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Schooled to Fail? The Underachievement Debate in Wales

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ABSTRACT

The underachievement of students in school is one of the predominant debates in education today. It is one that has been used to describe relatively poor academic performance on a grand scale – from that of a nation to an individual. It is a concept which has become familiar to educators in Wales, where since the early 1980s Welsh students have, according to some commentators, been ‘schooled to fail’ (Reynolds and Murgatroyd, 1981). This article considers the underachievement debate from a Welsh perspective. It will focus on the age-old issue of regional England/Wales comparisons, particularly in light of the two countries’ increasingly divergent curricula, before looking at trends in the examination performance of Welsh students at the end of compulsory education, the findings of which may give cause for a renewed optimism in education in Wales and lead us tentatively to suggest that perhaps our students are no longer being schooled to fail.

Introduction

The politics of globalization and the desire of nations to compete successfully on the world stage have increasingly led to the examination of educational achievement from an international perspective. This has become particularly apparent with the recent publication of the results from the Programme for International School Assessment (PISA) (OECD, 2001) and other large-scale international tests such as the Third International Maths and Science Study (TIMSS) and the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS). In

the United Kingdom, this refocusing of the standards debate has resulted in an interrogation of the national educational system and – from some quarters – accusations of the underachievement of a nation (see, for example, Barber, 1997; Phillips, 1996; Prais 1990). Indeed, some commentators have claimed that standards in British schools have reached unacceptable levels with a ‘yawning gap’ (Phillips, 1996: 3) in maths performance between us and other European countries; they describe a system where undergraduates are ill prepared for their courses and modern language teachers have to resort to teaching grammar in secret. Official statistics show that students from black Caribbean backgrounds are nearly three times more likely to be excluded from school than their white peers (DfES, 2002) and that half of all students leave school without achieving five or more ‘good’ GCSE passes (DfES, 2003). According to one teachers’ union, our students are the most tested in the world and the increased workload on teachers has resulted in unfair examination practices and ‘teaching to the test’ (NUT, 2003), despite this, pupils in school in the UK are less likely to remain in education after the age of 16 than many of their European counterparts (Nuthall, 2001).

One important motivator behind the desire to raise standards in schools is the need for the UK to become a global competitor and achieve higher levels of economic growth. This problem is particularly pertinent in Wales; with the decline in heavy industry since the Second World War, traditional jobs have been replaced by foreign investors, particularly in the electronic industries, with companies such as Panasonic, LG and Sony employing large numbers of people in the south Wales valleys region. However, a trend is emerging, as evidenced by the recent closure of the Hitachi factory in Hirwaun, whereby some investors are withdrawing and starting to produce in areas of the world where labour costs are lower than those in Wales. According to Brooksbank (2001), the availability of low-cost labour within the European Union means that Wales is going to have to adapt rapidly if it is to attract potential investors, and possibly change its skills base to cope with the new Europe. Education remains pivotal to these changes, and recent announcements of proposed amendments to the National Curriculum, allowing a more flexible and vocational post-14 curriculum, suggest a renewed emphasis on vocational qualifications.

A great deal of the criticism over the relatively poorer examination performance of the home nations has its foundation in the interpretation of international standardized test scores and the evidence they present of a ‘two-track’ education and training system in Britain where the top 10 per cent of the population perform relatively well but where the less able underachieve (Reynolds and Farrell, 1996). This contention has continued with the publication of results from more recent comparative tests which suggest that, despite

improvement in the performance of the more able students. Britain's performance in these international tests is dogged by a 'long tail of underachievement' (Johnson, 2002).

