External factors and gender differences in achievement

There are a number of reasons for gender differences in achievement. As with explanations of class and ethnic differences in achievement, we can divide them into external and internal factors:

- **External factors** – factors outside the education system, such as home and family background, and wider society
- **Internal factors** – factors within schools and the education system, such as the effect of schools' equal opportunities policies.

Many sociologists argue that gender differences in achievement, and especially the more rapid improvement in girls' results, can best be explained by changes that have occurred in factors outside the school, such as the impact of feminism, changes in the family, changes in women's employment, and girls' changing perceptions and ambitions.

1 The impact of feminism

Feminism is a social movement that strives for equal rights for women in all areas of life. Since the 1960s, the feminist movement has challenged the traditional stereotype of a woman's role as solely that of mother and housewife in a patriarchal nuclear family and inferior to men outside the home, in work, education and the law.

Although feminists argue that we have not yet achieved full equality between the sexes, the feminist movement has had considerable success in improving women's rights and opportunities through changes in the law. More broadly, feminism has raised women's expectations and self-esteem.

These changes are partly reflected in media images and messages. A good illustration of this comes from Angela McRobbie's (1994) study of girls' magazines. In the 1970s, they emphasised the importance of getting married and not being 'left on the shelf', whereas nowadays, they contain images of assertive, independent women.

As we shall see, the changes encouraged by feminism may affect girls' self-image and ambitions with regard to the family and careers. In turn, this may explain improvements in their educational achievement.

2 Changes in the family

There have been major changes in the family since the 1970s. These include:

- an increase in the divorce rate
- an increase in cohabitation and a decrease in the number of first marriages
- an increase in the number of lone-parent families
- smaller families.

These changes are affecting girls' attitudes towards education in a number of ways. For example, increased 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. To achieve this independence, women need well-paid jobs and therefore good qualifications. Likewise, increases in the divorce rate may suggest to girls that it is unwise to rely on a husband to be their provider. Again, this may encourage girls to look to themselves and their own qualifications to make a living.

3 Changes in women's employment

There have been important changes in women's employment in recent decades. These include the following:

- 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.
- Since 1975, the pay gap between men and women has halved from 30% to 15%.
- The proportion of women in employment has risen from 53% in 1971 to 67% in 2013. The growth of the service sector and flexible part-time work has offered opportunities for women.
- Some women are now breaking through the 'glass ceiling' – the invisible barrier that keeps them out of high-level professional and managerial jobs.
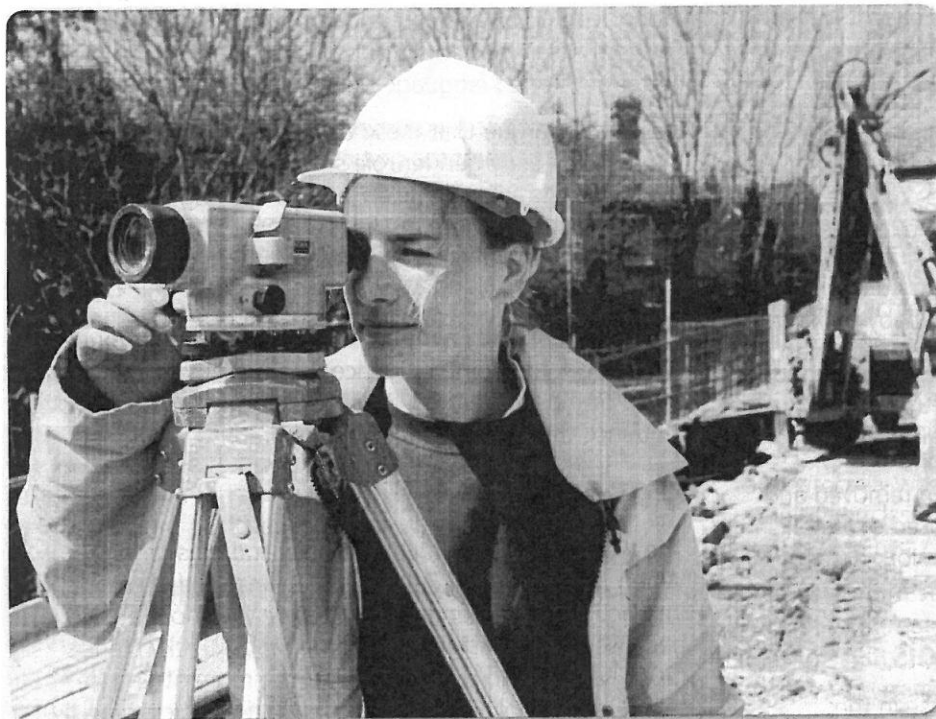
These changes have encouraged girls to see their future in terms of paid work rather than as housewives. Greater career opportunities and better pay for women, and the role models that successful career women offer, provide an incentive for girls to gain qualifications.

