The Evidence Homework Grading is Gender Biased

- By -

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Homework grading is gender biased against boys. This gender bias is a primary cause of the educational crisis with regards to boys. This report provides supportive research on one of our findings on why **smart boys get bad grades**, and why boys are now just 35% of graduates in higher education.

To understand this issue, first read our initial report, *“Smart Boys, Bad Grades”* (1) This report is a supplement with further evidence and research on the issue of homework grading.

**Smart Boys Bad Grades Summary**

Boys have different biological and neurological characteristics than girls. This means that boys learn differently from girls. A number of experts, such as Michael Gurian, have established this fact fairly convincingly.

Our work builds on that of Gurian and others. In explaining the relative recency of the problem, we have found that:

1. **Generations learn differently.**
   Boys learn differently than girls, and today’s boys also learn differently than previous generations of students.

2. **Boys are actually ahead.**
   Because of their neurology, boys are actually ahead in leading society into the new economic age of The 21st century.

3. **Boys are graded on “behavior unrelated to learning and knowledge”.**

In the United States, this means that boys’ grades are significantly lower than girls because they are punished for late homework.

The following is some of the recent research supporting our third finding that boys are graded on “behavior unrelated to learning and knowledge.” Specifically, grades are gender biased. **Grade Point Averages (GPA)** are lower for boys than girls because boys do less well on homework than girls, even though they do just as well on test scores, which are gender neutral. Boys get lower grades on homework primarily because they are graded on behavior unrelated to learning and knowledge, such as turning homework in late or not doing homework.

In our original report “Smart Boys Bad Grades” we found that some 84% of teachers report that boys are more likely than girls to turn in homework late, while only 4% say girls are more likely to turn in homework late. We also found that 96% of teachers penalize students for turning in homework late. Here is additional research related to the issue of grades, homework and gender. We have not found any research that refutes these findings.

**Grades don’t measure what students know**

*“Grades…. are often not accurate measures of what students know,”* writes Dr. John Woodward, Director of Research and Development for the NCA Commission on Accreditation and School Improvement. He writes, *“In theory grades could be one of the best indicators of student learning, if certain conditions were met. However, in practice, teachers include many factors that are not related to what students know when grading those students.”* (2)
Boys learn as much as girls

The problem cannot be that boys actually learn less or have less knowledge acquisition than girls, because they test roughly the same as girls.

Studies confirm that boys and girls score about the same on a variety of tests, not just ACT and SAT. For example, the College Board reports that on Advanced Placement exams that high school students take, “Males outscore females on almost all AP exams, except languages….” (3)

The numbers
In comparing grades and test scores, Willingham and Cole (4) found:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Boys</th>
<th>Girls</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grades and test scores roughly the same</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grades are significantly better than test scores</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Test scores are significantly better than grades</td>
<td>36%*</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*This is where the problem is.

Homework is the problem

An important study is one done by the Edina, Minnesota, public schools (6). It is important in these respects:

1. It pinpoints homework as the determining factor in the GPA gap.
2. The study reports on numerous testing measures, showing that boys and girls score roughly the same on a variety of tests.
3. The study is comprehensive in nature, providing data from a single school district that both correlates with national data, and shows clearly the relationships with a specific case study. (5)

Boys do less homework than girls

The Edina study found that in grades 8 through 12, significantly more females reported spending at least one hour doing homework daily than males. Parallel to the results shown in Table 3.2, results in Table 3.3 show that females in grade 9 and 12 outnumbered males in spending three hours doing homework daily across four years. P. 40 (5)

More reasons why boys do worse on homework

In SmartBoysBadGrades we discuss several reasons why smart boys do worse on homework. Add these reasons why boys do poorly on homework. Educators at the University of Southampton in the United Kingdom studied why boys do worse on homework than girls, and found these differences:

Boys often ‘batch’ their time, so they will work less frequently on homework, while girls will work more consistently and steadily. This could be part of the explanation as to why more boys than girls turn in homework late.

