

## What is a Gender Friendly Classroom?

Good teaching is about using different approaches to meet the learning needs of all students. Research shows that, in general, boys and girls have different learning needs. Teachers need to understand these differences to effectively teach to those needs. To do this, we need to become aware of the gender issues, and purposefully select strategies that “meet the strengths of the learners, while also finding ways to strengthen their weaker areas.”<sup>1</sup>

A gender-friendly classroom is one in which the teacher makes an effort to structure their classroom appropriately for both genders and teaches students about potential gender issues, and how to overcome these issues. “The goal (of gender friendly classrooms) is not to treat boys and girls equally, but to create equity by purposefully addressing the particular needs of each gender.”<sup>2</sup> If we want boys and girls to work together in a fair, friendly way, we need to teach them how to successfully function in the bi-gendered world that we live in. Gaining an understanding of how each gender thinks, feels, responds, and reacts is a major goal of gender-friendly classrooms and is a definite advantage of educating boys and girls together.<sup>3</sup> To begin to create gender-friendly classrooms, we first need to consider the past and present disconnects between teaching practice and student learning needs, and the problems it has caused for our students. We then need to consider the fact that differences in gender are both a function of nature, or biological forces, and nurture, or environmental forces and examine the effects these conditions have on learning.<sup>4</sup> Finally, we need to seek out different teaching strategies that will accommodate the needs of both genders equally.

In 1992, the American Association of University Women published a study that showed how schools were failing to meet the needs of girls in the classroom. The study found that boys were more regularly called on to answer a question, and were more likely to receive prompts if their answer was incorrect.<sup>5</sup> Girls were not encouraged to take advanced math and science courses, which likely contributed to their underachievement in these subjects. Another study found that girls were asked lower level questions, and were provided with less constructive feedback than boys. David and Myra Sadker posited that the imbalance of attention that girls received, coupled with quality and quantity of

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<sup>1</sup> Kommer, David. "Considerations for a Gender-Friendly Classroom." *Middle School Journal*, November 2006: 43-49

<sup>2</sup> Kommer, David. "Boys and Girls Together: A Case for Creating Gender-Friendly Middle School Classrooms." *The Clearing House* 79, no. 6 (July/August 2006): 247-251

<sup>3</sup> Boys and Girls Together, Kommer

<sup>4</sup> Boys and Girls Together, Kommer

<sup>5</sup> Boys and Girls Together, Kommer

interaction and lack of encouragement and feedback, resulted in the lowering of girls' levels of achievement and self-esteem.<sup>6</sup>

While, since then, significant progress has been made to close the gap between the differences in achievements in math and science, a large concern that still must be addressed is the decrease in confidence that girls experience as they go through the school system. One study shows that 60 percent of girls had positive feelings about themselves and their ability before entering preadolescence. Only 29 percent of girls in high school felt the same confidence.<sup>7</sup> If girls cannot be confident in themselves and their abilities, they are more likely to achieve less than they are capable of.

On the other hand, most teachers, parents, and other educational professionals know that it is mainly boys who under-perform in school. Statistics show that boys have also fallen victim to our educational system.<sup>8</sup> Consider the following gender questions (taken from Boys and Girls Together...): Who is more likely to drop out of school? Who is more likely to be sent to the principal's office for discipline? Who is more likely to be suspended or expelled? Who is more likely to be identified as a student needing special education? Who is more likely to need reading intervention? The answer to all of these questions is boys.<sup>9</sup> According to the three year study of knowledge and skills of males and females of 35 industrialized countries (including Canada and the U.S.) done by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, girls outperformed boys in every country, especially in reading/writing.<sup>10</sup>

Peg Tyre, author of the 2006 Newsweek cover story, "The Boy Crisis", suggests that a major reason for underachievement in our boys is that school academics are being accelerated, the curriculum narrowed, and students are given less and less unstructured free time as a result. Boys make up a large portion of those being medicated for ADHD, which likely is a result of the school day having fewer or shorter breaks. Tyre states that "Instead of fixing the school schedule to make it more developmentally friendly to all children, but especially boys, we try to fix the boy."<sup>11</sup> She also suggests that there is less

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<sup>6</sup> Reinhartz, Carol Sue Marshall and Judy. "Gender Issues in the Classroom." *The Clearing House* 70, no. 6 (July/August 1997): 333-337

<sup>7</sup> Boys and Girls Together, Kommer

<sup>8</sup> Michael Gurian, Kathy Stevens. "With Boys and Girls in Mind." *Educational Leadership* 62, no. 3 (November 2004): 21-26.

