

THE RESEARCH CENTRE

CITY COLLEGE NORWICH

**Gender Imbalance in
Participation and
Achievement
in FE (16-19) in the SELP
area**

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Acknowledgement

One of the greatest difficulties undertaking research in a regional context, especially when you are not what could be termed a 'native', is negotiating access to both information and individuals. The members of the South Essex Learning Partnership have welcomed participation in this research undertaking with enthusiasm and genuine kindness. The researcher would like to extend his heart felt thanks to all the willing participants of the research, both educational professionals, students and support staff alike.

Key Findings

- Equal Opportunities although recognised as not being a reality, is, a concept that young people positively identify with. Girls of this age group are assertive in stating their right to aspire to any career path they choose. Clearly however, both girls and boys are still making gender stereotyped choices.
- Girls in this age group seem to be more emotionally and socially grounded. Girls in the main seem to have adventurous social experiences at a younger age than boys. The boys may well be engaging in group social experiences more heavily when at the participating age for FE.
- It is evident that many of the boys' career aspirations are influenced by the prospect of money. The girls had longer term aspirations to be financially rewarded but were more likely to make educational choices on the basis of interest. Evidently and perhaps quite obviously, both groups make choices dependent on individual aptitude.
- Evidence shows that boys favour more formal methods of assessment such as the traditional public examination
- The media has a strong influence in shaping career perceptions. Although young people rejected the idea that the media influenced them, all recognised the changing emphasis on the professional capacity of women in the media.
- The South Essex social scene has a high impact on gender perceptions and identity. The 'Cruise' culture and the strong dance culture associated with this are a male dominated phenomenon.
- Gender identity was explored alongside group identity and the premise that it is 'lad culture' that impinges on boys achievement rates. From this point, the negative stereotypes of 'Essex boy' and 'Essex girls' were investigated as factors. Girls reject the image wholesale. Some boys embrace the image positively, along with its wider implications.
- Parental influence and peer opinion are key factors in shaping the cultural aspirations of this age group.
- There is a strong corollary between relative affluence and parental and peer support for progression into FE.
- The high visibility of affluence in the area is an important factor in the composition of young people's aspirations, particularly those of young men.
- Equal Opportunities could be better integrated into the CEG of schools. At present, although the National Qualifications Framework implies that this should happen, it is not a measured learning outcome.

Recommendations

- Highlight the economic returns on continuing education in SELP marketing.
- Engage the language of the age range. PHAT, MASSIV etc., in marketing 16-19 courses.
- Ensure uniform methods of teaching Equal Opportunities in CEG pre-Yr. 10.
- Engage parents, perhaps with further Family Learning opportunities.

Research Rationale

The National debate

Twenty five years after the Sex Discrimination Act (1975) was introduced, assumptions are still made about the roles, behaviour, abilities and needs of women and men. This is sex stereotyping and it can be found throughout society, influencing attitudes, expectations, choices and decisions which are made in all spheres of our lives. (Equal Opportunities Commission: Sex stereotyping)

There is a plethora of national research on the educational 'gender gap'. As a priority for research, this issue was brought to the concern of the South Essex Learning Partnership (SELP) in the commissioned research report entitled 'Facilitating Increased Participation in Further Education and Training: SELLP'.

There is anecdotal evidence that boys underachieve, compared to girls in secondary and tertiary education. It is recommended that the gender imbalance in achievement be investigated in the SELLP area.

The Department of Education and Employment (DfEE) recognise that the underachievement of boys in secondary and tertiary education is of major concern but acknowledge that the picture is far more complex than just girls wholesale outperforming boys¹. There is still an issue of gendered choice and differing performance across subjects both at GCSE and GNVQ/A-level. This essentially has far reaching societal effects.

The legal requirements placed on educational institutions by the Sex Discrimination Act of 1975 has done much to encourage the development of equality of opportunity in education. Access to the main curriculum, curricular options and extra-curricular activities is now a norm, an entitlement of all students regardless of gender. It is however, acknowledged that the legal framework and the best intentions of LEAs and educational institutions have done little to combat the wider social conditioning that continues to lead boys and girls to opt for subjects and career paths that are deemed suitable for their sex (Gaine C & George R, 1999)

In order to fully appreciate the backdrop to the current debate in terms of achievement, it is well worth taking a historical perspective. Looking at A-level performance between 1955 and 1995, there has been a remarkable reversal of the trend of boys outperforming girls, in 1955, boys were outperforming girls by about 80%. By 1970, this advantage had decreased to 20%, during the 1980s, it decreased further to less than 10% with girls achieving parity with boys in 1989. During the 1990s, girls have continued to maintain about a 10% advantage over boys².

A clear overview of the present participation and achievement differences between boys and girls both at GCSE and A-level is available on the 'Standards Site' of the DfEE web site. Considering A-level examination entries in the year 2000, there appears a distinct gender divide in terms of subject choices with boys dominating entry in mathematics and all the sciences other than biology. Girls' entry to English and the social sciences far exceeds that of boys. This does not however necessarily equate to better achievement in these subjects by the predominant sex, for example, although more boys enter A-level Physics examinations, girls seem to achieve better results than boys. In vocational qualifications (Advanced GNVQ for instance) the gender divide is more stark with girls dominating subjects such as Leisure and Tourism and Hair and Beauty, and boys IT and Engineering. The percentage of students achieving distinctions is far greater for girls than for boys in all subjects.

¹ See the recently established Gender and Achievement area of the DfEE website (http://www.standards.dfee.gov.uk/genderandachievement/more_index.html).

