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Gender and Education for All: The Leap to Equality

Gender and education in the United Kingdom

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GENDER AND EDUCATION IN THE UK

1. GENDER TRENDS IN EDUCATION.

‘Of all the educational inequalities which form the terrain of policy-making since the Second World War, gender has shown the most dramatic shift. Specifically, in England and Wales, the closure of the gender gap up to age sixteen and changing patterns of achievement in post-compulsory education and training stands as a testimony to this transformation.’ (Arnot et al, 1999: 30).

The UK has enjoyed formal ‘gender parity’ in education for a number of years. Since the early 1900s, almost all boys and girls aged 5-11 received some form of education up to at least 14 years of age. Today girls’ enrolment in pre-school, primary and secondary education¹ is between approximately 49 and 52 percent of total enrolments (UNESCO International Bureau of Education; DfES, 2002: 26).² In terms of national achievement patterns, not only has the gender gap in entry and performance at 16 and 18 closed but now new gender gaps have opened up: girls are now outperforming boys: in 2001, 56.5 percent of girls achieved 5 or more GCSE or equivalent passes at grades A* - C (or 1 – 3 in Scotland), compared to 45.7 percent of boys (EOC, 2003a: 3). The proportion of girls and boys achieving top grades at 18 (A-levels) is broadly equal, although girls seem to be gaining a slight advantage (in 2001/2002 35 percent of female and 29 percent of male students achieved three grade Bs or better at A’level). (DfES, 2003: 9). The qualification levels of women and men under 25 are now very similar. (EOC, 2001c: 2).

The relative improvement in girls’ performance in examinations at 16 has been achieved over the last ten years. In the 1960s, boys outperformed girls by about 5%; for the next fifteen years, boys and girls were performing at almost equivalent levels. However, from 1987 only about 80 boys to every hundred girls achieved 5 high grade passes at 16+. Boys lost their advantage in terms of school leaving credentials and are now struggling to keep up to girls’ success rate. In the mid 1980s, girls turned the tide of credentialism, even at least temporarily, in their favour.

Female school achievement is linked to the fact that girls closed many of the gender gaps in subject choice. They now study science and mathematics up to 16 and perform well in these subjects. By the 1990s, the new pattern of female academic success was established. In 1995, seven-year old girls had a head start in Mathematics (81% of girls reached the expected level compared with 77% of boys) and 86% of girls and 83% of boys reached the expected level in Science. Girls’ success in Science and Mathematics

¹ ‘Secondary education’ in DfES statistical tables includes separate figures for sixth form enrolments: however, in the tables provided by UNESCO it is not clear whether figures for sixth form enrolments have been included as part of the ‘secondary education’ figure.

² In 2001, girls were 49 percent of the total population aged under 16.

now follows them through to the school leaving examinations at 16 where again girls perform exceptionally well in these subjects. There is only a 1% difference between the proportion of girls and boys at 16 achieving the top grades in Mathematics and Combined Science. Similar patterns of success by girls in Physics, Biology, Chemistry are to be found at 18.

This new pattern of access and achievement has also been the result of boys' failure to improve their performance at the same rate of girls, from very young ages. A few studies have tracked boys' and girls' progress through primary or through secondary schools indicating that girls make better progress than boys in reading, mathematics, and verbal and non verbal reasoning (Arnot et al, 1998). Data collected from national assessments at the age of 7 demonstrate that girls get off to a better start at reading than boys and that the lead they establish in English is maintained at 11 and at age 14 (ibid). A sizeable gap between boys and girls in reading and English is sustained throughout compulsory schooling. By 2000, approximately 15% more girls than boys obtained high grades in English examinations at 16 (DfEE, 2000). The fact that boys have not reduced this female 'advantage' in language related subjects is one of the principal reasons why they have lost overall ground in terms of school qualifications in comparison with girls.

These recent patterns of female performance represent one of the most significant transformations in the history of social inequality in education in the UK. Neither social class inequality nor ethnic differences have been transformed in such a way. Recent research suggests that these other social divisions are now more rather than less extensive. Ethnic differences appear to have increased with the pressure of performance-oriented schooling and social class differences in educational achievement are being sustained if not aggravated; statistics on the gender gap nationally therefore can distort the picture (Gillborn and Mirza,2000). They hide the disadvantages some girls face within the educational system, mask the success of sons of the elite and professional middle classes and obscure the continuing patterns of class and race inequality within gender. Increasingly the question becomes *which* girls and *which* boys succeed or fail in the school system (Teese et al., 1995).

2. KEY FACTORS IN EXPLAINING GENDER PARITY IN ENROLMENTS AND PERFORMANCE

Market Related Factors

The transformation in girls' education in the UK is the result of a considerable range of factors, not least the efforts of gender equality reformers and government and school policy makers committed to improving female education. Arguably just as significant in the UK have been economic, political and cultural forces and the contradictory aspects of all of these. For example, while the Labour governments in the postwar period promoted traditional family values, they also constructed a welfare state that required high levels of female labour, raising the educational expectations of women and fuelling the demands of the women's movement. While Conservative governments argued against egalitarian approaches, promising to restore traditional family values and gender roles, they

nevertheless introduced a range of new school leaving examinations in 1984 and a compulsory curriculum in 1988 which redistributed educational credentials, although not intentionally, in favour of girls (Arnot et al, 1996).

