

Gender differences within the education system



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The Education System consists of all school types, from pre-schools to universities all over the world. There are many different types of gender differences within the education system including: academic, social, emotional and behavioural.

Academic gender differences are one of the most highly researched topics within the educational system. Within this essay I will discuss the widening gap between gender and achievement, and try to explain why these differences may be apparent, and how to change them.

Research shows that academic gender differences are evident from 3 years of age. Statistics from the Foundation Stage Profile Results for England for 2007-08 show that girls outperform boys in all 13 assessment scales. The main gap areas are

- social development (10% difference between genders)
- emotional development (11%)
- linking sounds and letters (11%)
- writing (18%)
- reading (11%)
- creative development (14%) (Steve Maynard, Gender differences in school, 2008)

During the 70's when academic achievement was being investigated research was showing that girls were underachieving, they did less well in GCE exams, left school earlier than boys and were less likely to go to university.

The main view was that gender differences were natural and unalterable, known as the Biological Deterministic approach. This may suggest why boys and girls were treated differently within the education system, as their adult roles were different i. e. men go out to work and women are home-makers, therefore not needing qualifications.

However, if this is the case it is important to address why research within the past decade, evidently shows an increasing gender achievement gap with male students lagging behind females on a number of important indicators of school success. (Clark. M, Flower. K, Walton. J, Oakley. E., 2008). It could be argued that this is down to the changing views of society, along with the introduction of a compulsory national curriculum where both girls and boys were required to take foreign languages, English, sciences and maths. According to Wilkinson (1994) the “ Genderquake” has a major part to play in the success of women within education today. He states that fundamental changes in attitudes towards female roles in society, have lead women to have a more positive attitude towards education as a means of improving their chances of success at work.

A report from the Rowntree Foundation (2007) found that academic gender differences can continue up to age 16, showing that boys outnumber girls by 20% as low achievers at GCSE.

Van Houtte (2004) suggests this may be due to the fact that males have a less study orientated culture than females. This would explain why achievement is higher in vocational and technical courses such as business

studies, IT, geography (where more boys enter) and in separate sciences – a more hands on approach to learning – in males than females.

Berg and Klinger (2009) found that subject performance is often associated with gender-specific stereotypes, and self-perceptions – such as reading for girls and maths for boys. This may explain why one of the only academic subjects males seem to have out performed girls in is mathematics. Many studies show that mathematical achievement is a male dominated subject.

A study in 2008, (Van de gaer, Pustjens, Van Damme. & De Munter.) amongst Flemish students showed that boys performance in maths is linked to their participation within that subject – boys participate in maths classes more than girls.

Further support for the above points comes from (Kyong Hee Chee, 2005) whose analysis indicated that women are more likely to possess an academic ethic than men. They also found that women tend to have higher Grade Point Averages (GPA's). They found GPA's to be positively associated with active participation in extra-curricular groups and clubs, and GPA was negatively related to employment for men.

These results pose the question in why there is such a large gap in achievement between genders?

Experts say that the reason for this may be down to the difference in nature and nurturing between girls and boys. Genetic theories state that females excel in language based subjects due to their greater verbal and reasoning abilities, where as males have a high level of innate spatial ability, increasing

their understanding of shape and form. As girls start to talk, read (read more often) and develop fine motor skills earlier than boys, they also progress quicker and develop more positive attitudes, they are generally better equipped for the start of formal schooling than boys. Once in school, girls tend to be more task-focused – more methodical and conscientious, and far better at tackling coursework. Boys tend to be action-oriented – impatient, imaginative, and inclined to take risks. They develop fine motor skills later than girls, and their learning and motivational skills are different. (Duffy, M. 2002)

There have been many discussions about how to close the gap between gender and achievement. This has included changing the ways that children learn, and it has been suggested that more male teachers in primary schools could help boys within their achievement. It has been argued that women teachers talk too much causing boys to “switch-off”. Celia Lashlie, author of “He’ll Be Okay” states that women teachers need to talk in lower pitches when teaching and use more non-verbal cues – like males do. Male can be seen as positive role models towards education teachers can break down assumptions such as reading is for girls. (Times Educational Supplement)

There are many campaigns in place to encourage boys to read, such as Welsh rugby players promoting reading within schools and libraries. Maloney (2002) states that boys like to read books that reflect themselves and who they aspire to be and appeal to their sense of humour. Interestingly, boys enjoy looking at newspapers, magazines and comic books but do not consider this reading, as these materials aren’t valued in school. It is

therefore important that to encourage reading and literacy skills, schools need to provide enough material for boys to want to read.

The most recent idea, that supports previous research findings is to change assessments to suit each of the genders needs.

AQA, the UK's largest school exam board, propose developing gender-specific alternatives, that are tailor made for girls and boys, to GCSE's. It has been suggested that these new key-stage 4 qualifications in English, Maths and Science could be taught as early as 2011, with coursework options for girls and more traditional exams aimed at boys.

AQA's director of curriculum and assessment, said: " We could offer a route for boys that is very different to a route for girls. Girls tend to perform better with coursework while boys do better with end-of-year exams. So we are pursuing that in science to see if we could have an option in science where we might have a straightforward examination for boys but a possibility of having a coursework option for girls." (Bill Alexander 2010, TES).

Even though the research within this essay often has a large sample size, and seems to have the same effect across cultures, It has been argued that, although research has shown that by the age of seven, some boys are almost two and a half years behind their brightest female class mates, gender is only a small part of academic gender gap, and factors such as poverty, ethnicity and birth season have a larger effect on a child's academic achievement.

The analysis conducted in 2000, revealed that the most disadvantaged pupils are male from a poor, ethnic-minority background, born in the summer, never went to nursery and spent their primary years moving from school to school. These children were more than two years behind more socially-advantaged, winter-born, female classmates. (Birmingham's Education Authority)

Also, biological theories for gender differences within education, can be strongly criticised. Genetic explanation can not explain how gender differences have narrowed between mathematics and science based subjects since the 1980's. Arguably, if these differences were genetic they would be expected to remain constant. Kelly (1982) suggests that the types of toys children play with can be attributed to the differences in spatiality ability.

Further support for this point comes from Sharpe (1976), who argues that childhood socialization plays a large part in masculine and feminine identity roles. This may suggest why women tended to stick to feminine subjects such as home economics, and art other than science and technology, which are seen masculine.

This provides further support for the views of the " Gender-quake" and the changing roles of women within society, henceforth the success of females academic achievement over males.

In conclusion, there are many reasons for academic gender differences within the education system, including the stereotypes and the views of gender roles within society. In order to close the gap that seems to be

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continuously growing, changing ways in which teaching is approached seems to be a logical solution. This includes the encouraging boys to read, as it has been suggested that due to a lack of reading boys are held back in their writing skills. Changing the ways in which assessment is carried out, may be more beneficial. (Times Educational Supplement)

As well as tailoring assessments to suit the needs of each gender, especially as boys seem to better in exams, especially those that are multiple choice due to their nature of risk-taking behaviour (Ramos, and Lambating, 1996) where as girls are more likely to excel in coursework . Another option is also allowing more hands on and vocational subjects onto the curriculum. In order to see if these options take effect, it is important for researchers to keep up to date with the current operations of the educational system and keep carrying out their research.

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