

Boys' Education

Britain's boys do seem to be having an increasingly poor time of it. Poorer academic achievement than girls, more neurological problems, tacit suppression of emotional difficulties, increasing mental health problems, lack of a positive male role model in many families and classrooms, and for the lowest ranking - a poor future. One consequence is that there are now 65,000 more unemployed male NEETs (Not in Education, Employment or Training) than female⁽¹⁾.

White working class children now consistently achieve lower academic results than other comparable socio-economic or ethnic groups, with boys significantly poorer than girls. Fewer boys proceed to sixth form level, with girls now taking significantly more A-level exam subjects.

As a result, girls continue to out-perform boys at A-level. They continue to take significantly more exam subjects than boys and significantly more girls than boys are getting better grades except for A* in traditional subjects, such as mathematics and chemistry, although girls appear to be steadily catching up on these.

In 2016, some 86 thousand more A-level subject papers were taken by girls than boys, and girls achieved in all subjects some 61 thousand more top grades A*+A+B than boys⁽²⁾.

A-level results 2016, England and Wales All subjects

	Boys	Girls	Difference	% difference
			(more girls than boys)	
Total of subject papers taken	375,226	461,479	86,253	10.3 ^(a)
<u>Number of top grades achieved</u> (thousands)				
A*	31.9	35.5	3.6	5.4
A	64.5	84.4	19.9	13.4
B	94.6	131.5	36.9	16.4
<u>A* + A + B</u>	191.0	251.5	60.5	13.7

(a) Difference/total boys + girls

In higher education, overall girls now out-number boys. Teenage girls are now outperforming their male rivals in securing places even at prestigious Oxford and Cambridge universities⁽³⁾. Young women received the same number of offers as men to study at Oxford this coming academic year (2017), even though fewer women applied. At Cambridge, women received 30 fewer offers than men even though 900 fewer applied. At other Russell Group universities, for example King's College, London, and the Universities of Leeds, Edinburgh, and Cardiff, the ratio of female to male students is now about 65 to 35. Overall, young women now outnumber young men at universities in England and Wales by about 6 to 4.

Mary Curnock Cook, head of the CAS admissions service, has warned⁽⁴⁾ that being male could be a new form of disadvantage, saying that "On current trends, the gap between rich and poor will be eclipsed by the gap between males and females within a decade". Ms Cook says that she is "instinctively convinced that the fall in the proportion of male students is connected to the increasing gender imbalance in the

schools workforce. Until the early 1990s, most secondary schoolteachers were male. This has now been completely reversed, with the teaching profession becoming increasingly female”.

Many parents would like to see their sons to be disciplined by strong male teachers. According to the father of a young boy, six of the nine primary schools he visited didn't appear to have any men at all. “Male primary school teachers seemed to be an endangered species”⁽⁵⁾.

The likelihood that many males entering the workforce in the immediate future could be generally less academically qualified than females, is an equality issue which receives little media attention. This trend is already established, although its effect on socio-economic patterns seems largely ignored. There appears to be no serious government focused action to redress this trend or the possible consequences.

History

Boys have not always underachieved by comparison to girls⁽⁶⁾. Available records for ‘school leavers’ go back to 1963 when boys had a slightly higher success rate at GCSE/CSE. Girls’ higher success rate started in 1970, and by 1989 the rate had increased to 6% more than boys at 16 years old achieving the criterion of five or more passes A*-C¹. It appears that social and cultural changes over that period, inside and outside school, may well have worked to the general disadvantage of boys.

The continuing underachievement of boys is evident at all stages of education, starting at 5 years of age and culminating in a smaller proportion of male university students. It is observed throughout the various school based assessment stages, starting at primary school (ages 5, 7 and 11 years), then at GCSE and A-level, and in the UK university population.

Over a period of more than twenty years, boys have remained disproportionately disadvantaged with little effectively done to help. It seems likely that the position would have been deemed unacceptable if it were girls experiencing such disadvantage. Are boys therefore being ignored in the equality stakes?

Other aspects

Boys are also disadvantaged on a wider scale. Boys outnumber girls in the population excluded from school. Data for fixed period exclusions, England 2010/11, from 3 plus years old (Nursery) to Year 12 and above, reported that 242,030 boys and 82,070 girls were excluded. In Year R (reception) age 4 plus, there were 1,060 boys excluded compared to 140 girls. The highest rate of exclusion was during the pre-GCSE school year (Year 10, aged 14-15) with 51,490 boys and 24,080 girls being excluded⁽⁷⁾.

