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Gender, Expectations, and Education:

Why Are Girls Outperforming Boys?



by Dr. Roger Wilson

Over the past couple of decades girls have surpassed boys in high school graduation rates, enrollment in AP classes, selection as valedictorians, and application to and graduation from higher education institutions, and for the first time ever, this new century witnessed more female applicants than males being accepted to professional programs such as law. Why? Are our expectations for boys in need of reconsideration, especially in a changing economy where the ability to work in a factory as a career alternative and still earn a meaningful wage is quickly diminishing? Are there other factors at play?

The history of gender access to education has clearly favored males. Since before the early colonial days in America, the education of females was seen by community elders and parents as being largely unnecessary or less necessary than their male counterparts. The traditional role of females was seen as focusing upon homemaking and child rearing, and in that capacity, the formal education of females was deemed to be of less consequence. Clearly, skills to support their traditional roles were important and those

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were often acquired from the more senior women in both the extended family and the community. Basic literacy and numeracy were important only inasmuch that as the individuals responsible for raising the family's offspring, and reading and writing were important for transmitting "the word" from the scriptures.

If we briefly examine historical educational opportunities for females in America, the early view of their lack of need to be educated was premised, in part, upon the belief that early colonial leaders were going to be either ministers of faith or lawyers, neither of which women could become. Consequently, it was not until 1920 that women were given the franchise in the US, having been denied, in part, because of the view that they were incapable of fathoming such erudite concepts as politics. The fact that the unschooled and illiterate male could vote seemed to have escaped the great thinkers of the day—being propertied was apparently equated with sufficient intellect [1].

Women have struggled historically to become educated and to be afforded the same educational opportunities as their male

counterparts. One only has to think of the work of Emma Hart Willard (1787-1870), Prudence Crandall (1803-1889) and Mary McLeod Bethune (1875-1955) to name but three. With the advent of the common school movement in Massachusetts in the mid-1800s, the precursor to today's public schools, opportunities for females to become educated were advanced, both as students in those schools, but also as a result of the fact that the movement's spread across the country witnessed a shortage of teachers, a void that was to be filled primarily by educated, middle class women.

The evolving nature of our current society from a traditional manufacturing-based economy to one requiring greater scientific and mathematical knowledge and skills as it shifts from industrial to a post-industrial state reflects the fact that many of the high paying manufacturing jobs can now be done as skillfully by workers in third world countries. The problem, notwithstanding the historical denial of educational opportunity for females and their ongoing struggles to gain their rightful place in the corporate world, is that at this moment, females might actually be better

KENT COUNTY LITERACY COACH'S NETWORK

by Susan Laninga, GVSU 1976

positioned educationally than many of our males to take advantage of the economy's shift. Our boys have long been able to fair poorly in their academic achievement and still find substantial employment in the industrial sector where wages were high, even if the work was less interesting and intellectually engaging. Over the decades, males have become habituated into the belief that, irrespective of their performance in school, there would be work for them somewhere and work that would generate a reasonable middle class lifestyle for them. But those opportunities are disappearing quickly in America as witnessed by the loss of manufacturing jobs in Michigan since 2001. Failure to gain a high school diploma is now seriously problematic. Gaining some level of higher education, be it an associate's or bachelor's degree, will become the new threshold or benchmark, if it has not already become so.

It might be argued that females have become the unintended beneficiaries of a societal practice that sets behavioral expectations for them in school, but has persisted in letting "boys be boys." The net result, so goes the argument, is that females have, through our societal expectations, developed a behavioral skill set that is more conducive to the present school experience and its study and work habits. Thus, as we examine the success of your young women in our educational institutions from kindergarten through higher education, as a gender they continually outperform their male counterparts. There are greater numbers and percentages of them than males succeeding in all the areas that are important for our society to move forward. Studies have found that high school males on the whole put greater stock in being a good athlete than planning to attend college or getting good grades [2]. Notwithstanding the importance of extra-curriculum sports in the lives of our students, how wrong-headed is such thinking? As parents, and particularly as fathers, are we not perhaps doing our sons a disservice by favoring attitudes that foster sports' participation and success at the expense of academic performance? Winning a state championship as a 17 year old is a memorable one-time experience. Having a solid education that affords significant occupational opportunity and financial reward lasts a life-time. ☺