<sup>9</sup> Boys and Girls Together, Kommer

<sup>10</sup> With boys and girls in mind, Gurian and Stevens

<sup>11</sup> Heiten, Liana. "Boy Problems." *The Education Digest*, April 2009: 29-32.

tolerance for boy behavior, especially in regards to anti-violence policies, which she believes have evolved into “anti-fantasy violence policies” that deny boys a chance to be their authentic selves at school.<sup>12</sup> As a result of us teaching boys that who they are is unacceptable in schools, they begin “to express the opinion that school is ‘girly’ and doing well, or getting the teachers’ approval is only for girls.”<sup>13</sup> And so the pattern of disengagement in boys begins.

There are a number of biological differences in the male and female brain that have implications for student learning. Positron Emission Technology and MRI technologies enable us to look inside the brain, and discover structural and functional differences between male and female brains that profoundly affect their learning.<sup>14</sup> The most striking difference is that the corpus callosum, or the system of nerves which connects the right and left hemispheres, is about 20-25 percent larger in females than in males.<sup>15</sup> This allows for more “cross-talk” between the hemispheres when processing information, giving girls the ability to multitask and pay attention better than boys. Boys seem to be largely right-hemisphere dominant, and as a result, boys are better at spacial and mechanical functioning, such as watching and manipulating objects, and understanding abstract mechanical concepts.<sup>16</sup> This gives them an advantage in mathematics, graphing, mapping, physics, engineering, and architecture. Girls, on the other hand, seem to use both sides of the brain and tend to be better at verbal and emotive functioning. More cortical areas in the female brain are devoted to literacy related activities, such as verbal functioning, sensual memory, sitting still, listening, tonality, and mental cross-talk.<sup>17</sup>

Interesting differences in hearing and seeing have been reported in studies by L. Sax. These studies indicate that girls hear at different levels, and in effect, better than boys, because they have stronger neural connections in their temporal lobes.<sup>18</sup> Other studies show that because of different chemistry in the eye and corresponding receptor in the brain, girls are able to read facial expressions better than boys.<sup>19</sup> Girls tend to take in more sensory data than boys, and because of this, combined with their lower level of testosterone, they engage in fewer physical risk-taking behaviours than boys. The prefrontal cortex, or the rational part of the brain, is also generally more active in girls, and

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<sup>12</sup> Boy Problems, Heiten

<sup>13</sup> Boy problems, Heiten

<sup>14</sup> With boys and girls in mind, Gurian and Stevens

<sup>15</sup> Boys and Girls Together, Kommer; With boys and girls in mind, Gurian and Stevens

<sup>16</sup> Boys and Girls Together, Kommer; With boys and girls in mind, Gurian and Stevens

<sup>17</sup> With boys and girls in mind, Gurian and Stevens

<sup>18</sup> Boys and Girls Together, Kommer

<sup>19</sup> Boys and Girls Together, Kommer

develops at an earlier age.<sup>20</sup> This allows girls to make fewer impulsive decisions. Finally, the hippocampus, a memory storage area of the brain, is larger in girls, which likely increases girls' learning advantage, especially in language arts.<sup>21</sup>

These brain differences, however, do not tell the whole story. There are also strong socialization factors that contribute to learning differences between the genders. Masucci believes that socialization begins before a child is even born.<sup>22</sup> This socialization process then continues throughout his/her school career. Gender identity becomes a huge concern, especially in middle and high school, because both genders are receiving conflicting messages about their role requirements in society.<sup>23</sup> "Society prescribes how a male ought to look and behave, what type of personality he ought to have, and what roles he should perform...Girls receive these messages equally as strong."<sup>24</sup> Boys, like girls, have many of the same feelings of inadequacy, but boys are ill-prepared to deal with these feelings because they lack the emotional vocabulary and permission to deal with their feelings. They are always told "big boys don't cry". Research conducted in Australia shows that boys' under-achievement in reading may be partly because certain messages are being sent to them about reading. It shows that reading is not identified with masculine activities and qualities and fathers often identify themselves as non-readers.<sup>25</sup>

