The Potential Bias of Schools Toward Girls Over Boys

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One has probably heard a great deal about how all of contemporary society is set up to favor men over women. One may thus be surprised to learn that there is a critical and ongoing discussion underway about how schools may be set up in such a way that are designed more for girls than they are for boys. The purpose of the present sample essay provided by Ultius is to delve more deeply into this discussion. The essay will begin with a general overview of the issue under consideration here. Then, it will proceed to discuss the most powerful argument on behalf the idea that schools are designed for girls more than they are by boys, which has been put forth by Christina Hoff Sommers. After this, it will consider the contrary feminist perspective that schools are in fact biased toward and not against boys. Finally, the essay will engage in a critical evaluation that concludes that Sommers is in fact by and large correct in her position.

It may be appropriate to begin this discussion by citing the following passage written by Mulrine (qtd. in Chapman): "Across the country, boys have never been in more trouble: They earn 70 percent of the D's and F's that teachers dole out. . . . They are the culprits in a whopping 9 of 10 alcohol and drug violations and the suspected perpetrators in 4 out of 4 crimes that end up in juvenile court. They account for 80 percent of high school dropouts and attention deficit disorder diagnoses" (para. 2). In short, boys are clearly in a great deal more trouble than girls when it comes to a wide range of metrics pertaining to students' experiences with the school system. This much would seem to be a matter of indisputable objective fact: the numbers pretty much say it all.

Conceptually, though, this leaves open two main possibilities. The first is that boys are just somehow intrinsically less suited for education than girls are; but the second is that the school system itself is somehow designed in such a way that it is biased against boys. This latter perspective is the one that will be the focus of the present discussion. As Fink has written, for instance: "Boys today aren't fundamentally different than the boys of 150 years ago. Yet today, they're confined to classrooms, expected to remain still for the majority of the day, and barely allowed to tackle meaningful labor of the real world until they reach the magical age of 18. Is it any wonder our boys are struggling?" (para. 12). The point here would seem to be that boys, more so than girls, have natural instincts and impulses that are mercilessly repressed by the school system as it stands today, and that this design of the system as a whole is primarily responsible for the disproportional failure of boys in schools.

In general, this issue is also exacerbated that the failure of boys is often not seen as a critical issue by many key stakeholders in society. In part, this is because girls would be the demographically weaker group relative to boys, just as Blacks would be the demographically weaker group relative to Whites; so, just as people often do not take the economic plight of Whites as seriously as the economic plight of Blacks, people also do not take the failure of boys as seriously as they may the failure of girls. This is how Whitmire has put the matter: "Higher education leaders, who feel that they are blameless in the boy troubles and have reaped the benefits of ever-rising numbers of female applicants, look the other way" (para. 11). In other words, the failure of boys can relatively look like the success of girls, and the success of girls is a very good thing, in terms of the normative narrative of feminism. This often causes the independent issue of the failure of boys within the school system—or the school system's failure of boys—to get relatively swept under the rug.

The most trenchant and articulate version of the argument that the school system has failed boys has been put forth by Christina Hoff Sommers. One of Sommers' main points is that the narrative that girls are worse than boys at school is just blatantly and patently false: "far from being shy and demoralized, today's girls outshine boys. They get better grades. They have higher educational aspirations. They follow more-rigorous academic programs and participate in advanced-placement classes at higher rates. . . . Girls, allegedly timorous and lacking in confidence, now outnumber boys" in a wide range of student organizations ("War," para. 5). According to Sommers, then, there is virtually no evidence whatsoever for the assertion that schools are designed in such a way that boys are privileged over girls. Her entire thesis is that the truth is very much the other way around: there would seem to be something about the school system as a whole that alienates boys and actually privileges girls instead.

Part of Sommers' argument is that feminist ideology has been to a large extent responsible for bringing about this state of affairs. As she has pointed out: "In the view that has prevailed in American education over the past decade, boys are resented, both as the unfairly privileged sex and as obstacles on the path to gender justice for girls. . . . [But] the research commonly cited to support claims of male privilege and male sinfulness is riddled with errors" (para. 4). In short, the actual empirical evidence would seem to suggest that at least as far as the school system goes, no such privilege exists, and that the bias actually runs in very much the opposite direction. According to Sommers, blindness to this simple fact is the result of the dominance of feminist ideology: feminists have created a narrative in which women are the victims of men; and since the school system's failure of boys does not fit that narrative, it is conveniently just left out.

