

Females The Educational Achievers

Females the Educational Achievers/19/1/98/P.Covington/1997 Yellow Education Disc

Introduction

In the early 1990's came the first indications that the imbalance between male and female achievement was changing. The evidence for this emerged firstly from the **results of GCSE examination** and then from **Advanced level results**. These showed that the gap between female and male attainment was **widening in favour of females** in arts and humanities subjects, **and in the sciences** the traditional advantage of male over female **was narrowing**. Three interpretations have been put forward for these changes.

1. Negative Attitude and Truancy

This approach suggests that it is not just that females are achieving better than before, but that there is a problem with boys and education that has not yet been fully explored by sociologists. The reasons given for this falling behind are varied, but according to **Barber** (1994) they are connected to males developing much less positive attitudes than females. This negative attitude is manifested in a number of ways, including **lower work rates among male students** and signs of disaffection, **such as increased truancy** and behaviour problems among male students. It is also suggested that male peer groups tend to develop less favourable attitudes to education and this creates peer group pressure. In 1994 *Panorama* BBC 1, 24th October, (see video notes, *The Future is Female*) drew on USA research to show that parents spend less time with sons than with their daughters. It was suggested that this could be linked to reluctance among males to read and poorer standards of literacy. This view has been influential in persuading some educationists that any agenda for Equal Opportunities initiatives needs to address male underachievement as that of females. However, Feminists would argue that this explanation tends to play down the real progress made by females and divert attention back onto boys.

2. Social Policy Aiding Females:

This view suggests that a number of **policy changes** that have been effective in encouraging female students to achieve in those areas where they have **traditionally done poorly**. The first initiative was GIST (Girls into Science and Technology), which was designed to encourage females to opt for science and technology. These included policies such as **arranging visits from female students to act as positive role models**, developing curriculum materials that reflected female interests, non-sexist career advice and raising teachers' consciousness of gender role stereotyping. However, critics of this explanation suggest that it is difficult to pin down a general increase in female standards to this particular initiative, as GIST was fairly narrow in its scope and affected only a few selected schools. Nor were these policies necessarily always followed through because they were expensive to implement.

3. Single Sex Classes:

Another initiative that has been claimed to be successful is the introduction of **single-sex classes**. This builds on the arguments in favour of single sex schools. Female only classes **provide positive role models**, as for example, the science teacher too has to be female. In science lessons, having no boys in the class **removes the domination of laboratory equipment by boys**, and also allows female students to answer questions and follow their interests. The positive outcomes of female-only classes are said to increase in female confidence and a more positive attitude to science. Critics of this approach argue that female only classes do not guarantee that teachers' attitudes are changed or that sexist material is not used. As with GIST, this approach has only been adopted by a very few schools, as it is relatively expensive to implement.

4. The Introduction of the GCSE Examination

The introduction of this exam, as opposed to O level and CSE is argued to have **favoured females**. The principles behind GCSE are that students should be allowed to show what they know, understand and can do. In order to achieve this, **coursework has been introduced as a prominent feature of GCSE courses**. This component is said to **favour the consistent and conscientious work that is characterised by female students**. Similarly, the increased emphasis on **oral assessment** is supposed to favour female skills. Also the widespread introduction of joint science GCSE's has led to increased performance among females as their strong biology orientation has pulled up their general grades in science. However, the effect of these innovations is likely to be limited. For example, coursework marks are now limited at GCSE at (20%), so there are clear constraints on the limited benefits that can be achieved. Nor is it clear that female students possess the attributes given to them, such as working consistently harder than males. There is for example a clear link between class and females attitudes towards schoolwork.

5. Changing Attitudes

This view suggests that **female attitudes** towards education and work have **changed significantly**. This is partly because more young women have rallied to the **feminist** calls for gender equality and partly because of an **increase in the employment opportunities** available to them. Thus it is claimed that **women are now more independent minded and ambitious**, and with their higher expectations they are less likely to want to marry and start a family at an early age. For example, the average age for the female when giving birth to their first offspring is now 29 years of age. Education, work and career have now become the focus of gender identity (Sharpe, 1994). Wilkinson, (1994) also shows that employment has taken over from starting a family as the main aim of young women, and that this shift in social attitudes is having a strong bearing upon educational aspirations and performance. In *Gender Divisions in a Post Fordist Era, (1992)* Linda McDowell has argued that recent changes in the economy has favoured the employment of women over men. She points out that the growing service sector depends upon good customer relationships, articulacy and personal presentation. – All of which favour women over men.

