

Educators Urge End to Classroom 'Gender Wars'

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It's time to stress what girls and boys have in common in the classroom, not what divides them, researchers say. They're dismayed their work is cast as a battle of the sexes and call for more research on ethnic, socioeconomic and racial differences.

WASHINGTON (WOMENSENEWS)--Experts on the educational experiences of girls and boys say the gender wars in the American classroom should be called off and more emphasis should be placed on broader gender roles and expectations for both sexes.

The findings and recommendations are contained in a report, "Beyond the Gender Wars: A Conversation About Girls, Boys and Education," recently released by the American Association of University Women's Educational Foundation. The report is the result of a symposium that brought together leading experts on the educational experiences of girls and boys.

The gathering's participants said that while the interests of girls and boys have been pitted against each other, many of the conditions that cause girls to fail in the classroom are the same ones that are detrimental to boys. And while the fierce debate over the unique educational and social needs of children of both genders has raged, scholars who study those needs have rarely tried to find common ground.

"We seem to be debating who has it worse, boys or girls; we know in a way that both boys and girls are being shortchanged in their education and in societal support," said William Pollack, best-selling author of the book "Real Boys: Rescuing Our Sons From the Myth of Boyhood."

The so-called gender wars can be traced to the aftermath of a 1992 report by the American Association of University Women entitled "How Schools Shortchange Girls." After the association and researchers such as Carol Gilligan, of New York University who conducted ground-breaking research on girls while at Harvard and is the author of "In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development," began highlighting the ways in which girls have historically been overlooked in American schools, other scholars countered that, in fact, it was boys who were being given short shrift.

Dispel Myth of the Battle of the Sexes, Seek Justice and Equity for All

According to the report, "The ensuing fractious discussion of gender and education often assumed the troubling zero-sum logic of a 'gender war,' a classroom battle of the sexes that girls win only if boys lose and vice versa."

So symposium organizers said they wanted to give the researchers a chance to respond to the way in which the debate had been framed and how their own

work had been used in the debate.

The discussions were moderated by Barrie Thorne, a professor of sociology at the University of California, Berkeley, co-director of the Center for Working Families and author of "Gender Play: Girls and Boys in School."

"Some of us have studied mostly girls. Some focused on boys. Some have focused on both," Thorne said. "But through all of these differences and disagreements, we share a strong sense of dismay that our many years of research and educational interventions on behalf of social justice and equity for all children have now been framed with a metaphor of war."

One of the most prevalent myths about education, symposium participants agreed, is that what works for girls in the classroom doesn't work for boys. Participants argued for a more subtle analysis of what benefits children, for example, focusing more on ethnic and racial differences than on gender.

"One has to ask, which girls, which boys," commented Thorne. "For example, the needs and problems of low-income African American boys and girls are quite different in some ways from the needs and problems of white, middle-class girls and boys."

For example, researchers said that while white girls do indeed suffer from crises of self-esteem in early adolescence--a phenomenon highlighted in a series of best-selling books in the early 1990s--African American girls do not.

Girls Fear Math, Science, While Boys Call English, Art 'Girl' Subjects

The symposium also looked at research showing that girls suffer from societal expectations that they shouldn't go into fields like math and science. Scholars who focus on the experience of boys say that boys also suffer from feelings that they shouldn't study English or art because they are "girl" subjects. Therefore, creating more flexible gender roles and broadening expectations for both genders helps boys and girls.

"Gender ideologies are harmful to boys and girls. Ideologies keep (boys and girls) locked into roles and induce us as adults to create certain kinds of educational opportunities for some and to block off other kinds of opportunities and visions for others," said Susan Bailey, who heads up the Wellesley Centers for Women and was a lead author of the 1992 American Association of University Women report.

What is important, she said, is "to open people up to a full range of possibilities, regardless of their gender, regardless of their background," she said.

"I can think of no trait whatsoever that only boys categorically have and girls don't or that girls categorically have and boys don't," said Michael Kimmel, professor at the State University of New York at Stony Brook and author of "The Gendered Society" and "Manhood in America: A Cultural History."

In order to redirect the debate over the treatment of girls and boys in American classrooms, participants were unanimous that researchers need to take a more collaborative approach. Though it can be difficult to achieve,

research must also look at ethnic, socioeconomic and racial differentiations, the report states, so that educators can better address the needs of specific children.

Participants recommended that schools address multiple learning styles in the classroom, so that girls and boys can both benefit from active, team-based lessons. Another priority should be creating safe schools where bullying isn't tolerated and children have the chance to form male-female friendships and learn to respect each other.

And all of the researchers said that they wanted to make more of an effort to listen to girls and boys and find out from them what they'd like to get out of their educations. "I don't think we know nearly enough about what boys and girls think about their own lives and think about what they need," said Phillips.

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