

Briefing paper: Gender

By Laura Carter

This briefing paper reviews secondary education since 1945 in the UK within the maintained and independent sectors, through the lens of gender. It is divided into three periods (1947-1967, 1967-1987, 1987-1997) and offers a chronological overview of patterns of co-education and single-sex education, pupil numbers in different school types, and leaver patterns, using central government statistics.

1. 1947-1967

Co-education and gender differences in the tripartite system

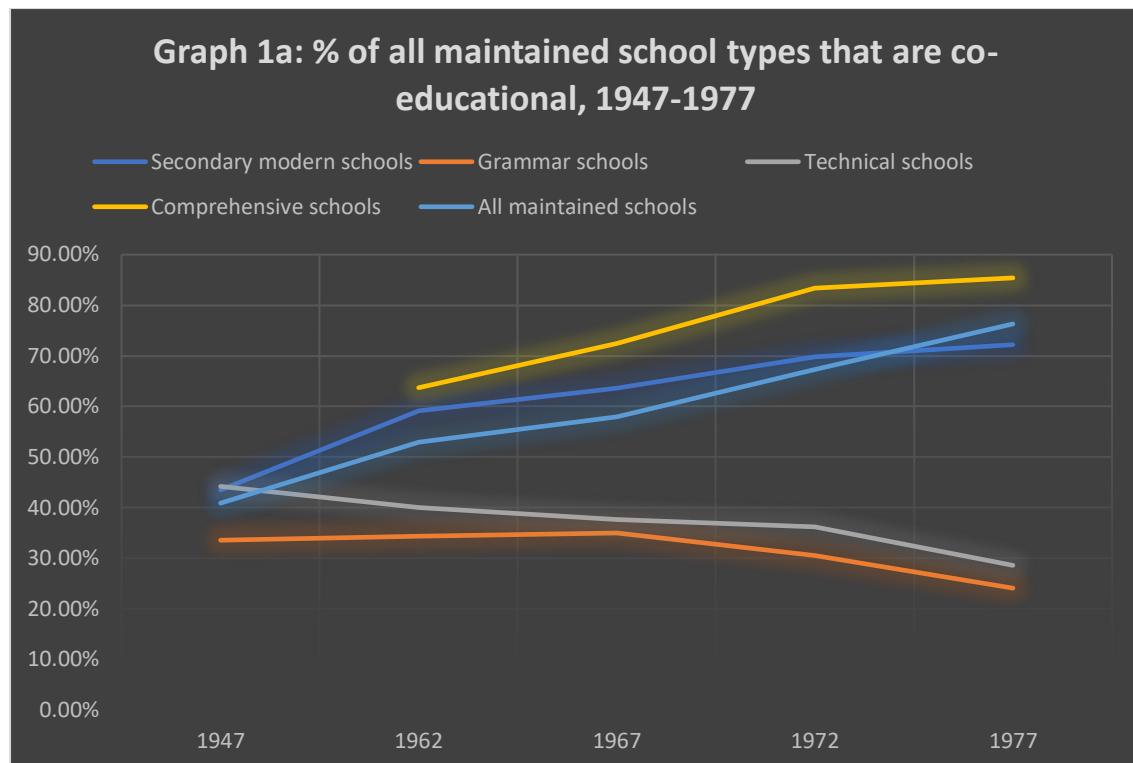
England had a relatively low proportion of co-educational schools when mass secondary education was first universalised after the Second World War. The grammar schools, most of which were much older than the Butler Act, were gender segregated. In 1947 they were split roughly at 1/3 boys, 1/3 girls, 1/3 co-educational. The technical schools (anyway few and far between) were also reasonably gender segregated and favoured boys, because the types of skills that they catered to mapped onto a gender-segregated workforce. By contrast, in 1947 43.5% of secondary modern schools were co-educational, 28.5% were all girls', and 28% were all boys'.¹ Secondary modern schools thereafter quickly surpassed more than 50% co-educational. One reason for this was because co-educational schools were cheaper in terms of resources, staffing, and space.

Graph 1a shows the overall rise in co-educational schooling in England and Wales across the 1940s-1970s.² The increase was steepest at the beginning of the period as more secondary modern schools opened, rising modestly throughout the 1960s, and then rising most steeply from the end of the 1960s when comprehensive schools opened more rapidly. Co-educational grammar and technical schools show a sharp decline. The number of co-educational grammar schools peaked in the late 1960s just as grammar schools were starting to close *en masse*; in 1967 35% of all grammar schools were mixed.³

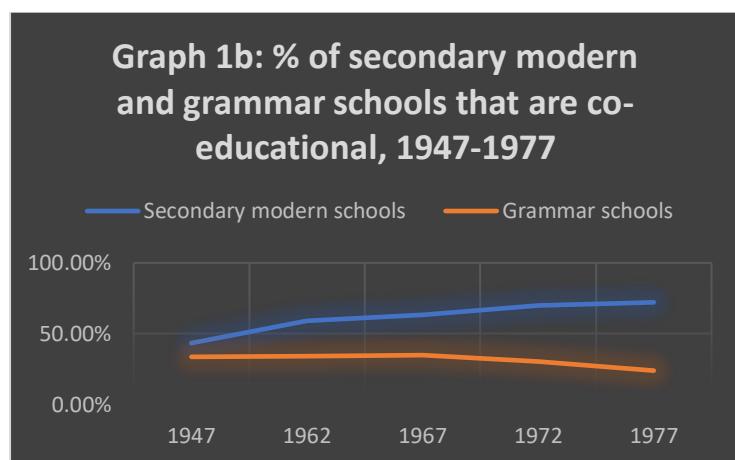
¹ *Education in 1947* (1948), pp. 104-31.

² The statistics for all graphs in this paper are drawn from [tables 1-6](#), produced alongside this briefing paper, which contain footnotes for all sources.

³ *Statistics of Education 1967* (1968), pp. 2-3.



The divergent pathways of co-educational secondary modern and co-educational grammar schools are illustrated more clearly in graph 1b. By 1977 only 98 co-educational grammar schools remained, whilst girls' grammar schools had actually increased by 2.6% of the total and boys' by 3.8% since 1972.⁴ Technical schools were always slightly skewed in favour of all boys' schools (for example in 1962 43.6% were boys', 16.4% were girls', and 40% were co-educational), but the number of technical schools was in decline anyway even throughout the 1950s and 1960s.⁵ The vast regional variation in these distributions is not shown by the graphs. In Douglas's NSHD sample, 65% of his Welsh pupils were in co-educational schools (of all school types) followed by 62% of those from the North, compared with 39% of pupils from the North West and 38% of pupils from the South East.⁶



⁴ *Statistics of Education 1972* (1972), pp. 4-5; *Statistics of Education 1977* (1979), pp. 2-3.

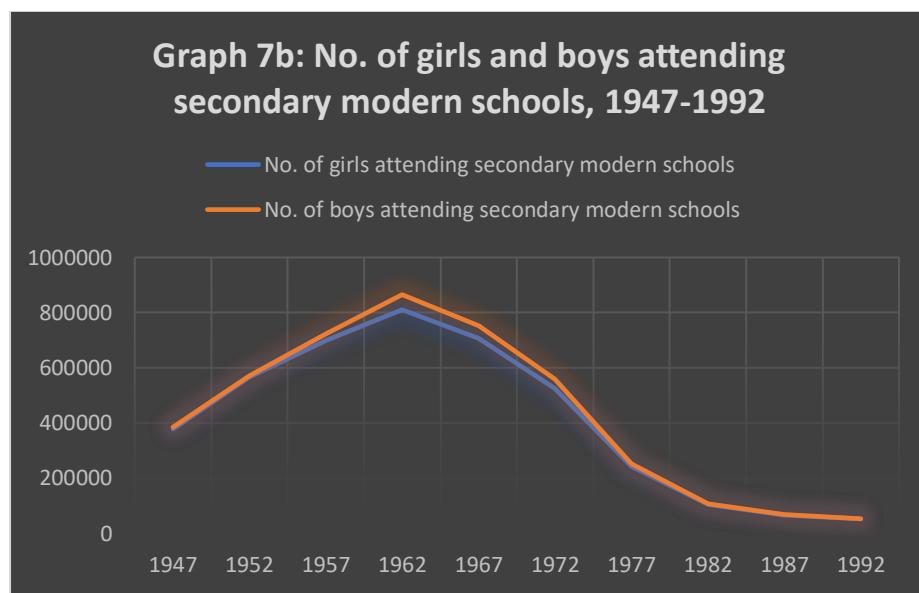
⁵ *Statistics of Education 1962* (1963), pp. 30-1.

