

The Myth of "The Boy Crisis"

by Caryl Rivers & Rosalind Chait Barnett
from *The Washington Post*, 4/9/06

It was the early 1900s, and boys were supposedly in crisis. In monthly magazines and books, urgent polemics appeared, warning that young men were spending too much time in school with female teachers, [thus] robbing them of their manhood. ... What boys needed, the experts said, was time outdoors learning from male role models. That's what led, in part, to the founding of the Boy Scouts in 1910.

Now the cry has been raised again. 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, displaying poorer verbal skills.

This time, experts are calling for a complete educational overhaul, saying boys are wired differently from girls and learn in different ways. Boys, they say, are at a disadvantage in the many classrooms headed by female teachers. ...

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 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. If there is a crisis, it's among inner-city and rural boys. White suburban boys aren't significantly touched by it. ... When it comes to academic achievement, race and class completely swamp gender. ...

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. 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 this is not the typical boy. Boys, in fact, are as different from one another as they are from girls. ...

There's little evidence that most boys lack verbal skills. ... The research also casts doubt on the idea, championed by author Michael Gurion (*The Wonder of Boys*) and others, that boys' and girls' brains are so different that they must be taught

in different ways. Although there are indeed some structural differences in the brains of males and females, we don't know what they mean. Perhaps very little. In the 19th century, scientists thought that the larger male brain meant men were a lot smarter. We now know how off the mark that was. ...

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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's really a remedial program in disguise. That's great for boys who need it, but most boys don't. ...

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. ...

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. **CW**

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See also in ClassWise: "The Trouble With Boys" (May/Jun 06), "Gender Differences in Academic Motivation" (Mar/Apr 05), "Differences in How Boys & Girls Participate" (Nov/Dec 03).

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The responsive teacher. "Presumably, the teacher who always has the best interests of the student uppermost in his or her mind is constantly reflecting upon the degree to which he or she is being responsive. Such a teacher asks questions like, 'What approach helped Thomas yesterday to make a breakthrough in understanding that difficult reading passage?' 'At what point did Ellen become confused when I was explaining the math problem?' or 'How can I structure the next assignment for Michelle so that it's more manageable?' By pursuing answers to such questions, teachers are being responsive to students in specific ways.

The Educational Forum, Winter 2004

How small groups affect achievement. A study compared heterogeneous and homogeneous cooperative learning groups in six classes taught by the same teacher using matching syllabi and assignments. *Results:* Overall, homogeneously-grouped students (based on achievement on earlier tests in the course) significantly outperformed heterogeneously-grouped students on the final examination. *Note:* High- or average-achieving students particularly benefited from homogeneous grouping. Low achievers did equally well in either type of group.

—Journal of Research & Development in Education, Spring 2006