

Closing the Gender Gap-Again!

David Sadker and Karen Zittleman

There's no great mystery in uncovering the race or economic class divides in school: simply look at where students sit in the lunchroom, and viola, there they are. Interested in more academic substance? Not a problem: check those well publicized race and class gaps on standardized test scores (or the scores of different ethnic or special needs children for that matter), and the numbers are there to see, and regret. Although many elementary principals feel challenged and pressured to close these gaps so often spotlighted in the media, lurking in the shadows is a persistent but less discussed challenge: the gender gap. Those who think that the gender gap is a thing of the past have a surprise in store. Gender is a quiet, persistent issue that ebbs and flows, but never seems to disappear, and the gender tide is coming in. In fact, the federal government is now promoting a dramatic "new" idea: the legal separation of girls and boys, a return to single sex education so prevalent a century or two ago. But before we look at that looming issue, let's take a closer at where we are, and where we still need to go to bridge the gender gap.

For the last few years, little attention has been paid to gender barriers, in part because so many principals read gender as "girls" Since girls outscore boys on most standardized achievement tests, receive better report card grades, and are much less likely to be behavior problems, the conclusion seems obvious: gender problem solved. But gender applies to both girls and boys, and many problems that plague schools are rooted in gender issues educators seem unable to see.

Most educators suffer from a common but rarely discussed disease: gender blindness. When race or class characterize educational divides—as in the scenarios opening this article—we immediately recognize such gaps as problematic. Yet, lunch rooms and test scores (and much more) are also divided by a gender line, one teachers and principals rarely see. Imagine a teacher organizing a spelling bee by announcing, "The African American students versus the whites." Seems preposterous in today's society? We hope so, but consider the same teacher and the same activity organized by gender, "a boys against the girls spelling bee." So common, so "natural," it has become a daily part of school life. Why? We have yet to come across a single reason explaining why gender competitions serve any positive educational, social or psychological purpose, yet gender segregation and competition remain commonplace. Schools separate girls and boys in lunchrooms, in class lines, on the playground, and on school buses (Rosa Parks, take notice).

In addition, gender bias is difficult to see because the same bias shapes girls and boys in different ways. Gender stereotyped males may "act out" and rebel at school work; stereotyped females may be docile, conforming, and willing to work hard to please the teacher. As different as those behaviors appear, they both reflect the same phenomenon: gender stereotyping. While the seeds are sown in early childhood, gender stereotypes can become lifelong obstacles for both females and males. It is past time for educators to remedy these problems. True, it is not all discouraging; we have made enormous gender progress over the past few decades: increased female enrollments in college, law school and medical school, more girls taking math and science courses in high school, and more boys

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exploring careers such as nursing and experiencing the joys of active parenting. But despite these gains, both new and old gender challenges remain.

READING GAPS

- For decades, males have consistently lagged behind females in reading and writing performance, a reality highlighted by standardized tests. Some attribute this to developmental or learning style differences, to an anti-school culture felt by boys, or even to brain differences. (NCES, 2003, Pollack, 1998)
- Boys often regard reading and writing as a “feminine” subjects, and report that reading threatens their masculinity. (Dutro, 2001/2002)

SCIENCE AND MATH

- Although elementary school males and females like and do well in math and science, as they go through school, girls become less positive and do less well. (NCES, 2000)
- By the third grade, 51% of males and 37% of females have used a microscope in class. (NCES, 2002)
- Boys receive more math and science-related toys than do girls. (NCES, 2002)

TECHNOLOGY

- Girls from all ethnic groups rate themselves considerably lower than boys on technological ability and are less likely to use computers outside of school. (NCWGE, 2002)
- Current software products are more likely to reinforce gender stereotypes and bias rather than reduce them. (AAUW, 2000)
- Girls are five times less likely than boys to consider a technology-related career, and by high school, boys account for 83% of computer science Advanced Placement test takers. (AAUW, 2000)

REPORT CARDS AND HIGH STAKES TESTS

- Girls receive higher report card grades throughout their schooling career. (NCWGE, 2002)
- Across all races and ethnicities, boys outscore girls on most “high stake tests”, including both the verbal and

math sections of the SATs, on the majority of the SAT IIs, and on the GREs. (ETS, 2001; NCES, 2000)

PSYCHOLOGICAL

- In 6th and 7th grades, girls rate popularity as more important than academic competence or independence. (NCMST, 2000)
- Boys are expected to follow a “boy code” or “mask of masculinity”—a kind of swaggering posture that hides their vulnerabilities and suppresses dependency while leaving boys feeling emotional isolated. (Pollack, 1998)

SEXUAL HARASSMENT AND BULLYING

- Sexual harassment—words and actions—begins in elementary school. Four out of five girls, and almost as many boys, experience some form of sexual harassment which often impacts school work. (AAUW, 2004)
- Thirty percent of students are victims of bullying. Males are both more likely to bully others and be victims of physical bullying, while females frequently experience verbal and psychological bullying (through sexual comments or rumors). (Nansel, et al., 2001)

