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Head to head: Gender and results

Denise Lodge



Here come the girls

Denise Lodge celebrates the success of single-sex education

Girls' over-achievement at school is such a success story we should be proclaiming it from the highest heights.

The success is visible in the league tables that the press use to rank schools based on their GCSE and A-level results. It is the single-sex schools that have consistently dominated the tables for years. And it's the girls' schools that occupy the premier positions.

In independent schools, students in girls' schools score higher than girls in co-ed schools. Look at statistics from the past four years: GCSE A*-C, GCSE A*-A and A-level A-C, the figures are 98 per cent, 66 per cent and 93 per cent in girls' schools compared with 94 per cent, 53 per cent, and 89 per cent for girls in co-ed schools.

At A-level in 2005, girls in independent schools took 52 per cent of the A grades while girls in independent co-ed schools took just 42 per cent. In Mathematics, Physics, English and French in girls' schools they scored 70 per cent, 54 per cent, 54 per cent and 54 per cent but the girls in co-ed schools scored 62 per cent, 44 per cent, 38 per cent and 42 per cent. Clearly, it's a phenomenon.

So, yes, girls do over-achieve, if they are in a school that specialises in the education of girls. Parents with both sons and daughters know that they learn in different ways. Learning and discovery are emotional as well as intellectual activities and it is only in schools that take this into account that girls will thrive and fulfil their potential.

The girls of today will be the leaders of tomorrow and parents believe that there should be no limits on their ambitions, either professionally or personally. The world of employment, however, is not always so enlightened and there are sticky floors and glass ceilings that need to be dealt with. At girls' schools the girls are shod with Teflon feet and tough heads and prepared for the positions of authority.

There is no sex stereotyping regarding subject choice in girls' schools. A survey in 2004 showed that in girls' independent

schools compared with all girls elsewhere, including co-ed schools, 70 per cent more girls took A-level maths, 90 per cent more took physics or chemistry and 80 per cent more studied modern languages.

Outside the school gates girls get plenty of opportunity for living in the real world. Yet it can be a relief for girls to know that, after a weekend packed with social fun, they don't have to deal with boys on Monday morning.

Parents who are rightly ambitious for their children will therefore avoid the mistake of sending their girls to Dad's old school because it is simply not geared to the right kind of schooling that should nurture their girls and prepare them for the world outside.

The enlightenment that is found in girls' schools does not always spread to universities. It is to be hoped that the good practices that we employ could be spread

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into some university establishments and into the world of work.

The current financial situation could perhaps have been avoided if more women had been employed on the boards of FTSE 100 companies. A more reasoned voice could have reduced the overt risk-taking in the worlds in which gambling with ordinary people's savings seems to have become acceptable.

Girls' schools are successful in producing girls who are superb over-achievers. The pressure should now be on the universities and on the employers to do the decent thing for their young women too – our country needs it.

About the author

Dr Denise V Lodge is the Head of Putney High School GDST, has taught in co-ed and girls' schools, independent and maintained, and attended a co-ed and a girls' school, both independent and maintained

Jannette Elwood



Myths and misses

Jannette Elwood tackles clichés about gender differences and exam results

Differences in examination outcomes between boys and girls are a popular, yet contentious, area of research and debate. As a media story, gender differences in examinations are big business.

Of particular concern over the past decade has been the apparent under-achievement of boys relative to girls at the end of compulsory schooling. Girls' achievement levels at this important phase of education are well exceeding those of boys, and girls are leaving school better qualified.

While research suggests that girls' improved achievement at school is the result of the removal of barriers to girls' attainment, and changing expectations on the part of girls, their successes are still portrayed as achieved at the expense of boys, and girls are still being blamed for boys' failure. Such notions of boys' and girls' achievements are, in the main, simplistic and belie the complex factors that influence why boys and girls do differently in examinations. Looking at the patterns of examination results on any one series of examinations hides the shifting patterns of success that boys and girls experience at different stages of examining (For example, GCSE and A-level).

Let us consider result patterns of boys and girls at GCSE and A-level in the UK. If we look at the benchmark indicators of the proportion of students from each group achieving grades A*-C (at GCSE) and A-C (at A-level) we will see some very different results. In 2008, statistics from the Joint Council for Qualifications showed that slightly more girls than boys were entered for GCSE examinations (51 per cent) and girls obtained 7.2 per cent more GCSEs at grades A*-C compared to boys. More girls enter for A-level examinations and, overall, girls perform better than boys, achieving 5.3 per cent more A-C grades.

However, if we look behind these figures we start to get a different story. These aggregate statistics ignore the relative proportions of boys and girls not entered for examinations, the proportion

of boys and girls who are entered but who do not complete their examinations, and the increase in the proportion of both boys and girls who obtain good pass grades at GCSE every year. What these figures also hide is a cross-over in performance between boys and girls at 16 and 18 in particular subjects that show the differences in top grades awarded to boys and girls reversed.

For example, in French in 2008, girls were 57 per cent of the entry at GCSE in this subject and obtained 10 per cent more A*-C grades than boys, whereas at A-level, while girls are still the biggest entry for the subject (at 69 per cent), boys obtained 0.5 per cent more A-C grades.

More realistic patterns of performance tell us different stories for boys and girls in relation to their achievements: that there is more overlap in performances between boys and girls and bigger differences

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within these groups (attributable to the interaction of gender, ethnicity and levels of poverty).

We need to stop positioning girls' achievement relative to that of boys' and vice-versa. A less relational positioning would enable girls' successes to be viewed in context and acknowledge that not all girls are achieving at similar levels. Boys' perceived underachievement would then not be regarded as a universal problem for all boys but only as a problem for certain boys at certain stages of schooling.

Such a position may go some way to highlighting the most important element of this debate – which boys, and indeed which girls, are underachieving, and at what stages and phases of education?

About the author

Professor Jannette Elwood is director of research clusters: contexts of teaching, learning and assessment at Queen's University Belfast, and deputy chair of the Research Committee at AQA

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