² See Marks J, 2001, *Girls Know Better*, The Institute for the Study of Civil Society: London, p15

Given the complexity of this issue, research has tended to focus on the effects of gendered course content, assessment methods and whether specific modes favour a particular gender and behavioural issues and gender differences³.

Data supplied to this study by Essex Careers and Business Partnership Ltd. shows from the destinations of Year Eleven pupils in Essex that stereotyped choices are equally prevalent in Essex, with more boys taking on Modern Apprenticeships and girls preferring more academic routes through FE such as A-levels. Around 70% of young people in Essex choose to enrol on some form of Further Education at the end of Year Eleven. There is clearly a higher proportion of boys that leave compulsory education to enter employment in Essex as a whole.

No reliable figures on the achievement rates of boys and girls in the South Essex with respect to participation in FE were available to the study. It is hoped that what this research will do is enable the SELP to encourage equality of opportunity by providing an enhanced qualitative understanding of the issues that are perceived to be associated with the gender divide in education in South Essex.

³Such as the study undertaken for OFSTED published in Autumn 1998 by The Stationery Office, entitled *Recent Research on Gender and Educational Performance*. A summary of which can be found at http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/genderandachievement/data_1.2.html.

Research Methodology

Aims

The aims of this study as stated in the original proposal (Appendix One) were as follows:

- To identify issues that may effect low achievement in particular subjects by both boys and girls
- To investigate into the reasons why certain subjects are under-subscribed to, especially by girls.
- To make recommendations that will enable learning providers to adapt provision to ensure achievement and take-up within the SELP district can be optimised.

In practice, the study focus has been broad in the sense that the methodology aimed at focussing on SELP's perspective of these issues, that is to say that the methodology employed allowed for 'progressive focussing' of the study (Parlett M & Hamilton D, 1977), with a view to 'illuminating' the attitudes and aspirations of the target age range (16-19). It was acknowledged from the outset that the research agenda and subsequent analysis would be dictated by the client group and SELP themselves:

"...the process of analysis will systematically search for 'emergent themes' and will attempt to ensure that the agendas of the participants are addressed rather than pre-ordained questions of the researcher."

In order to explore the underlying causes of the 'Gender gap', the approach of this study has been attitudinal. The implicit aim has been to elucidate upon the root causes by exploring gender identity and the cultural aspirations of the 16-19 age group in the SELP area.

Methodological approach

The methodology utilised in the course of this study has been primarily qualitative. The study has been investigating personal perspectives on the career aspirations and broader cultural aspirations of the 16-19 age group in South Essex in order to delve deeper into the roots and context of the 'Gender Gap' in South Essex. Cultural stereotypes such as 'Essex Boy' and 'Essex Girl' have been explored with the age group in their respect to attitudes towards continuing education post Year Eleven. The study endeavours place this data in the context of the wider research and continuing debate on the educational 'gender gap'.

Focus groups

In order to facilitate the emergence of initial themes and issues for the study to address, focus groups were held with representatives of the SELP partnership. The first of these focus groups was held at ECBP Ltd in Rochford with representatives of SELP's 16-19 Advisory Group. The personal perspectives of this group were sought on the constituent factors of the gender imbalance in FE participation and achievement within the 16-19 age range. From this group the themes and issues discussed were analysed and collated to be commented on and discussed at a second similar such exercise.

The second focus group was held at Basildon Adult Education College some two weeks later. The emergent themes were discussed and in some cases refuted. The 'moderation form' (Appendix Two) used in this second group allowed the issues to be addressed in the study to be refined before entering into the construction of a robust interview schedule. It also allowed for the construction of a semi-structured questionnaire that would enable the collection of similarly generic perspectives among other educational professionals and staff from supporting organisations.

Semi-structured questionnaire

As a result of the moderation exercise a loosely structured questionnaire (Appendix Three) was circulated among Essex careers staff, College careers co-ordinators, school careers co-ordinators and Youth Service staff.

Interviews

Interviews were held with ECBP Ltd. staff, Youth Service staff, School Careers tutors, College Careers Co-ordinators, Alternative Education, FE students (both vocational and academic, Year twelve and Thirteen, low base and high base) and Year Eleven students. In all twenty interviews were undertaken during the course of the project, amounting to approximately eighteen hours of conversation with sixty-seven individuals. All interviews were taped with the express prior permission of the participants in the knowledge that all information used would be made anonymous.

Young people were interviewed in single sex and mixed sex groups of between three and seven participants. These interviews were held in pre-arranged private surroundings. The purpose of the interviews has been to explore the influences that determine choices for this age group and the problems encountered locally with encouraging progression, such as aspirations, cultural and gender identity, and perceptions of socio-economic reality. For this reason and given the fact that in the main, these interviews were held in time slots that otherwise would have been for tutorials, it was felt necessary to design a robust interview schedule with appropriate materials. The questions were therefore designed to arise indirectly from an article from the BBC Education web site (www.bbc.co.uk/education) (Appendix Four) that discussed recent research into the FE 'Gender Gap'. It was felt that in this way, all interviewees were starting from the same prior-knowledge base and could discuss issues of consensus and contention.

Similarly, interviews held with all other participants used the same interview schedule. In all cases, the questions on the schedule were modified to suit the environment in which they were used and additional questions were asked. Appendix Five merely represents the conceptual shape of the interview process. All participants were encouraged to respond in an open and honest manner, adequate time was scheduled to allow the interviewees to follow their own tangents and explore issues of personal relevance to themselves, the aim was thus to 'illuminate' the cogent issues as they are seen by the participants.

