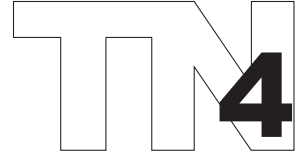


Topic 4

Gender, sexuality and education



This lesson can take place with or without a sociology teacher present. If a sociology teacher is not present, students should be given WS4. They need to be told to complete Activity 2 individually and then to form small groups to complete the remaining activities. This lesson is a good way to begin the topic of gender and education as it focuses on the students' own experiences and understanding of gender and sexuality.

It is a good idea to give students WS4 Activity 1 to complete before they come to the lesson; this will enable them to have a clear understanding of the concepts needed to take part in the lesson. Students should also be encouraged to develop their research skills by collecting articles and website addresses before the lesson. These resources can then be shared with the class before looking at the topic.

Aims

- To raise an awareness of how gender and sexual identities are formed in schools.
- To allow students to explore how schools reinforce or help to deconstruct gender stereotypes through the hidden curriculum.

Resources

- Photocopies of WS4
- Sociology textbook
- An A-Z of sociology
- Photocopies of the article 'Gender differences in education: the underachievement of boys' by Eirene Mitsos and Ken Browne (*Sociology Review*, September 1998)
- www.eserver.org/gender/default.html
www.share.youthcornwall.org.uk

Introduction

5 minutes

- I Get the students to share their definitions of the key concepts listed in Activity 1. Particular attention should be given to the definition of the 'hidden curriculum'. Check that students are aware that this refers to norms, values and beliefs that are taught alongside the formal curriculum. You may wish to allow the group some time to share the website addresses and articles that they have found.



Main

45 minutes

(Broken down into two sessions of 30 minutes and 15 minutes respectively.)

Session 1

30 minutes

- 2 Give out WS4 Activities 2, 3 and 4. Tell the class that this lesson will allow them to explore their own experiences of school and issues relating to gender and sexuality. They should be given 25 minutes to complete Activity 2 independently. It may be a good idea to tell the class that this sheet will not be taken in by the teacher and that it is not necessary for them to share all of their ideas with the class. This is a personal activity.

Session 2

15 minutes

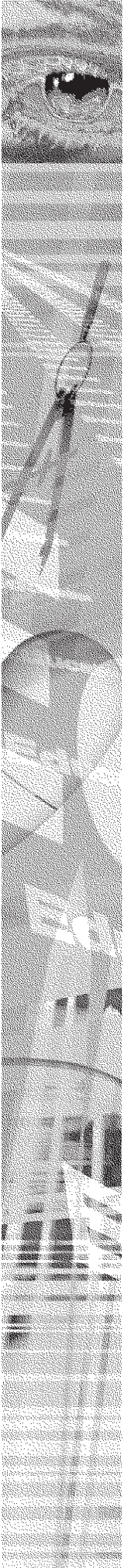
- 3 Divide the students into groups of three or four to work on Activity 3. One member of each group should be nominated as the scribe. Allow the groups 15 minutes.

Conclusion

10 minutes

- 4 The teacher or a student can draw the chart from Activity 4 on the board and brainstorm ideas. Students can copy these onto their own chart. Questions 2–5 should be used to conclude the session.





Topic 4

Gender, sexuality and education

WS4

Activity 1

Find out the meanings of the following key concepts. You can do this by looking them up in an A-Z of sociology, textbook or a relevant website.

Sex

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Gender

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Sexuality

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Socialisation

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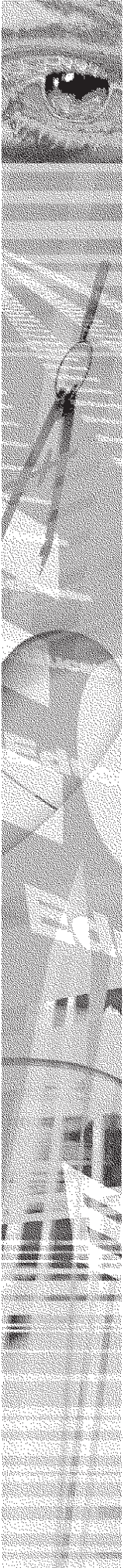
Hidden curriculum

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Before beginning to look at the relationship between gender and education, it would be a good idea to collect some articles and websites that link to the topic. You may wish to look at material that discusses gender and sexuality in more general terms first. Bring any articles or addresses to the next lesson.

- www.eserver.org/gender/default.html is an excellent website which gives links to other sites relating to sexuality and gender studies.
- www.share.youthcornwall.org.uk gives clear definitions relating to sexuality. Go to *Personal*, then *Sexual health*.



Activity 2

This activity will allow you to explore your own experiences of school and how school has influenced your gender identity.

