

Are Schools Shortchanging Boys?

Reality Check On the New Gender Gap

Bernie Froese-Germain, CTF Researcher

In recent years the media has been replete with stories on the “new gender gap” in education – highlighted by results from provincial, national and international assessments – in which boys appear to be falling behind academically. To call this phenomenon “new” may be a misnomer as it first emerged in the early 1990s. Not only are boys trailing girls in literacy (reading and writing) but girls are “catching up” in math and science, areas in which boys have traditionally done better than girls.

More questions than answers

In addition to test scores, other indicators of a widening gap include higher dropout rates among boys and the fact that young males represent a declining proportion of university enrollments. In Quebec, for example, the number of women in post-secondary programs increased to 57% of the student body in 1992, from a mere 20% in 1960 – although women are still under-represented at the doctorate level. Boys are also much more likely to be enrolled in special education classes. Some gender gap indicators – such as girls consistently getting better grades and higher class ranks, with boys tending to outscore girls on high-stakes competitive exams like the SAT – are not so new.

All of this raises a host of questions:

- How much of this phenomenon is actually part of a consistent trend observed over the years, now being drawn into sharp relief by the stronger achievements of girls?
- Have all girls become “super-achievers”? How are girls from diverse racial, ethnic and cultural backgrounds faring? Girls from low-income families? Girls whose first language is neither English nor French?
- Conversely, are there sub-groups of boys who are worse off than others?
- How substantial have girls’ academic gains been?

- Aside from “high status” areas of the curriculum like literacy, math and science, where the focus has been, how have girls and boys fared in other subject areas?
- Are there gender differences with regard to interest level or the perception of one’s abilities in a given subject?

There is also the issue of the class- and race-based achievement gaps and how they compare with the gender gap. Given what is known about socio-economic status and parents’ educational level as predictors of student achievement, it is important to consider the interplay of social class and other factors such as race with gender. Sadker informs us that in the U.S., while white men and women attend university in roughly equal numbers, “the disparity between males and females in college enrollment is shaped in large part by the serious dearth of males of colour in postsecondary programs.” (p. 240)

‘What about the boys?’ has become the rallying cry of critics who believe schools are failing young males.

‘What about the boys?’

‘What about the boys?’ has become the rallying cry of critics who believe schools are failing young males. Some feel that boys have been neglected as a result of earlier efforts to bridge the gender gap for girls, that gains for girls have been made on boys’ backs. “Feminization” of the curriculum, school culture and teaching profession, so the argument goes, has worked against the interests and strengths of boys.

There’s been no shortage of hyperbole. A recent cover story in *Business Week* referred to the new breed of “alpha femmes”, noting that “it seems as if girls have built a kind of scholastic Roman Empire alongside boys’

languishing Greece.” (Conlin, 2003) Some have even taken to describing it as “a war on boys”, inflammatory rhetoric that amounts to a critique of feminism in these staunchly neo-conservative political times.

In many media reports there is an assumption that gender equity for girls is a fait accompli, and now it's time to turn our attention to the boys. David Sadker (2002) in the School of Education at American University in Washington dispels this notion by showing that it is not borne out by the experience of girls in school. As he puts it, the reality is that “neither boys nor girls ‘rule in school’ ” (p. 240). He cites research findings in several areas – achievement, academic enrolment, academic interactions, special programs (gifted programs, special education), and athletics – to support his claim that, while there is evidence that educational progress has been made for each gender, many challenges also remain for each gender. When students themselves are asked to weigh in on the gender issue, their comments are revealing. Sadker, reporting on a couple of U.S. studies, states that both boys and girls “had more positive things to say about being a boy than being a girl.” (p. 240)

Predictably, the latest release of standardized test results re-ignites the new gender gap issue. Results from the 2002 School Achievement Indicators Program (SAIP) writing test continue to fuel this intense debate. Canada's interprovincial education body, the CMEC, which administers the SAIP, has expressed concerns that women will eventually leap ahead of men in the education, jobs and earnings race (Horsey, 2003). Conlin cites similar concerns about school failure for boys leading to subsequent problems in the family and the workplace; the future of our economy hangs in the balance – or so some would have us believe.