The requirement for more skilled labour and for more people to enter scientific and engineering related professions in the postwar period provided an important economic spur to government policy on educational provision - leading to a range of initiatives to improve 16-19 provision (Arnot et al, 1999). Behind many educational reforms therefore lay human capital approaches to encouraging longer educational careers and more vocationally focussed school courses. Within such programmes were often criteria which encouraged greater opportunities for girls and boys (for example, The Technical Vocational Educational Initiative (TVEI) in the 1980s which was triggered by EC funding). Recently, New Labour discourse concerning the under-representation of women in science, engineering and technology fields has highlighted the fact that women's participation in the labour market is essential in order to maintain economic progress. (Department for Trade and Industry, 2000). This recognition of the importance of education to the knowledge economy is reflected in the number of educational reforms of the 1980s and 1990s and the increase in public expenditure. In 1999, public expenditure on education represented 4.7 % of UK GDP in 1999, compared to the OECD average of 5.2 %. The UK's figure was higher than that for Japan (3.5 %) but lower than that for the U.S. (5.2 %) and France (6 %) (DfES Trends in Education and Skills website).

Women's position in relation to the market has shifted dramatically during the twentieth century: while in 1900, men comprised about 70 percent of the UK labour force, their monopoly on economic activity declined steadily since the Second World War, with the result that women now make up almost half the UK workforce.³ Such economic demands are mediated by the complexity of family-work balance which in the UK is characterised by the lack of adequate state provided childcare. As a result many women are found in part time employment. In 2002, 43% of female employees were working part time compared with only 9% of male employees. Eighty two per cent of part time workers were female. In recent years many employers have introduced part-time, flexible work – but the opportunities for flexible work in professional or managerial work are very limited (EOC Flexible Working website).

Substantial economic restructuring in the UK has dismantled many of the traditional male preserves within manufacturing economies (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997) and the destruction of communities based on industrial employment. For example, in 1946 construction, mining and manufacturing industries provided 45% of employment and service industries 36% of jobs. In 1989, these three great industrial sectors made up just 25% of jobs in the country, while the service sector accounted for 15 million jobs (almost 70% in employment) (Arnot et al, 1999). By the late twentieth century, traditional working class communities experienced high levels of male unemployment and the need for wives to support the family financially. With high divorce rates, women are often now left as heads of single parent families. Traditional middle class male work are also

³ Marriage bars, which had been introduced between the two World Wars in certain occupations to prevent women from working, were removed in the 1940s and 1950s. (EOC, 2000b)).

affected by the restructuring of the service sector, bankruptcies and redundancies. There is an associated rise in dual career families (EOC Flexible Working website).

The messages to young men and women from a restructured economy are still very different. Boys are faced with an increasingly insecure and different economic environment where the traditional transitions between boyhood and manhood, between school and work are broken. The evidence suggests that, on the whole, boys' respond to such economic insecurity by sustaining strong gender boundaries except in those rather rare cases where they chose to move in the direction of new entrepreneurial cultures where such distinctions are less clear. For the majority, supporting traditional class based male identities appears to be the norm. The pressures of social change, particularly it seems the weakening of the collective economic and familial bases of traditional masculinities, appear in the investment of manhood in physique (body, sport/fitness), sexual prowess and traditional patterns of male employment (Connell, 1989, 1997; Epstein et al., 1998; Mac an Ghail, 1988; 1994 and 1996; Sewell, 1997).

Gender in the Household

The closing of the gender gap up to 16 may be associated not just with the increase in women workers but also the desire of more women to be economically independent. Young women in the UK are now more sexually/physically advanced at earlier ages. Twelve per cent of girls now have their first menstrual period before they leave primary school. A report published in the British Medical Journal shows the average age of menarche (age at first period) in British teenagers is 12 years and 11 months (adopt from 13.5 years in the 1950s/60s. The availability of contraception and abortion in the UK have also offered girls many more choices in terms of their sexual lives. Young women in the UK are keen to explore their sexuality, choose from a variety of life style options and determine their own life plans.

The transformations of family life are indicative of the changing status of women in society but also of women's shifting life expectations. Sixty-seven per cent of women between 16 and 64 are now in employment (EOC 2003a, 1) and there has also been a significant increase in the number of women who work after marriage and having children. Since 1984, the employment of mothers who are married or in relationships has increased by a third (EOC, 2000c, 3). There are now more opportunities for women to combine their family commitments with a commitment to a career: for instance, the number of places for children under the age of 8 in day nurseries and with childminders in England and Wales more than doubled in the 10 years up to 1997. (ibid: 4). In January 2002, 96 percent of 3 and 4 year olds were enrolled with an early years education provider (DfES website on Early Years). Women now have greater control over their fertility, evidenced by the fact that ,in comparison with 1900, far fewer children are now being born. (EOC, 2000b). Evidence of cultural shifts in female values or life styles can also be found in figures concerning the choice of whether to bear children and when. The mean age at of women at childbirth rose from 24.6 years in 1976 to 28.9 years in 1998 (National Statistics online database). This has been caused by a major decrease in the birth rates of women aged 20–24 years are in sharp contrast with the enormous increases

for women aged 30 to 39 years. In 1976, over two-thirds (69%) of live births to women in their twenties but this proportion fell to under half (48%) of women in 1998. In contrast, the proportion of births to women in their thirties more than doubled—from 20% in 1976 to 42% in 1998 (Roberts, 2000: 1).

