

Study explores why boys are falling behind girls in school

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Thirty years ago, boys, not girls, were the high performers in schools. Today, test scores, grades and dropout rates show boys are achieving at levels far below girls, and an international study that includes the University of Florida is yielding insights that may explain why.

In the United States, girls capture more academic honors, outscore boys in reading and writing, and score about as well on math at the fourth-, eighth- and 12th-grade levels on the National Assessment for Educational Progress exam. Internationally, fourth-grade girls significantly outperformed boys in the eight leading industrialized nations that took part in the 2001 Progress in International Literacy Study. And 15-year-old boys have been surpassed by 15-year-old girls among the 28 countries involved in the 2000 Program for International Student Assessment.

According to a UF College of Education researcher engaged in a joint project examining male underachievement in public education across cultures, there are many factors involved in why boys are falling behind.

“Brain research has shown differences in male and female brains that can affect preferred learning styles and communication,” says Mary Ann Clark, UF associate professor of counselor education and principal investigator. “It has been suggested that public school curriculum may not be teaching ‘to the boys’ and that teaching styles are more suitable for girls.”

To examine the factors that lead to male underachievement and the measures needed to raise the achievement of boys, Clark and two doctoral students from the College of Education at UF have teamed with other teacher education and school counselor faculty and students from universities in England and Australia on an “Internationalizing the Curriculum” project. The research is supported by the International Center at the University of Florida.

The study, which is under way with results expected by this summer, includes focus groups, interviews and database analyses. Undergraduate and graduate students in the colleges of education at Nottingham University in England and Wollongong University in Australia are comparing findings across their schools and discovering themes or factors that may contribute to the gender achievement gap.

“It is our hope that pre-service educators will use their findings to develop some interventions to use with their students in schools that will help in their work as teachers and counselors,” Clark says of the university students’ work on the project.

Preliminary study results were reported recently in *ASCA School Counselor*, the journal of the American School Counselor Association.

Heather Adams and Erin Oakley – the two UF students working with Clark – have a personal interest in the topic. Adams says she is intrigued by the differences in the male and female brains and their development, as well as in the socialization of males and females in society.

And Oakley says that through her clinical work at the Gainesville Wilderness Institute, a Florida Department of Juvenile Justice program for young offenders, she has seen that teaching and counseling styles that work with girls don’t necessarily work for boys.

“We need approaches that address boys’ special needs and that meet them where they are, rather than expecting them to fit some predetermined mold of what ‘good’ students should be,” Oakley says.

Clark says although the study is still in progress, one major issue already has become clear: the need for awareness of the special needs of students with regard to gender. Many “school success skills” such as compliance and organization seem to be more easily applied to girls, says Clark, adding that teachers, administrators, school counselors and even parents should be trained in strategies for providing a positive view of learning and studying that targets all students.

“Curricular materials, particularly reading, may need to be more inclusive with regard to male interests. The use of physical space and need for movement should be taken into consideration,” Clark says. “We also need to recognize that developmental stages differ between males and females, with females maturing earlier, cognitively as well as physically.”

Source: University of Florida

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