'a job for life', but must rather expect to 'upskill' and remake themselves for a succession of jobs in an insecure market-place (Beck, 1992). In this context social values become less intrinsically concerned with a person's occupation, but rather with their consumption (Bauman, 2005). These socio-economic practices become fundamental in the social construction of 'appropriate personhood', and internalised by individuals (Youdell, 2004). This latter is particularly the case because of neo-liberalism's location of responsibility in the individual (Rose, 1999; Walkerdine, 2003). The market-place may be insecure but, neo-liberal discourse maintains, this is inevitable in a competitive global economy. It is the duty of the individual to be sufficiently flexible to maximise the opportunities available to her/him, and any failure resides in the individual

rather than in the socio-economic structures (see e.g. Rose, 1999; Bauman, 2001; 2005; Giroux, 2002 for critiques of this position). Hence in this neo-liberal 'individualised' model the self is not fixed, but is rather a work in progress, constantly being made and remade (Beck, 1992). As DuGay (1996) elegantly puts it, individuals are become the 'entrepreneurs of the self'<sup>iv</sup>.

One of the benefits for the neo-liberal state in the transference of responsibility for 'failure' from the state to individuals is that these discursive practices justify what Bauman (2005) calls a 'washing clean of hands' in relation to those not thriving in this socio-economic environment. Bauman maintains that discourses of work ethic and meritocracy enable us to blame the poor for their social position. He maintains,

'If poverty continues to exist and grow amid growing affluence, the work ethic must have been ineffective. But if we believe that it stays ineffective only because its commandments are not properly listened to and obeyed, then this failure to listen and obey can only be explained by either moral defectiveness or criminal intent on the part of those who fall out....Purity of hands and consciences is reached by the twin measure of the moral condemnation of the poor and the moral absolution of the rest' (p. 77-78).

As the poor are discursively positioned as irresponsible rather than unfortunate, so there has been a corresponding shift in thinking about how to deal with them. The shift from a notion of 'entitlement' to that of 'obligation' began in the US (Fraser 1993; 1994), and, again, has been developed with enthusiasm by other neo-liberal governments. The New Labour administration in the UK has been preoccupied with 'Something for Something' (rather than the supposedly prior 'something for nothing') welfare policies; which in Australia has been referred to as 'Mutual Obligations' (and the ensuing catch-phrase 'no rights without responsibilities'). Hence a new approach to welfare has developed, based on themes which Mendes (2003) identifies as a concern with 'welfare dependency'; and drives to delineate the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor and to privatise welfare. This has involved the inception of a raft of punitive policies that involve the surveillance, regulation, circumscription and punishment of those deemed 'undeserving' (Bauman, 2005; Hayes & Lingard, 2003). Recent examples in the UK include the various 'tough' measures and punishments to deal with 'yobbish behaviour' including 'ASBOs' – 'Anti-Social Behaviour Orders' (Carr, 2005); the jailing of parents whose children persistently truant; and Tony Blair's intention 'to cut child benefit of persistent truants' (Grice, 2005) (though this latter plan was blocked after a Cabinet revolt).

These practices of locating 'failure' with the individual rather than the state, and the practices emanating from this location, are discussed below in relation to education. It is argued that while 'poor boys' discourse continues to be applied to boys generally, these neo-liberal policy drives are beginning to position some boys differently, with an increasingly sour note developing in the policy documents on 'failing boys'.

### **The impact of neo-liberal education policy on the 'boys' underachievement' debate – 'at risk' boys and 'problem boys'**

Although the 'poor boys' discourse remains pre-eminent in British education policy concerning 'the gender gap', my colleague Christin Skelton and I have shown that the 'boys will be boys' discourse has recently been in decline, and that the way in which 'poor boys' discourses position boys warrants further analysis (Francis & Skelton, 2005). We argue that the wane of the 'boys will be boys' discourse that valorised and celebrated boys' roguishness and antipathy for diligence, has been precipitated by the rise of new discourses that are beginning to position boys' roguishness and antipathy for diligence as points of grave concern. As we have seen, neo-liberalism is dependent on individuals buying into notions of meritocracy (via educational credentialism), flexibility, individual responsibility, economic competitiveness and so on – all of which evoke the 'good' hard-working pupil rather than the errant school-boy 'rogue' or 'lad'.

