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Canada: Our Time to Lead

Failing boys and the powder keg of sexual politics

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Compelling statistics show boys rank behind girls by nearly every measure of scholastic achievement, yet the phenomenon is as polarizing as it is puzzling. Part 1 of a six-part series.

In 1998, when stories about schools short-changing girls still played in the press, and research continued to chronicle the gender bias against females in the classroom, some of Canada's leading educational publishers began revising their standard science textbooks for Grades 7 through 10.

Several studies had faulted textbooks for pushing sexist stereotypes of Dick and Jane, driving girls away from certain subjects, science in particular. Mindful of that, publishers instructed their contributors to feature girls prominently in the revised editions.

“If you had a picture of a person doing something positive, winning a race, performing an experiment successfully, etc., [you had to] make sure it was of a girl,” said one of the consultants involved in the revisions. “If you had to have a picture of someone doing a bad thing – bullying, making a mistake, being unsure which course of action to take, etc. – the image was invariably of a boy.”

The consultant, who asked that his name be withheld to protect his employment, said the intentions were good but perhaps the pendulum swung too far. “The side effect was to show the boys that they are rarely winners and we expect less of them,” he said. “The unstated assumption was that boys did not need the same degree of encouragement.”

Just 12 years later, the assumption seems as dated as the strap. Boys have been recast as the underdogs of academics. It's a controversial shift – fuelling a complex battle of the sexes – but these days boys are the ones making news, for falling behind and flunking out, from the U.S. to [China](#), from the U.K. to the Philippines, from New Zealand to Canada.

Here, a hill of data suggests that boys, as a group, rank behind girls by nearly every measure of scholastic achievement. They earn lower grades overall in elementary school and high school. They trail in reading and writing, and 30 per cent of them land in the bottom quarter of standardized tests, compared with 19 per cent of girls. Boys are also more likely to be picked out for behavioural problems, more likely to repeat a grade and to drop out of school altogether.

While men and women are enrolling in university in record numbers, the proportion of women attending is significantly higher. Men make up just 40 per cent of university undergraduates, and they're much less likely than women to graduate from the college or degree program they start.

Yet the phenomenon can be as puzzling as it is polarizing. Some see it as proof of society's forgotten boys – that while diligent efforts went into helping girls learn, boys were disregarded, left to find their own way in a feminized education system.

“I've been accused of being a dinosaur and anti-feminist when I bring it up. But it's the elephant in the room – the classroom,” said Jon Bradley, a professor of education at McGill University in Montreal, where the dropout rate is as high as 60 per cent in some urban schools. “We've got all the data, and still we don't really want to admit there is a problem.”

Others, however, feel the current concerns over education statistics smack of smoke and myopia. They argue girls have always earned better grades and that it's the marketplace that's changed, making young men without good marks less competitive in a knowledge-based economy. They balk at the notion that boys now need special measures to get ahead.

After all, despite the giant strides women have made in higher education – outpacing men with their degrees and grade point averages – boys grow up to be men and, as *The Globe* documented in its series on Women in Power last week, it is still a man's world. Men run the vast majority of countries and companies, and even when women have the same level of education, men still bring home more bacon.

“It's hard to argue that boys are being short-changed. Even with the generation difference, it's very doubtful that today's girls will be ascending into positions of power and today's boys will be in a minority in business and politics,” said Paula Bourne, head of women's studies at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.

It's no mystery that talk of males in need can become a powder keg of sexual politics, said Paul Cappon, president and [CEO](#) of the Canadian Council on Learning. “We don't like to talk about it, because we think it's denigrating the achievements of females, but that's not the case,” he said. “You have to ask what is happening, and you have to ask why. It's a head-in-the-sand, politically correct view to say there's no problem with boys.”

Theories abound to explain the new gender gap in education – slower brain development, video games that zap away study time, peer pressure, a lack of male role models at school and at home, and sons parented differently than daughters.

Compelling insight comes from Statistics Canada's ambitious Youth In Transition Survey, which in 2000 began tracking 30,000 15-year-olds at 1,000 schools and 23,000 youths between the ages of 18 and 20. It finds that while overall marks, reading ability and study habits are the top three predictors of which teenager will go to university, parental expectations rank fourth.

Nearly 70 per cent of parents said they expected their 15-year-old daughters would complete a university degree. Yet only 60 per cent had the same expectation of their 15-year-old sons.

"I think too many of us accept the failure of boys, we say, 'Well, that's just the way boys are,' there's a social impulse in that direction, that even our expectations are lower," Dr. Cappon said. "We don't pay nearly enough attention to their needs and aspirations, take seriously their interests, and what motivates them, whether it's reading comics or science fiction. It isn't at all clear that schools have taken account of that."

In 2002, Toronto youth psychologist Fred Mathews organized the First National Conference on the Status of Male Children in Canada. It was the culmination of two decades of research showing the struggles of males, from the earliest days of childhood, are under-reported, understudied and ignored.

"We really don't know a lot about boys, we make a lot of assumptions about male children, but we don't know," said Dr. Mathews. "In the playground, we pick up girls who fall down and give them a hug; with a boy, we brush him off and send him on his way."

Dr. Mathews hoped to hold a boys conference every year, and to tackle the education question head-on. But he was unable to raise the money to hold another one.

Canada's youth survey found boys are more likely to say they feel disengaged with school, to spend less time studying or none at all, and to report that neither they nor their friends plan to go to university.

Dr. Cappon suspects the new gender gap in education could be a harbinger of social and economic upheaval if males drift to the fringes of productivity and women have to be both primary breadwinners and child-bearers.

Prof. Bourne argues that society adapts. Back when the first classes of women began graduating from Dalhousie, she says, people worried that women would stop getting married. Girls have always viewed a university degree as the ticket to higher earnings, she says, but only in recent decades are they "reaping the benefits" of their hard work. And only now, with the loss of manufacturing jobs, has boys' school performance become an issue.

She feels the story of boys struggling in school has been "overemphasized," when many boys are doing quite well. (Indeed, some 32 per cent of boys are A students, a distinction that applies to more than 46 per cent of girls.)

Last fall, University of Alberta president Indira Samarasekera told the Edmonton Journal that as a female leader and visible minority, she hoped to be an advocate for young white men, calling their decline in universities a “demographic time bomb.”

Angry students put up 300 posters around campus a few days later, likening the university president to King Kong. “Women are attacking campus,” they read. “Only white men can save our university.”

“It got a little testy,” Dr. Samarasekera recalled.

But without drawing more men to postsecondary education, she feels, the work force will lack diversity, women and men will lack compatible mates, especially as the economy shifts to one of mind over manufacturing.

Dr. Samaraskera described how her daughter, a lawyer, had been a self-starter where schoolwork was concerned. Her son “took a little more time to figure out what he wanted.” Today he’s training to be a surgeon, but, she says, “I was on him all the time.”

She feels more young men have to hear about the benefits of education, that their minority status in university is not a reflection of intelligence, but interest. Advances women made in education could now serve as a template for helping boys, she said: “We should take a page out of the book of what we did years ago.”