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# When will we accept that boys will be boys?

It seems that, after years of the education system discriminating against girls, the reverse is now the case

**T**HE STRUGGLE for gender equality is one that starts in the classroom. Girls have long demanded that the education system afford them the same opportunities historically offered to their male counterparts.

However, recent trends, particularly evident in the reporting of results achieved in State examinations, consistently suggest that girls are now outperforming boys across the board. Instead of welcoming this as a positive development, we might examine whether it means, in fact, that we are failing our boys.

Data compiled by the State Examinations Commission shows girls achieving a greater number of As, Bs and Cs than boys across almost all subjects at both ordinary and higher level. Female students excel by the narrowest margin, of 1 per cent, in higher level maths, traditionally a male preserve not even offered in many all-female schools.

In my own school, my Leaving Cert class was the first to sit honours maths. Prior to that, we mathematically adept girls were expected to cross the road to the local boys' school and sit with them – an unpalatable prospect.

These trends are repeated internationally and are generally attributed to the greater emotional maturity of 17- and 18-year-old girls, plus the fact that by their very nature girls tend to prepare more diligently for exams.

This emerging imbalance is likely to result in male confidence being undermined, with male students becoming disheartened when faced with the prospect of being constantly outperformed.

This reversal of fortunes is indicative of a problem in the education system and an inadequacy in the methods used to gauge a student's ability. In the great scheme of things, females are not more intelligent than males: they are as intelligent. The system of measurement adopted simply seems to suit them better.

In order to address this disparity, a growing neuroscience lobby in the UK is advocating that boys and girls be treated differently in the classroom. Leading the charge is an organisation called Brainsex Matters.

According to neuropsychologist and Brainsex Matters founder, Dr Anne Moir, "There has seldom been a greater divide between what intelligent, enlightened opinion presumes – that men and women have the same brain – and what science knows: that they do not."

Moir believes an understanding of our distinctive gender-based brain circuitry explains why men and women respond so differently to the same emotional and situational triggers.

Blackawton Primary School in Devon has adopted policies designed to take account of such differences in brain structure, function and connectivity between boys and girls that affect the way they learn.

The school has attempted to implement the findings of neuroscientific studies by designing a learning experience adapted to the differing needs of boys and girls.

During a recent edition of *Woman's Hour* on BBC Radio Four, headmaster of Blackawton, Dave Strudwick, said: "There is a potential danger that we do things because that's what schools do rather than [because it's] the best way to learn. One of the things that science helps to do is to [raise our] awareness of the complexity of the brain and the way that we learn."

Due to its focus on the fact that different children learn in different ways, the school encourages expression through art, drama and more controversial activities such as the encouragement of play-fighting among boys.

There is an argument to be made that too much focus on behaviour management in the primary classroom may result in teachers praising behaviour that comes more easily to girls than boys: writing neatly and sitting quietly.

It would be preferable to explore innovative ways of improving overall classroom concentration and achievement. After all, playing with Lego is an equally valid method of developing motor skills and may be more stimulating for little boys than writing.

Opponents suggest that an approach tailored along gender lines merely reinforces dangerous stereotypes. They believe that learning experiences should meet the needs of the individual rather than bluntly differentiating between boys and girls.

Dr Paul Howard-Jones, senior lecturer in education at the University of Bristol's Graduate School of Education, believes that tailoring the learning experience to the requirements of the individual child is the most workable solution, saying, "We are learning so much about the brain now. It just seems crazy that we are not using more of this knowledge to improve education."

An alternative school of thought suggests that the solution lies in delaying formal learning until both boys and girls are emotionally mature enough to cope, certainly a more easily implemented and less costly approach.

Steve Biddulph, Australian psychologist and author of *Raising Boys*, claims that boys' fine motor development (essential when holding a pencil, for example) is slower and that they should start school a year later than girls the same age.

The *Cambridge Primary Review*, the most comprehensive inquiry into English primary education for 40 years, proposes a delay in the start of formal schooling until the age of six and an increased focus on structured play until this age is reached.

Across the Border the Department of Education in Northern Ireland is advocating a school starting age of six. Here in Ireland, statistics from the De-

partment of Education show that almost 50 per cent of children start school at age four despite the fact that the law allows a child to delay until their sixth birthday. Irish children generally enter formal education earlier than their continental counterparts.

John Carr, general secretary of the Irish National Teachers' Organisation, believes that school starting age should reflect the readiness of the individual child. He is quoted as saying, "Among the things parents will need to look at are independence, self-confidence and interaction with other children. Social skills are a key factor."

Whatever the reasons leading to a female majority among university graduates and boys apparently struggling in our classrooms, the certainty is that this is something that must be addressed.

**ELEANOR  
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**Too much emphasis on the wrong kind of activities in school can leave boys feeling unstimulated.**