

2015 - Issue Three

The Role of Gender in the Education of the Child

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Leonard Sax, *Boys Adrift: The Five Factors Driving the Growing Epidemic of Unmotivated Boys and Underachieving Young Men* (Basic Books, 2009).

Leonard Sax, *Girls on the Edge: The Four Factors Driving the New Crisis for Girls—Sexual Identity, the Cyberbubble, Obsessions, Environmental Toxin* (Basic Books, 2011).

Dr. Leonard Sax MD, PhD is striving to make sense out of the phenomenon he sees in his clinical practice and in schools: boys who have lost their passion and girls who cannot find their identity. In his books, *Boys Adrift* and *Girls on the Edge*, Sax offers several reasons for the difficulties that children face including teaching methods, technology and even environmental toxins. He believes we need to consider how a student's gender impacts his learning and gives a very detailed account of biological and psychological differences between the sexes that play a role in education but are often overlooked or neglected. Refreshingly, it seems at first that Sax affirms the reality of sexual difference and gender—indeed, given his medical/biological background, he cannot help but acknowledge the difference that is self-evident to us all. However, as Sax attempts to explain the origins of gender itself he removes it from its place in the body and ultimately weakens not only his acute observations but also the entire point of writing these books at all. Still, it is worth looking at the books not only to take his observations into consideration, but also to try and understand why and how his gender theory goes so wrong. Many of the gender differences he sees can be discussed in the context of three broader areas: curriculum, environment, and the teacher. Let us take a look at each in turn.

Curriculum

Early in *Boys Adrift* Sax provides an explanation of how the school curriculum has changed over the last 30 years. Specifically, he reflects on the kindergarten curriculum, which he demonstrates is not developmentally appropriate for boys: “Asking five-year-old boys to learn to read—when they’d rather be running around or playing games—may be the worst possible introduction to school, at least for some boys” (18). This is not because boys have changed but rather because the curriculum now expects much more of a child who is, especially if a boy, developmentally unprepared for reading and writing. To demonstrate this point Sax cites studies of brain development that clearly distinguish between the genders. He explains, “It now appears that the language areas of the brain in many five-year-old boys look like the language areas of the brain of the average three-and-a-half-year-old girl” (18). The girls in the modern kindergarten classroom may be better suited to reading and writing but the boys may not

be developmentally capable. He later describes how this often leads to teachers explaining to parents that their son is unable to sit still and focus on tasks and could have ADHD, but in reality the child is simply a normal boy (86).

Along with new benchmarks for learning, Sax also cites changes in the kind of learning that is expected of children. He explains the difference between knowing something experientially (*Kenntnis*) and book knowledge (*Wissenschaft*) and the way that these different types of learning have been valued throughout history and across cultures. He suggests that our lack of experiential learning in the curriculum is a reason why boys disengage from the classroom while girls are more likely to be successful with a curriculum that focuses more on *Wissenschaft* because they feel rewarded by pleasing the teacher (cf. 28–32). He relates:

If you ask a boy to read about the life cycle of a tadpole metamorphosing into a frog, but that boy has never touched a frog, never had the experience of jumping around in a stream in his bare feet chasing after a tadpole, he may not see the point. The shift in the curriculum away from *Kenntnis* toward *Wissenschaft* has had the unintended consequence of diminishing the motivation of boys to study what they're asked to learn. (32)

He explains that boys are very interested in learning through (and about) movement and action while girls are more interested in understanding what something is and why something is (*Girls on the Edge*, 136–40). Sax falls a bit short here: a deeper explanation as to exactly how these different types of learning are rooted in the gender difference is missing. It may be that he truly does not know, though given his attentiveness to the body (and his medical background) it seems strange that he does not go a bit further, drawing out the fact that the male body relates to the world in a more outward way and the female body relates to the world in a more inward way, and that this relationship of the body to the world may also play a role in learning.

Environment

Sax very strongly advocates single-sex education. He cites numerous studies that show how single-sex education is beneficial to both boys and girls. One of the more interesting studies to which he appeals describes how a team atmosphere in the classroom or school could motivate boys to learn—most boys thrive on competition where there are clear winners and losers and the results are uncertain (*Boys Adrift*, 45–47). In one example, Sax describes a class competition and a boy that may not care about the subject or his grade, “but he doesn’t want to let his teammates down. He doesn’t want to risk being the one who got the wrong answer, whose one wrong answer cost the whole team the prize” (47). Girls, on the other hand, “value friendship above team affiliation” and would have difficulty competing against a close friend (47). An all-boys’ school, in his view, allows for the possibility of the kind of competition that truly engages boys. Sax also explains that he has seen many cases of boys who were on medication for ADHD in a co-ed school, “who were able to stop those medications after switching to a boys school, and who blossomed into well-rounded students and athletes after making the transition” (96).

