The Issue of Gender in Educational Inequalities in Post New Labour England. An Outline of the Problem

ABSTRACT. The paper presents some of the problems referring to the issue of gender gap when considering educational inequality with the focus on England. Interestingly, the problem of educational inequality or inequality as such has been the focus of researchers’ attention for quite a while. However, there seems to be a lack of solid data allowing to draw better conclusions referring to the interconnections of gender and inequalities. There seems to be a general agreement that the problem of gender gap in educational environments is later negatively reflected on professional life and career. Yet, there is little research proving this belief right. The reasons behind the problem of gender and gender gap may be rooted in the complexity of the matter. It is rather difficult to precisely define and name everything that may and should be involved in a gender related research. It also seems to call for more psychologically oriented terms, which forms yet greater challenge for any sociologist. Calling upon the data present, researchers tend to interpret the same sets differently due to employing varying theories, which further muddles the issue of gender, gender gap and its possible relation to educational inequalities. The article is aimed at showing some of the aforementioned problems within the context of educational inequalities in England. It is merely an attempt calling professional circles if not policy writers, to take a step back and rethink the issue of gender inequalities within the context of education.

KEYWORDS: gender, gender gap, educational inequalities, attainment

There is very little agreement on how to measure the concepts of inequalities of educational attainment or access to education. It is a truly tortuous problem that influences professional life, equality in one’s workplace, equality of wages and many others. Simultaneously, the differences of the sexes are crucial to understanding gender inequalities. The reasons provided in literature as responsible for gender gap lead to emphasizing the complexity of this problem. Among these we can find information based on various cognitive theories claiming boys and girls have different learning styles; girls are more motivated to hard educational work, more likely to revise material and prone to verify their
knowledge than boys. Then, boys are more self-confident but get easily distracted, lose attention and get disheartened, none of which helps in a learning situation and school environment. They are also more susceptible to negative peer pressure and so, more frequently belittle the importance of gaining knowledge.

In its work Willis (1981) wrote that work on academic success contradicts the concept of masculinity. These ideas are reflected in research of Francis (2000), Howe (1997), Spender (1982), Younger, Warrington & Williams (1999), all showing that boys are typically louder, more physically active and easily distracted. It is often believed girls have to work hard to gain knowledge whereas boys are naturally talented and learn with ease (Cohen, 1998; Epstein, 1998; Power et al., 1998; Quenzal & Huzzelman, 2010).

There are multiple papers with research data on various gender interconnections. Many of recent research shows a rather optimistic picture with gender gap in educational attainment becoming smaller (Müller & Haun, 1994; Erikson & Jonsson, 1996; Vallet, 2004; Buchman & Di Prete, 2006). Nonetheless, the reports published since 2006 prove the complexity of the gender gap problem and the way its issue is transferred to educational attainment, and later professional life and career.

And so, on the basis of the data from publications Aitken et al. (2007); DCSF (2007); OECD (2007); Lupton & Sullivan (2007); Machin et al. (2007), Meadows & Metcalf (2007) we can draw a following picture of the connections between gender differences and educational inequalities in England. Gender gap in results from English is greater than maths. On the whole, girls perform better than boys. When it comes to sciences, the differences between the sexes remain insignificant or really small.

The difference in GCSE\(^1\) exam results for students receiving 5 or more grades A*-C remains on a steady level of 10 percentage points since 1988. In 2006 this difference equals 9.6 percentage points (i.e. 63.4% girls and 53.8% boys) with greatest discrepancies (over 10 percentage points) in languages, art and humanities. Smaller differences (about 5.5 percentage point) are visible in maths and other sciences. What is worse, it seems that a stereotypical subject choice division is further strengthened – humanities, languages and the arts prevail among girls whereas geography, PE and IT are chosen by boys. Yet greater differences are observed between older teenagers (above 16 years old) who decide to take

\(^{1}\) General Certificate of Secondary Education – an exam introduced in 1989.
The Issue of Gender in Educational Inequalities in Post New Labour England

academically oriented A-levels. Amongst 10 most popular exam subjects chosen by students are respectively:

• Physics, business studies, geography and PE (by the boys).
• Psychology, art and design, sociology, media/film/television (by the girls).

