

# Perspectives

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## Educating Boys: Tempering Rhetoric with Research

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For a hot button education issue (and there are more than a few to choose from), look no further than the gender gap in schools. Every release of major test results it seems is accompanied by much hand-wringing over the fact that boys are falling further behind girls in academic achievement and other areas (Froese-Germain, 2004; see also Fall 2003 issue of *PD Perspectives*).



To assist us in walking through this debate, Marcus Weaver-Hightower's thorough review of the literature on boys' education in a recent issue of the American Educational Research Association's *Review of Educational Research* is in my opinion very useful.

He begins by dividing the research into four overlapping categories (see p. 474):

- popular-rhetorical literature – which “generally argues that boys are disadvantaged or harmed by schools and society and that schools are ‘feminized’ ” (more on this later);
- theoretically-oriented literature – which is “concerned with cataloguing types of masculinity and their origins and effects; [and] examines how schools and society produce and modify masculinities”;
- practice-oriented literature – which, as the heading suggests, is “concerned with developing and evaluating school- and classroom-based interventions in boys’ academic and social problems”; and
- feminist/pro-feminist responses – these are described as critiques of the “boy turn, moral panics over boys, notions of ‘underachievement,’ and popular-rhetorical backlashes”; these critiques also tend to have a social justice focus and can usefully provide important checks and balances to the discussion (I’ll also return to this later).

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According to Weaver-Hightower, there are various reasons for the “boy turn” in gender and education research and policy, dating back to about the mid-1990s (on this, see also the work of Bouchard et al., 2003). These include:

- media panic over boys and the emergence of popular and rhetorical books and articles (readers may be familiar with such titles as Christina Hoff Sommers’ 2000 book, *The War Against Boys*);
- interestingly, earlier feminist examinations of gender roles and the use of narrow initial indicators of gender equity (test scores, enrollment data);
- economic and work force changes, and the “worldwide ‘crisis of masculinity’ that drives, and is driven by, the moral panic over the schooling and rearing of boys.” (Weaver-Hightower, p. 478);
- explicit feminist backlash politics; and
- pervasive New Right and neo-liberal education reforms.

Making explicit the intersection between gender equity issues and the accountability and privatization agendas in education,

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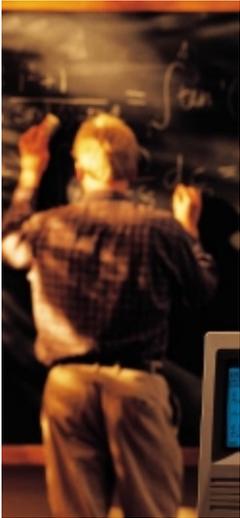
Weaver-Hightower explains that the “structure of [the New Right’s] educational reforms, particularly the interconnected processes of privatization and accountability, have accomplished more than its antifeminist rhetoric ever could.” (p. 476)

This is particularly evident in places like England with its system of public school choice and the creation of a competitive education market. The intense focus on high-stakes testing combined with the ranking and reporting of test scores in “league table” format – to facilitate consumer choice – has pressured administrators and teachers to “overvalue test performance lest they lose students and, consequently, their schools or their jobs.” (Weaver-Hightower, p. 477) This has resulted in what Weaver-Hightower describes as “educational triage”, with both gender and racial consequences. On the gender implications, he cautions that:

Because boys outnumber girls in the lower test score ranks, funding will go disproportionately to them; moreover, advances in equalizing the curriculum, particularly in language arts, may be rolled back to better suit boys .... educational reforms championed by the New Right have created a “structural backlash” ... that operates to challenge feminist victories without having to engage in explicit antifeminist rhetoric. (p. 477)

In the current climate of market-driven and standardized education reform, educators harbour no illusions that advancing gender and other forms of equity in education poses significant challenges (on this, see Larkin & Staton, 2001). (Bourne and Reynolds offer several recommendations for making classrooms and schools sites for moving forward on gender equity.)

