

The gender 'gap' in attainment: the Scottish policy perspective

VAL CORRY

University of Glasgow

ABSTRACT

The 'gender gap' in attainment is an issue in Scotland but is also an international phenomenon. In Scotland, this gap continues to be apparent as girls outperform boys in national examinations. This raises challenges for those working in schools and for policymakers in responding to this phenomenon. This article focuses on appraising critically the policy context of gender and, more specifically, attainment within Scotland from the perspective of the national education system, and from the perspective of Scotland being part of the UK, and consequently being subject to UK-wide and European legislation on equality. Attainment data is presented to set this phenomenon in a national and international context and serves to show that the gap is most significant for academically able boys, rather than all boys. The policy examined for this article suggests that the focus has been on **all** boys rather than considering which groups of boys and girls. In most recent policies in Scotland and the UK there appears to be a 'gender blindness' with gender being subsumed into inclusion and diversity. The article concludes by raising some questions for those influencing and making policy if there is to be a deeper understanding of gender, the gender gap and how this is to inform practice.

Key words: gender and attainment; academically able boys; boys' attainment; gender and educational policy; gender and Scottish education

INTRODUCTION

With a major element of current Scottish educational policy and funding focussing on improving levels of attainment, an important question is the relationship between gender and attainment. This article examines critically the question of a gender attainment gap in Scottish education. The issue of gender in education emerged from the development of feminism and efforts to increase educational opportunities for girls and women. There are broadly three ways in which gender has been dealt with historically in education. The first is 'gender-blind' where gender is not treated as a significant issue in education. The second is a strategy to remove the significance of gender, 'gender neutral', where the focus is on equality by ensuring individual needs are met. However, such a stance does not recognise the significance of gender in learners' identity (Head, 2008) nor does it

allow us to consider the relationship between gender and other social factors in shaping educational achievement. A more recent idea is a 'gender-sensitive' approach where the importance of gender identity in learning is recognised and further, that gender intersects with other factors such as race and ethnicity, sexuality, social class and disability in hindering or facilitating learning (Forde 2008). As policy has evolved in Scotland, there has been a tendency to adopt either a 'gender-blind' or a 'gender neutral' approach where issues of gender and attainment are dealt with in terms of the performance of all boys and all girls and only limited consideration of the attainment of different groups of boys and different groups of girls.

Two important policy changes in Scotland happened from about the mid-eighties which helped raise the question of attainment. One was the 'improving schools' agenda with a strong focus on raising attainment, and second, the introduction of the *Education (Scotland) Act 1981* (UK Parliament, 1981). This Act gave parents choice over schooling and required schools to publish attainment data (Croxford, 2009). This meant that schools had an imperative to track and monitor progress, and to ensure pupil performance in SQA examinations was maximised. The wider attainment issue is one context that helped raise the issue of gender and attainment, the other being legislation. The issue of gender in education is subject to equality legislation and there have been a several acts since the mid 1970s that have had implications for education.

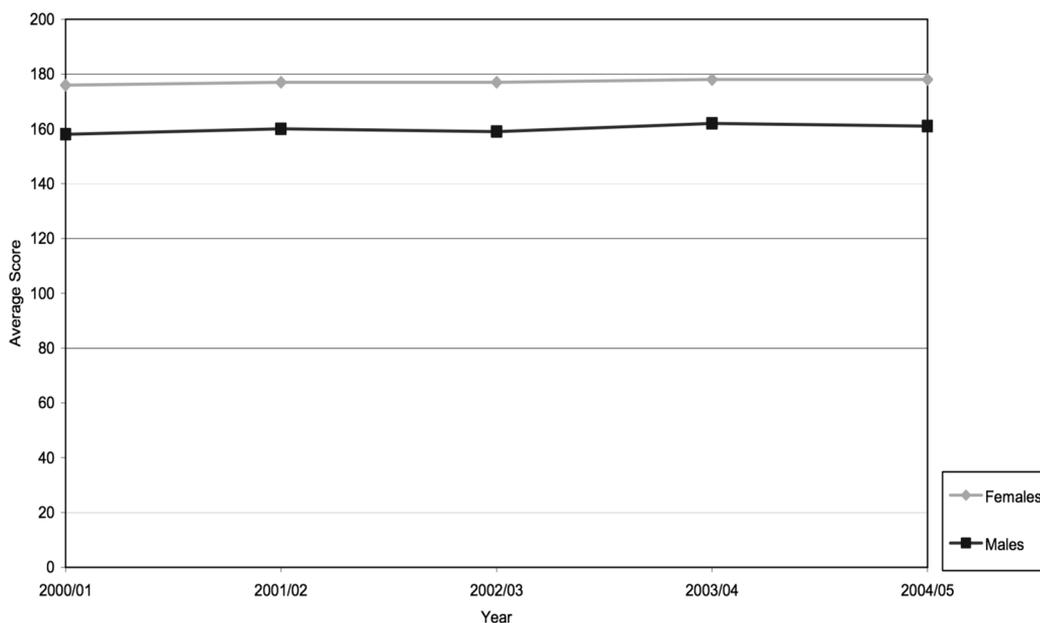
The focus of this article is the development of educational policy on gender and particularly gender and attainment since the mid-eighties. A major concern has been the 'gender gap' in attainment and that boys are underperforming. While the underperformance of a particular group of learners should be a cause for concern, there is a lack of clarity about what constitutes a gender attainment gap and how the issue of gender relates to other social factors. In Scottish education the collection of attainment data has been accompanied by commissioned reports analysing data and by the publication of guidance about educational practice. The article begins by locating historically the discussion of gender and attainment in the wider issue of attainment and improvement in Scottish education. Drawing from a range of published attainment statistics, data by gender in relation to Scotland and to the wider UK is discussed to explore patterns of attainment. This is followed by a critical appraisal of educational policy on gender and attainment looking firstly, at the legislative frameworks on gender and equality and secondly, the way in which these have been addressed through educational policy in Scotland, in the UK and internationally. The article concludes by raising several issues for the development of gender policy in education. We begin by examining some of the data gathered to identify patterns related to gender and education in Scottish education.

