**Gender and Educational Achievement - Internal Factors**

**THE TRENDS**

It has been noted that differences between the academic performance of girls and boys begin at an early stage in their educational journey. In 2013, teacher assessments conducted during the reception stage indicated that girls outperformed boys in subjects such as literacy, language, maths, and personal social and emotional development. This disparity continued to widen throughout Key Stage 1, 2, and 3, with girls performing better in humanities and English subjects. However, this gap narrowed when it came to science, mathematics, and technical subjects. At Key Stage Four, the average gap in terms of GCSE point score ranged from five to 10 points. This gap further narrowed at A-Level, which can be attributed to the fact that students are free to choose subjects they are interested in or talented at. Thus, their interest in a subject can significantly impact their educational achievement.

Sociologists tend to focus on GCSEs for educational achievement as it is the qualification that many 16-year-olds in the UK undertake. Though there are alternative qualifications such as GNVQs, BTECs, and IGCSEs, GCSEs provide a vast dataset that sociologists can use to identify trends and potential causes. In vocational education, more boys than girls tend to undertake practical qualifications. However, despite this, girls tend to perform better, achieving more distinctions than boys.

Let's take a closer look at the trends in GCSEs. The first metric we will examine is the average attainment eight score. The attainment eight score is determined by adding up the grade score for eight subjects, including English and maths, along with their best back subjects, and the highest grades from the remaining subjects. Since 2014, under Michael Gove's curriculum changes, there has been a significant discrepancy between the academic performance of boys and girls. Boys typically score between 43 and 47 points, while girls score between 49 and 52 points, highlighting a substantial gap. Furthermore, girls outperform the national average, indicating that they perform better overall in GCSEs than boys. If we focus on the percentage of students achieving a grade four or C in E back subjects, there is a notable difference, with girls averaging around 30% and boys just under 20%. This 10% gap in performance between the genders is of particular interest to sociologists, who seek to uncover the reasons behind this widening gap.

**INTERNAL FACTORS**

Internal factors are those elements that exist within the education system, encompassing not only the confines of the school or classroom but the education system in its entirety. This encompasses the examination of governmental policies and programs, the influence of role models, changes in curriculum, as well as the application of labelling theory. While these subjects may have been covered previously in alternative contexts, the current focus aims to bring together these previously addressed areas of study within the specific context of education. Such exploration of internal factors provides a greater understanding of the intricate workings of the education system, as well as the numerous factors which contribute to the development of an individual's academic potential.

**GOVERNMENT POLICIES AND PROGRAMS**

A key area of investigation is the analysis of government policies and programmes that impact educational achievement. There are two distinct lenses through which we can examine these policies: firstly, by assessing the extent to which they support the achievement of girls, and secondly, by evaluating their efficacy in addressing the underperformance of boys in education. Notably, it has been widely acknowledged that boys are not performing as well as their female counterparts, prompting the implementation of policies and procedures to support their academic success.

One prominent sociologist, Jo Baoler, has highlighted the positive impact of government policies on girls' achievement. Specifically, Baoler notes the effectiveness of girl-specific programmes, such as GIST and WISE, in creating a more meritocratic education system. By removing some of the barriers girls face in pursuing subjects such as science and technology, these programmes are providing girls with equal opportunities in schools and promoting greater gender equality. This, in turn, has increased girls' aspirations to succeed academically and excel in a wider range of subjects.

Changes to the national curriculum have been observed, both in terms of the subject matter taught and the instructional approach utilized. The curriculum has diversified, with a shift away from focusing solely on ethnicity to encompassing gender as well. The English curriculum, for instance, has moved away from its traditional emphasis on Western white male authors and poets to include more female and ethnic minority voices. Similarly, history curricula now include units on women's roles in World War II and the Tudor era. This change in focus represents an effort to bring more female elements to the curriculum and promote diversification of subject matter.

The instructional approach to the national curriculum has also changed over time. The introduction of coursework has been one notable development. Coursework has provided support to girls, who are more likely to take their time and achieve higher grades as a result. Additionally, the marketization and league tables introduced in 1988 have made girls more desirable to schools. Girls are known to achieve higher goals and have fewer behaviour problems than boys, which makes them more attractive to schools looking to boost their reputations and attract more students.

