Year 1 Sociology

**Paper 1: Education with Theory & Methods**



Education

Booklet 5: Differential Educational Achievement of Social Groups: **Gender**

Specification Content:

**What you need to know for Education in your Paper 1 exam:**

You will be expected to:

* The role and functions of the education system, including its relationship to the economy and to class structure
* Differential educational achievement of social groups by social class, gender and ethnicity in contemporary society
* Relationships and processes within schools, with particular reference to teacher/pupil relationships, pupil identities and subcultures, the hidden curriculum, and the organisation of teaching and learning
* The significance of educational policies, including policies of selection, marketisation and privatisation, and policies to achieve greater equality of opportunity or outcome, for an understanding of the structure, role, impact and experience of and access to education; the impact of globalisation on educational policy.

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| **Questions may be based specifically on the following areas:** | Do I have completed Notes? | Have I made revision Notes? | Have I memorised this info? | Have I practised exam style questions? |
| **Social class differences and achievement** | Patterns and trends in educational achievement by social class e.g. in relation to GCSE results |  |  |  |  |
| External factors: explanations of class differences e.g cultural deprivation, material deprivation and cultural capital; plus evaluation |  |  |  |  |
| Internal factors: teacher labelling, self-fulfilling prophecy, pupil subcultures and pupils’ class identities |  |  |  |  |
| **Gender differences and achievement** | Patterns and trends in educational achievement by gender e.g. in relation to GCSE results |  |  |  |  |
| External factors: changes in the family and labour market affecting women and men; influence of feminism |  |  |  |  |
| Internal factors: curriculum selection and marketisation, feminism of education, pupil subcultures, gender identities, subject choice |  |  |  |  |
| **Ethnic differences and achievement** | Patterns and trends in educational achievement by ethnicity e.g. in relation to GCSE results |  |  |  |  |
| External factors: cultural deprivation, material deprivation and racism in wider society |  |  |  |  |
| Internal factors: racist labelling, self-fulfilling prophecy, pupil subcultural responses, ethnic identities, institutional racism, ethnocentric curriculum |  |  |  |  |

Exam Structure:

**This topic will appear on Paper 1 at A Level**

The A-level Paper 1 will be 2 hours long, contain 80 marks and be worth a third of your A Level. You will be assessed via short answer and extended writing questions in the following areas:

* **Education**: short answer and extended writing worth 50 marks
* **Methods In Context**: extended writing worth 20 marks
* **Theory and Methods**: extended writing worth 10 marks

**Area 3: Gender Differences and Achievement**



By the end of this section, should be able to:

* Identify the trends and patterns of gender differences in educational achievement
* Describe and evaluate explanations of gender differences in educational achievement in relation to **external factors**, e.g. changes in the family.
* Describe and evaluate sociological explanations of ethnic differences in achievement in relation to **internal factors** e.g. feminisation of education.
* Describe and evaluate reasons for gender differences in subject choice
* ![C:\Users\norria.ST-AIDANS.002\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary Internet Files\Content.IE5\UCDR24VP\MP900442480[1].jpg]()Understand the effect of school experiences in shaping gender identities

Patterns and trends in educational achievement by gender

Gender and education, some facts and figures.

* Girls do better than boys at every stage in the National Curriculum Tests (SATs)
* Girls are more successful than boys in most GCSE subjects but boys are catching up each year.
* In GCSE English the gender gap is huge. 70% of girls get A\* - C compared to 54 % of boys (2014).
* In 2013, 66 % of girls got 5 or more GCSEs grades A\* - C (including Maths and English) compared to 56% of boys.
* A higher proportion of girls stay in 6th form and stay in education after 18.
* Female school leavers are more likely to have 3 or more A Level passes than males and on average get higher point scores.
* Female students are more likely to get 1st class and upper 2nd degrees (the highest degree marks)
* On starting school teacher assessment showed that girls are ahead of boys.

*Suggest some possible reasons of why there are gender differences in achievement:*

Official statistics provide evidence of differences in the achievements of girls and boys at several important stages of their education.

