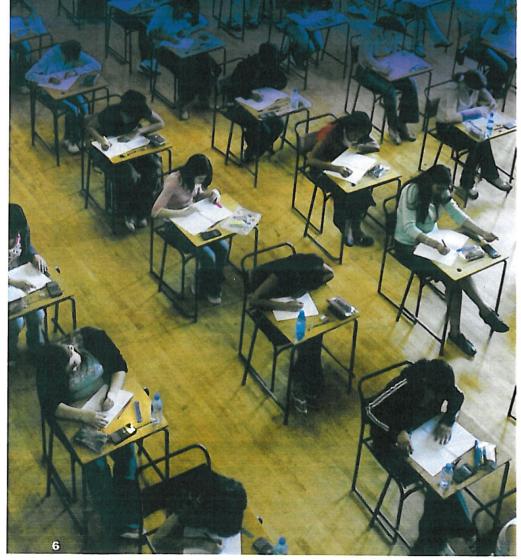# Education, gender and social class

Louise Archer

Educational policy makers and the media are concerned that boys are underachieving at school compared to girls. However, the picture concerning gender and achievement is more complex.

Academic research has shown that the preoccupation with boys' underachievement at school is fundamentally misleading, since not all boys are performing badly and not all girls are doing well. Instead, there are complex patterns of differential achievement relating to social class, race/ethnicity and gender. For example, children from working-class backgrounds tend to gain lower results than those from middle-class backgrounds, irrespective of gender. There are also different rates of attainment found across different ethnic groups (Francis and Skelton 2005).

The research outlined in this article focuses on understanding the relatively 'hidden' issue of educational disengagement among working-class girls and tries to highlight some of the social inequalities that they face in relation to their schooling.

Research on girls and schooling

Since the 1970s, feminists and sociologists have drawn attention to how working-class girls may resist schooling and education because they perceive it to be at odds with the particular version of feminine identity (femininity) that they value and that they perform in their everyday lives (McRobbie 1978).

While social values have obviously changed considerably since the 1970s (for example fewer women and girls today see marriage and/or motherhood as necessarily preventing them from having a job or career), working-class young women still continue to leave school earlier, and with fewer qualifications, than their middle-class female peers.

Heterosexuality is an important defining feature of many young women's feminine identities, but research suggests that it is much more likely to impact negatively on girls' and young women's education and achievement than it does on boys and young men. For instance, girls are more likely than boys to describe limiting their aspirations due to wanting to 'stay local' and 'settle down'.

There have also been concerns in recent years, particularly within the media, that some girls — especially working-class girls — are going 'off the rails' because they are aping male behaviour. These fears are encapsulated in the stereotype of the 'ladette', who drinks excessively, swears, fights and is loud, rude and sexually explicit (Jackson 2006, and see SOCIOLOGY REVIEW Vol. 19, No. 1).

The study

The research findings discussed here come from a study that explored the identities and aspirations of 89 working-class young people, aged 14–16 years and from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, attending six London schools (Archer, Halsall and Hollingworth 2007).

Methodology

We conducted repeat interviews with 53 young people from six multiethnic London schools, whom we tracked individually while they were in Years 10 and 11. Each of these young people was interviewed up to three or four times over the 2-year timescale.

Discussion groups were also conducted with 36 additional young people. Eight pupils completed photographic diaries (where they were given a camera and asked to record 'A day in my life').

The project also involved interviews with 19 members of staff (including head teachers, heads of year, subject teachers, inclusion managers, learning mentors and connexions advisors) and five parents (all mothers). Here I will be focusing in particular on the 37 young women who took part in the study (23 girls who were individually tracked and 14 girls who took part in discussion groups).

Glamorous femininities

Many of the young women we interviewed put considerable time and effort into creating a glamorous, heterosexually attractive, feminine identity. Successful performances of this glamorous femininity brought peer status and approval, and many girls spent a lot of time on their everyday appearance,

which they then displayed with obvious pride. For example:

- Leah dressed in black and offset her outfit with gold jewellery, wore striking make up and crafted her hair into a detailed ringlet pattern on one side of her head.
- Jermina sported a pink look, with pink accessories — a large pink ruffle, a pink bowler Puma handbag, a pink jacket, a pink watch — and braided hair.
- Jane had ever-changing hair colours and styles each time we interviewed her and described spending all the £40 per week that she earned from babysitting on her appearance.
- Nadia's photo diary also recorded the importance of her appearance to her, with photographs of her favourite nail varnish, perfume and accessories such as her mobile phone. Nadia also spent a considerable amount of time evaluating and debating which photographs of her were 'ugly' or 'nice'.