Boys’ needs

Beyond a certain age, boys respond to the male ethos in sport and also in learning. It is an important factor in their learning about the positive aspects of masculinity and manhood. It could be argued therefore, that redressing the present extreme shortage of this male ethos in the great majority of primary schools is an issue of the utmost importance for the welfare and future success of boys and therefore of our whole society, irrespective of academic achievement. Failure to nurture and provide for the different needs of boys is already producing huge and visible social problems. It is also a human rights issue.

Explanations

Various explanations have been offered to account for the difference in academic achievement between boys and girls, in particular with 'working class' children, now well established. However, the phenomenon has been only partially explained, since a range of social and cultural changes could apply. Changes in the methods of teaching and of testing boys and girls possibly contribute. Another factor could be the widespread lack of male teachers, especially at primary school level. In England, only about 13% of teachers at primary schools are male. The absence of fathers in the home (so-called 'dad deprivation') for increasing numbers of boys (and girls) serves to compound the disadvantage of a lack of positive role models suffered by these children.

Studies

A considerable number of UK academic studies have been published over the years on this issue. As early as 2004, Gray et al (2004) found that there were a considerable number of schools where girls had been making greater progress than boys between KS3 and GCSE. Also, that there were hardly any schools where boys' progress had been superior to that of girls. Connolly (2006) concluded that both social class and ethnicity exert a far greater influence on the GCSE performance of boys and girls than did gender.

Despite the range of such research, some aspects of the issue, such as the lack of positive male role models both in the classroom and, increasingly, in the home due to family breakdown, appear not to have been explored in any depth, nor were they mentioned seriously in a House of Commons Education Committee Enquiry in 2014⁽⁸⁾.

Male teachers

Whatever the research may show, there is a general consensus and concern that more male teachers are needed, particularly in primary schools. Boys need boundaries and strong direction from 'male mentors' at an early age. The Government has in the past accepted the need for more male teachers⁽²⁾, but so far with little obvious result. It is not clear how seriously the Government takes the issue. Articles on the need for more male teachers appear regularly in the press⁽³⁾.

Parental concern

Some critics⁽⁴⁾ complain that boys are being betrayed by our education system. There appears urgent need, therefore, to explore the phenomenon of boys' academic under-achievement in a rigorous and impartial manner, so that Government and educational policies can be informed constructively on ways to address it effectively and fairly. In time, this will help to promote the fuller access and participation in society, both academically and generally, of under-achieving children, both boys and girls. It will also help to raise standards generally, including behavioural, and in particular help the children concerned to a better quality of life in personal terms.

Summary

There is now clear evidence of a persisting 'gap' in the overall academic achievements of boys compared to girls, as the annual GCSE and A-level results published each summer demonstrate. This gap has widened from about 2% in 1988/89 (when GCSEs replaced O-levels) to over 10% today, with an even wider gap in literacy amongst some cohorts. Although girls also under-achieve academically, the great majority of under-achievers are working class boys. The Government is well aware of the problem, and some initiatives have been put in place, but to date there has been little discernible improvement.

Children, both boys and girls, who are at present under-achieving academically, are likely to face life-long socio-economic disadvantage in consequence.

There is increasing anxiety amongst parents and educational authorities and the public over this continuing academic gap and educational standards generally, which affects some ethnic groups more than others. Research also suggests a relationship with both socio-economic and parental status.

Clear and determined action by the Government and education world to address this persisting inequality is essential, if the country is really serious about the basic concept of 'equality'.

References

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- (3) 'Women take more Oxbridge places'. Nicola Woodcock. *The Times*, 26 Jan 17
- (4) 'Rise in women teachers 'bad for boys''. Nicola Woodcock. *The Times*, 12 May 16
- (5) 'My son and Britain's Boy Crisis'. Martin Daubney. *The Times Magazine*, 26 Nov 16
- (6) 'Is Action Overdue on Boys' Academic Underachievement?' PARITY Briefing Paper, March 13.
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- (7) DfE: <http://www.education.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s001080/index.shtml> First Excel file, Table 6.
- (8) House of Commons Education Committee. 'Underachievement in Education by White Working Class Children'. First Report of Session 2014-15. HC142.

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