⁶ Douglas, Ross, and Simpson (1968), p. 68.

Considering full-time pupil attendance, graphs 7b, 7c, and 7d show the differing gender patterns for girls and boys in secondary modern, grammar, and technical schools (of all sex types). There were always more boys than girls in secondary modern schools, because of the tendency for boys to stay on at school longer than girls until the 1970s. This difference is even more marked if we consider the much larger number of boys in technical schools across most of the period, shown in graph 7d. The secondary modern gender gap increases across the 1950s and starts to close across the late 1960s and early 1970s.

In the grammar schools, boys were slightly more numerous until the late 1960s, when the number of girls overtook boys across the 1970s, almost evening out by the early 1980s. For the NSHD kids, who entered secondary school in 1957, Douglas found that slightly more girls than boys achieved grammar school places in his sample (20.2% vs. 18%), which does not correlate with the overall secondary education national statistics (the grammar school population in 1957 was 50.6% male 49.4% female).⁷ This is explained by the tendency of boys to catch up and stay on longer: one of Douglas's key gender findings was that whilst girls were more successful at primary school and therefore at age 11, they fell behind over the course of secondary schooling especially in arithmetic, geography, and science. Middle-class boys, who made up most of the grammar school population, were the best at catching up.⁸

The grammar school gender gap in favour of girls in the 1970s could be explained by a number of factors: the staying on difference for grammar school vs. secondary modern girls was much starker than for boys, there were more girls' grammar schools than boys' grammar schools for the entire tripartite period (and these schools seem to have held on slightly better during comprehensivization), and there were more boys than girls at comprehensive schools throughout the 1960s and 1970s (3.4% more in 1972 and 2% more in 1977).⁹



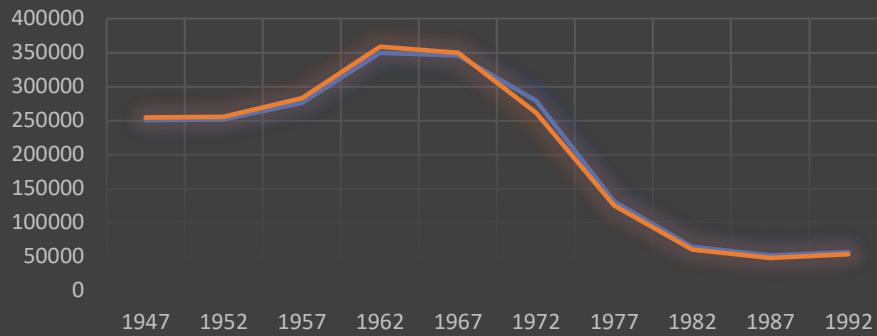
⁷ *Education in 1957* (1958), pp. 97-126.

⁸ Douglas, Ross, and Simpson (1968), pp. 29-34.

⁹ *Statistics of Education 1972* (1972), pp. 4-5; *Statistics of Education 1977* (1979), pp. 2-3.

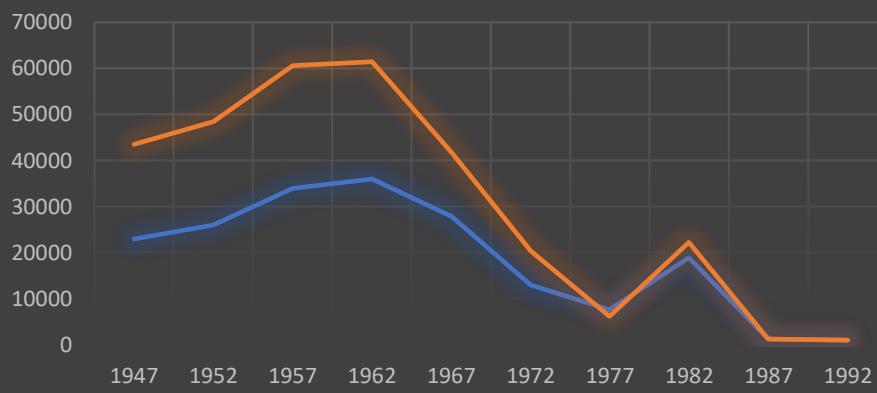
Graph 7c: No. of girls and boys attending grammar schools, 1947-1992

— No. of girls attending grammar schools
 — No. of boys attending grammar schools



Graph 7d: No. of girls and boys attending technical schools, 1947-1992

— No. of girls attending technical schools
 — No. of boys attending technical schools