If you attend or have attended a single-sex school you may not be able to answer all the questions. Your answers may differ from those of students who go or have been to a mixed school. However, these differences in experiences will enrich the next activity.

Your experiences of primary school

1 What type of games did you play at primary school outside lessons?

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2 Were there any times when boys and girls were separated inside school?

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3 If so, what was the purpose of the separation?

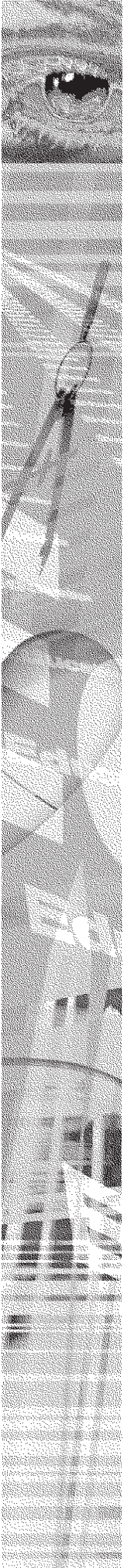
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4 Who were you generally friends with at school — boys or girls?

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5 Briefly describe your friendship.

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Topic 4 Gender, sexuality and education

WS4

6 How would you describe the relationship between boys and girls in your primary school?

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7 Were there any examples of teachers treating boys and girls differently? Note them down.

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8 How would you describe your behaviour in primary school?

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9 How would you describe the behaviour of the opposite sex?

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10 On looking at your answers, do you think that your experiences of primary school reflected traditional gender stereotypes?

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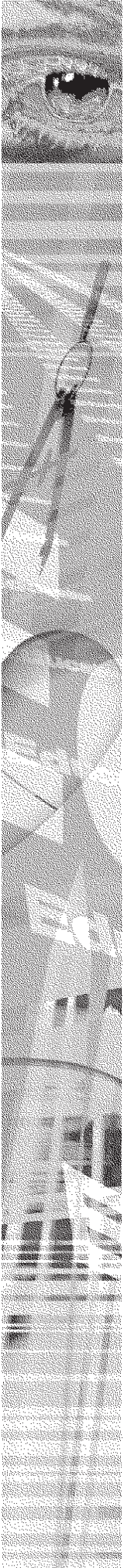
Your experiences of secondary school

1 What is/was seen as deviant behaviour for boys at your school?

.....

.....

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Topic 4 Gender, sexuality and education

WS4

2 What is/was seen as deviant behaviour for girls at your school?

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3 Do you think that teachers have had different expectations of boys and girls? Illustrate your answer with examples.

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4 Are/were there any times when boys and girls are/were separated inside school?

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5 If so, what is/was the purpose of the separation?

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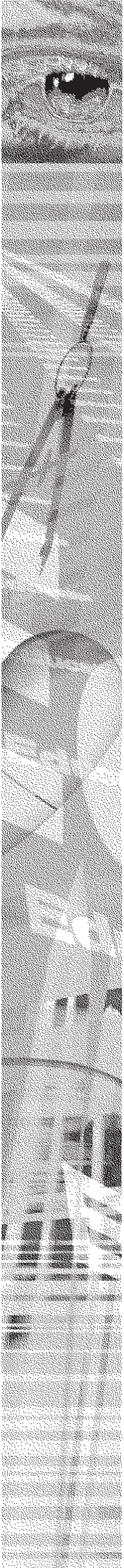
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6 How did you and your friends make the transition from childhood to adolescence? Identify any rituals that were used to mark the transition.

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Topic 4 Gender, sexuality and education

WS4

7 Note down your memories of sex education lessons at school.

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8 What messages do you think sex education in school gives young people about sex and relationships?

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9 Identify any ways in which you could view school as a homophobic institution.

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10 What career advice have you received/did you receive at school?

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11 Looking at your answers, do you think that your experiences of secondary school reflect traditional gender stereotypes?

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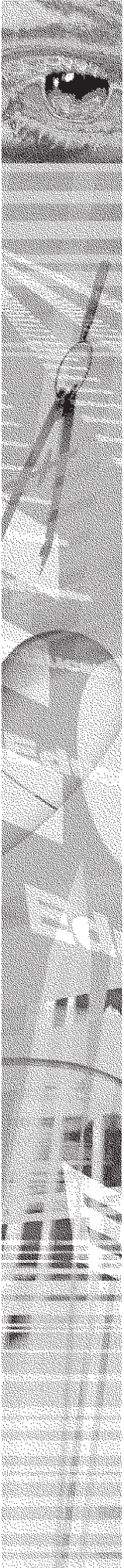
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12 Identify any other ways that the hidden curriculum may have influenced your gender identity.

