

Girls on Top? Girls, Career Aspiration, and Achievement at School

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In recent years a growing concern about social change involving men and boys, dubbed 'the crisis of masculinity', has been reflected in the British media. Two recurring themes in this debate are those of boys' 'underachievement' at GCSE level, and the impact of the decline in manufacturing on the future working lives of young men. Particularly regarding the issue of GCSE achievement, the debate has largely focused on boys: there has been little attention devoted to the reasons for female success at this level. This article suggests that it is girls' practices, rather than those of boys, that have changed. It is argued that social changes and shifts in girls' career aspirations can explain the improved performance of girls at age 16.

Underachievement?

The notion of boys' underachievement is a controversial one (1). It is certainly the case that girls do better than boys at English and other language subjects at GCSE level. However, this was also the case twenty years ago before the introduction of the National Curriculum. What has changed is that at GCSE level girls have now largely caught up with boys at Maths and the 'hard' Sciences. As recently as two decades ago, boys were out-performing girls at 'O' levels in these subject areas, and this was causing concern among feminist educationalists. However, as Walkerdine et al. (1989) pointed out, girls were actually doing better overall than boys at 'O' level even at this time. It was simply that this achievement tended to be in the 'wrong' subject areas, e.g. Domestic Science, and consequently was not viewed as 'real' achievement. Since the introduction of the National Curriculum in Britain, girls and boys have been forced to take the same core subjects, and girls have shown rapid improvements in traditionally 'masculine' areas. As Epstein et al. (1998) observe, boys' performance has actually been improving year on year, yet is still perceived as underachievement in comparison with girls.

It is also important to remember that, once free to choose which subjects to take at 'A' level, girls largely revert to traditional patterns with the majority choosing Arts and Humanities subjects at the expense of Maths and Science. This has important implications for their futures as I shall discuss below.

Very little has been said about the reasons for girls' improved achievement at GCSE level. What little speculation there has been has usually focused on the apparent success of equal-opportunities programmes, or on the coursework component of GCSE assessment (the argument being that girls are better than boys at written presentation, and worse at exams – this argument is belied by the lack of change in achievement patterns since the recent reduction in GCSE coursework). Arnot et al. (1999) make the more general argument that economic and social change, including the introduction of the National Curriculum, has impacted on girls'

performance. Developing this point, findings from my study suggest a more specific argument: that girls' increased career ambition, coupled with a feeling that they may be disadvantaged as women in the workplace, is providing girls with the impetus to achieve. Of course, this argument supposes two things: firstly, that girls want jobs and see their future employment as important; secondly, that girls believe success at school will help them to gain employment. This article discusses these questions.

The Study

The findings presented here are drawn from a study of Year 10 and 11 pupils' constructions of gender and learning, which was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. Pupils' behaviour during top and middle-band Maths and English classes was observed at three different London co-educational state schools. 100 of these pupils (50 girls and 50 boys) were then interviewed about their views of school and learning, their career aspirations, and their perceptions of gender issues. Full details of the findings can be found in my book *Boys, Girls, and Achievement: addressing the classroom issues* (Francis, 2000).

Job Choice

When asked what job they wanted to do when they completed their education, girls listed 36 different jobs, and boys 34. This diversity of choice supports my findings from a previous study in primary schools (Francis, 1998), showing that girls now consider a far wider range of occupations than they did in the 1980s (according to studies at the time, e.g. Spender, 1982). And where Spender (1982) and others found that secondary school girls largely aspired to stereotypically feminine, non-professional jobs, I found that 30 girls chose jobs which

normally require a degree (nearly two-thirds). (This trend was even stronger among the boys, with 35 choosing jobs which usually require a degree). Some traditionally feminine jobs listed by Spender in the 1980s were represented among girls' choices: for example, hairdresser, nurse and air hostess. However, their choices also included traditionally masculine occupations such as pilot, computer scientist, soldier and business person. 'Doctor' was the most popular choice among girls: six girls said that they wished to pursue this occupation. Solicitor and actress came joint second, with four votes each. The choices of doctor and solicitor illustrate girls increasing interest in professional careers, observed by Lightbody & Durndell (1996).

This picture demonstrates a dramatic shift in girls' career aspirations over the last twenty years. While Spender (1982), Gaskell (1992) and others found girls preparing to work until they were married, and then to stop work or assume the role of secondary breadwinner, my findings in the primary and secondary school show that girls are now far more career-oriented (Francis, 1998; 2000). The majority appear to see their chosen careers as reflecting their identity rather than viewing paid work as a stop-gap before marriage. This may be partly the result of equal-opportunities programmes and a larger availability of role models as increasing numbers of women participate in, and succeed in, the labour market. However, it may also stem from changes in society which bring a new materialism and realism. The increasing divorce rate and number of single-parent families seemed to have had an impact on the thinking of some girls in my primary-school study who argued that women must fend for themselves as you 'cannot rely on a man' (Francis, 1998). Moreover, in two-parent families it is now far more usual for both parents to work full-time than was the case even a decade ago.