Further evidence of women taking control over their fertility is the increase in lifetime childlessness. There has been an increase in the proportions of women remaining childless at each age for cohorts born since 1950. Only one in ten (10%) of women born in 1945 were childless at age 40 compared with as many as one fifth of women born in 1975 and later who will remain childless (National Statistics, 2001)

By the late 1990s, the UK had a rise in marriages for the first time since 1992 and an exceptionally high divorce rate. Marriages had dropped substantially since the 1950s when there were 408,000 marriages a year, to 306,000 in 2000 (National Statistics online database on Marriage and Divorce). Also by 1997 divorced people accounted for 8% of the population compared with 1% in 1971 with considerable consequences for women's lives..

- There are an estimated 1.7 million one-parent families in Britain – nearly a quarter of all families.
 - They care for around 3 million children – over one in five.
 - Ninety percent of lone parents are women.
 - More than half of one-parent families in the UK live below the poverty line.
 - Between a third and a half of children will spend some time in a one-parent family.
- (National Council for One Parent Families)

These changes to the UK family structure influence the expectations of young men and women and men in complex ways. ‘The strict demarcation of roles at the turn of the century between women and men has weakened. Women and men now expect to be in paid work and manage their caring responsibilities.’ (EOC, 2000b: 1).

The twentieth century has witnessed unprecedented change in the lives and roles of women and men. Opportunities for women have expanded dramatically as the burdens of multiple child bearing and household work have diminished. The pace of change has accelerated sharply at the end of the century, giving a clear signal of future trends for the new millennium (EOC 2000b: 1).

At the same time, female single parents are now more responsible for the economic welfare of their children. The development of the market for women's labour is inextricably linked to changes in women's position in the domestic sphere. This change represent the culmination of a hundred years of struggle to break the hold of Victorian values which has also in its turn affected the school system (Arnot et al, 1999). State schooling is no longer used to support the Victorian ideology of ‘separate spheres’ (the

division of labour between the sexes in which the male is breadwinner and the female housewife and mother). In a recent national survey conducted by the EOC, school students' perceptions of gender issues were sensitive to such changed cultural expectations about the role of women in society (although often their perceptions of occupations and careers remain stereotyped) (EOC, 2001d:3). Around 82% of girls and 64% of boys disagreed with the statement that 'A man's job is to earn money, and a woman's job is to look after the home and family.' Most children agreed with the statement that 'It is okay if the father stays home and looks after the children and the mother goes out to work' (ibid). The study also found that children from working classes tended to hold more stereotypical views.

These gender differences in boys' and girls' values may reflect the fact that whilst there has been encouragement for girls to 'break the mould' in the UK little pressure has been exerted on the majority of boys to rethink their understanding of masculinity. Considerable evidence is now available that girls are 'on the move' in terms of their expectations of their future. Girls perceive the need to be economically independent, especially if they cannot rely upon a man to support the family financially or be involved sufficiently in childcare. Secondly girls express the desire to achieve autonomy, to determine their own sexual preferences and partners rather assume traditional models of family life (Arnot et al, 1999). Mothers in the middle classes and 'transitional' working classes have been found to encourage their daughters' education 'in their own right' and to aim for social mobility either for themselves or in the case of African Caribbean girls for their community (Mirza 1992). In this context, girls' attitudes to education especially have been deeply affected by economic and cultural changes in society.

Other Political Factors

Political reforms cannot easily be isolated as causal factors in the closing of gender gaps in educational access and achievement, although anti-discrimination legislation represents an significant climate of change. These policies cannot be directly connected with the rise in representation of women in public life especially since for most of the postwar period women were a small minority in the UK government. Although in 1918 women were given the right to vote in elections (although it was not until 1928 that this was on the same basis as men) and were allowed to stand for election to parliament, the number of female Members of Parliament in the UK has only reached a high of 18.2 percent at the 1997 general election. In December 1999, women held five out of the 22 cabinet posts (EOC, 2000b: 5) and constituted 16 percent of members of the House of Lords. (EOC, 2002, 4). The Australian notion of a 'femocrat' within state bureaucracies does not easily apply to the UK, nor are the concepts of civil rights or affirmative action a possibility in a country without a written constitution. The tradition of egalitarian reform has influenced UK government policy making since the 1940s not least because of the strong history of trades unionism, the women's movement and campaigns around racial discrimination.

