

Web site to accompany Ryan/Cooper *Kaleidoscope*, 11e  
Additional Articles  
Part 9 – Diversity and Social Issues

## **Shortchanging Girls and Boys**

**by Susan McGee Bailey**

### **A Classic Reading in Education**

**FOCUS QUESTION** How can teachers be fair to both boys and girls?

#### **TERMS TO NOTE**

Gender equity

Title IX

Recently gender equity in education has become a hot, or at least a “reasonably warm,” topic in education. Higher education institutions across the country are under renewed pressure to provide equal athletic opportunities for female students. The U.S. Supreme Court is considering cases involving the admission of women to all-male, state-supported military institutions. And the continued underrepresentation of women in tenured faculty positions is prompting many donors to withhold contributions to Harvard University’s fundraising campaign.

But it is at the elementary and secondary school levels that the shortchanging of girls has been most extensively documented (Wellesley College Center for Research on Women 1992, AAUW 1995, Orenstein 1994, Sadker and Sadker 1994, Thorne 1993, Stein et al. 1993). Twenty-four years after the passage of Title IX—which prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex in any educational programs receiving federal funds—

girls and boys are still not on equal footing in our nation's classrooms. Reviews of curricular materials, data on achievement and persistence in science, and research on teacher-to-student and student-to-student interaction patterns all point to school experiences that create significant barriers to girls' education. These factors have fostered widespread discussion and action among parents, educators, and policymakers.

### ***Barriers to Gender Equitable Education***

As the principal author of the 1992 study, *How Schools Shortchange Girls*, I have followed the discussion with considerable interest and mounting concern. The central problem posed in the opening pages of this report continues to be ignored in our discussions of public K–12 education

[There are] critical aspects of social development that our culture has traditionally assigned to women that are equally important for men. Schools must help girls *and* boys acquire both the relational and the competitive skills needed for full participation in the workforce, family, and community (Wellesley College Center for Research on Women 1992, p. 2).

Too much of the discussion and too many of the proposed remedies rely on simplistic formulations that obscure, rather than address, the complex realities confronting our society.

First among these are the assumptions that 1) gender equity is something “for girls only” and 2) if the situation improves for girls, boys will inevitably lose. These

constructions are dangerously narrow and limit boys as well as girls. Gender equity is about enriching classrooms, widening opportunities, and expanding choices for all students.

The notion that helping girls means hurting boys amounts to a defense of a status quo that we all know is serving too few of our students well. Surely it is as important for boys to learn about the contributions of women to our nation as it is for girls to study this information. Surely adolescent pregnancy and parenting are issues for young men as well as young women. And surely boys as well as girls benefit from instructional techniques that encourage cooperation in learning.

A second set of assumptions concerns the single-sex versus coed dichotomy. During discussions of gender equity, rarely does anyone stop to consider that coeducation, as the term is generally used, implies more than merely attending the same institution. It is usually assumed to mean a balanced experience as compared to an exclusive, one-sided, single-sex, all-female or all-male one. Thus the term itself undercuts our ability to achieve genuine coeducation by implying that it already exists.

We would do better to describe U.S. public elementary and secondary education as mixed-sex education rather than as coeducation. Girls and boys are mixed together in our schools, but they are not receiving the same quality or quantity of education—nor are they genuinely learning from and about each other. Our task is to find ways to provide the gender equitable education the term coeducation promises, but does not yet deliver.

### *Lessons from All-Girl Schools*

It may indeed be easier in an all-girl setting both to value skills, career fields, and avocations generally considered feminine *and* to encourage girls in nontraditional pursuits. Pressures on students from peers, from popular culture, and even from many adults around them all define gender stereotypic behavior as normal, expected, and successful. Particularly for young adolescents, the clarity of these stereotypes can be reassuring; questioning them can be uncomfortable and risky. In a world where being labeled a “girl” is the classic insult for boys, single-sex environments for girls can provide a refuge from put-downs and stereotypes.

