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Educating Peter

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This is Thursday so she must be from Cornell.

The econometrics of happiness. Exchange rate dynamics in Chile. S-s models and inflation. Altruism experiments in the laboratory. We are heavily into hiring season in British universities. The myriad titles of the candidates' job-talks look strange but interesting.

Like artichokes, the 2006 crop of PhD students have been nurtured in hothouses around the globe. Now they are ushered through Terminals 2 and 4 at Heathrow, gently turned over, bitten into, applauded, and, of course, sometimes rejected. Compared to the old days, when there was a less-international market, and personal ties and influence controlled much of what happened, this is a more brutal but meritocratic, and probably also more efficient, way to match people with job slots. My department for weeks has been listening to apprentice lecturers pitch for the vacant posts, and then quizzing them over dinners and coffees. Offer letters have just gone out and a fair number of acceptance emails will be on their way in.

One thing that is noticeable is the greater number of women now coming out of PhD programmes. Whether I am chairing a hiring panel in another department, or sitting in on young economists' seminars, I see a fairer mix of male and female candidates.

Of course a longstanding imbalance is still visible. Of the 50 staff who teach economics in my department, 20% are women. Among the support and administrative staff, 90% are women. Since its inception in 1969, no female has ever won the Nobel Prize in economics, and, across all disciplines, since 1901 only 33 females have won the Prize compared to 725 males. Yet there is some small

sign of change. For example, 30% of the prestigious Massachusetts Institute of Technology Phd-graduating class in economics are female, compared to a ratio of 15% among the people who teach the subject there.

Gender is an emotive subject. The most interesting recent research I have seen on it, although about schools not universities, is a paper by an innovative young economist called Thomas Dee. If you work in education at any level, you will get a lot from a search on the web to find his remarkable research.

Mr Dee provides new evidence, on an old question, showing that it is important for boys to be taught by men and for girls to be taught by women. If that upsets you, and it will many people, his papers are worth reading before you decide to be against them.

He takes a mass of longitudinal data on 25,000 American children in 8th grade, draws upon that information in a careful way, and blends it with data on their classroom teachers. He makes sure to control for the possibility that certain kinds of children are deliberately allocated to certain kinds of teachers. If we are to be sure about causality, this check is important. His is one of the most interesting studies I have seen.

This subject matters. As in the United Kingdom, boys in the US do substantially less well at school than girls. Just as in the United Kingdom, nobody is really sure why.

Mr Dee thinks he does. The author's conclusions are striking. For young males, one extra year spent with a male English teacher would eliminate nearly a third of the gender gap in reading performance among 13 year olds. For young females, one more year with a female teacher would close approximately half of the gender gap in science achievement. These are just patterns that come out of his data set. His argument about why, however, is a plausible one: children are natural emulators. Boys and girls absorb information differently from men and women, and they need role models.

Britain's education establishment should look into this research. In our country, roughly two-thirds of teachers are female (compared to

the one third found in universities, law firms, and professional medical practices). In the mid 1980s, the proportions of boys and girls getting 5 or more good GCSEs were equal, at about 30% across the sexes. Today, the good news is that 60% of girls go on to attain this level. Yet only 50% of boys do so. More generally, girls out-perform boys at all levels of compulsory education in our country. True, some of that is made back at university. Our universities are not full of female professors. But the bigger issue is why young males are steadily falling behind.

If Mr Dee is right, we have an important part of the answer. Boys need men at the whiteboard.