A number of legislative and policy developments impacted on the achievement of formal 'gender parity' in education. The earliest significant development was the Education Act of 1944, which established the principle of free secondary education for all implicitly (but

not explicitly) afforded girls equal opportunities alongside boys. The raising of school leaving age in 1972 to 16 was important, although girls had traditionally stayed on longer than boys. Increasingly the contradiction between a domestic education for girls and the new job opportunities for women focused attention on the problem of unequal treatment of women at work, in the family and in the school. The Women's Movement prioritised gender equality in education as one of its manifesto goals. The line of anti-discrimination legislation which developed in the 1970s and picked up again in the 1990s by another Labour government (described below) was important in highlighting discrimination against women teachers/managers, in preventing discriminatory access to educational institutions and courses, and in encouraging equality policies in schools and colleges, local government and the wide range of educational agencies including school examination boards and inspectors. The laws on their own were less effective in tackling indirect forms of sex discrimination in the informal cultures of the school and in tackling prejudices and stereotyping within the content of the curriculum.

Equal Pay Act 1970

Gives an individual a right to the same contractual pay and benefits as a person of the opposite sex in the same employment, where the man and the woman are doing: like work; or work rated as equivalent under an analytical job evaluation study; or work that is proved to be of equal value.

Sex Discrimination Act 1975

Prohibits sex discrimination against individuals in the areas of employment, education, and the provision of goods, facilities and services and in the disposal or management of premises. It also prohibits discrimination in employment against married people (it is not unlawful to discriminate against someone because they are not married). This Act covers all aspects of direct and indirect discrimination, but does not apply to either single-sex schools or educational materials such as textbooks. It also set up the Equal Opportunities Commission, for both implementation and investigation of sex discrimination issues.

Race Relations Act 1976

Prohibits race discrimination against individuals in the areas of employment, education and the provision of goods, facilities and services and in the disposal or management of premises. It also set up the Commission for Racial Equality, which can investigate discrimination against ethnic minority pupils. The Race Relations Act 1976, as amended by the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000, makes it unlawful to discriminate against anyone on grounds of race, colour, nationality (including citizenship), or ethnic or national origin.

Protection from Harassment Act 1997

This creates a criminal offence of harassment. It also creates a new type of civil claim, allowing individuals who are harassed to claim damages and/or seek a court order to stop the harasser from continuing the harassment.

Human Rights Act 1988

Intended to implement the European Convention on Human Rights in the UK. The latter outlines several issues, including rights to freedom of thought, conscience & religion, the right to respect for private and family life, and the right to education. 'The enjoyment of the rights and freedoms... shall be secured without discrimination on any ground such as sex, race, colour, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, association with a national minority, property, birth or other status.'

The introduction of a common examination system in 1984, a compulsory National Curriculum in the Education Reform Act of 1988 (the National Curriculum) and national targets based on standardized tests of pupils' abilities in core subjects at various ages addressed the problem of gender differentiated subject choices in secondary education. It became compulsory for boys to study modern languages and for girls to study mathematics, science and technology. At the same time, the 1988 Act as the cornerstone of the new free market agenda in education which now appears to have increased existing social inequalities (Gillborn and Mirza, op. cit).

The role of policy in terms of the achievement of formal 'gender parity' in British education is difficult to quantify. Arnot et al. (1999) have scrutinised the notion that 'policy could and would inevitably have a positive effect upon behaviour and/or performance.' (ibid: 13). They argue that it is difficult to 'prove' a relationship between the achievement of gender parity in education and government policies and reforms, even if these occur 'during the same historic period' and say that 'in fact, it is more likely that changes – whether in performances or policies – derive from the same cultural sources rather than that each influences the other.' (ibid: 31).

Educational Provision

In the UK, the opportunities for top down central government reform of the school system was circumscribed by the devolved control of the curriculum. More important in this social democratic era was the development of a grassroots teacher-led movement for gender reform. 'Educational feminism,' was central to the post-war era of social democracy. The 1980s was a 'pivotal decade' for feminist projects in education in which gender-aware, often highly politicised, teachers became pioneers of anti-sexist and 'girl-friendly' education. (ibid: 67). However, the implications of this are difficult to quantify, not least because this field of initiatives has been little-researched. 'In the UK we have

yet to undertake research into the ways in which feminist curriculum reforms have been mobilised.' (Skelton, 1998: 224).

Girl friendly schooling practices were encouraged by feminist initiatives particularly but not solely in the inner cities in which municipal socialism supported gender equality. Teachers promoted strong curriculum and school subject networks, they engaged in institutional research projects with the help and collaboration of higher education academics, and they activated gender equality policies in teacher unions, local educational authorities and schools. The initial priority was to raise gender awareness through the use of legislation, in-service courses for teachers, managers and policy makers, the collection of relevant evidence, and the provision of guidance materials. New careers in equal opportunities were established through gender equality responsibility posts in schools, local authorities and educational agencies. Schools set up working parties and by the 1980s were able to support specific gender initiatives through vocational training budgets (e.g. TVEI). Gender monitoring of patterns of performance and school cultures became common elements in school development plans and school inspection regimes and, to a limited extent, initial teacher education courses have taken gender into account.