Males often view “home” and “work” as very separate. That is work takes place outside of the home, while home is a place to rest and not do work. We know males' brains need more rest than females' brains, and we also know that historically male work has primarily taken place outside of the house. Females, by contrast, apparently do not place such a dichotomy between home and work, and do not view them as opposites or contradictory, say the University of Southampton researchers.
The link between homework and grades

Since homework constitutes a significant factor in Grade Point Average (GPA), it is not surprising that Harris Cooper, a leading researcher on homework, reports that “The correlation between time spent on homework and class grades was +.47 for Tonglet (2000) and +.21 for Cooper et al. (1998).” (6) What this means is that homework scores is a primary factor as to why boys get lower grades than girls.

The link between homework and tests

Dr. Cooper also reports no significant correlation (+.07) between time spent on homework and standardized achievement test scores, noting “No strong evidence was found for an association between the homework-achievement link and the outcome measure (grades versus standardized tests) or the subject matter (reading versus math).” (6) What this means is that time spent on homework for boys does not lead to better test scores. Boys do quite fine on tests while spending less time on homework than girls.

Why boys can do less homework and still test well

UK researchers Rogers and Hallam suggest that boys study differently, and use time more effectively, than girls. “The boys reported doing less homework than the girls. The findings suggest that overall high achieving boys have better studying strategies than high achieving girls. They achieve high standards while doing less homework.” (7)

Girls and boys approach homework differently

Research in Educational Psychology provides more supportive conclusions. “Compared with boys, girls more frequently reported working to manage their workspace, budget their time, and monitor their emotions. They also reported that they spent more time doing homework, were less likely to come to class without homework, and considered homework less boring.” (8)

Note: The conclusion in this study is at odds with the conclusion of the Rogers/Hallam UK study. What they both have in common is the finding that girls and boys approach and do homework differently. We suggest that both conclusions might be consistent and true. That is, girls’ approach to homework yields greater success in completing homework, while boys’ approach to homework yields greater time-efficiency and knowledge acquisition in preparing for tests and exams.

The solution in action

In 1999 when Robert Massa came to Dickinson College in Carlyle, Pennsylvania, boys were just 36% of the incoming freshmen were male. Dr. Massa changed the admissions policy to weight SAT scores more heavily, and grade point average less. As a result the student body went up to 44% male by 2005. Retention rates stayed the same, and graduation rates actually went up, demonstrating that increasing the percentage of males accepted did not worsen retention or harm the academic quality and performance at the institution.

Anecdotal evidence

The anecdotal evidence concerning this issue is numerous, and growing. Many stories illustrate our research that boys are given artificially low GPAs because of behavior, usually related to homework, unrelated to knowledge and learning. With so many stories, at what point does anecdotal evidence become supporting data?
Here is one story about being late.

**Lynn Mack’s student**

Lynn Mack teaches math at Piedmont Technical College in South Carolina. A young African American man fails to show up for the final exam. But Lynn really wants him to pass the course, so she puts the final exam in the college testing lab and tells them to give it to him if he shows up within seven days. Two weeks later he shows up. But Lynn really wants him to pass the course, so she tells the testing lab to give him the exam. He gets a 97. He aces the exam!

Most faculty are horrified by this story and indicate they would have failed the student, preventing yet another African American male from completing college.

**Solution**

Homework should be graded based on the learning and knowledge gained, not unrelated behavior such as when it is completed. The solution:

- No penalty for turning in homework late.
- Students can redo homework/assignments until they get them right.
- Students can quiz out of homework/assignments they already know.

Woodward supports the contention that grades should not be based on behavior unrelated to learning and knowledge, recommending:

- Grades should not be based upon attendance, punctuality, or behavior in class.
- Grades should not be used to reward or to punish students. The purpose of the grade is to represent what students have learned.
- Homework completion should not be a part of the grade. For many reasons homework completion is not an indicator of what was learned.
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