We Should However, Not over-estimate the Continuing Sexism

However, it is important not to overestimate the degree of change in attitudes. Sharpe (1994) indicates that many of the females in her 1990's study like those in the 1970's anticipate life as a 'dual worker', combining waged employment with family and domestic responsibilities. Sharpe also acknowledges that the desire to gain educational qualifications may partly reflect female's recognition of the fragility in the labour market in a period of recession. (6 months of zero growth in production in the economy).

We should also point out that the increased employment opportunities are less impressive than at first sight. It may be that the '**glass ceiling**' has been lifted slightly, so that women are found in significant **numbers in middle-management positions**, but females are **still underrepresented in the top echelons of management and over-represented in the dead end, part time work they have traditionally dominated**. This lack of gender equality is recognised by Sharpe, and she sees it as potentially denting the expectations of females in the 1990's. According to Neil Postman the economic and social changes that have taken place in the 1990's have undermined student motivation.

6. Revision at Home

A large number of students said they did not realise that revision would be so important. As girls tend to revise more than boys, girls are more aware of what is needed to obtain good qualifications. Whereas boys are more likely to be involved in Sport or gang activities, girls are more likely to spend their leisure time talking. (McRobbie, 1976) Girls are therefore more likely to work harder and do more revision as they feel that they have something to aim for.

7. Homework

There is a considerable amount of sociological evidence available that suggests that there is a connection between **homework and educational attainment**. Research in Britain and the USA indicates that working class boys who **do at least an hour homework a night perform as well as middle class boys in examinations**. (Estelle and Morris), 1996. A recent study provides evidence that girls spend more time on homework than boys, (S. Harris, School Work Homework and Gender, 1993)

8. Relationship with Teachers

The type of relationship that the student has with their teachers has a considerable bearing on exam results. Teachers have different ideas about the type of behaviour that is consistent with the pupil's role. Similarly, pupils have conflicting views about what makes an ideal teacher. Some pupils are unable to live up to the model of the ideal pupil held by their teacher. As a result it may lead to new patterns of behaviour, which influence their levels of attainment. A considerable amount of research has been carried out into how teachers make sense of, and respond to the behaviour of their pupils. In his book *Outsiders* **Howard Becker** puts forwards his labelling theory of behaviour. His theory suggests that the classifying of behaviour by teachers' **leads to labels being attached to pupils**. This classification will then affect what will eventually happen to the pupil. And thus will lead **to the self-fulfilling prophecy**. **Ball** for instance in 1986 found that teachers' **labels had affected performance**. Whilst **Licht and Dwect** found that boys *are more often criticised by their teachers and therefore develop negative feelings towards schooling*. Relationships between girls and their teachers are generally better than those enjoyed by the boys and their teachers. (**Abraham, 1995**) One reason for this is that a higher percentage of girls than boys share the values of the teacher. **Gay Randall, 1987** noted that teachers had more contact time with girls than boys.

9. Behaviour of Pupils in Class

A recent report by government inspectors suggested that bad behaviour in the classroom was responsible for children underachieving at GCSE. (OFSTED, 1996). This appears to be supported by research, for example, **Licht and Dwect** noted that boys seem to **be more easily distracted in the classroom**. Boys are also more likely to cause discipline problems. For example, nationally, 80% of pupils excluded from secondary schools are boys, (OFSTED, 1996) A number of pupils interviewed often suggested that image was important factor. Pupils did not want to be seen as doing as much work because it did not look good for their image. **Peter Woods** in *The Divided School* argues that boys are more concerned with the approval of their peer group than the approval of teachers.

10. Sets and Performance

Research shows that some underachieve because they were placed in the wrong set. There was very little difference between the sexes on this issue. Some students thought that they had been unfairly placed into the wrong sets. As **David Hargreave** has pointed out, **the set that someone is in will influence teacher expectations**. This in turn will influence performance. Students believed that there were more behavioural problems in the lower sets. This was more of a problem for boys as their peer group more easily influenced them. **Bly, 1996**.

