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I am very opposed to selection at 11. I don't accept that what we've done since 1997 is not consistent with that
Hilary Benn, page 5
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Boy crazy

Parents want their daughters to go to single-sex schools, but not their sons. The result is that 'mixed' schools are often anything but. Does the imbalance matter? By **Polly Curtis**



Research suggests that a large proportion of boys in a class worsens the outcome for both boys and girls Photograph: David Sillitoe

Girls thrive in single-sex schools, but boys do not. It is a common assumption and new research from London's Institute of Education (IoE) suggests, to a certain extent, that it is true. Assessing the biggest ever swath of historical data on the issue, researchers found that girls who go to girls' schools will later earn more than those from mixed schools – partly because they are less likely to make gendered decisions about their studies and are therefore more likely to take maths and science subjects. But the research also found social problems in boys-only schools. “Single-sex education seems to have a negative social impact for boys and a positive academic impact for girls,” says Alice Sullivan, the IoE researcher behind the report.

Parents had worked this out long before the research proved it: they want their daughters to go to girls' schools and their sons to go to mixed schools. In much of the country, there has been a 40-year drift towards mixed-sex education in which boys' schools have been replaced with co-educational schools far more readily than girls' schools have. In some areas of the country, this has created a quiet phenomenon in which girls are now outnumbered by boys in some mixed schools by three to one.

Overall, in the state sector, 13% of girls now go to girls' schools and 10% of boys attend boys' schools; within mixed

schools, 51% are boys. But when you drill down into some inner-city areas, the gender balance is tipped. In outer London, 33% of girls attend girls' schools, and 24% of boys attend boys' schools. In co-educational schools, 53% of students are boys.

But in inner London, the majority of girls (52%) attend girls' schools, and just 27% of boys attend boys' schools. And 59% of students in mixed schools are boys.

Camden in north London now has four girls' secondary schools, and only one boys' school. In Hackney, east London, there are three girls' schools and only one for boys. One of the most extreme imbalances in the co-educational sector occurs in Islington, north London, where boys make up 71% of the mixed secondary school population.

The same is true in other urban areas. In Liverpool, there are 31 schools, eight of which are girls' schools and five for boys only. There are three schools in the area with at least 60% boys on the rolls.

“Parents increasingly feel there's a gender imbalance in mixed schools,” says Paul Clein, a councillor in Liverpool. “The

'In some areas of the country, girls are now outnumbered by boys in some mixed schools by three to one'

anecdotal feedback we get is that they feel more like boys' schools than mixed schools. Certainly we've had letters from parents expressing concerns about this.”

Sullivan says that the area of boy-dominated mixed schools has not been well researched. “Possibly because people haven't noticed that it's become quite a big issue in some areas,” she says. “It's the side-effect of the parental choice agenda: parents want single-sex schools for their girls, but not their boys. It's one of those clear incidences when individuals' choices don't add up to a socially acceptable outcome.”

Little research

She adds: “Given that boys tend to have more discipline problems and lower academic attainment, my guess is that those schools would have more problems than schools that are closer to 50-50. The question is, do these schools have particular problems of sexual harassment and bullying?”

There is no British research addressing these particular questions. But a study carried out last year in Israel offers some perspective. It suggests that a large proportion of boys in a class worsens the outcome for both the girls and boys.

The researchers, Victor Lavy at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and Analia Schlosser of Princeton University, studied results from eight cohorts in 280 Israeli high schools, some 425,138 students. No matter which way they measured it, they found that the higher

the proportion of girls in a class, the better the results for everyone.

“The positive female peer effect is related to a lower level of classroom disruption and violence, improved inter-student and student-teacher relationships, as well as to an increase in students' overall satisfaction with their school,” they wrote. “It also significantly lessens the teaching fatigue and burn-out feelings of teachers, though it does not affect their overall satisfaction from work.”

Diana Leonard, head of the centre for research and education on gender at the IoE, has conducted separate research which found that boys are more likely to be excluded for a significant amount of time if they go to single-sex, rather than mixed schools; the research found the same is not true for girls.

“Certain boys dominate the classrooms in mixed situations. The sheer number of boys in some schools must make it difficult. Girls take protective measures – they sit together, separately. The more boys you have, the more equipment and teacher time they take up,” she says.