4 Girls' changing ambitions

The view that changes in the family and employment are producing changes in girls' ambitions is supported by evidence from research. For example, Sue Sharpe's (1994) interviews with girls in the 1970s and 1990s show a major shift in the way girls see their future.

In 1974, the girls had low aspirations; they believed educational success was unfeminine and that appearing to be ambitious would be considered unattractive. They gave their priorities as 'love, marriage, husbands, children, jobs and careers, more or less in that order'.

By the 1990s, girls' ambitions had changed and they had a different order of priorities – careers and being able to support themselves. Sharpe found that girls were now more likely

as creators of their own future and had an individualised notion of self. They believed in meritocracy (equal opportunity for every individual to achieve) and aimed for a professional career that would enable them to support themselves. Clearly, these aspirations require educational qualifications, whereas those of the 1970s girls did not.

class, gender and ambition

However, there are class differences in how far girls' ambitions have changed. 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.

As Diane Reay (1998) argues, this reflects the reality of the girls' class position. Their limited aspirations reflect the limited job opportunities they perceive as being available to them. By contrast, a traditional gender identity (especially being part of a couple) is both attainable and offers them a source of status.

Similarly, Biggart (2002) found that working-class girls are more likely to face a precarious position in the labour market and to see motherhood as the only viable option for their futures. Hence they see less point in achieving in education. For example, most of the low-aspiring working-class girls in Fuller's study were not interested in staying on at school and expressed a desire for low-level jobs.

▲ What policies might encourage more girls to pursue a career in construction?

to see their future as an independent woman with a career rather than as dependent on their husband and his income.

Likewise, O'Connor's (2006) study of 14–17 year olds found that marriage and children were not a major part of their life plans.

Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2001) link this to the trend towards individualisation in modern society, where independence is valued much more strongly than in the past. A career has become part of a woman's life project because it promises recognition and economic self-sufficiency.

In order to achieve independence and self-sufficiency, many girls now recognise that they need a good education. For some girls in Carol Fuller's (2011) study, educational success was a central aspect of their identity. They saw themselves

Activity	Research

Investigating pupils' aspirations

...go to www.sociology.uk.net

Internal factors and gender differences in achievement

While factors outside school may play an important part in explaining gender differences in achievement, factors within the education system itself are also important. These include equal opportunities policies, positive role models in schools, GCSE and coursework, teacher attention and classroom interaction, challenging stereotypes in the curriculum, and selection and league tables.

1 Equal opportunities policies

Feminist ideas have had a major impact on the education system. Policymakers are now much more aware of gender issues and teachers are more sensitive to the need to avoid stereotyping. The belief that boys and girls are entitled to the same opportunities is now part of mainstream thinking and it influences educational policies.

For example, policies such as GIST (Girls into science and technology) and WISE (Women into science and engineering) encourage girls to pursue careers in these non-traditional areas. Female scientists have visited schools, acting as role models; efforts have been made to raise science teachers' awareness of gender issues; non-sexist careers advice has been provided and learning materials in science reflecting girls' interests have been developed.

Similarly, the introduction of the National Curriculum in 1988 removed one source of gender inequality by making girls and boys study mostly the same subjects, which was often not the case previously.

Jo Boaler (1998) sees the impact of equal opportunities policies as a key reason for the changes in girls' achievement. Many of the barriers have been removed and schooling has become more meritocratic (based on equal opportunities) – so that girls, who generally work harder than boys, achieve more.

2 Positive role models in schools

As Table 2B shows, there has been an increase in the proportion of female teachers and heads. These women in senior positions may act as role models for girls, showing them women can achieve positions of importance and giving them non-traditional goals to aim for.