From a sociological point of view, the girls' dress and appearance can be understood as combining a complex mix of styles and symbols, reflecting the interplay of ethnicity, social class and gender.

For instance, the girls mixed elements of 'black', urban US style ('bling') with more unisex (or masculine) sportswear (especially Nike) and ultra feminine 'sexy' clothes, make-up and hairstyles. Being able to perform these desirable feminine identities can give girls a sense of power and status, which may be particularly important for those working-class girls who may not feel valued in schools (or society more generally) through, for instance, their comparatively lower levels of achievement, the areas they live in or the schools they attend.

Many girls seemed to enjoy performing these glamorous feminine identities. However, while such identities may have enabled girls to feel good about themselves and provide them with social status, they were also problematic in that they were viewed negatively by schools. They discouraged girls from following particular routes and continuing into further and higher education, and contributed to the reinforcement of oppressive social relationships. In other words, they did not provide a straightforward release or escape from social inequalities.

Girls frequently described how their appearance brought them into conflict with schools, for instance due to wearing 'too much' or the 'wrong sort of' jewellery or forbidden items of clothing, and for breaking rules regarding appropriate hair and make-up. Moreover, many of the teachers and other professionals we interviewed felt that these highly (hetero)sexual femininities (and the girls' prioritisation of their appearance) mitigated against the girls being 'good pupils'.

This preoccupation with 'looking the part' was seen as both a distraction to learning and as a physical, outward symbol that

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a girl was not interested in education. As one learning mentor commented, many girls look up to people like Beyoncé (Knowles, the singer), but this can lead them to focus on their appearance at the expense of schoolwork:

> They spend their time in the toilets doing their make-up and their hair, trying to look the part, because if they don't look the part they will get teased. Because this culture is that you have to look good and you have to wear the right stuff and they focus more on that than they focus on their education.

The girls' performances of femininity were regulated not only by schools but also by their female peers, and this peer surveillance could create considerable anxiety and fear as 'getting it wrong' or not conforming could mean exclusion from peer groups. Numerous girls talked to us about the lengths to which they had to go to try to avoid being ridiculed due, for example, to wearing the 'wrong' brand trainers or style of clothing:

> Let's say if I don't wear a designer thing the kids will probably laugh at me saying, oh you're not wearing, you know, Adidas or Nike or whatever.
> Melissa

In other words, girls 'policed' themselves to ensure a high level of conformity to these forms of femininity — but without realising that this preoccupation with glamorous femininity can reinforce gender and social-class inequalities.

Some girls talked about wanting to leave education and not continue to college or university because they needed to earn money as quickly as possible to fund the maintenance of their appearance. Girls like Jordan saw higher education as 'not for me' because she could not see it fitting with her own sense of style as a 'Nike person' (Archer, Hollingworth and Halsall 2007).

Boyfriends

For a number of girls in the study, their disengagement with schooling was exacerbated by their preoccupation with their boyfriends. The boys we interviewed would often talk and joke about girls and girlfriends, but they tended to deny that these relationships had any impact on their educational engagement.

Indeed, it seemed that a girlfriend was more likely to be a *positive* influence on a boy. Babu recounted how his girlfriend had helped him to reduce the amount of cannabis that he smoked and had encouraged him to engage more at school.

In contrast, for girls, having a boyfriend seemed to have a more negative effect on their aspirations and educational engagement. For instance, Jordan became pregnant over the course of the project and had to leave school and did not complete her exams.

Jane had previously achieved well at school but over the course of the project she distanced herself from her friends and started to spend almost all her free time with her (older) boyfriend. By the time of her third interview, Jane's whole day revolved around her boyfriend. The relationship not only filled her spare time, but also impacted on her aspirations. Previously Jane had aspired to go to university. She now claimed to be no longer 'bothered', saying that she would prefer to stay in the local area and find a job to be near her boyfriend.