The so-called underachievement debate is a central issue in education today; it is synonymous with the notion that all is not well with our schools, our students and indeed our national education system. Wales, in particular, has received its fair share of such unfavourable comparisons, from accusations in the 1980s of an education system whose students were being 'schoolled to fail' to more recent home nation comparisons fuelled by the publication of school performance league tables. However, the notion of underachievement is complex; there are problems both with its definition and measurement. Frequently it is confused and conflated with 'low achievement' – an error that has important policy implications both at the school and the individual level (Smith, 2003a, 2003b). Before effective strategies for raising performance can be adopted by schools and before we can be more confident about labelling one section of the school population as 'underachieving', it is essential that the underachievement debate, with all its connotations, is more clearly understood. This article adds to the discourse by considering two perspectives of the underachievement debate that are specifically Welsh in their focus: first, the age-old issue of regional England/Wales comparisons and, second, the trends in the performance of Welsh students at the end of their compulsory education.

A regional perspective: Wales versus the North East of England

On the one hand, comparing Wales with the whole of England might seem to be of little value. But, if educational underachievement is 'embedded in family, social and community disadvantage' (ETAG, 1998: 27), it would seem reasonable that if a truly comparative assessment of Welsh standards were to be made, it should be with an economically equivalent region. The economic well-being of a region manifests itself through a range of economic indicators such as gross domestic product (GDP), average weekly earnings, economic activity and house prices. A review of these variables is presented in tables 7.1 to 7.4. For the sake of brevity, only the data related to England, Wales and the North East are given here, but a complete break-down of all English regions appears in Appendix 1.

Table 7.1
GDP per head (as proportion of UK total)

Region	1991	1993	1996	1998
Wales	85.3	82.7	83.1	79.4
North East	85.2	85.8	84.3	78.8
England	101.8	101.8	101.7	102.0
United Kingdom	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: Office of National Statistics (2001).

Table 7.2
Average gross weekly earnings (full time) (£) April 2003

	Male	Female
United Kingdom	522.6	394.8
North East	437.8	347.3
Wales	448.3	357.3

Source: Office of National Statistics (2004).

Table 7.3
Average dwelling price (£ thousands)

	1996	1999	2002
United Kingdom	70.6	94.6	148.1
North East	51.3	59.4	81.3
Wales	55.4	62.4	88.3

Source: Office of National Statistics (2001, 2004).

Table 7.4
Economic activity rates (percentages)

	1997	1999	2003
United Kingdom	62.6	78.4	78.7
North East	58.2	72.3	73.0
Wales	57.9	73.7	75.3

Source: Office of National Statistics (2001, 2004).

A review of these figures suggests that on almost every measure of economic well-being, the region most similar to Wales is the North East of England. These particular measures of economic prosperity show that a comparison of Wales and England is not simply a comparison of like with like. Even if economic factors are put to one side and the comparison is made simply on size of population, surely, it is unfair to write policy based on a comparison of a nation of just under 3 million people with one of just under 50 million? (table 7.5). Again, it is the North East of England which appears to present a fairer area for comparison with Wales.

Table 7.5
Resident population, all persons (thousands)

	1991	1996	1998	2002
United Kingdom	57807.90	58801.50	59236.50	59232.00
North East	2602.50	2600.50	2589.60	2513.00
England	48208.10	49089.10	49494.40	49537.00
Wales	2891.50	2921.10	2933.30	2919.00

Source: Office of National Statistics (2001, 2004).

If it is agreed that the North East and Wales are similar regions, both in terms of population and economic activity, then a comparison of education attainment, in particular the benchmark five or more A*-C grades, would be of great interest (Table 7.6). Thus, it might seem reasonable to argue that the benchmark GCSE examination results of pupils in Wales are not only at least as good as those in England but are superior to those of the North East, Wales's closest economic peer. These results reflect the findings of a comparison of LEAs in England and Wales by Gorard, who discovered that, when taking into account socio-economic variables, there was little evidence of a 'general under-performance of the schools and students in Wales relative to those in England' (2000: 96). Rather, the author suggested that school results in Wales are generally as expected when factors such as intake were taken into account.

This comparison of performance between Welsh schools and those in the North East of England is not intended to be a call for regional comparisons in order to place Welsh schools in a good light. Indeed, there is an argument for separating Wales itself into different regions – a rural/urban split for example. Rather, the aim of the analysis is to demonstrate that, whichever way comparisons are carried out, there are winners and losers. Poor Welsh performance against

one 'competitor' can be transformed into good Welsh performance against another, but this gets no closer to telling us anything more about what is happening in Welsh schools.

