

Why should women have to be like men?

The Scottish Executive rightly sees a highly motivated teaching force as a top priority. Perhaps we are more likely to get the best out of our teachers if our improved grasp of gender differences, triggered by boys' underachievement, is also applied in the staffroom.

As our educational leaders are with a few exceptions men, masculine motivational profiles dominate educational thinking. This has perhaps always been the case but has become more apparent with the recent intensification of the achievement agenda. Men and women are more similar than different and are equally committed to raising achievement. But the current regime is too one-sided in its reflection of masculine concepts such as best value, competitive league tables, narrow targets and continuous improvement.

These ideas may be causing increasing dissonance for women teachers whose disaffection could become as big an issue as that of boys. Indeed is there a connection? A female agenda might include a less competitive more consensual approach, non-hierarchical structures, bottom-up innovations, a wider view of teaching aims – incorporating for example, social competencies and self-esteem – and a higher priority for nurturing goals.

Recent research in motivation backs up my observations over many years. Although there is a greater variation within genders, men as a rule are more focused and goal oriented while women are more able to consider multiple goals simultaneously. Men generally enjoy structures (such as performance indicators) which some women see as obstacles to be overcome. Women tend to reflect on issues and check out with others to make sure they remain firmly based in reality while the male tendency is to be cavalier and speculate. Both genders are motivated to seek a sense of self-worth and self-determination. Men, however, are more interested in individuality, autonomy and control, while women are more concerned about being involved with and approved of by others.

Men are more comfortable when comparisons are made and feel better when such comparisons highlight their superiority. Women feel better when comparison highlights similarity with colleagues. Men will be more at ease with best value than women, who usually want to be their best rather than the best.

Men are more interested in promotion and seek out recognition. They tend to think they are good at most things and want others to recognise these qualities. Women are more neutral, attributing neither strongly positive nor negative traits to themselves. They are lower in self-esteem but only in comparison to the flattering way men portray themselves. They too seek recognition for what they have done but mainly to know if they are on the right track.

To feel good men seek goals about who they would ideally like to be while women seek goals about who they ought to be. Failure and

criticism cause dejection for men and agitation for women. In the extreme forms of these behaviours men behave in a self aggrandising way and cultivate their good points to be noticed whereas women go in for a cautious and noncommittal behaviour.

Typically men maintain positive views of themselves by using biases to interpret events in ways that favour them. As women prefer to see themselves in an accurate way they are less able to minimise the importance of their weaknesses. Furthermore, men can blame others for their shortcomings and can more readily discount criticism because they feel it doesn't describe them correctly.

Women blame themselves for failure and take little credit for success. They tend to over-assimilate negative feedback into their view of themselves and are less able to point to alternative positive qualities. The tendency to broaden a specific criticism into a general sense of failure perhaps reflects women's goals which are closer to their self identity compared to men's more pragmatic goals.

Many women teachers are working mothers whose dual roles lead to stressful lives. Maternity leave can also create feelings of being deskilled which adds to low self esteem. Women in general are twice as likely as men to suffer from depression and anxiety, possibly because of the complex issues with which they have to grapple. Stress is linked with higher depression and lower self esteem in women. Women are more prone to experience guilt when they don't live up to their own standards.

Women are brought up to see their selves as objects of judgement and their self worthy as contingent upon these judgements. This sense of self can make women more vulnerable to criticism. Contingent worth is created by competitive situations where only the best are valued. Women growing up are judged principally on something over which they have little control, but which is centrally linked to self-esteem – their appearance. Consequently some women find being professionally 'measured' more challenging and may experience this as public exposure of their worth.

What's the answer? It isn't sending women on 'assertiveness' or 'women into management' courses to become more like men. Convergence is not the answer. We need honestly and explicitly to identify, understand and encourage each gender's specific contributions and exploit diversity of values and qualities.

Perhaps with our new gender balanced Parliament our understanding will advance beyond rhetoric to ensure both genders are given equal representation at all levels of decision making. A challenging set of performance indicators for our educational institutions would include evidence of the influence of both genders on school life.