If we look beyond the misogynist tendency of 'poor boys' discourses to blame females for boys' apparent educational underperformance, it emerges that an ascendant narrative within the 'poor boys' discourse is that of 'boys at risk' (Skelton, 2004; Francis & Skelton, 2005). We have shown how in recent policy documents and media commentary boys are presented as vulnerable and confused, and their apparent bad behaviour and/or underperformance as expressing or hiding their insecurity and alienation. For example, the Department for Education and Skills publication *'Using the National Healthy School Standard to Raise Boys' Achievement'* juxtaposes a fragile 'inner boy' with an external, macho presentation of schoolboy masculinity and recommends that, "school assemblies and tutorial time are used to address issues related to developing a 'caring masculinity'". It suggests that teachers should encourage boys to talk about their feelings in order to 'talk out' their pent-up aggression: "In this way a culture is being developed that enables a boy to be himself, rather than having to live up to a tough male stereotype" (2003; p. 14)<sup>v</sup>. Likewise, Pollack (1998) maintains that, 'Boys' self esteem as learners is far more fragile than that of most girls ... boys resort to bravado to cover over the shame they would experience if they actually showed their fears about not messing up.' (p. 238). Boys are presented in this literature as lacking self-esteem, and even as socially excluded as a group (Francis & Skelton, 2005). Such positionings are clearly evident in the arguments of populist writers such as Hoff-Sommers (2000)

and Gurian (2002), both of whom illustrate the discursive penchant of blaming girls/feminists/feminisation of educational practice for boys' apparent plight.

At this point it seems important to reiterate that such presentations of *boys as a group* as underachieving or as experiencing low self-esteem are not based on evidence. Indeed, national statistics continue to show certain groups of boys achieving high attainment, and studies continue to support Sadker and Sadker's (AAUW, 1992) findings that boys tend to hold higher self-esteem in relation to learning than do girls (e.g. Barber, 1994; Chaplin, 2000; Walkerdine et al, 2001). But educational policy makers and commentators persist in presenting boys generally as vulnerable and disaffected.

Fletcher's (1995) concerns are typical of the genre:

"Boys excel, not just at suicides, but at drownings, low literacy, drug offences, serious assaults, burns, language faculties, spinal cord damage, sexual assaults, expulsions from school, alcohol abuse, reading difficulties, work injuries, attention deficit disorder and head injuries" (Fletcher, 1995, p. 208)

So boys generally are seen as 'at risk' of becoming social problems. 'At risk' boys are positioned within the 'poor boys' discourse as deserving our

sympathy and attention, damaged as they have been by the ravages of feminism and liberal approaches to teaching (cf Hoff-Sommers, 2000; Gurian, 2002). They are in need of attention and remedy in order to save them from becoming *'problem boys'*. 'Problem boys' are constructed throughout the social policy arena in relation to delinquency, crime, unemployment, and other 'social ills'. But focusing specifically on education, we are witnessing a shift in the positioning of particular groups of disruptive and low-achieving boys. The behaviours of such boys used often to be accepted with wry amusement as an inevitable fact of life, or even lionised as the natural expressions of rebellious Alpha-males 'just being boys', within the 'boys will be boys' discourse (and this continues to be the case within many school classrooms). But increasingly such boys are now being positioned in the policy literature as irresponsible and inadequate. As I discuss elsewhere, from a neo-liberal perspective these 'underachieving' boys appear to be unable – or worse, unwilling - to fit themselves into the meritocratic educational system which produces the achievement vital for the economic success of the individual concerned and of the nation (Francis & Skelton, 2005). Within the 'something for something' social ethos discussed above, underachieving boys do not appear to be upholding their side of the bargain. In fact, further to their own lack of application, they are increasingly identified as distracting their classmates and teachers, hence impeding those better-intentioned pupils doing their best to progress:

Boys who are failing to reach their full potential often cause problems in the classroom through disruptive and anti-social behaviour ... Every day people working in and with schools are spending valuable time and money picking up the pieces after routine acts of disruption and vandalism which are mostly carried out by boys. (*Boys Will Be Boys?* 1996 p. 2).

