Using material from Item A and elsewhere, assess sociological explanations of gender differences in achievement and subject choice (20 marks)

There has been a shift in the level of attainment that girls have over the years and this can be attributed to two main factors: changes in education and changes in families. For example: in the curriculum, the introduction of coursework which girls were found to be advantageous to girls rather than 100% exam qualifications. (Findings by Mitos and Browne). This improvement has also been influenced by the changing roles of women in the home and in the workplace.

Boys and girls have always chosen different subject wherever possible according to Wilkey, boys are inclined to choose Maths for example and girls are more likely to choose English. Kelly argues that subjects ‘give off’ an image that influences that will want to choose it. For example, in science textbooks that the examples and images are predominantly males. Initiatives such as GIST (girls into science and technology) are trying to combat the stereotype that it ought to be males who choose to do science and is trying to encourage more girls to pursue science and improving attainment in this subject.

However, a study conducted by Murphy involved setting tasks for primary school children where they were asked to design vehicles and design boats. Murphy found that boys designed battleships and sports cars whereas girls designed family cars and cruise. This supports a view that it is during primary socialization when children are assigned gender roles and how a woman’s role is a domestic one.

Marketisation could also be said to have played a part in the gender gap in attainment. This is because the competitive nature of league tables may cause a school to see girls as preferable as they achieve better exam results. Browne and Webb found that more girls are accepted into university, do better in all SAT exams and outperform males in GCSEs. Jackson comments that the introduction of exam league tables has improved the prospects for girls, as they are more attractive to schools. This causes the gender gap in attainment to widen between the sexes.

There has been a change in the roles of women and the dynamic of families in the last 50 years. There has been an increase in divorce rate and single parent families mean that women are required to work. Changes in the economy also mean that it is imperative that if a couple is getting a mortgage for example that both of them are working in order to afford it. There has also been a change in the type of employment in society such as the decline in traditional, masculine manual labour. This means that boys are less likely to achieve as they may lose a sense of their masuclinity and feel threatened by females.

In 1970 the Equal Pay Act was passed which made it illegal for women to be paid less than men for equal work. There has been an increased amount of new jobs that are available to women that were not previously. This provides an incentive for girls to gain qualifications in order to get these jobs over the traditional maternal role in the home. Sharpe would support this point of view and states