11. Relationship With Parents

J.W.Douglas's work *The Home and School* reveals that **parents have considerable influence over the academic performance of their kids in school**. This pioneering research has been confirmed by plenty of other sociologists, in the 1970's, **Berthoud, 1976, Swift, 1977, Mackinnon, 1978**. Divorce, as other research, shows can severely curtail academic performance.

Under-Achievement among Boys

Boys, principally from working class backgrounds, may be experiencing low self esteem and poor motivation which is having an adverse effect of their educational performance. Research by Harris et al in 1993 into the attitudes of 16-year-olds from predominately working class backgrounds towards schoolwork, homework and careers confirms that many boys are achieving below their potential. It was found that girls tended to be more hard-working and better motivated than boys, whilst boys were more easily distracted in the classroom and less determined to overcome academic difficulties. Overall, girls were prepared to work consistently to meet coursework deadlines, whereas boys had difficulties in organising their time.

There was a greater readiness among girls to do school works at home and spends more time on homework than boys. When thinking about the future, the young women recognised the need to gain qualifications, for lives, which would involve paid employment as well as domestic responsibilities. Generally, the males had not given much thought to their futures and seemed fairly unconcerned about their poor school performance.

The authors relate their findings to the gender 'regimes', which the young people encounter in their homes and communities. Some of the girls, exposed to the image of women as organiser, responsible for home and family and wage earning, displayed similar characteristics themselves, i.e. being highly organised with school work and homework. Harris et al argue that the dominant stereotype of the male in the working class community they examined was highly macho. Typically, this was characterised by a disregard for authority of organisational structures and an enjoyment of the active company of other males. Some boys were already fulfilling such a stereotype in their approach to school, showing little regard for working steadily and dissociating themselves with formal requirements.

Source : Sociology Review, Vol 5. No 4. , Clark, 1996

Exercise One

Look at the following quotes and match them to one of the reasons for male underachievement

1. **Michael:** My friends who were boys rarely revised and because I did they would take the Mickey.
2. **Danielle:** The relationship that I had with my subject teacher was important. The subjects with the more committed teachers were the ones where I achieved better grades. The teacher in the top set for subject F, cared about what we got and worked hard on our behalf. I therefore, not only wanted a good GCSE grade for men but for her as well.
3. **Stuart:** I was bright enough to be in a higher set but because I fell to pieces during tests I was placed in lower sets. I should have been placed in sets not just on my test marks but on other class work as well.
4. **Vanessa:** Science teaching is so much better today, thanks to better text books that are non-sexist and the positive role models portrayed both in texts and in real life, I had not hesitation in choosing to do science at A level.
5. **Karen:** I always get high marks in coursework. I work quietly and consistently on it, and thus always seem to do well. Sometimes some of my male friends run off their coursework a day before it is due in. It is no wonder they do so badly!
6. **Helen:** These days's girls do not just want to get married and have kids, we want careers. I want to become a solicitor, so I never have to be dependent upon a man!
7. **Vicky:** Marital break up is an awful time for Kids, so that causes problems. I know someone who had to cope with her parents separation whilst doing her exams with little support from her family. It is an awful thing to happen.
8. **Peter:** I dunna want to do revision, its crap and boring, I wanna be out with me mates in the gang.
9. **Allanah:** I go to an all girl's school. In class we don't have to put with male disruption, we don't chit-chat about whom we fancy we just get on with our work.
10. **Alec:** I am prone to misbehave in class if other people are mucking about. I much about because I want to get noticed and look good in front of my friends. This was especially true of subject P, because I was in a low set and the teacher had no control over the class.
11. **Allan:** I cannot see the point of learning History, it is a waste of time. So I bunk it and go and hang out with me mates in Romford.
12. **Stuart:** My friends were brighter than me and they finished their homework quickly. I did not do enough homework because I wanted to go out with my friends.
13. **Mark:** I did not get on with my subject teacher. It all started when I got moved from my friends for no reason. I therefore rebelled. The teacher moved those who did not want to work, including me, to the back of the class. I then did no work at all.

Exercise Two

Which are strengths and which are weaknesses of this argument.