In 1996, equal opportunities policies dealing with gender were claimed by most of the primary and secondary schools (Arnot et al, 1996). These policies were now related to entitlement and citizenship but also to the discourse of 'performance, standards, school improvement and value-added policies.' (ibid., 26). This new wave of equal opportunities policy making (sometimes triggered by equality audits by the inspectorate or school league tables) was reflected at government levels since gender issues became part of the new performance-oriented, managerial discourses of the Conservative administration and latterly New Labour. (ibid., 67). The impact of such 'mainstreaming' of gender on performance patterns is hard to assess especially since it built upon high levels of teacher commitment triggered by what is often called 'education feminism' - the educational wing of the women's movement.

The development of 'education feminism' in the UK is probably one of the most vigorous globally, developed as it was within a decentralised educational system which took as its ideological motto 'equality of opportunity for all'. At its strongest, this motto encouraged a social movement which demanded full female entitlement to the same education that boys received and the rights of girls to make their own choices. At its strongest, the educational movement called for equality of outcome and gender equity in society - a gender blind approach to education. At its weakest, it encouraged the removal of obstacles, barriers and restrictions on girls' choices. These political platforms were hotly debated in public through the school system and in the media. For girls in particular it led to a questioning of the nature of conventional femininity within the 'safe haven' of the school and the broadening of their horizons. Research suggests that it encouraged girls to adopt a more individualised but also more positive independent approach to their schooling and future lives.

3. THE RELATIONSHIP OF GENDER GAPS TO GENDER EQUALITY

Formal 'gender parity' in education in the UK masks important issues that have yet to be resolved. First are the continuing inequalities women experience in both education and in society as a whole. Second is the relatively recent problem of 'boys' underachievement,' which has received a great deal of public attention.

Continuing gender inequalities

Although the UK has achieved formal 'gender parity' in both educational admissions and achievement, the subject areas in which qualifications are gained still reflect gender stereotypes. It is highly significant that, although the introduction of a common examination and common curriculum removed the separate educational/curriculum tracks for boys and girls that had structured the educational system previously (Arnot et al, 1999: 18), it did not prevent young men and women choosing sex stereotyped subjects and in post 16 vocational and academic courses (ibid, 21-22). This pattern has a considerable effect on the type of employment individuals are qualified for.

There are clear gender differences in the proportion of women and men studying particular subjects at A-level and Highers. All Sciences are dominated by men except for Biological Sciences, whereas all the Arts are dominated by women. Gender stereotyping is as prevalent at degree level as at other qualification levels. Men are over-represented in Engineering and Technology whereas women are over-represented in Education and the Humanities. Further education is also heavily gender stereotyped. Young women are far more likely to study subjects allied to Medicine, the Social Sciences or Creative Arts whereas young men are more likely to study Mathematical Sciences, Agriculture, Engineering or Technology. Youth training and Modern Apprenticeships also display gender stereotyping of occupations (EOC, 1998: 1).

With predominantly arts, humanities and social science academic qualifications and qualifications in domestic/care oriented courses, women still find themselves in what has traditionally described as 'women's work'. In 2002, women formed 69 % or more of administrative & secretarial, personal service, and sales & customer service occupations. Men made up 69 % or more of managers & senior officials, skilled trades, and process, plant & machine operatives (EOC, 2003a: 1). Women's jobs often command lower wages than 'men's work,' leading to inequalities in pay and income. (EOC, 2001c: 1). Even with relative equality in levels of qualification, the gender pay gap is still in existence; female employees working full time earn on average nineteen per cent less than the average hourly earnings of male full-time employees (EOC, 2003a: 1).

Boys' Achievement Debate and Gender Difference

Despite formal 'gender parity' in enrolment and in certification levels, there is considerable concern now about the 'underachievement' of boys. Two key gender gaps in performance were identified by the recent OFSTED review (Arnot, James, Rudduck and Gray, 1998) - firstly the literacy gap and secondly the different pattern of male and female

success in achieving 5 or more higher grade GCSE's have become the focus of schools aiming to raise performance levels in the market (Arnot and Gubb, 2002; Arnot et al., 1998). The gap between boys and girls in terms of literacy is already established by the age of 7. By the time pupils reach secondary school, girls are ahead of boys. DFES statistics for 2000 suggests that at the end of Key Stage 2, 'around 10% more girls than boys achieved level 4 in English, and far more girls than boys reached level 5'. The gender gap was larger in writing than in reading. (DfES The Standards Site). At 16, boys are now performing less well than girls in most subjects, and in 1996, four times as many boys as girls were excluded from school (EOC, 1998: 1). The press has called this relative underachievement of boys a 'crisis in masculinity'.

Much attention has been paid in recent years to the 'feminisation' of the primary school workforce and culture (Skelton, 1996: 186). Evidence for this 'feminisation' is identified in the fact that the majority of primary teaching staff are female: although women have always made up a majority of the primary teaching force, in recent years there has been a decline in the number of men entering the sector and a slight increase in the number of women. In 2002, women primary teachers outnumbered men by 5 to 1. (Skelton, 2002:85). It has also been suggested that primary teaching environments are biased towards 'feminine styles,' through their daily routines and practices, low teacher expectations of boys, the absence of male role models, and the way in which the curriculum is delivered and assessed.⁴ As a result, there are now moves in the UK to recruit more men into primary school teaching in order to tackle the problem of boys' underachievement.