Nadira's aspirations and educational engagement also changed over the course of the study as a result of her relationship. In the beginning, she had a confident plan to go to university and pursue a professional career in business or IT. By the final interview, she was considering stereotypically working-class, feminine jobs in childcare or beauty. She described her sole motivation now as being to marry her boyfriend:

> I don't know why I'm thinking about this at my age but I really, really, really want to get married to my boyfriend. That is [the] one thing I want, to end up with him.
> Nadira

While Nadira justified her aspiration to get married as soon as possible as a 'typical' Asian tradition, her family actually wanted her to wait until she had been to university before getting married. Indeed, mothers of girls from a range of different ethnic backgrounds worried that having a boyfriend might distract their daughters from achieving at school.

The 'ladette'

Not all the girls in the study conformed to popular versions of 'glamorous' femininity. When we first met Melissa, for example, she distanced herself in her dress and attitude from what she called the 'proper girlie' femininities of her peers and described herself instead as a 'tomboy'.

Unlike most of the other girls, Melissa always wore Nike trainers, hoodies and baggy tracksuits or unisex sportswear (her school did not have a uniform). She also described herself as competitive and physical, and enjoyed playing football with boys. She took particular pride in confounding boys' expectations of her abilities.

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While she did not personally use the terminology, in some ways Melissa might be read as typifying the 'ladette' image, as she described getting into trouble for smoking and drinking in school and she was repeatedly excluded. She also talked with some pride of her 'loudness' and her ability to 'bunk off' (play truant) from school without being detected.

However, Melissa also described desperately wanting to be seen as intelligent, but felt unable to escape from being labelled by the teachers as 'bad' due to her style and appearance. She felt trapped because, as she put it, 'first impressions always count and I should make a better impression'. She felt that teachers held a 'grudge' against her because of the way she looked and acted, and decided that in order to become educationally successful, she would have to shed her non-feminine appearance and transform into a 'proper girl' (as she put it).

Melissa's transformation was driven by her female cousins and her mother, who took her under their wing during the summer holidays and taught her how to 'do' femininity. Melissa now wore make-up, jeans and skirts, and enjoyed dressing up.

When we interviewed Melissa again after the summer, she was enrolled at a local college doing a media course and was not truanting from any classes. She felt that both her educational engagement and achievement was intricately linked to her embodiment and performance of a more 'gender-traditional' femininity.

As Melissa herself suggested, she had now become a 'good girl'. This transformation not only involved her becoming a good, or better, pupil but was also built around her performance of a dominant, socially valued version of femininity, which required her to adopt responsibility and care of the self (both physically and educationally). This form of femininity was then rewarded symbolically (through praise and respect from her family, friends and peers), educationally (through her grades and positive support and feedback from her new college) and materially (for example through her access to resources such as the education maintenance allowance and related services). While Melissa's transformation might be seen on one level as a success (she is now educationally engaged), on another level it highlights the inequalities facing girls in that the possibilities for them to feel and be successful at school seem extremely narrow.

Conclusion

While the media and educational policy remain preoccupied with the issue of boys' (supposed) educational underachievement, evidence suggests that social-class inequalities in attainment are far starker. Here, I have attempted to draw attention to some of the complexities underlying working-class girls' disengagement from schooling.

In particular, I have argued that gender inequalities may intersect with class inequalities, such that girls' performances of 'glamorous' femininities and their prioritisation of boyfriends over their own education and aspirations can not only feed into oppressive gender relations but also contribute to keeping them in socially and economically disadvantaged social positions.

The girls discussed here were caught in a dilemma. While particular popular femininities might generate social status and power within peer groups, these identities can also reinforce social inequalities and disadvantage girls educationally.

Dominant patriarchal discourses privilege passive, submissive and gender-conservative forms of femininity as being more 'feminine' and 'attractive'. As a result, it is harder for girls to choose 'masculine' subjects such as science, or to espouse 'high' aspirations, and to simultaneously be seen as attractive, desirable (glamorous) young women. Both glamorous and ladette femininities were viewed negatively by schools, constraining the girls' ability both to 'be themselves' and to be 'good pupils'.

In conclusion, it might be argued that in order to understand and address inequalities in terms of educational achievement and engagement, we might need a better understanding of young people's identities.

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Key words

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