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Activity 3

Having completed Activity 2, you will now have lots of ideas and examples of how gender and sexual identities are formed in school. Many sociologists believe that girls' and boys' experiences within school influence their achievements. Currently, girls are achieving higher grades both at GCSE and A-level. A variety of explanations for this trend have been put forward.

The article 'Gender differences in education: the underachievement of boys' by Eirene Mitsos and Ken Browne, *Sociology Review* Vol. 8, No. 1, September 1998, identifies various explanations.

1 In the article, five reasons are identified for the improvement in girls' performance in school. Rank the reasons from 1 to 5, 1 being what you think is the most significant reason.

- The women's movement
- Equal opportunities
- Growing employment opportunities
- Girls are well motivated
- Girls mature earlier

2 Write a brief justification for the order you chose.

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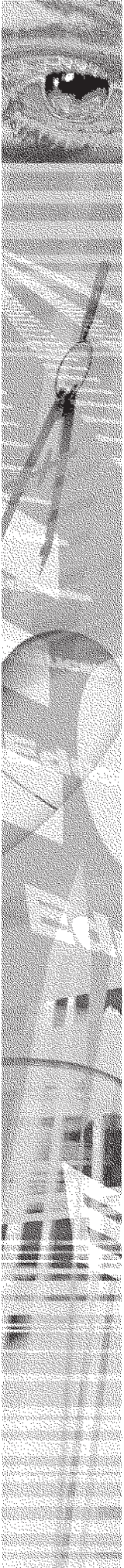
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3 Four reasons are also given in the article for the underachievement of boys in school. Rank the reasons from 1 to 4, as in Question 1.

- Lower expectations by teachers
- Behaviour is more disruptive
- An anti-school subculture exists
- Decline in traditional male jobs



Topic 4 Gender, sexuality and education

WS4

4 Write a brief justification for the order you chose.

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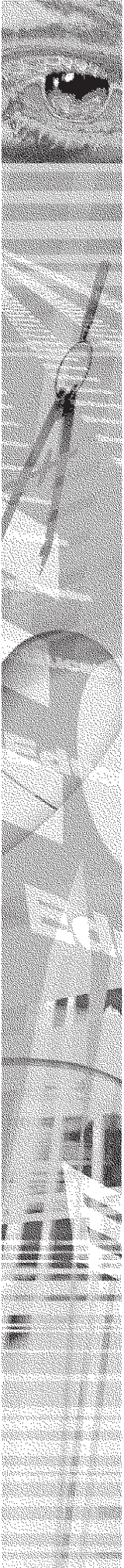
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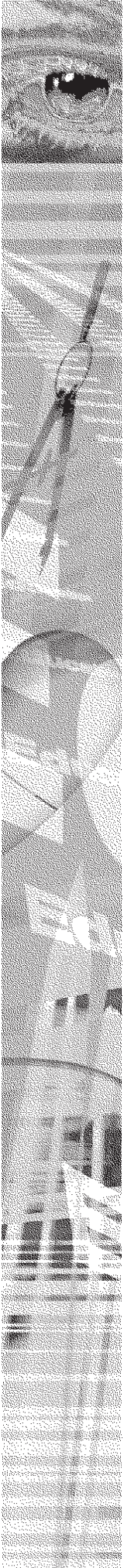
Activity 4

1 Bring your group's ideas together by filling in the chart below.

| A Ways in which the hidden curriculum and wider society socialise girls into feminine roles | B Ways in which the hidden curriculum and wider society socialise boys into masculine roles | C Ways in which the hidden curriculum and wider society socialise girls and boys into heterosexual identities |
|--|--|--|
| | | |

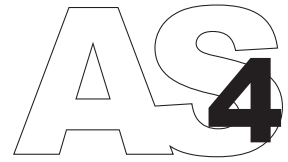
Discussion questions

- 2 Look at the lists and state how the hidden curriculum may act as a form of social control for girls and boys.
- 3 How might this form of control stop girls and boys from reaching their full potential inside schools?
- 4 Is there evidence that traditional stereotypes are being challenged in schools today?
- 5 Which do you think are the more significant in influencing achievement, factors inside school or factors outside school?



Topic 4

Gender, sexuality and education



Activity 1

The following definitions are a brief guide to the possible student responses. They may find more detail in the recommended resources.

Sex

Biological differences between males and females.

Gender

Social and cultural differences between men and women.

Sexuality

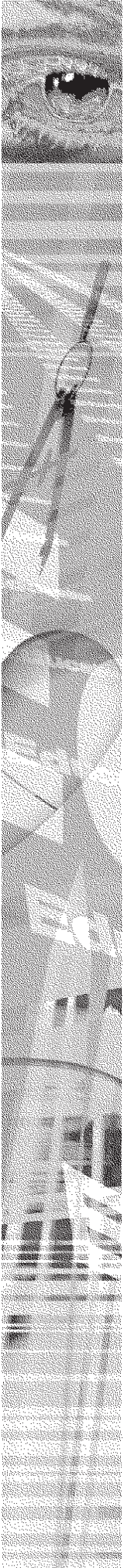
The sexual preference and identity of an individual. This term is usually used to discuss forms of sexuality such as heterosexuality and homosexuality.