Secondary schools often contain groups of boys who create a culture that is anti-work, anti-establishment and disruptive to both boys' and girls' education – the antithesis of the positive achievement culture and ethos that a school is hoping to create. (*Using the National Healthy School Standard to Raise Boys' Achievement*, 2003, p.14).

So within these new discourses, 'problem boys' are positioned as not only irresponsibly impeding their own individual growth, but also those of their peers, and indeed of the nation (Francis & Skelton, 2005). Hence 'problem boys', once wryly condoned as simply expressing their natural masculinity, are now demonised as 'beyond the pale' in the policy discourse. And who are these boys who have become problems? In Britain they are indicatively working class white, African-Caribbean and Pakistani boys (these groups hold the largest proportions of low-achieving boys; Gillborn & Mirza, 2000). It is no coincidence that the largest groups of 'failing boys' are those who are working class, i.e. comparatively, or sometimes extremely, 'poor'.

It is arguable that in contemporary education policy the delineation between 'boys at risk' and 'problem boys' is comparable to Bauman (2005) and Mendes' (2003) analyses of the processes of dissection of the 'deserving' from the 'undeserving' poor. A raft of recommended measures have been produced in policy documents for teachers to introduce pedagogies that will apparently raise boys' achievement (e.g. QCA, 1998; Ofsted, 2002a; 2002b; DfES, 2003). Government money has been invested in research, resources, training and interventions to meet what the government has identified as an educational priority (see Francis & Skelton, 2005 for elaboration). Yet as research has documented, the outcomes of many of these strategies for 'raising boys' achievement' are inconclusive, and indeed some of those recommended by consultants and educationalists have been identified as thoroughly counterproductive (Younger *et al*, 2005; Francis & Skelton, 2005). Hence for policy makers there is a clear incentive to view boys who persist in their underachievement in spite of resourcing as hopelessly and deliberately wanton. Rather than question the logic of the strategies adopted<sup>vi</sup>, blame for failure appears to be beginning to be apportioned to certain groups of boys. The suggestion being that the measures to facilitate attainment are in place - if they are not working, this must be due to boys' wilful refusal to cooperate. The evidence that the maintenance of dominant constructions of masculinity encourages boys to avoid working hard for fear of being seen as 'boffins' (and hence effete) (see e.g. Epstein, 1998; Martino, 1999; Francis,

2000; Mills, 2001; Skelton, 2001; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli; 2003), is largely ignored as too complex and difficult to confront.

Here the parallels with the construction and treatment of the 'undeserving poor' in neo-liberal policy continue; for if opportunities are offered but not taken up, the resulting revelation of the ingrates as undeserving frees 'us' (policy-makers, educationalists, the general public) from responsibility and further obligation. As Bauman sardonically puts it, 'We are responsible offering the poor opportunities. The poor are irresponsible, refusing to take them.' (2005, p. 77). Hence Bauman's theorisation of the function of the work ethic in regard to un/employment can be directly applied to a work ethic regarding educational diligence. He expands,

The call to abide by the commandments of the work ethic serves now as a test of eligibility for moral empathy. Most of those to whom the appeal is addressed are expected (bound) to fail this test, and once they fail they can be without compunction assumed to have put themselves, by their own choice, outside the realm of moral obligation. Society can now relinquish all further responsibility for their predicament without feeling guilty about its ethical duty (p. 83).

I would argue that this analysis is directly applicable to emerging policy discourse concerning underachieving 'problem boys'. All the research evidence indicates that it is social constructions of gender which locate diligence, obedience and application in the feminine and resistance, rebellion and hedonism in the masculine that have a substantive contribution to play in the comparative underachievement of some groups of boys. And these constructions of masculinity continue to be elevated by society at large, and even by educationalists (Connolly, 1998; Francis, 2000; Mills, 2001; Skelton, 2001). Yet this resultant underachievement is, in the case of 'problem boys' (working class white and black boys) beginning to be positioned as the responsibility of individual boys, rather than of social structures.

