

System needs changing, not boys

Kate Tennier, National Post

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"When I was 11, I had the pigeon franchise at the local church. I'd climb the bell tower with two cages each week to bring home pigeons for my mother to make into pie." So began a recent conversation I had with a 90-year-old family member. He described raising rabbits, walking miles to the local swimming hole and climbing every structure that presented itself as too irresistible not to.

It was with sadness that I listened because this long-ago life -one of purpose and activity -is something currently not available to boys, and it is a life that our school system does nothing to foster. That is why a new TDSB report, with its strong emphasis on addressing the glaring deficiencies in the education of boys, is a welcome one.

Michael Reist, a well-known Toronto-area educator and passionate advocate of "what boys need," says the current "boy problem" starts with the very fact that we define it as a problem.

"We need to stop pathologizing boys," says Mr. Reist. "We need to stop talking about them in negative language, as if the vast majority of them are living with some intractable disability."

Mr. Reist says that while we talk of the need to "rescue" and change boys, it is the system that needs to change.

While he's heard of jurisdictions addressing the issue by turning classrooms into all-day video meccas, he says that's the wrong way to go. As a father of four, three of them boys, and a passionate literacy advocate -- he heads a high school English department-- Mr. Reist believes we need to redefine what literacy means to boys, especially in this age of electronic communication.

"Getting them to read emotional novels, *Memoirs of a Geisha* for example, is just not what turns boys on. What we need to do is help them 'process text,' which in turn helps them learn the things they need to know."

But it is not just the content of schools that need changing, their structure does too: It is not a solution to just graft "boy" classrooms onto a female system.

The report's suggestion to create more integrated K-8 schools is a move that will benefit boys -- and girls -- if they are leveraged to their best effect: we really don't need "all-boy leadership academies" when we can engage older students with younger ones in a meaningful way, an option currently not available to the thousands of Grade 7 and 8 students in senior elementary schools.

As a former K-8 teacher, I often put older students in leadership roles when organizing full-school events, as well as having them help out in ways that were crucial to the functioning of my primary classroom.

We need to ask the big questions: Would boys not benefit from starting school at a later age? Should we not eliminate schools' stifling age segregation so boys and girls whose maturity levels differ remarkably in the younger years find a more natural fit with others at their level? Why are house league sports not a mandatory part of school life? And, picking up on the shop-class-as-soulcraft zeitgeist, where exactly has woodworking class gone?

There is a feeling that if anyone can turn this thing around, it is Chris Spence, the TDSB's new education director, author of *The Joys of Teaching Boys*, and architect of the plan released yesterday.

But if he -- indeed all of us -- can't or won't improve the lives of boys in our schools, the only thing to do is to follow the report's other suggestion that "less-is-more": perhaps boys should spend less time in school and more time swimming in the local swimming hole, climbing the closest trees and catching rabbits or pigeons, or doing whatever it takes to give them the meaning and purpose they so obviously crave in their lives.

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