

Too Many Boys Are Failing In American Schools: What Can We Do About It?

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ABSTRACT

This research studied those factors that impact the failure of boys in American schools. Multiple areas were explored. Among the broadly investigated area were: physiological, social and cognitive. Attributing to the failure of boys included brain structure, cultural standards, teaching practices, economics, environmental factors, and familial expectations. Included among the list of negative factors attributed to the failure of boys were: poor academic performance, behavioral penalties, substance abuse, and self inflicted death. Greater emphasis was give to seeking solutions to the failure of the African American male because the data reflected higher failure rates among this group. Alternatives to these negative attributes are offered to a range of publics in soliciting their support in ameliorating the problem. Among the public are: parents, educators, community organizers, government personnel, and medical professionals.

Keywords: Education; Boys; American Schools; Failure Rates

INTRODUCTION

Across the nation school districts are concerned about the decline in the academic performance of our students. But, no group of students is more troubling than the academic performance of our male students. The literature is replete with research studies conducted on the achievement of males. To simply acknowledge the problem is insufficient and counter-productive for the nation on several fronts. Males play a positive role in the family, the economy, and the military strength of the nation. Therefore, it is critical that our boys are intellectually as well as physically fit.

Parents are the first teachers. However, the only legal obligation parents have regarding the child's education is to send them to school, as directed by their local jurisdiction. Therefore, it becomes the school's responsibility to educate the child. Where then, have our schools failed? To seek answers to this problem requires conducting research in multiple areas, namely: cognitive, physiological, and social.

For educators to be successful in ameliorating the academic failure of our boys, they must address each of the areas cited above. To do so, there should be a concerted effort to become familiar with the research. Evidence garnered from the research suggests that schools are miseducated regarding our boys. Sadker's book, Failing At Fairness, provides a list of quantitative data to support the claim that our boys are repeatedly receiving less than favorable data regarding their schooling.

Among the data are these:

- Boys receive lower report-card grades.
- Boys are far more likely to be grade repeaters.
- Boys suffer hyperactivity and stress nine times more frequently than girls.
- Boys are identified for special education more.
- Boys receive greater behavioral penalties.
- Boys comprise 70% of school suspensions.
- Boys are three times more likely to become alcohol and drug dependent
- Boys commit suicide two to three times more frequently than girls.

Gurian and Steven reported similar data in 2005, but their findings included the following:

- Boys are 80% of high school dropouts.
- Boys make up less than 44% of college populations.
- Boys, on average, are a year to a year and a half behind girls in reading and writing, according to the U.S. Department of Education. (Gurian and Stevens 2005)

Cognition

Let us examine what might be attributing factors to these data just cited. To do so, it would be helpful to determine whether there is a difference beyond the physical appearance among males and females. Learning is a cerebral process that is largely the responsibility of the trained professional teacher.

Effective cognition developed for all learners is critical to academic success. Multisensory brain training enables learners to overcome obstacles and reach their full potential. It has been found that weak underlying cognitive skills – concentration, perception, memory and logical thinking – account for the majority of learning difficulties, especially among boys.

Research has shown that cognitive skills are a determining factor of an individual's learning ability. Consequently, when cognitive skills are strong, learning is fast and easy. But, when cognitive skills are weak, learning becomes a struggle. According to Reid Lyon, reading is regarded as the most important skill that a child must acquire to meet with success in school. Here again, boys are more negatively impacted. In a study conducted by Mayo Clinic, of 5,718 children in Rochester, Minnesota, boys were two to three times more likely than girls to be affected by reading disabilities. And unfortunately approximately 20 – 30 percent of school age children have difficulty learning to read. It is believed that there are at least two factors that contribute to this reading deficit – ineffective teacher training institutions and youngster's failure to have access to the world of books and other kind of texts for learning and enjoyment. Most often these findings can be attributed to children having to be reared in low socio-economic environments, where schools are ill equipped with educational tools and resources, as well as with the assignment of the least prepared teachers to the educational institutions in these neighborhoods.

PHYSIOLOGICAL

Studying the research should shed light on how different the male student is as a learner and to propose ways that the "teachers" in his life can contribute to making the schooling journey an academically rewarding and life-changing experience. Educators who are knowledgeable about the research on how students learn and how their learning preferences are related to the way their brains are wired will be better equipped to individualize their teaching styles to meet the learning styles of their students. Fundamental to an effective teaching and learning process is understanding the physiological structure of the brain. (Gurian and Stevens, 2005)

Key factors cited below help to facilitate effective learning experiences.