Physics is the least popular of girls’ choices yet it remains amongst the most frequently picked examination subjects (being at the time 6th in the rankings).

Interestingly, gender differences at the level of primary education (Key Stages 1 – 3) remain rather small.

Gender is not the strongest predictor of attainment and yet it remains an important and quite a reliable one. For example, the differences in attainment on GCSE level are similar for all social groups though gender gap can be portrayed differently once we look at ethnicity. Here in particular black Caribbean boys seem to be performing really poorly which is not quite the case for black Caribbean girls. White British who are entitled to free school meals constitute another group characterised by poor educational attainment². Also, black Caribbean boys come last no matter whether they are eligible for free school meals or not.

Gender differences in attainment are visible mainly in results in reading and the knowledge of language as such. At the same time differences in mathematics and sciences are minor when looking both at home results dating 60 years back and international data. It is further worth mentioning there are no differences in attainment between girls and boys depending on the type of school they attend, which contradicts the beliefs of the general public.

Behaviour patterns seem stereotypical with 80% permanent exclusion referring to boys. Yet, there is a growth in the proportion of girls in the same situation (from 16% in 1998 to 20% in 2005). This is the result of lowering the percentage of excluded boys and the level of girls exclusion remaining nearly unchanged. Differences in exclusion are also slight when we look at ethnicity. Students receiving free school meals are three times more likely to be excluded that their peers, regardless their gender. Girls more often become victims of psychological harassment and boys of physical.

Looking at the gender gap in tertiary education women constitute majority of students at every level apart from postdoctoral research. It is

² Only 22% gets 5 or more A*-C marks from their GCSEs, which makes 33 percentage points less than this exam’s average attainment.
also mostly women who graduate with first degrees (DCSF, 2007). Unfortunately they are far less likely to choose the sciences with greatest differences in engineering and technology where only 9.1% are women and 90.9% men.

Considering the youngest group in education it is necessary to point to a few trends. When talking about measuring cognitive abilities using IQ or logical thinking tests (thus directed towards the youngest), gender differences are small and do not seem to reflect any later differences in achievements from English and the humanities. A report published in 2010 by Euridice points to generally better results in reading when it comes to girls. Girls devote more time to reading books and magazines whereas boys read mostly online. When it comes results on mathematics boys get better results at the primary stage of education (their fourth year) but already in the eights year of education gender gaps disappears. Also, there are no evident differences in attainment in sciences when it comes to gender division and that is regardless of the level (primary or secondary).

Unfortunately, despite well-developed cognitive and social skills in young girls, which may be the result of parents being more prone to reading to girls, teaching them songs and rhymes since their first months of life, already in primary school girls are characterised by low self-esteem including their self-efficacy with regard to what they can achieve in sciences. In an article that appeared in The Guardian Asthana (2010) wrote that the statistics are truly staggering. Boys remain far behind girls in 11 out of 13 categories at the age of 5. It is also more than a half less probable for children from poorest families to achieve good GCSE results, and Caribbean descent back boys are three times more likely to be excluded than their peers. 4 out of 5 children with special education needs (SEN), regardless their gender, are bullied at school and between one third and one fourth of Muslim girls have no qualifications.

Type of school seems to have no influence on gender gap. There are practically no schools where boys would get better results than girls. One study however shows that there are many schools where both boys and girls receive similar results. Unfortunately, these are schools where

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attainment levels are generally low. It could be inferred that gender differences are greater in schools with higher attainment levels.

According to new data gender gap, instead of becoming smaller, has been gradually widening. World Economic Forum (WEF) has begun research into the area of gender equality in 2006. Then, UK was placed 9th in world rankings whereas in 2014 it dropped to 26th place. What is more, widening of the gap has been registered across all measured categories, namely:

1. Market participation (from 37th to 46th),
2. Educational attainments (from 1st to 32nd),
3. Health (from 63rd to 94th),
4. Political equality (from 12th to 33rd).