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On starting school, children are given baseline assessments. A national survey (2013) of 6953 children showed that girls scored higher in all tests (between 7 and 17% points) compared to boys. Girls were also more able to concentrate without supervision for longer.

At Key stage 1 to 3, girls do consistently better than boys, particularly in English, where the gap widens with age. In Science and Maths, the gender gap is narrower, but still girls perform better.

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At GCSE, the gender gaps stands at around 10% for instance in 2013, the A\*-C pass rate for girls was 72% whilst boys was 64% (DfES).

At AS and A level, girls are more likely to sit, pass and get higher grades, though the gap is narrower than at GCSE. In 2013 for example, 46.8% of girls gained A or B grades at A-Level, but only 42.2% of boys. Girls were even more likely to get more A-C in 'boy' subjects like Maths and Science.

In relation to Higher Education, in 2006, 30% of 17 yr old boys and 37% of 17 yr old girls went on to higher education.

On average now, women tend to get better degrees than men.

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Explaining gender differences in educational achievement:

To explain gender differences in achievement, we need to break these reasons down in to internal factors (within school) and external factors (outside of school)

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| **External factors** | **Internal factors** |
| The impact of feminism |  Assessment - coursework |
| Changes in the family | Teacher attention and role models |
| Changes in women's employment | Boys and achievement |
| Girls' changing ambitions | Gender and subject choice |
|  | Gender identities |

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**Out of interest…**

Think back to primary school, were your teachers predominately

male or female?

What about high school?

What about now?

**Why do girls now do better than boys?**



**1. External factors** - why might girls be doing well?

**1. The impact of feminism (use p 52 – 53 of the textbook)**

Feminism is a social movement that strives for equal rights for women in all areas of life.

*In your view how were women 'traditionally' stereotyped before the 1960s?*

 Do you think this has changed? Why?

Even though feminists argue that we have not achieved full equality between the sexes, the feminist movement has had considerable success in improving women's rights and opportunities through changes in the law.

For example the equal pay act (1970) and sex discrimination act. These are laws which now make it law that men and women should have the same treatment in the work place. There is also the Equality Act 2010 which gives equal pay to men and women for equal work.

How would these changes in law make girls learn better at school?

Feminism as a result has raised women's expectations and self-esteem.

**Key Study: McRobbie (1994)** examined media messages from girls' magazines. In the 1970s, magazines emphasised the importance of getting married and not being 'left on the shelf'. Nowadays, girls' magazines contain images of assertive, independent women.

*How can feminism explain the changes in media messages in girls' magazines? Why could this affect their achievement in school?* .............................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................

**2. Changes in the family**

There have been major changes in the family since the 1970s. These include:

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These changes are affecting girls' attitudes towards education. For example, increased numbers of female-headed lone-parent families may mean more women need to take on the breadwinner role. Similarly the increase in divorce rates may lead girls to believe not to rely on a husband to be the provider. This in turn creates a new adult role model for girls - the financial independent woman.

*How could this lead to increases in achievement?*

**3. Changes in women's employment and growing ambitions for girls**

There have been important changes in women's employment in recent decades.

 Summarise these changes.

As a consequence, girls have become more ambitious, and they are less likely to see having a home and family as their main role in life. Many girls today have mothers working in paid employment, who provide positive role models for them. Many girls now recognise that the future involves paid employment, often combined with family responsibilities.

**Key Study:** **Sharpe (1994)**

Sue Sharpe (1976) carried out a study of working class girls - she found that their priorities for the future were, **'love, marriage, husbands, children, jobs and careers, more or less in that order'**.

She repeated her research in 1994, she found these priorities had changed to 'job, career and being able to support themselves'. She found these girls to be confident, assertive and ambitious.

In the 1970s 80% of the girls wanted marriage.

In the 1990s when this was repeated on 45% were focussed on marriage. This could be due to rising divorce rates.

