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ARE SCHOOLS FAILING BOYS?

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across a wide range of cultures, social systems and economies. This suggests that there is a common denominator - which could be genetic.

In the PISA reading tests of 15-year-olds, girls outscored boys by an average of 30 points within an overall mean of 487. Among the 76 countries,

Where there have been attempts to unravel the gender gap in exam performance, biological factors have tended to be overlooked or wilfully ignored. It is curious that while the medical benefits of greater genetic understanding are keenly anticipated, there is considerable reluctance to acknowledge that genes have anything at all to do with educational achievement.

Not infrequently, the evidence that there is has been disregarded. The 2014 House of Commons Education Select Committee inquiry into the educational underachievement of white working class boys heard from Robert Plomin, the distinguished

Even if biological differences in educability cannot not be ameliorated, a better understanding of them would make it possible for schools to tailor education to the potential that is there.

Accepting that some children are biologically more capable than others would, however, clash head-on with the present emphasis on fairness and equality. It would mean accepting that some children would be able to progress further and faster than others and would end up in different places. It might be thought a benefit to both them and us all to help them on their way, but this would be selection which is currently an anathema. In the circumstances, it might be thought better not to know about the biological influences.

Similarly with medical knowledge. Modern genomics holds out the prospect of accurately predicting susceptibility to diseases and the life span. This would enable . But many human beings just do not want to know and prefer to leave it to chance.

The current climate in universities has also to be taken into account. Academics have been backing away from researching and commenting on particular topics, because they do not want to provoke the wrath of students and fellow academics. If you can be hounded out of your post, as Professor Kathleen Stock, a distinguished philosopher, was from the University of Sussex for simply asserting that men and women are biologically different, then who knows what will light the better

Social

Social factors have considerable force. To appreciate this you only have to think of how different Christmas Day is from day. A clear example from education is the allocation of places to grammar schools when there was a national 11+. Passing the test earned entry to a much better school, which paved the way to university. Girls, on average, scored higher in the test, which should have led to more of the places, but the pass mark was set lower for boys to balance the intakes. This was justified by a narrative which said that, since boys matured later, this had to be allowed for in the admissions.

There is no doubt that boys at that time were more likely to stay on at school and go to university, and so it did appear that their talents were developing later. But drilling down into the data shows it was mainly a consequence of the different scripts that were written for boys and girls at the time.

The brightest pupil in my class at our East End co-educational grammar school was a girl. She had enviable talent and would have done extremely well at university. But her parents, like many others of that era, thought that anything beyond basic education was wasted on girls. They insisted that she left school at the earliest opportunity, got a job, and looked for a good marriage. Even the more ambitious parents of talented girls often
a more appropriate destination for their daughters than university.

Since the 1950s

Although it is obvious that there are social influences on academic achievement, it is difficult to be sure how important they are relative to other factors. Moreover, their importance will vary from situation to situation. If parents block the pathway to higher education, then this becomes the over-riding factor, but conversely their ambitions for their children may be thwarted by the necessary talent not being there. Thus either biology or society can be the kingpin.

We also have to take into account what happens in education itself.

Educational

It is widely felt that, with most teachers being female, education is somewhat slanted towards girls. The Covid-enforced switch from examinations to teacher assessment has provided a golden opportunity to test one aspect where this might be the case: do teachers assess girls more generously?

In the teacher-assessed 2021 GCSE results, girls were ahead in top grades by 9.0 percentage points against the 6.5 pp in the 2019 exams. At A-level, the corresponding differences were 4.8 pp and 0.1 pp.

In terms of individual subjects, at GCSE, boys were ahead in only two in 2021 against seven in 2019. Similarly, at A-level, four in 2021 down from nine in 2019. pp at A* in maths in 2019 all but disappeared in 2021.

In an analysis at school level, the largest increases in top grades were found in

It does look very much as though teachers do assess girls more generously.

Conclusion

We thus have possible biological, social and educational explanations for girls getting better GCSE and A-level grades, but we do not know which are real, nor their relative importance, nor how they interact. There is enough there though to suggest that schools may not be getting the best out of boys.