Socialisation

The process whereby an individual learns the norms and values of society.

Hidden curriculum

The norms and values that an individual is taught at school which are not part of the formal curriculum.



Gender differences in education

The underachievement of boys

Much of the early research on relations in the classroom focused on the ways in which girls were disadvantaged compared to boys. These days it seems to be boys who underachieve at school. Is it all plain sailing now for girls and all gloom for boys at school? **Eirene Mitsos** and **Ken Browne** report

There are marked differences between the sexes in education. Until the late 1980s, the major concern was with the underachievement of girls. This was because, while girls used to perform better than boys in the earlier stages of their education, from GCSE-level they tended to fall behind, being less likely than boys to get the three A-levels required for university entry and less likely to go into higher education. However, in the early 1990s girls began to outperform boys in all areas and at all levels of the education system. The main problem today is with the underachievement of boys, although there are still concerns about the different subjects studied by boys and girls. There are also concerns that girls could do even better if teachers spent as much time with girls as they are forced to do with boys.

The facts

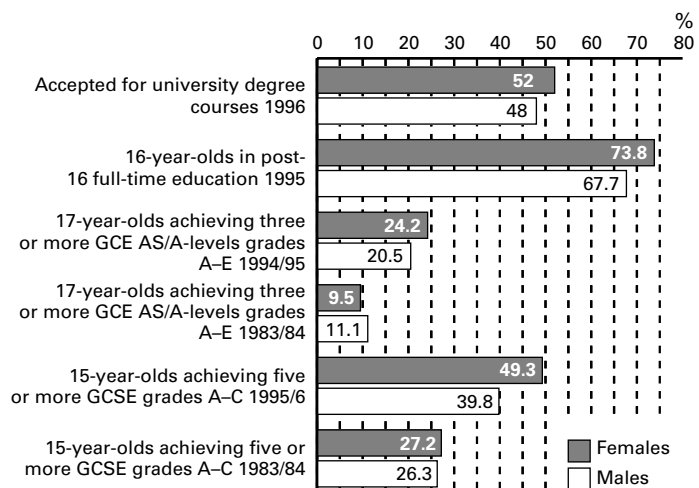
Girls do better than boys at every stage in National Curriculum SAT (Standard Assessment Test) results in English, maths and science, and they are now more successful than boys at every level in GCSE, outperforming boys in every major subject (including traditional boys' subjects — design, technology, maths and chemistry) except physics. In 1995–96, 49.3% of girls got five or more GCSEs (grades A–C) compared to 39.8% of boys (see Figure 1). In English at GCSE,

the gender gap is huge, with nearly two thirds of girls getting a grade A–C, compared to less than half of boys.

A higher proportion of females stay on in post-16 sixth form and further education, and post-18 higher education. Female school leavers are now more likely than males to get three or more A-level passes (see Figure 1), and more females than males now get accepted for full-time university degree courses.

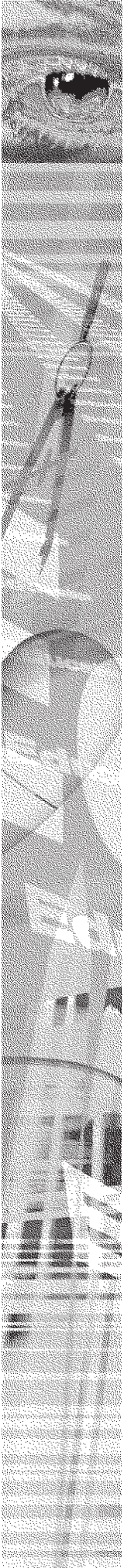
But problems still remain for girls...

Despite this general pattern of girls outperforming boys, problems do still remain for girls. As Table 1 (p. 45) and Figure 2 (p. 48) show, girls still tend to



Source: Data from *Separate Tables*, DFEE, 1997, and UCAS Annual Report, 1996

Figure 1 Some male and female differences in education



Topic 4 Gender, sexuality and education

continued

take different subjects from boys, which influences future career choices. Broadly, arts subjects are 'female', science and technology subjects 'male'. This is evident at GCSE-level, but becomes even more pronounced at A-level and above. Girls are therefore less likely to participate after 16 in subjects leading to careers in science, engineering and technology. Girls tend to slip back between GCSE and A-level, achieving fewer high-grade A-levels than boys with the same GCSE results.