[1] for an interesting history of women's suffrage in America, see that topic in 'wikipedia.org'

[2] *Monitoring the Future Survey: 1998.* Institute for Social Research, University of Michigan

Imagine 90 teachers in one room, excitedly talking about one topic. They gesture with their hands, their faces are animated and the room buzzes with voices filled with passion and conviction. This is a picture of the Literacy Coaches Network (LCN) of the Kent Intermediate School District. These teachers are representatives from grades Kindergarten through High School of public, charter, and Christian schools in Kent County. Their responsibilities range from full-time literacy coaches to full-time teachers who have been asked to spearhead the focus on literacy in their buildings. Some have special education degrees, others majored in reading instruction. Still others are experienced in specific content areas have years of classroom teaching experience. Many are elementary teachers, but one third have a background in secondary education. All are teacher leaders in this literacy effort.

Literacy is one of the five initiatives adopted, supported and encouraged by the Kent Intermediate Superintendents' Association (KISA). "KISA chose literacy as an initiative because of its impact across all content areas. Strong literacy skills lead to success in the classroom and increased student achievement!" said Kevin Konarska, Kent ISD Superintendent (GVSU, 1987). "We wanted to raise the level of importance of literacy as well as help unify our school districts around this important work. Working collaboratively gives it great strength. Kent ISD's role is to bring staff together to engage in conversation around 'best practices' and create an ongoing dialogue that will sustain this work through all districts."

The Kent Curriculum Council was charged to carry out this initiative. Char Firlik (GVSU, 1972) was hired to develop an action plan for literacy. She worked with county leaders to define literacy in an "Action Model for Literacy Achievement."

The framework of this model elaborates 6 facets of literacy-building:

1. Use of common standards, including curriculum, standards, vocabulary and instructional strategies.
2. Comprehensive instructional models, such as the gradual release or scaffold model.
3. Literacy instruction for content.
4. Use of common assessments and data, including classroom, grade level, building, and district data as well as state testing data.
5. Research-based intervention strategies, such as differentiation and learning styles, response to intervention models and targeted instruction.
6. Collaborative professional development using professional experts, book studies, and coaching models.

The LCN is a targeted a group of teacher leaders. The network gives them a place to come together to learn about what is happening across the nation, state, and in all of our districts regarding literacy strategies and coaching techniques, sharing their successes and their needs. After attending this coaches meeting once a month, the teachers go back to their buildings energized to work further with their staffs. Nationally and globally-recognized presenters, such as Doug Fisher, Nancy Frey, and Miriam Trehearne have come to the county to spread their knowledge and successful experiences with literacy-building. Professional development opportunities in Learning Styles (Dunn and Dunn Model), Differentiation, and Tactile/Kinesthetic strategies (Foldables) have been offered to all educators.

The LCN Leadership team, comprised of Char Firlik, Mary Stearns, Patronella Koster (GVSU, 1985), Susan Laninga (GVSU, 1976), Maureen Grey, Kailone Dunsmore, and Julia Reynolds, thoughtfully plan activities for each network meeting. Their goal is to give participants plenty of food for thought about literacy, as well as time to converse, debate and reflect. The leadership models the strategies they are teaching and give time for guided practice. The LCN has studied such books as *The Literacy Coach's Survival Guide*, by Cathy Toll, *Literacy Leadership: Six Strategies for Peoplework*, by Donald A. McAndrew, and others. Teachers discuss articles, such as "Try Feed Forward instead of Feedback," by Marshall Goldsmith and "A Framework for Shared Leadership," by Linda Lambert.

LCN members learn about change models to help them facilitate change and improvement in their buildings. They practice strategies for effective meeting design and productive professional conversations using realistic scenarios. Those with ideas that are working well share them with the group in roundtable format, effectively spreading best practices throughout the county.

Planning for next year, 2007-2008, is already underway. The group of educators who participated this year have expressed interest in continuing to learn and grow together. The look of the second year may not be the same. It may be centered around the coaches' own expressed needs and interests. Local districts have seen the value of their literacy coaches learning from those in other districts, more teachers want to participate in this training, and the probability of a second year of building teacher leaders in literacy is emerging. And most importantly, Kent County is building a true network of vibrant educators who will continue to support one another in the pursuit of literacy for all students. ☺