Table 7.6
GCSE* achievements of 15-year-old pupils

	1999/2000	2000/2001	2001/2002	2002/2003
North East	42	43	44	47
England 1*	48	49	49	51
England 2**	N/A	N/A	51	53
Wales***	49	50	50	51

* Including grant maintained schools, city technology colleges and maintained special schools

** Students in all schools

*** Includes pupils in LEA, grant maintained and independent schools

Source: DES (2000–2003), National Assembly for Wales (2000–2003).

This section has demonstrated that the notion that all is not well with education in Wales is questionable on several levels. But, if comparisons have to be made and are done on purely economic grounds, Welsh performance is superior to its closest English peer – the North East. Furthermore, Wales and England have increasingly divergent curricula which, when coupled with economic incomparability and a differing population, make the usefulness of these 'home nation' comparisons uncertain. The article will now consider the performance of Welsh students in national tests at the end of compulsory schooling and will focus particularly on the relative performance of boys and girls – a central theme of the underachievement debate.

Underachieving pupils

Underachievement – and the underachievement of working-class boys in particular – has become one of the most 'predominant discourses' in education today. Evidence for a gender gap in school performance has come from recent examination results that appear to suggest that girls are outperforming boys and that the gap between them is increasing (Arnot et al., 1998). The reasons given for the apparent failing of boys in school are various and range from the curriculum and its assessment, to the interaction of teachers and pupils in the

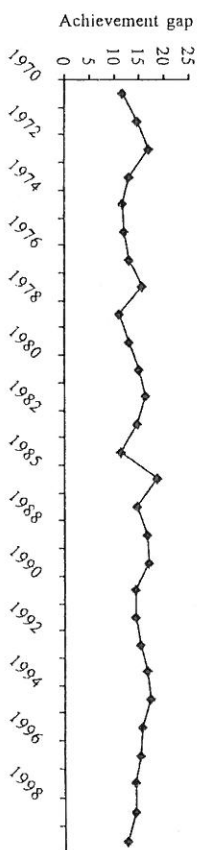
classroom, to the conflict of masculinity in contemporary society (see, for example, Francis, 2000; Spendlove, 2000; Younger and Warrington, 1996). However, an alternative account does exist. For example, Delamont contends that 'it is pointless to be swept away by a moral panic about "failing", anti-school working-class boys. This is not a new problem' (1999: 13). Schools, she argues, have never been able to deal with the working-class boy. According to Delamont, the whole standards debate is surrounded by a 'discourse of denision' (1999: 3), compounded by a lack of understanding of the academic gains made by all pupils, and coupled with the media's resistance to hearing good news. Gorard (2001) disputes the fact that boys have *ever* attained higher grades than girls in compulsory education at any time over the past twenty-five years. In an analysis of examination data for all pupils at all levels, he demonstrates that achievement gaps between these groups have remained relatively static and that differential attainment by gender is 'a product of the changed system and nature of assessments rather than any more general failing of boys' (Gorard, 2001: 10).

Nevertheless, a moral panic surrounding the achievement of the nation's young people does exist and has placed the notion of underachievement firmly at the heart of the standards debate. It is performance in public examinations, in particular GCSEs, that has been most widely used as evidence of an increasing male-female gap in performance and to demonstrate the 'underachievement' of different groups of individuals. In order to examine the extent of any underachievement of pupils in Wales, an analysis of gaps between pupil entry and achievement at the end of compulsory schooling was undertaken.¹ In particular, the relative performance of boys and girls in Wales over the thirty-year period from 1970 to 1999 was considered. This section presents the results of the analysis as they relate to achievement in English, maths and Welsh. English and maths were selected because they have long been core subjects, and therefore compulsory for all students. As the examination data described here was for Welsh Joint Education Committee (WJEC) exams only, it reflects a predominantly Welsh population during the 1970s but less so since the introduction of the GCSE in 1988, when more English schools began to adopt the WJEC syllabus. By including the results for Welsh-language examinations, the trends in performance for a mainly Welsh cohort can be considered. The figures and table below show the achievement gaps in the performance of male and female entrants who gained a grade C or above at O level/GCSE or a grade 1 CSE in the WJEC examinations in selected subjects between the years 1970 and 1999.²

English

In English the achievement gap between the male and female students has hardly changed since the early 1970s. There is little evidence here of any differences over time in the relative performance of boys and girls in English – indeed, the current gap is the smallest since the early 1980s.

