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Summary

- Boys are not doing as well as girls in school.
- The causes include employment trends, the feminization of education, and “child-centred teaching methods.
- Schools should adjust their programs so that they support boys’ learning styles.

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Quick Study

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What Can We Do About The Boys?

by Mark Holmes

It is well known that boys are falling behind girls in terms of educational success. They do worse on tests, not only in language but in math. They receive fewer academic honours in high school. They are much more likely to be labeled with some disability. They form a minority on university campuses.

While extreme feminists still focus on women getting fewer places than men in engineering and senior positions in corporations, parents are more likely to be concerned about prospects for their boys - with good reason.

There are many possible causes for boys’ decline. Employment in western democratic societies is gradually becoming more feminine. Proportionately more men than women were laid off in the recent and perhaps continuing recession, and more remain unemployed. Factories are being closed and their jobs exported to developing nations. Fewer people are employed in agriculture and manual labour in general is increasingly mechanised. Jobs in the service and public sectors, where women predominate - civil service, retirement and nursing homes, education, hospitals, and restaurants and hotels - are increasing.

The best opportunities for boys remain in engineering and computer science, while women become increasingly competitive in business, which used to be dominated by men. Boys of average or below average academic ability are too often justified in thinking that their schooling is boring and irrelevant to their future.

Schooling is increasingly feminized. Female teachers still far outnumber men in the elementary grades and now also dominate high schools. Principals and senior administrators are more likely to be women than in the past. At the same time, the curricula are also being changed to reflect qualities more likely found in girls than boys.

Reading, the key to most subsequent learning, is still dominated in many jurisdictions by “child-centred” ideology that sees opportunity as more important than direct, phonetic instruction. Girls are more likely than boys to have both the will and the ability to please the teacher and take the opportunity to master reading. Ironically, young children are asked to use language in math - they are expected to explain how they found that 6 times 7 is 42. Woe betide the boy who has memorized his tables or has found arithmetical short cuts.

Pictorial illustrations, often empty of thought, are also demanded beyond primary grades. Projects proliferate, vaguely described and without apparent instructional purpose. Boys, less inclined to voluntary “enrichment” in the first place, lag further. Formal teaching of skills and concepts declines or disappears. Instruction in high schools becomes more inductive and less deductive, but boys do better in logical steps than in intuitive exploration.

Overall, current educational fashions appeal most to compliant middle or upper class girls who enjoy the learning processes and are happy to ask for help from their teachers and parents, and least to those boys who are primarily task-oriented, unwilling to go beyond the expected minimum, and resistant to supervision.

There are no easy solutions - the facts are the facts - in society and within schools. Encouraging the separation of children into separate boys’ and girls’ schools is an obvious but not very helpful solution. There were good reasons why most schools, including independent schools, became mixed. At a time when jobs, at work and in the home, are becoming less divided by gender, a common socialization is even more necessary to develop mutual respect and understanding.

Equally important, the cultural and genetic differences between the sexes are generalized averages - some girls are more aggressive than some boys, some boys love the process of learning, and some girls quickly develop an aptitude for manipulation of objects in three dimensions while some boys are clueless. Separation aggravates the isolation of those children who partially or not at all fit their gender’s template.

However, there are some actions that would help boys learn.

Promotion to principal should be based on published, objective criteria. Those criteria should be based more on student achievement and less on belief in fashionable pedagogy, more on the promotion of discipline and order and less on the toleration of disturbing behaviour, and more on accurate and fair student evaluation and less on assuring parents that no student fails. School and program choice should permit parents to choose more direct and objective-focused instruction, beginning in grade one, if they believe it suits their child.

Alternative high school programs should be developed to provide the teaching of important, basic academic skills combined with paid, cooperative work in the kinds of employment to which high school graduates could reasonably aspire. Alternatives to current teacher training programs should be developed. Young men, notably those with intelligent and questioning minds, are unwilling to spend a year or more on activities lacking intrinsic utility other than to obtain a paper qualification. For example, teaching in a school could be combined with a program dealing with the actual problems they experience and an understanding of the different ways young people learn.

Mainly-objective, external exit tests should be given at least as much weight as teachers’ grades at the end of high school. Pleasant girls are inevitably better regarded by male and female teachers than awkward and belligerent boys – even if the boys are actually learning more.

In short, the pendulum in schools has swung too far to the attitudinal - emphasizing cooperation over competition, docility and obedience over independence and scepticism, effort over achievement, and conciliation over order. Doubtless the emphases were too far in the other direction in 1950, but now is the time for some adjustment.