

Why boys trail further behind girls at GCSE

Stephen Lambert

Thirty years ago girls did less well at school compared to boys at the age of 16 across Tyneside. Now, according to recent figures, it's the boys who are disadvantaged. Stephen Lambert examines some of the reasons behind this trend and what can be done to equalise it.

There are striking differences between the sexes in education, especially when it comes to taking GCSE exams at the age of 16. Although over 55 per cent of youngsters in Newcastle achieved five or more GCSEs at grades A to C, including maths and English, young men lag behind young women by a staggering 8 per cent. Girls have opened up the largest attainment gap over their male classmates in the top grades at GCSE since the A* was brought in. Nationally, some 20 per cent of boys were awarded an A in 2012 compared with 27 per cent of girls – a gap of 7 per cent. So what's going on, and is it all gloom and doom for young men at school in Newcastle?

Experts are divided as to the reason why young men are doing less well at every stage in the school system whilst young women are doing better than ever. First, there's some evidence that teachers are not as strict with boys as with girls. They are more likely to extend deadlines for submitted written work, to have lower expectations of young men, and tend to be more tolerant of low level anti-social behaviour in the classroom. Second, young men are generally more disruptive in class than young women. Four out of five permanent exclusions from school are boys! And third, there appears to be a growing 'laddish, anti-learning culture' amongst some working-class white boys in many of our inner city comprehensive schools.

Another key factor which has been cited by sociologists is the sharp decline in traditional male jobs. The region's deep-seated coal mines have gone and traditional industries which took on thousands of men such as shipbuilding thirty years ago have virtually disappeared. Given this huge change in the jobs market some working-class young men have given up and have become NEETs (those not in education, employment or training). As a result of these huge changes many lack

motivation and ambition. Many white young men now have low expectations, low self-esteem and low self-image. Too often this leads some working-class young men into anti-social behaviour or low levels of criminality. Although the number of unskilled jobs has rapidly declined in the last decade, employment opportunities for women in the service sector, despite the recession, have increased. As a result, young women have become more aspirational and are less likely to see having a home or family as their primary goal in life. In a post-industrial city like Newcastle, many young women from both middle-class and working-class backgrounds have mothers in paid jobs, who in turn provide positive role models for them. Many girls now acknowledge that their futures involve paid employment, often in conjunction with parental responsibilities. Young women in the city want jobs, a career and independence, and are more likely to attend college or university to attain these aims. 60 per cent of undergraduates at both Newcastle and Northumbria Universities are women – contrast that to when I was at Warwick University between 1978 and 1981, where women made up 35 per cent of undergraduates.

Also, there is mounting evidence that girls work harder at school and are better motivated. Coursework at GCSE and at A-level seems to suit them rather than end-of-year exams. Girls put more energy into their written work and spend more time on carrying out their homework thoroughly. They tend to be better organised than boys and take pride in the presentation of their academic work. Finally, by the age of 16 young women are more mature than boys by up to two years, according to some experts. Put simply, girls are likely to view exams in a far more responsible and serious way.

Recent research from Michael Barber reveals that 'more boys than girls think that they are able, and fewer boys than girls think they are below average'. Yet recent GCSE results show these views to be quite the opposite of the truth, as the previous figures indicate. Barber's work is fast coming to the conclusion that the gender attainment gap is due to the differing ways in which the sexes behave and spend their leisure time. While boys are obsessed

with computers and engaging in other aspects of 'laddish conduct', girls are more likely to read or stand around communicating verbally. Although IT plays a key role in pupils' educational experience, its virtues must not be over-stated. Take the smart-board, for instance. What's wrong with a simple whiteboard to convey key points?

It's become clear that many boys simply don't like reading. They see it as a feminine activity which is a dull waste of time and not real work. Nothing could be further from the truth. Reading a book has become a 'feminised' activity. Most library readers are women, but they also take responsibility for highlighting the value of reading to their kids. Alarmingly, research has shown that boys stop being interested in reading at the age of eight! Furthermore, the advent of IT and computer games is partly to blame for this phenomenon.

So what can be done to boost working-class male achievement at school? Boys-only classes is one possibility. Less reliance on ICT in schools could be another, and giving reading and writing the status it deserves. But perhaps, above all, we need to give vocational education the status it deserves in schools and colleges, and not see it as second best. The bottom line is that many young men simply don't want to go to university, despite Tony Blair's policy aim to get over half of all 18 year-olds into university. Rather, many would like to take an apprenticeship at 18 with real educational and vocational value. Britain can learn a lot from Germany, a successful economy with low levels of unemployment or NEETs, where vocational education and apprenticeships are seen as the norm and carry equal status to university degrees.