1. Although girls may be doing better at examinations at school, this is not to say that females will make strides in achieving top managerial positions.
2. Evidence from the work place and elsewhere support the assertion that female attitudes to success have changed, women have children later, and see careers and vital.
3. A lot of the work lacks empirical data to support it. It is often small scale, and thus generalisations are difficult to make.
4. These studies give an up to date account of classroom attainment in the 1990's.
5. The work fails to take into account class differences. In reality it is not boys per se who fails, but working class boys.
6. This debate is sterile. In reality it is a smokescreen to divert attention away from the real gains women have made, and to divert attention back again on the male of the species.
7. Many of the so-called initiatives were only narrow in their scope and can thus not be said to be responsible for added female achievement.
8. Much empirical quantitative data show that this trend is consistent and widening, and thus cannot be dismissed easily.

Paper One, June 1993, Question 3: Exercise Three

Look at the following examination question. The question I want you to consider is taken from AEB's June 1993 Paper One.

This exercise is aimed at helping you to order your arguments logically, so that evaluation aspect of your response shows through. To do this exercise properly, you will need to refer to the examination question.

Using the information from the Items,

Question

Using Information from the Items, evaluate sociological contributions to an understanding of the hidden curriculum, as it affects female pupils. (10 marks)

Paragraph 1

Clarricoates however adds this important dimension, as she found that teachers maintained that males were intellectually more elite, despite girls getting consistently higher marks.

Paragraph 2

Stanworth takes a more holistic view of schools and sees that they are male dominated, and so until they change, female achievement will not improve. Her study is particularly useful as it shows how the whole structure and ethos of school affects the hidden curriculum, which in turn affects females.

Paragraph 3

Shaw proposes single sex education and **Arnot** single-sex-classes in mixed schools. Their suggestions could be seen as a response to the worsening situation, though it must be remembered that their contribution (as far as explored here) are not empirically based and on their own provide insufficient evidence.

Paragraph 4

Since the early biological arguments of **Tiger and Fox**, sociologists have looked for social reasons why females tend to underachieve. The hidden curriculum is something that interactionists have been particularly interested in, as they see it as a central part of schooling that directly affects female pupils.

Paragraph 5

Gender inequalities and experiences shaped by a pupil's sex are issues that are not isolated to schools. Douglas and **Sharpe** show that parental expectations affect how pupils regard their education. Marxists argue that teachers are unwitting agents of capitalists and that the ruling class shapes schools so that females will be wholly domesticated or became part of the reserve pool of labour for the feminised industries. It is safe to say that, though that the hidden curriculum, practised in schools includes values that are not necessarily exclusive to schools, so Marxist and Functionalist theory is relevant here.

Paragraph 6

As we seen in Item C, **Spender** identifies boys receiving two thirds of teachers' time. This implies that teachers see it as 'natural' for boys to do well and therefore pay special attention to ensuring they achieve. Spender's research is important as it identifies one important way that attitudes of teachers affect females. However, it could be argued that from this observation alone that in fact girls are more self-sufficient and require less attention, whereas boys are 'needy' and require more.

Paragraph 7

Se can see that studies that focus on the school contribute quite well to our understanding of the hidden curriculum, though they could be accused to teacher bashing and are not placed within the context of the whole society. Nevertheless, they seek to uncover the experiences of the pupils themselves from their point of view.

Paragraph 8

However, studies that deal directly with the curriculum could be successfully applied to schools and hence are a valuable contribution.

Paragraph 9

Kelly shows how the formal curriculum, hand in hand, with the hidden curriculum, can affect female pupils. She is concerned about the low percentage of girls in science and sees this as a result of attitudes that treat it as a boys' subject. Kelly is most in favour of GIST.

Paragraph 10

In studying the hidden curriculum (which is identified as the informal value systems, attitudes and norms within schools) **interactionists and interpretativists** have used qualitative methods, actually going into schools and doing empirical research to explain female underachievement. Thus their research is particularly valid as they give us insight into the day-to-day running of schools and, through the practise of **Verstehen** and ethnographic studies, tell us what the experiences of females actually are in relation to the hidden curriculum.

Paragraph 11

In Item E, we can see that gender can be important criterion for teachers' labelling of students, which may lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy. **Howard Becker**, also shows that the 'ideal pupil' notion that teachers have is that of a white middle-class male, not female. If it is true (as in Item D) that teachers' qualities are influential, then as females come aware that teachers have these sorts of attitudes they may feel discouraged.

Sources

Education and Training: **Tim Heaton** and **Tony Lawson**

Sociology in Perspective: **Mark Kirby** et al

Underachievement at GCSE: research project by **Sackville School**, Yr 12 Sociology Group. (with kind thanks to Mrs. Maggs)