Women teachers are likely to be particularly important role models as far as girls' educational achievement is concerned since, to become a teacher, the individual must undertake a lengthy and successful education herself.

3 GCSE and coursework

Some sociologists argue that changes in the way pupils are assessed have favoured girls and disadvantaged boys. For example, Stephen Gorard (2005) found that the gender gap in achievement was fairly constant from 1975 until 1989, when 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 any more general failing of boys".

Eirene Mitsos and Ken Browne (1998) support this view. They conclude that girls are more successful in coursework because they are more conscientious and better organised than boys. Girls:

- spend more time on their work
- take more care with the way it is presented
- are better at meeting deadlines
- bring the right equipment and materials to lessons.

Mitsos and Browne argue that these factors have helped girls to benefit from the introduction of coursework in GCSE, AS and A level.

Along with GCSE has come the greater use of oral exams. This is also said to benefit girls because of their generally better developed language skills.

Sociologists argue that these characteristics and skills are the result of early gender role socialisation in the family. For example, girls are more likely to be encouraged to be neat, tidy and patient. These qualities become an advantage in today's assessment system, helping girls achieve greater success than boys.

However, Jannette Elwood (2005) argues 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 on final grades.

4 Teacher attention

The way teachers interact with boys and girls differs. When Jane and Peter French (1993) analysed classroom interaction, they found that boys received more attention because they attracted more reprimands. Becky Francis (2001) also found that while boys got more attention, they were disciplined more harshly and felt picked on by teachers, who tended to have lower expectations of them.

Swann (1998) also found gender differences in communication styles. Boys dominate in whole-class discussion, whereas girls prefer pair-work and group-work and are better at listening and cooperating. When working in groups, girls' speech involves turn taking, and not the hostile interruptions that often characterise boys' speech.

This may explain why teachers respond more positively to girls, whom they see as cooperative, than to boys, whom they see as potentially disruptive. This may lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy in which successful interactions with teachers promote girls' self-esteem and raise their achievement levels.

Table 2B	Percentage of teachers and head teachers who are women, 1992 and 2012			
	Nursery and primary schools		Secondary schools	
	1992	2012	1992	2012
Head teachers	50	71	22	37
Teachers	81	86	49	61

Source: House of Commons Library (2013)

1 Approximately how many times more male than female secondary head teachers were there in 2012?

2 Suggest reasons why there are bigger proportions of female teachers and female heads in primary schools than in secondary schools.

5 Challenging stereotypes in the curriculum

Some sociologists argue that the removal of gender stereotypes from textbooks, reading schemes and other learning materials in recent years has removed a barrier to girls' achievement. Research in the 1970s and 80s found that reading schemes portrayed women mainly as housewives and mothers, that physics books showed them as frightened by science, and that maths books depicted boys as more inventive.

Gaby 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.

6 Selection and league tables

Marketisation policies (see Topic 6) have created a more competitive climate in which schools see girls as desirable recruits because they achieve better exam results.

David Jackson (1998) notes that the introduction of exam 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.

Roger Slee (1998) argues that boys are less attractive to schools because they are more likely to suffer from behavioural difficulties and are four times more likely to be excluded.

As a result, boys may be seen as 'liability students' – obstacles to the school improving its league table scores.

They give the school a 'rough, tough' image that deters high-achieving girls from applying.

Two views of girls' achievement

While there have clearly been changes in gender and educational achievement, sociologists differ in their interpretation of the importance of these changes.

Liberal feminists celebrate the progress made so far in improving achievement. They believe that further progress will be made by the continuing development of equal opportunities policies, encouraging positive role models and overcoming sexist attitudes and stereotypes.

This is similar to the functionalist view that education is a *meritocracy* where all individuals, regardless of gender, ethnicity or class, are given an equal opportunity to achieve (see Topic 5).

Radical feminists take a more critical view. While they recognise that girls are achieving more, they emphasise that the system remains patriarchal (male-dominated) and conveys the clear message that it is still a man's world. For example:

- Sexual harassment of girls continues at school.
- Education still limits girls' subject choices and career options.
- Although there are now more female head teachers, male teachers are still more likely to become heads of secondary schools.
- Women are under-represented in many areas of the curriculum. For example, their contribution to history is largely ignored. Weiner (1993) describes the secondary school history curriculum as a 'woman-free zone'.