Girls, according to his research, focus more on *who* they are rather than how they *look* if they are enrolled in an all-girls’ school (*Girls on the Edge*, 142). To demonstrate this point Sax cites a study by Johns Hopkins sociologist James Coleman who “found that girls at co-ed schools were often more concerned with being pretty and wearing fashionable clothes, as well as having what he called ‘an enticing manner’” (141). The benefits of the school environment go beyond grades, but those are important too. Sax notes that girls perform better academically in an all-girls environment compared to

that of a co-ed school (140). As with the interplay between gender and curriculum noted above, it would be most helpful to know more precisely why and how a child's gender disposes him to interact with his environment. For example, what is it about being a girl in a co-ed school that makes her more focused on how she looks? What is it about being a boy in a co-ed school that makes him more likely to disengage from school? That is to say, why does the gender difference actually make a difference?

The Teacher, Coach or Mentor

According to Sax, boys and girls need slightly different things from their teachers. Boys need strong role models, whereas girls are interested in a teacher who cares about them as a person (*Girls on the Edge*, 154). He explains:

If the teacher cares about each girl as a person and truly wants to listen to what's going on in each girl's life, the girls will know it. Girls will work harder for such a teacher, even if they don't much like algebra or geometry, because they don't want to disappoint the teacher. If a boy finds a subject boring and doesn't care about getting a good grade, then he's not likely to worry much about disappointing the teacher, even if the teacher is kind and caring. But for a girl, knowing that a teacher really cares about her is a powerful motivator. (154)

The rewards of grades and adult approval motivate a girl to learn and do well (128). Girls are more likely to follow rules and care about what grown-ups think, and they place a high value on self-esteem (*Boys Adrift*, 26, 50). To again push Sax further, what about her nature makes a girl care about her relationship to the teacher or performing well?

In both books Dr. Sax laments that our culture no longer provides adolescents with help in transitioning into adulthood, the kind of help that traditionally came from adults in the community. He notes:

We ignore the importance of these traditions at our peril. Manhood isn't something that simply happens to boys as they get older. It's an achievement—something a boy accomplishes, something that can easily go awry. If we ignore the importance of this transition, and fail in our duty as parents to guide boys through it, then we will learn the hard way why traditional cultures invest this transition with so much importance. (171)

He describes the need of young boys and girls to have models whom they can imitate and laments that as a culture, "[W]e no longer make any collective effort to provide such models" (167). The result, Sax laments, is that young people will construct their own models and that this contributes to social problems such as violence.

Sax does not believe that gender is a social or cultural construct and briefly discusses the idea that the understanding of masculinity and femininity is not universal. He says:

Each culture differs somewhat, then, in terms of what is considered masculine behavior. But these variations in cultural attitudes should not confuse us. There are certain constants. There is no enduring culture in which cowardly men are esteemed, or in which brave men are held in contempt. There is no enduring culture in which lazy men are celebrated while hardworking men are despised. (168)

He points out that cultures that have lasted for hundreds or thousands of years have one thing in

common: they “pass this information one generation to the next in gender-separate communities. Women teach girls what is expected of adult women in their community. Men teach boys” (169). This leads us to the all-important question: if we are going to talk about how gender matters for education, we need to have a clear understanding of gender.

What is gender?

I have thus far pointed out only a couple of weaknesses I see in these generally helpful books by Sax, but even these few criticisms might seem unfair. One might ask, did he simply intend to provide observations rather than a theory of gender? But, in fact, Sax does provide a theory of gender—one which undercuts almost all of his previous observations. Sax’s view of the gender difference is not ultimately deep enough to hold all of his examples and advice together: despite explaining many biological and psychological differences in detail, he loses his grounding in the last chapter of *Girls on the Edge*, entitled “Spirit,” when he explains his understanding of gender:

All of us, as human beings, have both feminine and masculine dimensions. Fifty years ago, the conventional wisdom was that masculine and feminine are opposites; and in popular culture, that notion is still prevalent. According to that notion, the more feminine you are, the less masculine you are. It’s a one-dimensional either or.

Today we have a more informed understanding of the importance of gender in the way we construct ourselves. For three decades now, scholars in the field of gender studies have recognized that masculine and feminine are two independent dimensions. Any individual may be very feminine; or very masculine; or both feminine and masculine, *androgynous*; or neither feminine or masculine, *undifferentiated*. It’s a two-dimensional both/and. Masculine and feminine are not exclusive. (185–86)

With the above definition of gender how does one determine his category of belonging? How does one discover his identity? Is gender based on actions? Is gender, then, simply a behavior? How could a person be neither gender?

Dr. Sax’s view of gender here excludes the body which was the very focus of much of his earlier research. He goes on to further divide gender from the body when he says:

...femininity and masculinity are independent of one another, and different from the biological female and male. A particular girl might be more masculine than she is feminine, while a particular boy might be more feminine than he is masculine. (186)

How can Sax account for so many differences biologically if gender is “different from the biological”? What is the body after all? Would it not be easier to account for these differences if masculine and feminine were two separate continuums, with their basis in the *body*, upon which there could be an infinite variation?

While Sax ultimately falls short in his definition of gender and therefore fails to see the body and its deepest meaning, his research and affirmation of the body go further than he does, as it were. His observations make clear that gender and sexual difference are indeed self-evident and for that reason it must be true that keeping gender in mind is important for educating the child.

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