Geographic spread

Every effort has been made to ensure that the study has a good geographical coverage. Opinion has been sought in all the districts of South Essex Learning Partnership. The study has gathered a large amount of data and suggests further on in this report issues that should be considered by the partnership with respect to FE participation and achievement of 16-19 year olds.

Participants perceptions: a qualitative analysis

Analytical approach

Interviews were held with ECBP Ltd. staff, Youth Service staff, School Careers tutors, College Careers Co-ordinators, Alternative Education, FE students (both vocational and academic, Year twelve and Thirteen, low base and high base) and Year Eleven students. In all twenty interviews were undertaken during the course of the project, amounting to approximately eighteen hours of conversation with sixty-seven individuals. All interviews were taped with the express prior permission of the participants in the knowledge that all information used would be made anonymous.

Interviews were transcribed in full. The process of transcription itself marks the beginning of the data analysis process (Silverman, 2000, 149). By listening to the taped conversations time and time again, the researcher becomes 'immersed' in the data and themes emerge and are refined. Responses from the semi-structured questionnaires have been subject to the same and concurrent process of repeated analysis. In most cases it has been found that the questionnaire responses support the themes and findings of the interview analysis. For this reason, the two forms of data will be dealt with as one body of evidence to support the analysis below. It is hoped that the following analysis does justice to the diversity of individual perceptions freely offered to this study.

Themes

From within the broad themes below, contradictions and complexities are explored. The themes are in no way isolated from one another and there may be instances of repetition as themes are like the two genders, closely related. It is intended that this be seen as a discussion that will allow deliberation and future action to be informed within the SELP.

Illuminating cultural and career aspirations with a view to gender identity.

Equal Opportunities although recognised as not being a reality, is, a concept that young people positively identify with. Girls of this age group are assertive in stating their right to aspire to any career path they choose. Clearly however, both girls and boys are still making gender stereotyped choices.

As stated earlier, equality of opportunity is a legal requirement for all areas of society, not just the education sector. The current generation of 16-19 year olds living in the SELP area have grown up in a world where this premise is, if not universally accepted, at least universally understood. The concept of the '90's man' has thrown us into an epoch where it is 'PC' to talk about the different genders as being of equal capacity, with equal social responsibilities and roles. The changing expectations and roles of women in society are reflected to this generation in a more and more pervasive media. From amongst the girls who participated in this study there seemed little reticence to assert in group situations that they had particular career goals which traditionally would have once been considered to be the domain of men. Equally, of the young men interviewed, there was little defined prejudice exhibited towards girls choosing 'male' career paths. There was however a clear distinction made in terms of gender identity, both sexes asserting that the sexes are in many ways different and distinct, equal perhaps, but inherently different. As one male A-level student alluded:

There's no reason why women have to do the childcare and men have to do the engineering. It would be just as easy to change it around, women are just as capable of doing a job, but just are never doing it. (A-level boy)

Girls in this age group seem to be more emotionally and socially grounded. Girls in the main seem to have adventurous social experiences at a younger age than boys. The boys may well be engaging in group social experiences more heavily when at the participating age for FE.

You don't come here to learn like how cells split and stuff, you sort of just come to have a laugh and meet your friends really. Girls are motivated by learning things and thinking, yeah, that will get me to a good University. They've got like more of a goal than we have. (A-level boy)

Across the broad categories of interviewees and questionnaire respondents, the issue of emotional maturity was repeatedly brought up. It has been well established for many years that the physical development of boys and girls follows different patterns with most girls addressing the physical and emotional changes of puberty well before the average boy. In Year Eleven when choices about continuing education are being made, the majority of boys will be at the cusp of addressing the physical metamorphosis associated with testosterone, girls invariably will have made this transition to adult form much earlier. The extent to which this has an impact on the nature of educational choices made and potential achievement is perhaps evidenced by the frequency with which it was mentioned. There was an overriding feeling that male Year Twelve starters were less autonomous as learners than their female counterparts.

....to be honest I think boys are still developmentally behind girls a bit all the way through the teenage years. And you actually see them develop while they're here... (Careers tutor)

At least in terms of physical and social development there was recognition amongst the boys interviewed that the girls were some way ahead of them in this respect. Due perhaps to their advanced state of development in comparison to the boys it was not unexpected to hear in more than one case that girls' social experiences were more adult earlier.

I mean they look older, from a younger age and so they go, girls I know have been going out clubbing since they were fifteen whatever, fifteen sixteen. Whereas, blokes generally don't look like they're old enough until they're seventeen eighteen. (A-level boy)

The group culture of girls and boys and the social scene in the region was questioned. It seemed that those girls interviewed who were participating in some form of education had a much more measured and mature response to their social group and activities than the boys. For many 'lads', Year Twelve was seen as a time to relax a little and 'hang out with mates'.

So again, I think that the maturity doesn't kick in with a lot of boys, the reality perhaps doesn't kick in until a bit later. I think that's part of it. (Careers tutor)

Developmental issues were also seen to be having an impact on the nature of choices being made by this age group. The stereotyped areas of participation, i.e. girls doing Hair and Beauty and boys doing Engineering was often put down to the development of gender specific proficiencies.

I think it is probably more to do with physiological make-up in the fact that I think it has been proven that males have better spatial awareness and females have better communication skills. And, where you utilise those skills in terms of occupation is going to determine where you might choose to go. (Careers staff)

When questioned about whether students felt that their choices were in any way gender stereotyped there were quite broad themes arising in response.