 In the 1990s girls were still largely looking at ‘women’s jobs’ but were more likely to consider ‘men’s’ jobs than before.

*Why would this research explain why girls are performing better at school?*

**Key Study: Francis (2000)** carried out research involving observations of twelve classes of 14- to 16-years old and interviews with students in three London secondary schools in 1998-9. Her interviews **supports** Sharpe's findings, and she found many girls were very ambitious, aiming for higher professional qualifications like doctors and solicitors, rather than traditional female occupations like clerical work, hairdressing or beauty therapy.

***However****, this research was based on interviews - what could be a problem with using this method?*

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This shows that changes in the job market have meant more and more young women now expected to gain a degree qualification as a required for an interesting and rewarding career - this therefore motivates girls to do well and achieve at school in order to gain qualifications.

However....

These explanations may not explain ALL girls achievement in schools. There are important *class* differences in how far girls' ambitions have changed. **Biggart (2002**) found that working-class girls face an unstable position in the labour market and continue to have gender-stereotyped aspirations for marriage and children and expect to go into traditional low paid work. They see motherhood as the only viable option for their futures. Therefore, they see less point in being ambitious and achieving well at school.

**2. Internal factors – why girls might be doing well.**





**Around the pictures of school boys and school girls, consider in one colour how they might see themselves and in another colour how the teachers might view them. This is important for understanding what is below.**

**1. Educational policies**

Feminist ideas have had a major impact on the education system. Policymakers are more aware of gender issues and have created educational policies to help girls achieve.

![C:\Users\seedac\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary Internet Files\Content.IE5\G1WDFRGS\MC900278548[1].wmf]()Policies aimed at improving the position of girls:

* **GIST (Girls into Science and Technology)** and **WISE (Women into Science and Engineering)** encourage girls to pursue careers in these non-traditional areas. Female scientists visited schools to act as role models and science teachers have been encouraged to be more aware of gender issues and learning materials reflecting girls’ interests have been developed.
* The introduction of the National Curriculum in 1988 meant that it was compulsory for girls and boys to study the same subjects.
* Traditionally there were gender stereotypes in textbooks which may have created barriers to girls’ achievement. They may have seen women in their textbooks being shown as housewives and mothers but **Gaby Weiner (1995)** shows that since the 1980s teachers have challenged these stereotypes and sexist images have been removed from learning materials which may have raised achievement as girls have higher aspirations.

As a result, many of the barriers have been removed and schooling has become more meritocratic (based on equal opportunities) - so that girls, who generally work harder than boys, achieve more.

**2. Positive role models in schools**

There has been an increase in the proportion of female teachers and head teachers. For example, in 1992, the percentage of female teachers in secondary schools was 49%, compared to 61% by 2012 (House of Commons Library, 2013). These women in senior positions may act as role models for girls, showing that women can achieve positions of importance and giving them non-traditional goals to aim for. Women teachers are likely to play important role models for girls' educational achievement, as it shows girls that to become a teacher, the individual must undertake a lengthy and successful education them self.

**3. GCSE and coursework**

Sociologists argue that changes in the way pupils are assessed have favoured girls and disadvantaged boys. **Gorard (2005)** found that since the introduction of coursework in 1989, the gender gap in achievement increased sharply. Gorard concludes that the gender gap in achievement is a "product of the changed system of assessment rather than any more general failing of boys".

What four reasons did **Browne (1998)** use to explain why girls are more successful in coursework?

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Sociologists argue that these characteristics and skills that girls have could be the result of early gender role socialisation in the family. For example, girls are encouraged to be neat, tidy and patient. These qualities become an advantage in today's assessment system, helping girls achieve greater success than boys.

However....

**Elwood (2005)** argues that although coursework has some influence, it is unlikely to be the *only* cause of the gender gap because exams have much more influence on coursework on final grades.

**4. Teacher attention**

The way in which teachers interact with boys and girls differs. French (1993) looked at classroos and found that boys received more attention because they attracted more 'telling offs' from the teacher. Boys were disciplined more harshly and felt picked on by their teachers, who tended to have lower expectations of them.

