

# Gender educational performance



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## **Gender Educational Performance**

Does gender affect educational performance in the primary school?

Gender has increasingly become a growing concern for educationalists especially since the Women's Movement has become more prominent in our society. Gender has been considered in relation to many facets associated with education, ranging from examination results, subject choices to peer interaction. The research that has been conducted is not exhaustive and is very often open to criticism and review.

This is primarily due to the fact that research into educational issues is regularly context specific and therefore, it is difficult to extract generalizations when there is little comparative data from related studies available. There is limited research on Faith Schools and Independent schools and not very much comparative data for analysis between co-educational schools and single-sex schools. This creates a very difficult situation when trying to ascertain whether gender affects educational performance as opposed to the type of educational experience (Delamont, 1992).

There is a substantial amount of data and analysis that is accessible detailing the relative abilities of boys and girls across core subjects, year groups, classes and cohorts. In Key Stages One and Two, SATS are undertaken in Year 2 and 6, with schools opting to take optional QCA assessment tests in Years 3, 4, and 5. In addition data is available from the Fisher Family Trust, which provides value-added data of comparative gender achievements.

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Certainly, from studying performance profiles for boys and girls achievements in National Curriculum tests and GCSE results, it is evident that there is a gender gap in pupil's results (Younger and Warrington). This gap is more pronounced at secondary school level.

In Great Britain, the vast proportion of research that has been undertaken into gender and educational performance has been mainly concentrated in secondary schools; this my study will hope to rectify. I will be purposely researching a region that has received very little previous investigation so as to supply context specific data which can then be used for comparative analysis in future research studies.

It is important to challenge what is meant by achievement. Not all pupils are able to attain the level that is expected of them according to their age. It is universally accepted that all children are able to make some progress and acknowledgement of this fact must be given. To this end, measures of absolute attainment must be balanced with a child's contextual value added score. This is where each child's starting point is taken into consideration when tracking their achievements.

Other factors that the school has no control over, for example, gender, EAL, ethnicity, family circumstances are also taken into account because they have been found to have an influence on a child's performance (DCSF, 2008). CVA scores will help allow make comparisons between schools more valid. My research will utilize Raise online to provide contextual data (OFSTED, 2008)

My research intends to look outside the usual conditions of maintained schools in England and Wales to assess the affects that working in single gender contexts might have on learners. It is a study, where no residual hypotheses will be tested and no pre-conceived ideas implanted in the study. It will comprise one over-arching question - what effects will a single sex cohort have on pupil performance at Primary School level?

Whilst gender is different from the sex of a person, they are both linked closely together socially as well as psychologically and this implies that data in gender stereotyping is just as relevant in the analysis of test results which appear to confirm established gender roles, namely subjects such as Science are for boys; English is for girls. Sikes informs us that, ' The independent, given view of reality might be that any differences in intellectual ability and aptitude between boys and girls...are mainly the result of natural, biological, physiological and hormonal causes.... A social constructivist view, however, might explain differences in terms of socialization, as the outcome of different expectations, experiences and ways of being treated...' (2004, pg 21).

In the first instance it is important to indicate the role of this study, and what contribution it - and studies like it - could make to better understanding of the needs of learners. Similarly, it will not be presumed that gender will make a difference to children's attainment; for future comparative analysis, an insignificant effect is just as important as finding a large difference. The results from the research should be adaptable to enable the project to be beneficial to future researchers.

**What methodology is available?**

Research can be undertaken in a number of different formats. Cohen et al. consider that, ‘ There is no single blueprint for planning research. Research design is governed by the notion of “ fitness for purpose”’ The purposes of the research determine the methodology and design of the research.’ (Cohen et al, 2007).

A decision has to be made as to whether it is going to be a quantitative or qualitative research paradigm, (positivist or phenomenological). This does not mean that the two methods have to be in opposition and no prior assumptions as to the two approaches relative importance should be made. Muijs points out, ‘ To ascribe radical subjectivist views to all quantitative researchers is a fallacy. To label all quantitative researchers positivists is equally inaccurate.’ (Muijs 2004)

**What are the strengths and limitations of the methods available?**

Consideration will be given to considering the strengths and weaknesses of different methods available in relation to the desired outcomes, which Cohen et al. characterize as ‘... those decisions which set the boundaries of the research.’ (Cohen et al, 2007)

Thought needs to be given to: what are the implications and consequences of a qualitative or quantitative approach for researching this topic? What form of enquiry should be used so that the relevant data is obtained, and draws attention to any issues?

As previously mentioned results that can be measured quantitatively (for example, SAT’s results), are readily available, however, a chronological

spread is required so that observable contrasts in attainment can be highlighted, or that they indicate that important modifications in teaching and learning are required.