There is little evidence that the generally better results of girls at 16 and above lead to improved post-school opportunities in terms of training and employment. Women are still less likely than men with similar qualifications to achieve similar levels of success in paid employment, and men still hold the majority of the positions of power in society. In the 16–59 age group in the population as a whole who are in employment or are unemployed, men tend to be better qualified than women. However, this gap has decreased among younger age groups, and can be expected to disappear if females keep on outperforming males in education.

Explaining gender differences in education

The change to girls outperforming boys is still a fairly recent development, and research to explain it is still at an early stage. There are some

suggested explanations for the huge improvement in the performance of girls, the under-performance of boys and the subject choices that continue to separate males and females.

First, the *women's movement* and *feminism* have achieved considerable success in improving the rights and raising the expectations and self-esteem of women. They have challenged the traditional stereotype of women's roles as housewives and mothers, and this means that many women now look beyond the housewife/mother role as their main role in life.

Second, the work of sociologists in highlighting the educational under-performance of girls in the past led to a greater emphasis in schools on *equal opportunities*, in order to enable girls to fulfil their potential more easily. These policies included, amongst others, monitoring teaching and teaching materials for sex bias to help schools to meet the needs of girls, by encouraging 'girl-friendliness', not only in male-dominated subjects but across the whole range of the experience of girls in schools. Teachers are now much more sensitive about avoiding *gender stereotyping* in the classroom; this may have overcome many of the former academic problems which girls faced in schools.

Third, the number of 'male' jobs, particularly in semi-skilled and unskilled manual work has been declining in recent years, while there are

Table 1 (a) GCSE achievements of 15-year-old males and females by subject group, entries, and pass rate (% achieving grades A–C) in England by the end of 1994/95. **(b)** GCE A-level achievements of male and female candidates by subject group, entries, and pass rate (% achieving grades A–E) in England by the end of 1994/95

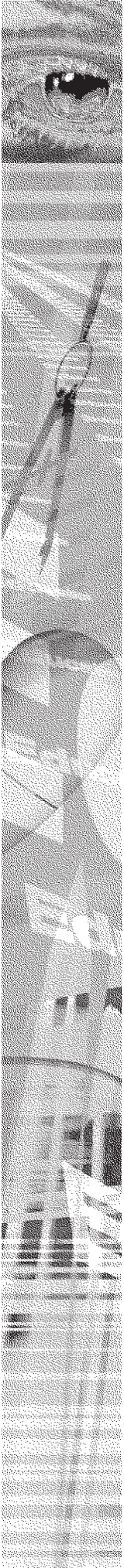
| (a) Subject group | Male entries | Pass rate (%) | Female entries | Pass rate (%) | (b) Subject group | Male entries | Pass rate (%) | Female entries | Pass rate (%) |
|---|-----------------|------------------|-------------------|------------------|-------------------------------------|-----------------|------------------|-------------------|------------------|
| Sciences ¹ | 824,112 | 44.9 | 799,817 | 47.3 | Sciences ¹ | 122,173 | 81.5 | 80,376 | 81.9 |
| Social sciences ² | 380,515 | 46.1 | 335,439 | 53.1 | Social sciences ² | 101,283 | 77.2 | 114,047 | 76.2 |
| Arts ³ | 897,733 | 48.3 | 981,576 | 63.6 | Arts ³ | 65,096 | 86.2 | 129,206 | 88.5 |
| Total number of students entering any subject | 274,893 | 68.5 | 267,414 | 79.2 | General studies | 28,520 | 85.1 | 28,230 | 78.8 |
| | | | | | Total students entering any subject | 317,072 | 81.4 | 351,859 | 82.2 |

¹ Includes subjects like biology, physics, chemistry, single/double science, mathematics, computer studies, craft, design and technology, and home economics

² Includes subjects like business studies, geography, history, area studies, economics, humanities, social studies, physical education and vocational studies

³ Includes subjects like art and design, English, English literature, drama, communication studies, foreign languages, classical studies, music, creative arts and religious studies

Source: data from *Separate Tables*, DFEE 1997.



Topic 4 Gender, sexuality and education

continued

growing *employment opportunities* for women in the service sector. As a consequence, girls have become more ambitious and are less likely to see having a home and family as their main role in life. Many girls growing up today have mothers working in paid employment, who provide positive role models for them. Many girls now recognise that the future involves paid employment, often combined with family responsibilities. Sue Sharpe found in *Just like a Girl* in 1976 that girls' priorities were 'love, marriage, husbands, children, jobs and careers, more or less in that order'. When she repeated her research in 1994, she found that these priorities had changed to 'job, career and being able to support themselves'. These factors may all have provided more incentives for girls to gain qualifications.