**Swan (1998)** found gender differences in communication styles. Boys prefer whole-class discussions and often dominated these (e.g. interruptions); whereas girls prefer pair-work and group-work where they work at listening and cooperating (e.g. turn taking). This might explain why teachers respond more positively to girls (whom they see as cooperative), and more negatively to boys (whom they see as potentially disruptive). This can create a *self-fulfilling prophecy* for girls as these successful interactions with their teacher can boost their self-esteem and raise their attainment levels.

It is interesting that girls are more likely to see themselves as less able and boys have a higher opinion of themselves than how they actually do.

Barker (1996) showed that more boys think they are able or very able whereas more girls think they are below average.

In Francis’ consideration of 3 London secondary schools found that some boys thought it would be easy to do well in exams without needing effort. When boys do badly they tend to blame their teacher rather than their own lack of effort.

**5. Selection and league tables**

Marketisation policies have created a more competitive climate in which schools see girls as desirable recruits because they achieve better exam results.

*What does 'Marketisation' mean?*

*..............................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................*

 The introduction of exam league tables have improved opportunities for girls: high-achieving girls are attractive to schools, whereas low-achieving boys are not. This can create a self-fulfilling prophecy - because girls are more likely to be recruited by good schools, they are more likely to do well.

In contrast, boys are less attractive to schools because they are likely to suffer behavioural issues. For example, Slee (1998) found boys are 4 times more likely to be excluded from school. Therefore, boys may be seen as 'liability students' - obstacles to the school improving its league table scores.

**3. Other things to think about**

**Feminist views on achievement**

While there have clearly been changes in gender and educational achievement, sociologists differ in their interpretation of the importance of these changes.

Girls can be underconfident and get less attention from teachers BUT they still do better BUT they get worse jobs and still have to do more in the home even though they are working potentially as much as their male partners.

Task: Using page 55 of the textbook, investigate the differing views of liberal and radical feminists.

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| --- | --- |
| **Liberal** | **Radical** |
|  | http://www.newsrealblog.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/plentysister.jpg |

Francis 2005

Looked at how school is a mini society and stereotypes and men’s dominance are being played out in school so although girls are achieving they are learning, on top of primary socialisation that men are superior in these ways

1. Verbal – boys dominate the classroom, interrupt girls, ridicule their contributions and get more attentions from teachers which may lead to young men being more confident and seeing themselves as more important than their female peers. Boys belittle certain behaviours so this defines men as superior.
2. Physical – boys dominate more of the space in school, are more active at moving around the classroom and move around more of the playground whereas girls are more likely to stay in one place and chat.
3. Pursuits – girls tend to focus on their appearance and femininity to please boys whereas boys focus their attention on boasting about their own sexual exploits. Again this reinforces the idea that women are passive and men dominant. Girls who boast about sexual pursuits are in contrast seen in a negative light.
4. Classroom behaviour – girls help boys with their work and tidy up after them. Girls are often silenced by boys which again reinforces the idea about men as being dominant.
5. Teachers – have different ideas about pupils, see girls as being quiet / conformist / obedient and hard working, if they do not conform to this they get more heavily penalised than boys who are expected to be naughty – ‘boys will be boys’

Summarise in your own words what Francis shows about gender and education

**Why do boys underachieve? (combination of internal and external)**

P57 of textbook.

As well as the above factors, the relative improvement of females in education could partly be explained by the relative decline of male’s achievement. The underachievement of boys has been a matter of increasing concern. Boy’s performance has in fact been improving, but not as quickly as girls. This has sometimes been exaggerated in the media, and has caused a moral panic.

