

# Sociology Factsheet



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## The Underachievement of Boys

Sociologists are interested in four areas of education:

1. Why some pupils achieve more than others?
2. Who benefits from education?
3. How pupils experience schooling?
4. The impact of the laws and policies the government makes.

This Factsheet will focus on the first point – why some pupils achieve more than others and, in this case, gender differences.

Social class and ethnicity have a big impact on an individual's experience of education, but so does gender. Over the past thirty years or so there have been some important changes. Both sexes have raised their level of achievement, but girls have overtaken boys.

By the late 1980's the underachievement by girls was attracting more concern than the underachievement of working-class students. During this time, girls were less likely than boys to achieve one or more A-Levels, and were less likely to go into higher education. However, by the mid-1990's there was a reversal of this trend, and changes in achievement statistics meant that attention moved to male achievement.



By 2006, 45% of females achieved two or more A-Levels, compared to 35% of males. By 2004/5, 57% of people studying in higher education were female.

An article in the *i* dated 10<sup>th</sup> November 2016, stated that 76% of boys from white working-class families fail to achieve 5 good GCSE grades, research has revealed. Only 24% of such pupils in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland gain 5 passes at A\* to C including English and Mathematics, making them the worst performing of the main ethnic groups in the UK.

### Statistics on Different Stages of Education

- **Age 3 to 5, starting school:** In a QCA (Qualifications & Curriculum Authority) national survey of nearly 7,000 children, they found that girls scored higher in all tests. 56% of girls could write and spell their own name correctly, but only 42% of boys could do this.
- **Age 5 to 8, Key Stages 1-3:** Girls do consistently better than boys, particularly in English, but even in science and mathematics where the gap is narrower, they still do better.
- **Age 14 to 16, GCSE:** A DfES (2007) study showed that the percentage of pupils achieving 5 or more GCSE grades A\* to C or equivalent was around 56% for boys and around 66% for girls – the gender gap therefore stands at around 10%. 2016 GCSE results show that female entrants had an A\* to A rate of 7.3% higher than male entrants, and an A\* to C rate 8.9% points higher. Mathematics was the only subject in which boys received a higher proportion of the grades – outperforming girls by 0.7% at A\* to A and 0.5% at A\* to C. Girls were significantly better in Art & Design where

the A\* to C rate was 18.6% higher than the boys (statistics from schoolsweek.co.uk).

- **Age 16 to 19, AS and A-Level:** Girls are more likely to pass and get higher grades, but the gap is narrower than at GCSE. 2016 A-Level results show that male candidates perform better at the top end, gaining substantially more A\*'s than female candidates (8.5% of male A-Level entries gain A\*'s, compared to just 7.7% for female entrants). However, female candidates get a higher proportion of A's, B's and C's. (Statistics from schoolsweek.co.uk).

### What factors influence these gender differences in achievement?

There are clearly reasons for these differences in male and female achievement, and on a general level they can be divided into two categories:

- **Internal factors** are those within school and education.
- **External factors** are those that are outside of the education system.

Internal factors include the following:

#### 1. Teacher attention and classroom interaction

A good deal of sociological research has been conducted in this area.

**Spender (1983)** found that teachers spent more time interacting with boys than with girls.

**Stanworth (1983)**, in a study of A-Level classes in a further education college, found that in the classroom, interaction disadvantaged girls in several ways:

- Teachers found it difficult to remember the girls in their classes,
- Teachers held stereotypical views of what female pupils would do in the future,
- Pupils felt that boys received more attention than girls, and boys were therefore more likely to join in discussions, seek help from teachers and be asked more questions.

**Jane & Peter French (1993)** analysed interaction in the classroom and found that the amount of attention paid to girls and boys was similar.

**Swann & Graddol (1994)** found that boys were generally more boisterous and therefore attracted the 'teacher's gaze' more than girls, and so got more opportunity to speak. However, they did find that teacher interaction with girls was more positive because it focused on school work rather than behaviour.

**Swann (1998)** found differences in communication styles – with boys dominating whole class discussions, and girls preferring pair-work and group work (they were also better at listening and co-operating). Girls took turns in groups when speaking, whereas boys were more likely to make hostile interruptions.

**Epstein (1998)** looked at the way masculinity is constructed within school. Her findings suggested that working-class boys were more likely to be harassed and labelled as sissies and subjected to homophobic abuse if they appeared to be 'swots'.



**Francis (2000)** in research undertaken in London made several observations about girls and boys achievement:

- Though female achievement had overtaken male achievement, males still dominated classrooms, and got more teacher attention than girls.
- Girls were more likely than boys to fit teachers stereotypes of 'ideal pupil'. According to Francis, boys were more concerned than girls to be labelled 'swots' as this was a threat to their masculinity. She also found that laddish culture was becoming more widespread, and this, she argued, is because girls were increasingly going into masculine careers, and so boys responded to this by becoming increasingly laddish in their effort to construct themselves as non-feminine.