It is evident that many of the boys' career aspirations are influenced by the prospect of money. This was a really strong theme, recognised as a strong motivator for boys even by the girls.

The money, it is for me, particularly me, I don't want to be living in one bedroom flat, like on my own with no one around me, I want to be highly successful, have a house. (GNVQ boy)

Unlike boys who are into it for the money unless they really enjoy it and have got good money. (GNVQ girl)

Discussion about career motivations and likewise cultural aspirations was extensive. There was evidence that the boys focus on monetary return was in many instances seen in the short term. **The girls had longer term aspirations to be financially rewarded but were more likely to make educational choices on the basis of interest.**

Nah, I think girls just prefer to do something.....That they enjoy, that they want to do, for the rest of their life. (GNVQ girl)

You've got to find it interesting or there's no point going on with it is there. Maths and Computers just bore me. (A-level girl)

Girls interviewed seem to have a well developed sense of direction with respect to careers, they will have given a lot of thought to what they want to be and how to get there.

Yeah, 'cos there's no point in getting a qualification in something that you don't enjoy (GNVQ girl)

I mean trying to pick a subject that you want, ones that you enjoy and ones that you're good at and are going to do well in even if you don't enjoy them. (A-level boy)

For those girls interviewed who were currently undertaking some form of education post Year Eleven, there was a strong sense of commitment to the choices that they had made. For some, the experience of further study had clarified career aspirations or made them reconsider their options, but many were strongly focussed on the end vocational result of the choices.

Yeah, if you ain't got no goal, you won't do nothing will ya. (GNVQ girl)

Evidently and perhaps quite obviously, both groups make choices dependent on individual aptitude. For all the young people interviewed, performance in examinations at secondary school was a key determining factor in the nature of the choices that they made at the end of Year Eleven.

There was a recognition amongst the group that although in theory boys and girls should have equal opportunities, they are still very different in their interests and aptitudes. Boys in general prefer to have a practical element to courses and are well aware of their limitations. The perceptions or misconceptions of the gender divide are interesting when viewed from the standpoint of this generation.

Girls are more sensitive though aren't they. I mean, they find it easier to express their feelings and so they're more likely to take subjects that are creative, aren't they. I mean, take English, girls are probably more, gonna get better grades in English because they are more creative and they can express themselves better. (A-level boy)

The issue that the gradual change in course assessment methods towards a greater use of coursework favouring girls was explored. **Evidence shows that boys favour more formal methods of assessment such as the traditional public examination.**⁴

I think girls make more of an effort on coursework, because it's presentation thing, because girls will make the effort to go and draw the pictures. If you think in our class, I mean with coursework, girls make the effort and boys don't. (A-level girls)

Traditionally, it would be fair to say that from all the course work that I've done with pupils over the years, the girls will do much better at course work. Because, they're more organised at home, they're more controlled, they have a more controlled environment. They have a greater awareness of time....(Careers Tutor)

The media has a strong influence in shaping career perceptions. Although young people rejected the idea that the media influenced them, all recognised the changing emphasis on the professional capacity of women in the media. Gender stereotyping is not an innate human trait but a learnt one, one that is propagated by prevailing attitudes in society as a whole. Perceptions of careers are formed through experience and exposure and clearly the television has a major impact on this generations perceptions of their choices:

⁴ In a recent publication by The Institute for the Study of Civil Society entitled 'Girls Know Better', the author John Marks quotes one Martin Turner as saying, "a significant quantity of work for both GCSE and A-level is now done outside the exam itself, in uncontrolled conditions that might offer a role to personality variables such as conscientiousness or diligence which may well favour girls over boys."

, you will notice that less want to do psychology now because, obviously 'Cracker's got less of a high profile, 'Cracker' had a big link to wanting to be a psychologist. (Careers staff)

This age range, as all, is subject to targeted marketing that is highly refined, products are no longer marketed as products but as whole packages of image and images of lifestyle that should be aspired to. It was evident that young people are highly sensitised to the media and yet highly skilled at filtering this complex information.

So, the media shapes and changes attitudes and it can build people up and it can knock them back down again and young people are very fickle with who'll they'll follow, it's the latest trend. (Youth Services)

The South Essex social scene has a high impact on gender perceptions and identity. The 'Cruise' culture and the strong dance culture associated with this are a male dominated phenomenon.

Even if young people do not aspire to participate in the 'Cruise', the car culture in South Essex has a visible impact on this age groups expectations. Almost without exception, those interviewed expected to become car owners and recognised the associated costs.

It's very poor, local public transport, you know buses and that are awful. I mean, you've got to have a car to get anywhere, I'd say around here. (Careers tutor)

....a lot of our students will leave and at seventeen they've all got their flash cars and everything. And that's a big motivation as well. (Careers tutor)

The predominant status symbol of the 16-19 age group in South Essex is a car. In attempting to investigate the age groups' different sub-cultures, this issue was questioned with all young people interviewed. The 'Cruise' is both revered and ridiculed, in general terms, the event involves modified cars of all descriptions, upwards of one hundred vehicles, 'racing' or at least being actively displayed on a Friday and Saturday night on Southland seafront. Reverence of the event tended to wain the older the young interviewee was. There was however a noticeable gender distinction in opinions of the whole concept. Boys tended to show more acceptance:

Well like, cars is a big thing. Drinking, anything you know, you can do that's wrong you do it. (A-level boy)

Although this finding is not universally applicable, there is strong evidence to suggest that the visibility and ready acceptance of the image of this lifestyle, could well be a factor in the non-participation or non-retention of boys in FE in the area:

