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BRIEFING NOTE: 2001 A-LEVEL AND GSCE RESULTS

Briefing note on the 2001 A-level and GSCE examination results in Northern Ireland and the causes of the "gender gap".

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SUMMARY OF KEY POINTS

Gender Differences in Educational Attainment in Northern Ireland - 2001 Examination Results

The publication of A and AS Level results on 16 August 2001 revealed that, at both levels, girls are outperforming boys. According to CCEA statistics, at A Level, girls outperform boys at Grade A by 3.1% and at A-E 1.5%. The gap at AS Level is slightly wider, the equivalent figures being 3.4% and 2.8%¹. The statistics for the year 1999-2000 are as follows²:

- Girls outperformed boys in terms of the highest level of qualification achieved with 33.3% of girls achieving three or more A levels or equivalent in 1999-2000 compared to 22.7% of boys, and 41.9% of girls achieving at least two A levels or equivalent compared to 28.8% of boys.
- When the type of school is considered 79.8% of grammar school girls left school with two or more A-levels or equivalent compared to 67.9% of grammar school boys (the corresponding proportions for secondary schools were 16.7% for girls and 6.6% for boys).
- For those leaving school with at least five GCSEs at grades A* - C or equivalent the proportion of girls remained higher than the proportion of boys (65% of girls leaving school in 1999-2000 achieved at least five GCSEs at grades A* - C or equivalent compared to 49.2% of boys).
- Approximately twice as many boys left school with no GCSEs compared to girls (6.9% of boys and 3.4% of girls).
- Girls leaving school are more likely to continue their education with 70.9% of girls entering Institutions of Higher or Further Education compared to 51.5% of boys.

At GCSE level (21 August 2001) in Northern Ireland, 7% of pupils got the top Grade A* (9% per cent of girls and 5.3% of boys). Girls achieved 10% more than boys in the two top grades³.

The 'gender gap' in educational attainment has been a major issue nationally and internationally for several years. For example, the following statistics are presented by the National Assembly of Wales⁴ in *Examination Achievement: Gender Analysis 2000*:

- In general, girls continue to perform better than boys, with smaller gaps in maths and science than in languages;
- At Key Stage 4, the gap between boys and girls has increased since 1996
- At A level, the gap is greater than in 1996, but decreased between 1999 and 2000.

¹ Press release CCEA (16/08/01) <http://www.ccea.org.uk/>

² http://www.deni.gov.uk/statistics/pr/stats_press_release_index.htm

³ http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/english/uk/northern_ireland/newsid_1501000/1501266.stm

⁴ http://www.wales.gov.uk/keypubstatisticsforwalesheadline/content/education/2001/hdw20010131a_e.htm

Similar results are also apparent in England⁵ and Scotland, and indeed, according to Gallagher⁶ throughout developed industrialised societies in general.

Potential Causes of the Gender Achievement Gap

The gender gap in educational attainment to the benefit of girls is a feature of many developed countries. This gap tends to increase at the higher levels of school education. From the review of the literature, the following factors may influence the performance of boys in relation to that of girls:

- The lack of male teachers in primary and post-primary sectors⁷
- Boys are more likely to score extreme scores
- The interaction between pupils and teachers, and gender stereotyping
- Girls show more aptitude and liking for collaborative, discussion-led lessons
- Coursework and changing forms of assessment which are thought to favour girls
- Reluctance of male pupils to select 'female' subjects
- Changing patterns of employment, the decline of the manufacturing sector and the perceived greater employability of girls, and the subsequent implications for boys' motivation and degree of disaffection
- Boys are more likely to reject authority, to truant and to be excluded
- Cumulative deficits in core skills of literacy and numeracy

However, most commentators indicate that social class and ethnic background are more important than gender in educational attainment (although differences in attainment between boys and girls of the same social class have been noted (Powney, 1996)).

⁵ Ofsted (2000) Educational Inequality: Mapping Race, Class And Gender A Synthesis Of Research

⁶ Gallagher, Dr A.M. (1997), A Review of Research Evidence in the Apparent Underachievement of Boys (Department of Education)

⁷ Belfast Telegraph (27 April 2000)