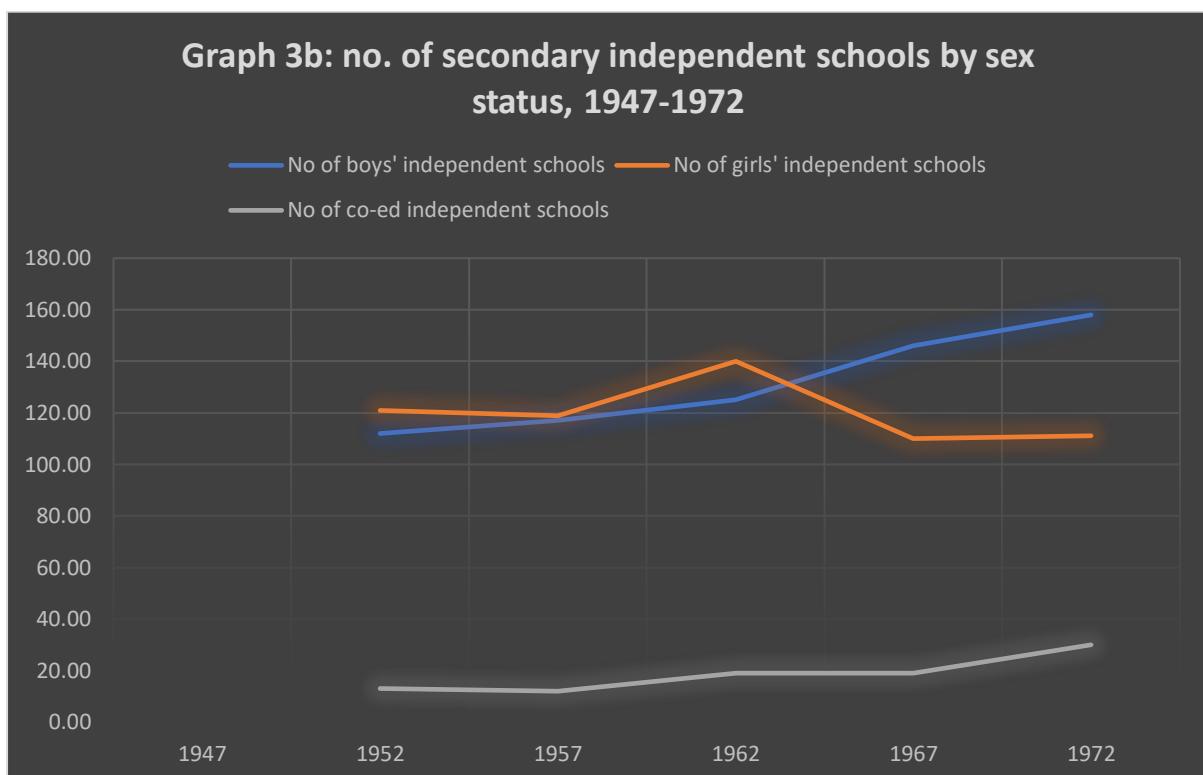
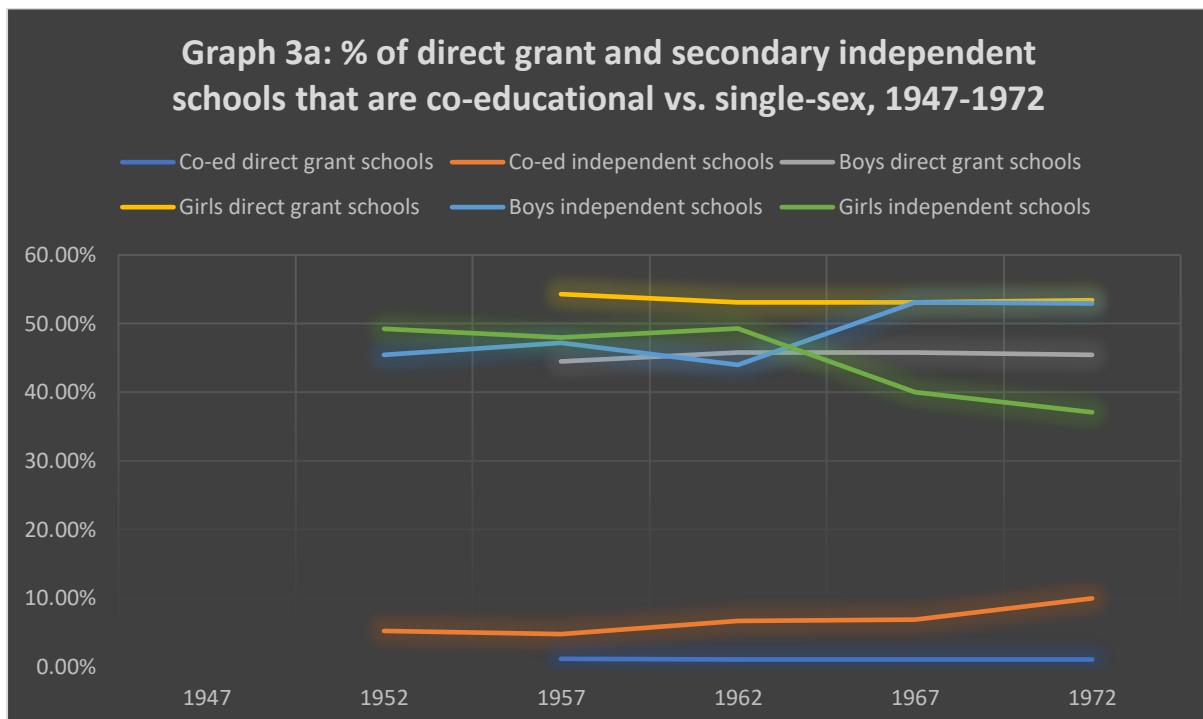


Direct grant and independent schools

Direct grant grammar schools are most instructively compared to the independent sector, because both school types had very high numbers of gender-segregated schools compared to the fully state-maintained schools (in fact between 1962 and 1972 there were only ever two co-educational direct grant schools in the whole of England and Wales).¹⁰ Graph 3a shows the full comparison. Across the 1940s-1970s there were always more girls' than boys' direct grant schools, reflecting the dominance of girls' Catholic schools in this sector. The fall in numbers of girls' independent schools in the 1960s (28 between 1962 and 1972) shown in graph 3b is met by a 3% rise in co-educational independents and 9% rise in boys' independent schools. By the early 1950s an independent school gender gap in favour of boys had been established. There was a much sharper drop in female independent school attendance after war as middle-class girls moved into maintained grammar schools. Both populations

¹⁰ The independent schools included in the graphs and discussed in this paper are only those deemed 'efficient' by the state and thus collected in government statistics.

rose from the end of the 1960s in response to the closure of grammar schools, but boys more steeply than girls.



Scotland

Most of Scotland's secondary schools were co-educational.¹¹ In 1959 the secondary school population (total 248876 pupils) was 49% female and 51% male, with the number of girls dropping off in the fifth and sixth years.¹² In 1963 (total 286441 pupils) it was 48.8% female and 51.2% male, with the figures similarly even up to the fourth year of secondary school, after which more girls left school than boys.¹³ That same year, the Scottish Education Department noted in its annual report its hope that more 15 year-old pupils would complete the three-year course during the 1960s (in 1963 numbers dropped by 16368 between second and third year and by 40852 between third and fourth year, roughly evenly between genders). Local Authorities produced two separate pamphlets for girls and boys, 'Let Him Stay on at School' and 'Let Her Stay on at School', describing the benefits of staying on, which were distributed to the parents of pupils starting the third year of a senior secondary course.¹⁴

Leavers and careers

Until the end of the 1960s, when the school leaving age was 15, more boys than girls stayed on at school. Graph 2 shows the difference between girls' and boys' reasons for leaving school across the entire period. Boys were always more likely to leave for employment, girls for further education. As the importance of employment declined and further education rose, the gender gap became slightly bigger. These rather crude 'reasons' mask some important differences. A lot more boys than girls were leaving for apprenticeships throughout the 1950s and 1960s, and apprenticeships were included in the leaving for employment figures (e.g. in 1962 20% of boys and 3.7% of girls left for apprenticeships).¹⁵ Apprenticeships were designed for a gender-differentiated labour market that favoured boys' technical and practical skills. Statistics collected by the 'Institute of Manpower Studies' on girls and boys entering apprenticeships by industry in the 1960s and 1970s show a fair diversity of distribution for boys compared with pitiful figures for girls, who were heavily concentrated in white-collar administrative and service work.¹⁶ Meanwhile, the vast majority of girls leaving for further education went into teacher training and secretarial or similar courses, *not* higher education. More boys than girls went into higher education in Britain until the end of the millennium.

¹¹ Scottish Education Department annual reports do not provide any breakdowns for girls' boys', and co-educational secondary school types in their statistics tables.