THE GENDER GAP – WHICH GAP?

The issue of a gender gap in attainment has been a significant question and attainment data illustrates this and as a result, the Scottish Executive commissioned a number of reports to look more closely at these patterns. The evidence from Scottish national quantitative data, provided by SQA, showed that there was a difference in levels of performance of boys and girls, favouring girls (Croxford, 2009; Tinklin *et al.*, 2001). From 1970 attainment overall was improving

but the gap between boys' and girls' performance remained. A Scottish Government report (Scottish Executive, 2006) illustrates the gap for S4 pupils comparing all boys and all girls, and this is shown in Figure 1.

FIGURE 1: AVERAGE TARIFF SCORES OF S4 PUPILS, BY GENDER, SCOTLAND, 2000/01 TO 2004/05



(Scottish Executive, 2006, p.128)

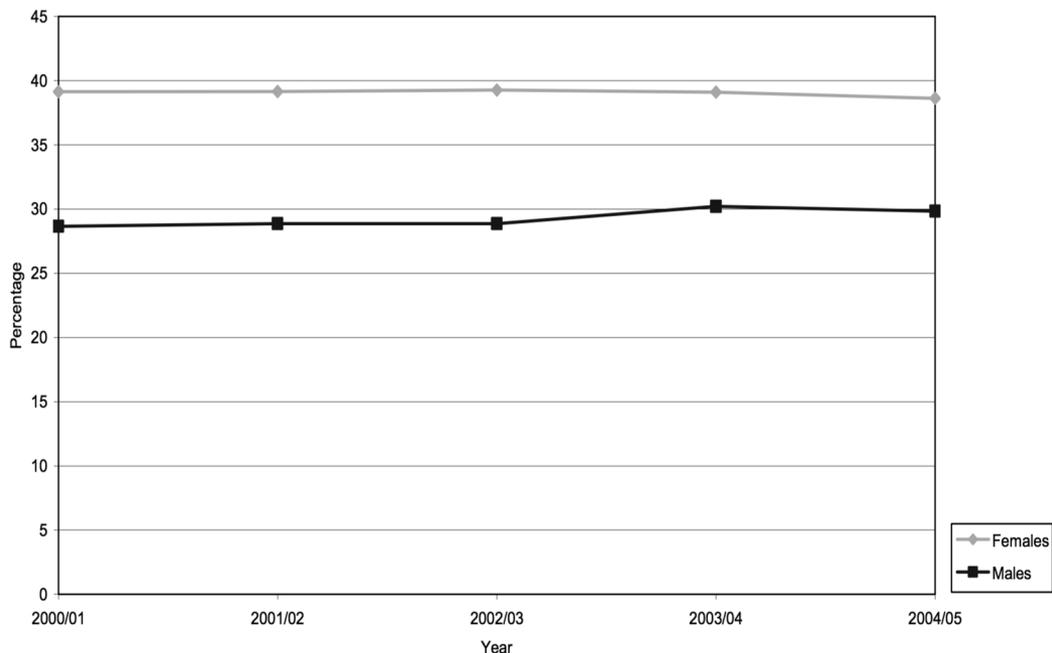
Figure 1 shows that girls outperformed boys based on the average performance of all boys and all girls across all levels of study. It is also worth highlighting that the gap remained constant from 2000/01 to 2004/05. UK-wide data also show that there is a difference in levels of performance of boys and girls (Croxford *et al.*, 2003). However, to consider the difference in performance between all boys and all girls does not allow deeper interrogation of the specific groups of boys who are underperforming. A later report (Scottish Executive, 2006), illustrates the difference in performance between boys and girls at '5+ Level 5', the most demanding level of examinations in S4 and a proxy measure for those pupils who are high attaining or who have the potential to be high attaining (Figure 2).