But these environments may also send messages that can perpetuate rather than eliminate negative gender stereotyping. Removing girls from classes in order to provide better learning opportunities for them can imply that girls and boys are so different that they must be taught in radically different ways. When all-girl classes are set up specifically in science or math, an underlying, if unintended, message can be that girls are less capable in these subjects. Separating boys from girls in order to better control boys’ behavior can indicate that boys are “too wild” to control.

Rather than assuming that we must isolate girls in order to protect them from boys’ boisterous, competitive behavior—or that boys will be unduly feminized in settings where girls are valued and comfortable—we must look carefully at why some students and teachers prefer single-sex settings for girls. We must understand the positive aspects of these classrooms in order to begin the difficult task of bringing these positive factors into mixed-sex classes.

In U.S. public schools, this is not only a matter of good sense, but it is a matter of law. Title IX permits single-sex instruction only in very specific situations.<sup>1</sup> In doing so,

we will be moving toward genuinely coeducational environments where the achievements, perspectives, and experiences of both girls and boys, women and men, are equally recognized and rewarded whether or not they fall into traditional categories.

### ***How to Eliminate Barriers***

As long as the measures and models of success presented to students follow traditional gender stereotypes and remain grounded in a hierarchy that says paid work is always and absolutely more important and rewarding than unpaid work, that the higher the pay the more valuable the work *and* the worker who does it, we will be unfairly limiting the development of, and the opportunities available to, all our students. Gender equitable education is about eliminating the barriers and stereotypes that limit the options of *both* sexes. To move in this direction, we need to take three major steps.

- 1.** *We must acknowledge the gendered nature of schooling.* Schools are a part of society. Educators cannot single-handedly change the value structure we ourselves embody, but we can acknowledge and begin to question the ways in which gender influences our schooling. *How Schools Shortchange Girls* points out that the emotions and the power dynamics of sex, race, and social class are all present, but evaded, aspects of our classrooms. We can begin to change this by fostering classroom discussions that explicitly include these issues and that value expressions of feelings as well as recitations of facts.

2. *We must take a careful look at our own practices.* Years ago as a first-year teacher, I was proud of my sensitivity to the needs of my 6th graders. I carefully provided opportunities for boys to take part in class discussions and lead group projects in order to channel their energies in positive ways. I was equally careful to ensure that two very shy, soft-spoken girls never had to be embarrassed by giving book reports in front of the class.

Only much later did I realize that rather than helping the boys learn cooperative skills, I may merely have reinforced their sense that boys act while girls observe, and that I may have protected the girls from exactly the experiences they needed in order to overcome their initial uncertainties. Further, in protecting the girls, I also deprived the boys of opportunities to learn that both girls and boys can take the risks and garner the rewards of speaking up in class and speaking out on issues.

One technique that teachers can use to gain a picture of their classes is to develop class projects in which students serve as data collectors. Students are keen observers of the world around them. Having them keep a record of who is taking part in class can serve as a springboard for important discussions. These discussions can raise everyone's awareness of classroom dynamics, dynamics sometimes so ingrained that they have become invisible.

3. *We must learn from all-girl environments about teaching techniques and curricular perspectives that have particular appeal to girls and determine how to use these approaches successfully in mixed-sex classes.* In talking with teachers

working in all-girl environments, I hear three frequent suggestions: 1) place less emphasis on competition and speed and more emphasis on working together to ensure that everyone completes and understands the problem or project; 2) place more emphasis on curricular materials that feature girls and women; and 3) increase the focus on practical, real-life applications of mathematics and the sciences.

### ***Three Practical Suggestions***

Teachers can apply these three suggestions in mixed-sex settings. The first is the most difficult. What appears to happen naturally in all-girl settings—for example, girls' working together in an environment where they feel empowered to set the pace—must be deliberately fostered in settings where a different style has been the norm. Girls and their teachers speak of all-girl classes as places where fewer students shout out answers and interrupt one another. Teachers indicate that they deliberately work to ensure that all girls take some active part in class activities. If teachers can directly address these factors in an all-girl setting, surely we can begin to address them in mixed-sex settings.

Further, teachers must experiment with instructions and with reward systems that will encourage students to value a thorough understanding of a task as well as a quick answer, and of group success as well as individual performance. In doing so, we will be encouraging strengths many girls have developed and helping boys acquire skills that they need.

