

ARE SCHOOLS FAILING BOYS?

Alan Smithers

**Centre for Education and Employment Research
University of Buckingham, January 2022**

ARE SCHOOLS FAILING BOYS?

Alan Smithers

CEER, University of Buckingham

Boys are getting poorer results than girls at all levels of education. The 2021 GCSEs and A-levels are the latest striking examples. In top GCSE grades, girls were ahead by nine percentage points, and in 46 of the 48 subjects. At A-level, they did better by 4.8 percentage points and in 34 of the 38 subjects.

The superiority of girls in this respect has long been known, but mainly discounted. The thinking seems to be that males tend to come out on top in life anyway, so why does it matter?

On the contrary, it goes to the heart of education. Unless it is established that girls are intrinsically brighter, we have to accept that schools are not getting the best out of boys. If this is indeed the case, we must get to the bottom of it.

There, of course, needs to be more research, but this alone will not be enough. While it will contribute more evidence and further interpretations, it will be conducted within a particular framework. For a full understanding the various strands have to be brought together. This will take a high-level national inquiry, preferably a Royal Commission. Only when we have a coherent picture will there be a solid basis for action.

Current explanations of why girls do better at school are essentially of three kinds: biological, social and educational.

Biological

The results gap could, at root, be biological. From the earliest years, girls have been found to have, on average, stronger verbal skills, not only in this country, but

across a wide range of cultures, social systems and economies. This suggests that there is a common denominator - which could be genetic.

In the OECD's 2018 PISA reading tests of 15-year-olds, girls outscored boys by an average of 30 points within an overall mean of 487. Among the 76 countries, the biggest gap was Qatar's 65 points and the smallest was the ten points in Peru and Colombia. Finland, different in so many ways from Qatar, had a similarly large gap of 52 points.

Verbal fluency underpins the whole of education, including science and maths since they are presented and tested verbally. It may be that to ensure education is made more accessible to boys, there should be greater attention to their understanding of the words.

The other side of the coin to the verbal fluency of girls is the edge boys have in numerical and spatial abilities. They might, therefore, be expected to surpass girls in maths and science. And so they do on occasions, but to a lesser extent.

In the teacher-assessed 2021 GCSEs, physics and statistics were the only two subjects where boys were awarded more top grades. But in the actual exams of 2019, they were on top in seven, including physics, maths and four other quantitative subjects. PISA tests give a similar picture for maths. In 2018, boys were ahead overall, but only by five points compared to the 30-point lead of girls in reading. Contrary to expectation, however, girls did better in science.

The greater development of girls' intrinsic abilities suggests that they have benefitted more from their education. This could stem from the greater concern shown to them. Their under-representation in physics, computer science and engineering in the sixth form and at university, for example, has prompted major campaigns demanding change. But boys' poorer school outcomes have been accepted without a murmur.

Where there have been attempts to unravel the gender gap in exam performance, biological factors have tended to be overlooked or wilfully ignored. It is curious that while the medical benefits of greater genetic understanding are keenly anticipated, there is considerable reluctance to acknowledge that genes have anything at all to do with educational achievement.

Not infrequently, the evidence that there is has been disregarded. The 2014 House of Commons Education Select Committee inquiry into the educational underachievement of white working class boys heard from Robert Plomin, the distinguished authority on twin studies. He set out very clearly the extent of genetic influence on GCSE performance. Yet, this was completely ignored in the Committee's report. A successor Committee returned to the subject in 2021, but again was only interested in societal factors, such as, poverty, lack of parental support, family experience of education, attitude to school, and lack of access to good schools.

As it happens, I am from the white working class, and Plomin's analysis resonates with me. Quite a number of the boys I was at primary school with simply did not have the wherewithal or the interest to get much out of their education. There was talent around because the generation ahead of ours had had to leave at age 14. But for us there were the grammar schools which gave us every chance. Today's white working class will consist mainly of those left behind, so biology may well be imposing a constraint on social mobility.

Why is there such reluctance to even consider biology? It could be that, unlike social and educational factors, it is assumed that nothing can be done about it. But this is not necessarily the case. Religious beliefs and assumptions about human rights can be so deep-seated as to be intractable, while some biological changes are relatively easy to effect, as in making good insulin deficiency.

Even if biological differences in educability cannot not be ameliorated, a better understanding of them would make it possible for schools to tailor education to the potential that is there.