However, other commentators now believe that schools are becoming 're-masculinised' through the emphasis on testing and assessment, performance indicators, and stratified and hierarchical management and administration structures (ibid., 91-2) Paradoxically these trends may also cause problems for boys. The increase in anxiety associated with high performance and less time for teacher- pupil sociability is understood to aggravate boys' worries in a context where masculinity is associated with success or superiority.

Gender researchers are now considering gender learning preferences as a way of understanding why boys report lower levels of enjoyment at school. It has been suggested that certain teaching styles tend to favour girls. The OFSTED review on gender research (Arnot et al 1998) offered the following summary of research findings:

- Girls are more attentive in class and more willing to learn. They do better on sustained tasks that are open-ended, process-based, relate to realistic situations and require thinking for oneself. Girls may over-rate the difficulty of particular subjects. Girls find timed end-of-course examinations less congenial. Teachers believe that coursework favours girls but other factors (including syllabus selection) may be more important.

⁴ Christine Skelton suggests that there are two forms of the 'feminisation of teaching' discourse: one that avoids blaming the changes in women's position; and another, which she identifies as 'backlash politics,' which alleges that feminism has created a shift toward the privileging of females. (Skelton, 2002: 86).

- Boys show greater adaptability to traditional approaches which require memorising abstract, unambiguous facts which have to be acquired quickly. They are more willing to sacrifice deep understanding for correct answers achieved at speed. Boys do better on multiple choice papers, whatever the subject.

Boys have been found to benefit from more structured and ‘rule bound’ classes, whereas girls prefer to learn through discussion and collaboration. The emphasis given to coursework in the GCSE exams,⁵ teachers’ ‘relaxation’ of standards for boys, and poor quality children’s literature aimed at boys have been cited as factors leading to the ‘underachievement’ that has been identified. Some studies also suggest that streaming and authority and management patterns also play a role.

The Department for Education and Skills, which has developed a website addressing the problem of boys’ underachievement, attribute the problem to the following:

- girls’ greater maturity and more effective learning strategies at all ages
- the apparent success of equal opportunities programmes in schools
- the emphasis amongst girls on collaboration, talk and sharing;
- (some) boys’ disregard for authority, academic work and formal achievement, and the identification with concepts of masculinity which are frequently seen to be in direct conflict with the ethos of the school;
- differences in students’ attitudes to work, and their goals and aspirations, linked to the wider social context of changing labour markets, de-industrialisation and male employment;
- differential gender interactions between pupils and teachers in the classroom, particularly as perceived by (some) boys;
- the influence of laddish behaviour, the bravado and noise as boys seek to define their masculinity
- peer group pressure against the academic work ethic
- boys’ efforts to avoid the culture of failure - a ‘can’t do/can’t win’ insecurity leads to a ‘won’t try/won’t play’ culture (Department for Education and Skills: Standards Site).

⁵ However, there is also evidence to suggest that girls find timed, end-of-course examinations less favourable than boys do and this may adversely affect their performance. Further, the Department for Education and Skills have argued that the affect of coursework assessment on performance is probably marginal, because other elements in the examination can be more critical in determining final grades.

Research on learning differences between girls and boys encourages the view that gender blindness (treating all pupils alike) may no longer be helpful (Arnot and Gubb, 2001). Investigating the similarities and differences in learning styles of boys and girls is likely to be more fruitful for identifying appropriate strategies. Similarly the current interest in developing more effective models of pupil consultation suggests that teachers have a lot to learn about learning from pupils themselves.

A number of other gender issues in schooling are being brought into focus by such concerns about boys' education. Of central importance are teachers' gender values, especially in relation to their pupils' concepts of masculinity and femininity – and the effect such values might have on pupils' learning experiences. In certain contexts, teachers can encourage rather than discourage male disaffection. Increasingly, researchers (c.f. Arnot et al., 1998) are highlighting the following:

- Images of masculinity being legitimated by the school (through the hidden curriculum) and by teachers' interactions with boys. There is evidence from research of conflict between male and female teachers and boys especially over overtly 'masculine' behaviour (Abraham 1994, Sewell 1997, Mac an Ghail 1994; Skelton 2001).
- Teacher expectations about boys' abilities in so far as they affect, for example, the diagnosis of special needs (especially behavioural and emotional difficulties), learning support provision, and disciplining strategies (expulsions, suspensions). Boys are considerably over-represented in all these categories. Each year over 10,000 pupils, mainly black and white working class boys, are excluded from schools in the UK (Gillborn and Mirza, 2000).
- The levels of bullying reported by pupils in the UK raise concern about teachers' responses to such incidents, especially when they involve boys. If teachers' responses are considered unfair or not sufficiently protective by pupils, then they may contribute to the lower levels of male enjoyment and engagement with schooling (Chaplain 1996). There has been increasing interest in the incidence of violence and bullying amongst female students which has been associated with the alleged increase in the number of 'laddettes'.

