

## The Rise of Women: The Growing Gender Gap in Education and What it Means for American Schools

reviewed by Sarah Jane Twomey – April 13, 2015

**Title:** The Rise of Women: The Growing Gender Gap in Education and What it Means for American Schools

**Author(s):** Thomas A. Diprete & Claudia Buchmann

**Publisher:** Russell Sage Foundation, New York

**ISBN:** 0871540517, **Pages:** 296, **Year:** 2013

Search for book at [Amazon.com](http://Amazon.com)



This book examines gender differences in educational performance through the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries in the United States. The authors analyze the problem from global and local perspectives, stating the heterogeneous nature of gender identity within the intersections of race, social class, and ethnicity. Using synthesis of large data sets, the authors study how educational policy as well as school, peer, and family environments have contributed to this gap and its effect on labor market and economic outcomes. The primary goal of the book is to address the current low college completion rate of males primarily in the middle third of academic distribution of completion (p. 7). The book explores why K-12 schools do not adequately prepare boys for college. The authors conclude by noting the need to develop policy interventions and changes in educational practices that can support American boys who are academically underachieving and unprepared for college.

This book makes a timely contribution to the recent US national educational policy initiative, Race to the Top, and its resulting 2012 Common Core Standards, which have created sweeping curriculum reform across the United States. The rationale for said educational reform is directly related to the aim of this book, which is to understand and address ways in which to prepare American students to be college and career ready.

The book presents a wide range of perspectives on why boys are falling short in academic achievement and, therefore, college completion. The authors argue convincing causes for the male shortfall at all levels of education, presenting gendered normative attitudes toward school as a primary cause. For example, the oppositional culture, which is often characterized as ‘hegemonic masculinity’ depicts identification with school and willingness to work hard for grades as unmasculine” (p. 203). The authors show evidence for how boys do not put as much effort into school and display a deficit in social and behavioral skills needed for higher academic achievement (p. 201). The conclusions reached are quite general. Causes for the gender gap are explored such as the feminization of schooling in coeducational settings (p. 159); possible solutions include increasing single gendered schools and male teacher role models (p. 165). The book includes numerous graphics of extensive data the authors used in their study. The book’s 30 pages of references are also very useful for those interested in related research.

Although the authors state that the book is more focused on the relationship between gender and educational achievement (p. 19) than gender identity, the authors miss significant developmental research based on gender identity that would provide another level of complexity to their analysis (Gilligan, 1982; Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Gilligan, Lyons, & Hanmer, 1990; Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Pipher, 1994; Neubauer, 1992; Eckert, 1989; Ornstein, 1994). Historically, developmental theory had established masculine experience and competence as a baseline against which both men’s and women’s development was then judged; often to the detriment or misreading of women (Belenky, et al, p. 7). Belenky and Gilligan’s groundbreaking work in the 1980’s about the relational lives of adolescent girls provided such a framework in which, for the first time in American psycho-sociological research, girls development was determined not in relation to boys, but rather with a unique and distinctive moral framework premised on care and justice. Diprete and Buchmann have chosen to take up the gender gap within a binary construct of gender as defined in relation to what males are not achieving compared to girls, rather than defining the male and female experience as separate and distinctive experiences (gender difference theory). For example, the authors state “. . . girls may work harder in school because they receive greater intrinsic satisfaction from high academic performance than do boys” (p. 204). This binary construction of gender can oversimplify the complex and differing nature of identity development for males and females, contributing to a misreading of

females within the male construct of achievement.

The title *The Rise of Women*, suggests there is a discourse of girlhood that promises an ideal of possibilities and freedom to go beyond the old ideas of femininity. Walkerdine, Lucey, & Melody (2001) state that this new “post feminist assertion of girl power and the idea of an active and powerful femininity” (p. 175) is a discourse that fits the notion of a neo-liberal subject that can be anything she decides. However, Walkerdine (2003) state that this discourse ignores or fictionalizes the barriers that still determine who gets what:

They face a girl power that tells them they can be what they want in a labor market that cruelly sets limits on any ambition, together with an education system that classifies them as fit for certain kinds of work depending on their academic capabilities. (p. 21)

The 1992 report by the American Association of University Women identified that girls were not receiving the same quality or quantity of education as the boys and that by age fifteen girls’ self esteem had plummeted. The result of girls not showing interest in the physical or computer sciences in the 1980’s was presented as not only the result of an achievement gap, but a confidence gap (Ornstein, 1994). Diprete & Buchmann argue that women have overcome this gendered academic and confidence gap. Although this appears as a leveling of the ‘playing field’ in that girls consistently outperform boys academically “at all stages of education” (p. 11), women still face very different barriers to economic prosperity as adults. Despite the fact that the authors show consistent evidence for the gender gap between white boys and white girls is narrowing in education, young women still graduate from college with a growing income gap and a larger debt load (American Association of University Women, 2013). Women in 2011 earn less than men overall in every occupation and poverty rates are higher for women in every ethnic and racial group, making on average 77 cents for every dollar that a man makes (Institute for Women’s Policy Research, 2013). Diprete and Buchmann’s book reinforces what is already known—women are still hugely underrepresented in higher paying STEM occupations. Although some states are showing progress, girls are still significantly missing (fewer than one in four) from high paying jobs in science, technology, engineering, and math despite the fact that they show 80% enrollment in career and technical education postsecondary programs (Institute for Women’s Policy Research, March 2013).