Identity, class and girls' achievement

While girls on average now achieve more highly than in the past, this does not mean that all girls are successful. In particular, there are social class differences in girls' achievement. For example, in 2013, only 40.6% of girls from poorer families (those eligible for free school meals) achieved five A*-C GCSEs, whereas over two-thirds (67.5%) of those not on free school meals did so.

Symbolic capital

According to feminists such as Louise Archer et al (2010), one reason for these differences is the conflict between working-class girls' feminine identities and the values and ethos of the school. In her study of working-class girls,

Archer uses the concept of 'symbolic capital' to understand this conflict. Symbolic capital refers to the status, recognition and sense of worth that we are able to obtain from others.

Archer found that by performing their working-class feminine identities, the girls gained symbolic capital from their peers. However, this brought them into conflict with school, preventing them from acquiring educational capital (qualifications) and economic capital (middle-class careers).

Archer identifies several strategies that the girls followed for creating a valued sense of self. These included adopting a hyper-heterosexual feminine identity, having a boyfriend and being 'loud'.

Hyper-heterosexual feminine identities

Many of the girls invested considerable time, effort and money in constructing 'desirable' and 'glamorous' hyper-heterosexual, feminine identities. For example, one girl spent all of the £40 a week she earned from babysitting on her appearance. They constructed identities that combined black urban American styles with unisex sportswear and 'sexy' clothes, make-up and hairstyles.

The girls' performance of this feminine identity brought status from their female peer group and avoided them being ridiculed or called a 'tramp' for wearing the wrong brand.

However, it also brought them into conflict with school. For example, they were often punished for having the wrong appearance: too much jewellery, the wrong clothing or makeup and so on. Teachers saw the girls' preoccupation with appearance as a distraction that prevented them engaging with education.

This led to the school 'othering' the girls – defining them as 'not one of us', incapable of educational success and thus less worthy of respect. Bourdieu describes this process as symbolic violence. Symbolic violence is the harm done by denying someone symbolic capital, for example by defining their culture as worthless.

According to Archer, from the school's point of view, the 'ideal female pupil' identity is a de-sexualised and middle-class one that excludes many working-class girls.

Boyfriends

While having a boyfriend brought symbolic capital, it got in the way of schoolwork and lowered girls' aspirations. This included losing interest in going to university, in studying 'masculine' subjects such as science or in gaining a professional career. Instead these girls aspired to 'settle down', have children and work locally in working-class feminine jobs such as childcare. One girl had to drop out of school after becoming pregnant.

Being 'loud'

Some working-class girls adopted 'loud' feminine identities that often led them to be outspoken, independent and assertive, for example questioning teachers' authority. This failed to conform to the school's stereotype of the ideal female pupil identity as passive and submissive to authority and brought conflict with teachers, who interpreted their behaviour as aggressive rather than assertive.

Working-class girls' dilemma

Working-class girls are thus faced with a dilemma:

- **Either gaining symbolic capital** from their peers by conforming to a hyper-heterosexual feminine identity
- **Or gaining educational capital** by rejecting their working-class identity and conforming to the school's middle-class notions of a respectable, ideal female pupil.

Some girls tried to cope with this dilemma by defining themselves as 'good underneath' (despite the teachers' negative views of them). This 'good underneath' self-image reflects the girls' struggle to achieve a sense of self-worth within an education system that devalues their working-class feminine identities.

Thus, Archer argues that working-class feminine identities and educational success conflict with one another. Working-class girls' investments in their feminine identities are a major cause of their underachievement.

'Successful' working-class girls

Although working-class girls in general are likely to underachieve, some do succeed and go on to higher education (HE). However, even they may be disadvantaged by their gender and class identities, as Sarah Evans (2009) shows in her study of 21 working-class sixth form girls in a south London comprehensive school.

She found that the girls wanted to go to university to increase their earning power. However, this was not for themselves, but to help their families. As one girl said, "The one thing I want to do is just give something back to my family really, that's the most important thing to me, and helping my Nan and all".

The girls' motivation reflected their working-class feminine identities. As Skeggs (1997) notes, 'caring' is a crucial part of this identity, and the girls in Evans' study wished to remain at home and to contribute to their families.

Economic necessity was a further reason for living at home. Cost and fear of getting into debt are major issues for many working-class students in deciding which universities to apply to. However, while living at home made HE more affordable, it also limited their choice of university and the market value of their degree.

