

Abstract

A New Issue on School Performance in the UK

— Social change seen through the girls' outperformance in national tests —

<Keywords>

UK, school performance, gender, national tests, education reform

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This paper highlights the underachievement of boys and the superior performance of girls in UK schools as observed in national test results since the 1980s. Significant social change is argued to be the important background for these phenomena.

Despite the fact that the introduction of the National Curriculum in England and Wales and the reorganisation of national testing - Key Stage tests, GCSE, A-level - under the Conservative Government have been criticised as being, for example, an anti-intellectual and nostalgic (Ball, S.) policy, this new system has played a substantial role in generating a fortuitous phenomenon; girls' outperforming boys at school. This compulsory curriculum for ages 5 to 16 years should be said to have helped girls to challenge so called male subjects. In all levels of tests, including the top grade of A-levels, girls now obtain higher marks than boys.

The counterpart of this superior performance of girls is the underachievement of boys at school. Some research shows that among white boys this trend is especially noticeable. Through economic recession and social change, masculinity based on sexual division of labour, which had been a source of social power expecting men to be breadwinners, has been altered and became insecure. Both working class and middle class boys are experiencing the crisis of masculinity and uncertainty of their future in respective ways.

This operative social background, which is also referred to as 'the challenging Victorian virtues' (Arnot, M.), may have had negative consequences for the academic motivation of boys. Gender issues in education can no longer be interpreted as mere gender bias against girls but should be understood as issues for both sexes. The underachievement of boys is consequently being focused on as a new gender issue in education.

The contents of this paper are as follows.

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