Gender in education and jobs

What can we learn by summarising educational and occupational data by gender?

A-level subjects and results

What do the recent A-level results and subject choices tell us about the impact of gender on school academic activity and performance? Well, some boys seem more likely to perform less well towards the bottom of the A-level scale. However, boys also slightly outpace girls at the excellent A* end of matters. There is no clear story here — certainly not without considering the impact of other structural features (see Figure 1).

Perhaps more interesting is the gendering of subject choice by entry. The so-called ‘hard’ sciences — maths, physics and chemistry — are still more favoured by boys, while girls favour certain arts subjects (such as English) and the ‘softer’ science of biology (see Figure 2).

Occupations

In many ways, the percentages shown in Figure 2 replicate what we also know about gender and the occupational structure. That is, despite some shifting and challenging of gender distinctions in employment, more women still tend to end up in the service side of the UK economy, while more men pursue work in science, engineering and trades (see Figure 3).

One way to see this is to argue that the sexes are ‘naturally’ suited to different kinds of jobs and different sorts of subjects at school. This would take us back to the old functionalist arguments about the sexes complementing each other in their different natures, preferences and skills.

Another approach might be to examine the early socialisation of boys and girls. Dame Athene Donald, professor of experimental physics at Cambridge University, told the British Science Association in September 2015 that toys aimed at young girls steer them away from science and engineering even before they reach school age, and that schools often matched work experience for pupils with gender stereotypes. Finally, she argued that toys targeted at boys were often described in terms of power and battles, while those marketed at girls emphasised love and magic. The discourses of gender identity are established very early on.

Bridging the gap at university

Mary Curnock Cook, head of the universities admission service UCAS, took a slightly different slant on the gender division argument in 2014 by pointing out that the discrepancy was actually much greater in subjects such as nursing. There we would need over 20,000 extra male university acceptances to balance the gender books (see Figure 4). Why, she asked, do we hear so much about getting women into ‘hard’ science and not more about getting more men into the ‘caring’ professions? Would it be more socially acceptable for young men to go into nursing or social work if those occupations were valued just a little more than they currently seem to be?

Source: Learning Plus UK

Figure 1 A-level grade spread by gender (2015)

Source: Learning Plus UK

Figure 2 A-level subject entry by gender (2015)

Source: Office for National Statistics licensed under the Open Government Licence v.3.0

Figure 3 Occupations by gender in the UK (2013)

Source: UCAS

Figure 4 Balancing gender disparity in university subjects (2014)

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