In Figure 2 the percentages in 2004/05 show that 39% of females compared to 30% of males gained '5+ Level 5' and this was a consistent pattern during the period illustrated, and is a larger relative difference than for the whole cohort as shown in Figure 1. Other reports support this finding. Tinklin (2000) was commissioned by the Scottish Executive Education Department to consider high attaining females using data (1990-1997) from the Scottish School Leavers Survey¹ (SSLS). She used those achieving four or more Highers on leaving

¹ Survey carried out in Scotland from 1970s until 2010 when it was subsumed into the Summary Bulletin, for example *Summary statistics for attainment, leavers destinations and school meals, No.1: 2011 Edition*. This supplementary data is available at Scottish Government (online b).

school. The reason she gave for this choice was that selecting four or more, gave a group to be investigated that was not just working at a minimum level (three or more is considered a minimum entry for university) but who were working at higher performance levels, and so were demonstrating higher ability. She showed that there was a strong correlation between high attainment and social advantage or privilege, and showed that middle-class girls outperformed middle-class boys. Although the data gives an indicator of differences in attainment between boys and girls at this level of difficulty, it is limited because only one measure has been used to identify or confirm a problem and no other data used.

FIG 2: PUPILS IN S4 GAINING 5+ AWARDS AT SCQF LEVEL 5, BY GENDER, SCOTLAND, 2000/01 TO 2004/05



(Scottish Executive, 2006, p. 124)

The review commissioned by the Scottish Executive and carried out by Croxford *et al.* (2003), using data for those who achieved three or more Highers (the high attaining group as defined by Croxford *et al.*, 2003) showed that the percentage of school leavers with this level of qualification rose throughout the period under study - 1965 to 1998 - with the gap widening between boys' and girls' performance. By 1998, 35% of girls and only 26% of boys achieved this level of award. Croxford *et al.*'s also examined the difference in attainment amongst the more academically able pupils in S4 in 1999 at Standard Grade. The gender difference in performance was most marked at Credit level, the most demanding level of study. Two further analyses illustrate the continued attainment gap looking at levels of award. MacPherson and Bond's (2009) review, funded by the EHRC found that the differences in attainment between boys and girls, favouring girls, were evident in Scotland and the UK. The years studied by MacPherson and

Bond (2009, p.47) were 2004/05 to 2006/07 and the difference was most marked at the 5+ awards at SCQF level 5. A similar trend was shown in the *Equality Outcomes Gender Evidence Review* carried out on behalf of the Scottish Government (Scottish Government, 2013) for the demanding levels of study in S5 and S6. For example, in 2004/05 in S5 11% of girls and 8% of boys achieved 5+ Higher awards.

The pattern by class and gender was also examined. Although there was no nationally available data to differentiate by gender and by social class, Croxford *et al.* (2003) used data gathered from young people about parental occupation to look for trends by class and gender using the SLS data. Croxford *et al.* (2003) did make clear that the data used did offer an opportunity to examine the impact of social class but was subject to “measurement errors and potential non-response bias” (p.45). This data showed that for all but the unskilled there was a difference in attainment favouring girls. Croxford *et al.* also found that this pattern of girls achieving more highly than boys began in early years and was evident throughout primary and secondary. This analysis used average performances of boys and girls which as Croxford *et al.* noted, concealed those boys who were doing well and conversely, girls who were not and stressed it was important not to see boys and girls as homogeneous groups. In a later review commissioned by the Scottish Government, and covering 1985 to 2005, Croxford (2009) extended the information about how attainment by gender had changed. As in her review of 2003, she gathered data from young people about parental occupation to look for trends by class and gender. Her data showed that at 16, using an average score for Standard Grades, girls outperformed boys in all social classes and this had been a trend from 1984-2002, and was similar at 18, using average UCAS tariff score (UCAS, online). Data from 1987 till 2002 revealed the same trend but with a larger gap between girls and boys from the ‘managerial’ and ‘intermediate’ classes than the ‘working’ and ‘unclassified’ classes, and this gap widened from 2001 to 2005 (Croxford, 2009, p.37). Croxford (2009) also noted that the difference in attainment by gender was less than the difference in attainment by social class when comparing those young people with no social disadvantage to those living with social disadvantage due to socio-economic circumstances. She suggested that this gap was highlighted less because there were no statistics of performance by social class or deprivation index.