Gender segregation and other responses

Test results – notwithstanding the documented problems with standardized testing – and other indicators of a gender gap are being advanced to support various educational changes. There are the usual calls for more male teachers in schools (and male role models in boys' lives generally), more books that boys can relate to, and “active learning” strategies in

the classroom. Other proposed solutions include school choice, same-sex schools and classrooms (experiments with gender segregation are popping up here and there in schools across Canada), a return to traditional values and a more teacher-centred approach to instruction for boys, increased testing, and using computers to sustain boys' interest. Also, injecting a healthy dose of competition into one's instructional approach apparently suits boys' learning style (Seeman, 2000).

The reality is that “neither boys nor girls ‘rule in school’.” While progress has been made for both boys and girls, many challenges also remain for each gender.

Some of these proposals are questionable from a research standpoint. The intense focus on standardized testing and school rankings in the name of accountability begs the question of whether “teaching to the test” and other pedagogically suspect practices may become the methods of choice for artificially boosting boys' test scores. On gender segregation in schools (a throwback to a previous era – imagine intentionally re-segregating schools by race?), Bouchard and her colleagues at Laval University who have studied gender equity issues make this observation:

It is difficult to generalize the findings of research comparing co-ed and single-sex schools and classes While the research does sometimes show positive results among girls, in certain conditions and for certain aspects, it does not show the same results for boys – and in some cases, quite the opposite. It would appear that depriving a group of its strongest elements further weakens the weakest elements. (p. 60)

Put another way, integrated or co-ed education is critical to preparing students to live and work together in a pluralistic democratic society.

Considering broader influences

Teachers and schools clearly have a responsibility to address the needs and abilities of both boys and girls – public education has no less a mandate than to provide a quality education to all children.

Unfortunately, the education system has been given the near impossible task of carrying out this mandate without adequate resources and other support. Underfunding, large class sizes, a shortage of programs for special needs and ESL students, overloaded teachers and the mechanization of teaching and learning through standards-driven reform only detract from the learning context for everyone, male or female. Starving schools of funding and resources – text books, library books and other materials, teacher librarians – will do nothing to foster literacy among boys or girls (how many of us can claim that our local school has a well-stocked library, open on more than a part-time basis, and staffed by a knowledgeable teacher librarian?).

A study by BCTF researcher Anny Schaefer – entitled *G.I. Joe Meets Barbie, Software Engineer Meets Caregiver* – challenges the simplistic claim that schools are failing boys, raising larger questions about the socialization of boys in our present day culture. Schaefer argues that understanding the powerful and complex social and cultural influences that shape boys' (and girls') behaviour in our society is key to advancing this debate beyond pitting the needs of males against those of females. The latter approach is harmful and ignores the fact that, as noted earlier, there is considerable diversity *within* each gender, that boys and girls are not homogenous groups when it comes to learning. It also neglects the fact that there are pedagogical approaches of benefit to both sexes.

As Schaefer emphasizes, there is a broader societal context, including the home environment, the media, etc., to consider. Boys are generally socialized to believe it's not cool to read or to be seen as being smart ("cool to be stupid" as one observer put it). One only has to look at the streak of anti-intellectualism that pervades the popular media. Clarke (2003) suggests that boys are being "anaesthetized by a 'boy culture' that celebrates bravado, lassitude, and stupidity." Similarly, Kimmel (as cited in Bouchard et al.) maintains that, "

'It is not the school experience that 'feminizes' boys, but rather the ideology of traditional masculinity that keeps boys from wanting to succeed' " (p. 10). Interestingly, this is supported by some intriguing Canadian research on the school achievement gap between boys and girls which points to a relationship between the degree of conformity to rigid sexual stereotypes and academic success (Bouchard et al.). All of these things need to be carefully factored into any analysis of the gender gap.

Gender equity writ large

It is more than a little instructive to put concerns about the education of boys in industrialized countries into the larger international context. Most of the staggering 130 million children worldwide who are not in school are girls and young women, and the gap is widening – leading Bouchard et al. to claim that "globally it is difficult to argue ... that males are discriminated against in education" (p. 5).

