

Report summary

Girls' career aspirations

Young women achieve better educationally than boys at the age of 16. A higher proportion of girls than boys continue in education to degree level. Their early success, however, does not translate into similar advantages in terms of careers and pay in later life. Women are also less likely than men to work in certain sectors such as science, engineering and technology.

This small scale survey looked at the choices of courses and careers made by girls and young women at various stages in their education and training. Between June 2009 and December 2010 inspectors visited 16 primary schools, 25 secondary schools, (including 13 single-sex girls' schools) and 10 further education colleges. Inspectors also contacted 36 businesses linked to 12 schools. Inspectors found that from Year 3 onwards, the girls spoken to were thinking about what they would like to do after they left school. For girls of all ages, this thinking was strongly influenced by family and friends. These girls were aware of the conventions surrounding 'girls' jobs' and 'boys' jobs'. By secondary school they could also articulate reasons why they could, should they wish, choose any kind of job irrespective of tradition. Almost all the girls and young women who took part in the survey were open to the possibility of pursuing a career that challenged gender stereotypes, if the career interested them sufficiently. Their awareness of this potential, however, did not always translate into practice. Course and career choices made by the girls and young women, in the schools and colleges visited, were predominantly stereotypical and mirrored the national picture of take-up of courses.

Careers education was generally weak in Key Stage 3. This made informed choices of courses and careers difficult. In particular, the girls spoken to had only limited knowledge and understanding of how their choices influenced their future pay and progression. Eleven of the 12 mixed schools visited were not doing enough to promote the confidence, drive and ambition of girls and young women to take risks in challenging vocational stereotypes. While the 13 all-girl schools said that confidence and competitive attitudes were easier to promote in the absence of boys, it was still the case that the proportion of girls' entries for individual GCSE and A-level subjects in these schools broadly matched the national profile of examination entries by girls.

In the few examples where girls had changed their minds and set out on a new and unfamiliar route, that change had often been catalysed by a personal experience of either meeting a professional in school, or directly encountering the new kind of work for themselves. That could happen accidentally, for example as part of a school trip that captured an individual's imagination, or deliberately through school-directed work placements designed to challenge preconceptions.

Inspectors also found good examples of ways in which the specialist status schools visited engaged with employers. In these cases, the schools used their specialist status to present broader career pathways to young women and to develop their knowledge, skills and attitudes.

Key findings

- From an early age, the girls surveyed had held conventionally stereotypical views about jobs for men and women. They retained those views throughout their schooling despite being taught about equality of opportunity and knowing their rights to access any kind of future career.
- The programmes of careers education and work-related learning, and the provision of information, advice and guidance in the schools visited, were not focused sufficiently on the knowledge, understanding and skills that girls and young women needed in order to deal with factors such as career breaks and the roles they might wish to play as future parents.
- A narrow range of gender-stereotypical work placements dominated choices in almost all the settings seen.
- The girls and young women spoken to had limited knowledge and understanding of how choices about courses and careers influenced pay and progression routes.
- Even in the all-girls' schools visited for this survey, and despite the rich range of awareness-raising activities across all the schools, most girls chose careers along stereotypical lines.
- For a few girls, career ambitions were changed through direct observation of a professional at work, through mentoring activities, and through personal encounters and extended discussion with a professional about what their job was actually like.

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