

**Gender Differences in Educational Achievement & Subject Choice**

**Patterns and Trends in Achievement**

- **On starting School:** In 2013, teacher assessments of pupils at the end of year one showed girls ahead of boys by between 7-17 percentage points in all 7 areas of learning assessed. Girls were also better than boys at concentrating. According to a DfE (Department for Education) 2013 study, boys are two and a half times more likely than girls to have a statement of special educational needs.
- **Key Stages 1 – 3:** Girls do consistently better than boys. This is especially so in English, where the gender gap steadily widens with age. In Science and Maths the gap is much narrower, but girls still do better.
- **At GCSE:** The gender gap in achievement stands at about 10 percentage points in 2013. This gap steadily widened from 1986. However in recent years boys are catching girls up. In English at GCSE, the gender gap is huge with 70% of girls getting an A\*-C, compared to just 54% of boys in 2014.
- **At AS and A Level:** Girls are more likely to sit, pass and get higher grades than boys, though the gap is much narrower than at GCSE. In 2013, 47% of girls gained A or B grades at A Level, but only 42% of boys. Even in so-called 'boys' subjects such as maths and physics girls were more likely than boys to get grades A-C.
- **Further Education:** A higher proportion of girls stay on in sixth form and further education and post-18 higher education. Female students are more likely to get top 1<sup>st</sup> class and upper 2<sup>nd</sup> class degrees.

**Sociological Explanations for Gender Differences in Achievement**

**Analysis**

**Evaluation**

**External (Outside School) Factors**

**1. The Impact of Feminism**

Since the 1960s, the feminist movement has challenged the traditional stereotype of a woman's role as solely that of mother and housewife. These changes are partly reflected in media images and messages. A good illustration comes from Angela **McRobbie's** (1994) study of girls' magazines. In the 1970's they emphasised the importance of getting married and not being left on the shelf, whereas nowadays they contain images of assertive independent women.

**2. Girls' Changing Ambitions**

**Sharpe** (1994) interviewed girls in the 1970s and 1990s to show a major shift in how they see their future. In 1974 girls had low aspirations believing that educational success was unfeminine and that appearing ambitious would be unattractive. However in the 1990s girls had a placed importance on a career and being able to support themselves. Furthermore **Francis (2001)** found that girls now had higher career aspirations and so needed educational qualifications. The changes encouraged by feminism may affect girls' self-image and ambitions with regard to family and careers. In turn, this may explain improvement in their educational achievement.

**3. Changes in the Family**

Changes in the family such as an increase in the divorce rate, cohabitation and lone parent families have all affective girls' and boys' attitudes towards education. For example, increasing numbers of female-headed lone-parent families may mean more women need to take on a breadwinner role. This in turn creates a new adult role model for girls, the financially independent woman. Furthermore this may explain underachievement in boys through lack of a male role model in the family unit to aspire to.

**4. Changes in the Labour Market**

The 1970 Equal Pay Act makes it illegal to pay women less than men for work of equal value, and the 1975 Sex Discrimination Act outlaws discrimination at work. These changes have encouraged women to see their future in terms of paid work rather than as housewives. Greater career opportunities and better pay for women provide an incentive for girls to gain qualifications. Furthermore, there has been a decline in heavy industries such as iron, steel, shipbuilding and mining in the UK. **Mitsos and Browne** claim that this decline in male employment has led to an 'identity crisis for men'. Many boys now believe

**The Impact of Feminism**

McRobbie's research can be criticised for being an out-dated view since it is over 20 years old. Forms and the power of the media have changed considerably in the past two decade. However we are unsure whether this has had a much greater influence on young girls' attitudes.

**Girls' Changing Ambitions**

However, there are class differences in how far girls' ambitions have changed. Diane Reay (1998) found that some working class girls continue to have gender-stereotyped aspirations for marriage and children and expect to go into traditional low paid women's work.