Bouchard et al. also caution about the need in this debate to differentiate between academic achievement, school success, and social success. While some educational outcomes seem to favour females, this has not (yet) translated into major advances beyond the classroom (Riordan, 2003). The larger equity picture continues to be characterized by an imbalance of social, economic and political power favouring men. Significant gains have been made with respect to economic equality for women, however the income gap between men and women remains stubbornly wide. Women are under-represented in areas such as the skilled trades, senior management, the engineering field, and full professorships in academia as well as institutional leadership positions at the post-secondary level (presidents, chief academic officers, etc.). Women also comprise the vast majority of classroom teachers, but are under-represented in educational leadership roles as school-based administrators and decision-makers. Unlike men, women are clustered in a handful of occupations like nursing, teaching and social work as well as clerical jobs.

Understanding the powerful and complex social and cultural influences that shape boys' (and girls') behaviour is key to advancing this debate beyond pitting the needs of males against those of females.

Landsberg reminds us that:

...the patriarchy is safe, thank you very much. Men have little to fear from women, but a great deal to fear from globalization, economic restructuring, downsizing and the loss of well-paid industrialized jobs, melting away to the subsistence-wage world with a giant sucking sound.

Clearly, things are never quite as simple as they appear on the surface. Bouchard et al. conclude from their research that the convergence of diverse factors – socio-historical and political – have led to a “realization that more girls than boys were persevering in their studies and achieving good marks in the school system in Quebec and elsewhere” (p. 89). The specific factors cited are:

- reports on high school drop-out rates in the early 1990s;
- the publication of gendered data that provided a basis for comparison using indicators;
- the globalization of the economy and the emergence of a feeling of insecurity among men;
- the employment crisis affecting young men in particular over the same period;
- educational reform and policies on performance and accountability;
- the intergenerational mobilization in modest and middle-income families to promote their girls – starting with the mobilization of girls themselves;
- the success of the women’s movement, which made education a means of accessing and producing the knowledge that would free girls from traditional social roles. (p. 89)

Indeed, an issue as multi-layered as the educational gender gap must not be shortchanged by simplistic flawed analyses (blaming schools and/or the women’s movement for example) and equally simplistic solutions that will benefit neither boys nor girls, and may exacerbate the problems they’re trying to solve. Sadker describes the success of the feminist backlash as a potent reminder of “the power of political ideologues to set the agenda for education.” (p. 240) This is not

exactly what progressive educators have in mind when they talk about putting equity back on the agenda.

Phyllis Benedict, former president of the Elementary Teachers’ Federation of Ontario, sums it up well. In a presentation on the feminization of education at a CTF national conference on teacher demographics, she stressed the need to work towards the goal of making schools more equitable for all children. On the issue of whether schools are shortchanging boys, she remarked that “it is unlikely.” Echoing Sadker’s observations, she stated that “children may not be receiving the best education possible, but there is not a ‘war against boys.’ We need to focus our attention on ensuring all children are allowed to excel in the ways that are right and appropriate for them.”

Over the coming year, CTF will be examining this and other gender equity issues in education – specifically, the growing feminization of the Canadian teaching profession and the status of women in educational leadership roles. ■

References

- Benedict, P. (2000). *Feminization of Education*. Paper presented at the Canadian Teachers’ Federation “Demographics of the Teaching Profession” Conference, Ottawa, October 2000.
- Bouchard, P., Boily, I., & Proulx, M.-C. (2003). *School Success by Gender: A Catalyst for the Masculinist Discourse*. Ottawa: Status of Women Canada.
- Clarke, P. (2003, Winter). “So, Where Are The Boys?” *Equality News* (MTS), 11(2), p. 17.
- Conlin, M. (2003, May 26). “The New Gender Gap.” *Business Week Online*.
- Horsey, J. (2003, May 29). “Boys Lagging in Classroom Could Spell Significant Education Changes in Future.” *Canadian Press Newswire*.
- Landsberg, M. (2003, June 7). “Problem Isn’t Little Boys, It’s Little Minds.” *Toronto Star*.
- Riordan, C. (2003, Winter). “The Silent Gender Gap.” *Equality News* (MTS), 11(2), pp. 18-19.
- Sadker, D. (2002, Nov.). “An Educator’s Primer On the Gender War.” *Phi Delta Kappan*, 84(3), pp. 235-240, 244.
- Schaefer, A. C. (2000). *G.I. Joe Meets Barbie, Software Engineer Meets Caregiver: Males and Females in B.C.’s Public Schools and Beyond*. BCTF Research Report. Vancouver: B.C. Teachers’ Federation.
- Seeman, N. (2000, Feb. 22). “Education System Failing Boys: Experts.” *National Post*.