Plenty of people do it, it's just they've left school or college because they want to get a job to do whatever within it to get a car or whatever, and just leave because they're fed up with being skint. (A-level boy)

Although the need to own a car was held as a high priority for girls, there did not seem the same image or status attached to it. Some amount of incredulity was witnessed amongst the young girls interviewed:

We went to the Casino the other night and the police just stop every car, it's like, you've got blue lights, you've got green lights, I don't know, you haven't got lights. They were just pulling over every car, it's just...but that is the typical 'Essex Boy' isn't it, white XR3i. (A-level girl)

I don't think I know any girls who've got like, they've got a nice car but they haven't got them done up like or with the music, just with the stereo they've got.... We wouldn't spend all that money on cars though would we. (GNVQ girl)

Gender identity was been explored alongside group identity and the premise that it is 'lad culture' that impinges on boys achievement rates. From this point, the negative stereotypes of 'Essex boy' and 'Essex girls' were investigated as factors. Girls reject the image wholesale. Some boys embrace the image positively, along with its wider implications.

For most of the young people interviewed it evident that their gender identity was closely tied to the enormity of these regional stereotypes. Almost without exception the 'Essex Boy' and 'Essex Girl' stereotypes had had a significant effect on the development of their personal identity. Discussion of the impact of these stereotypes on the educational choices they had made and their cultural aspirations in general caused much banter and equally humour. It is clear that whether this is viewed as negative or in some way positive, young people have well formed opinions about the origins and possible examples of these stereotypes, many of which are stereotypical themselves.

It's what you grow up in in't it. That's the environment that's there for you, you know, everyone's doing it. (A-level boy)

Yeah, but only because some people might like their white dresses, their knee-high boots, the white skirts, don't mean that they're Essex Girls. (NVQ girl)

Nah, the boys would think that they're Essex Boys yeah, but I don't think the girls want to be proud of being called Essex Girls. But no matter where you go you're gonna get called an Essex Girl if you're from Essex. (NVQ girl)

But I have to say if I do go on holiday, I do say I'm from somewhere like Surrey or.....(A-level girl)

All stereotypes aside, there was an appreciation that the image of the stereotype was individually conceived and dependant upon location and circumstance. One GNVQ student put the issues importance into perspective:

Not nowadays I don't think it does, 'cos I think more and more people are realising that they do need to take Further Education, whether they're in, wherever they come from. 'Cos I mean, there's a lot of 'rebels', and I use that word loosely, but they're in College and they're in Further Education so I think more and more 'Essex Boys are taking it further. (A-level boy)

Parental influence and peer opinion are key factors in shaping the cultural aspirations of this age group. In all the interviews with educational professionals, there was unanimity regarding the importance of parents' opinion as a factor in whether both boys and girls continue their education beyond Year Eleven of compulsory education.

Keeps the old dear sweet don't it! (A-level boy)

The biggest influence by far is parental influence and the biggest influence by far on a boy is paternal influence. (Careers tutor)

I've actually done some investigations in to that, why a boy is less likely to go into FE. And I mean the biggest criteria is my dad never went into FE and he said go out and get a job, you know, it's as simple as that, you know grand dad did and dad did and therefore the son should really go off. Whereas girls very much do have higher aspirations than perhaps their mothers or certainly their grand mothers (Careers Tutor)

In a time of post-feminist appreciation of the aptitudes of women and at a time when the growth of service industries is exponential with the impact of the 'information revolution', expectations for girls and their educational achievement is far greater than ever before. Interviewees pointed to the fact that the average age of expectancy for first child and indeed marriage was rapidly increasing. There is also evidence to suggest that peer opinion is far greater an influence for boys than it is for girls. Male group culture and the sub-cultures discussed with young men seem to emphasise far more the issue of conformity and acceptance:

....everything that blokes do is like, you're following someone else, whose following someone else, whose following someone else, you know. (A-level boy)

Female group dynamics in contrast seem in many respects to emphasise support and individuality:

Girls seem to share more with each other really, like boys don't share things that girls normally tell each other. 'Cos if like you told some other bloke something, they'd probably accuse you of being a 'poof' or something. Where as girls like tell each other all their problems, they're probably more open. (GNVQ boy)

There is a strong corollary between relative affluence and parental and peer support for progression into FE.

South Essex exhibits pockets of relative affluence and equally pockets of lesser affluence, interviews have been conducted with young people from very diverse socio-economic backgrounds and professionals with experience of working with diverse client groups. There is no doubt that parental aspirations for their offspring with respect to continuing education are based upon their own experience of the value of education in relation to the employment market and society as a whole⁵. Where educational institutions attract from predominantly affluent catchment areas there is greater likelihood of progression to A-level, expectations of education and the motivation for participation may also have less to do with monetary return.

Money is an issue but that's not going to determine what I want to do in life because, the way I've been brought up, you know, money doesn't make you happy sort of thing, it's the work you do, you live that. (A-level girl)

There was evidence to suggest that the boys were under no greater pressure than girls to seek employment opportunities rather than continuing education. There was however a strong feeling that family experience of the worth of higher education and socio-economic background, influence the decisions of young people greatly.

It was family influence, without any shadow of a doubt. He agonised over it and I think in his heart of hearts wanted to go but family influence was too strong. (Careers staff)

So, getting a youngster whose family have never ever considered, and none of them have ever been to University or anything like that is very hard to break down those barriers and get them to really consider it as a realistic option. (Careers staff)

I can't stay away from money too long (GNVQ Girl)

The high visibility of affluence in the area is an important factor in the composition of young people's aspirations, particularly those of young men.