Gender Discrimination

When asked whether they believe that their gender impacts on their lives in

any way, two-thirds of the girls said that it does. They provided various explanations, ranging from arguments that they face greater restriction from their parents than do boys, to bemoaning the hypocritical values which lead sexually active boys to be admired, where girls risk being branded 'slags'. However, it was gender discrimination at work which most of the students alluded to when maintaining that gender makes a difference to one's life. This was particularly true of girls, of whom 21 raised the issue of discrimination against women in the workplace (compared to only six boys).

Girls talked about the possibility of sexual harassment in the work place and discrimination in employment practice. Regarding the latter issue, girls voiced three areas of concern: some girls argued that men are paid more than women, others that men are given the best jobs or preferred to women by employers, and others claimed that more jobs are available to men than to women. Many girls also drew on personal or anecdotal evidence to argue that there is still discrimination against women when attempting to enter traditionally masculine occupations. A number of girls had ready examples of sisters, cousins and the like who had attempted to get jobs traditionally seen as male, and who had been unsuccessful (though some had apparently persevered and had gone on to excel in these occupations). The diversity of issues raised by girls, and the numbers of girls voicing these anxieties, indicates a strong concern with the future work environment on their part of these students. These findings lend support to Pickering's (1997) speculation that a possible explanation for girls' higher levels of motivation in the secondary school might be a feeling that they have to do better than boys in order to compete with them on even terms in the workplace. Athena (a mixed-race, Year 11 girl) specifically supported this interpretation. She described the current jobs market as gender-discriminatory. When I asked her whether she thought this situation will change, she replied: "I think it will

change, because girls are doing better, so they [employers] will have no choice". Girls are doing better because "girls have realised that they have to work that much harder than boys to get somewhere".

It is arguable, then, that if girls seek dynamic careers, yet see the adult workplace as gender-discriminatory, they might pursue ways of minimising their gender disadvantage by increasing their likelihood of resisting employer discrimination. In terms of education, such investments or weapons might be knowledge and experience, and qualifications.

In fact, my findings show that virtually all students, both male and female, believed that participation in further education is important. Many pupils stressed the importance of being 'educated', valuing 'an education' in its own right. But the majority of pupils talked in terms of the qualifications provided by further education, arguing that these help you to get a better job in what is often seen as a highly competitive employment market. For example, when I asked what difference further education makes, Joseph (Afro-Caribbean, Year 10) replied that, "without further education, you'll probably end up working in Sainsburys". Many students were aware of the issue of youth unemployment. These pupils presented the world of employment as hard and competitive: Maisie (Anglo, Year 10) explained, "the way things are going at the moment, with um, sort of, employment and that, you have to have good grades and that, to get, like, just a job really. So many people doing college and everything you've got to start keeping up with them otherwise you won't get a job".

Although boys and girls appeared equally positive concerning further education, it does not appear unreasonable to suggest that girls in particular may see the gaining of qualifications as imperative in securing their future careers, given the high proportion that said gender discrimination exists in employment practices.

Discussion

It is true that boys were equally ambitious in terms of their careers, and also placed a high importance on further education in the belief that qualifications would earn them better jobs. However, my main point is that girls' similar preoccupation with qualification and careers marks a change for girls. It may be this change in their post-secondary school aspirations which partly explains their swift acceleration in achievement at GCSE level, and their increasing continuation to higher education. Moreover, their awareness of the issue of work-place discrimination may provide them with an extra spur in their efforts in education, which does not apply to boys.

Whether girls' investment in their futures does in fact pay off is debatable. As Rees (1999) observes, men still hold the vast majority of top jobs across Europe, though women have increasingly broken into middle management. Moreover, the different types of post-16 courses and careers pursued by men and women mean that particularly highly remunerated or high-status jobs continue to go to men. In this sense, girls' fears about future gender disadvantage in the workplace, and male complacency about the future, appear justified.

A further finding from my study was that, although girls' job choices were diverse and often ambitious, caring and creative jobs were over-represented at the expense of business-oriented and technical jobs (while the reverse was true for boys). This trend is of course reflected in the continuing high numbers of young women choosing arts and humanities courses, and young men science courses, at 'A' level and degree level; and the larger proportion of young men that take up vocational training. As many of the skills shortages in the European workforce are located in the IT and engineering sectors (and as these jobs tend to be particularly well remunerated), girls' avoidance of these subjects in post-16 education and in their career aspirations is significant.

Work needs to be done in schools to show students of both sexes the current and developing patterns of job availability and skill shortage, and the way in which their choices of course and career can influence their future career prospects.

Notes

(1) For an up-to-date, considered debate on the extent of 'gender gap' at GCSE level, see Arnot et al. (1999).

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