These various analyses on the relative performance of boys and girls serves to illustrate the importance of looking not at whole cohorts but examining performance of different groupings. Collins *et al.* (2000) suggested the use of the expression the ‘gender jigsaw’ rather than the gender gap to avoid perpetuating the belief of the homogeneity of boys and girls, and to use data “to piece together the patterns of the gender jigsaw” (Collins *et al.*, 2000, p.62). However, a more fine-grained approach is limited by the way in which data is collected. The SLS data used by Tinklin (2000) and Croxford *et al.* (2003) was reliant on completion of questionnaires by school leavers, and by 2002 the cohort responding had fallen to 45% of the total cohort with those living with disadvantage and males were less likely to respond. This survey was discontinued in 2005 and this limited the ability to examine the intersection of gender and class in performance. Although *Insight* was introduced in August 2013 (Scottish Government, online a) which can track performance by SIMD but does not provide the nuanced detail of gender

differences of males and females by class (ScotXed, online). Nevertheless, a difference in performance by gender is evident in Scotland and this is echoed in the UK.

The gender gap – UK

A UK-wide review, *How fair is Britain?* (EHRC, 2011) showed there was a difference in attainment in favour of girls in all three countries: England, Scotland and Wales and according to their analysis this has been the case since 1945. Comparing the three countries the gap was less for Scotland than either of the other two countries: Scotland, 50% of girls compared to 46% of boys; England, 54% of girls, 47% of boys; and Wales 51% of girls, 43% of boys (EHRC, 2011, p.328). The focus was mainly on the more academically able achieving at level 5 rather than all boys and all girls. The two areas of focus were Standard Grade awards at levels 1-3 (levels 1 and 2 are equivalent to SCQF level 5) and Intermediate 2 at grades A-C (equivalent to level 5) at age 16. These findings were echoed by Machin *et al.* (2013) comparing the performance of 18-year-olds at Higher or equivalent. However, Machin *et al.* did acknowledge the differences between Scotland's education system and that of the other countries. The curricula in England, Wales and Northern Ireland are similar and nationally prescribed, whereas in Scotland the policy for the curriculum is not prescribed and the curriculum is the responsibility of the LAs and not central government. Freeman's study (2004) drew from data from national examinations across the UK for the 16 to 18 age range and looked specifically at high ability 'gifted' pupils and the achievement of the top grades. Freeman stated that girls were outperforming boys in all subjects including the sciences where traditionally boys had performed better. There were also fewer failures amongst girls. As Freeman notes this trend had been evident from the end of the 1980s (Arnot *et al.* 1998). If we look across these various analyses from Scotland and the wider UK, the trend in gender difference in attainment is pronounced at the most demanding levels of study. The next section considers how policy has responded to the gender 'gap'.

THE POLICY CONTEXT – EQUALITY

One of the critical issues in the various policy developments is the way in which gender is dealt with in wider legislative and in successive educational policy developments both in relation to equality and curriculum. The mandatory requirement to provide equal opportunities, by gender, can be traced back to firstly, the *Sex Discrimination Act 1975* (UK Parliament, 1975), a UK-wide legislation, applicable in Scotland, and secondly, to the EOC (Equal Opportunities Commission) (later subsumed into the EHRC (Equality and Human Rights Commission)), constituted in October 2007). However, in Scotland, the LAs responsible for the provision of education locally, did not develop policy for gender equal opportunities until the 1990s and there was a lack of coherence. Schools within the same regions developed policies in different ways to try to address their context. For example, Riddell (2000) noted that for one school serving an area with relatively high deprivation, the public availability of examination data and consequent scrutiny of this data had marginalised and reduced the work on equal opportunities. Later, in their review, Condie *et al.* (2006), primarily gathering

evidence from LAs about strategies to address gender inequalities, found LAs had an expectation that schools would have policies in place regarding equal opportunities related to gender but these did not appear to be available when considering the feedback from schools themselves.

The advent of devolution through the *Scotland Act 1998* (UK Parliament, 1998a), saw a shift in the political landscape in Scotland and gave Scotland more powers and responsibilities. However, in the case of equality, the UK Government has overall responsibility for equality issues with the EHRC sited in London, but with the Scottish Government having responsibility for implementing policy. The *Scotland Act 1998* set out the definition of equal opportunities and the duty of the Scottish Parliament to ensure the principles and practice of equal opportunities are met (UK Parliament, 1998a). Furthermore, the Scottish Government, has a responsibility to ensure that the Scottish public authorities are adhering to all aspects of the Act including equal opportunities (UK Parliament, 1998b). There is a Scottish equality policy programme: the Scotland Business Plan (EHRC, online a). There is a Scotland Committee (EHRC, online b) that works with the Scottish Government and LAs in Scotland to improve the quality of outcomes and to “promote fairness and equality of opportunity in Great Britain’s future economy” (EHRC, 2015, p. 6) – one of the key strategic priorities of their business plan.