Figure 7.1
Achievement gaps between male and female students (English)



Source: WJEC examination board.

Maths

In mathematics, proportionally more girls are now being entered for the examination than thirty years ago. The performance of boys and girls has also evened out since the early 1990s, with boys and girls enjoying almost equal success. What happened in 1991 to affect boys' scores so drastically is worthy of further study, but further investigations suggest that the change coincided with the introduction of compulsory coursework in this subject.

Table 7.7
Achievement gaps between male and female students (maths)

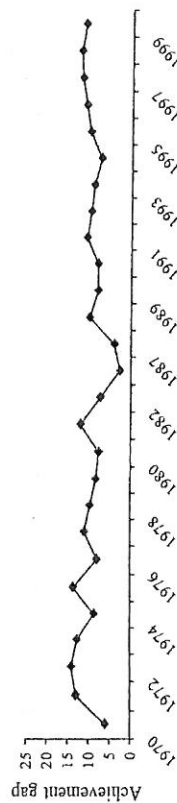
Year	Both	Girls	Boys	Achievement gap
1970	37.6	32.7	42.0	-12.39
1975	31.4	27.5	35.2	-12.41
1980*	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
1985	37.0	33.1	41.3	-11.06
1990	38.8	35.0	43.0	-10.29
1995	44.9	45.0	44.8	0.22
1999	48.3	48.8	47.9	0.94

* Introduction of the CS (common syllabus) examination – no gender-related data available

Welsh

The results for Welsh are also of interest, as they represent a predominantly Welsh population (see notes at end). However, the results are particularly susceptible to variation as they represent a smaller number of students. Nevertheless, the achievement gap (in favour of the girls) has shown little consistent sign of change over the last thirty years.

Figure 7.2
Achievement gaps between male and female students (Welsh)



Source: WJEC examination board.

Several factors may influence examination scores. For example, changes in the nature of the course, introduction of coursework and changes in the proportions of pupils entering the examination might all play a part. Nevertheless, these examination results suggest that the 'underachievement' debate between boys and girls is not as clear-cut as popularly believed. There is no convincing evidence here to suggest that the gap between male and female performance at age 16 has widened. Although it is true that boys do not do as well as girls in English and Welsh, there is evidence here to suggest that they probably never have done and that any 'underachievement' of boys in these subjects is not a new phenomenon. This lends support to the alternative account of underachievement described above. In subjects where girls' performance appears to have 'overtaken' that of the boys (for instance, maths), the difference between their performance is generally less than 10 per cent and surely not enough evidence to label the boys as 'underachieving'.

This re-analysis is not unique, or without support. Indeed, there are several instances cited in the literature where different interpretations of examination data have led to one group or another being labelled as 'underachieving', and where reinterpretation of the findings has presented a very different picture (see, for example, Gorard, 2001; Heath, 2000).

Conclusion

This article has sought to examine the underachievement phenomenon from a Welsh perspective. It is difficult to overestimate the influence the underachievement discourse has had on the standards debate, not only from the perspective of the policy-maker but also at a school level where strategies such as single-sex teaching and homework clubs with premiership footballers are used to try and ameliorate the underachievement of certain groups of students.

