up with Boys

by Barbara Vobejda and Linda Perlstein

Is the Future Female?

by Michele Jordan

The current anxiety about boys' underachievement is only a negative reaction to the success of girls.

As we have all seen on TV, read or heard on the news, boys are underachieving at every level of education compared to girls and the gap between the academic achievements of boys and girls is widening, according to research in England and a recent report compiled by Dr. Anthony Gallagher of Queens University. But for some critics the current anxiety about boys' underachievement is only a negative reaction to girls' success.

Although a child's early experiences usually take place within the family, one of the most important agents of socialisation is, and has been, the extremely different educational experiences to which boys and girls are exposed. Does anybody remember the pretend-kitchens we had to sit in during home economics or domestic science class? Educational experiences of women have not only reflected the dominant ideologies of the time, but their social class, the situation in the labour market and society's fixed attitudes to them. If a society expects men and women to fulfil different roles then it is hardly surprising that education will play an important part in reinforcing these roles.

The previous curriculum did not tax girls' intellectual powers fully or put them in a position where they could compete with men for social, economic or political power. In coeducational primary schools, research has shown that girls received praise for neatness, cleanliness, and social ability, and boys for toughness, strength, and adaptability.

These behavioral characteristics were largely reinforced by reading, materials, toys and teacher expectations. You only have to look at *Ladybird* books to see that girls and mothers rarely go outside their domestic sphere, girls passively looking on as their adventurous brothers pursue interesting and active pursuits, usually with their father. Girls were still being schooled with marriage in mind.

Historically we see that women had to struggle for education throughout the centuries when learning was a privilege for men, and not for mothers, wives and daughters. When the Compulsory Education Act was introduced in 1870 [in the United Kingdom], it was still seen as more important for boys and when work was available girls did not attend. "A woman's place is in the home," the pillars of society dictated, so therefore education for women was seen as less important.

In Victorian times, it was argued that biological differences made men more intellectual than women. It was claimed that women's brains were smaller than men's and as a result women were incapable of mental stimulation. It was also recommended that for the health of the girl/woman, all activity (especially any form of intellectual study) should cease during pregnancy, puberty and menstruation. Women who wanted to be educated were often accused of wanting to be like men. A life of scholarship did not always combine easily with a life devoted to the needs of a family. Even the most fortunate of women who were supported by their families became ostracised by society for challenging the male-dominated world of education.

The previous tendency for girls to specialise in Arts subjects acted as a handicap for those who wished to enter further or higher education. In the 1960s, two-thirds of women concentrated on Arts while two-thirds of boys passed two or more scientific subjects as A-Level. This was significant as fewer educational and occupational opportunities are open to those who did not have maths or physics qualifications.

Now in the 1990s girls are not being told what sort of education/knowledge is suited to them and they are being less inhibited by gender stereotypes within British society. And without the preconception that they will be less successful than boys, girls are now performing better than boys.

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