But living at home was not just an economic necessity. It was also a positive choice and an aspect of their working-class identities. As Archer (2010) shows, a preference for the local is a key feature of working-class habitus (the ways of seeing, thinking and acting shared by members of a class). The girls showed a strong preference for the local and familiar over the distant.

Thus, as we have seen, the gender identity of working-class girls may play a significant part in their relative lack of success compared with middle-class girls. As Archer shows, a hyper-heterosexual feminine identity puts working-class girls at odds with the school. Evans demonstrates that, even for more successful working-class girls, the 'caring' aspect of working-class feminine identity produces a desire to live at home with their families while studying. This results in their self-exclusion from elite universities further afield and places a limit on their success.

Boys and achievement

We have focused so far on the thing that appears to have changed most – girls' performance. Recently, however, the gender gap in achievement has given rise to concern about boys falling behind.

Several possible factors may be responsible for this. These include external factors (outside the education system) such as boys' poorer literacy skills and the decline of traditional men's jobs, as well as internal factors (within the education system), such as the feminisation of education, the shortage of male primary school teachers and 'laddish' subcultures.

Boys and literacy

According to the DCSF (2007), the gender gap is mainly the result of boys' poorer literacy and language skills. One reason for this may be that parents spend less time reading to their sons. Another may be that it is mothers who do most of the reading to young children, who thus come to see reading as a feminine activity.

In addition, boys' leisure pursuits, such as football, do little to help develop their language and communication skills. By contrast, girls tend to have a 'bedroom culture' centred on staying in and talking with friends.

Poor language and literacy skills are likely to affect boys' performance across a wide range of subjects. In response to this problem, government has introduced a range of policies to improve boys' skills. (See Box 7.)

Globalisation and the decline of traditional men's jobs

Since the 1980s, there has been a significant decline in heavy industries such as iron and steel, shipbuilding, mining and engineering. This has been partly the result of the globalisation of the economy, which has led to much manufacturing industry relocating to developing countries such as China to take advantage of cheap labour.

Traditionally, these sectors of the economy mainly employed men. Mitsos and Browne claim that this decline in male employment opportunities has led to an 'identity crisis for men'. Many boys now believe that they have little prospect of getting a proper job. This undermines their motivation and self-esteem and so they give up trying to get qualifications.

While there may be some truth in this claim, we should note that the decline has largely been in manual working-class jobs that require few if any qualifications. Thus it seems unlikely that the disappearance of such jobs would have much impact on boys' motivation to obtain qualifications.

Feminisation of education

Tony Sewell is reported as claiming that boys fall behind because education has become 'feminised' (BBC, 2006). That is, schools do not nurture 'masculine' traits such as competitiveness and leadership. Instead, they celebrate qualities more closely associated with girls, such as methodical working and attentiveness in class.

Sewell sees coursework as a major cause of gender differences in achievement. He argues that some coursework should be replaced with final exams and a greater emphasis placed on outdoor adventure in the curriculum. He argues: "We have challenged the 1950s patriarchy and rightly said this is not a man's world. But we have thrown the boy out with the bath water."

Shortage of male primary school teachers

The lack of male role models both at home and at school is said to be a cause of boys' underachievement. For example, large numbers of boys are being brought up in the 1.5 million female-headed lone parent families in the UK.

Similarly, only 14% of primary school teachers are male and according to Yougov (2007), 39% of 8-11 year old boys have no lessons whatsoever with a male teacher. Yet most boys surveyed said the presence of a male teacher made them behave better and 42% said it made them work harder.

Some commentators argue that this is because the culture of the primary school has become feminised as a result of being staffed by female teachers, who are unable to control boys' behaviour. In this view, male teachers are better able to impose the strict discipline boys need in order to concentrate. If this view is correct, it would suggest that primary schools need more male teachers.

Box 7	Policies to raise boys' achievement

Government has introduced a range of policies to improve boys' achievement:

- The *Raising Boys Achievement* project involves a range of teaching strategies, including single-sex teaching.
- The *National Literacy Strategy* includes a focus on improving boys' reading.
- The *Reading Champions* scheme uses male role models celebrating their own reading interests.
- *Playing for Success* uses football and other sports to boost learning skills and motivation among boys.
- The *Dads and Sons* campaign encourages fathers to be more involved with their sons' education.