**Jackson (2006)** found that schools were dominated by a culture of 'hegemonic masculinity', which valued power, toughness, and competitiveness. Academic work was defined as too feminine, and not seen as 'cool' by boys, leading to boys messing about in schools and not focusing on their work, acting out 'laddish masculinity'. Jackson argues that laddish masculinity is a response to fear of failure in a competitive education system. This behaviour cushions the disappointment for boys who do not do well.

- The higher number of women in nursery and primary education is, on the one hand, a positive thing, but not when you compare the fact that in 2005 84% of nursery and primary school teachers are female, but only 34% head teachers. This is a very feminized sector of education, which clearly has implications for both male and female pupils.

Though there is a good argument for suggesting that girls are doing well in education because of female role models in the education system, there is also an argument that the growing lack of positive role models at home and at school for boys is said to be a cause of boy's underachievement. The fact that large numbers of boys are being brought up in female-headed single-parent families is an external factor, while the lack of male primary school teachers is an internal factor. Only 16% of primary teachers are men, this is a startlingly low figure, and, a Yougov poll (2007) showed that 39% of 8 to 11-year-old boys have no lessons with a male teacher. Interestingly, most of the boys surveyed said that the presence of a male teacher made them behave better, with 42% saying it made them work harder. It is not a simple picture, however, because recent research shows that the absence of male teachers may not be a key factor as to why boys are under-achieving.

**Francis (2006)** found that two-thirds of 7 to 8-year-olds believed that the gender of teachers does not matter.

#### Activity

Do some research among your peers as to what their experience was of teachers while in primary education to see if it is similar or different to the research above.

#### Activity

Read through the above section with research covering 20 or so years from 1983 to 2006.

Draw a timeline showing what happened to educational achievement of boys and girls during this time, and write a paragraph explaining why girls started to out-perform boys.



## 2. Role Models in Schools

There has been an increase in the proportion of female teachers and head teachers in the last couple of decades. It could be argued that women in authority roles act as role models for girls, who might want to achieve a similar position.

A DfES study in 2007 showed the following statistics as percentages:

	Nursery & Primary Schools		Secondary Schools	
	1992	2005	1992	2005
<b>Head Teachers</b>	F - 50 M - 50	F - 66 M - 34	F - 22 M - 78	F - 35 M - 65
<b>Teachers</b>	F - 81 M - 19	F - 84 M - 16	F - 49 M - 51	F - 56 M - 44

#### Activity

Summarise what these statistics show.

These statistics are interesting for a few reasons:

- Female teachers are good role models in terms of a girl's educational achievements, as teachers need to have an extensive education to qualify, and so the increase of female teachers in secondary schools is a positive thing for girls.

## 3. Stereotypes in the Curriculum

Sociologists have looked at the textbooks used in schools, and have argued that the removal of gender stereotypes has helped remove a barrier to girl's educational achievement.

**Abraham (1986)**, when analysing comprehensive school textbooks, found that mathematics textbooks were male dominated, with men being shown as running businesses and women shown generally in stereotypical roles such as shopping.

**Weiner (1995)** believes that since the 1980s teachers have challenged these sorts of stereotypes and that most sexist images have been removed from pupils learning materials. This shift would certainly have helped girl's educational achievement by allowing them to see more positive images of women.

## 4. Coursework

It is argued by some sociologists that assessment strategies used in more recent times have disadvantaged boys and favoured girls. GCSEs were introduced in 1988 as part of the National Curriculum, replacing O-Levels and CSEs.



**Gorard (2005)** discovered that achievement between genders was quite constant from 1975 to 1988. However, with the onset of GCSEs coursework became a large component of most subjects. He concluded that the gender gap in achievement is a product of the changed system of assessment rather than the general failing of boys.

**Mitsos & Browne (1998)** also found that girls are more successful in coursework because of their abilities of being more conscientious and organised. Girls, for example, spend more time on their work and take more care with the way it is presented and are better at meeting deadlines than boys. They suggest these factors have helped girls improve their grades and improve their overall performance in education.

## 5. Selection and League Tables

The 1988 Education Reform Act introduced by Margaret Thatcher's Conservative Government established the concept of marketisation in education. Marketisation refers to the process of introducing the market forces of consumer choice and competition between suppliers into areas run by the state – e.g., Education. This has created a more competitive environment in education, and so schools see girls who achieve better exam grades as a more desirable intake. Exam league tables place high value on academic achievement, and this has improved opportunities for girls, argues **Jackson (1998)**. Boys, on the other hand, are a less attractive proposition as they are low achieving compared to girls.



