

EDUCATING BOYS: TEMPERING RHETORIC WITH RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT. In the context of boys' declining academic achievement in schools in relation to girls, this article highlights some critical issues arising from the debate on boys' education. The emphasis is on the contribution of feminist analysis and other perspectives to broaden and contextualize the debate. This includes, for example, the need to carefully consider *which* boys aren't doing well rather than assuming all boys are having difficulty. Links between the "boy turn" and choice in educational markets, single-sex schooling, multiple sexualities, and the "feminization" of the teaching profession are also discussed. Not surprisingly, the issues are complex and multi-faceted and hence not well served by a "girls then, boys now" approach to conceptualizing policy, practice and research.

ÉDUCATION PRIMAIRE DES GARÇONS : TEMPÉRER LA RHÉTORIQUE PAR LA RECHERCHE

RÉSUMÉ. Dans le contexte du repli des résultats scolaires des garçons par rapport aux filles, l'article met en évidence certaines des principales questions autour desquelles le débat sur l'éducation des garçons s'articule. L'accent est mis sur la contribution de l'analyse féministe et sur d'autres points de vue afin d'élargir le débat et de le mettre en contexte. On aborde par exemple la nécessité de déterminer précisément *quels* garçons n'affichent pas de bons résultats au lieu d'assumer que tous les garçons ont des difficultés. Les liens entre le « revirement en faveur des garçons » et le choix des marchés d'éducation, les écoles non mixtes, les sexualités multiples ainsi que la féminisation de la profession de l'enseignement font aussi l'objet de la réflexion. Sans surprise, les questions sont complexes et ne sont donc pas réglées efficacement par l'approche « les filles alors, les garçons maintenant » qui sert à conceptualiser la politique, les pratiques et la recherche.

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 in Canada among other western countries is accompanied by

much hand-wringing over the fact that boys are falling further behind girls in academic achievement and other areas such as university enrolment and graduation rates (Froese-Germain, 2004). Canadian results from the 2000 and 2003 OECD PISA studies (Programme for International Student Assessment) found girls doing significantly better than boys in reading, with a much smaller gap in math achievement favouring boys – results consistent with findings from the Canadian School Achievement Indicators Program (SAIP) as well as other studies (Statistics Canada, 2004).

To assist in walking through this debate, Marcus Weaver-Hightower's thorough review of the literature on boys' education in the American Educational Research Association's *Review of Educational Research* is 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).

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, enrolment 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 – Bouchard et al. discuss the education performance gap between boys and girls in the context of Quebec as well as the rest of Canada and other industrialized societies, and how it has contributed to the feminist backlash, fueling what they describe as the “masculinist discourse”; this discourse is spread by the media and certain

men's associations and underpinned by "an ideology that aims to challenge the gains made by women and discredit feminis." (p. viii); they note that, since about the mid-1990s,

we begin to see in the media discourses that cast suspicion on female elementary teachers, single mothers, and feminists, blaming them for the problems experienced by boys. A key element seen in this period is the emergence of a victimization theme, in which boys are portrayed as being discriminated against by an education system that has become a feminist environment. More [print media] space is given to experts who support this thesis, including some from other countries. Co-educational schools are challenged and, toward the end of the decade, we see systematic links established to the male suicide rate, boys on Ritalin, fathers gaining custody of their children, the suffering of male abusers, the loss of male identity, false allegations of violence against men, etc. (Bouchard et al., p. 2)

Pervasive New Right and neo-liberal education reforms going back nearly three decades have also contributed to the focus on boys' education. Making explicit the intersection between gender equity issues and the accountability and privatization agendas in education, 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" (the use of limited school resources for the questionable practice of boosting student test scores), 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 reforms, educators should harbour no illusions that advancing gender and other forms of equity in education poses significant challenges (on this, see Larkin & Staton, 2001). (Bourne & Reynolds [2004], 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. On the topic of masculinity, he states that “there is no single, universal, ahistorical version of masculinity to which all cultures subscribe or aspire. Rather, ideals of masculinity are historically and contextually dependent, making a nearly infinite number of masculinities possible” (p. 479). Masculinity is indeed fluid and changeable.

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 picture in which neither boys nor girls “rule in school,” as Sadker (2002, p. 240) describes it. Stating that “both boys and girls confront different school challenges, and they respond in different ways” (p. 238), Sadker highlights some of the progress made – and the challenges remaining – for both genders in a number of areas, including grades and tests, academic enrolment, special programs (such as special education and gifted programs), health and athletics, and classroom and school interactions between teachers and students.