*Methodological Evaluation: How can we evaluate Sharp's use of interviews to investigate girls changing attitudes?*

**Changes in the Family**

The sociological explanation of changes in the family has gained theoretical support from New Right sociologists. The New Right claim that a decline in the nuclear family has resulted in many boys developing an anti-school subculture which results in poor educational achievement.

**Changes in the Labour Market**

Sociologists have criticised Mitsos and Browne by pointing out that the decline has been in manual working class jobs that require few if any qualifications. This it seems unlikely the disappearance of such jobs would have much impact on boy's motivation to obtain qualifications.

that they have little prospect of getting a proper job. This undermines their motivation and self-esteem and so they give up on trying to get qualifications and underachieve at school.

*NB: Make sure you are able to explain how all these sociological points leads to girls achievement/boys underachievement in school.*

### Internal (Within School) Factors

#### 1. GCSE and Coursework

**Gorard** (2005) found that the gender gap in achievement was fairly constant from 1975 until 1989, which it increased sharply. This was the year in which GCSE was introduced, bringing with it coursework as a major part of nearly all subjects. Gorard concludes that the gender gap in achievement is a product of the changed system of assessment rather than of failing of boys. **Mitsos and Brown** (1998) explain this trend. They conclude that girls are more successful in coursework because they are more conscientious and better organised than boys. For example, girls spend more time on their work, take more care with the way it is presented and are better at meeting deadlines.

#### 2. Challenging Stereotypes in the Curriculum

Research in the 1970s and 80s found that reading scheme portrayed women mainly as housewives and mothers, that physics books showed them as frightened by science, and that maths books depicted boys are more inventive. **Weiner** (1995) argues that since the 1980s, teachers have challenged such stereotypes. Also, in general, sexist images have been removed from learning materials. This may have helped to raise girls' achievement by presenting them with more positive images of what women can do.

#### 3. Selection and Marketisation

Marketisation policies have created a more competitive climate in which schools see girls as desirable recruits because they achieve better exam results. **Jackson** (1998) notes that the introduction of league tables has improved opportunities for girls: high achieving girls are attractive to schools, whereas low-achieving boys are not. This tends to create a self-fulfilling prophecy – because girls are more likely to be recruited by good schools, they are more likely to do well.

#### 4. Feminisation of Education

**Sewell** claims that boys fall behind because education has become feminised (BBC, 2006). This is when schools do not nurture masculine traits such as competitiveness and leadership. Instead they celebrate qualities associated with girls such as methodical working and attentiveness in class. As a result boys feel under-valued in the education system and therefore underachieve.

#### 5. 'Laddish' subcultures

**Epstein** (1998) argues that the growth of laddish subcultures has contributed to boys' underachievement. She examined the way masculinity is constructed within a school and found that working-class boys are likely to be harassed, labelled as 'sissies' and subject to homophobic verbal abuse if they appear to be swots. This is because in working-class cultures, masculinity is equated with being tough and doing manual work. Non-manual work and by extension school work is seen as effeminate and inferior. As a result, working class boys tend to reject school work to avoid being called 'gay'.

*NB: Make sure you are able to explain how all these sociological points leads to girls achievement/boys underachievement in school.*

#### GCSE and Coursework

However, **Elwood** (2005) argued that although coursework has some influence, it is unlikely to be the only cause of the gender gap because exams have much more influence than coursework in final grades.

#### Challenging Stereotypes in the Curriculum

Weiner's research has gained theoretical support from **Liberal Feminists**. They take a march of progress view of education and claim that small improvements inside and outside schools has resulted in an increase in educational achievement amongst females.

#### Selection and Marketisation

**Slee** (1998) offers further explanation of the effects of marketisation by providing an explanation for boys' underachievement. He argues that boys are less attractive to schools because they are more likely to suffer from behavioural problems and are four times more likely to be excluded.

#### Feminisation of Education

The feminisation of education does not consider the fact that boys can still be seen to dominate lessons and take up more of the teachers' time. It can be said that perhaps girls are underachieving in school, but not so in relation to boys.