4. INNOVATIVE MEASURES

School Equality Strategies

The gender gap became a matter of national political concern in the UK when it was seen that improved overall school performance was dependent upon the efforts of schools to tackle those boys who were most disaffected. The Schools Standards Minister Stephen

Byers pointed to the fact that 83% of permanent exclusions are of boys and that 7,000 more boys than girls left school at 16 with no qualifications, commenting that:

'Failure to raise the educational achievement of boys will mean that thousands of young men will face a bleak future in which a lack of qualifications and basic skills will mean unemployment and little hope of finding work' (quoted in Arnot et al, 1998)

At the same time, he argued it was vital that 'policies aimed at disaffected boys are not introduced at the expense of girls whose improvement over recent years has been a real success story'. Despite such concerns about girls, many recent projects have in fact focused on how to raise boys' academic achievement with noticeably less attention and funding being devoted to girls and science/mathematics after sixteen.

The OFSTED review's conclusion that 'there are no simple explanations for gender differences in performances; in any one context several factors are likely to have an influence' (Arnot et al. 1998) is reflected in the range of school approaches to gender equality developed in the UK. Arnot and Gubb (2001), for example, identified three secondary school approaches: *targeting boys*; *promoting equal opportunities for all*; and, the *pastoral approach*. These three perspectives led a range often overlapping initiatives to encourage both sexes to perform well at schools. Preliminary findings of the DFES project on gender and achievement suggest the following four strategic approaches amongst their sample of secondary schools:

- *Organisational Strategies* identify the importance of a positive school culture through, for example, a carefully designed prefects' system, a high quality physical environment, celebrating boys' achievements, support clubs, success days, merit systems and single sex groups.
- *Individual strategies* which involve the active development of use of performance data and formative target settings, and such supports as tutor interviews, mentoring, etc.
- *Pedagogic Strategies* focus for example on classroom management, teaching and learning strategies, literacy across the curriculum, identifying texts that are appealing to boys.
- *Socio-cultural Strategies* which involve, for example, targeting students as key leaders and image makers, challenging conventional images of masculinity, formal and informal behaviour management schemes.

MacDonald et al's (1999) report on boys' achievement advises schools to take a whole-school approach to gender issues, putting into place a range of departmental strategies and management techniques, one of which is the annual monitoring of gender performance (National Curriculum Tests, GCSE and measures of value-added performance), or the targeting of particular pupils - particularly in Years 8 or 9. Short

term single sex learning groups have been tried in mixed secondary schools in order to explore gender stereotypes about learning and to offer 'safe' contexts to review pupils' preferences and attitudes (e.g. in English). More opportunities have been provided in different subjects for boys and girls to explore their interests. Some schools have given more recognition to the need to work directly with boys and to build their confidence in themselves and their abilities. Teachers are also now called upon to research for themselves how gender works within the culture and structure of the school, in relation, for example, to: male and female responses to different teaching styles and learning demands, to different modes of assessment, and to various types of classroom organisation (see also Chaplain, 1996; Bray et al 1997; Bleach, 1998).

Skelton (2001: 175) argues that a relevant gender equity programme should address four key questions to challenge gender identities and characterisations. These are:

- 'What images of masculinity and femininity are children bringing with them into school and what types are they acting out in the classroom and playground?
- What are the dominant images of masculinity and femininity that the school itself reflects to the children?
- What kinds of role model does the school want and expect of its teachers?
- What kinds of initiatives/strategies/projects should teachers be undertaking with children to question gender categories?'

Such models of masculinity and femininity are closely associated with, indeed are often the expression of, ethnic and class identities. Teachers and schools are encouraged to find ways of engaging constructively, critically and dynamically with pupils' identities and the choices which follow from them. Care must be taken not to assume that masculinities and femininities are in opposition to the school - rather they are expressions of social survival and change.

With the introduction of ICT and new vocational courses for 14 year olds and a more 'flexible' curriculum, there is increasing concern that sex stereotyping will re-emerge at these young ages. Strategies are needed to assist these choice processes in such a way as to prevent greater gender differentiation in subject and career choices. The EOC recommends that legislation should provide each child with an entitlement to additional time with an advisor; additional information should be provided on choices, and opportunities should be given for a non-traditional taster work placements. Heads should be trained in the requirements of equality legislation.

5. THE IMPACT OF GENDER GAPS ON GENDER EQUALITY IN SOCIETY

The redistribution of educational credentials towards female students is neither uniform nor complete. The sustained increase in female certification should have reduced sex

segregation in the labour market. Yet, although opportunities for women have expanded dramatically and the pace of change has accelerated, there are still worrying inequities within the labour market :

Women's involvement in the labour market is steadily increasing. There is also a growing convergence between the participation of women and men in paid work. But this convergence masks deep and enduring differences in the nature of their contribution to the labour market (EOC, 2000a: 1).

The gulf between men and women's work appears to be sustained despite the fact that women now make up almost half the work force and have moved into higher level professional jobs in greater numbers. The EOC predicts that 57% of women aged 16 and over will be economically active in 2011, that they will comprise 46% of the work force (EOC, 2000b: 3-4). Whilst many more women will be in professional employment most of the female work force, on current predictions, will remain in typically female jobs. The EOC points out

Gender segregation between industries and in working hours creates inflexibility in the labour market, inhibits men and women from achieving their full potential and limits the pool of skilled labour available to employers. Gender, rather than an individual's skills and abilities, continues to be a major determinant of individual economic prosperity. (EOC, 2000a: 1).