Sommers has also made a recommendation regarding how to improve education for boys: "For one thing, we must acknowledge that boys and girls are different. In many education and government circles, it remains taboo to broach the topic of sex differences. Many gender scholars insist that the sexes are cognitively interchangeable . . . Meanwhile, one gender difference refuses to go away: Boys are languishing academically, while girls are soaring" ("Make," para. 7). In other words, Sommers' recommendation, like her criticism, is primarily ideological in nature: she is suggesting that the feminist insistence that there is no cognitive difference between boys and girls has led to a situation in which empirical facts are ignored, generally at the expense of boys and not girls. This state of affairs is starkly ignored by the dominant discourse on this subject, which continues to insist, on the basis of a false ideology, that girls are the ones who are marginalized and oppressed by the school system. According to Sommers, this is quite decidedly not the case at all, and there is no correspondence between ideology on the one hand and reality on the other.

It is now worth turning a little attention to the feminist perspective so harshly criticized by Sommers. This is how Trueman has articulated this perspective: "Feminists believe that the education system is patriarchal and dominated by men, just like the work force is. Feminists argue that the education system is just a primary preparation for leading into the future work force. They believe there are still gender differences in subject choice in schools" (para. 2). According to the feminist perspective, then, schools are an institution of society, and insofar as society as a whole is dominated by patriarchy, it naturally follows that schools will also be dominated by patriarchy (see Beauvoir). That is, they would be naturally biased toward the success of boys and not girls.

From this perspective, the complaint that boys are not performing as well as girls could be interpreted as emerging from a kind of resentment that itself emerges from wounded male privilege. That is, in a similar way to how Whites may resent it when Blacks gain success within society, men may resent it when women gain success within schools. However, this would be reflective not of any intrinsic problem with the situation but rather with one class of people having become accustomed to being unjustly socially superior to another class of people. What may seem like failure may thus simply consist of a leveling of the playing field: perhaps boys were always "failing," and this has now only become apparent as girls are finally meeting with success. In short, the argument could be made that there is a kind of relativism at play here that makes the failure of boys today more or less unproblematic. Rather, it would perhaps be better to celebrate the success of girls.

Comparing Sommers' perspective on the issue of schools favoring girls to the feminist perspective on the same, it is more or less self-evident that all of the actual evidence is on the side of Sommers. Her argument is based on objective facts and statistics, and not on abstract ideological speculation. On the other hand, the feminist perspective would seem to be based on almost nothing but on such speculation, when it comes to the issue under consideration here. There is virtually not one shred of actual evidence to support the contention that schools are designed in such a way that they favor boys over girls, in light of the overwhelming numbers regarding the success of girls relative to boys. Moreover, it can also be pointed out that a feminism that could actually take pleasure in this failure of boys is clearly reflective of the worst kind of ideology, and that such sentiments should have no place whatsoever within the sphere of public policy in a democratic society.

The only possible thing that could be said in favor of the feminist perspective is that the failure of boys is perhaps due less to structural factors within schools than to differences in motivational levels between boys and girls that must be attributed to some other, as yet undefined variable. This line of thought, however, becomes tenuous fast; and insofar as it is the actual duty of the school system to ensure the success of all students in an equitable way, it would be the role of the school system itself to identify and address that unknown variable in an effective way. When an entire population (in this case, boys) does worse than an entire other population (girls), this cannot really be attributed to anything other than structural factors within the system itself, especially when it is the job of the system to address any other variables that may be responsible for these structural factors. It can thus be suggested that the feminist perspective more or less has its head in the clouds, whereas Sommers' analysis clearly has its feet on the ground.

In summary, the present essay has consisted of a discussion of the potential issue of schools being designed in such a way that they favor boys over girls. After providing a general overview of the issue and considering the opposing perspectives on this issue, the essay has reached the critical conclusion that the school system as it stands today very clearly does favor boys over girls. All of the actual empirical evidence is behind this conclusion, whereas there is nothing but abstract ideological speculation behind the contrary perspective. Whatever the real issues of patriarchy and gender bias against women may be within society at large, it is clear enough that no analogy can be made to the situation within the educational system today, in terms of the actual empirical achievements of boys versus girls. It is thus time to drop the ideology and address the real issue at hand.

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