Accepting that some children are biologically more capable than others would, however, clash head-on with the present emphasis on fairness and equality. It would mean accepting that some children would be able to progress further and faster than others and would end up in different places. It might be thought a benefit to both them and us all to help them on their way, but this would be selection which is currently an anathema. In the circumstances, it might be thought better not to know about the biological influences.

Similarly with medical knowledge. Modern genomics holds out the prospect of accurately predicting susceptibility to diseases and the life span. This would enable sensible planning to be made of life's contingencies. But many human beings just do not want to know and prefer to leave it to chance.

The current climate in universities has also to be taken into account. Academics have been backing away from researching and commenting on particular topics, because they do not want to provoke the wrath of students and fellow academics. If you can be hounded out of your post, as Professor Kathleen Stock, a distinguished philosopher, was from the University of Sussex for simply asserting that men and women are biologically different, then who knows what will light the touch paper.

Ignoring biological differences does not mean that they are not there. Any social or educational initiatives aimed at improving the lot of the disadvantaged will come up against them. Much time, effort and money will be wasted on policies, initiatives and schemes that have little hope of succeeding. Addressing biological differences opens up the opportunity of making genuine improvements.

Social

Social factors have considerable force. To appreciate this you only have to think of how different Christmas Day is from a 'normal' day. A clear example from education is the allocation of places to grammar schools when there was a national 11+. Passing the test earned entry to a much better school, which paved the way to university. Girls, on average, scored higher in the test, which should have led to more of the places, but the pass mark was set lower for boys to balance the intakes. This was justified by a narrative which said that, since boys matured later, this had to be allowed for in the admissions.

There is no doubt that boys at that time were more likely to stay on at school and go to university, and so it did appear that their talents were developing later. But drilling down into the data shows it was mainly a consequence of the different scripts that were written for boys and girls at the time.

The brightest pupil in my class at our East End co-educational grammar school was a girl. She had enviable talent and would have done extremely well at university. But her parents, like many others of that era, thought that anything beyond basic education was wasted on girls. They insisted that she left school at the earliest opportunity, got a job, and looked for a good marriage. Even the more ambitious parents of talented girls often thought that teachers' training college was a more appropriate destination for their daughters than university.

Since the 1950s, although there is residual suspicion that there is still male bias, the watchword has become equality. This has opened the way for girls to achieve their examination success and to reverse over a period of forty years the ratio in universities from two-thirds men to two-thirds women.

This freedom is most definitely not the case in all countries. In Afghanistan, for example, the new social order has drastically altered the lives of women to the extent that to go on a long journey they have to be accompanied by a male relative.

Although it is obvious that there are social influences on academic achievement, it is difficult to be sure how important they are relative to other factors. Moreover, their importance will vary from situation to situation. If parents block the pathway to higher education, then this becomes the over-riding factor, but conversely their ambitions for their children may be thwarted by the necessary talent not being there. Thus either biology or society can be the kingpin.

We also have to take into account what happens in education itself.

Educational

It is widely felt that, with most teachers being female, education is somewhat slanted towards girls. The Covid-enforced switch from examinations to teacher assessment has provided a golden opportunity to test one aspect where this might be the case: do teachers assess girls more generously?

In the teacher-assessed 2021 GCSE results, girls were ahead in top grades by 9.0 percentage points against the 6.5 pp in the 2019 exams. At A-level, the corresponding differences were 4.8 pp and 0.1 pp.

In terms of individual subjects, at GCSE, boys were ahead in only two in 2021 against seven in 2019. Similarly, at A-level, four in 2021 down from nine in 2019. A boys' lead of 4.1 pp at A* in maths in 2019 all but disappeared in 2021.

In an analysis at school level, the largest increases in top grades were found in girls' schools, particularly in the private sector.

It does look very much as though teachers do assess girls more generously.

Conclusion

We thus have possible biological, social and educational explanations for girls getting better GCSE and A-level grades, but we do not know which are real, nor their relative importance, nor how they interact. There is enough there though to suggest that schools may not be getting the best out of boys.

There is a need for more research, but even more important is to sift the evidence to establish the facts and use them to create a practicable plan for tackling the issue. This would take a major inquiry. Something along the lines of the Dearing Report into Higher Education of 1996 would do it.

But in order to get to grips with boys' underachievement there must also be a change in mind-set. It has to be accepted that the success of girls shows that schools could be doing more for boys. If our education system is letting boys down, then this is so serious as to call for a Royal Commission for the first time this century.