Similarly, the closing of gender gaps in education has not led to full political participation of women. More is needed by way of citizenship education and leadership training for girls. Women's representation in the public sphere is not yet proportional to their representation among the UK population.

Gender relations in the UK are a point historically of greatest contradiction when the gap between girls' school success and their later achievements is at its most extreme historically - female graduates, for example, rarely reach equivalent levels of employment as their male counterparts on the labour market, equal participation in cultural and economic decision making nor equal pay. Women and men still have different opportunities and experience different types of discrimination through their lives which are the result of the ways in which the family, education and access to the labour market interact and continuing sex discrimination in employment. Thus despite the fact that young men and women have similar levels of educational attainment, 'they still tend to make different career choices which have a serious impact on their earnings potential' (EOC 2001c: 1). The choices made by young men and women as adolescents are therefore critical to their lives and can create '*a life cycle of inequality*'.

The breaking down of the ideology of 'separate spheres' and the transformation of women's education after the Second World War has shifted women's education from being a training for domestic life, towards being on a more equal footing with that of men. However, women and men do not yet share domestic responsibilities in British

society: and the continuation of women's primary responsibility for the domestic sphere is a major factor standing in the way of the achievement of substantive gender equality. The official view until recently has been that girls' educational problems are now solved and little more needs to be done, in their name. Schools are developing initiatives in relation to boys almost to the exclusion of projects on girls (Arnot, Maton and Millen, 1996).The strategies offered to deal with boys' 'underachievement' seem to promise a return to the situation identified by feminists in the 1970s, where pedagogies and practices were based around boys' experiences (Skelton, 1998: 223). The current problem for the British education system is how to deal with the issue of boys' underachievement while taking care not to re-marginalise girls: who, after all, are still a disadvantaged social group.

Gender never works in isolation: it affects and is affected by ethnic and class cultures. The social class attainment gap substantially dwarfs both the race and gender gaps in educational performance, and the effects of race and gender aggravate social class differences (Gillborn and Mirza, 2000). In 1997 the Youth Cohort Study (YCS) found that:

There is evidence that the inequality of attainment between social classes has *grown* since the late 1980s. For example, in relation to the five higher grade benchmark, between 1988 and 1997, the gap between 'managerial/professional' backgrounds, and 'unskilled manual groups' grew from 40 to 49 percentage points (Gillborn and Mirza, 2000: 18).

Despite the doubling of student numbers in higher education and the increase in qualifications at 16 and 18, it is still the case that some 80 per cent of children from low income groups do not go to higher education, whilst 80% of higher income children do. Only 1% of applicants were from students from Class V (unskilled manual classes) and they were allocated approximately 1% of places.

Unfortunately there is no study of the pattern of performance in specific school subjects of boys and girls from different social classes and ethnic groups which might provide evidence of which girls and which boys succeed in the UK system. However it is significant that the success of girls in raising their achievement of 5 higher grade GCSEs mainly applies to white middle class girls rather than girls from different ethnic groups or working class girls. This increase in middle class girls' qualifications and their higher status, better paid work has increased the class differences between women and between the two income professional family and families living on one or no income.

Also, as the training and employment statistics demonstrate, many young working class women despite appearing to want autonomy, nevertheless, convert their academic capital into traditional working class jobs rather than into economic capital in the labour market. In contrast with upper middle class girls who aim for professional jobs in the primary labour market, working class appear to be less able to challenge the sex segregated structures in the much less secure conditions of the secondary labour market. Instead,

and with great pragmatism, they choose training courses which draw upon the domestic and caring skills learnt in the home.

Working class boys' youth cultures which sustain boys' confidence and pride in the context of disenfranchisement and social exclusion, equally problematically also hurtle these young men outside the boundaries of society. It now appears that it is only by challenging masculinity that schools in the future will be able to offer disengaged youth the chance to grapple with economic (and gender) change. Current debates suggest that, in the future, schools in advanced economies will need to address a 'crisis in masculinity'. Although discursively constructed around the unease and anxiety associated with women's encroachment of the elite male public sphere, these debates re-open questions about the relationship of schooling to masculinity.

Girls' educational performance has been read by the UK media as indicative that 'the future is female'. At one level, such media hype is right. There is evidence of a shift in the role of education in relation to gender issues. The principle of gender differentiation which shaped the class divided school system is now clearly not as explicit nor as legitimate. It is more likely to be hidden within the *individualising* processes of learning (micro-inequalities) rather than be found in the formal structures of schooling. Although girls in the UK appear to be strengthening their economic and social position by gaining access to higher status male subjects and to be seen to be doing well in them, there is no guarantee that such academic capital could be converted and indeed would be converted into academic and economic privilege. Thus, despite media panics and egalitarian social movements which attempted to redistribute male power, male dominance of academic capital is still intact. The conditions for sustaining gender inequalities, although different, are still in place.

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