

The Gender Gap in Education

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Executive Summary

- A generation ago, female students scored far below males in sciences, a gap that teachers, administrators and school boards have since closed.
- Today, boys lag behind girls at school, especially in literacy and language arts.
- In 1999, 9% of 20-year-old women had not completed high school, compared to 15% of 20-year-old-men.
- Only 42% of university students are men, and the number keeps falling.
- Today's teaching styles are on balance better suited to the needs of girls, not boys.
- Boys lack male role models at school, as few teachers are men.
- Single-sex classrooms could help both boys and girls to learn better.
- More men are needed at all levels of the school system.
- Teachers must accommodate the learning styles of all their students.
- Parents should have the freedom to choose the school that best suits their child's needs.

Introduction

Equality of opportunity is crucial to a healthy democracy. An educational system that allows all children to learn the basics with which to acquire a profession and function in society is the single best way to provide this equality. In Canada's recent history, schools have adapted to accommodate the needs of different subgroups of the population. Immersion, ESL and enrichment programs are all examples of the commitment of our schools to meeting the needs of all students. When, in the 1970s, it became clear that girls were not performing as well as boys in mathematics and the sciences, education faculties and ministries of education took steps to correct this imbalance, with great success.

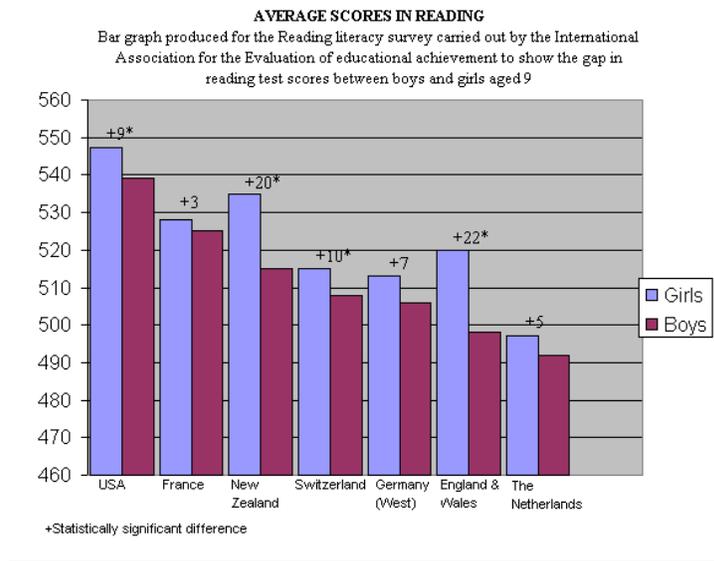


Now, the performance of girls in the sciences is as good, or slightly better, than that of boys. This time, boys are falling behind, especially in literacy. Not only are they performing more poorly, but they are participating in smaller numbers. Young men are almost twice as likely as young women to be high-school dropouts. Men make up only 42% of full time university students and this number drops every year. Our schools should take action to meet the needs of a group that is not thriving in the current system.

The Problem

Throughout the OECD, high school girls test as highly as boys on mathematical and scientific exams, and significantly higher on language arts subjects.¹ The problem therefore is not a regional one, unique to Manitoba or Canada.² Something that all these countries have in common, though, is a new approach to educational theory and curricula that has gradually replaced almost all of what was traditionally taught, and how it was taught. Concern for self-esteem, and a desire to promote co-operation, has led to the near-elimination of competition within the classroom. A consequence of this has been reduced motivation for boys, who respond well to competition. In fact, boys are more likely than girls to believe that what they are learning in school is useless, and therefore put less effort into homework and studying.³

The failure to take into account innate differences between boys and girls hurts the former in schools. Even in a matter as seemingly minor as penmanship, fine motor skills develop more slowly in young boys than in girls, and a teacher who does not take this into account is likely to consider that her male students are performing more poorly than female students.⁴ Young boys do not focus as well for extended



periods, and take longer to learn to sit still during a long lesson. Rather than pathologizing this, or labelling it as a discipline problem, teachers should play to the strengths of their students and facilitate their learning, not hamper it.

Reading matter, too, makes a difference. Boys are much more interested in, and therefore

more likely to read carefully, stories about adventure, danger and excitement. Much of the educational establishment now frowns upon such young adult fiction, and prefers instead books about the friendships and family relations of characters, which are of minimal interest to elementary school boys. The books of Judy Blume, about the coming of age of pre-teens and their friends, are far more commonly found in the modern classroom than G. A. Henty's novels about adventures in the Old West, or Roman times, or explorers in Africa, which used to be staples of middle-school reading.

Curricula should not be skewed in this way. A boy who reads a factual account of the first space flight is developing his literacy skills as surely as a girl who reads a novel about a group of babysitting friends, will more likely feel engaged in the material and therefore will participate more in the education process.

The education system has increasingly become feminized.⁵ This is clear not only in the style of teaching, and in the subjects that are taught, but also from looking at who is doing the teaching. Women outnumber men as teachers, and especially so in elementary schools; the University of Manitoba's Faculty of Education has three female students for every male, an imbalance that is growing, not shrinking.⁶ Some students don't encounter a male teacher until high school. This

furtheres the tacit message to boys that school and learning are feminine endeavours, a message that does nothing to promote their participation or increase their interest in studying.

An approach suggested in the 1980s and 1990s as a remedy for the poor performance of girls in science was single-sex schools or classes, at least in some subjects. Our schools should consider applying this strategy to improve the education of boys. Since learning styles of boys and girls differ, single-sex classes allow teachers to choose the teaching method most suited to their students.