The second suggestion is also not without difficulties when transported to mixed-sex settings. As television producers have discovered, girls may watch programs with

male characters, but programs featuring girls are less likely to attract or hold boys' interests. But schools are places where students come to learn. Boys *and* girls need to learn to appreciate and value the accomplishments of women and women's groups who have succeeded in traditionally male fields: Shirley Chisholm, Indira Gandhi, Sally Ride, the Women's Campaign Fund, as well as those whose success has been in traditionally female areas of employment and avocation: Jane Addams, Mary McLeod Bethune, the Visiting Nurses Association.

In *Natural Allies, Women's Associations in American History*, Anne Firor Scott notes that "by the 1930s the landscape was covered with libraries, schools, colleges, kindergartens, museums, health clinics, houses of refuge, school lunch programs, parks, playgrounds, all of which owed their existence to one or several women's societies" (1991, p. 3). Our students—male and female—need to learn more of this work if they are to grow into adults who can carry on activities vital to our survival as a viable, humane society.

The third factor is perhaps the least problematic. Although girls may be most enthusiastic about pursuing science when they see it as relevant to daily life, boys will surely not be less interested when presented with more relevance! For teachers to develop new lesson plans and materials in the sciences, however, will require increased support from school administrators and school boards for professional development, new materials and equipment, and perhaps a reorganization of class time.

Operation Smart, an after-school informal science program for girls developed by Girls, Inc., is just one example of new relevant science programs. A unit on water pollution, for example, offers middle school and junior high school girls an opportunity

to study the effects of pollution in their own communities and to gain an understanding of the value of scientific knowledge and procedures in improving living conditions (Palmer 1994).

Mixed-sex classes can easily adapt such projects, and many have. Last year my nieces, both middle school students in mixed-sex classes in Mystic, Connecticut, eagerly showed me their science projects. Sarah's, done with her close friend Caitlin, contained several different pieces of cloth, each of which had been put through a series of trials: burned, washed, stretched, and frozen. "We thought the synthetic pieces of cloth would be stronger, but they weren't! Now we know natural material is very tough."

Aidan, a year older, collected samples of river water at points varying in distance from the mouth of the Mystic River where it joins the salt water of Fisher's Island Sound. Expecting that the water would be less salty the farther away it was from the Sound, she was surprised to find that her graph was not a straight line: a very salty sample appeared at a point quite far upriver. Trying to figure out what might account for this became the most interesting aspect of the project. For both Sarah and Aidan, science is about their own questions, not out of a book or in a laboratory and it is certainly not a boys-only activity!

### ***Moving Beyond Stereotypes***

As we move into a new century, we must leave behind our boys-only and girls-only assumptions and stereotypes. On any given measure of achievement or skill, we can find greater similarity between the average score of girls as a group and the average score of boys as a group than we can find when comparing among individual girls or among

individual boys. We must no longer allow stereotypic assumptions to guide our expectations or obscure the reality that empathy, cooperation, and competition are all important skills—and are important for all our students.

#### **NOTE**

1. Under Title IX, portions of elementary and secondary school classes dealing with human sexuality and instruction in sports that involve bodily contact may, but do not have to be, separated by sex. (Title IX Rules and Regulations of the Educational Amendments of 1972, section 86.34)

#### **REFERENCES**

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- Sadker, D., and M. Sadker, (1994). *Failing at Fairness: How America's Schools Cheat Girls*. New York: C. Scribner's Sons.
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- Stein, N., N. Marshall, and L. Tropp. (1993). *Secrets in Public: Sexual Harassment in Our Schools*. Wellesley, Mass.: The Wellesley College Center for Research on Women.

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Additional Articles

Part 9 – Diversity and Social Issues

Thorne, B. (1993). *Gender Play: Girls and Boys in School*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press.

Wellesley College Center for Research on Women. (1992). *The AAUW Report: How Schools Shortchange Girls*. Washington, D.C.: American Association of University Women Educational Foundation; reprint ed., (1995). New York: Marlowe and Company.