Within South Essex, there are populace centres that have relative affluence and non-affluence living side by side. The identifiable consumer culture in South Essex has a definite influence on the shaping of young peoples aspirations, particularly those of boys. Long-term aspirations focused upon the accumulation of material symbols of wealth, wealth was often associated with success.

When most people think ten fifteen years time I'd like a swimming pool, I'd like a big house, nice car. Most people think along those lines don't they. (A-level boy)

We seem to be a county that needs possessions, god knows why. And I don't mean having the opportunity to own your own house, it's the possessions that people can see. (Anon)

The money, it is for me, particularly me, I don't want to be living in one bedroom flat, like on my own with no one around me, I want to be highly successful, have a house. (GNVQ boy)

Equal Opportunities could be better integrated into the CEG of schools. At present, although the National Qualifications Framework implies that this should happen, it is not a measured learning outcome.

⁵ See the most recent Youth cohort study of 16 year olds on the DfEE web site (www.dfee.gov.uk): Youth Cohort Study: The Activities and Experiences of 16 Year Olds: England and Wales 2000.

There is the impression that Equal Opportunities is not taught in a common format and to some extent the mode of delivery is reliant on the imagination and inclination of the schools' careers co-ordinator⁶. Aspirations and gender identity are forming at an earlier and earlier age amongst young people and some common approach or sharing of good practice might well be welcomed

I don't think boys are doing worse, I just think that girls as you say, there's more opportunity out there now, 'cos it's more of an equality thing going on, um, that we know what we can get and I think in a way we're kind of determined to show the blokes that we can do it as well. (A-level girl)

The changes in the focus of the work of the Careers Services, has left a great deal of the responsibility for spreading the message of Equal Opportunities within the remit of schools. Some concern was voiced with regard the capacity of teachers to take an individual approach to student needs and adequately direct students with respect their longer-term choices.

I don't think the same attitude is taken in schools at all. For a variety of reasons, not just on that issue, but on a lot of other issues as well. I think kids get labelled at a very early age.... Not specifically to gender but I certainly would say in terms of ability and in terms of being encouraged to reach their potential and this sort of thing. Um, they are a trouble maker, they are this, they are that, and you hear it in the staff room, very much kids have got labels put on to them. (Anon)

⁶ The nature of the way in which Equal Opportunities was taught seemed to differ greatly across the study sample. One innovative approach was explained as a lesson plan in which students in Year Nine were asked to draw pictures of a secretary and a doctor. From the pictures, the tutor then 'unpacked' the idea of learnt gender stereotypes and aspirations.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusions

This study has been fascinating to be associated with. The debate about education and gender is long established and with the increasing focus on boys underachievement in relation to girls not least in government policy, it is extremely topical at this point in time.

With reference to the SELP area, certain underlying issues within the key findings of this study should be held in mind when developing priorities for action within the partnership, these are born out in the recommendations below. The issue of gender in participation and achievement is an extremely complex one and it is acknowledged that this study represents only tentative allusions to the attitudes and societal factors in the SELP area that may comprise a proportion of this complexity.

Children develop ideas about the roles of men and women even before they start school and these are often reinforced by many different influences including parents, teachers and the media. As a result, subject and career choices may be shaped from an early age. (EOC, Sex stereo)

As a partnership, SELP are well placed to develop strategies to address misperceptions and gender stereotyping but must be pragmatic about the pace of change they can affect.

Recommendations

- Highlight the economic returns of continuing education in SELP marketing.

Given the fact that on a national level boys are not progressing on to FE in the same numbers as girls, or at least not achieving as well, the fact that long-term earning potential dramatically increases above FE level 3 needs marketing⁷.

- Engage the language of the age range. PHAT, MASSIV etc., in marketing 16-19 courses.

Image and language are an integral part of the culture of young people in South Essex. Assimilation and utilisation of the local sub-cultures needs to be considered in the marketing of courses. It's not so much about 'getting hip with the kids', but understanding more about the wider social context and sub-cultures of the 16-19 client base. Young people have a quite dower perception of traditional academic institutions. This will of course not be applicable to every target group of potential learners, but it is essential to ensure that in addressing this particular age group, some effort is made to bridge the 'cultural void' between the educator and young person.

- Ensure uniform methods of teaching Equal Opportunities in CEG pre-Yr. 10.

This could well stimulate the sharing of good practice and address misconceptions and stereotypes before they are set in stone with young people. Cultural norms are formed at an earlier and earlier age, often, these norms are learnt outside of the school environment.

- Engage parents, perhaps with further Family Learning opportunities. Targeting should ensure a coverage of the less affluent areas of South Essex.

Not an earth shattering conclusion but through the process of fieldwork, this issue has been reinforced time and time again. The likelihood of continuing education is far greater if a young person's parents have remained in education. In an age of Lifelong Learning, initiatives to engage parents in education

⁷ For a detailed analysis of the economic returns of FE participation see Fletcher M, 2001, *Lifelong Learning: Is there a logic for loans?*, LSDA: London, 5.

and or their children's education would encourage a greater amount of familial support for the continuing of education post Year Eleven.

