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The Silent Gender Gap

Reading, Writing, and Other Problems for Boys

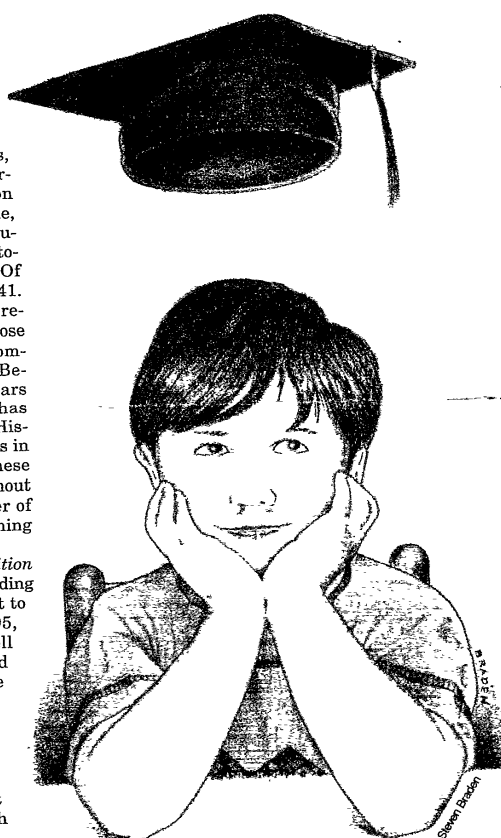
By Cornelius Riordan

Recent reports have confirmed that boys, not girls, are increasingly on the unfavorable side of the gender gap in education and developmental matters. For example, enrollments in institutions of higher education in the 1990s favor females by a ratio of 54-to-46. As recently as 1980, the ratio was 50-50. Of course, in 1970 the ratio favored males by 59-to-41. Similarly, in 1971, only 43 percent of those who received a baccalaureate degree and 40 percent of those who received a master's degree were women, compared with 54 percent for each degree in 1993. Because of the large gap favoring males just 25 years ago, it is easy to understand how the reversal has gone unnoticed. Among African-Americans and Hispanic-Americans, the gap actually favored females in 1970, and has expanded substantially during these past two decades. This pattern is repeated throughout Europe. The issue has recently become a matter of concern to college officials interested in maintaining a balanced male-female ratio.

The U.S. Department of Education's 1995 *Condition of Education* report concluded that "the gap in reading proficiency [favoring girls] is roughly equivalent to about 1½ years of schooling." In the July 7, 1995, issue of *Science*, Larry Hedges and Amy Nowell show that boys' writing skills are significantly and profoundly below the skill levels of girls. It is true that all of the above sources show differences favoring boys in mathematics and science, but the differences are smaller, and these deficits for girls in science and mathematics have been provided with special treatments over the past 20 years or so. And, in fact, the data do show that the achievement-test-score differences in math have been reduced considerably as a result.

The Educational Testing Service has released a four-year study reinforcing this emergent view regarding the gender gap. For this report, Warren Willingham and Nancy Cole (1997) analyzed data from 400 different tests from more than 1,500 different data sets. They found that for most subject-matter tests, gender differences were very small, and whenever a gender difference was found, it "cut both ways." The researchers acknowledge that the results contradict the view that girls need to catch up with boys. In particular, they note that "12th grade girls have substantially closed the familiar math and science gap over the past 30 years but there continues to be a fairly large gap in writing skills that boys have not closed."

But other indicators deserve attention as well. Girls have consistently obtained better grades and higher class ranks than boys. In 1988, 8th grade girls were significantly more likely than boys to be in the highest quartile of self-reported grades, and significantly



less likely to have repeated at least one grade. More boys than girls suffer from learning disabilities. Approximately three times as many boys as girls are enrolled in special education classes. More boys than girls are involved in all types of criminal, delinquent, and violent behavior, and studies have shown that alcohol, tobacco, and drug abuse is significantly greater among boys than girls, both in and out of school. Although girls experience higher rates of depression and suicide ideation, boys experience more loneliness and substance abuse.

Despite this array of male deficits, virtually all efforts continue to be targeted toward the problems of girls. For example, the American Association of University Women has committed funds for studies that have received national and international headlines. These studies have resulted in several publications:

How Schools Shortchange Girls and Hostile Hallways (AAUW, 1992 and 1993), and *School Girls: Young Women, Self-Esteem, and the Confidence Gap* (1994). These reports have captured widespread attention, and I have often cited them in my own work because they contribute, like any study, to the overall picture of what is going on. But what is curiously missing here are studies that address educational and developmental outcomes in which boys are now (and in some cases always have been) at a disadvantage. With the AAUW's October 1998 release of *Gender Gaps*, they now sound the alarm to the crisis of computer technology as the next battle zone where schools are still shortchanging girls.