We have demonstrated that the dichotomous approach of labelling one group of students or one nation's school system as 'underachieving' relative to another is neither straightforward nor accurate. There is little to suggest that in Wales the gap between the GCSE performance of male and female students is increasing, and cherry-picking English regions against which to draw comparisons tells us little about the state of education inside our own country. What is clear is that things are changing in the education system in Wales. With no school performance tables, limited testing at ages 7 and 11, no specialist schools and the piloting of the Welsh Baccalaureate, the signs are that the system is diverging from that in England (Bloom, 2003). The homogenous nature of the local comprehensive, a less intrusive school inspection system, the absence of league tables and national tests for 7-year-olds have all been given as explanations for the relative recent examination success of Welsh students (Berliner, 2003a). One academic has also cited the 'connectedness' of Wales as a reason; good practice travels fast in a small country with a greater sense of community (Berliner, 2003b). Although the irony of being 'connected' in a country where the quickest way to travel between north and south is via England should perhaps not be forgotten. Whatever the reasons for this renewed optimism in education in Wales, the examination results speak for themselves. In 2002, 79 per cent of Welsh 11-year-olds achieved the national target level in English and 50 per cent of 16-year-olds achieved five or more A*-C grades at GCSE. Results like this just might lead us to suggest that perhaps Welsh students are no longer being schooled to fail.

However, while the term 'underachievement' may have outlived its usefulness in helping us understand how students perform in tests in schools in Wales, achievement gaps in the performance of different groups of students do still exist. For example, it is still the case that some students, namely those who come from the poorest homes, perform less well in school than their peers from more economically advantaged backgrounds (Gorard, 2000; Smith, 2005). This issue of low achievement is conceptually different from that of underachievement (Smith, 2003a, 2003b). Considering the differential attainment of different groups of students shows us that even though the achievement levels

of all pupils, as measured by national tests, are steadily improving, inequities do still exist and are most apparent among those from the poorest homes. The next step perhaps for educators, researchers and policy-makers in Wales is not only to understand why this may be the case, but also to ensure that strategies that are proven to close achievement gaps should be developed, refined, or supported in wider practice.

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Appendix 1: Economic statistics, United Kingdom

Table 7.8
Gross domestic product (per head)

	1991	1993	1996	1998
United Kingdom	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
North East	85.2	85.8	84.3	78.8
North West and Merseyside	91.0	91.1	90.9	88.2
Yorkshire and the Humber	91.5	89.9	89.5	87.8
East Midlands	97.5	96.7	94.3	94.8
West Midlands	92.7	92.8	93.5	91.7
Eastern	109.0	107.9	108.8	114.2
London	124.0	126.6	123.3	130.4
South East	111.2	111.0	114.5	116.7
South West	95.2	95.2	94.7	91.9
England	101.8	101.8	101.7	102.0
Wales	85.3	82.7	83.1	79.4

Source: Office of National Statistics (2001).

Table 7.9
Average gross weekly earnings (full time) (£) April 2003

	Male	Female
United Kingdom	522.6	394.8
North East	437.8	347.3
North West and Merseyside	483.1	367.9
Yorkshire and the Humber	463.8	360.4
East Midlands	467.3	357.4

Emma Smith

Table 7.9 (cont.)

	Male	Female
West Midlands	477.1	363.7
Eastern	528.5	382.7
London	716.5	516.5
South East	560.9	415.7
South West	485.1	364.7
England		
Wales	448.3	357.3

Source: Office of National Statistics (2004).

Table 7.10
Average dwelling price (£ thousands)

	1996	1999	2002
United Kingdom	70.6	94.6	148.1
North East	51.3	59.4	81.3
North West and Merseyside	58.3	63.5	92.4
Yorkshire and the Humber	57.4	63.5	92.1
East Midlands	59.8	69.5	111.7
West Midlands	64.6	76.6	118.8
Eastern	74.3	94.7	160.4
London	94.7	150.1	241.0
South East	88.3	118.4	193.3
South West	68.4	90.3	157.0
England	73.1	N/A	N/A
Wales	55.4	62.4	88.3

Source: Office of National Statistics (2001, 2004).

Table 7.11
Economic activity rates (percentages)

	1997	1999	2003
United Kingdom	62.6	78.4	78.7
North East	58.2	72.3	73.0
North West and Merseyside	59.9	75.7	77.3
Yorkshire and the Humber	61.0	77.6	78.4
East Midlands	64.4	80.1	79.5

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Table 7.11 (cont.)