Equality has become a key theme in Scottish educational policy. In 2000, *Standards in Scotland's Schools etc. Act 2000* (Scottish Parliament, 2000a), set out the mandate for five National Priorities, defined later in 2000 (Scottish Parliament, 2000b). The two relevant Priorities here are National Priority 1: Achievement and Attainment, and National Priority 3: Inclusion and Equality. National Priority 1 has a focus on “raising standards of educational attainment for all” and achieving “better levels in national measures ... including examination results”, and the aim of National Priority 3 is “to promote equality and help every pupil benefit from education ...” (Scottish Parliament, 2000b). However, despite the *Scotland Act 1998* highlighting the mandatory requirement for due regard to be given to equality in relation to gender, the difference in attainment between boys and girls within National Priority 1 on achievement and attainment (Scottish Executive, 2003) is noted and gender is not highlighted in the description of National Priority 3 for inclusion and equality. This reinforces the point made by Skelton (2007) that working to ensure equal opportunities for pupils in relation to gender did not have a specific profile but was embedded in the concept of ‘diversity’. To support and monitor the progress towards realising the National Priorities, performance measures and quality indicators arose from the National Priorities to give more information about school improvement than was available from using quantitative data alone. Again, there was no mention of gender equality in these additional evaluative measures.

The development of the National Priorities in 2002 provided an improvement framework that supported schools in improvement planning and target setting and identified the responsibilities of the LAs. The Scottish Executive (2003) reported on progress on the National Priorities in 2002, part of which demanded the LAs to set out how they would “encourage equal opportunities” (Scottish Executive, 2003, p.6). Some authorities were found to be auditing practice and others had developed frameworks to monitor the “promotion of equality” (Scottish Executive, 2003, p.40) with specific reference to gender. HMIE conducted a review of how

schools were taking forward the National Priorities. It is worthy of note that the only mention of gender and attainment in the report was in reporting on 5-14 data, not on gender in respect of external examinations in senior school years (HMIE, 2005). In 2002, the National Debate in Scotland (Scottish Executive, 2002) was initiated which led to the development of Curriculum for Excellence (Scottish Government, 2008b). This saw a shift away, in policy terms, from the National Priorities to an outcome focused curriculum (MacPherson and Bond, 2009). However, there was also significant legislation which had an impact on policy in Scottish education.

In 2006, the *Equality Act 2006* (UK Parliament, 2006) was passed by the UK Government and this gave rise to the UK *Gender Equality Duty (GED) (2007)* (EOC, 2007). This was constituted to improve the experiences for men and women by tackling gender inequality and put certain duties on public bodies. The *Gender Equality Duty Code of Practice for Scotland* published in 2007 (EOC Scotland, 2007) explained the benefits and obligations of the gender equality duty. The Scottish LAs were given specific duties to ensure the promotion of equal opportunities in their schools in relation to gender, and to have clear actions to promote equality between boys and girls, with monitoring procedures in place in schools to measure impact and to report on progress (EOC Scotland, 2007, p.49). In practice each LA in Scotland reported annually on how gender equality was being addressed and, on a three-yearly basis, to report on progress on a range of aspects: comparisons between boys' and girls' performance; difference between the exclusion rates of boys compared to girls; gender preference in relation to subject choice; and work experience choices (Forde, 2008).

At a national level, in response to the *Equality Act 2006* and the GED, a gender equality toolkit (Scottish Executive, 2007) was produced. The toolkit gave practical advice to schools and educators about how to realise equality. The gender equality toolkit set out quality indicators based on *How Good Is our School?* (HMIE, 2007) to support improvement efforts and there is some reference to a more complex understanding of gender and attainment. Reference was made in the toolkit to *Quality Indicator 1.1 Improvements in Performance* (p.6) and to 'which' boys and 'which' girls but did not go into detail about the difference between boys' and girls' attainment due to other factors such as class or ability groupings. The priority of evaluating and acting on areas for improvement was built into planning for improvement (*Quality Indicator 6.3*, p.21) where the expectation was that data by gender would be scrutinised and actions taken.

The Scottish Government (2008a) as a sequitur to the GED, recognising that gender inequality had not been eliminated, published the *Gender Equality Scheme 2008-2011*

to ensure that the frameworks and the policies which we develop remove barriers and challenge the attitudes and behaviours that prevent gender equality in Scotland (Scottish Government, 2008a, p.1).

The aim of the scheme was to integrate equality into the day-to-day work of Scottish Government with an expectation that there would be an annual report produced by Scottish Government on progress towards gender equality. Education from the perspective of attainment was considered in the *Gender Equality Scheme* with a commitment to improve attainment for all, including

seeking reasons for boys not underperforming, but there was no differentiation within groups of boys or groups of girls. Importantly, issues related to girls were also considered, for example raising the point that some girls do not necessarily move into careers that match their qualifications.

The Scheme provided a gender equality action plan focussing on addressing gender inequality in attainment. The action for Scottish Government was to ensure that all schools had data provided by ScotXed (Scottish Government, 2008a, p.64) to highlight the difference in levels of attainment by gender. There was no focus on **which boys** or **which girls**: despite statistical evidence indicating in gender patterns girls and boys were treated as homogeneous groups. The rationale for providing this data was to give schools information to identify and provide interventions to maximise pupils' attainment to allow ambition to be fulfilled. The Scottish Government commissioned the review by Condie *et al.* (2006) about the time of the publication of this scheme, to find reasons for boys' apparent underachievement and suggest strategies that schools could adopt.

