

The Myth of 'The Boy Crisis'

By Caryl Rivers and Rosalind Chait Barnett
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It was the early 1900s, and boys were supposedly in crisis. In monthly magazines, ladies' journals and books, urgent polemics appeared, warning that young men were spending too much time in school with female teachers and that the constant interaction with women was robbing them of their manhood. In Congress, Sen. Albert Beveridge of Indiana railed against overeducation. He urged young men to "avoid books and in fact avoid all artificial learning, for the forefathers put America on the right path by learning completely from natural experience."

What boys needed, the experts said, was time outdoors, rubbing elbows with one another and learning from male role models. That's what led -- at least in part -- to the founding of the Boy Scouts in 1910.

Now the cry has been raised again: We're losing our boys. The media have been hyping America's new "boy crisis" in magazine cover stories, a PBS documentary and countless newspaper articles. Boys, these reports lament, are falling behind in academic achievement, graduating from high school at lower rates than girls, occupying fewer seats in college classrooms, displaying poorer verbal skills.

This time, experts are calling for a complete overhaul of American education based on gender, saying that boys are wired differently from girls, learn in different ways and may just need their own schools. Boys, they say, are at a disadvantage in the many classrooms headed by female teachers, who are supposedly hostile to their sex. One male high school student in Massachusetts has even filed a federal lawsuit claiming that his school is biased against males.

But are American boys in academic free fall? Not really, if we look closely. Nor do they need special boys-only classrooms to teach them in ways tailored for their unique brains.

The boy crisis we're hearing about is largely a manufactured one, the product of both a backlash against the women's movement and the media's penchant for continuously churning out news about the latest dire threat to the nation. The subject got a big boost last year when first lady Laura Bush announced that she was going to turn her attention to the problems of boys.

But those problems are hardly so widespread. The alarming statistics on which the notion of a crisis is based are rarely broken out by race or class. When they are, the whole picture changes. It becomes clear that if there is a crisis, it's among inner-city and rural boys. White suburban boys aren't significantly touched by it. On average, they are not dropping out of school, avoiding college or lacking in verbal skills. Although we have been hearing that boys are virtually disappearing from college classrooms, the truth is that among whites, the gender composition of colleges is pretty balanced: 51 percent female and 49 percent male, according to the National Education Association. In Ivy League colleges, men still outnumber women.

One group of studies found that although poor and working-class boys lag behind girls in reading when they get to middle school, boys in the wealthiest schools do not fall behind, either in middle school or in high school. University of Michigan education professor Valerie Lee reports that gender differences in academic performance are "small to moderate."

When it comes to academic achievement, race and class completely swamp gender. The Urban Institute reports that 76 percent of students who live in middle- to higher-income areas are likely to graduate from high school, while only 56 percent of students who live in lower-income areas are likely to do so. Among whites in Boston public schools, for every 100 males who graduate, 104 females do. A tiny gap.

But among blacks, for every 100 males who graduate, 139 females do. Florida's graduation rates among all students show a striking picture of race and class: 81 percent for Asians, 60 percent for whites, 48 percent for Hispanics and 46 percent for blacks.

A peculiar image of the "typical" boy has emerged in many media reports: He's unable to focus, can't sit still, hates to read, acts up in class, loves sports and video games, gets in trouble a lot. Indeed, such boys exist -- it has long been established that boys suffer more from attention deficit disorder than girls do -- and they need all the help they can get. But research shows this is not the typical boy. Boys, in fact, are as -- or more -- different from one another as they are from girls.

Nonetheless, some are advocating boys-only classrooms in which boys would be taught in boot-camp fashion. In a recent Newsweek cover story, Houston neurologist Bruce Perry described today's co-ed classes as a "biologically disrespectful model of education." In the New Republic, Richard Whitmire wrote of a "verbally drenched curriculum" that is "leaving boys in the dust." New York Times columnist David Brooks suggested that boys ought to be given books about combat, to hold their interest. (Forget Julius Caesar, give them GI Joe?)

There's actually not much evidence that most boys lack verbal skills. In 2005, University of Wisconsin psychologist Janet Hyde synthesized data from 165 studies on verbal ability and gender. They revealed a female superiority so slight as to be meaningless. And psychologist Diane Halpern of Claremont McKenna College looked at many studies of verbal and math abilities and found that, overall, the gender differences were remarkably small.

This research casts doubt on the idea, championed by author Michael Gurian ("The Wonder of Boys") and others, that boys' and girls' brains are so different that they must be taught in very different ways. Although there are indeed some structural differences in the brains of men and women, we don't know what they mean. Perhaps very little. In the 19th century, scientists thought that the greater size of the male brain meant that men were a lot smarter. We now know how off the mark that was.

The Massachusetts student who has brought the discrimination suit against his high school wants boys to be given credit for sports and to be excused from the school's community service requirement. But might that not send the message to boys that they are inherently too dumb to get academic credit and too insensitive to be concerned about community issues?

Many, perhaps most, boys would be bored to tears in the kind of classroom that is now being described as "boy-friendly" -- a classroom that would de-emphasize reading and verbal skills and would rely on rote learning and discipline -- because it is really a remedial program in disguise. That's great for boys who need it, but most boys, especially those in affluent suburban schools, don't.

Still, as Newsweek reported, educators "are reviving an old idea: separate the girls from the boys." We may see a rush to single-sex classrooms that won't really be good educational policy. California tried such classrooms in the 1990s under Gov. Pete Wilson, but they did not succeed in boosting academic achievement. In fact, according to a 2001 Ford Foundation report, the academic success of both girls and boys is influenced more by small classes, strong curricula and qualified teachers than by single-sex settings.

The Department of Defense offers a better model. DOD runs a vast network of schools on military bases in the United States and abroad for more than 100,000 children of service members. And in those schools, there is no class and race gap. That's because these schools have high expectations, a strong academic focus, and hire teachers with years of classroom experience and training (a majority with master's degrees). Of course, this solution costs money, and has none of the sex appeal of the trendy single-sex-school quick fix.

Obsessing about a boy crisis or thinking that American teachers are waging a war on boys won't help kids. What will is recognizing that students are individuals, with many different skills and abilities. And that goes for both girls and boys.

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