	1997	1999	2003
West Midlands	62.5	79.1	78.5
Eastern	64.7	81.5	81.9
London	64.6	77.3	75.6
South East	65.6	82.8	82.5
South West	63.2	82.1	81.7
England	63.0	N/A	N/A
Wales	57.9	73.7	75.3

Source: Office of National Statistics (2001, 2004).

Table 7.12

Resident population, all persons (thousands)

	1991	1996	1998	2002
United Kingdom	57807.90	58801.50	59236.50	59232.00
North East	2602.50	2600.50	2589.60	2513.00
North West and Merseyside	6885.40	6891.30	6890.80	6771.00
Yorkshire and the Humber	4982.80	5035.50	5042.90	4983.00
East Midlands	4035.40	4141.50	4169.30	4215.00
West Midlands	5265.50	5316.60	5332.50	5304.00
Eastern	5149.80	5292.60	5377.00	5420.00
London	6889.90	7074.30	7187.20	7355.00
South East	7678.90	7895.30	8003.80	8038.00
South West	4717.80	4841.50	4901.30	4961.00
England	48208.10	49089.10	49494.40	49537.00
Wales	2891.50	2921.10	2933.30	2919.00

Source: Office of National Statistics (2001, 2004).

Table 7.13

GCSE/GNVQ achievements of 15-year-old pupils in all maintained* schools

	1999/2000	2000/2001	2001/2002	2002/2003
North East	42	43	44	47
North West	46	47	48	49
Yorkshire and Humber	43	44	44	46
East Midlands	47	48	49	51

Table 7.13 (cont.)

	1999/2000	2000/2001	2001/2002	2002/2003
West Midlands	46	47	48	50
Eastern	51	53	53	54
London	46	47	48	51
South East	53	54	54	55
South West	52	53	53	55
England 1*	48	49	49	51
England 2**	N/A	N/A	51	53
Wales***	49	50	50	51

* Including grant maintained schools, city technology colleges and maintained special schools

** Students in all schools

*** Includes pupils in LEA, grant maintained and independent schools

Source: DfES (2000–2003); National Assembly for Wales (2000–2003).

Appendix 2:

Achievement gaps in performance between boys and girls in Wales
in the GCSE and GCE (CSE) examinations from 1970 to 1999

Table 7.14
English*

Year	Both	Girls	Boys	Achievement gap
1970	50.0	55.8	44.0	11.77
1971	47.6	54.4	40.5	14.54
1972	48.8	56.9	40.3	16.96
1973	18.6	54.8	42.2	12.95
1974	42.3	47.0	37.1	11.61
1975	42.7	47.6	37.4	11.93
1976	42.1	47.3	37.4	12.87
1977	41.4	47.6	34.5	15.79
1978	40.2	44.4	35.7	10.87
1979	39.7	44.7	34.3	13.06
1980	37.3	43.1	31.8	14.89
1981	37.0	42.7	30.7	16.20
1982	36.0	41.0	30.5	14.64
1983	35.8	N/A	N/A	N/A

Table 7.14 (cont.)

Year	Both	Girls	Boys	Achievement gap
1984	36.1	40.3	32.0	11.49
1985	35.8	42.2	28.9	18.60
1986	35.8	N/A	N/A	N/A
1987	38.0	43.4	32.2	14.73
1988	41.6	48.3	34.5	16.56
1989	44.1	51.3	36.4	16.87
1990	44.6	50.8	37.9	14.43
1991	46.3	52.7	39.5	14.23
1992	47.1	54.2	39.6	15.49
1993	46.6	54.3	38.9	16.52
1994	50.7	60.2	41.2	17.41
1995	53.2	61.5	44.8	15.76
1996	54.6	62.9	46.3	15.20
1997	55.7	63.5	47.7	14.18
1998	57.1	65.2	49.0	14.19
1999	56.2	63.3	49.0	12.72

Table 7.15
Maths*

Year	Both	Girls	Boys	Achievement gap
1970	37.6	32.7	42.0	-12.39
1971	36.3	32.5	39.7	-9.93
1972	37.1	32.1	41.5	-12.57
1973	34.4	29.9	38.5	-12.53
1974	30.4	26.2	34.3	-13.29
1975	31.4	27.5	35.2	-12.41
1976*	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
1977*	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
1978*	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
1979*	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
1980*	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
1981*	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
1982*	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
1983*	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A

Table 7.15 (cont.)

