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Gender Gap in Education Cuts Both Ways

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Why do the best-educated girls do worse at math than top-educated boys? Concern about this deficit exploded into public consciousness 35 years ago, when researchers in the department of psychology at Johns Hopkins University published an article suggesting the gap might be caused by a “superior male mathematical ability.”

Was there anything “natural” about the performance gap? Or was it the product of gender bias working its way through schools? As the debate raged, ending the underrepresentation of women in science, technology, engineering and math became a critical policy priority.

Amid the din over top girls’ mathematical abilities, something important was forgotten: What is happening that so many boys are falling behind in pretty much everything else?

Last week the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development — a collective think tank of the world’s industrialized nations — published a report about gender inequality in education, based on the latest edition of its PISA¹ standardized tests taken by 15-year-olds around the world. The gender gap in math persists, it found. Top-performing boys score higher in math than the best-performing girls in all but two of the 63 countries in which the tests were given, including the United States. Test scores in science follow a similar pattern. And women are still steering clear of scientific careers: Across the O.E.C.D. nations, only 14 percent of young women entering college for the first time chose a science-related field, compared with 39 percent of men.

But these are hardly the most troubling imbalances. The most perilous statistic in the O.E.C.D.’s report is about the dismal performance of less educated boys, who are falling far behind girls. Six out of 10 underachievers in the O.E.C.D. are boys. More boys than girls underperform in every country tested except Luxembourg and Liechtenstein.

Across the board, girls tend to score higher than boys in reading, which the O.E.C.D. considers the most important skill, essential for future learning. At the bottom, the gap is enormous: The worst-performing American girls — who did worse in reading tests than 94 out of every 100 of their peers — scored 49 points more than bottom-ranked boys, a 15 percent gap. And the deficit across the O.E.C.D. was even bigger.

¹ The Programme for International Student Assessment

These deficits pose a direct threat to social cohesion and economic prosperity. “The message you get is that girls around the world don’t get a chance in education, but that is not true for most of the world,” said Gijsbert Stoet, who teaches psychology at the University of Glasgow and has studied educational inequality globally. “Boys around the world don’t do well in education. What surprises me is the lack of eagerness to solve the problems that boys face.”

Men’s educational attainments have fallen decidedly behind women’s. By 2012, 34 percent of women aged 25 to 64 across O.E.C.D. countries had attained a college degree, compared with 30 percent of men. “Trapped in a cycle of poor performance, low motivation, disengagement with school and lack of ambition,” as the O.E.C.D. puts it, many young men are in no shape to succeed in a job market that requires increasing skill levels.

One thing to understand is that while social and economic development might help boys, research suggests it won’t reduce girls’ math deficits. Over all, girls outperform boys on the standardized tests by some of the widest margins in relatively poor countries, like Malaysia and Thailand. The gender gap in math at the top actually widens as living conditions improve. Girls’ scores improve, but boys’ scores improve more.

Moreover, the dismal performance of so many boys in well-developed countries like the United States suggests development alone is not enough to lift their educational prospects. The O.E.C.D.’s suggestions to close gender gaps in education are hardly earth-shattering. Top-performing girls suffer from a lack of self-confidence in their mathematical abilities. Boys, by contrast, are much more likely to be disengaged. They devote less time to homework and read less for fun, especially complex and demanding books.

The bottom line is that strategies premised on the belief that gender gaps in education merely reflect discrimination in society have not closed the longstanding deficits of the best-educated girls. And they have done nothing for boys.