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**PROPOSAL FOR AN INDEPENDENT RESEARCH PROJECT TO
INVESTIGATE ISSUES OF LOW ACHIEVEMENT BY SUBJECT AND
GENDER IMBALANCE IN SUBJECT TAKE-UP
IN THE SELLP AREA**

Background

South Essex Lifelong Learning Partnership (SELLP) is one of many Learning Partnerships now established throughout England to improve the planning and coherence of local post-16 learning. The partnership vision, formalised in the Action Plan following their inception in April 1999 is as follows:

“The Partners of the South Essex Lifelong Learning Partnership will work together energetically to promote and encourage social inclusion and lifelong learning to the people of South Essex.”

All Learning Partnerships are charged with the same key tasks:

- To harness the strengths of a range of local partners
- To co-ordinate action towards shared objectives
- To achieve greater coherence and value for money

In formulating actions to meet these shared objectives the working groups of the partnership identified the need for specific research to be undertaken into two possibly related topics:

- The low achievement of both boys and girls in different subject areas
- The low take-up of particular subjects, especially by girls.

Through the Further Education Development Agency (FEDA), the chair of SELP’s 16-19 Learning Advisory Group approached The Research Centre of City College Norwich to put forward a proposal for a research project to investigate these issues.

Research Aims

It is understood that the overall requirements of the research are to:

- Identify issues that may effect low achievement in particular subjects by both boys and girls
- Investigate into the reasons why certain subjects are under-subscribed to, especially by girls.
- Make recommendations that will enable learning providers to adapt provision to ensure achievement and take-up within the SELP district can be optimised.

This proposal offers a methodology for approaching the topic based on one researchers time between the months of December 2000 and February 2001 with a view to recommendations being presented no later than mid-March 2001.

Methodology

Although some quantitative data may be gathered, the evaluation needs of this project are essentially qualitative. In other words, this project will aim to elicit the learners’ agendas and by so doing, illuminate their needs and expectations. The same will be true of stakeholders, as it is anticipated that within SELP, the core issues of this topic are already well understood.

Fieldwork will be focused on gathering qualitative data from current students and the socially excluded as well as key stake-holders. The researcher will facilitate focus groups, conduct structured and unstructured interviews and write up field observations as well as conduct surveys as appropriate to

data needs and budget constraints. Questionnaires will be based on the analysis of preliminary data from the focus group and interviews.

The researcher will use a grounded theory approach for the analysis of the collected qualitative information. That is the process of analysis will systematically search for 'emergent themes' and will attempt to ensure that the agendas of the participants are addressed rather than pre-ordained questions of the researcher. The general focus of the research will be to examine the perceptions of learners (in particular girls) to different educational subjects and the reasons why some subjects have a low achievement rates in the SELP district. An overarching aim is to increase the understanding of all those involved.

Proposal

Research Aims:

- Identify issues that may effect low achievement in particular subjects by both boys and girls
- Investigate into the reasons why certain subjects are under-subscribed to, especially by girls
- Make recommendations that will enable learning providers to adapt provision to ensure achievement and take-up within the SELP district can be optimised with particular regard given to gender.

Time scale 14 weeks beginning 04 December 2000

Possible Action Plan

	<i>Dec 00</i>				<i>Jan 01</i>				<i>Feb 01</i>				<i>Mar 01</i>	
WEEK#	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
TASK														
Focus group														
Preliminary interviews														
Questionnaire construction														
Questionnaire pilot														
Questionnaire dispatch														
Questionnaire analysis														
Semi-structured interviews														
Field Observations														
Analysis														
Report writing and presentation														

Budget

Staff costs including support staff and on-costs (16 days)	£4800
Travel	£400
Subsistence	£600
Total	£5,800

The costs of stationery, postage and telephone will be met by City College Norwich.

Appendix Two

Gender Imbalance in participation and achievement (16-19) in the SELP Area

Questionnaire for SELP Partners

Partners in the SELP have made the following statements. For each statement please tick the box to indicate the extent to which you agree with the assertion from your experience.

Proposition	Agree	Disagree	Additional comments
16. Girls in the 16-19 year old age range are more 'emotionally intelligent' than their male peers of the same age.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
2. Girls are more 'compliant' within the educational environment.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
3. Media stereotyping and materialist aspirations less influence girls than boys.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
4. Girls excel at arts subjects such as the humanities because of better-developed communications skills.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
5. Boys are stronger at maths and science.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
6. Mixed sex education may impede the achievement across subjects of both boys and girls.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
7. The growth of service industry favour what are typically considered feminine skills.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
8. Boys are under greater pressure than girls to seek active employment.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
9. There is an identifiable 'laddish' culture in the SELP area that is focused upon the accumulation of status symbols.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	

Proposition	Agree	Disagree	Additional comments
10. Adverse experiences of compulsory secondary education deter a large number of boys and girls from continuing education.			
11. Patriarchal traditions still pervade young peoples' relationships, increasing pressure on boys to earn.			
12. Vocational courses have to be marketed as essential if boys are to participate.			
13. Boys may opt out rather than compete with 'high-earning' parents.			
14. Boys have greater difficulty than girls in asking for help.			
15. Boys prefer interactive courses rather than interactive groups requiring communication.			
16. Boys are less likely than girls to achieve well when a course assessment involves coursework.			

Additional comments cont. and or observations

Appendix Three

Gender Imbalance in participation and achievement (16-19) in the SELP (South Essex Learning Partnership) Area project

Questionnaire for Essex Youth Services Staff

It must be stated from the outset that the responses made in this questionnaire will be treated as confidential. Any use of the data collected will be anonymized. The contact details asked for are expressly for the use of the researchers in the event that we may wish to contact you and discuss any of your responses in more detail. We appreciate that the responses will reflect your own personal perspective, this is exactly the information that we are attempting to elicit, please try to be as comprehensive in your reply as possible.