Special schools, which are usually far more male-dominated, have particular problems, she adds. “People argue for the civilising effects of girls. The reason there is more violence in boys' schools is because boys have a code of honour and don't tell when there is trouble brewing. Girls will talk to staff more. But I would think it's also quite hard on the non-aggressive boys if there are more boys.”

All of this affects parents' **»»**

Inside

Front section

3 **Best foot forward**
Libya opens up to lessons in English – and hip-hop

4 **Fiona Millar**
We still don't know what Gordon really thinks about schools

Schools

7 **Big bang to evolution**
Where to find the facts on heaps of scientific theories

Further

8 **Getting to know you**
The caring, sharing face of army recruitment

Higher

10 **Poor show**
Who works hardest: doctors, lawyers or academics?

11 **No dice**
Why more casinos *will* mean more problem gambling

Children's services

23 **Anxiety attack**
Do we really need another inquiry into children's wellbeing?

Jobs index

13	Senior HE Academic
17	HE Academic
18	Research
19	Senior Research
19	Studentship
19	Postgraduate Courses
19	Courses
19	TEFL
20	Senior Education Support
21	General Education Support
23	Student Services
24	Teaching

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educationguardian.co.uk

Tim Radford
How scientists are saving wildlife
John Sutherland
News from across the pond
Teacher conferences
What did the NUT decide?
Video podcast
How they do maths in Hungary

In-flight education

A new breed of international student commuters is growing at UK universities

Jessica Shepherd

Student Eurocommuter, *noun*, a person who studies at a UK university during the week and takes the first economy flight home to Europe at weekends

Their laptop case squeaking under the strain of carrying this week's handouts, next weekend's clothes and a PC, the student Eurocommuter is fast becoming a familiar sight on campus. Almost a sixth of first-year UK university students from European countries other than Britain plan to visit home "often". That is what they told pollsters Opinionpanel Research, which quizzed almost 300 of them last November. And "often" now means as regularly as once a week.

Budget airlines, with their cheap and frequent flights, make a Eurocommute financially and practically possible for many students. Modular degree courses, which make timetables more flexible, also play their part. So, too, do the completion rates, which are higher at British universities than at European ones.

If you add to those factors the fact that university places at European institutions outside Britain are becoming scarcer and that our degrees take less time, it is not difficult to see why this breed of student Eurocommuters has come into existence.

But some say they show, most of all, how highly prized degrees from British universities, and qualifications taught and assessed in English, are. "The UK brand of higher education is highly popular and well respected across the world," says Professor Les Ebdon, vice-chancellor of Bedfordshire University. His institution – a five-minute taxi ride from Luton airport – attracts many student Eurocommuters.

"It might seem unusual to some, but Eurocommuting is fast becoming regarded as normal, particularly for postgraduates," says Dr Paul Temple, a lecturer in higher education management at the Institute of London. "This is part of the internationalisation of higher education.

"There is now the feeling that graduates need to show they have an international perspective, whether they want to work for the private or public sector, and taking a degree abroad is a good way of doing that."

But is UK higher education doing something wrong if so many of the 74,000-odd EU students on undergraduate and postgraduate degree courses jump on the first flight home every weekend?

"I don't think it's particularly to do with UK higher education that they go home at weekends," says Temple. "They may well have family commitments of various



Simar Selezov is studying for two degrees, one at the University of Bedfordshire and one at Tallinn University Frank Baron

kinds, say, or even work commitments – and, of course, they may not go back every weekend."

Yet surely these Eurocommuters make it harder to create a student community on campus? "On the contrary," says Ebdon. "They bring the global village into the university and contribute a lot to university life. Students are choosing to study eight miles closer to home every year. Without these Eurocommuters, they would not get so much out of university."

Life on the move



Simar Selezov
Bedfordshire and Tallinn

Most people find studying for one full-time undergraduate degree enough. Simar Selezov is doing two – and in different countries. He is currently studying for a BA in marketing at the University of

Bedfordshire and an economics degree at the Tallinn University of Technology in Estonia. Selezov, 22, is in his third year of both degrees and will graduate from both institutions this September. He travels between Tallinn and Luton two to three times a month.