Are more male teachers really needed?

However, research suggests that the absence of male teachers may not be a major factor in boys' underachievement. For example, Becky Francis (2006) found that two-thirds of 7-8 year olds believed the gender of teachers does not matter.

Barbara Read (2008) is also critical of the claims that the culture of primary schools is becoming feminised and that only male teachers can exert the firm discipline that boys need to achieve.

To test these claims, Read studied the type of language teachers use to express criticism or disapproval of pupils' work and behaviour. She identifies two types of language or 'discourse':

- A disciplinarian discourse: the teacher's authority is made explicit and visible, for example, through shouting, an 'exasperated' tone of voice or sarcasm.
- A liberal discourse: the teacher's authority is implicit and invisible. This child-centred discourse involves 'pseudo-adultification': the teacher speaks to the pupil as if they were an adult and expects them to be kind, sensible and respectful of the teacher.

The disciplinarian discourse is usually associated with masculinity and the liberal discourse with femininity. However, in her study of 51 primary school teachers (25 male and 26 female), Read found that most teachers, female as well as male, used a supposedly 'masculine' disciplinarian discourse to control pupils' behaviour.

Read draws two conclusions from her findings:

1 The fact that most teachers favoured a 'masculine', disciplinarian discourse of control disproves the claim that the culture of the primary school has become feminised, as Sewell and others argue.

2 The fact that female teachers were just as likely as males to use a 'masculine' discourse to control pupils' behaviour disproves the claim that only male teachers can provide the stricter classroom culture in which boys are said to thrive.

Malcolm Haase (2008) echoes Read's first conclusion when he says that although women make up the majority of primary teachers, it is better to think of primary schools as a male-dominated or 'masculinised educational structure that is numerically dominated by women'. For example, as Jones (2006) notes, male teachers in the UK have a one in four chance of gaining a headship; women only one in 13.

'Laddish' subcultures

Some sociologists argue that the growth of 'laddish' subcultures has contributed to boys' underachievement. Debbie Epstein (1998) examined the way masculinity is constructed within school. She found that working-class boys are likely to be harassed, labelled as sissies and subjected to homophobic (anti-gay) verbal abuse if they appear to be 'swots'.

This supports Francis' (2001) finding 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.

This is because in working-class culture, masculinity is equated with being tough and doing manual work. Non-manual work, and by extension schoolwork, is seen as effeminate and inferior. As a result, working-class boys tend to reject schoolwork to avoid being called 'gay'. As Epstein observes, 'real boys don't work' – and if they do they get bullied. She notes that:

> 'The main demand on boys within their peer group, but also sometimes from teachers, is to appear to do little or no work, to be heavily competitive at sports and hetero-sex, to be rough, tough and dangerous to know.'

Epstein's findings parallel those of Mac an Ghaill and Willis (see pages 63 and 73).

According to Francis, laddish culture is becoming increasingly widespread. She argues that this is because, as girls move into traditional masculine areas such as careers, boys respond by "becoming increasingly laddish in their effort to construct themselves as non-feminine".

The moral panic about boys

Critics of feminism argue that policies to promote girls' education are no longer needed. These critics speak of 'girl power', of girls today 'having it all' and of women taking men's jobs. They believe girls have succeeded at the expense of boys, who are the new disadvantaged.

According to feminists such as Jessica Ringrose (2013), these views have contributed to a moral panic about 'failing boys'. This moral panic reflects a fear that underachieving working-class boys will grow up to become a dangerous, unemployable underclass that threatens social stability.

Ringrose argues that this moral panic has caused a major shift in educational policy, which is now preoccupied with raising boys' achievements. This policy shift has had two negative effects:

1 By narrowing equal opportunities policy down simply to 'failing boys', it ignores the problem of disadvantaged working-class and minority ethnic pupils.

2 By narrowing gender policy down solely to the issue of achievement gaps, it ignores other problems faced by girls in school. These include sexual harassment and bullying, self-esteem and identity issues, and stereotyped subject choices.