**The research and methodology will concentrate on quantitative methods plus an attitudinal survey, with the proviso that positivist aspects could be included in a larger scale research study at a later date. It is now necessary to plan what format the questions will take, and determine what medium they will be transmitted in. Smith et al. disapprove of the ‘... analysis of boys and girls as homogeneous groups...’ (2007, pp. 455-471). This view is reinforced by Cohen et al. when they draw attention to ‘representativeness and parameters of the sample’ as a major worry. (2007. pg 100)What methods will I choose and why?**

**Will the methods be appropriate to the specific research questions asked?**

Data collection will mainly be by questionnaire and interview with differentiated weight attached to the responses as deemed appropriate. A variety of questions will be formulated so as to give an extensive range and quality of responses – they will be reflective by means of the questionnaires and discursive through the use of interviews. When deciding on the pupils who will be involved in the research, consideration needs to be given not only to their gender but their approach to learning in general.

As previously mentioned it may be possible to explain gender achievement in relation to attitude, ability, English as an additional language, family circumstances or other reasons. These are all acceptable and valid considerations, but they could prove to be confounding variables in relation to this research.

This means that each sample of children should be of a similar ability level, (within the level statements) and in addition they should have made comparable progress through value-added data. This should not

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automatically exclude SEN or EAL pupils but it is important that their profiles are as long as their profiles are consistent.

Will the methods be realistic? Will they be managed? How long will it need? Will human and physical resources be required?)

Firstly, it will be necessary to obtain the Headteacher's permission and once this has been achieved a decision has to be made whether it is deemed necessary to get parental permission. Consent and communication between the researchers and subjects is of paramount importance to ensure that there are no ethical issues, especially if the study is going to be published at a later date. (Cohen *et al* , 1994, p. 351, 375).

Discussions and consultation will be made with the School Assessment coordinator, respective year group leaders, class teachers and the School special needs coordinator. It will be necessary to study statutory and school class records that have been collated. Once again, high ethical standards and levels of integrity are of paramount importance. This is reinforced by Cohen *et al* (2007), who believe that ethical practices must be adhered to.

My research proposes to work with Year 5 pupils. The same Maths, Science and English lessons will be taught by the same teacher to two gendered groups of pupils over a term. Observations will be made as to how the pupils behave independently and how they interact and support others in group work.

The pupils will be asked to reflect on their experience. Subsequently, and following the assigned medium term plan, the same sample of pupils will be

split into two mixed gender classes where there are an equal number of girls to boys. Similarly, the same Maths, Science and English lesson will be taught by the same teacher to both groups, again for a term.

The children will then answer a questionnaire about their experience as well as have an individual interview on the experience.

To avoid leading questions and observer bias, the subject of gender will not be introduced. Instead the interviewee will concentrate on the quality of the learning experience that each child underwent. The questions will take the following format:

- Which lesson did you learn the most in?
- Which lesson did you enjoy most?
- What kind of lessons would you like have in the future?
- Did you achieve the Learning intention of the lesson?

From these questions it is hoped that the children will refer to the gender issue. If so, it is thought that it will be more valid than if ‘guided’ questions were asked; guided questions could well lead to observer/response bias. The answers to the questions will also reveal approaches to teamwork, and the ability to interact and empathize. An informal interview can be constructive by bringing to light more understated influences, inferences and options that have not been considered (Cohen et al, 2007).

The personal contact between the researcher and subject is beneficial because any ambiguities can be clarified immediately and response is guaranteed which is not so when research methods involve such procedures



as postal questionnaires. In the school environment, success revolves around respect, tolerance and helping others. This research aims to find out if single sex classes assist the learning process and aids pupil achievement.

### **Conclusion**

This research proposes how I would conduct a research into how primary pupils perform in the altered contexts of single gender, or co-educational settings. It is primarily a study of how socialization affects learning according to gender.

The results of this research obtained will be context specific. The choice of Maths, Science and English subjects to base the study on meant that a quantitative approach could be added through the use of end of term summative assessments. Also, they are subjects in which learning and ability are frequently considered to be related to gender.

It is considered that this research will complement, stimulate and support future research in this area and will validate all costs and organisation deemed necessary. The research will develop our comprehension of how gender influences educational achievement, knowledge essential so that we can examine gender within the school environment but furthermore so that it can be used by the government if they feel there is a need to remedy any gender base disparities.

The methodology that I have described will emphasize the subtle relations of gender stereotyping, gender and educational achievement. This research which will indicate if any future course of action is deemed necessary as a result of my findings.

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