The insinuation that these (indicatively working class white, African-Caribbean and Pakistani) boys are the same ones that will become the 'yobs' and social problems of the future is often overt in the English policy documents. For example, the *report Boys Will Be Boys?* (1996) alludes to the "increasing numbers of young people – mainly boys – who have effectively ceased to be part of mainstream society" (p.2). These undeserving boys, then, the problem boys, are the architects of their own failure, and as such can expect no sympathy. Indeed, in line with the punitive approaches to social problems described above, recommended draconian approaches to such schoolboys and their behaviours are beginning to appear (see for

example the suggestions from School Standards Minister David Miliband, for confronting the 'lad culture' in schools, quoted in *The Times*, 2004). As the Department for Education and Skills document *Using the National Healthy School Standard to Raise Boys' Achievement* (2003) sternly declares,

The existence of an anti-swot culture is regarded as a major threat and is [to be] addressed not only through the development of an achievement culture, but also on a day-to-day basis through school policy *and appropriate sanctions which are widely documented and distributed* (p. 14, my emphasis).

Again, this pattern is evocative of that identified by Mendes (2003) and Bauman (2001; 2005) in relation to the poor: the poor are subjected to growing public surveillance, and those seen as undeserving are subject to increasing coercion and penalties.

This punitive approach can be increasingly found on literature on boys' (under)achievement. For example, an article in the Daily Mail (2003) recommends a coercive approach, reporting that 'The boys themselves acknowledged that they worked better when they were not allowed to sit with their male friends', and how boys need 'close monitoring to stop them slipping into the laddish culture which rejects learning or enjoying lessons as

'uncool''. Likewise, Hoff Sommers approvingly quotes Janet Daley of the *Daily Telegraph* newspaper who asserts,

boys need far more discipline, structure and authority in their lives than do girls...Boys must be actively constrained by a whole phdanx of adults who come into contact with them - parents, teachers, neighbours, policemen, passers-by in the streets - before they can be expected to control their asocial, egoistic impulses. (Quoted in Hoff Sommers, 2000, p.180-181).

### **'Problem Boys' as the demonised 'others' of educational success**

Moral discourses and harsh penalties serve to further pathologise those 'undeserving' (Mendes, 2003). As Fraser (2000) notes, such marginalising practices mean that the individuals against which such measures are taken are often rendered unable to participate in social life, either through stigmatisation and ostracism or through legal exclusions. This creates a cycle by which the socially stigmatised are 'othered' further and further. Those of us constructed as 'normal', 'responsible' and 'included' are hereby seduced to participate in this othering which becomes normalised as natural and correct. As I have argued, such draconian approaches are very evident in current British social policy in regard to 'social problems'. As political commentator Carr (2005) observes of serving politicians' punitive rhetoric,

“There is so much that is unacceptable. That won’t be tolerated. That will be driven out. Antisocial behaviour particularly”. And he cites one Labour minister as urging the public to “keep at it working together driving out the antisocial behaviour of the minority”. He points to current plans to increase fines for buying alcohol for underage drinkers, and the heavy sentences for relatively minor ‘youth crimes’ such as stealing mobile phones to illustrate his concerns.

Theorists such as Bauman (2005) maintain that through these draconian measures and the resulting pathologisation of groups deemed ‘anti-social’, neo-liberal practices create folk devils onto which we can project our blames and fears. He maintains, ‘Every type of social order produces some visions of the dangers which threaten its identity’. These visions of threat ‘tend to be self-portraits of the society with minus signs. Or, to put this in psychoanalytical terms, threats are projections of a society’s own inner ambivalence about its ways and means, about the fashion in which it lives and perpetuates its living’ (p. 78). Bauman argues that such demonisation supports the growing incidence of behaviour classified as criminal (or, I would add, as illness; see Skelton 2004). He maintains that this is not an obstacle to consumerist society, but rather its natural prerequisite.