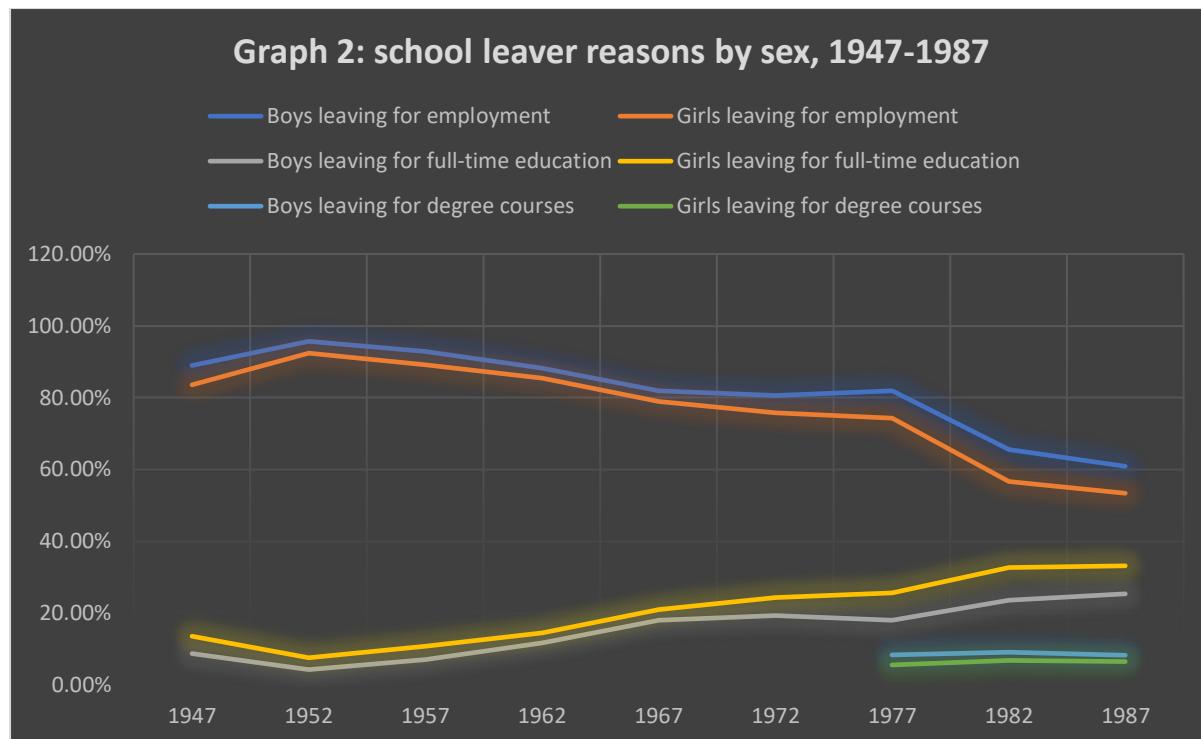
¹² *Education in Scotland in 1959* (1960), p. 112.

¹³ *Education in Scotland in 1963* (1964), p. 116.

¹⁴ *Education in Scotland in 1963* (1964), p. 15.

¹⁵ *Statistics of Education 1962* (1963), pp. 30-1.

¹⁶ Institute of Manpower Studies (1978).



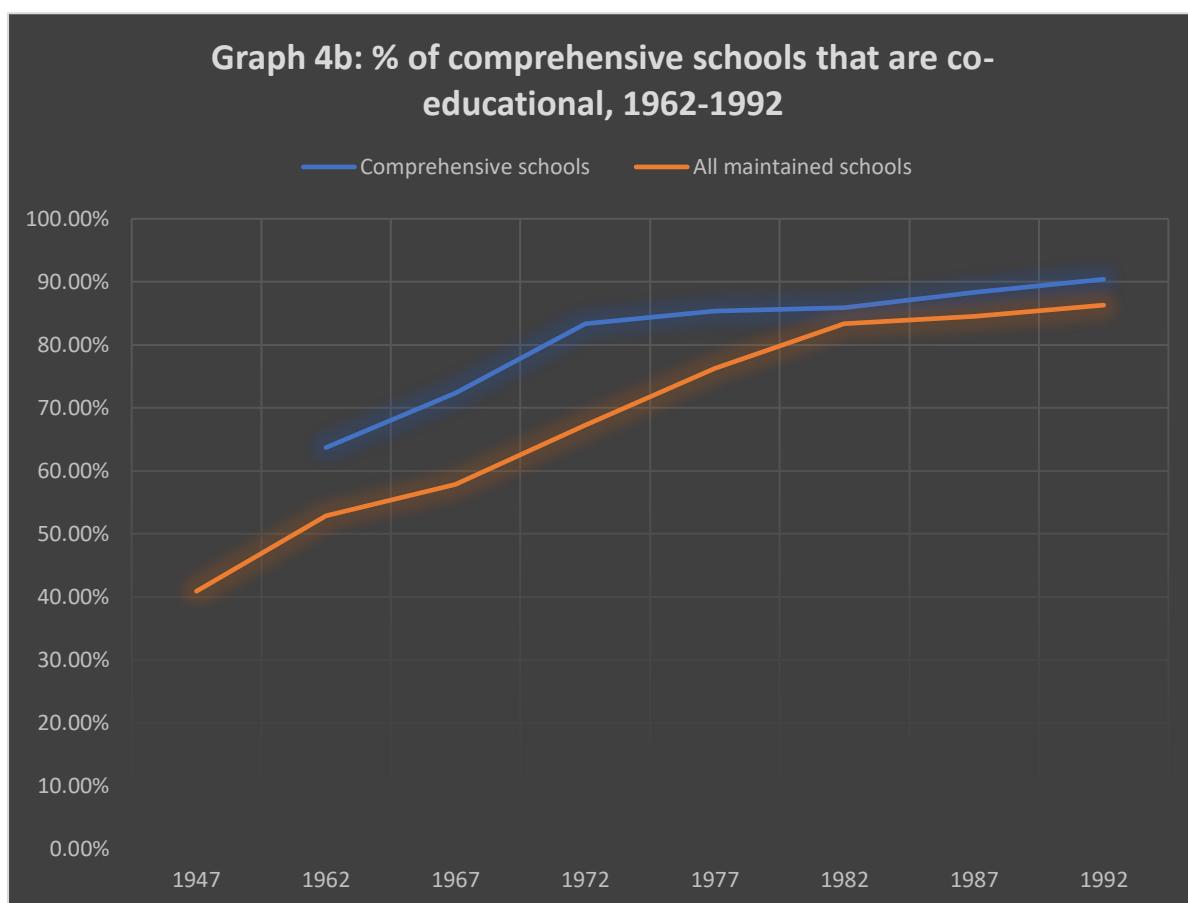
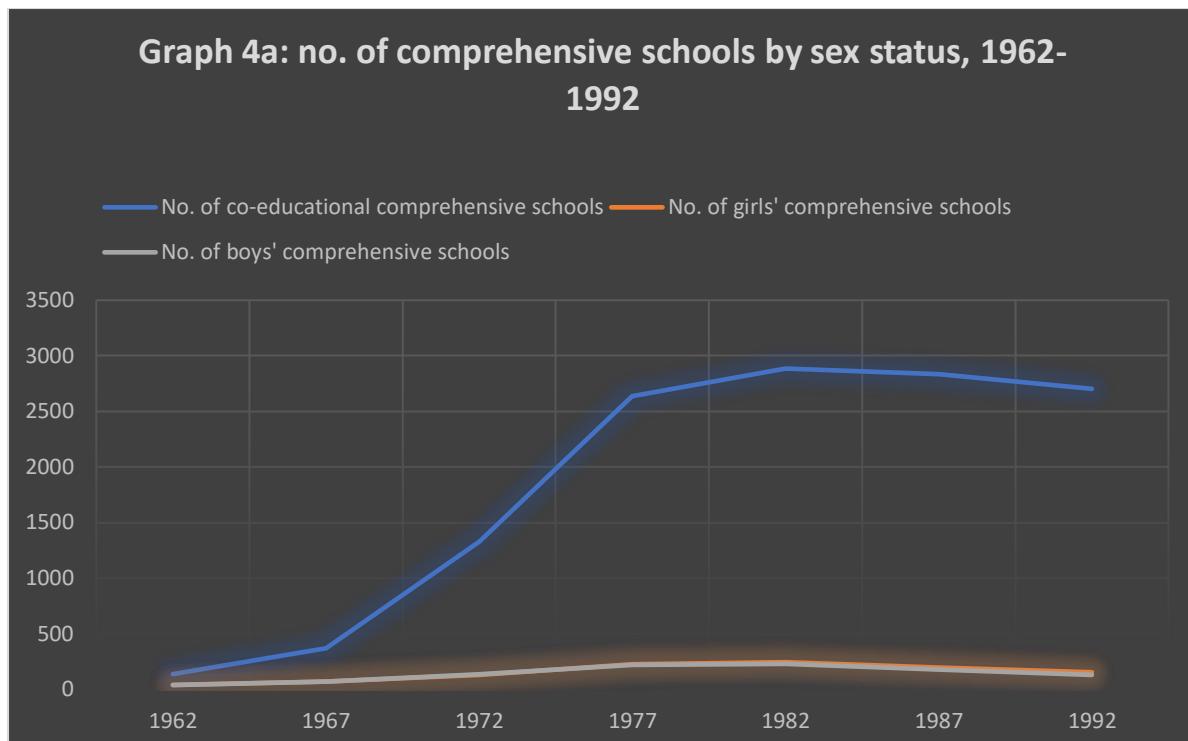
2. 1967-1987