"It is very challenging to do two degrees. My friends think I am a bit crazy, but I do it because England is one of the most important centres in Europe for finance and I thought it would be a great challenge to study here.

"It works well. Our approach in Estonia is more theoretical; in Bedfordshire, it is more practical. The overall experience is excellent. Luckily, in Estonia, university timetables are very flexible and the university moved things around for me.

"But being a Eurocommuter is certainly not easy and it is expensive. I have friends I stay with when I am in Luton, and friends who work for easyJet, so I get a discount. Two of my Estonian friends have a house and I pay them rent when I am there. The government pays for my degree in Estonia because I got a scholarship. I also have a bursary.

"The advantage is that I know about travelling and how to manage my time. In the future, if I work for an international company, I could be a very good manager of international affairs.

"I have to plan very carefully when I am going to be able to do everything. I also feel that Stansted airport is my home. I have been there between 30 and 50 times in the last year. I almost always have my laptop wherever I go. I read lecture slides in the airport. Sometimes I email tutors and send assignments from there. Of course, I have to stop when the plane takes off and lands."

Journey: bus to Tallinn airport, flight to Stansted, coach to Luton, walk. **Time:** 5 hours 20 minutes. **Cost:** approximately £700 a month.



Carla Cré
East Anglia and Antwerp

Carla Cré says being a Eurocommuter is more worrying than glamorous. The 24-year-old from Antwerp, Belgium, is in the third year of her PhD, but studies at

the John Innes centre at the University of East Anglia. She goes home every three to four weeks to see Jan, her partner of two years.

"The centre here is scientifically much better than what we have in Antwerp, but I get fed up with my eurocommute. It is not just the 45-minute flight, it is the waiting in the airport. There is always the worry that you might miss the train or plane. I used to take my PhD work and look at it in the airport. You always think you'll be able to do it. Now I have realised I can't, and I take a magazine.

"I try to make up the time I have lost travelling by working the weekends when Jan and I don't see each other.

"I think being a Eurocommuter does affect your social life at university. I miss parties in Norwich and in Belgium. And I feel that I live nowhere.

"There are more and more Eurocommuters, because the world is getting smaller and young people want the independence that living abroad as a student gives. I feel completely independent and faced with a culture that challenges my preconceptions. Another good thing is that the Eurocommuters begin to recognise each other at the airport and we make friends."

Journey: bus to Norwich airport, flight to Amsterdam, train to Antwerp. **Time:** 6 hours. **Cost:** between £125 and £250 a month.



Svenja Kreyenhop
Luton and Bremen

Svenja Kreyenhop commuted between her home town of Bremen in Germany and Luton last year. The 25-year-old was studying for an advertising and marketing communications degree at the University of Bedfordshire. It was linked to her course at the Academy for Marketing and Communications in Hamburg.

"Some of the Chinese students said that they were jealous of me because it was impossible for them to go home so easily. Fortunately, easyJet started offering flights that were very convenient for me just a few months before my studies in Luton started. I used to have a boyfriend back home and I was also playing hockey for my German team. I commuted back and forth, every weekend sometimes, and very often every fortnight.

"I would go straight from university to the airport to catch my flight home on a Friday evening and only return to Luton late Tuesday evening. So sometimes I would only actually stay in Luton for three nights before going back home.

"Going back home meant staying back at my parents' place, on their expenses. When I managed my time badly, it was due to laziness, not the commute."

Journey: taxi to Luton airport, flight to Bremen, car home. **Time:** approximately 2 hours. **Cost:** approximately £40 a time.

» Boy crazy

choices, she says. "Boys' schools are difficult places, and that's why parents and local authorities don't like them. We have got the paradox that we want mixed schools because they are better for boys and behaviourally easier. But single-sex schools encourage girls to have ambition and higher self-esteem, and they do that not just for middle-class girls but for girls from lower socioeconomic and disturbed backgrounds. It seems a pity to lose that for the girls and throw them into the lions' den."