Similarly, Audrey Osler (2006) notes that the focus on underachieving boys has led to a neglect of girls. This is partly because girls often disengage from school quietly. By contrast, boys' disengagement often takes the form of
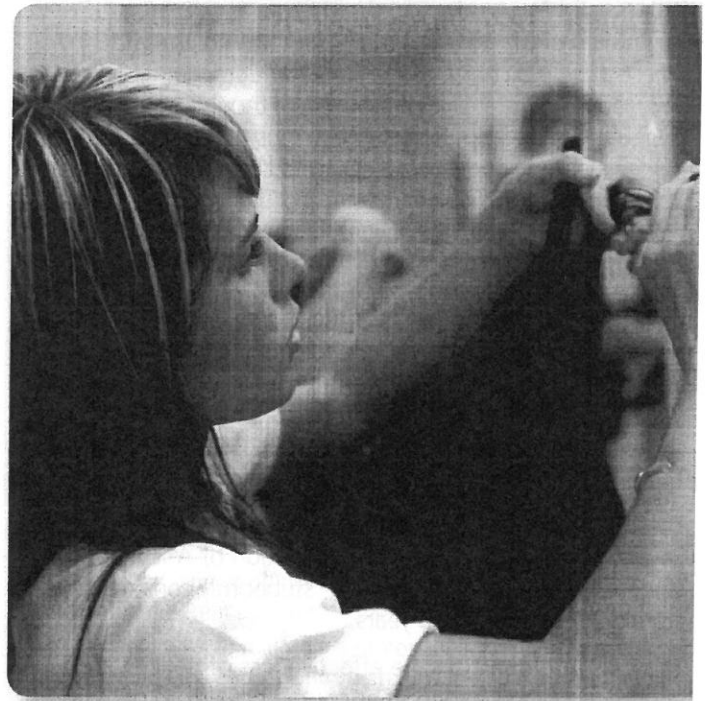
public displays of 'laddish' masculinity that attract attention from teachers and policymakers.

Osler gives the example of mentoring schemes aimed at reducing school exclusions among black boys. She points out that these ignore the problem of exclusions among girls, which are increasing more rapidly. Furthermore, girls who are excluded are less likely to obtain places in pupil referral units. Official exclusion rates also mask a wider, hidden problem of exclusion among girls, including self-exclusion (truancy) and internal exclusion (removal from class).

Activity	Discussion

Is the education system biased in favour of boys?

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Gender, class and ethnicity

However, it would be wrong to conclude that boys are a 'lost cause'. In fact, as Figure 2.6 shows, the performance of both sexes has actually improved considerably in recent years. Boys may now be lagging behind girls, but boys today are achieving more than they did in the past.

Furthermore, as Tracey McVeigh (2001) notes, the similarities in girls' and boys' achievement are far greater than the differences, especially when compared with class or ethnic differences. For example, the class gap in achievement at GCSE is three times wider than the gender gap.

As a result, girls and boys of the same social class tend to achieve fairly similar results. For example, at GCSE in a typical year, the gender gap *within* any given social class is rarely greater than 12 percentage points. By contrast, pupils of the same gender but different social classes achieve widely different results. For example, girls from the highest social class can be as much as 44 points ahead of girls from the lowest class. These figures show that class is a more important influence on a pupil's achievement than gender.

▲ Eighty-nine per cent of all hairdressing apprentices are girls

Also, the extent to which gender influences achievement itself varies depending on a pupil's class and ethnic group.

For example, the gender gap among black Caribbean pupils is greater than among other ethnic groups. As Fuller shows, many black girls are successful at school because they define their femininity in terms of educational achievement and independence. By contrast, as Sewell found, some black boys fail at school because they define their masculinity in opposition to education, which they see as effeminate.

These examples show that we need to take the interplay of class, gender and ethnicity into account in order to gain a better understanding of differences in achievement. As Connolly (2006) suggests, certain combinations of gender, class and ethnicity have more effect than others. For example, being female raises performance more when 'added to' being black Caribbean than it does when 'added to' being white.

Gender and subject choice

There continues to be a fairly traditional pattern of 'boys' subjects' and 'girls' subjects'. Boys still tend to opt for subjects such as maths and physics, while girls are more likely to choose modern languages, for example.

The National Curriculum gives pupils little freedom to choose or drop subjects by making most subjects compulsory until 16.

However, where choice is possible, both in the National Curriculum and much more so after 16, boys and girls tend to follow different 'gender routes' through the education system. This is shown in National Curriculum options, AS and A levels, and vocational courses.