Similarly, in a recent *Education Week* Commentary ("Science, Math, and Girls," Sept. 15, 1999), Patricia B. Campbell and Beatriz Chu Clewell react to these reports showing that boys are not doing well in school by continuing to push forward the needs of girls in the areas of mathematics and science. They claim that media stories on this issue have suggested that "efforts to improve education for girls might better have been spent remedying the educational plight of boys." Rather, the real news that appears in both educational research and media stories is that *both* boys and girls are now being "shortchanged" in school.

During the past several years, I have conducted my own research on the gender gap for students in public secondary schools. Data from the National Longitudinal Study, High School & Beyond, and the National Educational Longitudinal Survey provide an excellent basis for assessing changes in gender effects over the past 20 years. They represent the high school graduating classes of 1972, 1980, and 1992, respectively.

On the basis of my research, I have concluded that there is no evidence for a *one-way gender gap* favoring males beyond 1992 in public secondary schools. As of that time, females possess a significant advantage on most central educational outcome indicators, on average. Movement toward this 1992 state of affairs can be observed in the trend results as early as 1980.

All of this suggests that the broad nationwide efforts to raise female achievement in schools have been effective. Hypothetically, one might have expected that these efforts would have been limited to students of higher socioeconomic status and/or to students in private schools. One might have feared that, as is often the case, low-socioeconomic-status females in public schools would have been left out of the movement toward gender equity. The fact that this is not the case points to the depth and

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Cornelius Riordan is a professor of sociology at Providence College in Providence, R.I. His most recent book is *Equality and Achievement* (Longman, 1997).

The Gender Gap Is Not One-Way

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breadth of the nationwide effort to address the needs of girls and women in schools.

As a result of these trends, boys rather than girls are now on the short end of the gender gap in many secondary school outcomes. Currently, boys are less likely than girls to be in an academic (college-preparatory) curriculum; they have lower educational and occupational expectations, lower reading and writing test scores, and expect to complete their schooling at an earlier age. They are more likely to cut class and more likely to be placed in remedial math and English classes.

Boys do less homework, work more at part-time jobs, and read less for pleasure outside of school. They are less likely to be enrolled in a science and mathematics class sometime between the 10th and 12th grades, and they have a lower sense of environmental locus of control. They feel no more safe at schools than girls, and their mathematics-test scores are no greater than girls'.

In addition to the outcome



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measures considered in my own research, boys are more likely to drop out of school, obtain lower grades and lower class ranks than girls, and are more likely to suffer from learning disabilities. Men are less likely to attend college and, while in college, they spend more time than women exercising, partying, watching TV, or playing video games. Consequently, they are less likely to graduate from college than women. As a whole, boys are not doing well in school, and this is probably an understatement, if we were to consider high-risk youths.

There are, of course, other fac-

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tors that require consideration in estimating the direction of the gender gap. One of these factors is the degree of sexual harassment that occurs both in and out of school. In the AAUW's *Hostile Hallways*, girls reported that they had been sexually harassed to a greater degree than boys along a wide range of specific harassment behavior. On average, 83 percent of the girls and 60 percent of the boys had received unwanted sexual advances in school, on school grounds, or coming to and from school. There were several items, however, in which boys were more likely to have been harassed. Moreover, a

1995 National Center for Education Statistics report by Mary Jo Nolin and colleagues found substantial bullying, physical attacks, and robbery in schools, and that "boys were more likely to be victimized at school than were girls." Thus, the matter of safety and harassment in schools is not unidirectional.

Another issue is that educational outcomes do not transfer immediately into changes beyond the classroom. Ultimately, educational advantages for females, should they persist, will lead to greater equity in occupational attainment and income. But this is not yet a reality. Women continue to be undervalued in the workplace, excluded from leadership posts in many occupations, and underpaid relative to equally qualified men. This issue can be conceived as the distinction between getting "into" the proverbial pipeline and getting "through" the pipeline.

There are several ways of interpreting the implications of these findings. In the not-too-distant past, females were on the bottom end of the gender gap on virtually all education outcome indicators. For example, although women in 1997 were more likely than men to have completed four years of college or more (29 percent vs. 26 percent), men still held a lead in college completion for the total 1997 population age 25 and older by 26

percent to 22 percent (U.S. Census Bureau, 1998). Thus, one could easily conclude that the movement toward gender equity is not yet complete. Conceivably, gender equity might require more than an equal opportunity structure and more than equal outcomes, given the long history of gender stratification in schools and in society.

On the other hand, as we prepare to move into the 21st century, we also must recognize that boys are not flourishing in school. This being the case, the educational needs of boys require close monitoring over the next decade, perhaps leading to a more balanced approach to the issue of gender equity in schools. ■

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