#### 'Laddish' Subcultures

Epstein's work is supported by **Francis** (2007) who claims that boys were more concerned than girls about being labelled by peers as swots because this label is more of a threat to their masculinity than it is to girls' femininity.

### Patterns and Trends in Subject Choice

- **National Curriculum Options:** Although design and technology is a compulsory subject, girls tend to choose the food technology option whilst boys choose graphics or resistant materials.
- **AS and A Levels:** Boys tend to opt for maths and physics and girls choose subject such as sociology, English and Languages. These differences are mirrored at University level.
- **Vocational Courses:** Only 1 in 100 boys opt to do a childcare apprenticeship, whereas only 2 in 100 girls opt to do vehicle maintenance and repair.

### Sociological Explanations for Gender Differences in Subject Choice

#### Analysis

##### **1. Gender Role Socialisation (EXTERNAL)**

Gender role socialisation is a process of learning the behaviour expected of males and females in society. **Norman (1988)** notes from an early age boys and girls are dressed differently, given different toys and encouraged to take part in different activities.

**Murphy and Elwood (1979)** demonstrate how this can result in different tastes in reading and therefore subject choice. Boys read hobby books and information texts while girls are more likely to read stories about people. Hence why boys prefer science subject and girls subjects such as English.

##### **2. Gendered Subject Images (INTERNAL)**

**Kelly** argues that science is seen as a boys' subject because:

- Science teachers are more likely to be men.
- The examples used to teach concepts often draw on boys' rather than girls interests (such as using sports balls to demonstrate the orbit of the planets).
- In Science lessons, boys monopolise the apparatus and dominate the lessons.

##### **3. Gender Identities within School (INTERNAL)**

Pupils' experiences in school reinforce their gender identities, reinforcing 'hegemonic masculinity' – the dominance of a heterosexual masculine identity (**Connell, 1995**).

**Verbal abuse** – abusive language between pupils reinforces dominant gender identities. **Parker (1996)** found that a boy will be called 'gay' if he is friendly, polite and gets on well with girls and female teachers.

**The male gaze** – **Mac an Ghail** argue that the way male pupils and teachers look girls up and down, seeing them as sexual objects and making judgements about their appearance is a form of surveillance where dominant masculine identities are reinforced.

**Double standards** – **Lees (1993)** argues that boys will boast about their own sexual exploits but if girls do the same they will be called 'slags'.

**Teachers and discipline** – **Mac an Ghail (1988)** found that teachers play a part in reinforcing gender identities. Male teachers have told boys off for 'behaving like girls' in the classroom.

This therefore results in segregation of the genders within school which ultimately leads to girls opting for typically feminine subjects such as English and boys opting for typically masculine subjects such as Maths.

#### Evaluation

##### **Methodological Evaluation of Subject Choice**

Although subject choice and gender are relatively straightforward concepts to operationalise (define and measure – there are only two genders and subjects are easily identifiable); the process of making subject choice is very hard to observe and so a lot of the research into this area involves the sociologist making their own judgements on the patterns seen. Therefore this weakens the overall validity of the research into gender and subject choice.

##### **Gender Identities within School**

**Leonard (2006)** argues that single sex schools tend to hold less stereotypes subject images and make less traditional subject choices. She found that girls in girls' schools were more likely to take maths and science at A Levels compared to girls in mixed schools and boys in boys' schools were more likely to take English and Languages than boys from mixed schools.

##### **Equal Opportunities Policies**

Much of the research into gender differences in subject choice has not taken into account the impact of equal opportunities policies such as GIST and WISE that encourage women into more male dominated professions. These policies have ensured female scientists visit schools; non-sexist career advice is given and even reviewed learning material in science subjects. All of these initiative have gone some way to ensure a more equal split of genders in subject choice.

Note: You may be asked about:

Underachievement of Boys ONLY

Achievement of Girls ONLY

Achievement of boys and girls

Subject choice ONLY

Achievement and Subject Choice