

Progressive Education's War on Boys

Male students, especially those from deprived backgrounds, need traditional teaching methods.

By Janet Daley

Just when you thought nothing new could be added to progressive education's long catalogue of failures, yet one more has come to light — and it is a particularly grave and far-reaching failure. For progressive education is responsible for the epidemic of underachievement among boys in British state schools, now so deep and widespread that it is taking on the proportions of a national crisis.

Where boys had once lagged behind girls only in the earlier years of primary education — and then only in English and history, rather than in math or science — they now keep falling behind in both English and mathematics through the entire course of their schooling.

Experts and pundits have blamed this poor performance on everything from the influence of street culture and the media to the declining number of male schoolteachers who could provide role models. But the real culprit is the radical shift in teaching methods and in the content of the school curriculum that progressive education has wrought. To understand why this should be so, consider just exactly what progressive educators hoped to accomplish — and how in the process they explicitly rejected male virtues and values.

Progressive ed's 'liberation' of the British classroom and curriculum had an unashamedly and overwhelmingly political agenda. Rather than encouraging working-class children to see the inadequacies of their own deprived social backgrounds and to aspire to go beyond them, schools would embrace and idealize 'anti-élitism,' in the name of delivering children from their feelings of class inferiority. It seemed to occur to no one that this inverted snobbery would lock deprived children into the limitations into which they had been born.

This rebellion against 'cultural élitism' and 'middle-class values' contained a wholesale rejection of virtually the entire corpus of historical

and literary knowledge that had traditionally been passed down from one generation to the next by formal schooling. Lost too was any kind of rigour in instruction. Testing, for example, fell into disuse. The schools dropped formal training in literacy and numeracy in favour of play-like, unstructured, open-ended work done in groups.

The brunt of all this fell most disastrously on boys — who, it turned out, temperamentally depended much more than girls on the principles of traditional education: discipline, structure, and competition. Even middle-class boys within the state school system are achieving significantly less well in public examinations than their female counterparts. But in areas of high social deprivation, the disparity between the performance of girls and boys is staggering. White working-class male youths are now performing more poorly in school than almost any other social or ethnic group, the sole exception being Afro-Caribbean boys, who do marginally worse.

One key reason why girls are doing strikingly better than boys is that teachers, in accordance with progressivist ideology, now judge schoolwork in a way that rewards enthusiasm and personal involvement more than objective knowledge and accuracy. Girls are particularly good, much better than boys, at identifying with others and seeking to please. By the age of four or five, little girls can play together with minimal supervision. Perfectly normal boys of the same age will rampage into anarchy without intervention.

Even for a non-professional, observing a room full of young children of both sexes at play is an instant education in the differences between them — and the inevitable educational consequences of those differences. While most girls are likely to be motivated by a desire for approval, competitiveness seems to come naturally to

boys, who seem to need a reliable ladder of progress and explicit rewards to channel their competitiveness. What used to provide such a framework was classroom competition and traditional structured academic tasks, with ever-increasing, ever-challenging levels of mastery.

By deriding competition, schools have loaded the system very heavily in favour of female achievement and male failure. What has been systematically dismantled is just the kind of externally-imposed structure and clear discipline that boys require. School is now designed to be most helpful to the self-disciplined and self-motivating — which, during childhood and adolescence, largely means girls.

To be understood in its full enormity, what has happened in British education because of progressivist ideology has to be seen against a background of what has been lost. The old tradition separated pupils into academic or technical tracks based on a selective examination at 11 years of age. According to historical myth, this division after elementary school reinforced class divisions. In fact, grammar schools (as the academic schools were called) were responsible for delivering more working-class children from deprivation than the 'comprehensive' school system that swept grammar schools away.

In the 1960's, before it abolished its two-tier system of state secondary schools, Britain had more university students from working-class homes than any other European country. But now, the proportion of working-class students at traditional universities has plummeted. The ultimate irony of the progressive revolution in British schools is that it has harmed most disastrously the deprived children it was intended to rescue.

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