Despite this vision of the *Gender Equality Scheme*, the reporting of progress towards reducing differences in attainment by gender, as required by the scheme, appears limited. The *Equality outcomes and mainstreaming report 2015* (Scottish Government, 2015a) made no mention of differences in attainment by gender and instead a shift in focus to "reducing inequity in educational outcomes for all learners" (Scottish Government, 2015a, p.24).

In 2010 a new *Equality Act* (UK Parliament, 2010) covering the UK which brought together all the previous and various pieces of legislation on equality and human rights, including the *Sex Discrimination Act 1975*, into one Act. This Act "provides a legal framework to protect the rights of individuals and advance equality of opportunity for all" (EHRC, online c), enshrining in law equal opportunities in the UK in relation to gender in educational provision. However, the guidance for LAs from EHRC (EHRC, 2012, 2014), has no mention of the aim of promoting equity for boys and girls in their educational provision and outcomes.

In summary, equality policy is an important aspect in Scottish educational policy. Schools in Scotland are required to examine attainment at different stages and levels as part of their accountability for pupils' progress mandated in the *Standards in Scotland's Schools etc. Act 2000* (Scottish Parliament, 2000a). This continues to be a focus for HMIE (Education Scotland, 2015) and the Scottish Government, as laid out in the *National Improvement Framework for Scottish Education Achieving Excellence and Equity* (Scottish Government, 2016). There is also a duty on Local Authorities (LAs) throughout the UK to report on progress on providing equal opportunities in schools, including those related to gender. However, where gender is included it is dealt with as unidimensional factor and not related to other factors including social class and ability. Indeed, this can be seen in the way in which statistical data is collected. Each year since 2011, the Scottish Government has produced a statistical bulletin (Scottish Government, 2011) for public consumption giving summary statistics for attainment, leaver destinations and school meals. The statistics on attainment by gender are for the whole cohort and no exploration of gender with class/SIMD. The latest publication using data from 2013/14 National Qualifications (Scottish Government, 2015b) shows differences in male and female performance, favouring girls, but only using measures of one or more qualification at SCQF level 5, and one or more

qualifications at level 6 (Scottish Government, 2015b). The data does not give a picture of the significant differences seen when examining statistics of the higher levels of ability (Scottish Government, 2015b, p.15). The last set of statistics that could be found relating to reporting on equality trends by gender by higher ability was published in 2006 (Scottish Executive, 2006) and this illustrated the difference at '5+ Level 5' (Scottish Executive, 2006, p.52) but was limited in the information given about different groupings.

DISCUSSION

From this exploration of the legislation/policy landscape related to Scotland, there has clearly been intent to address gender equality in an educational context, from the *Sex Discrimination Act* in 1975 through to the *Equality Acts* of 2006 and 2010, with the associated *Gender Equality Duty* and toolkit, and subsequently the *Gender Equality Scheme*. Forbes *et al.* (2011) suggest that because of the two-tier system of governance of equality, controlled by the UK Government but enacted by the Scottish Government, there has been a lack of importance placed on gender equality in Scottish education policy and practice. Further, Forbes *et al.* argue that subsuming the Equal Opportunities Commission into the Equality and Human Rights Commission, which encompasses all categories of difference, has led to a loss of specific focus on gender. The Business Plan published by the EHRC for 2015/16 (EHRC, 2015) (with the Scotland plan now appearing to be subsumed into the plan for the UK), has no reference to gender inequality or inequity in terms of attainment within the educational context. The only mention of gender in education in the latest EHRC Scotland review (2013/14) is that of gender stereotyping and gender segregation in some careers (EHRC, online d, p.13).

In terms of the response by Scottish Government and organisations such as the HMIE and now Education Scotland, gender is touched on when discussing academic attainment, for example in *Curriculum for Excellence* (Scottish Government, 2008b), and *Improving Scottish Education* (HMIE, 2009) publication. In this last document, gender linked to attainment is mentioned twice: (1) in attainment by gender in primary schools, and (2) strategies to improve academic outcomes. Education Scotland (online, p.1) did produce a report following the *Equality Act 2010* "to support schools and centres in promoting diversity and equality through all aspects of planned learning" and gave some examples of good practice: staff training on equality to developing "responsible views of gender" (p.8); and teachers challenging gender stereotyping through learning experiences in the classroom. There is one mention of attainment with a question to schools about how they aim to ensure that gender is not a barrier to pupils participating and achieving (p.24). The mandate to report on equality outcomes nationally is enshrined in legislation. Currently this is manifest at national level in an annual report, *The Equality and Mainstreaming Report*, but this makes no reference to gendered patterns of attainment. The focus in this report is on reducing inequity in educational outcomes for all.