Proof of the influence of parental choice is evident in the independent sector. There are over 200 girls-only private schools and fewer than 150 boys-only. There are 110 schools that have 40% to 50% boys, and 374 with 50% to 60% boys. Clive Dyton, headteacher of the independent Oratory school in Berkshire, argued recently that boys' schools were increasingly turning co-educational as schools bowed to market forces.

Some parents are beginning to complain about the gender imbalance in certain state schools. In Liverpool, councillors have been receiving complaints for several years, and Clein says they are now trying to persuade mixed schools to offer single-sex teaching. "I'm not talking about home economics, but, for a trial, maybe maths and English and one or two other subjects, to see if it makes any difference," he says. "The perception is that it might improve things for boys and girls.

"We're asking schools to consider it because we feel that, where parents do have concerns, it may go some way towards alleviating those concerns. Their

daughters will get an education within a single-sex environment. When they are in mixed classes, boys show off to the girls. That is a factor. The perception is that if you separated those boys out it may help."

Supporting female pupils

Other schools are trying different methods to support female pupils in male-dominated schools. Acland Burghley, a north London secondary with 64% boys on its roll, runs a "girls' den" at lunchtimes to give the female students a space to meet away from the boys. The headteacher, Michael Shew, says: "The main issue for us is that an average-size tutor group has only got nine girls, instead of 15. That reduces the chances for friendships groups to form. The girls' den was to enable girls to meet outside of tutor groups more easily." In fact, the den has become less popular as students have become more confident, he says.

When Shew arrived at the school, it was noticed that girls' results were not as good as they should be. He employed a team of inspectors to come in with a brief to look at the way that female students were working in class. The move led to a series of strategies to deal with the gender imbalance. When it looks as though the number of girls in tutor groups is going to dip below eight, for example, boys-only tutor groups have been set up – with permission from parents. After advice from the inspectors, new teaching styles were introduced which made teachers aware of the gender dynamics in the classroom

so they could better respond to all pupils.

Up the road in Haringey, at Highgate Wood school, the tide is turning a little. There used to be three boys for every two girls, but the figures are starting to shift in the other direction. This school, too, has some girls-only classes, in PHSE (personal, health and social education), in which they talk about assertiveness and "sexual bullying", headteacher Patrick Cozier says. The question of balance is something the school is very aware of when recruiting students, he adds.

Many parents of girls in the area opt first for the local girls' school, so Highgate Wood must fight hard to attract girls at all. At parents' evenings, Cozier presents the schools' results and highlights the success of the girls and how well they do there, in a bid to try to attract more; it is also highlighted in the school's literature. But it is a double-edged sword, he says. "It's quite dangerous if you highlight the brilliant successes of the girls, because parents of boys may be put off. I'm careful not to go overboard."

Teachers' focus on boys

He says that the girl-boy ratio is most pronounced in the lower ability sets for maths, which is one of the few subjects the school sets for. These are almost entirely boy-only classes. In fact, the minority status of girls in the school is not the immediate concern for teachers. "The issue we have – like many other schools – is that the girls vastly outperform boys. The focus of the teachers can often be on helping the boys catch up," says Cozier.



Science class at Acland Burghley school

Some experts say the place of girls in such schools is often overlooked, as they are essentially employed as a levelling factor for difficult teenage boys. Gus John, visiting professor of education at Strathclyde University and an expert in inner-city and black education, says that there could be a penalty being paid by girls in schools where they are outnumbered. "Anecdotally, I have observed that it makes for patchy results," he says. "Boys often have a poor culture of learning – an anti-academic environment. Some girls would resist that and do well. Some boys would benefit from those girls being around and do well. But for a section of both the boys and girls, there is a lowering of aspirations and therefore of performance.

"It seems to be that quite often there's a burden placed on girls in terms of humanising those 'damn boys', and it's not often studied in terms of its impact upon them and their level of performance."

The Israeli research found this, too. The real boost in results came when girls significantly outnumber boys; the researchers did not find a case for mixed schools per se, and certainly not when the girls are in the minority. Like competing siblings, the debate can come down to whom you prioritise: the girls or the boys. Boys stand to benefit from girls being in their classes, but girls can lose out. Or, as the researchers put it: "The gain for females from school or classroom gender segregation is offset by the loss for males."

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