Solutions

The new gender gap in our schools can be addressed in four main areas:

- Classrooms need to be led by teachers who are aware of the learning styles of their students, and who teach to the needs of each student.
- More male teachers are needed, both to provide a variety of teaching styles and to serve as role models.
- Schools should experiment with single-sex classes.
- Parents must be given more autonomy to choose the schools and teachers who bring out the best in their children.

Pedagogy and Learning Styles

While co-operative learning and teamwork suit most girls, they often stifle many boys who tend to enjoy competition. Textbooks, resources



and choice of reading matter must be balanced, and cannot ignore the needs and interests of half of the classroom. Teachers must be required to create an environment that is equally conducive to learning for boys and girls, and must allow all students to draw upon their strengths, while improving in areas of weakness.

Male Teachers

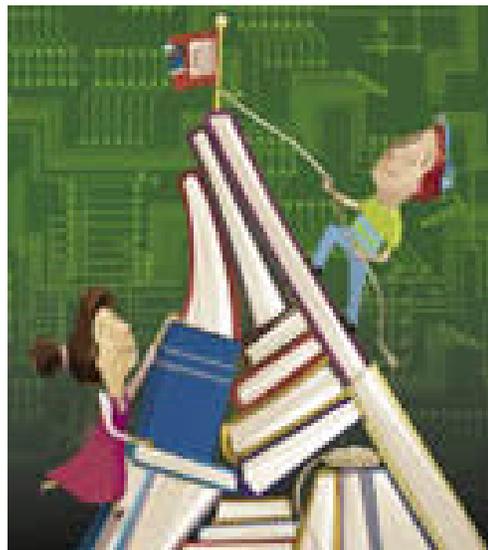
Part of the increased feminization of the classroom comes not from ideology or theory but from the sheer numbers of women teaching, and the lack of men in the classroom, especially in lower school levels. Education faculties should try to recruit more men, especially into elementary and middle-year streams. Further, the relatively low status and pay for teachers dissuades many men from joining the profession. A merit-pay system would break the artificial salary caps, which fail to reward excellence in teaching, and might well induce more men to become teachers.⁷

Single-sex Classrooms

All-girl classes have been shown to improve the performance of girls in mathematics and the sciences. Research indicates similar promise for boys with respect to language arts and social studies.⁸ The benefits for teachers and students of single-sex classes are significant. Teachers can choose teaching styles and subject matter that will interest a far larger proportion of the class in such a system. The inevitable distractions to older children by the presence of members of the opposite sex will also be eliminated, further encouraging students to focus their energies on learning and participating properly. Schools must be allowed and encouraged to experiment with single-sex teaching, whether only for some subjects or for an entire school.

Parental Choice

One reason why schools have not innovated to solve the gender-gap is the lack of accountability they face. If parents had the autonomy to remove their child from a school that did not meet his needs, and had real alternatives, schools would soon be forced to correct the imbalance in male achievement. Parental choice, combined with schools empowered to try different ways of teaching, would allow more children and families to find the school that meets their needs. Families who feel strongly about co-ed education, and whose children thrive



there, would certainly be able to find such schools. But parents whose children perform better and are more confident in a single-sex environment should also be able to find a school that accommodates them.

Conclusion

Our educational system took effective and rapid measures to correct the gender gap between boys and girls when girls performed poorly in mathematics and the sciences. We should react as quickly to the current gap, in which boys are performing increasingly poorly at all levels of the educational system, especially with regard to literacy. With each passing year, this gap grows. The importance of a solid education is increasing, and we cannot afford to let boys fall behind academically.

The differences between boys and girls can no longer be ignored. Instead, teachers should learn about them, and be trained to teach in styles that accommodate all their students and their needs. Lesson planning and curricula must reflect the needs, interests and learning styles of all students.

Further, the feminization of education must be corrected. More men are needed in the classroom at all levels, and especially in earlier years. Single-sex classrooms are an option that can create optimal learning environments for both boys and girls. Finally, parental choice and autonomy must be increased, in order that parents are empowered to choose the education best suited to their child's needs.

About the Author



Dennis Owens is the Frontier's Senior Policy Analyst. A descendent of homesteaders near Portage la Prairie, he graduated from the University of Winnipeg in 1970 with a Bachelor of Arts in English and Political Science. Over a 20-year career in the transportation business, he rose to the position of operations manager of a Winnipeg-based firm. Since then he has researched and written about Canadian public policy issues for a variety of organizations including the Manitoba Taxpayers Association and the Prairie Centre. His specialties at the Frontier Centre include municipal issues, public education, healthcare and aboriginal policy. His frequent exposure in electronic and print media has included a regular commentary on CBC radio and articles printed in the *Wall Street Journal* and the *National Post*.

Footnotes

¹ News, *Boy's Own Story*, November 25, 2003, available at

<http://www.cbc.ca/news/background/gendergap/>

² Statistics Canada, *The Gap in Achievement Between Boys and Girls*, available at

<http://www.statcan.ca/english/freepub/81-004-XIE/200410/mafe.htm>

³ Ibid.

⁴ Business Week Online. *The New Gender Gap*, May 26, 2003, available at

http://www.businessweek.com/magazine/content/03_21/b3834001_mz001.htm

⁵ Christina Hoff Sommers, *The War Against Boy: How Misguided Feminism is Harming Our Young Men*, Touchstone Books, 2001.

⁶ Faculty of Education, University of Manitoba, *Faculty of Education Annual Report 2003/2004*, available at <http://www.umanitoba.ca/education/med/research.shtml>

⁷ Frontier Centre for Public Policy, *A Merit Pay Plan for Manitoba*, January, 2003, available at

http://www.fcpp.org/main/publication_detail.php?PubID=514

⁸ Susan Phillips, *Tackling the Gender Gap*, Society for the Advancement of Excellence in Education, Fall, 2003, available at http://www.sae.ca/policy/D_059_FFH_LON.php