The examination of the educational policies in Scotland reveals that gender or other forms of diversity appear less dominant than the focus on the individual child with the aim of ensuring the same opportunities for all children and young people regardless of background (Scottish Government, 2016). The dominance of

'individual needs' reinforces notions of generalised ability and overlooks structural social barriers such as gender (Forbes *et al.*, 2011) that can limit attainment. This shift away from a focus on gender issues to a broader strategy of 'inclusion' began about 1997, where the *diversity* and *inclusion* agenda of New Labour resulted in the issue of gender being downplayed. This shift in social policy themes diluted the very real and important necessary interventions required to develop gender equity of opportunities and outcomes. Gender issues were reduced to the drive to increase male teacher recruitment (Skelton 2007). Riddell and Tett (2006), in their study on the teaching profession in Scotland, point to a policy concern for the gender balance amongst teachers. This lack of gender related policy in Scotland signaled to practitioners that although gender issues exist they are not as important as other issues (Forbes *et al.*, 2011), and this raises the concern of the likelihood of little action on gender in education (Forbes *et al.*, 2011).

This lack of response to gender related issues in Scotland contrasts with the response in Sweden. Both are small countries: Sweden has a devolved model of governance with responsibility for education being with the LAs and the teaching profession. In Scotland education is devolved to the Scottish Government with the *governance* of education lying with LAs as mentioned earlier. In Sweden against a backdrop of success of the feminist movement to give women opportunities previously denied, gender has a profile in educational policy terms. Although there was a concern in Sweden about the 'problem' of boys, this was within a context where there was a commitment to question understandings of gender in the national curriculum. Opportunities to examine the construction of gender were introduced. The curriculum was the vehicle of transforming thinking through education (Forbes *et al.*, 2011). Forbes *et al.* also note a change in Sweden to a more universal approach with gender being combined with other factors, for example, ethnicity and disability. Although Forbes *et al.* argue that Sweden has been progressive in policy terms with gender specific policies, there could be a danger that with this move away from gender having a specific focus, gender issues could be marginalised.

Forbes *et al.* (2001) claim that the lesser social feminist capital in Scotland has resulted in less influence to bring about change regarding gender. Forbes *et al.* (2001, p.771-2) suggest that Scotland has largely ignored gender related policy, with the emphasis not being on "discourses and practices, producing the symbolic figure of the un-gendered child". This lack of importance placed on gender is manifest in the response of LAs. The mandate for LAs was clear: develop policy, plan and report on strategies and outcomes to meet the gender equity agenda. However, it would appear that such efforts were subsumed in the task of addressing other needs that were perceived as greater notably deprivation issues (Riddell, 2000). Where gender is included, for example HMIE's review of the National Priorities, the focus was on 5-14 attainment and not the gender patterns of attainment by different ability groups in external examinations. Further, the National Priorities were also limited in their focus on the intersectionality between gender, attainment and other factors such as socio-economic indicators.

There is no doubt that the policy and legislation does seek to address the issues of gender inequity but from a simplistic stance with no finesse around the different groupings of boys and girls. There is no mention of gender discourses as postulated by a poststructuralist perspective. there tends to be a focus not on

which boys or which girls, or on individual boys or girls, but on 'all boys' and 'all girls', both in absolute terms and in relative terms. If we compare boys' performance with that of girls', the performance is a comparator measure not matched to a defined standard. Consequently, one gender will always be doing less well. This lends itself to problematising performance by gender. Thus there appears to be a continued focus on gender polarity, seeing boys and girls each as a homogeneous group, and no consideration given to different groups of boys and girls, despite the real evidence used by the Scottish Government in the *Gender Equality Scheme* to highlight the difference, shown in Figure 2. To continue to take this essentialist stance by gender is to perpetuate gender as a binary concept. Forbes *et al.* (2011) reinforce this, citing Riddell (2007) who observed that the focus is not on equality of opportunity for both boys and girls but rather on the problems associated with boys. This, as she points out, is problematising boys at the expense of girls and reinforces the essentialist stance of the duality of gender.

This review of policy would also suggest that, despite the strong focus on equal opportunities and the commitment, in policy and in terms of legislation, to impact positively on gender equity, little real progress has been made towards understanding inequalities or having a consistency of effort to remove barriers. There has been little or no improvement in the gap between boys' and girls' performance based on external examination results, neither overall attainment nor within specific groups of boys or girls, including the most able. In the most recent reports by Scottish Government examined and discussed above, attainment by gender is no longer reported on.

Wider Perspectives

A similar picture emerges across the UK. The *Equality Review* raised the issue of differences in educational attainment with the aspiration of reducing this. It highlighted the need for 'fairness' with an emphasis on equality: "an equal society recognises people's different needs, situations and goals and removes the barriers that limit what people can do and can be" (Equalities Review, 2007, p.6). Inequality was defined by the gap - difference rather than an absolute value, a point raised above. The attainment of both groups could rise but the difference could remain at the same level, and again it is worth noting that there is no defined standard, hence there is always likely to be a differential. The focus in this Review was on young people living with disadvantage and it cited evidence from England of the lower attainment of boys relative to girls, particularly in English (Reading and Writing at Key Stage 1). However, despite this evidence there was no probing about how this differs by class/socio-economic indicators/level of advantage.