- Get to know all of your students (especially boys) by knowing their names.
- Learn about their culture and academic interests.
- Show them positive academic role models in their communities.
- Present their learning experiences in a relevant manner.
- Learn to listen to students verbally and non-verbally.
- Make a positive difference in a student's life each day.
- Teach to the needs of the students.
- Ensure that all students are learning.
- Use innovative ways to present the subject.
- Use technology to enhance instructional delivery services.
- Encourage peer mentoring and academic support.

Sociological

Another issue of concern when addressing the school performance of boys is the sociological issue. Theron McInnis cites “Multi-culture Education in a Pluralistic Society,” as addressing the nature versus nurture topic governing the academic performance of boys. In many cultures, masculinity is highly valued. Thus, any behavior counter to independence, assertiveness, leadership, self-reliance, aggressiveness, toughness, and emotional stability renders the boy non-masculine, especially among his peers. Hence our boys perform to avoid labels such as sissy, gay or homosexual. These actions often get them into trouble by demonstrating negative behavior, such as harassing others, looking off in class, and doing poorly on academic tasks. For boys, gender identity is of paramount importance in studying male socialization data and academic performance. This phenomenon has been of concern among researchers. Thus, it is recommended that parents and other adult nurturers must aid in rectifying the emotional connection among boys. Michael Gurian, in Boys and Girls Learning Differently, establishes the notion that boys and girls learn differently.

As a result, boys have different educational needs that are not being met in the classrooms. Rather, the educational practices in classrooms are counter-productive for boys. Thereby, boys are viewed as ill-prepared academically. Additionally, these factors limit the number of positive male role models in school environments.

Suggestions for rectifying or ameliorating the sociological issues that have been suggested by Harris and Harper are as follow:

- Provide opportunities for critical reflections through journaling, course reading, and analyzing popular issues, and other assignments.
- Increase male student’s participation in campus activities and programs that facilitate healthy identity development that leads to productive outcomes.
- Provide opportunities for bonding by way of facilitated discussion groups and other activities that are popular among male students. (McInnis 2010)

While those data aforesated were focused on the needs of all boys, the data reported on African American boys are far more distressing. Within this at-risk group, African American adolescent males stand alone in terms of the vast array of negative factors affecting their future (Smith 2004, Comer 2000) Major areas impacting their lives long term are social behavior and intellectual performance. Also, in 2001, Alexander, Entwisle and Olson reported that African American Adolescent males were more prone to truancy and aggressive behavior in school environments than peers in other races. And, when viewing academic factors, African American adolescent males lag in skill achievement. According to the Education Trust, 61% of African American graduating students performed below basic level on an eighth grade measure of math attainment.

A closer look at the data cited above reveals factors that can have a significant bearing on these negative results. According to Carnoy, as early as the 1990’s, poverty has been consistently associated with poor achievement, with one out of three African American male adolescents being raised in poor households. In 2003, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2003) reported that 24% of adolescents attending urban schools represent the highest percentage of households at the poverty level. These students are also exposed to a lack of access to health care, inadequate nutrition, crime-redden neighborhoods, and inadequate educational facilities, all factors that mitigate against the development of well-rounded, wholesome individuals. And, further data support the need for drastic measure to be taken to “stem the tide” of failure among minority males.

- Data showing an achievement gap separating black from white students has long been documented. This social divide is extremely vexing to policy makers.
- Only 12 percent of black fourth grade boys are proficient in reading, compared with 38 percent of white boys, and only 12 percent of black eighth grade boys are proficient in math, compared with 44 percent of white boys.
- Poverty alone does not seem to explain the differences. Poor white boys do just as well as African-American boys who do not live in poverty, as measured by whether they qualify for subsidized school lunches. These data were collected from highly respected national math and reading tests, known as the

National Assessment for Educational Progress, which is given to students in fourth and eighth grades. Most recently, the report, “A Call for Change,” for public urban schools was issued in 2009.

- Data on family structure also impact children. For example, fewer than one out of three Black Americans in prime marrying/childbearing years is married. This is a primary reason for the high out-of-wedlock birthrates. Therefore, it can be noted that an education system failing a generation of boys is going to produce unprecedented human misery for children, women and for the men themselves.

http://www.nypost.com/p/news/opinion/opedcolumnists/the_nation_schools_are_failing_boys_nvjstdJ0OEupWcNtrm1wUN#ixzz1mEekYP5r

Regrettably, the very institutions (the home and the school) that could have the most positive impact on reversing the downward trend are rendered inadequate. What then might be some solutions to this problem?