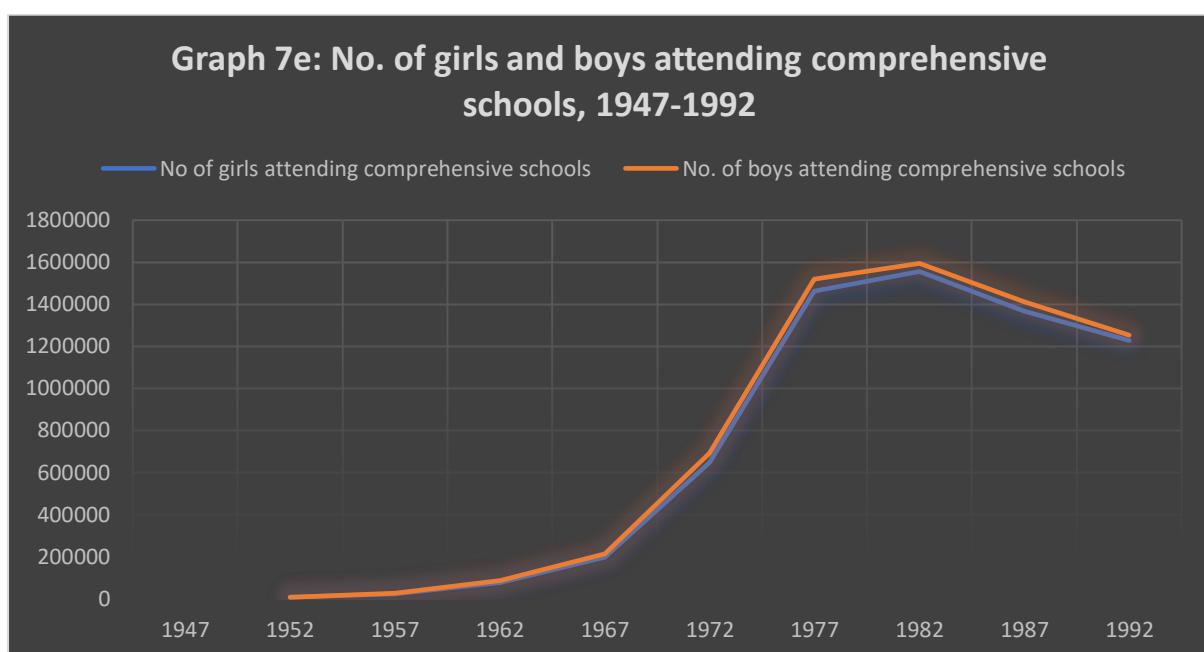
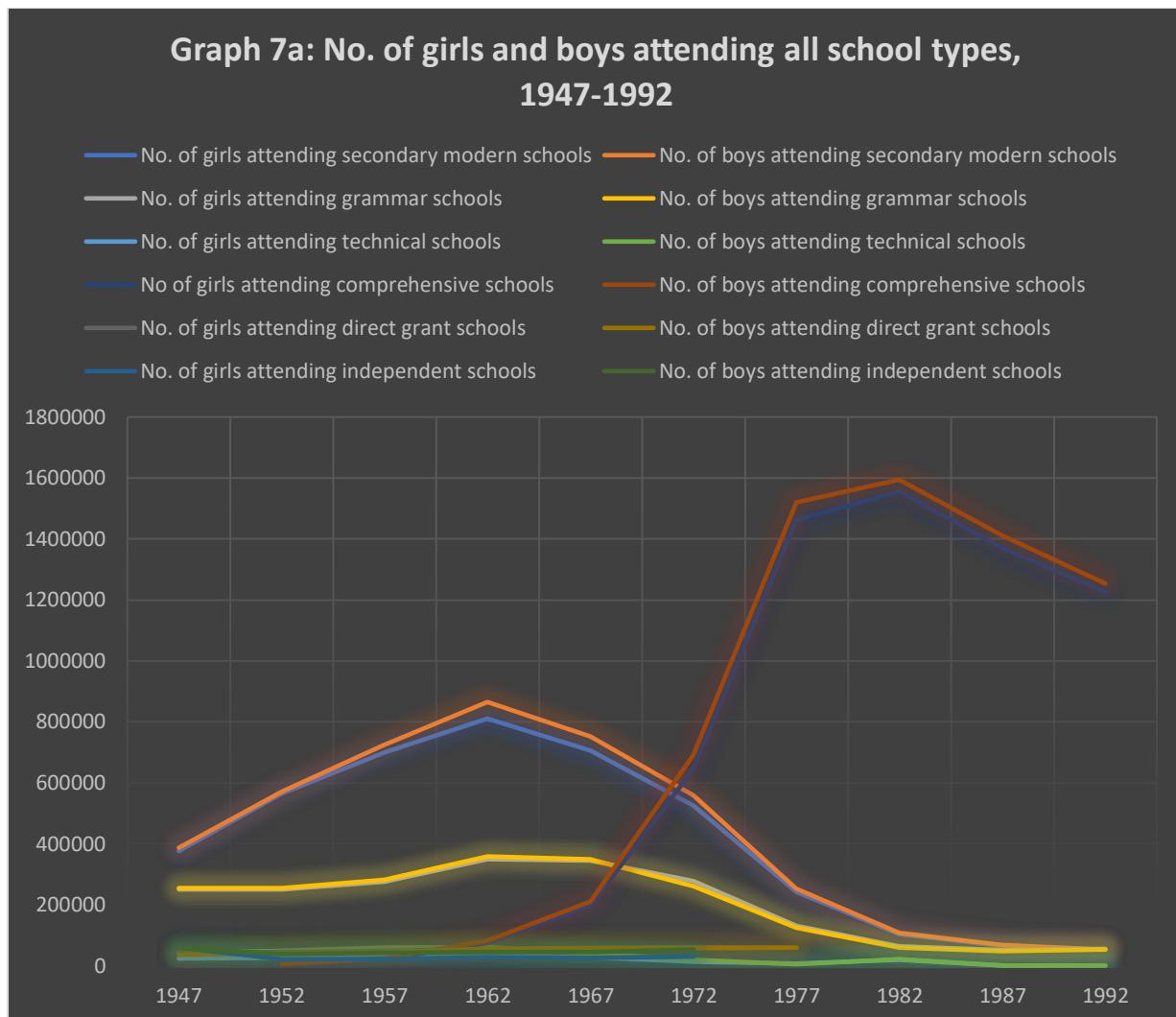
Co-education and comprehensivization

In graph 1a the yellow line shows the steady rise in co-educational comprehensives, which is really just the story of a rise in the number of comprehensive schools over the period. The crossing of the two blue lines represents the point at which, in the early 1970s, there were more co-educational comprehensive schools than co-educational secondary modern schools. Graph 4a shows more clearly the tendency for comprehensives to be mixed (over 85% in 1982, 90.4% by 1992) with single-sex comprehensives increasing modestly and plateauing by the late 1970s.¹⁷ But, as graph 4b shows, by the early 1990s the trend for all maintained schools to be co-educational (the lines look like they might be about to meet in the early 1980s) had slowed considerably due to the resilience of single-sex grammar schools in certain areas. As we saw with the grammar school gender gap in favour of girls for the 1970s, graph 7e shows that from the late 1960s there are more boys than girls attending comprehensive schools. This gap was at its widest in the late 1970s, in 1977 58051 more boys than girls attended comprehensive schools.¹⁸ The picture for both genders and all school types in graph 7a shows that the numbers of all pupils attending comprehensive schools overtook the number of all pupils attending grammar schools already in the late 1960s (and likewise for secondary moderns in the early 1970s), adding weight to the argument that we ought to think about comprehensivization as a long, slow, regional post-1945 process rather than as an ‘event’ that took place from 1965.