A study carried out by The Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency (Eurydice, 2010), using the reference year 2008/09, covered all Eurydice Network countries (in Europe). They advocated that due consideration should be given to gendered differences in attainment when formulating policy because of the evidence from the study. They found that most policies appeared to focus on disadvantage as a barrier with little focus on gender as a cause despite the evidence of patterns of attainment that were gender specific. The study did show a general trend across Europe of girls achieving more highly amongst those

aspiring to go on to University with the gap becoming larger with higher levels of study. However, the study did acknowledge that the average gendered pattern did not reveal the differences between some groups of boys and girls. The most frequent response was to focus on boys' underachievement as a systemic trend. Gender-sensitive policy was strongly advocated by the European Union, not only efforts to promote equality but also specific interventions to help both boys and girls. It was stated that there was an expectation that governments, LAs and schools would collect and analyse data of underachievement, including by gender when there were apparent differences.

The importance of analysing attainment by gender was also highlighted worldwide. PISA data suggested that boys' underachievement was an international phenomenon (OECD, 2015). Stoet and Geary (2015) carried out a meta-analysis on boys' and girls' performance in Mathematics (based on extensive analysis of PISA data from across the world). They concluded that there was no link between narrowing the performance gap between boys and girls and equality policy. This raises the question about policy but also about different approaches to addressing the phenomenon. As we have seen in Scotland, the way data is collected can shape what is seen as a policy problem. Martino and Rezai-Rashti (2012: p.428) in their review of the attainment gap by gender in the Ontario context, argue that the use of attainment data in the form of standardised testing was a "basis for the endorsement of particular truth claims about the gender achievement gap" and the policy decisions to address the gap. Where accountability measures use almost exclusively attainment data in the form explored in this paper, can lead to a tendency to address the underachievement related to one particular group over another. The importance of exploring gender and its link with attainment (Eurydice, 2010) has been subsumed into an equality agenda. The focus is now on those living with disadvantage (Equalities Review, 2007; Scottish Government, 2016). This has arisen because of the difference in attainment of advantaged and disadvantaged pupils.

There are three important points to make here. Firstly, that focusing on one particular group should not be at the exclusion of considering attainment and achievement by gender or any other focus of diversity. In the case of gender, there is evidence of gendered patterns of attainment that require investigation and, as such, policy, practice and evidence is needed to bring about change. Secondly, there exists a mutual exclusivity when focusing on one aspect, which does not acknowledge the complexity and the intersectionality of advantage/disadvantage/class with other aspects such as gender, race, ethnicity and disability. To continue to have one focus means that the education system will continue to fail some rather than addressing the needs of all. Finally, only considering the raw attainment data is a simplistic stance. As suggested by Stoet and Geary (2015) there are greater considerations that simply using the data. As a matter of importance, consideration should be given to "value frameworks" (p.149) to formulate strategies to address aspects an equality agenda..

CONCLUSION

In summary, this article raises questions for those influencing and making policy if there is to be a significant narrowing of the gender gap that is sustainable, and a realisation of equal opportunities for all. The relevant legislation and policy, and

reports arising from the policy to support schools and LAs in relation to gender and attainment, demonstrates that the ambition of both the UK and Scottish Governments is to reduce the gap in performance amongst boys and girls. However, the ideologies underpinning the policies relating to gender tend to see the gap as a problem with the boys rather than the improvement in opportunities for both boys and girls. There has also been limited focus on high attaining pupils despite the evidence of the larger attainment differential in this group. Boys and girls are still seen as homogenous groups despite the extensive body of research on the concept of gender, gender identity and discourses. How can policy be realigned to take account of the points raised above including considering the differences between different ability groups of pupils and adopting a stance that does not perpetuate gender polarity?

The review findings also suggest a 'gender blindness' in relation to later policies with gender being subsumed into inclusion and diversity. There appears to be less of a focus on gender per se and more of a focus on disadvantage in socio-economic terms. The issue of gender in education as a barrier should not be lost, or the intersection of socio-economic indicators and gender in limiting achievement. In addition, limited attention has been paid to considering gender in policy to influence practice and to reporting outcomes by gender, although the duty of LAs and schools is clear with the requirement to report on the impact of policy promoting gender equity. A recent statistical release (UK) in 2014 (Department of Education, 2014), of the 'early years' attainment profile, again showed no change in the gender gap with girls outperforming boys in all measures. This was using data for all boys and all girls. There can be no prediction other than this gender attainment gap will still be apparent in 2030 based on this early years' data, unless there is a change in policy. Therefore, the task now is to consider how the profile of gender in education be raised within the wider inclusion agenda.

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