Fourth, there is mounting evidence that girls work harder, are more conscientious and are *better motivated* than boys. Girls put more effort into their work and spend more time on doing their homework properly. They take more care with the way their work is presented and they concentrate more in class. (Research shows that the typical 14-year-old girl can concentrate for 3 to 4 times as long as her fellow male students.) Girls are

generally better organised: they bring the right equipment to school and meet deadlines for handing in work. It has been suggested that these factors may have helped girls to take more advantage of the increasing use of coursework in GCSE, A-level and GNVQ. Such work often requires good organisation and sustained application, and girls do better than boys in these respects.

Finally, by the age of 16, girls are estimated to be *more mature* than boys by up to two years. Put simply, this means that girls are more likely to view exams in a far more responsible way, recognise their seriousness and the importance of the academic and career choices that lie ahead of them.

Why do boys underachieve?

Many of the reasons given above also suggest why boys may be underachieving. However, there are some additional explanations. First, there is some evidence that staff are not as strict with boys as with girls. They are more likely to extend deadlines for work, to have *lower expectations* of boys, to be more tolerant of disruptive, unruly behaviour from boys in the classroom and to accept poorly presented work.

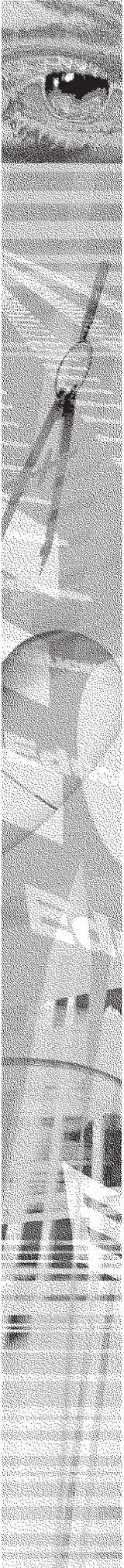
Boys' underachievement in English

Research carried out in Coventry showed that one of the main reasons why boys do not do as well as girls in English is because of their attitudes to the subject and to reading. Boys saw English as a 'feminine' subject that was 'alien' to their way of thinking and working: they felt 'uncomfortable', while in science they felt 'safe'. 'Science is straightforward. You don't have to think about it. There are definite answers... You feel safe in science.' English, on the other hand, 'is about understanding, interpreting... you have to think more. There's no definite answer... the answer depends on your view of things.'

This shows how boys' view of English is related to the way they are socialised into their gender roles: middle-class men's position in society — the fact that they occupy the positions of economic, political and ideological power — means that men have to be seen as strong, sure of themselves, always being right and always in control. English is a subject where the boundaries are not clearly defined. One of the boys interviewed said: 'That's why girls do English (at A-level) because they don't mind getting things wrong. They're more open about issues, they're more understanding... they find it easier to comprehend other people's views and feelings.' This also reinforces the idea that women are the 'understanding', the 'caring' sex.

Men use language to protect their independence and to negotiate status; women, on the other hand, use language to seek confirmation, to make human connections and to reinforce intimacy. This division between facts and emotions is reflected in the differing natures of the two subjects. Those students were articulating this.

Adapted from E. Mitsos (1995) 'Classroom voices', The English and Media Magazine, Nos 33 and 34.



Topic 4 Gender, sexuality and education

continued

Second, boys are generally *more disruptive* in classrooms than girls. They may lose classroom learning time because they are sent out of the room or sent home. Four out of every five permanent exclusions from schools are boys: most of these are for disobedience of various kinds and usually come at the end of a series of incidents.

Third, boys appear to gain 'street cred' and peer-group status by not working, and some develop almost an *anti-education*, anti-learning subculture, where schoolwork is seen as 'unmacho'. This may explain why they are less conscientious and lack the persistence and application required for exam success, particularly with the new coursework styles of assessment. This subculture was first discussed over 20 years ago by Paul Willis in *Learning to Labour* and was rediscovered by Stephen Byers, the schools minister, in January 1998, when he said, 'We must challenge the laddish, anti-learning culture which has been allowed to develop over recent years and should not simply accept with a shrug of the shoulders that boys will be boys.'

Fourth, the *decline in traditional male jobs* is also a factor in explaining why many boys are under-performing in education. They may lack motivation and ambition because they may feel that they have only limited prospects and that getting qualifications won't get them anywhere anyway, so what's the point in bothering? These changing employment patterns and unemployment have resulted in a number of (predominantly white) boys and men having lowered expectations, a low self-image and a lack of self-esteem. This inevitably leads boys to attempt to construct a positive self-image away from achievement and towards 'laddish behaviour' and aggressive 'macho' posturing in attempts to draw attention to themselves.

