Gender Gap in Education – Issues and Strategies

Snapshot of the Literature

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Many Western societies today are struggling to understand the reasons behind an alleged downturn in boys’ educational performance and seek to develop appropriate responses. This literature review will summarize the most common debates in the area of study, and will offer some considerations about possible future practical school-based strategies.

A wide number of studies over the last two decades tried to pinpoint the reasons for the growing gender gap. There are currently four broad schools of thought in educational research literature: (1) popular-rhetorical, (2) theoretically-oriented, (3) practice-oriented, and (4) feminist (Weaver-Hightower 2003).

Popular-rhetorical literature
This type of literature argues that boys are at a considerable disadvantage even when socio-economic ranking and race are taken into account. It focuses on re-masculinising education in order to cater to boys who are seen as “victims of single-parent families, female-dominated primary schooling, and feminism which has enabled girls’ successes” (Skelton 2001, p.6). Also included are studies that acknowledge a natural degree of difference between boys and girls. Generally, strategies suggested by popular-rhetorical literature focus on ‘boy-friendly’ approaches (i.e., expansion of sports programs, increased opportunities for competition, etc.).

Theoretically-oriented literature
Acknowledging that there is no single notion of ‘masculinity’, this perspective seeks to determine society’s role in reproducing established labels, and to eventually challenge this practice (Weaver-Hightower 2003). Most theoretically-oriented studies agree that the solution to boys’ underachievement lies in the long-term objective to challenge the stereotypical male image. They caution against enforcing ‘quick-fix’ solutions or ‘boy-friendly’[curricula]”, as these are more likely to inadvertently reinforce hegemonic notions of masculinity without properly investigating the kinds of differences in which boys are actually interested (Martino et al., 2004). In broad terms, interventions must be based on collaboration rather than competition (i.e., group work), fostering a strong ethic amongst both sexes, and giving students the opportunity to critically reflect on their own needs (Warrington, 2000).

Practice-oriented literature
Practice-oriented literature (i.e., case studies, policy documents, etc.) concentrates on developing strategies and interventions as well as new tools for testing and evaluation. Principally, this type of research “seeks to ameliorate the academic and social problems of boys at the classroom

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level” (Weaver-Hightower, 2003). These studies are primarily concerned with finding short-term solutions that would benefit boys in the context of the particular school in question.

Feminist and pro-feminist literature responses

This last category of research stresses that by solely focusing on boys, educators begin to disregard the needs of girls, who on average, fare worse later in life (Weaver-Hightower, 2003). This perspective has shifted over the years to one which questions which of the boys are struggling, and argues that class, race, religion, and sexual orientation can play an important role in boys’ educational underachievement, rather than gender alone (Weaver-Hightower, 2003).

Literacy - Strategies

Although there appears to be no single solution for improving literacy performance, a number of classroom interventions aimed at improving boys’ engagement have already been carried out. Drawing on the theoretical discourses outlined above, the following are examples of some of these strategies.

Use of technology

Boys’ attitudes such as non-compliance, lack of interest, and disengagement have been linked to issues of self-esteem (Warrington et al., 2000). However, it was found that teachers who employed hands-on approaches and/or utilized technology also observed boys developing an increased interest in the activity. Technology can be used in various ways, such as in co-authoring and co-production of e-books/magazines/newspapers, or marketing and design of CD packages. Technology competence is common amongst boys, thus its use allows boys to demonstrate their skills in a meaningful and dynamic way (Alloway et al., 2002). Finally, producing a better product contributes to a positive presentation of the self, ultimately affecting boys’ confidence in an encouraging manner (Alloway et al., 2002).

Active learning and personal histories

Some schools found that boys became more engaged in literacy activities when given an opportunity to choose a topic related to their interests (Atkinson 2009; Gallagher 2009). Choosing a topic permitted boys to become active researchers, more vigorously involving them in their own learning experience (Alloway et al., 2002). Furthermore, inviting boys to share their findings with the rest of the class can help them become ‘experts’, thereby promoting confidence building (Alloway et al., 2002, see Appendix A).

A number of theoretically-oriented scholars said that the process of involving all students, and not just boys, in the selection of materials for the classroom may enhance their sense of ownership while giving the teacher an opportunity to discover in what youth are interested. This is particularly important for those boys who may not be fascinated by technology or topics connected to essentialist notions of masculinity (Watson, 2011). In such circumstances, the teacher must understand the nuances and complexities of individual students’ situated histories so that literary practices must be adjusted accordingly (Watson, 2011).
References:


Further Reading


APPENDIX A: Teacher recommendations for improving boys’ literacy outcomes

Figure 8.1: Teacher recommendations for improving boys’ literacy outcomes

- Expanding repertoires for engaging with cultures by focusing on:
  - The ‘real’ and everyday
  - Popular culture materials
  - Electronic technologies
  - Multimedia and multimodal work

- Expanding repertoires for relating as:
  - ‘Learners’ in literacy classrooms
  - ‘Class participants’ in literacy classrooms

- Expanding repertoires for (re)presenting the self by:
  - Reconfiguring classroom literacy as active and embodied
  - Capitalising on choice and personal experience
  - Focusing on boys’ sense of self

Research into gender differences in education has tended to focus on the poor performance of girls in science and maths, virtually ignoring the low achievement of boys in reading and writing. According to Cecilia Reynolds, from the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, it has long been recognized that girls did well in literacy and that boys did not, but there was no great concern about this because in the real world, boys were still going to get better jobs and salaries. However, a 2004 study by the Council of Ministers of Education, found that Canadian girls are outperforming boys. Keywords: divorce, education, gender, assortative mating. The decline and eventual reversal of the gender gap in education represents a dramatic reversal of a long-standing social gradient in the United States and other countries (OECD 2010). Much of the literature on the reversal focuses on its causes, pointing to the growing disadvantage of sons with less educated or absent fathers, girls better academic performance in school, and the growing returns to education for women (Buchmann and DiPrete 2006; Charles and Luoh 2003; DiPrete and Buchmann 2006; Goldin, Katz, and Kuziemko 2006). But the reversal of the gender gap in education also has potentially far-reaching consequences for marriage markets, family formation, and relationship outcomes.