Additionally, there has been a fall in average pay for women from £18,000 to £15,400, making it the lowest result since 2008. Nearly one third of women earn below starting point salary. Disciplines such as politics, sport, culture or business remain underrepresented by women. Seven women a month are murdered by their current or ex partners, which creates a very somber behavioral picture.

It would of course be unwise to claim that all aspects relating to the problem of gender are worsening in UK. Five Nordic countries that occupy the top of results board started at a higher level of gender equality than UK. Yet, they have all introduced further improvements, which cannot be said about England.

The impact of educational attainment of individuals on their chances for intergenerational social mobility has been one of the interests of vast sociological studies. Unfortunately, following Goldthorpe (2013) it may be stated that the speed of research in the area seems to be preventing theoretical sociologists from developing an up-to-date theory. Consequently, research results are frequently conflicting and similarly the data gathered can and is often interpreted in various, often contradictory, ways. There is however one aspect majority of researchers agree with – so called OED model also known as the OED three or trinity, where

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4 Which makes it a fall from 18th place in 2013 to 26th in 2014.
5 Following the data from European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (Eurofound) found in their report entitled “Recent Developments in the Distribution of Wages in Europe” (sireresearch.eu).
6 Which stands for 27% women compared to 16% men in a similar situation.
7 Namely Iceland, Finland, Norway, Sweden and Denmark (in that order).
O stands for Origin (i.e. social origin), E for Education and D for Destination (i.e. chosen social migration goal). In other words, experts agree on the complexity of the problem and interconnections between the factors involved.

Regrettably, that is where common views on the problem of educational differences (as well as further professional development and social progression) end. For example, reading Bukodi et al. (2015) we find out that the results based on newly created set of data covering four cohorts and used to analyse social mobility point to social mobility - contrary to common media and politicians’ beliefs – not falling at all, and when it comes to women even rising. If we read McNab et al. (2002), we are to find out that using data covering female attainment in tertiary education from 1993, they claim that women would have higher results than men but were less likely to graduate with first degrees. They further point to a lack of evidence to the existence of factors which could prevent females from getting lower results in subjects remaining the domain of men and yet, on average 50% more men than women achieve best diploma results from these disciplines.

The strategies devoted to reading and counting introduced during New Labour government had positive impact on reducing gender gap however, being directed only at boys they were not actually expected to drive down gender gap related discrepancies. If, for example, we take the results in reading, boys are doing better with questions about facts and girls deal better with questions referring to narration. This creates for us an opportunity to work upon curriculum which would cater for both these abilities, creating numerous possibilities for the both sexes to practice and achieve better results. It seems like a more reasonable solution as opposed to focusing purely on simplified solutions based on modifying testing forms so as to create an artificial situation where the results obtain are only seemingly more equal between the sexes. It is a pity it has not been decided to make a better use of the possibility to modify educational process in order to not only improve attainment of one group but both and further think about a more permanent solution allowing to progressively diminish gender gap discrepancies and so lead to a greater professional equality between the sexes.

In 2014 it was reported GCSE attainment gap between boys and girls was the greatest in 11 years. The percentage of girls achieving A*-C

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8 National Literacy Strategy and National Numeracy Strategy.
The Issue of Gender in Educational Inequalities in Post New Labour England

Grades were 73.1% for girls and 64.3% for boys, making it an 8.8 percentage point difference. Despite having received so far the largest number of A grades by boys, they still achieve lower results overall. If we compare that data to a departmental report from 2007, we may find intriguing information referring to (recently having been in the politicians' spotlight) differences with reference to the sciences. Since 2007 it has been indicated girls perform generally better than boys on GCSE level with a few exceptions. First of these would be chemistry, where gender gap would be nonexistent. Next, boys would be better than girls at physics and biology by one percentage point, and from other sciences by five percentage points. Yet, newer data from a CEER report show that boys are far better at maths and their performance and attainment levels have been gradually growing since 2009. Boys are also better at biology although girls are not far behind here, and chemistry (yet here, gender gap grows). Girls seem to do better though at physics.

Looking at the GCSE results tables in the CEER database it is striking that in spite of an improvement in both boys’ and girls’ attainment gender gap between them persists.