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| **Reason** | **How does it link to boys achievement** |
| * **Boys don’t like reading**

Girls read and talk about books. Women talk about books and recommend them to each other, this is not a male passtime. Mums are more likely to read to their children. After 8 years old research shows many boys stop reading. Girls tend to read fiction and boys tend to read fact books.  |  |
| * **Boys leisure activities in conflict with the feminisation of education**

Girls work harder and are more motivated. Research showed that 14 year old girls can concentrate for 3-4 times as long as their fellow male students. Boys are more likely to run around kicking balls and playing games. Girls more likely to read, talk.  | Boys are therefore at a disadvantage when it comes to completing coursework for example as girls are more organised and more able to self-motivate themselves.Boys are also at a disadvantage generally as the skills they have are less suited to school than girls are better as describing / debating and analysing which they have learnt through talk.  |
| * **Shortage of male primary school teachers**
 | **Evaluation**: However, Francis (2006) found that the absence of a male teacher is not a major factor in boys’ underachievement. She found that two-thirds of 7-8 years old believe the gender of the teacher does not matter. Also, Read (2008) found that female teachers are more likely to use a more ‘masculine’ disciplinarian discourse (authority is explicit e.g. shouting) to control pupils’ behaviour.  |
| * **Globalisation and the decline in traditional men’s jobs – male identity crisis**

**Remember Mac an Ghaill (1994) showed that there was a decline in working class jobs for men as factories closed.**  | This would have affected working class boys in particular as they would have had less focus on what they will do in the future, consequently undermining their motivation and self-esteem. It is worth noting that this explanation would not be effective in explaining underachievement of middle class boys. |

**TASK**: Use 2 colours to colour code which explanations are examples of *INTERNAL* factors, and which are examples of *EXTERNAL* factors.

**What about subcultures?**

**Boys and the anti – learning culture.**

Boys peer group pressure shows that the dominant identity is developed through resistance to school.

Academic work is seen as being feminine.

Boys may be ridiculed for working and be seen as being ‘girly’ of may be called ‘gay’

Remember Paul Willis? In ‘learning to labour’ we saw that academic success among those boys was in conflict with what those teenagers thought being a ‘man’ should be like.

**Key study**

**Debbie Epstein (1998): Laddish Culture**

She used interviews and questionnaires to study masculinity and femininity in 8 schools to find

* Academic work was seen as 'uncool' by boys
* School were dominated by a culture of toughness and masculinity
* Boys tended to mess around to impress their peers rather than concentrating on the work
* Some boys wanted to succeed but preferred to work at home so that they were not seen as 'uncool' by others
* Boys are likely to be harassed, labelled as 'sissies' and subjected to homophobic (anti-gay) verbal abuse if they appear to be 'swots'.

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**Policies aimed at improving boys’ achievement**

The Government has introduced a range of policies to improve boys' achievement:

* *Raising Boys’ Achievement Project* – this focuses on teaching strategies that might appeal to boys, including single sex teaching.
* The *Reading Champions* Scheme uses male role models to celebrate their own reading interests.
* *Playing for Success* uses football and other sports to boost learning skills and motivation among boys.
* The *Dads and Sons* campaign encourages fathers to be more involved with their sons’ education.

**Gender Differences in Subject Choice**

This is important because girls may choose subjects which are easier to do well in. Traditionally girls choose languages, food technology, English Language and Lit, whereas boys more likely to opt for Maths and Science and at GCSE identify more with these subjects. It can be harder to achieve higher grades in science and maths which may explain why girls do better? Why is there this difference?

**Key Study - Kelly (1987)** research has repeatedly shown that boys dominate science classrooms. They may grab the apparatus quicker and take the lead in experiments. There are more male science teachers and more male scientists in textbooks and on posters around the room.

We see a similar picture with computer science - Anne Colley (1998) found that computer science is seen as masculine, boys may like working with machines and girls may not enjoy the teaching style of those lessons preferring groupwork.

BUT it is interesting that subjects can change. Music was largely seen as female but as the curriculum has changed to include more technology more boys are interested in music.

**Use p 60 – 62 to make some notes in the chart below.**

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| **Gender role socialisation** | **Gendered subject images** |
| **Gender identity and peer pressure** | **Gendered career opportunities** |

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**Gender Identities and Schooling** – How schools reinforce gender.