¹⁷ *Statistics of Education Schools 1982* (1983), p. 9, p. 13; *Statistics of Education Schools 1992* (1993), pp. 110-113.

¹⁸ *Statistics of Education 1977* (1979), pp. 2-3.





There has been plenty of debate about what drove comprehensivization in this period, and Mandler has convincingly argued that bottom-up demand was more persuasive than top-down ideology.¹⁹ But was co-education a top-down or bottom-up aspect of comprehensivization, or was it just a practical necessity, or a combination of all three? Comprehensives were bigger schools and were often literally formed through the amalgamation of existing girls' and boys' grammar and secondary modern schools, hence the practical element. On the side of ideology, proponents of comprehensivisation did fiercely advocate co-education as a feature of democratic mass secondary education. But the idea that girls and boys should attend school together became a kind of subsidiary point to the more pressing social debate about class, and eventually racial, mixing in secondary schools. Writing in 1968, Douglas's gender findings prompted him to warn that, through comprehensivization, the drift to co-education was not being properly thought through.²⁰

Scotland

The evidence from Scotland in this period provides a warning against assuming that changes in gender culture came immediately with the arrival of majority, co-educational comprehensive schools. In the 1970s the Scottish ideal of a common curriculum seemed to hold true for the first two years of secondary school, but thereafter became highly stratified by gender and by whether or not pupils were entering for exams. Post ROSLA in 1975 the Scottish HMI produced a special report highlighting gender differences, showing that boys were more likely to take physics and girls biology. It concluded that these inequities were not a consequence of policy but were deeply entwined with societal gender issues at large.²¹

The 1977 Scottish leavers survey found that Higher, O-grade, and non-SCE pupils reported very different experiences of their last two years of secondary school. Boys' and girls' experiences in these groups were quite similar, except that a far higher proportion of boys reported experiencing some form of corporal punishment.²² As in England and Wales, female school leavers in Scotland at the end of the 1960s were going into further education more than boys. Interestingly, the proportion of full-time students that were female in Scottish universities did not drop below a quarter for the entire century, which is much higher than in England. There was a significant downturn in the growth of male students at Scottish universities between 1971-1990.²³ Female labour market participation in Scotland did not rise as quickly as in England during the 1970s and 1980s.²⁴

Northern Ireland

The gender situation in Northern Ireland was the opposite of Scotland because almost all schools were single-sex and selection at age 11 persisted across the whole period. In Northern Ireland differences between county (Protestant) and voluntary (Catholic) schools produced an even more complex gender situation. Graph 8a shows that within the grammar school system, the county system slightly favoured girls and the voluntary system slightly favoured boys, and graph 8b shows the opposite for the intermediate schools (akin to secondary moderns). In the 1960s and 1970s the voluntary system was

¹⁹ Mandler (2014).

²⁰ Douglas, Ross, and Simpson (1968), p. 73.

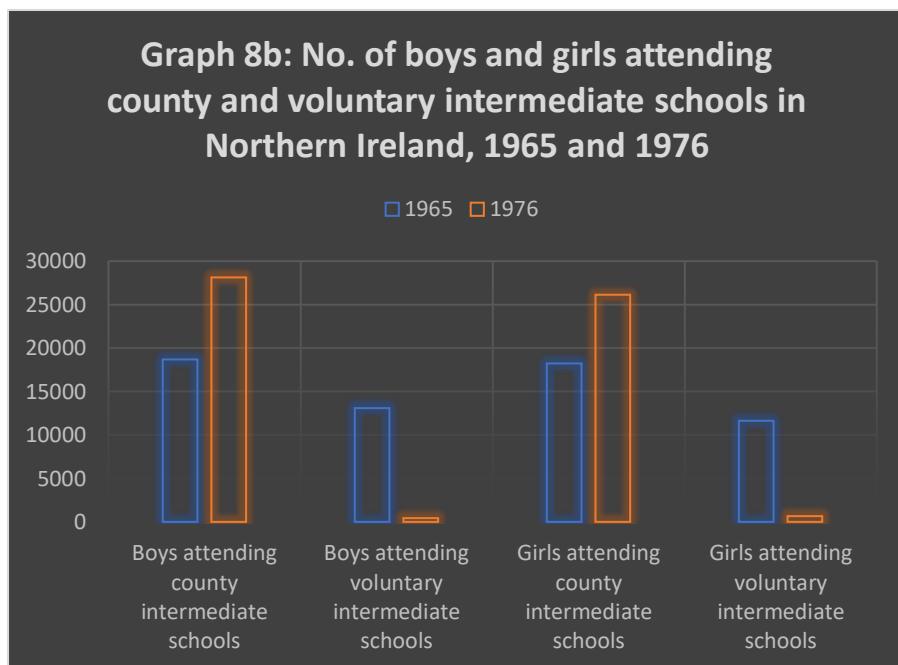
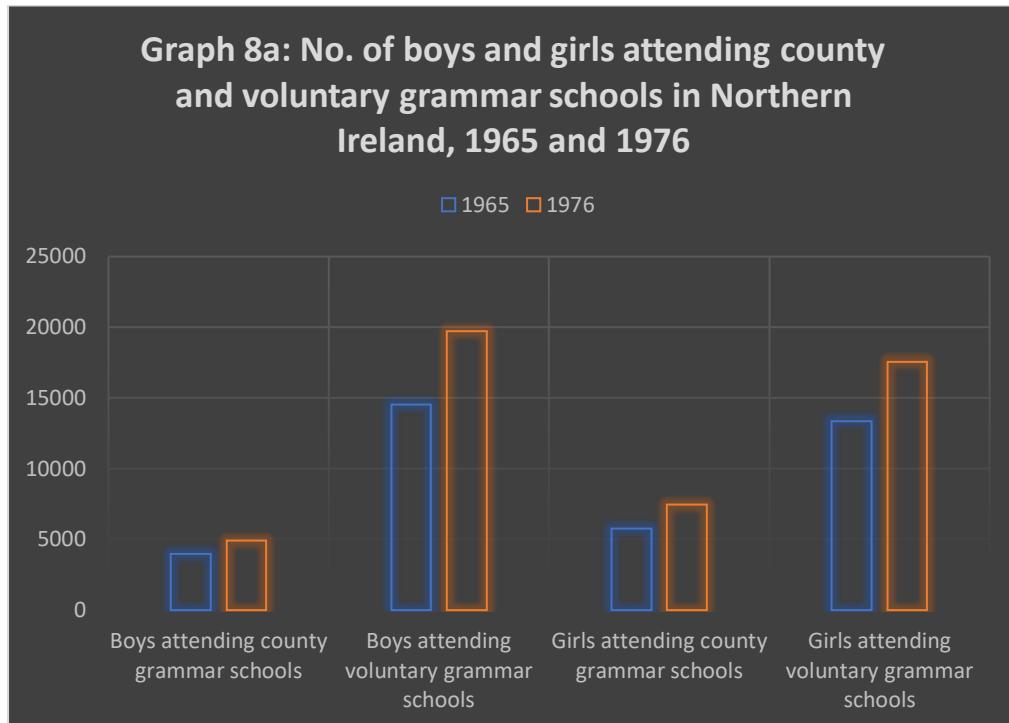
²¹ Scottish Education Department (1975).

²² Gray, McPherson, and Raffe (1983), p. 174.

²³ Brown (2010), pp. 27-28. Cf. Dyhouse (2006), p. 99.