Gender based differences in educational results may have various grounds. They may reflect the differences in the types of studied subjects or refer to individual features associated with attainment such as family background, age or marital status (Hoskins et al., 1997; Rudd, 1984). They may also be the result of psychological or biological discrepancies (Mellandy et al., 2000). Or they may be the reflection of gender stereotyping and prejudice amongst men dominated professions (which influences inter alia how students are graded) (Bradley, 1993).

Gender differences in education are particularly important due to the impact they have on attainment and job market position. Studies (Blanded & Machin, 1993; Jones & Makepeace, 1996; McNabb & Wass, 1997) brought empirical proof of the general public’s belief in the existence of something like a glass ceiling in the UK that stops women from further progression in management and expert roles. Similarly, the study results prove another common opinion that women earn less. The studies of Battu, Belfreld and Sloane (1999) point to a dependency between earnings and previous results in tertiary education. Bachelor’s degree studies (so called level 6 according to The National Qualifications Framework) completed with a distinction transfer to a 9 to 13% rise in earnings 6 years after graduation. To compare, achieving very good instead of distinctive marks guarantees only half that amount a rise in the
same time span. Therefore, the fact that more men than women achieve highest final results is a significant factor later differentiating their earnings. That is yet another reason why unequal students’ evaluation is a huge problem potentially leading to enlarging the vicious circle of gender gap.

It is difficult to find studies allowing to analyse the data according to gender gap and in particular gender differences in educational attainment according to psychological or biological factors. Some elements drawing upon this problem may be found in the data covering such aspects like anxiety, exam stress, self-efficacy or willingness to take up risk strategy while preparing for the exams. Yet, these seem not to influence gender gap in terms of educational attainment.

As mentioned before, judging the differences based on gender is far from an easy task. Typically they are attributed to the differences in attainment in English and other subjects based primarily on the abilities of reading and writing. Gender difference with reference to maths and sciences is really small. On the whole, even though gender helps to predict results in particular subjects, it is still believed that social class and background are two more important factors influencing educational inequalities and their explanation. Then again, too strong a focus on only one gender – in case of UK boys – may lead to disregarding the fact that also a considerable number of girls’ results are poor. It leads to conclude politicians should focus on this problem having both sexes in mind. It would be further advantageous to look at the way students are taught, the formation of curriculum, and the influence of these on the students’ choice of subjects as these later affect long-term results, further educational attainment and choices of professional career. Thinking of creating a modern society we cannot choose few tracks when the country needs a vast (India railway type) network to function efficiently and well.

Previously mentioned WEF analysis shows that UK remains far behind countries where women have greater chances for equality (whether general or educational or health) and it is overtaken by countries like Nicaragua, Bulgaria or Burundi. Such comparison was only possible due to an exceptional data indexing showing any gender gaps or differences in countries regardless of gender and development level. And so less developed countries, as it turns out, are those characterized by highest level of gender equality even if the citizens’ earnings are lower, education
access worse and health results poorer. Yet, there is also visible a small increase in the number of women in tertiary education.

The authors of this report claim that (comparing to a report from 2006) medium world gender gap in 2014 with reference to market participation, attainment and health has slowly narrowed (successively by 60%, 94% and 96%). This does not change the fact that no country has achieved gender equality. It is certain there is relation between gender gap in a country and its market. It is logical that since women constitute half the database of talents of that country, it would be reasonable to admit that a country’s long-term competitiveness depends on how its women are treated and how their potential is explored in their professional life to secure this country’s smooth economic development. And although England seemingly proceeds with progress in mind, it seems to fall far behind when it comes to gender equality. To make matters worse, present position of women in the society looks far worse than during the New Labour government. Thus, it allows us to state that a country’s development may be only partial (if not ostensible), which then proves we cannot cease to be alert towards any inequalities if we want to secure better lives for the citizens and society’s wellbeing. It is irrelevant which party is currently governing. All that matters is how they deal with problems and whether they have the courage and ability to choose the sort of steps and solutions that may not necessarily follow the beliefs of all their members, all in order to help the economy by directing education to the rails of actual equality.

REFERENCES