The interrelationship between the home, the community and schools becomes clear here. Beatrix Campbell showed in her book *Goliath* how, in the climate of underfunding and cutbacks in community provision in the early 1990s, funds are focused on the troublesome boys who destroy communities, rather than on the people who struggle to maintain those communities — who are mainly women. Educational research has shown the same pattern, where teachers' time is

spent mostly on the troublesome boys, rather than on the girls who are keen to learn and to get on with their schooling. This suggests that girls may still be underachieving, even if they are not doing so in relation to the boys.

Feeling and behaving differently

Boys and girls feel differently about their own ability. Research by Michael Barber at Keele University's Centre for Successful Schools reveals that 'more boys than girls think that they are able or very able, and fewer boys than girls think they are "below average"'. Yet GCSE results show these perceptions to be the reverse of the truth. Boys feel that they are bright and capable but at the same time they keep stating that they don't like school and that they don't work hard. Girls, on the other hand, lack confidence in their ability, feel undervalued and see teachers spending more time with the boys than with them.

More research is coming to the conclusion that the differences in the achievement of girls and boys is due to the differing ways in which the genders behave and spend their spare time. To simplify and generalise: while boys run around kicking footballs, playing sports or computer games and engaging in other aspects of 'laddish' behaviour, girls are more likely to read or to stand around *talking*. Girls relate to one other by talking, while boys often relate to their peers by *doing*. The value of talking, even if it is about the heart-throb of Year 11, is that it uses a key skill that is needed at school and in many non-manual, service-sector jobs: verbal reasoning. Peter Douglas argues: 'School is essentially a linguistic experience and most subjects require good levels of comprehension and writing skills.' Further research is revealing a picture of boys as viewing the crucial reading and linguistic skills as 'sissy'.

Boys don't like reading

Girls like reading while boys don't: boys see reading as a predominantly feminine activity, which is boring, not real work, a waste of time and to be avoided at all costs. The interrelationship between society and schooling is clear here. Reading is 'feminised' in our culture: women are not only the main consumers of reading in our society, but they also carry the responsibility for

continued

disseminating reading — it is women who read, talk about and ‘spread the word’ about books. The consequences of this are that there are very few positive role models for boys. Research has shown that boys tend to stop being interested in reading at about the age of eight.

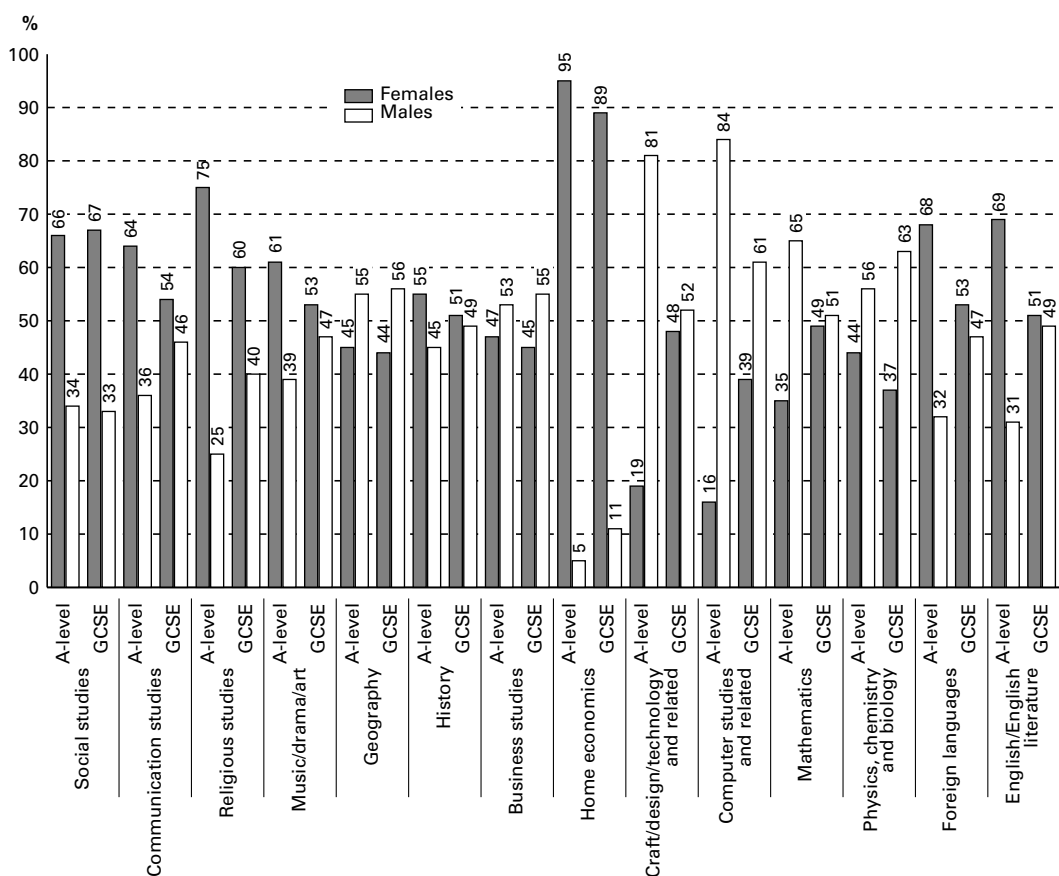
Girls and boys also tend to read different things: girls read fiction while boys read for information. Schools tend to reproduce this gendered divide: fiction tends to be the main means of learning to read in the primary school years and this puts girls at an early advantage.