Finally, Weaver-Hightower sorts through the research on boys in education, leaving no doubt that the issues are enormously complex and multi-faceted. His discussion of the formation of masculine identity and the notion of multiple masculinities competing with each other for dominance is of particular interest.



In this struggle, visible minority, working class, and gay men often lose out to the hegemonic or dominant male group. He also suggests that one of the weaknesses in the research is a lack of awareness about the dualistic focus of this work (e.g., boy/girl, masculine/feminine, heterosexual/homosexual), effectively ignoring transgender, multiple sexuality and other issues. As with the gay rights and other social and political movements, the struggles and concerns of transgendered people are showing signs of picking up momentum as a political force (Armstrong, 2004).

Feminist critiques of the “boy turn” include highlighting the serious shortcomings of using large-scale standardized testing as a measure of student learning and, specifically, of gender equity. Alternative indicators of gender equity paint a more nuanced accurate picture in which neither boys nor girls “rule in school” as it were (Sadker, 2002, p. 240).

Other feminist critiques include looking more carefully at “which boys”, rather than mistakenly assuming “all boys” are in trouble. In the same way that not all girls are excelling, not all boys are doing poorly. Disaggregating boys by race, social class, geography (urban vs. rural) and other factors reveals the differences among them as a group. Also, as noted, there’s the danger that policy and research as well as funding could focus on boys at girls’ expense. For example, on the assumption that the curriculum has become too “feminized” and that this is hurting boys, Weaver-Hightower notes that,

as some argue ... the “feminine” nature of the English curriculum is debatable at best, for many of the authors covered in contemporary schooling ... are still from the “dead White men” camp, and many of the themes are masculine or sexist and the protagonists male. If we accept

this argument, then *increasing* the “fit” of the curriculum to boys’ concerns will only exacerbate existing inequality. (pp. 486-487)

However, he does hasten to emphasize the need to

avoid a kind of “zero-sum” thinking in this matter, for just as feminist scholars argue that girls have not benefited in education at the expense of boys ..., attending to boys’ concerns does not *necessarily* mean taking from girls. In fact, some practice-oriented researchers have been careful to state their aims explicitly to avoid harming the achievement of girls. (p. 487)

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Indeed, as Bodkin informs us, “promising strategies for raising the achievement of boys are, in fact, strong and effective practices for all students.” (as cited in Bourne & Reynolds, p. 2)

Feminist analyses of the boy turn also address concerns associated with proposed solutions such as single-sex schooling, which appears to be growing in popularity. Weaver-Hightower notes that such proposals can “fall short because all-boys arrangements can be breeding grounds for virulent sexism ... or can become dumping grounds for boys with discipline problems” (p. 487). Riordan describes the issue of single-sex schooling as being “overpoliticized and underresearched” (as cited in Viadero, 2002), with the few credible studies being mixed. Despite the lack of good evidence, the U.S. federal

Department of Education is proposing legislative changes – to Title IX civil rights protections prohibiting sex discrimination in publicly funded schools – to encourage same-sex classes and schools.

The “feminization” of the teaching profession is all too often implicated in boys’ lagging academic performance. The growing number of women among the ranks of elementary and secondary teachers, while not a new trend, has been accentuated by a steady decline in the number of men (who are either leaving classrooms or not choosing teaching as a profession, especially at the elementary level). All of this is further complicated by an imbalance favouring men in educational leadership positions, as well as impending teacher shortages and the related issues of recruitment and retention.

Increasing the diversity of the teaching profession – including the proportion of males – to better reflect student and community diversity is undeniably an important equity goal. Robertson (2003) however dispels the notion that simply putting more men into classrooms will magically improve boys’ learning, or that having fewer men is detrimental to the education of boys. As always there are complex issues and concerns embedded here, including the need to challenge restrictive, unhealthy notions of masculinity. Delany for example (as cited in Davis, 2003, p. 26) contends that:

...expecting male teachers to come into schools as role models has a problem: what if they don’t have the professional development, skills and training to engage boys in issues of gender, and reinforce undesirable notions of dominant masculinity?