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**6**

**Gender identities: class and girls' achievement**

But / However

P55 - 56

Even though research suggests that girls do better than boys in education, it is important to consider that note that not ALL girls achieve well in school. We need to consider a pupils’ social class: for example, in 2013, only 40.6% of girls from poorer families achieved five A\*-C GCSEs, compared to 67.5% of those from middle-class backgrounds. It is important that sociologists consider how a girl’s social class can also affect their gender identity at school.

**Archer (2010)** – a feminist – states that one reason for these class and gender differences is due to the conflict between working-class girls’ feminine identities and the values and ethos of the school. She found that working-class girls gain **symbolic capital** (refers to the status, recognition and sense of worth that we are able to obtain from others) from their peers; and this brings them into conflict with school, preventing them from acquiring educational capital (qualifications) and economic capital (middle-class careers).

Archer states that these girls have several strategies to help create a valued sense of self.

**TASK**: Summarise these below and explain how these can affect their achievement in schools:



*What about working-class girls who are successful and achieve in school? How is their gender identity shaped? (page 56)*

**Conclusion**

*What can we conclude from our topic about differential education achievement? (Class, gender and ethnicity)*

To understand the relationship between gender and achievement, we need to look at how it interacts with class and ethnicity as these will also have a powerful effect on achievement. We cannot consider any of these factors in isolation.

Research has shown that boys and girls from the same social class tend to achieve fairly similar results e.g. rarely any greater than 12 percentage points at GCSE. By contrast, pupils of the same gender but different social classes achieve widely different results. For example, girls from the highest social class can be as much as 44 points ahead of girls from the lowest social class. These figures show that *class* is a more important influence on pupils’ achievement than gender. It is also dependent also on the pupils’ ethnic group, e.g. Fuller found that black girls are more successful in schools because they define they femininity in terms of educational achievement and independence.

These examples suggest we need to consider an **interaction** between gender, class and ethnicity in order to gain a better understanding of differences in achievement. As Connolly (2006) suggests, certain combinations of gender, class and ethnicity have more effect than others. For example, being female raises performance more when ‘added to’ being black Caribbean than it does when ‘added to’ being white.

As well as considering the relationship of a child's gender, class and ethnicity influencing their achievement, it is also important we also consider an interaction of both internal and external factors rather than look at these in isolation.

 **Eye on the exam…**

* 1. Using one example, briefly explain how the 'male gaze' may affect pupils' experience of schooling (2 marks)
	2. Outline three reasons why girls generally achieve more highly than boys in education (6 marks)
	3. Outline and explain two reasons why girls and boys often choose to study different subjects (10 marks)

Examiners Advice:

**Q3** - Possible reasons can include early socialisation, gender domains, subject image, peer pressure, and gendered career opportunities. Describe in some detail each reason, explaining how it leads to a gendered choice of subjects.

**Item A:**

Sociologists have investigated a number of aspects of gender and education. Although it is clear that in most subjects, girls achieve better examination results than boys, girls' experience of schooling in other respects may be less positive. For example, there is evidence that schooling reinforces traditional gender identities. Some sociologists argue that this disadvantages girls.

* 1. Applying material from **Item A** and your knowledge, evaluate the claim that although girls outperform boys in terms of achievement, the experience of schooling reinforces traditional gender identities (30 marks)

Examiner’s Advice:

Aim to spend 45 minutes on this question. Begin by separating out the two issues in the question. Identify gender patterns in achievement and consider a range of explanations of them, including both internal and external factors. For the second part of the question, use material on subject choice, verbal abuse, peer groups, the male gaze and double standards, explaining how these may reinforce traditional identities. Use evidence from studies in your answer, e.g. Sharpe, Archer, Gorard etc.; and develop points noted in Item A. Develop evaluation, e.g. in relation to achievement, not all girls do well (consider class differences here). In relation to other aspects of education, consider how far schools reproduce patriarchy through reinforcing gender identities.