This celebratory discourse of girl power implied by “Women on the Rise” is problematic and misleading in terms of how adolescent females are struggling to find ways to articulate the sexism that they experience in school. A recent study of ‘smart girls’ from Canada (Pomerantz & Raby, 2011), suggests that girls still struggle with incidents of sexism in school amidst the contradictory message that equality has been achieved. This study showed how ‘smart’ girls perceived their capacity to “handle everything all at once” and to not only be ‘smart’, but sexy and ‘hot’ within a seamlessly integrated girl identity that is very much dependent on an individualized responsibility to perform as a ‘supergirl’ (p. 557). This super girl or girl power discourse is also persuasive within a global understanding of what has been researched as the ‘girl effect’ (Moeller, 2013). This effect positions girls as “disproportionately responsible” for ending global issues of extensive proportion, like poverty, not just for their own family, but for their communities, nations, and the world (p. 620). It is not surprising that these overachieving girls are also developing psychological illnesses in relation to behaviors in schools, with recent research from Sweden showing how putting responsibilities on the girls themselves neglects the material and discursive environment of schools in co-constituting these illnesses (Taguchi & Palmer, 2013). We also know that one in three women on both a national and global scale will experience some kind of sexual violence in their lifetime, 70% of those victims before the age of 25. Four in ten adolescents experience some kind of intimate partner violence (US Dept of Health and Human Service 2013). The more recent awareness of sexual violence on college campuses in the United States is another indication of the need to address white patriarchal discourses of masculinity, not unrelated to hegemonic masculine discourses that perpetuate boys’ underachievement.

Despite the book’s lack of significant focus on why girls are perhaps ‘over’ achieving to their detriment (and a continuing significant wage gap), the authors contribute empirically rich data to explore the causes of boys’ underachievement. A significant contribution to the field is the important finding of the value of non-cognitive skills in predicting academic achievement and college completion. Also compelling is the finding that boys benefit from having girls in their classroom (p. 165). The authors’ conclude that boys lack of “high expressive attachment” to school can be accommodated with more “instrumental” attachment through school based policies and instructional practices that value academic achievement within a dual male identity (p. 147).

To summarize, the book presents many possible causes for male under achievement in America, reminding educators of the powerful role they play in contributing to school-based interventions that might accommodate hegemonic masculine identities and still challenge male stereotypes that continue to influence the male shortfall in education. What this means for American schools is the need not only to provide a climate of test-driven academic achievement, but also to create policy interventions that support academic cultures in our schools and that foster curiosity and creativity. The book is a reminder of work that still needs to be done to provide a large portion of American students the pathway to a promising future despite

the constructions of race, social class, or gender.

### References

American Association of University Women. 1992. How schools shortchange girls. Washington, DC: AAUW Educational Foundation; National Education Association.

American Association of University Women. 2013. Women in Community Colleges: Access. Washington, DC: AAUW Educational Foundation; National Education Association

Belenky, M. F., Clinchy, B. M., Goldberger, N. R., & Tarule, J. M. (eds) (1986) *Women's ways of knowing. The development of self, voice and mind*. New York, NY: Basic Books.

Brown, L. M. & Gilligan, C. (1992) *Meeting at the crossroads: Women's psychology and girls' development*. New York, NY: Ballantine Books.

Eckert, P. (1989) *Jocks and burnouts: Social categories and identity in high school*. New York, NY: Teachers College.

Gilligan, C. (1982) *In a different voice: Psychological theory and women's development*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Gilligan, C., Lyons, N. P., & Hanmer, T. J. (Eds) (1990) *Making connections. The relational world of adolescent girls at Emma Willard School*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2013. Women and girls still missing from career and technical education in high paying fields. Some states showing progress.

<http://www.iwpr.org/press-room/press-releases/women-and-girls-still-missing-from-career-and-technical-education-in-high-paying-fields-some-states-showing-progress>

Retrieved November 28, 2013.

Moeller, K. (2013). Proving "the Girl Effect": Corporate knowledge production and educational intervention. *International Journal of Educational Development* 33(6), 612-621.

Neubauer, J. (1992) *The Fin-de-Siècle culture of adolescence*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Ornstein, P. (1994) *Schoolgirls: Young women, self esteem and the confidence gap*. New York, NY: Doubleday.

Pipher, M. (1994) *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the lives of adolescent girls*. New York, NY: Putnam.

Pomerantz, S., Raby, R. & Stefanik, A. (2013). Girls run the world? Caught between sexism and postfeminism in the school. *Gender and Society* 27(2), 185-207.

Taguchi & Palmer, 2013 A more 'livable' school? A diffractive analysis of the performative enactments of girls' ill-/well-being with (in) school environments. *Gender and Education* 25(6), 671-687.

US Department of Health and Human Services. 2013. Teen Dating Violence—Awareness and Prevention. Retrieved Nov 28, 2013 from <http://www.hhs.gov/ash/oah/news/e-updates/eupdate-11.html>

Walkerdine, V., Lucey, H., & Melody, J. (2001) *Growing up girl: Psychosocial explorations of gender and class*. London: Palgrave.

Walkerdine, V. (2003) Reclassifying upward mobility: Femininity and the neo-liberal subject, *Gender and Education*, 15, 237-248.

Cite This Article as: *Teachers College Record*, Date Published: April 13, 2015

<http://www.tcrecord.org> ID Number: 17929, Date Accessed: 9/26/2016 12:39:11 PM