STAFFING

- Approximately 9 percent of the nation’s elementary school teachers are men, down from 1981, when about 18 percent were men. (NEA, 2004)
- Although males comprise a minority of elementary teachers, almost half of elementary principals are male, sending a clear message of the gender hierarchy at a very young age. (NCES, 2004)

A NEW CHALLENGE: NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND AND SINGLE SEX SCHOOLS

No Child Left Behind includes a problematic proposal to change Title IX, the federal law prohibiting sex discrimination in education, by encouraging the establishment of public single-sex schools and classes for both girls and boys. While the romantic image of a pleasant, polite and preppie all-girls or all-boys school may come to mind, there are real

danger signs in this proposal. Although publicly committed to “scientific” and objective research, the current administration is proposing these changes despite the absence of such evidence. Some educators point out that many single sex schools are not particularly effective and attribute the academic successes of others less to their single-sexness and more to their smaller classes, engaged parents, well trained teachers, and strong academic emphasis. Other educators believe that single-sex schools work less well for boys than girls, or that only lower class boys benefit. Still others have reported that such schools can do considerable damage and intensify gender stereotypes and homophobia. A California experiment in single sex education that was carried out just a few years ago did not go well. The boys’ schools turned out to be a magnet for discipline problems, places to refer troublesome boys. There were no funds for teacher training, no specific program or curriculum to implement, and the failed results were not surprising. Nevertheless, the federal government is considering doing the same thing on a national scale. Worse yet, the federal plan speaks of “comparable” not “equal” schools and classes. Perhaps a gifted science class for boys offered in conjunction with a practical science course for girls might be considered “comparable” under the *NCLB*. One thing is certain: when a civil rights law is changed, civil rights are jeopardized. Principals should think twice before jumping aboard this ship.

As most educators know all too well, evaluating student test scores are critical in determining a school’s Annual Yearly Progress under *NCLB*. While student test score data are considered for many different groups, from racial to special needs children, gender is mysteriously ignored. This seems strange indeed, for an elementary school with an enrollment of 65 percent boys, plagued by bullying and sexual harassment, and with no resources for teacher training, may very well find these gender issues driving low reading scores. Although gender plays a critical role in the nation’s public schools, *NCLB* basically ignores gender except for promoting the sex segregation of students.

HOW CAN EDUCATORS CLOSE THE GENDER GAP?

Let’s conclude this article on a more positive note. How can principals address these debilitating gender gaps? Here are some touchstones to consider:

Teaching Skills: Although most teachers want to teach all children equitably, boys and girls often receive different treatment. Teachers call on boys more often than girls, wait longer for boys’ answers, and provide more precise feedback to boys. Girls are more likely to be quiet in class and

be praised for their neatness. Teachers deserve objective observations that track their interactions: which students are included and which left out, and is there a persistent pattern of gender difference in teacher feedback? This is the first step to change, and research shows that when teachers are aware of their biased classroom behaviors, more equitable interactions develop.

Attributions. Boys and girls frequently interpret their successes and failures in very different ways. Boys typically attribute success to intelligence and failure to luck or insufficient effort. Girls are more likely to attribute success to luck and their failure to inability. Girls’ attribution creates a harmful self-fulfilling prophecy: trying harder or risking a new approach won’t make much difference if you believe you’re simply not smart enough. Instead of stopping this cycle, teachers too often feed into it. A recent study found that 71 percent of male teachers likely attribute boys’ success in technology to talent while dismissing girls’ success as luck or diligence (AAUW, 2000). Educators need to set high expectations for all students.

Learned Helplessness. “Doing for” girls is not helpful: encouraging girls to do for themselves is. Boys gain valuable experiencing by more frequently using scientific instruments and computers. In one study, boys carried out 79 percent of student-led science demonstrations, while girls were 300 percent more likely to be the group note taker (NCWGE, 2002). Teachers also encourage boys to persist and solve problems, yet unintentionally finish tasks for girls who hit a roadblock.

Gender Stereotyping in School. Older elementary school girls may believe they will be unpopular if they are perceived an intelligent “doer.” and may avoid “boy stuff” (a.k.a. math and science). Schools can break the mold and insure that student and teacher roles and chores are not stereotyped. Find girls who love to set up equipment, and boys who can take notes—open up options and work that eliminate gender stereotypes.

Displays and Curriculum. There is an old saying, “if the walls could speak”. Truth is, the walls do speak. What are the displays and exhibits in your schools saying? Are male accomplishments more likely to be recognized? Does your school supplement textbooks with curricular materials that teach students about the experiences and contributions of women and non-stereotyped males?

Sexual Harassment, Bullying and Title IX: Policy. If your district doesn’t have a clear policy on these issues, it is time that such policies are communicated. Be certain that your school community, both teachers and students, know the

law. Learning communities do not flourish where intimidation thrives or inequities are tolerated.

Gender issues influence elementary schools in urban and rural America, in wealthy and poor communities, in communities that are diverse as well as those that are homogeneous. In short, the gender gap is the one demographic that binds all our schools and challenges all principals. How strange that these obvious gender issues have become so difficult for us to see.

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