Girls also receive a constant stream of conflicting messages. "They must be beautiful, but beauty is only skin deep. Be sexy, but not sexual. Be honest, but don't hurt anyone's feelings. Be independent, but be nice. Be smart, but not so smart that you threaten boys."<sup>26</sup> During adolescence, girls' self-confidence drops rapidly. Whereas before, most girls felt like they could do anything, they begin to judge themselves by how they are perceived by others. Math, science, and technology, have always been considered to be male-dominated subjects, so girls may have a hard time excelling in these subjects if they believe that they are not good enough to succeed in them. Schools need to do more to educate both boys and girls about the detrimental messages they receive every day so that both genders can learn to decipher and combat these messages.

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<sup>20</sup> With boys and girls in mind, Gurian and Stevens; Boys and Girls Together, Kommer

<sup>21</sup> With boys and girls in mind, Gurian and Stevens

<sup>22</sup> Considerations, Kommer

<sup>23</sup> Considerations, Kommer

<sup>24</sup> Boys and Girls Together, Kommer

<sup>25</sup> Horton, Rosemary. "Boys are people too: Boys and reading, truth and misconceptions." *Teacher Librarian* 33, no. 2 (December 2005): 30-32

<sup>26</sup> Boys and Girls Together, Kommer

All of the conditions above contribute to a divide between the genders and their ability to succeed in our education system. There are many things that teachers can do to create gender-friendly classrooms, and ensure that boys and girls receive equitable treatment, and opportunities for learning. These strategies<sup>27</sup> include:

- Explicitly teaching cooperation and giving students a chance to work in cooperative groups.
- Providing a balance between competitive and cooperative activities
- Giving students a chance to take on leadership roles
- Providing movement and energy release activities, and incorporating hands-on activities and manipulatives.
- Providing support for students working in their weak areas, and changing the focus so that everyone has equal opportunity to work in their strong areas.
- Calling on students equally (names on Popsicle sticks) and providing opportunities for both genders to clarify and extend their thinking (think-pair-share, jigsaws, heads together).
- Teaching students how to be media literate (for example: discussing stereotypes in TV shows and movies, and biases in news reports)
- Giving instructions and teaching lessons to accommodate all learning styles
- Using graphic organizers, such as KWL charts, Venn diagrams, webs, etc.
- Using different approaches in reading and writing: offer reading material (books, magazines, comics, etc.) that is friendly to both genders and includes some non-traditional gender roles, ask students to suggest books, open the parameters of what is acceptable to write about and give students some choice, and allow more time for “free” reading and discussion around personal choice books.
- Teaching students about gender issues, such as gender bias, harassment, homophobia, and stereotyping, and about ways to overcome these issues (also keep parents in the loop)

Some questions for further consideration are: How do we get reluctant students and parents to support gender friendly classrooms? How can parents encourage this at home? What other resources/strategies are out there to support this kind of classroom? How do we break the cycle of gender stereotypes being passed on from parents, peers, and the media? How do we support the learning of transgendered students?

Creating gender-friendly classrooms is not difficult, especially for teachers who already have the desire to meet the learning needs of their students. To establish a classroom wherein neither gender is at a disadvantage, we need to be consciously aware of the issues, and of the social and biological learning differences between genders. Most importantly, we need to remember that “To limit the opportunities of even one student is to limit the future of all.”<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Harry Daniels, Angela Creese, Valerie Hey, Diana Leonard, Marjorie Smith. "Gender and learning: equity, equality, and pedagogy." *Support for Learning* 16, no. 3 (2001): 112-116; Boy problems, Heiten; Gender issues in the classroom, Marshall and Reinhartz; Boys are people too, Horton; Boys and Girls Together, Kommer; With boys and girls in mind, Gurian and Stevens; Considerations, Kommer

<sup>28</sup> Gender Issues in the Classroom, Marshall and Reinhartz

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## Further readings:

-Boys and girls learn differently! A guide for teachers and parents -Michael Gurian

-Why gender matters: What parents and teachers need to know about the emerging science of sex differences- L. Sax

Helping boys succeed: Which research-based strategies curb negative trends now facing boys? – D. Taylor and M. Lorimer