**Slee (1998)** argues that boys are also less attractive to schools because they are more likely to have behavioural problems and so more likely to be excluded. Boys are likely to be seen as obstacles to the school improving its league table position.

## 6. Education Policies

Gender issues have become much more important within the education system because of feminism.

Teachers are now more aware of the need to avoid gender stereotyping. Education policies are informed by notions of the equality of boys and girls, and that they are equally entitled to the same opportunities. Policies such as GIST (Girls into Science & Technology) and WISE (Women into Science & Engineering) have been set up to encourage girls to go into careers in these areas, which have been traditionally male.

**Kelly (1987)** suggests that making science a subject on the compulsory core curriculum helps equality.

**Boaler (1998)** argues that equal opportunities policies are a key factor in explaining the changes in girl's achievements. Schooling has become much more meritocratic, so that girls achieve more as they work harder.

### Activity

Which of these internal factors do you think is most important? Explain why.

## External Factors

### 1. Early Socialisation

**Normal et al (1988)** argue that sex stereotyping has already started before children start school. They play with gendered toys that reinforce the stereotype of girls as carers, which can affect educational aspirations, and boys, who are encouraged to play with constructional toys, which help develop scientific and mathematical concepts. Sociologists have argued that early socialisation in the family encourages gender behaviour – girls are more likely to be encouraged to be neat, tidy, and patient. This now helps with contemporary strategies such as coursework.

According to the DfES (2007), the gender gap is predominantly the result of boys' weaker literacy and language skills. One potential reason for this is that parents spend less time reading to their male children, and another is that as mothers do most of the reading, it is then seen as a feminine activity. Poor language and literacy skills therefore can affect boys' performance in many subjects.

## 2. Changes in the Family

Various changes have occurred since the 1960s, which are a result of socio/cultural/political/economic factors:

- Divorce law changes in 1969 saw a huge increase in the divorce rate.
- An increase in the number of lone-parent families, mostly female lone-parents.
- The contraceptive pill was introduced for all women in 1967 (previous to this it had only been available for married women). This was instrumental in family sizes becoming smaller, as women had much more control.

### Activity

Do some research into law changes around the late 1960s to mid-1970s, e.g. Divorce Reform, Abortion, etc.

Explain what impact you think these laws may have had on female educational achievement.

## 3. Changes in Employment Opportunities for Men and Women

Prior to the 1970s, women would mostly see their future as housewives, but new laws, e.g. Equal Pay Act (1970) and Sex Discrimination Act (1975), changed the employment opportunities for women. According to an ONS report September 2013, over the past 40 years there has been a rise in the percentage of women aged 16-64 in employment and a fall in the percentage of men.



In 1971, there were 53% of women aged 16-64 in work and by 2013 this had risen to 67%. Since the 1980s, there has been a decline in industries such as mining, steel, iron, shipbuilding, engineering, and other manufacturing (which are all traditional jobs for men).

**Mitsos & Browne** claim that the decline in male employment has led to an identity crisis for men. According to BBC research, May 2012 Women occupy an average 30.9% of the most senior positions across 11 key sectors, including business, politics, and policing. This has an impact on boys, as many believe that they do not have great prospects of getting a proper job, and therefore their motivation and self-esteem are undermined – this leads to many giving up trying to get qualifications.

## 4. Girls Changing Ambitions

Sociologists argue that changes in both the family and employment are affecting girls and their ambitions. **Sue Sharpe** conducted research in the 1970s and again in the 1990s. In the 1970s, her research found that girls considered their ambitions more in terms of marriage and children rather than career, but by the 1990s girls put careers as a primary ambition.

## 5. Feminism

The first wave of feminism saw women fight for equality, hence the vote in 1928. The second wave (1960s to 1980s) saw feminists challenge the traditional stereotype of a woman's role being a mother and housewife. Feminism can claim many successes over the past five decades and this has clearly had an impact on female self-image and ambition, and certainly helps explain improvements in their educational achievements.

### Activity

It is clear from the statistics and trends in education over the past twenty years that girls are doing well and boys are under-achieving. What do you see as the way forward? Do you think this trend will continue or do you think it will change? Explain your answer.

**Exam Hint:** *There is a great deal of information/research/statistics/examples in this Factsheet. If you were answering a question in the exam on gender differences in educational achievement, you would need to draw on the many factors shown here. Summarise the information in this Factsheet by completing a table similar to the one below. Once you have filled out the table, make an essay plan in readiness to answer the exam question.*

### Exam Question

Assess the relationship between gender and attainment in education.

You could use a table to help collate your research. For example:

Theorist/Research/Newspaper	Date	Findings	Implications for male or females or both