Name:	Company:
Job Title	
Telephone number:	

1. The assumption has been made that many of the choices (education and training or employment) made by the 16-19 age range reflect commonly held gender stereotypes (e.g. boys: engineering, girls: hair and beauty). In your opinion, is this the case? Why do you think this is?

--

4. In your experience, in the 16-19 age range, are there any additional reasons (other than those already stated), why girls are participating in education and training more and achieving higher grades and in greater numbers than boys?

A large, empty rectangular box with a black border, intended for the respondent to provide their answer to the question above. The interior of the box is light gray.

Additional comments: Please use this space to write any comments that have you feel pertinent that have not been addressed by the above questions.

A large, empty rectangular box with a black border, intended for the respondent to provide any additional comments. The interior of the box is light gray.

Appendix Four

This article was sourced from the BBC Education website: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/education>

Thursday, 17 August, 2000, 12:38 GMT 13:38 UK

Why girls are beating 'lads'

Girls now beat boys in all exams except degrees. The negative effect of a "lad" culture is one of the theories put forward to explain why girls are now outperforming boys at A-level as well as in the earlier school years.

Dr Mary James of Cambridge University, who has researched the gender issue for the standards watchdog, Ofsted, said boys were under pressure to conform to a culture created by images in magazines.

"There are quite considerable pressures on both boys and girls, but it may be that boys find it very difficult to resist being one of the lads and pressures from the media and images from the media about what it is to be masculine," she said. "Although people are desperately trying to create role models to show it's cool to work, boys seem to have an extreme amount of pressure on them and it's very hard for them to resist the lad culture."

Dr James, whose 16-year-old son frequently reads "lad" magazines FHM and Loaded, said young men wanted to be cool and felt they would be regarded as "geeks" if they were studious. The acting editor of Loaded magazine, John Perry, said: "We're a magazine, so we're encouraging reading and we've got many award-winning journalists on board, so it's not low quality writing." He said the magazine was pro-fun rather than anti-work and that readers needed a level of intelligence to "decode" it. FHM magazine declined to comment.

Stereotyping

Dr James said that girls were still opting out of subjects which would later yield the greater salaries, however.

"Although girls are doing well there's still a major gap in entry levels. Both boys and girls are still choosing stereotypical subjects. There is still a learning gap between girls and boys but boys are still taking the subjects that often have the higher salaries at the end of it."

Alan Smithers, professor of education at Liverpool University, said: "There's a lot of evidence that girls work harder at school and have better language skills. "But we also have to keep this in proportion. Results of both boys and girls have improved considerably over the past 15 years." The problem with boys' relative underperformance originated early on, at the primary level, he suggested. "Boys don't get a very good start at school. Some experience failure and then seem to slip further out of the school context."

Lack of male teachers

The author of the anti-feminist book *No More Sex Wars*, journalist Neil Linden, supports the view that the problem needs to be tackled at an earlier stage. "The key factor here is the extinction of men as teachers in primary schools," he said. "As a society, we've seen it as essential to promote the interests and education of girls. Boys are less involved, more likely to be truants, more disruptive and less likely to take part in extra-curricular activity," he said. Education Minister Baroness Blackstone said: "Girls are more conscientious, they do work rather harder, but I also think they are aware that there are jobs available for them, careers they want to do, that in the past they would have thought were not for them." The government is anxious to investigate the issue further.

Career incentives

The headmistress of a top girls' school, Janet Mills, of Merchant Taylors' School for Girls in Liverpool, agrees.

"Girls now see that the top positions in industry are achievable for them and they have the incentive to work hard," she said. I think women have a strong work ethic and are used to managing different aspects of our lives. "Furthermore, I think the examination system is now more helpful to girls, because of course work and the modularity elements - girls work consistently hard whereas boys seem to leave it to the last minute and hope to pull something out of the bag."

The general secretary of the Secondary Heads' Association, John Dunford, also thinks the increasing use of modular exams may be significant. "We see the same improvement there as we saw in 1990s with GCSEs," he said.

Swinging pendulum

"Teachers have become conscious that they have to pay more attention to girls in class because boys tend to be always the first to answer questions. "Culturally, parents' aspirations for girls used to be poorer and I think schools have compensated for that. "What schools are beginning to realise is that they need to concentrate more on boys."

The general secretary of the National Association of Head Teachers, David Hart, said the growing gender gap was "a very worrying trend. A laddish culture, that despises academic achievement and is tolerated by far too many parents, must be changed," he said. "If the problems besetting boys are not cracked by 11, and certainly by 14, they will cause damage throughout the rest of their school careers."

Appendix Five

Interview Schedule

Attitudinal questions: 16-19

Materials: BBC Education article

1. What do you think about the statement that “lad culture” is the reason why boys are less successful than girls in Further Education? What is “lad culture”?
2. The article implies that the media puts pressure on boys to behave in a masculine way....sort of macho. Is this case? Can you give me some examples of how this is so? Is it right to give the examples of FHM and Loaded?
3. Is this not the case for girls of the same age group?
4. It would seem that the sorts of career paths that boys and girls choose are still gender stereotypical, i.e. Boys choose engineering and girls choose hair and beauty? Is this the case in your experience? If it is why do you think that this is?
4. Do you think the impact of role models is significant in the things that you have chosen to do? Can you give me an example of someone who has influenced you greatly?
5. Do you think that the education system is better suited to girls than to boys? Why is this?
6. Is the South Essex area, in your opinion, in any way different in the above respects to the rest of the country? If so how is this?