Why do males and females still tend to do different subjects?

As Figures 1 and 2 and Table 1 show, there is still a difference between the subjects that males and females do at GCSE and above. Females are still more likely to take arts subjects, like English literature, history, foreign languages and sociology, and males are more likely to take scientific and

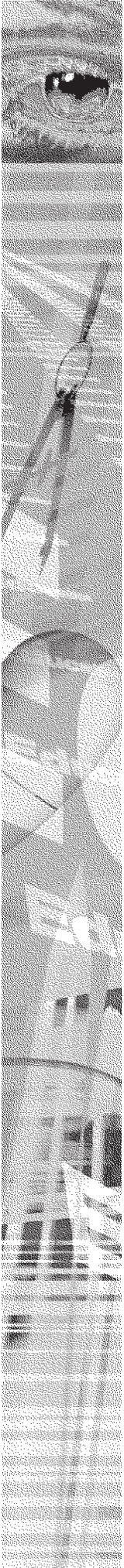
technological subjects — particularly at A-level and above (even though girls generally get better results when they do take them). This is despite the National Curriculum, which makes maths, English and science compulsory for all students. However, even within the National Curriculum, there are gender differences in option choices. For example, girls are more likely to take home economics, textiles and food technology, while boys are more likely to opt for electronics, woodwork or graphics. How can we explain these differences?

First, *gender socialisation* from an early age encourages boys and girls to play with different toys and do different activities around the home, and they very often grow up seeing their parents playing different roles in the home. Such socialisation may encourage boys to develop more interest in technical and scientific subjects and to discourage girls from taking them. In giving subject and career advice, teachers may be reflecting their own socialisation and expectations



Source: Data from DFE, *Separate Tables*, 1997.

Figure 2 Percentage of entries by subject and sex, GCSE and A-level



Topic 4 Gender, sexuality and education

continued

and reinforcing the different experiences of boys and girls by counselling them into different subject options, according to their own gender stereotypes of 'suitable subjects'.

Second, science and the science classroom is still seen as mainly 'masculine'. Boys tend to dominate science classrooms — grabbing apparatus first, answering questions directed at girls and so on, which all undermine girls' confidence and intimidate them, so that they do not take these subjects. Gender stereotyping is still found in textbooks, with the 'invisibility' of females particularly obvious in maths and science textbooks. This reinforces the view that these are 'male' subjects.

The male identity crisis

In the face of girls' marked disadvantages, such as underrating themselves and lacking confidence in their ability, getting less of teachers' time and having to tolerate the dominance of boys in the classroom, it is perhaps surprising that they tend to do much better at school than boys. The reasons for boys' underachievement have to be placed firmly in the changing nature of men's position in society. The change has come about because of economic and political changes, but also because of a rise in women's expectations. This has brought on an *identity crisis* for men, who feel unsure about their role and position: this insecurity is reflected in schools, where boys don't see the point in working hard and trying to achieve. The future looks bleak and without clear purpose to them.

We must not forget, however, that it is still men who hold most of the highly paid, powerful positions in society — it is still mainly men who pull the strings and 'run' our society. Women go out to

work more than they used to and they now make up about half the workforce. However, research has shown that in the home gender roles have not changed that much: women now not only go out to paid work a lot more, but they still have the majority of the burden of housework and childcare.

We cannot predict what the future holds, but it is to be hoped that women will not continue with the triple burden of housework, childcare and jobs that increasingly reflect their high achievement at school, while working-class men continue with poor employment prospects or unemployment and while middle-class men continue to hold the majority of positions of power and control in society. 'Girl power' needs to go beyond the Spice Girls and media hype, with women achieving positions in society which are commensurate with their educational achievements.

References and further reading

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Exercise

Information from this article can be used directly to interpret your own experiences at school or college. Can you identify ways in which boys and girls are treated differently by teachers, for example? Do boys have a different attitude to school work and to different subjects? Do they behave differently in class? Look at the number of male and female students who study different subjects; are some subjects heavily 'gendered'? Keep examples from your own experiences to highlight your essays and discussion.