Several research studies, propose the recommendations that follow:

- In addition to providing extra school resources through Title I funding, that students be provided Take Home Education Kits, since there are very few educational resources in the homes;
- Infuse the curriculum with positive cultural expression and heritage of minority populations;
- Select school personnel with strong academic skills and human relations skills, as well as experience in minority communities;
- Provide the school with large pools of voluntary tutorial support;
- Structure a longer school day; and
- Extend the school year to include enrichment activities that incorporated skill development in reading and mathematics.

In the articles, “His Story” and “The Key to Black Male Academic Success: Mentorship,” Daniels proclaims that Black men are not taking Black male students’ academic under-achievement as seriously as they need to.

According to a study conducted by the University of Kentucky entitled “Preventing Youth Delinquency and Identifying School Risk and Protective Factors,” it was suggested that school-level characteristics can help minimize the risks for delinquency. Among the school level positive factors that prevent youth delinquency are:

- Small enrollments
- Fewer rules
- More Positive adult enter-action with students
- More family involvement
- More money per pupil on instruction
- Better building conditions
- School-wide academic focus
- Hands-on, active teaching styles
- Students on task and engaged
- More supportive administration
- Higher staff collegiality and morale
- Proactive discipline philosophy
- Included all school employees in planning for student success
- Include students in making school policy decisions
- Involved each teacher in an extra curriculum activity
- Involve all teachers and administrators in the Advisor- Advisee program, and
- Institute Positive Behavior Management Programs

Christie CA., Nelson, CM, Jolivette, K, Riney, M.D. (2002 – 2003)

In view of these data, how should educations and the community at large proceed? Boys do not live in a vacuum, and they do not just learn at school. Opportunities to learn are everywhere and at all times. It will take the whole village to educate young men successfully: parents, community, and teachers.

CONCLUSION

Today's societal changes require revised and redesigned roles for parent groups, schools, and communities. These entities, of necessity, are interdependent; they must become more collaborative and supportive in their efforts to improve the American Educational System. The nuclear family is a vanishing phenomenon. Contributing factors are industrial mobility, the demise of the traditional family, high divorce rates, teenage parenting, and high teacher turnover.

For lasting results, the coming together of parents, school personnel, and community representatives must be more than a listing of volunteers prominently displayed on a school's front-hallway bulletin board as a coalition. These groups must unite in support of male students. This coalition of stakeholders should be known to these students as persons who contribute to their well-being, both inside and outside the school. Boys must be able to speak about tangible and intangible "gifts" that these persons have deposited in their lives. Through awareness and training sessions on male differences and team building, individuals on a team will become more effective in their relationships among each other and in their interactions and bonding experiences with male students. Team members have the awesome responsibility and rewarding experience of knowing that they help to keep boys from falling behind in school and life.

The suggested strategies to promote attachment are cited below in an abbreviated form are extracted from the work of Gurian, Stevens, and Crum. While those authors propose that these strategies should be used early in a child's life, these strategies are included here, with more advance descriptions, because attachment is vital to young men as they confront the challenges of life. In addition, it is likely that the failures of the male population could be attributed to the fact that they may not have experienced many of these strategies as they were maturing. But, if not then, why not now? These are among the critical attachment strategies:

- Attention – showing a boy that he is worthy of one's time
- Affirmation – validating positives with words of praise or rewards
- Choice making – developing independence and decision making
- Formulate Olympics of the mind teams

What does society really want? In the final analysis, there must be a realistic look at what society's long range goals are for the maintenance of a viable life style.

The issues before us follow:

- We want husbands and fathers ourselves and for our children, who are confident, successful, and able to work in support of their families.
- The problem is not that women are doing well; it's that men are not doing as well as they need to. The two genders cannot be pitted against one another without all losing.
- The data from the Pew Research Center states that today's women are marrying men who are less educated. Twenty-eight percent of wives aged 30 to 44 years old have more education than their husbands, compared to 19 percent of husbands who are better educated than their wives, and one in four wives now substantially earns more than their husbands.
- When men fail, fewer women get married. Since 1970, the proportion of 30 to 44 year olds who are married dropped from 84 percent to 60 percent. By 2007 for Black families, the marriage rate had dropped to 33 percent.
- Wolfers' 2007 study, "The Paradox of Declining Female Happiness," notes that "By many objective measures the lives of women in the United States have improved over the past 35 years. Yet, measures of subjective well-being indicate that women's happiness has declined both absolutely and relatively to men's happiness."

In conclusion, concerted effort on the part of families, schools and other community agencies must engage in more collaborative undertakings to cultivate a more caring and productive society.

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