

Row over gender-gap in Britain's exam results conceals more than it reveals

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Last month's announcement of examination results for secondary school pupils sparked a strange discussion in Britain's government and media.

For several years the Advanced-level examination results ("A-level"—normally taken at 17/18 years of age after two years of study) has led to hostile exchanges between government and business. The government has trumpeted that the year-on-year improvement in results proves that it is raising standards in education, whilst business has complained that exams have become easier and that there is a lowering of the academic "gold standard".

This year's results, which recorded a one percent rise in the overall pass rate, had an additional twist—the improvement in girls' results. For the first time in 49 years of A-level exams, girls narrowly eclipsed boys in the top grades, with 18.1 percent achieving A grades, 19.9 percent gaining B and 21 percent C grades. Boys by contrast achieved 17.8 percent, 18.2 percent and 20.6 percent respectively. This was the first year that a detailed gender breakdown has been released.

When the GCSE results (General Certificate of Secondary Education—examinations taken at age 15/16 usually after two years of study) were published a week later, showing that girls accounted for 61.1 percent of all top A* to C grade passes, compared to 51.9 percent for boys, one could be forgiven for thinking a major social disaster had occurred.

The education "gender-gap" became the most talked about issue of the day. The press was filled with articles on "girl power", "women—the new men?" or "men—the new women?" and equally superficially denunciations of magazines such as *Loaded* and *FHM* for promoting crude sexist culture as the root cause of educational underachievement.

In apocalyptic tones, commentators warned of an impending male backlash against women. Labour's Secretary of State for Education David Blunkett made a typical knee-jerk response by promising that the government would look into the question of re-introducing single-sex schools/classes to remedy the situation. He ordered all Local Education Authorities in England and Wales to provide progress reports outlining what they are doing to tackle boys' "under-achievement".

No one saw fit to point out that the basic premise of the entire discussion was spurious, as it rests on the simple identification

of examination results with intelligence. Exam results only act as a rough measure of knowledge. Ultimately, all they can evaluate is a person's ability to retain certain information and to perform under pressure. Based on these highly circumscribed criteria, the most it is possible to draw from an initial appraisal of the recent exam results was that girls have slightly improved whilst boys have remained static.

What accounts for the panic, then? In large part, there is a concern that past efforts to establish a more equitable educational framework have gone too far. Speaking on the overall improvements in results, Ruth Lea, policy director at the Institute of Directors, condemned the introduction of modular testing, in which students are examined at the end of each course element rather than at the end of a two-year period of study. The "shift towards coursework is a retrograde step", Lea asserted. Others bemoaned the introduction of a vocational element into examinations for leading to a "dumbing down".

Such complaints express deep-rooted class prejudices. Historically, Britain's ruling elite has sought to maintain a sharp distinction between academic and vocational qualifications, with the latter regarded as clearly "second class". The education system was structured to perpetuate a so-called "natural order" in which learned gentlemen governed, and the rest were governed over. Naturally, vocational qualifications were deemed to be the preserve of the lower social classes.

Between World Wars, the "eleven-plus" examination was developed to determine in which type of secondary school a pupil's education would continue from age 12. The academically gifted found a place in Grammar Schools, and were expected to go on to university. The rest usually attended a "Secondary Modern" with lower academic standards and did not go on to university. Those from better off homes almost universally fared better in the eleven-plus exam.

By the 1960s it became obvious that such prejudices were damaging the long-term interests of British capitalism. A combination of rapid developments in technology, the need to raise productivity and the grip of egalitarian ideals on popular consciousness led to several changes, including a concerted effort to open up universities to more working class students and the establishment of Polytechnics, aimed at providing technical/practical skills at degree level.

Gradually the two-tier system of Grammar and Secondary Modern schools was largely eliminated and replaced by all-ability Comprehensive Schools. It was not until as late as 1990 that testing controversially moved away from being wholly exam-based to a mix of exam and course work. This was in an effort both to aid girls who were seen as under-performers in exams and to establish a more scientific measure of general intelligence.

These progressive, albeit limited, measures were bitterly resented by sections of the British establishment who have seized on the latest exam results to vent their prejudices once again. Conservative Party Education Secretary Theresa May spoke for these layers when she blamed the "gender gap" on interfering "efforts to encourage girls to do well at school"!

Business also has cause for concern. Almost 30 years after sex equality was formally established in the workplace, women continue to be paid just two-thirds of men's wages. Industry is geared to capitalising on such inequalities. With women forming an ever-greater proportion of the work force, such differentials guarantee a plentiful supply of cheaper female labour and act to depress both sexes' wage rates. One article asked nervously, in light of the improvement in girls' results, "what if women start demanding more?"

It would be wrong to portray the furore over the "gender gap" in exam results as being simply motivated by barely concealed chauvinism, however. Underlying many of the public pronouncements is a rarely voiced fear of the political implications of the growing social divide expressed in this year's exam results.

The concentration on gender serves to obscure the fact that differences in educational attainment between the sexes are relatively minor. Those taking A-level examinations are already a minority, being students deemed to be high achievers based on their GCSE results.

Whatever the relative performance of boys and girls, the major determinant in exam outcomes is still social class.

Students from working class backgrounds of both sexes are three times less likely to have gained two or more A-levels and five times less likely to go on to university than their better off classmates. A study produced by the Institute of Education based on 16,000 British adults born in 1958 and 1970, "Obstacles and Opportunities on the Route to Adulthood"; found that social background and poverty remain the most significant factors determining educational attainment. The educational level a working class child will reach is generally sealed by age 13, the report said. "Only massive investment in children is going to reverse the trend to social exclusion for many of them," its authors concluded.

Amidst the media hype over the exam results, Blunkett hinted at this social reality when he identified "problem boys" specifically as those from working class families. He quickly passed on to next business, however, and little wonder; Labour argues that "poverty is no excuse" for low educational

attainment. It has placed the emphasis on individual motivation, even to the extent that 5-year-olds are expected to sign school "contracts" governing behaviour, homework, etc.

The relatively poorer educational performance of boys compared to girls is certainly a legitimate matter for concern. However, it is an international trend. The reasons are complex and varied, and warrant serious investigation. But to seek answers primarily in biological make-up at the expense of the social environment is retrogressive, and leads to the type of false polemic that has dominated Britain's media in the past weeks.

The fact remains that no student of either gender is well-served by the overbearing concentration on exam performance that currently predominates in the school system, thanks to the misnamed educational "reforms" instigated by the Conservatives and Labour over the past two decades. Both parties have sought to reverse earlier efforts to promote a more rational and child-centred system, whilst presiding over an unprecedented growth in poverty and social breakdown that has inevitably impacted on children's education.

The effect of these changes would be an area worthy of immediate investigation. For example, large class sizes, constant testing and intra-school competition resulting from the introduction of "league tables" means the emphasis is on students being disciplined, quiet and still. Those who find it hard to concentrate, or those who become bored and restless are considered troublesome and are often simply removed. It is a bitter truth that such proscriptions have had a disproportionate effect on boys, who now account for 81 percent of all school exclusions and the majority of all truants.

No parent, however, should allow their concerns for their children to be focused exclusively on narrow considerations of how best to ensure they achieve "good grades". The future of today's young people depends upon a thoroughgoing and informed questioning of an education system that is deeply flawed and aimed at preserving a social system that perpetuates inequality. It means returning again, and with renewed force, to a public championing of academic excellence, creativity, scientific rigor, artistic and intellectual freedom for all children—so that each can fulfil his or her true potential as human beings.



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