Susan McGee Bailey is the Executive Director of the Wellesley Centers for Women at Wellesley College, Wellesley, Massachusetts. Susan McGee Bailey, “Shortchanging Girls and Boys,” *Educational Leadership*, May 1996, pp. 75–79. Reprinted by permission of the author.

### ***POSTNOTE***

Susan Bailey has been one of the national leaders for gender equity in education, making her article one of our Classic selections. This article raises a number of hotly debated issues. Many educators agree with Bailey’s contention that certain practical steps can and should be taken to increase gender equity in our schools. Other scholars, though, have sharply criticized the body of research on which these arguments rest, debating both the methodologies and the conclusions. Indeed, some studies claim that boys, who have much higher dropout rates and significantly poorer achievement scores than girls, are the ones being shortchanged by our schools.

Bailey’s reference to findings from single-sex schools that can be applied to mixed-sex schools raises yet another issue. Research on single-sex schools by Anthony

Bryk and his colleagues demonstrates rather conclusively that girls flourish more academically in a girls-only setting. Why, then, is there not more interest in expanding single-sex education, particularly during the tumultuous preadolescent and adolescent years? From a historical perspective, coeducation or mixed-sex education is an innovation. If we are unhappy with the performance of girls and/or boys in our mixed-sex system, should we consider abandoning this innovation?

### ***DISCUSSION QUESTIONS***

1. What suggestions from single-sex schools does Bailey want to apply to mixed-sex schools?
2. What are your views on the value of single-sex education in middle schools and high schools?
3. Which group, girls or boys, do you believe is shortchanged the most in schools today?

[[End article]]

### **Reflection Assignment**

Describe a lesson that would incorporate all three of Bailey's practical suggestions for gender equity. Provide background information, such as the topic of the lesson and the age and level of the students. Be sure to provide specific detail about how you would apply each of the three suggestions.

### **Web Links**

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Visit the following websites for more information on gender equity in education, or to gather background information for the discussion questions or reflection assignment.

### **American Association of University Women**

<http://www.aauw.org/>

The national organization promotes education and equity for women and girls.

### **Gender Equity in Education**

<http://teachertech.rice.edu/Participants/mborrow/GenderEquity/gendsite.html>

Get lesson plans, and link to lots more information about how to treat both boys and girls fairly.

### **Wellesley Centers for Women**

<http://www.wcwonline.org/index.html>

Learn more about the work of Susan McGee Bailey's work and the Wellesley Centers for Women in promoting gender equity.

Shortchanging girls and boys. *Educational Leadership*, 53 (8), 75-79. McIntosh, P. (1983). Interactive phases of curricular re-vision: A feminist perspective. Working Paper 124. Wellesley, MA: Wellesley College Center for Research on Women. McIntosh, P. (1989). *White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack*. Peace and Freedom, (vol. issue?), 10-12. Failing at fairness: How America's schools cheat girls. New York, N.Y.: Touchstone Press. Sadker, D., & Sadker, M. (2004). *Teachers, schools, & society*. Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill. 22. Sadker, M., Sadker, D., & Long, L. (1993). Gender and educational equality. The American Association of University Women (AAUW) report, "How Schools Shortchange Girls," presents compelling evidence that girls are not receiving the same quality or even quantity of education as boys. The AAUW report is a synthesis of all the available research on the subject of girls in schools. It presents the rationale for a new and enlightened education policy to ensure that all children in the United States receive the very best schooling possible. Built around the recommendations from the AAUW report, this action guide provides community leaders with strategies for developing Even Boys wear short short cutoffs. I did too when I was his age. Had some really short-short cutoffs myself. Hot Boys Kids Boys Fashion 2020 Boy Fashion School Shorts Young Cute Boys Ballet Boys Boys Swimwear Leather Shorts. Security Check Required. Sissy Boys Petticoated Boys Pretty Boys Cute Girls Boys Wearing Skirts Young Girl Fashion Feminized Boys Dress Images Boy Outfits. boys in dresses. 75 best images about Sissy Boys. Math For Kids Fun Math Math Activities Math Addition Addition And Subtraction Algebra Eureka Math Singapore Math Primary Maths. Five For Friday: Number Bonds & Bar Models.