**Why boys trail further behind girls at GCSE top grades**

By Hannah Richardson BBC News education reporter 25 August 2011

  ys and girls achieved record results this year

**Girls have opened up the biggest achievement gap over their male classmates in the top grades at GCSE since the A\* was introduced.**

Some 19.8% of boys entries were awarded an A\* or an A this year compared with 26.5% of girls entries - a gap of 6.7 percentage points.

But education experts are warning against reading too much into the figures.

The achievement gap between boys and girls A\* to C grades has also widened on last year but narrowed in last week's A-level results.

Head teachers' leader Brian Lightman says: "Over time the girls improve and the boys improve, and the girls improve a bit more quickly, but it's not a question that anyone is failing."

But the Association of School and College Leaders head adds that girls at GCSE age are more mature and more able to see the longer-term consequences of hard work than boys, who respond better to having short-term goals.

Ian Toone, senior professional officer with the Voice teaching union, points out that this year sees the first set of results of the new-style GCSEs, which are broken down into separate units.

"Although this could help boys, as it means that they can cram for exams in short bursts, in practice it means that pupils need to perform consistently well throughout the whole two years of a GCSE course, and this kind of assiduous diligence is something at which girls tend to excel far more than boys."

He adds that GCSEs are achievement tests rather than measures of innate intelligence and thus favour pupils who apply themselves "in a dedicated and industrious manner".

"This is a trait which is more typical of girls than boys - who are more easily distracted and prefer to focus on one thing at a time," he claims.

But he acknowledges that there are other societal factors at play from early childhood.

"Boys are encouraged to be more active from an early age, whereas the restless movements of baby girls are pacified.

"Hence, girls develop the skill of sitting still for longer periods of time, which is useful for academic pursuits like studying for GCSEs."

**'Peer pressure'**

This is often evident right from when children start school, with girls tending to be more ready to sit down and concentrate on reading or writing than some boys.

Schools Minister Nick Gibb believes ensuring boys can read well in the early years is the answer.

"The gap often begins in primary schools, with poor reading skills a barrier. We need to intervene early on to make sure that boys can read well, and all the evidence from around the world shows that the systematic teaching of synthetic phonics is the best way to teach basic literacy skills," he says.

But Mr Toone adds: "Boys tend to cluster together in larger groups than girls and so are more likely to be influenced by peer pressure and to develop a gang mentality, which can militate against GCSE success.

"GCSEs require a degree of solo work and are not viewed as 'cool' in a laddish culture."

The former head of education at the National Union of Teachers, John Bangs, acknowledges that in most schools there are likely to be groups of boys who act out in an attention-seeking way.

"If there is a group of boys in a school who are completely off the wall, they have to be targeted for intervention.

"I remember going to a school in Greenwich where they were providing clubs during the lunch time specifically for boys and also specifically for girls. The really good schools are already doing this."

Brian Lynch, assistant head teacher of Bethnal Green Technology College in east London, says his school has introduced intervention strategies that have been really effective in improving the results of both boys and girls.

This year boys increased their A\* to Cs grades from 50% to 77% at the school. For girls the rise was from 79% to 82%.

Interventions include traditional methods such as close monitoring and streaming students in ability groups, but also encouraging thinking and leadership skills while working with community groups.

"It's really striving to develop their skills as leaders and giving them opportunities to express themselves," he says.

Mr Lightman says both girls and boys can respond very well to moves that make them feel a real sense of belonging and ownership in a school.

"It's about them being able to shape their own learning."

However, he warns: "Boys can be more susceptible to becoming demoralised by all the difficulties out there at the moment such as the socio-economic circumstances and all the difficulties about getting into university.

"They seem to be less resilient than perhaps some girls who can look to the long term."

Mr Bangs argues that gender gap will not close in our schools without resources continuing to be being targeted at the biggest underachieving groups - white working class boys and African-Caribbean boys.

He adds: "Schools should be looking at what they're teaching children to ensure that they engage boys as much as girls."