

Quick Study

ON EDUCATION ISSUES

December 2010. ISSN 1201-215



Malkin Dare is the President of the Society for Quality Education, a think tank based in Toronto. The Society promotes school choice in order to improve student learning.

Boy Oh Boy!

by Malkin Dare

Boys used to do as well as (or better than) girls in school, but now they're doing much worse. A number of theories have been advanced to explain boys' problems, but none of them is particularly convincing - mainly because little or nothing is ever mentioned that is true now but wasn't true 50 years ago when there was no gender gap.

A theory that isn't even being considered, however, is the change to the way children are being taught to read. In most North American schools 50 years ago, teachers used a mixture of Look Say and phonics - not the best way to teach beginning reading, but better than the current Balanced Literacy, which typically contains even less phonics instruction.

The reduction in phonics is obviously not the **only** factor in boy's decline. However, it is well accepted that a student's reading ability at the end of grade 1 is a powerful predictor of his or her academic achievement in high school and beyond. At a minimum, it would surely be a good idea to teach every child to read in grade 1.

Due to language differences, it is hard to draw conclusions from the fact that the size of the gender gap varies greatly from country to country. However, there is one English-speaking country where gender differences are smaller than in the rest of the English-speaking world - and that country is Scotland.

Summary

- Boys are not doing as well as girls in school.
- The usual suspects do not fully explain boys' decline.
- Boys' reading skills are far below girls' reading skills, and this is because boys need phonics more than girls.
- Systematic phonics should be taught in kindergarten and grade 1.

Permission is granted to reprint some or all of this text. The author is available for interview. Call Doretta Wilson, 416-231-7247.

Text Word Count: 750

As late as 1992, there were no gender differences in the reading scores of Scottish eight-year-olds. At that time, Scottish children were reading well above grade level on average. The usual explanations don't apply here, since the storybooks in Scottish schools contained the same proportion of masculine heroes, there were just as many female teachers, the Scottish curriculum was quite comparable, and Scottish boys are similarly made of snakes and snails and puppy dog tails.

However, there was one significant difference between North American and Scotland at that time: the way beginning reading was taught. Somehow, Scotland managed to escape the worst excesses of "progressive" teaching methods, retaining more traditional and phonics-based instruction.

Even today, a few Scottish shires, like Clackmannanshire and West Dunbartonshire, have excellent phonics instruction and, in these shires, the boys are reading at least as well as the girls. In some categories, they are actually reading better than the girls! Unfortunately, some progressive elements have gradually crept in to the rest of Scotland, and so now Scottish children are not reading as well as before and a slight gender gap has developed in reading.

When good phonics programs are introduced, there is always significant improvement in students' reading. A typical experiment in Bristol, England tracked about 700 primary age children who were taught to read by means of an excellent phonics program. Although there were children with every sort of special need, including some in the severe and complex category, not one child was omitted from the results.

The average reading and spelling age for these 700 children was 15 months ahead of chronological age at the end of their reception year (when they were about five years, nine months old) but reading and spelling at the 7:00 year level.

- The boys did just as well as the girls.
- The younger children in the age group did as well as the older children.
- Socially-disadvantaged children did as well as advantaged children.
- Children whose first language was not English did as well as native English speakers.
- No child developed "dyslexia", even though many came from "dyslexic" families where the older siblings had struggled to learn to read.

The children in the research project were followed through to the end of their primary education at age 11. The boys were reading as well as the girls, with both sexes reading better than other children in the same school board. Even more remarkable, the boys were better writers than the girls!

Experiments like these prove that boys can become good readers if they receive proper instruction.

Most if not all of the usual prescriptions for improving boys' academic performance (male role models, masculinised books, all-boys schools, etc.) are difficult to implement and unlikely to yield major improvement, certainly not in the short term.

The introduction of systematic phonics instruction in kindergarten and grade 1, on the other hand, is easy to implement, inexpensive, and likely to yield major improvement almost immediately. At a minimum, systematic phonics should be included in the list of measures for improving boys' academic achievement.