**Factors Affecting Subject Choice**

In this section, we will explore the various factors that influence the subject choices made by students at GCSE and A-Level, with a particular focus on gender.

Data indicates that at GCSE level, the sciences and maths are compulsory subjects, with a roughly equal number of boys and girls taking them. However, humanities and performing arts subjects tend to attract more girls, while technical subjects like design, technology, engineering, and computing attract more boys.

At A-Level, a similar trend is observed, with subjects like sociology, English literature, art and design, and psychology being predominantly chosen by girls, while boys tend to choose subjects like politics, design technology, maths, and business studies. The most male-dominated subject at A-Level is computing, followed by physics.

While individual choice plays a role in subject selection, social structures such as gender are also influential. Post-modernists argue that personal choice is the primary factor, while late modernists assert that social structures still play a significant role. Understanding these factors can help identify and address any potential gender disparities in subject choices and educational outcomes.

**GENDER AND SUBJECT CHOICE**

**GENDER ROLE SOCIALISATION**

The first crucial aspect that requires consideration is gender roles and socialization, which proposes that girls and boys are brought up differently, directing them towards distinct academic subjects. Norman contends that from a young age, children are exposed to gender-specific activities and games. Girls are commonly assigned activities that foster nurturing, caring roles such as playing with dolls, baking, and cooking, which can lead to more expressive subjects like English literature, drama, and history. Boys, on the other hand, are encouraged to engage in more technical activities, such as helping with DIY tasks or playing with construction kits, leading them towards more scientific subjects. This reinforces the idea that certain activities are masculine or feminine, which impacts subject choices. Murphy and Elwood's research links this back to bedroom culture, where girls are more likely to read fiction and boys more likely to read factual or hobby-based books, steering them towards more technical subjects. Browne and Ross explore the concept of gender domains, where certain activities and areas of life are viewed as either male or female domains. For instance, DIY and mechanics are associated with men, while cooking, sewing, and crafting are often viewed as female activities. Children internalize these gender domains, shaping their views of acceptable activities and behaviour for men and women, thereby influencing their subject choices. This gender socialization can also be influenced by the perception that men are more likely to work outside the home and pursue business-related studies, while women are more often associated with quiet activities such as reading, drawing, and textile work, leading them towards subjects such as English literature, art, and textiles.

**GENDERED SUBJECT IMAGE**

Gender and subject choice are influenced by various factors, including the gendered subject image. Kelly, a renowned sociologist, argues that certain GCSE and A level subjects have a specific gendered view, which leads to their being perceived as either "boy subjects" or "girl subjects." For instance, Kelly maintains that science is viewed as a subject for boys due to the predominance of male teachers and illustrations that emphasize boys' interests, such as sports. Moreover, the gender that dominates a class may also influence the subject's gender image; for example, girls tend to dominate in drama and the art world, while boys dominate in PE. The experience of a subject, including the gender of the teacher and the dynamics of the group, can shape one's perception of whether it is a subject for girls or for boys. While some subjects are neutral and attract an equal number of male and female students, most subjects show a gender divide.

**GENDER IDENTITIES**

In the realm of gender and education, a third and final contributing factor to subject choice is gender identities and peer group pressures. In this context, students can encounter significant pressure to conform to gender stereotypes to gain acceptance from their peers. Thus, they may be reluctant to pursue certain subjects that are viewed as inconsistent with their gender identity. This can lead to bullying and name-calling, as pointed out by Dewar. Students who opt for subjects that are deemed opposite to their gender domain may be subjected to such harassment. For instance, a male student who chooses to take drama or art may face taunting and bullying for wanting to participate in these subjects, which are considered feminine. Similarly, as noted by Paechter in her study of subject choice and gender, some girls who excelled in sports in year eight or nine chose not to take physical education (PE) as a GCSE subject due to concerns about being labelled as unfeminine or "Butch." This perception reflects the view that sports are primarily a male-dominated domain and not traditionally associated with feminine interests.

**EVALUATION**

It is evident that various factors influence individuals differently, with some individuals choosing to ignore them while others are highly susceptible to them. Postmodernists contend that we are transitioning towards a gender-neutral society where such factors will no longer have any bearing. However, opinions on this subject may differ. There is a growing effort to eliminate gender-biased subject images, as seen in food technology, where male chefs are disproportionately famous compared to female chefs, and in textiles, where male fashion designers are more famous than female designers. Similarly, female sports and athletes, such as Olympians and the British female football and rugby teams, challenge gender stereotypes in sports. Moreover, there is a trend towards diversifying educational materials, with greater representation of each gender in textbooks and educational resources. In the context of families and households, gender-neutral parenting practices are becoming increasingly prevalent, allowing children to pursue their interests without restrictions based on gender. Such practices can redefine traditional gender domains, and symmetrical family structures can further erode gender stereotypes that influence subject choices. Sociologists have studied these phenomena, with the aim of better understanding how they influence individuals' lives and the wider society.

**ETHNICITY AND SUBJECT CHOICE**

**ETHNOCENTRIC CURRICULUM**

In this section, we will examine the relationship between ethnicity and subject selection. We will draw upon our previous discussions regarding the relationship between ethnicity and academic attainment, including the presence of an ethnocentric curriculum. BAME students may be disinclined to pursue certain subjects due to their perception that the curriculum is excessively ethnocentric. For instance, some may opt out of studying history at GCSE or A-Level because it focuses too heavily on the history of the Western world and fails to represent diverse cultures. Similarly, some may avoid English literature courses due to a lack of diversity in the novels and authors studied, with a preponderance of works by "dead white men." This can result in ethnic minority students disengaging from certain subjects as they perceive them as irrelevant or unrepresentative of their cultures. Consequently, these students may be less likely to pursue such subjects or lack interest in them.