However, there are also concerns about the negative consequences of marketization and league tables. Boys are four times more likely to be excluded than girls, which can harm a school's reputation if it is widely known that it has a high level of exclusions. Schools, therefore, have a covert interest in admitting more girls, as doing so can help maintain their reputations and funding levels. Although this behaviour can be viewed as manipulative, schools have a vested interest in ensuring they do not gain a bad reputation, which could negatively impact their enrolment and funding.

It has been observed that boys are underachieving in comparison to girls in education, and this disparity starts from an early age. Various policies and programmes have been introduced to address this issue, with the aim of improving boys' literacy and enhancing their GCSE attainment. The Raising Boys' Achievement Project (2002-2004), a government initiative, investigated the obstacles and challenges faced by boys in education that were preventing them from excelling academically. This project focused on key stages two and four and led to the introduction of several policies, primarily in primary schools, to enhance literacy levels. For instance, the Playing for Success programme offered literacy, numeracy, and ICT support to demotivated Key Stage Two and Key Stage Three students. These students were given after-school support, sports clubs, and football clubs, among other extracurricular activities, to not only improve their numeracy, literacy, and ICT skills but also to transform their attitudes towards education. The programme enlisted sports personalities to inspire young, demotivated boys and girls in key stages two and three. Additionally, the Reading Champions programme, which prioritized literacy, was established to increase the value of reading among students. Celebrities and famous people were engaged to advocate for reading, promote books, and demonstrate their enthusiasm for reading. This initiative aimed to highlight the importance of literacy in achieving academic success. Video clips, posters, and celebrity school visits were employed to raise the value of reading within schools. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of these policies is yet to be determined since the first group of students involved in these policies sat their GCSEs last year and this year, and the COVID-19 pandemic has hindered data collection. Therefore, it is still unclear whether these policies and procedures have had a significant impact on narrowing the gap between girls and boys in their educational achievements.

The final policy to consider is to enhance the recruitment of male primary school teachers. As of 2019, the data showed that only 14% of primary school teachers were male. This highlights the perception that education is predominantly associated with females, resulting in boys not appreciating the value of education and lacking motivation to excel academically, particularly in primary school. This subsequently carries through to their secondary education, GCSEs, and A-levels. However, by increasing the number of male primary school teachers, it is possible to instil higher aspirations among young boys and show them that education and learning are worthwhile pursuits, which are not exclusive to females. Despite the gradual increase in the number of male primary school teachers, they are still a minority. This could be due to social stigmas attached to men who choose to teach young children. Such stigmas are unfounded and wrongly suggest that men who opt to teach small children are in some way deficient. Consequently, these stigmas can prevent men from applying for primary school teacher training. Nonetheless, we are witnessing changes, with more and more male primary school teachers applying for and qualifying through teacher training programs.

**ROLE MODELS**

Next, we will examine the role of role models in education, specifically focusing on their impact on gender representation. Notably, research indicates that only 14% of primary school teachers in the UK are male, a concerning disparity which raises questions about the extent to which education is viewed as a traditionally female profession. However, recent data from 2019 shows that the number of female head teachers in secondary schools has increased to 38%, marking a 5% increase from the previous dataset in 2016. This trend is also observable in primary schools, where the percentage of female head teachers is significantly higher than their male counterparts (27%). It is important to note that although this increasing trend may not inspire all girls to pursue careers in education, it does demonstrate that high-level positions are attainable for women in the workplace, beyond the confines of the education sector.

Consequently, the presence of role models in education can serve as a means of fostering aspirations among young women. In particular, the increasing visibility of women occupying leadership positions may help to counteract the notion that education is a solely feminine pursuit. Conversely, the lack of male primary school teachers may contribute to the perception that teaching is a gendered occupation, and that male involvement is limited to more senior administrative roles. By addressing this disparity, education may become more accessible to all genders, encouraging diverse perspectives and opportunities for growth.

**DIVERSIFICATION OF CURRICULUM**

We also need to will examine the impact of changes in the curriculum on educational outcomes, particularly in relation to gender. The first scholar we will consider is Sewell, who argues that schools have become feminized in their focus on celebrating qualities such as attentiveness, passivity, and quietness in class, which are typically associated with female traits, while neglecting the development of masculine traits such as competitiveness, leadership, and assertiveness. Consequently, girls tend to perform better in school as the education system values and prioritizes traits that are more commonly associated with females. In contrast, boys who possess more masculine traits may experience discipline problems and may develop anti-school subcultures that lead to underachievement.