Such demonisation is not yet fully evident in relation to ‘problem boys’ within education policy discourse, but may be predicted based on the

analysis above in relation to 'anti-social' behaviours, and the emergence of critiques of 'problem boys' in the educational policy literature. As Youdell (2004) has analysed, the hegemonic individualist discourses supporting and produced within the neoliberal education policy context are deployed to constitute and delineate 'ideal, acceptable and unacceptable learners' (Youdell, 2004). Hence it appears likely that these expressions of criticism will increase in line with trends in other areas of neo-liberal social policy, particularly given: a) the increasingly credentialist ethos of English education policy; and b) that in spite of current spending to 'narrow the gender gap', this is so far making little impact in raising boys' achievements, and is unlikely to for reasons discussed above. Furthermore as Lucey (2004; Lucey & Reay 2002) has observed, the notion of 'success/high standards' which preoccupies current English education policy can only be constructed in relation to its opposite – failure/low standards. As she observes, this construction of success involves delineating and othering (and demonising) 'failure'. Hence certain groups of minority ethnic and working class 'underachieving' boys may find themselves increasingly pathologised in educational policy.

### **The challenge for feminists**

In charting the development of policy discourses in relation to the notion of boys' underachievement in England this paper has shown the hegemony of

the 'poor boys' discourse which valorises boys and blames women and girls for their apparent underachievement. But it has also discussed how the discourse of boys 'at risk' positions them as vulnerable to becoming 'problem boys'. These 'problem boys' are indicatively working class (including African-Caribbean and Pakistani boys), and are beginning to be pathologised in the education policy literature. Drawing on debates around neo-liberal policy and trends emerging in other sectors of social policy, I have argued that this problematisation is likely to increase as problem boys are demonised as the 'underserving' architects of their own failure.

Given that as a result of the 'poor boys' discourse the focus remains very much on how boys are disadvantaged in relation to girls, and the anti-feminist implications of such arguments, how are feminists to read this newly emergent pathologisation of 'problem boys'? My own research has contributed to the range of research that documents how the behaviours of some boys in mixed-sex schools have negative impacts on other pupils (female and male), as well as on their own achievement (Francis, 1999; 2000). Hence it is certainly not my intention to argue that the classroom behaviours of some boys are not a cause for concern. But my analysis outlined here suggests that neo-liberal policy movements may increasingly disguise attacks on the poor with cloaks of gender discourse. We must be vigilant in the task of critical analysis and deconstruction in order to make visible the discursive 'sharp blades' (cf Bauman, 2005) of delineation and

pathologisation at work in neo-liberal education policy. In other words, it is imperative that we maintain and extend engagement with analyses of 'gender gap' and with the production of gendered identities in education, both critiquing the misogynist epistemology of the 'poor boys' discourse, but also identifying and illuminating the ways in which neoliberal policy demonises vulnerable groups (including groups of boys).

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<sup>i</sup> Certainly, in Britain and elsewhere a great deal of money is being channelled into research, policy strategies and institutional and teaching practices geared at 'raising boys' achievement' (see Francis & Skelton, 2005, for elaboration). And increasingly there is evidence that in some cases this has a negative impact on girls (Warrington et al, 2002; Lucey et al, 2003).

<sup>ii</sup> The Daily Mail newspaper represents the Right Wing of the British Press, but its opinion is highly influential with the current government as the paper is to some extent seen as representing 'Middle England' (to whom the government is keen to appeal).

<sup>iii</sup> An example of a recent neo-liberal, free-market policy in education is the introduction of education 'academies' which have some independence from state education policy, and rely on private funding. The Guardian Newspaper (19/2/05) reports how a Government commissioned report by PriceWaterhouseCoopers drawing on evidence from US Charter Schools argues that UK policy to introduce independent 'academies' will produce a two-tier system in British education and fail to meet expectations of teaching excellence – but that this report has been 'covered up'. Instead, The Guardian (22/2/05) reports that ministers have gone ahead with their 'controversial plan to replace failing inner-city schools with independent, privately-run academies' despite this evidence.

<sup>iv</sup> See Walkerdine (2003) and Francis & Skelton (2005) for a discussion of how this 'flexible self' is gendered.

<sup>v</sup> In our book we discuss the contradictions inherent in the notions of 'caring masculinity' and of an 'authentic', vulnerable male self hiding beneath the masquerade of 'macho' masculinity.

<sup>vi</sup> Research itself sponsored by the British government has conclusively shown that other strategies can only be effective in raising boys' achievement in conjunction with a school ethos and classroom approaches that challenge dominant gender constructions (see Younger et al, 2005). Yet achieving such an ethos is of course difficult, and challenges prevalent social values – as such it seems unlikely to appeal to policy-makers.