Mclean’s analysis of the men’s movement (also as cited in Davis, pp. 26-27) and its implications for boys’ learning and development is also relevant to this discussion. He notes that:

“boys are ... deeply affected by the collective pressures of masculine culture but left to themselves they are unlikely to identify it as the source of their problems... Unfortunately, much of the current men’s movement has responded to this situation by identifying women as the problem, rather than joining with women in challenging the gender system which impacts so negatively on both boys and girls in different ways.”

While men can, and must, play a critically important role in boys’ lives, Mclean emphasizes that:

“This assertion is not based on some belief that ‘boys need men’ in ways that women cannot fulfil.

Rather, I believe it is unrealistic to expect boys to challenge the dominant culture of masculinity, if adult men are not challenging it themselves. This has nothing to do with ‘role modelling’.” (as cited in Davis, p. 27)

Catherine Davis, Women’s Officer with the Australian Education Union, argues that good teaching has less to do with gender than with the quality, commitment and ability of teachers. Quoting from the AEU’s 1997 submission to the National Inquiry into the Status of Teachers, she states that:

“the profession should be attempting to attract the best and most suitable people into the profession, regardless of gender. If teachers mirror more accurately the society in which they operate – in

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terms of gender, class and ethnicity – so much the better. But teaching ability must remain the primary consideration.” (Davis, 2003, p. 27)

As part of a province-wide campaign to encourage more men to enter the teaching profession, the Ontario College of Teachers conducted focus groups last spring. In the wake of this, Ontario Minister of Education Gerard Kennedy publicly stated that boys’ academic problems are linked to the growing shortage of male teachers (Leslie, 2004). However, Jane Gaskell, Dean of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto (OISE/UT) points out that the research on this is unclear, and believes the “gender gap is more of a labour issue than an education problem”, noting that “ ‘it’s telling us that jobs are still gender differentiated’ ” (Sokoloff, 2004).

Drawing on the Australian context Davis reinforces this idea, clarifying that:

...the profound problems facing the profession today – the failure to attract the next generation of teachers, the impending retirement of the majority of the teaching workforce, plus low salaries and heavier, more complex workloads – have little to do with the predominance of women. The solution to the critical issues facing school teaching is an industrial one. It is about significantly increasing teacher salaries, recognising and remunerating valued classroom experience, and properly supporting teachers inside and outside the classroom, during and after initial training. (p. 24)

She adds that the “feminization” label as applied to the teaching profession can be misleading. For example, the under-representation of women in senior management results for obvious reasons in education systems continuing to be controlled largely by men. Also, as

teaching has been historically viewed as “women’s work” which continues to be devalued in our society, the “feminization” label is convenient for those who want to pin the profession’s problems on women (Davis, p. 26).

In his examination of the research base on boys’ education, Weaver-Hightower laments the disconnect between the theory and practice traditions, a familiar yet valid refrain – teachers and teacher educators should and could make better use of the conceptual knowledge base, and educational researchers should be informing their work with classroom and school practice and experience. This speaks to the potential contribution of approaches such as participatory action research in marrying these traditions. The need to encourage greater use of teacher-researchers is something teachers’ organizations have recognized and are actively supporting in their work with classroom teachers.

Among the other directions for future research, Weaver-Hightower challenges educational researchers, policymakers and others to conceive of gender in its “relational interdependencies” – that is, to formulate “curriculum, pedagogy, structures, and research programs that understand and explore gender (male, female, and ‘other’) in complexly interrelated ways and that avoid ‘girls then, boys now.’ ” (pp. 489-490)

Not only is this useful advice in moderating some of the strong rhetoric in this debate, it is entirely consistent with the long-standing mandate of public education to make schooling more inclusive and equitable for boys, girls and *all* children.

(References on page 10.)

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- demanding the full and immediate implementation of the Dakar and Millennium Development objectives of education for all women and girls
- establishing affirmative action measures
- empowering women through union leadership training programmes
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