**ENGLISH AS AN ADDITIONAL LANGUAGE**

Another significant factor to consider is the issue of English as an additional language (EAL). EAL students may face additional barriers to accessing certain subjects, as they may be directed towards subjects that are perceived as requiring less proficiency in English, such as drama or practical subjects. These students may be discouraged from pursuing essay-based or verbal subjects due to perceived limitations in their English language abilities. Consequently, these students may be inadvertently channelled into subject areas, which can limit their future opportunities and career prospects. To address this issue, it is essential to provide additional support and resources for EAL students, such as language assistance programmes and subject-specific language support, to enable them to access a broader range of subjects and realise their full potential.

**LABELLING**

It has been observed that students from certain ethnic minorities may be subjected to labelling as less capable or disruptive, leading to them being pushed away from subjects and ultimately limiting their academic options. This phenomenon can result in a self-fulfilling prophecy, whereby students begin to internalize the belief that they are not capable and therefore begin to underperform. Additionally, students who are labelled as disruptive in earlier years may be relegated to lower sets and streams, further reducing their academic opportunities. In instances where schools utilize streaming systems, top-performing students are often granted more subject choices while those in lower groups are offered fewer options and are instead encouraged to focus on core subjects to secure higher grades. As a result, labelling practices in relation to ethnicity and educational achievement can significantly impact the academic opportunities available to students, particularly those from underrepresented groups who may be labelled as underachieving before they even have the chance to prove themselves.

**EVALUATION**

In recent times, the curriculum has undergone notable transformations, with a growing emphasis on decolonization and cultural expansion across various subjects. Specifically, there is a shift away from a narrow focus on Western and white Western experiences towards greater representation of ethnic minorities and diverse texts in English literature. Similarly, in history, there are discussions about introducing African history into the A-Level curriculum. In drama, plays that are discussed are increasingly diverse. This change is significant and provides more opportunities for students to engage with different perspectives.

Notably, there has been a move away from streaming students in schools, which has been informed by research on labelling and the self-fulfilling prophecy. Labelling has been identified as a form of institutional racism, particularly as it pertains to ethnic minorities. The introduction of the Ebacc has also contributed to the demise of streaming, as schools now prioritize the Ebacc subjects to improve their league table rankings. Overall, these changes indicate a growing recognition of the importance of diversity and representation in education.

**CLASS AND EDUCATIONAL ACHIEVEMENT**

**MATERIAL DEPRIVATION**

Material circumstances are a crucial factor in understanding why certain individuals may not choose to study certain subjects. For instance, individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds may feel excluded from subjects such as art, music, or drama because of the additional expenses associated with taking these subjects, such as purchasing materials or paying for theatre trips. The COVID-19 pandemic may have limited opportunities for school trips, but ordinarily, these activities may pose a challenge for students from disadvantaged or deprived backgrounds. The financial costs of studying specific subjects, including the purchase of materials, field trips, or other hidden expenses, may influence students' choices at the GCSE or A-Level level. Unfortunately, schools are not always forthcoming about these costs, leaving students unprepared to manage additional expenses. It is therefore essential to recognize that class plays a role in shaping educational choices and opportunities, and that hidden expenses may exacerbate existing inequalities. Sociologists, such as Pierre Bourdieu, have explored how social class and cultural capital influence educational attainment, providing a framework to understand the ways in which class impacts educational achievement.

**CULTURAL DEPRIVATION**

Cultural deprivation may also serve as a potential explanation for class-based subject image disparities. According to this perspective, certain vocational or technical subjects - such as business and design technology - are more likely to be pursued by working-class students due to the perceived ease of transitioning directly into a career path. Conversely, subjects such as drama, English, and modern foreign languages are often viewed as more middle-class due to the implicit requirement of possessing cultural capital to engage in those fields effectively. This notion of cultural capital can be a barrier to entry for some individuals who may feel discouraged from pursuing such subjects, thus leading to the exacerbation of class-based divides within academic pursuits. Numerous sociologists have contributed to the discourse surrounding cultural deprivation, including Pierre Bourdieu and Basil Bernstein, both of whom explored the relationship between social class and educational achievement.

**LABELLING**

Labelling is a phenomenon that affects the education of working-class students, as they are often directed towards vocational subjects rather than academic ones. The labelling process occurs when students are marked as less capable, leading to them being categorised as lacking the academic ability to undertake certain subjects. However, this may not be the case, as it could be a result of their limited cultural capital or material factors that prevent them from accessing the curriculum. The labelling process in the earlier stages of education has a significant influence on the subjects chosen by students, often resulting in them being channelled towards certain subjects over others. This highlights the need for greater consideration of labelling within the education system to ensure fair access and opportunities for all students. Prominent sociologists have explored the impact of labelling, including Howard Becker, who developed the concept of the "labelling theory," and Pierre Bourdieu, who introduced the concept of "cultural capital." These theories can provide a valuable framework for understanding the impact of labelling on education and the implications for social mobility.

**EVALUATION**

As previously mentioned, there exists a government initiative known as the Pupil Premium, which aims to address the issue of material deprivation amongst students. Pupil Premium funding is provided to schools to enable the purchase of necessary materials and payment for educational trips, which helps to remove the financial barriers to education that disadvantaged students may face. However, it is important to note that Pupil Premium funding is only available up to GCSE level, and there is no equivalent program for A-Level students. Nonetheless, most sixth form colleges provide a hardship fund or some form of support for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. With regards to cultural factors, it can be contended that a strong cultural foundation in Key Stage Three should not limit a student's progression to Key Stage Four and beyond. Therefore, cultural deprivation should not be a hindrance if students have been exposed to a broad and balanced curriculum in their earlier years of education.