The introduction of coursework in 1988, as part of the education reform act, has been seen as another important factor in the achievement gap between boys and girls. According to Gorard, prior to the introduction of coursework, the achievement gap between boys and girls was relatively even. However, after coursework was introduced, the gap began to widen, with girls performing better than boys. Brown argues that this is because girls are more successful in coursework due to their greater levels of conscientiousness, organization, and independence, which are all important skills required for successful completion of coursework. In contrast, boys may lack these independent skills and may be more impulsive and disorganized, leading to lower levels of achievement in coursework.

Furthermore, we need to consider how recent changes in the curriculum are challenging gender stereotypes in textbooks and content taught. Weiner argues that the recent diversification of textbooks and content taught has contributed to the removal of gender stereotypes. In the past, girls were often portrayed in textbooks as wives and mothers, and science textbooks only featured male scientists. However, recent developments have led to greater diversity and equality in the content and imagery used in teaching, leading to greater achievement in girls as they are presented with more positive images of what they can achieve beyond traditional gender roles.

**LABELLING**

In the realm of internal factors that can impact a student's educational experience, labelling plays a crucial role. Although this concept is not new, it warrants further exploration. Specifically, we will examine the influence of teacher attention on students. To do this, we will draw on the seminal work of Jane and Peter French, who conducted a non-participant observation study to investigate classroom interactions. Their research revealed that boys tend to receive more attention in class, albeit the nature of this attention tends to be negative. Boys often dominate discussions and debates, while girls are more likely to adopt a democratic approach by taking turns. Moreover, the language used by teachers reinforces traditional gender stereotypes, with girls often being referred to using endearing terms such as 'sweetheart' or 'darling,' and boys being addressed as 'mate' or 'dude.' This gendered language persists both in primary school and in higher education, contributing to the formation of school subcultures and disruptive behaviour among boys. Ultimately, such negative attention can limit their educational attainment.

The concept of the 'ideal pupil' as proposed by Becker and its impact on educational opportunities is a crucial factor to consider. According to Becker, girls embody the characteristics of an ideal pupil, including being quiet, passive, and committed to academic endeavours, even if not necessarily excelling academically. This depiction of the ideal pupil often results in girls being given more challenging work and opportunities to showcase their abilities, as there is evidence of their capability to succeed. Gifted and talented groups often have a higher proportion of girls than boys in academic subjects, reflecting the tendency for girls to be identified as gifted and talented. However, in sports, boys are more likely to be identified as gifted and talented than girls. The identification of girls as gifted and talented in academic subjects is likely linked to their embodiment of the characteristics of the ideal pupil. Such identification can lead to girls being afforded more educational opportunities, which, in turn, can facilitate their academic achievement.

Another important internal factor that can influence a student's academic performance is the emergence of laddish subcultures. These subcultures revolve around the acquisition of symbolic capital, where boys gain status and recognition from their peers by engaging in disruptive, anti-school behaviours. In contrast, girls tend to accrue symbolic capital through academic achievements. However, the pursuit of symbolic capital through negative or anti-school behaviours can have significant consequences for boys. Such behaviours often lead to their exclusion from school, either through fixed-term exclusion or the possibility of permanent exclusion. It is worth noting that exclusion from school can impede a student's academic progress since they will be absent from classes and opportunities for learning. Consequently, boys are more likely to underachieve academically compared to girls since they are more likely to be excluded from lessons due to behavioural reasons.

**EVALUATION**

The central question of whether internal factors are the primary reason for girls outperforming boys in GCSE exams is one that is still being debated. However, there are limitations to internal factors that need to be acknowledged. One of these is the negative experience that girls often have in school, despite achieving more. Radical feminists argue that this experience is pervasive and can be caused by sexual harassment and abuse in schools, which can affect girls' educational outcomes. Recent studies have shown that nine out of 10 girls report being victims of some form of verbal or physical sexual harassment during their school careers. Such negative experiences can lead to girls hunkering down and achieving more or becoming school refusers.

Moreover, recent curriculum changes, such as the elimination of coursework and modular exams, were made to reduce the gender gap. However, it is unclear whether these changes have had the desired effect. Additionally, there is still male domination in positions of power, with only 38% of secondary head teachers being female. This lack of representation may impact the success of female students.

Furthermore, gendered subject choice and the isolation of subjects can limit girls' opportunities and affect their choices when they leave school. The criticism of internal factors indicates that there may be other factors, beyond those that exist within the education system, that affect girls' educational outcomes.