²⁴ Brown (2010), pp. 27-28.

poorly funded compared to the county system. Moreover, there was a vast imbalance in the numbers of different types of schools.²⁵



²⁵ The reasons for this, relating to funding disputes between the Unionist state and the Catholic school system, are properly explained in the [Northern Ireland](#) briefing paper.

Leavers and careers

From the mid-1970s girls' staying on rates up to age seventeen began to overtake boys'. Returning to graph 2, the percentage of both girls and boys leaving school for employment began to decline sharply from the late 1970s. This was a result of apprenticeships declining, youth unemployment peaking, and staying on rates beginning to rise again. Likewise, youth training and further education options diversified in the 1980s, especially for boys. Teacher training, the traditional option for girls pursuing further education, underwent cuts and restructuring in the 1970s. Dyhouse uses this fact, alongside the impact of the Equal Pay Act (1970) and Sex Discrimination Act (1975) on workplaces to explain more women choosing higher education from the 1980s and beyond.²⁶

3. 1987-1997

Late-century trends

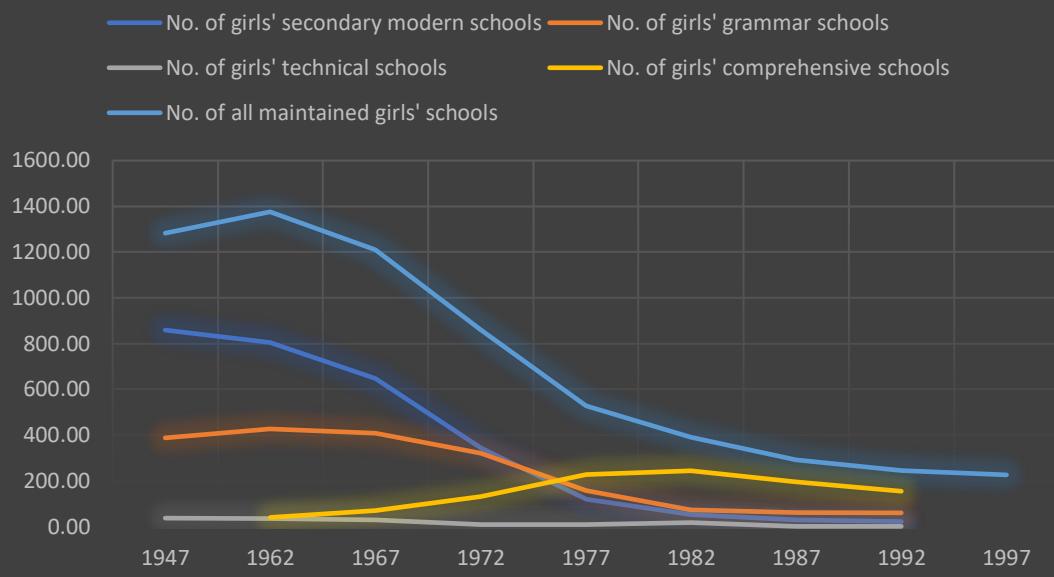
In graph 7a, the number of girls and boys attending comprehensive schools begins to decline slightly over the course of the 1980s at a roughly equal rate. The increase in boys attending grammar schools is too slight to explain this. It might be partly explained by the rise of Sixth Form Colleges (which were all co-educational). By 1987 there were 106 Sixth Form Colleges in England educating 64493 pupils.²⁷ But this cannot account for the 369702 drop in numbers of pupils attending comprehensive schools between 1982 and 1987, which is most likely simply a result of the drastic drop in the birth rate between 1975 and 1979. The number of comprehensive schools also began to drop from the mid 1980s.

Another notable feature of this period was the persistence and resilience of single-sex education. In graph 1a the grey and orange lines, representing the technical and grammar schools, drop from the mid-1960s. But the drop is considerably greater than the overall decline in these school types. This suggests that co-educational grammars were the first to be axed, as the single-sex schools were typically higher performing and preferred by the middle-classes, and were probably more fiercely protected in their localities. Graphs 5a and 6a show comparable trends for girls' and boys' single-sex maintained schools: gender segregated education was clearly in decline, but the grammar schools in both cases show a much slower decline than the other school types. Graph 6c illustrates the slight but growing difference between the number of girls' and boys' maintained schools, in favour of girls' schools.

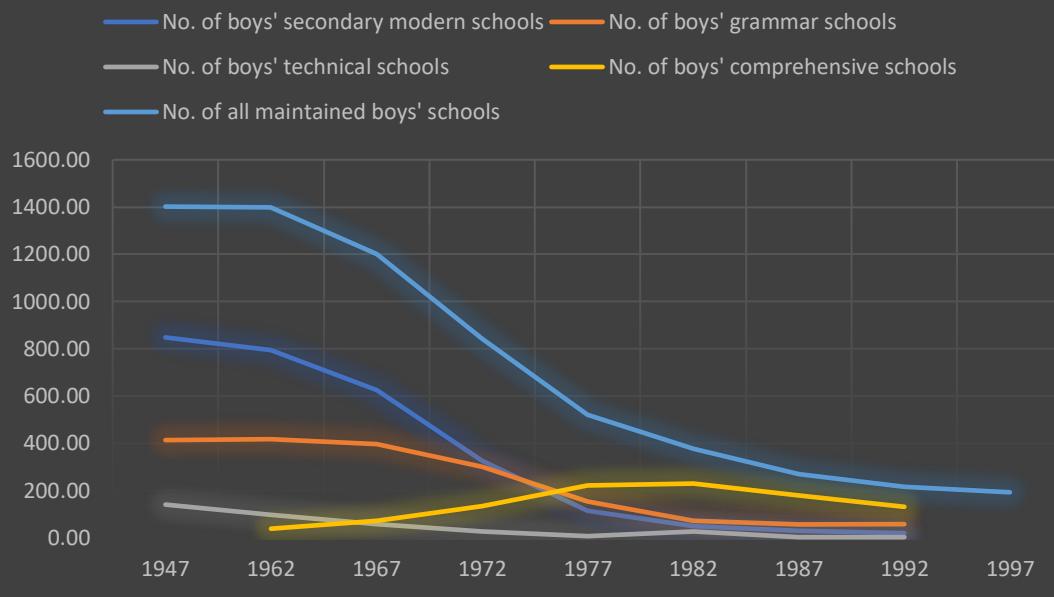
²⁶ Dyhouse (2006), pp. 112-113.

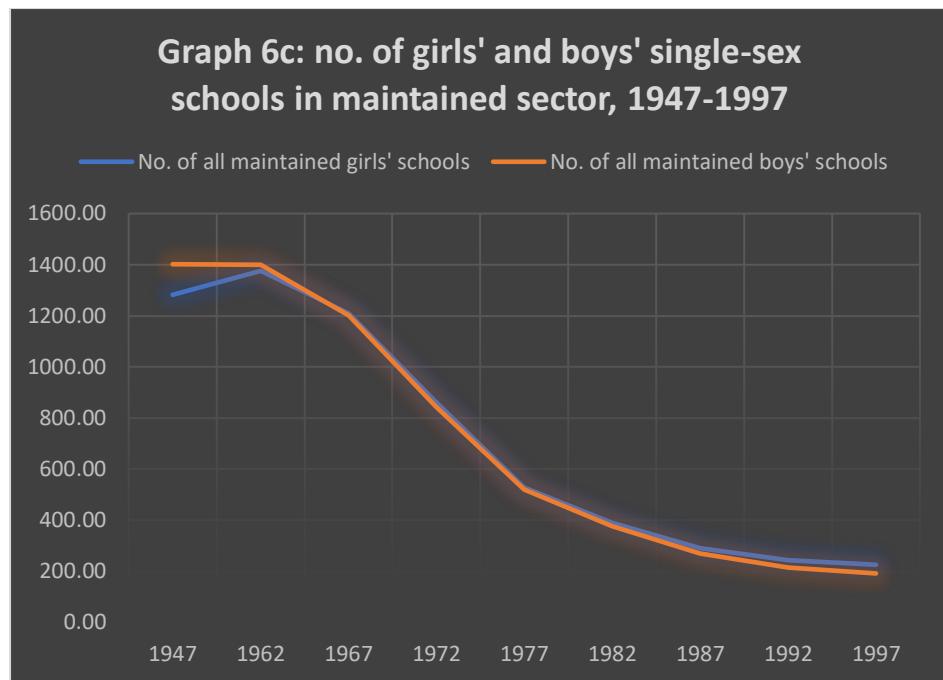
²⁷ *Statistics of Education Schools* (1988), pp. 119-122.