A considerable amount of research has been done on the latter issue. Results from a meta-analysis of teacher-initiated interactions with students found small to moderate sex differences in these interactions. Jones and Dindia (2004), the study’s authors, report that the results “suggest that teachers initiate more overall interactions and more negative interactions, but not more positive interactions, with male students than with female students” (p. 443). They also emphasize that these gender differences “are moderated by additional factors,” including the gender and race of teachers and the behaviours of students.

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 data on boys by race, social class, geography (urban vs. rural), and other

factors reveals the differences among them as a group. According to Mills et al. (2004), while

there is still a dominant perception that all boys are under-performing at school in relation to all girls... The need to nuance performance data by taking into account issues of class, ethnicity and race to consider which boys and which girls are being advantaged or disadvantaged within the current system of schooling are now widely accepted. (p. 361)

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)

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, 2004, 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. This includes single-sex classes in regular co-educational schools as well as same-sex schools (the former being the more prevalent response in the U.K. and Australia; Canada is also reported to be experimenting with single-sex classes). 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 "over-politicized 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), 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? (p. 26)

Mclean's analysis of the men's movement (also as cited in Davis) and its implications for boys' learning and development is also relevant to this discussion, echoing Bouchard et al. 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. (pp. 26-27)

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)

Mills et al. (2004) deconstruct many of the assumptions underlying the call for more male teachers, particularly the "male role model for boys" argument, which questions women's ability to teach boys and potentially all of the work that women teachers perform in schools.

Catherine Davis, Women's Officer with the Australian Education Union (AEU), 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 terms of gender, class and ethnicity – so much the better. But teaching ability must remain the primary consideration. (Davis, 2003, p. 27)

This is also the opinion of the majority of teachers and the general public in Ontario, according to a poll conducted by COMPAS Inc. for the Ontario College of Teachers (OCT) in July 2004. Those surveyed unanimously agreed that students should be taught by the best teacher irrespective of gender. Smaller majorities of teachers and the public also reported that the OCT should increase recruiting efforts directed at men (Canadian Teachers' Federation, 2005).

As part of a research study examining the growing teacher gender gap in Ontario schools, the Ontario College of Teachers in collaboration with several education partners conducted a series of focus groups in spring 2004. In the wake of this, former 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).

The results of the study were released in a highly publicized report in the fall of 2004 (*Narrowing the gender gap: Attracting men to teaching*). The report identifies major barriers to men entering the profession and recommends a government-sponsored marketing campaign to recruit more men to teaching careers, especially at the primary/junior levels (grades K-6), where only 1 in 10 Ontario teachers under the age of 30 is male. (Nationally, the male proportion of full-time teachers dropped from 41% to 35% during the 1990s.) Low initial salaries were cited by male high school students, male teachers, and senior administrators and education stakeholders as among the barriers faced by men. Other barriers include negative stereotypes about teaching and fears of allegations of sexual misconduct. Significantly, the study also highlighted the need for more empirical data to determine if there is a correlation between the achievement of boys and the presence of male teachers. It should be emphasized that a genuine concern with increasing teacher diversity would include but extend beyond gender to encompass race and ethnicity, Aboriginal identity, persons with disabilities, sexual orientation, etc.

Drawing on the Australian context, one of a number of western countries experiencing an under-representation of men in teaching, Davis reinforces the idea of the gender gap as a labour (i.e., teacher welfare, professionalism) issue, 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 their critique of an Australian policy document on the recruitment and retention of male teachers in the state of Queensland (the first such policy initiative in the country), Mills et al. argue that the construction of teaching as a “feminized” occupation has both

served to devalue the status of teaching by constructing such work for women as being a “natural” feminine activity.... [and] worked to police the entry of men into certain areas of the profession – namely the early years of schooling, and other supposedly “feminine” areas of the curriculum – and to construct men who do become such teachers as “abnormal,” which is often read as being gay or a (potential) paedophile. (p. 365)

Unfortunately, as the authors note, some of the strategies employed by men to overcome these pressures have actually “worked to reinforce the hegemony of traditional forms of masculine performance” (Mills et al., 2004, p. 365). Not only does this serve to “further marginalize men who perform non-traditional masculinities” (p. 366), it ultimately works against the possibilities for what Mills et al. describe as a “re-culturing of the school environment” (p. 365) allowing men to confidently exhibit these new masculinities.

One of the central issues in the debate over increasing the number of male teachers in schools, particularly as a means of providing boys with male role models, is the failure – and hence the need – “to address issues of hierarchical gendered power relationships” (p. 365). Men continue for the most part to occupy a privileged position within the existing gender order. There are some valuable lessons here for Canadian policymakers.

In his overall 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, *all* children.

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