Year	Both	Girls	Boys	Achievement gap
1984	37.7	34.2	41.5	-9.66
1985	37.0	33.1	41.3	-11.06
1986*	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
1987	38.0	35.2	41.1	-7.74
1988	37.8	33.6	42.1	-11.24
1989	38.9	34.1	44.2	-12.95
1990	38.8	35.0	43.0	-10.29
1991	38.9	36.7	41.3	-5.90
1992	41.2	39.4	43.0	-4.36
1993	43.1	42.2	44.0	-2.08
1994	45.3	45.1	45.6	-0.55
1995	44.9	45.0	44.8	0.22
1996	46.3	47.1	45.6	1.63
1997	46.5	47.0	46.1	1.96
1998	47.0	48.7	45.2	3.72
1999	48.3	48.8	47.9	0.94

Table 7.16
Welsh*

Year	Both	Girls	Boys	Achievement gap
1970	46.6	48.9	43.0	6.08
1971	45.7	50.7	38.4	13.02
1972	45.1	50.6	37.4	14.11
1973	43.8	48.4	36.9	12.62
1974	43.6	46.6	38.4	8.70
1975	41.1	45.5	33.3	13.78
1976	42.5	45.5	37.6	7.86
1977	43.2	46.9	36.6	11.14
1978	40.3	43.5	35.1	9.73
1979	44.3	47.4	39.2	8.49
1980	41.5	44.0	37.0	7.73
1981	41.8	45.6	34.2	12.09
1982	44.7	47.1	39.4	7.44

Table 7.16 (cont.)

Year	Both	Girls	Boys	Achievement gap
1983	42.6	N/A	N/A	N/A
1984	41.2	43.3	39.4	2.70
1985	37.2	N/A	N/A	N/A
1986	35.3	N/A	N/A	N/A
1987	34.4	35.5	32.6	3.96
1988	49.2	53.2	43.0	9.86
1989	53.5	56.9	47.9	7.88
1990	53.9	57.4	48.2	8.06
1991	53.1	57.8	46.1	10.70
1992	57.1	61.8	50.1	9.83
1993	56.7	61.0	50.5	8.87
1994	58.3	61.9	52.9	7.35
1995	58.7	63.6	51.5	9.95
1996	59.5	65.2	51.5	11.16
1997	60.2	66.2	51.1	12.03
1998	65.1	71.9	55.4	12.28
1999	67.3	73.6	57.7	11.30

* Source: The Welsh Joint Education Committee.

Notes

¹ The achievement gap is defined as 'an index of the difference in an educational indicator (such as an examination pass rate) between two groups (such as male and female)' (Gorard, 2000: 203). It is calculated by analysing the gaps in entry and in performance between two groups as shown in the equation below:

$$\text{Achievement gap} = \frac{\text{performance} - \text{entry}}{\text{gap}}$$

$$\text{Achievement gap} = \left(\frac{GP - BP}{GP + BP} \right) \times 100 - \left(\frac{GE - BE}{GE + BE} \right) \times 100$$

GP = number of girls achieving that grade or better

BP = number of boys achieving that grade or better

GE = number of girls entered

BE = number of boys entered
(from Gorard, 2000: 204)

- ² The following points related to the trends described for English, Welsh and maths:
- the full results for each subject are given in Appendix 2;
 - the results are for all exam entries, they do not exclude mature students;
 - in all the cases described, the tables show the percentage of boys, girls and all pupils gaining grade C or above, as well as the achievement gap between boys and girls (a positive value denotes a gap in favour of the girls).

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