Graph 5a: no. of single-sex girls' schools in maintained sector, 1947-1997



Graph 6a: no. of single-sex boys' schools in maintained sector, 1947-1997





Leavers and careers

Returning to the question posed at the beginning of this paper - the relationship between social change outside secondary schools and gender cultures within them - it is clear that the 1990s was the period when social change from the outside made girls' and boys' experiences of secondary education in the UK more equal. In this period all girls, not just the elite, could feel cultural change capturing up with structural change. Higher education opportunities for women expanded drastically as the Polytechnics were converted into new universities. The labour market, especially in the professions, opened up to women. Workplaces began to adapt to a new gender order and there was a lively public discourse about working parents.

As is evidenced by the experience of the 1970 cohort, women experienced a lot of upward mobility in this period but their qualifications were always more important in this process than was the case for men.²⁸ The GCSE, a standardised school leaving qualification introduced under Thatcher in 1986 in response to fears about falling standards, made a big difference to girls' achievements in secondary school. As the GCSE resulted in more pupils leaving school with five or more good grades, more of these pupils were girls.²⁹ In addition, academic researchers began to meaningfully probe gender politics and gender culture in the school classroom, leading to active interventions.

²⁸ Bukodi (2009).

²⁹ Bolton (2012).

Bibliography

HMSO publications

- Department of Education and Science, *Education for all (The Swann Report)* (London: HMSO, 1985).
- Department of Education and Science, *Mathematics counts (The Cockcroft Report)* (London: HMSO, 1982).
- Department of Education and Science, *Statistics of Education 1967, volume one* (London: HMSO, 1968).
- Department of Education and Science, *Statistics of Education 1972, volume one* (London: HMSO, 1972).
- Department of Education and Science, *Statistics of Education 1977, volume one* (London: HMSO, 1979).
- Department of Education and Science, *Statistics of Education Schools 1982* (London: HMSO, 1983).
- Department of Education and Science, *Statistics of Education Schools 1987* (London: HMSO, 1988).
- Department of Education and Science, *The Public Schools Commission: second report (The Donnison Report)* (London: HMSO, 1970).
- Department of Education and Science, *West Indian children in our schools (The Rampton Report)*. (London: HMSO, 1981).
- Department of Education, *Statistics of Education Schools 1992* (London: HMSO, 1993).
- Department of Education, *Statistics of Education Schools in England 1997* (London: HMSO, 1998)
- Ministry of Education, *Education in 1947 being the report of the Ministry of Education and the statistics of public education for England and Wales* (London, HMSO: 1948).
- Ministry of Education, *Education in 1952 being the report of the Ministry of Education and the statistics of public education for England and Wales* (London: HMSO, 1953).
- Ministry of Education, *Education in 1957 being the report of the Ministry of Education and the statistics of public education for England and Wales* (London: HMSO, 1958).
- Ministry of Education, *Education in 1962 being the report of the Ministry of Education for England and Wales* (London: HMSO, 1963).
- Ministry of Education, *Half our future (The Newsom Report)* (London: HMSO, 1963).
- Ministry of Education, *Secondary school examinations other than the G.C.E (The Beloe Report)* (London: HMSO, 1960).
- Ministry of Education, *Statistics of Education 1962, part one* (London: HMSO, 1963).
- Northern Ireland Department of Education, *Education Statistics Number 23* (Belfast: HMSO, 1977).
- Northern Ireland Ministry of Education, *Education Statistics Number 1* (Belfast: HMSO, 1965).
- Scottish Department of Education, *Differences of Provision for Boys and Girls in Scottish Secondary Schools: A Report by HM Inspectors of Schools* (Edinburgh: HMSO, 1975).
- Scottish Education Department, *Education in Scotland in 1959* (Edinburgh: HMSO, 1960).
- Scottish Education Department, *Education in Scotland in 1963* (Edinburgh: HMSO, 1964).

Other primary and secondary sources

- Black and Brooke, 'The Labour Party, Women, and the Problem of Gender, 1951-1966', *Journal of British Studies*, 36 (1997), 419-52.
- Bolton, 'Education: Historical statistics', (2012).
- Brown and Abrams eds., *A History of Everyday Life in Twentieth-Century Scotland* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010).

- Bukodi, 'Education, First Occupation and Later Occupational Attainment: Cross-cohort Changes among Men and Women in Britain', *CLS Cohort Studies Working Paper 2009/4* (2009).
- Burgess, *Inside comprehensive schools* (London: HMSO, 1970).
- Carter, 'Experimental' secondary modern education in Britain, 1948–1958. *Cultural and Social History*, 13:1 (2016), 23–41.
- Deem, *Co-education reconsidered* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1984).
- Douglas, Ross, and Simpson, *All our future. A longitudinal study of secondary education* (London: Peter Davies, 1968).
- Driver, 'How West Indians do better at school (especially the girls)' *New Society*, (17 January 1980), 111–14.
- Dyhouse, *Students: a gendered history* (London; New York: Routledge, 2006).
- Farley, *Secondary modern discipline* (1960).
- Gray, McPherson, and Raffe, *Reconstructions of Secondary Education: Theory, Myth and Practice since the War* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983).
- Institute of Manpower Studies, *Education and Employment: Selected Statistics for 1966-1977* (Cambridge: Hobsons Press, 1978).
- Jackson and Salisbury, 'Why Should Secondary Schools Take Working with Boys Seriously?', *Gender and Education*, 8:1 (1996), 103–116.
- Joseph, 'A Research Note on Attitudes to Work and Marriage of Six Hundred Adolescent Girls', *The British Journal of Sociology*, 12:2 (1961), 176–83.
- Lambart, 'Mereside: A grammar school for girls in the 1960s', *Gender and Education*, 9:4 (1997), 441–456.
- Mahony, *Schools for the boys? Co-education reassessed* (London: Hutchinson, 1985).
- Mandler, 'Educating the Nation I: Schools', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society (Sixth Series)*, 24 (2014), 5–28.
- Mandler, 'Education the Nation IV: Subject Shoice', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 27 (2017), 1–27.
- McCarthy, 'Social Science and Married Women's Employment in Post-War Britain', *Past & Present*, 233 (2016), 269–305.
- Ollerenshaw, *Education for girls* (London: Conservative Political Centre, 1958).
- Ollerenshaw, *The Girls' Schools* (London: Faber & Faber, 1967).
- Salisbury and Riddell, *Gender, policy, and educational change: shifting agendas in the UK and Europe* (London; New York: Routledge, 2000).
- Skeggs, *Formations of class and gender* (London: Sage, 1997).
- Spencer, 'Reflections on the 'site of struggle': girls' experience of secondary education in the late 1950s', *History of Education* 33:4 (2004), 437–449.
- Tisdall, 'Inside the "blackboard jungle": male teachers and male pupils at English secondary modern schools in fact and fiction, 1950 to 1959', *Cultural and Social History*, 12:4 (2016), 489–507.
- Weiner, *Just a bunch of girls: feminist approaches to schooling* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1985).