

Battle of the sexes

The latest research has found girls to be outperforming boys more than ever. (Tess Sept....) Teaching to different learning styles has been the favoured response to tackle the gender achievement gap. Schools' impact will be limited however until they grasp the implications of the fundamental differences between male and female motives and subsequent approaches to learning – differences that increase with age.

The need for belonging is fundamental but males and females seek it in different ways. The main female motive is intimacy and girls define themselves in terms of their close relationships. In contrast the key male drive is to distinguish oneself from others and males' self-definition is based on their individuality. Males' upbringing and roles emphasise collective aspects of the world and they seek status within large groups. Girls' greater interest in emotional housekeeping and group maintenance make them more likely to adjust to schools than boys who prefer not to be controlled by others. Female accommodation and male control is illustrated by who dominates the TV remote control in most living rooms!

Everyone is motivated to seek a sense of worth but given their different motives the source of worth varies between boys and girls as well as the strategies used to protect or enhance their worth. Boys' self-evaluations are not greatly influenced by what others think of them, unlike girls and some can in fact self enhance in the face of disapproval. They commonly enjoy inflated egos based on exaggerated judgements of their abilities. For example boys generally think they are more intelligent than girls who underestimate their ability. Females tend to have more 'feet on the ground' expectations compared to the often 'over the top' expectations of males. Maybe that's why more females pass their driving test at the first attempt. Teachers can praise boys' lack of realism as willingness to have a go and unwittingly reinforce goals that are destined to lead to disappointment. It is more helpful to encourage an accurate match between aspirations and skills and boys benefit from tasks being broken down into realistic steps.

Females' contingent esteem leaves them vulnerable to criticism in comparison to males for whom it goes in one ear and out the other. The tendency to broaden a specific criticism into a general sense of failure reflects female self-identity goals compared to the more pragmatic goals that males seek. Negative feedback to girls needs to be balanced with reminders of positive aspects and reassurances that the problems can be remedied. Arrogant boys need to be criticised in ways that counter their capacity to shrug off deficiencies and stress that the criticism is important and justified. For both genders a clear distinction needs to be made between disapproval of their work or behaviour from them as people.

Girls typically get together in non-hierarchical groups characterised by close friendships and co-operation. The male group is hierarchical within which boys vie for status. Consequently they don't like to ask for help (or directions!) because they don't want anyone to know they are in difficulty.

Because of their competitiveness boys are more likely to have a self-promotion mindset while girls tend to favour self-improvement goals. The male goal is to look smart while the female goal is to get smarter. Boys are energised when comparisons are made between themselves and their peers, as in quizzes and will feel good when comparisons highlight their superiority. Girls feel better when comparison suggests similarity with classmates. As showing ability is more important for boys, they protect themselves if failure is on the cards and their ability is on the line. They do this by finding excuses or using self-handicapping strategies like playing up in class or defence mechanisms such as procrastination.

It is often thought boys don't like praise. Younger boys enjoy acclaim from teachers but personalised praise can be counterproductive with teenage boys for whom indirect forms works best. Because of their need for group status males are motivated by anything that signals rank. Girls are more interested in success for its own sake. Thus in adulthood men feel obliged to go for higher status jobs even if they don't really want them or think they can do them while women only apply if they want them and think they are good enough.

Because of their need for control, males don't like being in a situation where they are not in control- like going to the doctor. Punishment is problematic with certain boys who display an "I'll show you can't hurt me" mentality. Private punishment provides less incentive for boys to challenge the teacher. Some punishments do no more than provide boys with status within the group. Getting into trouble doesn't play well within female groups and most girls are likely to be humiliated by punishment and so find group reprimands less demeaning. Girls learn they can't retaliate and so develop subtle ways to disguise their hostility towards a teacher by for example gossiping about them or making up a funny nickname they share with peers.

Teaching is about helping children become self-regulating by gradually supporting their autonomy. Boys paradoxically have a greater urge for autonomy but also a greater need for structures to enable that autonomy. This need can be met through fairness and a clear sense of direction and purpose, time limits and rules. Eventually their ambition, high self-esteem, competitiveness and focused interest enables males to achieve more than females who tend to have multiple goals and balanced priorities. The first challenge for schools is to strike a balance between reminding boys of their responsibilities while meeting their desire for self-determination. This tension can be resolved by imposing authority then gradually in a staged approach letting go of the reins and providing increasing opportunities for negotiation. All the fuss has surrounded boys' underachievement but the fact that girls are doing better doesn't mean schools have got it right. The second challenge is to prevent girls from throwing away their head start by encouraging a greater sense of individuality- without turning them into egocentric males.

