



Key Concepts

- ⇒ There are significant gender differences in achievement that do not remain constant across disciplines.
- ⇒ The magnitude of these differences changes on level of student achievement, socio-economic status, type of testing, mental health, age & attitude.
- ⇒ Boys may spend less time reading because their genres of choice are perceived as less worthy or appropriate.
- ⇒ Girls' use of computers develops in such a manner that they do not develop career-related skills as successfully as boys.
- ⇒ Gender equity cannot be obtained through equality of services.



Reducing the Gender Gap in Education: A Literature Review of Evidence, Policy & Practice



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It is generally recognized that boys and girls are different in many respects, including in the way they learn and how they socialize. In fact, the many ways in which the genders differ have been subject to abundant research both in the social sciences and education. Interestingly, research has indicated that our 'common knowledge' or beliefs about gender differences can sometimes be misleading in that they may not reflect what is observed in rigorous and controlled studies. One example is the widespread belief that boys and girls make homogeneous groups, that is, all boys are alike the same way that all girls are alike. This generalization of who boys and girls are, is at the basis of another common belief, that is, that boys are worse than girls in language-based subjects. This review shows that this is a simplistic view of the problem and one that does not accurately reflect the complex nature of the gender gap in education.

Gender differences are influenced by a myriad of physiological and socio-environmental factors, which make it difficult to identify what the primary contributors are to specific gender inequalities. However, it has been repeatedly proven that boys and girls have similar cognitive abilities suggesting that cultural or environmental factors, rather biological ones, are implicated in gender differences in learning and education.

It is therefore necessary to make the distinction between the physiology of individuals, and gender. As a social construct, gender is a modifiable characteristic that is often unknowingly influenced by the surrounding culture and social conditions. This means that differences in academic achievement between boys and girls may be explained by differences in social and contextual factors.

With the above considerations in mind, this review: describes the extent to which a gender gap exists in education; discusses the specific aspects of school outcomes that are implicated in the gender gap; discusses the factors that are implicated in the determination of the gender gap (is the gap a general phenomenon or does it relate to specific groups of students?); and discusses some of the policy frameworks and school initiatives that have been implemented in the attempt to reduce the gender gap in education.

One concept this review reaffirms quite clearly is that while schools are among the primary influences in determining learning outcomes among children, there are other important factors, 'external' to the school and classroom that are implicated in how children learn. This concept firmly holds when considering differences between boys' and girls' school outcomes. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge that schools are in a strategic position to effectively reduce the gender gap in education, but to achieve such a goal schools need to be open to reach beyond subject-specific curriculum boundaries: what children bring into the school from their home environments greatly affects how they learn and, to a large extent, our societal beliefs and attitudes about gender roles are often invisible but powerful determinants of gender gap. Another important concept that has emerged from the analysis of the literature is that in order to offer equal opportunity in education and achieve *gender equity*, school policies and practices must not strive for *equality* (whereby all students are treated in the same way or are offered the same services/interventions) but rather, interventions and programs should be flexible enough to accommodate the needs of the individual students and be sensitive to gender differences in learning and behaviour. In other words, *equity cannot be obtained through equality* of services since each individual will be receptive to programs in different ways. The differences we observe between the genders are often a reflection of broader socialization and contextual factors that are pervasive in the life of today's students.



“If indeed the school system strives for equity in its broadest sense (which includes the concept of gender, but also ethnicity and social class), we need to render our gender constructions explicit, discuss and debate them in meaningful ways not only within the classroom but also amongst education professionals and policy makers. We need to be knowledgeable about what being a ‘boy’ or ‘girl’ means and about the ways in which we can capitalize on gender differences in constructive ways so that every student is encouraged to challenge and grow beyond the boundaries of our social constructions of gender”

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