

Girls have actually always done better than boys at school, study finds. But why?

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Boys aren't falling behind in school. More accurately, they were never ahead.

A new international peer-reviewed study by Canadian researchers has found that over the last 100 years, girls have always done better than boys when it comes to school grades. And not just in language studies, though the gender gap in those subjects is wider: Their findings also hold true in math and science. In those stereotypically "male" subjects, girls have either performed just as well as boys, or do better. These results were not only stable over time, but across nationalities and race. And while boys do make up some ground in math and science in high school, girls still do better than them.

The study, [authored by Daniel and Susan Voyer](#), a husband-and-wife team of psychologists at the University of New Brunswick and published Tuesday by the American Psychological Association, is what's called a meta-analysis. The Voyers looked at 306 education studies from 1914 to 2011, which altogether reflected the classroom grades of one-million students divided equally by boys and girls. The majority of the students were American, but data was also included from roughly two dozen other countries, including Canada. (The study looked at classroom grades, not standardized tests.)

They found one outlier: In Scandinavian countries, the gender gap in school grades was virtually non-existent.

The results, Daniel Voyer argues, debunk some of the stereotyping that has prevailed in education policy and debate over the last few decades: that girls, as a group, once lagged behind boys in math and science, or that boys, on average, suddenly lost their advantage in school in the 2000s. Even a story this week in the New York Times, which linked "fidgety boys" to the U.S. "sputtering economy," suggested that today's girl-advantage in school (and the education system's failure to properly support boys) [was a new trend](#).

The Voyer study suggests otherwise, as would many a teacher and male student of the last century. The fact that girls are now outpacing boys at university shouldn't be a surprise. Lower-performing male students, having benefited from a false advantage when postsecondary education was less acceptable for women and the job market less open, are now facing real-world competition from stronger students.

But the analysis proves that education – and not just in North America – has long failed to close the gender gap, at the expense of boys. Just because it's not “new” doesn't mean there's no need to worry. If anything, there's more reason to worry than ever, because future success has never depended so strongly on the grades you get in school. Boys, in addition to underachieving, are also more likely to be labelled with behavioural issues, more likely to be suspended, more likely to drop out of high school and less likely to graduate university. (Those statistics are typically even worse for boys from disadvantaged families.) As [Peg Trye](#), the author of a Newsweek article and subsequent book titled *The Trouble With Boys*, points out, the cost of doing poorly in school is “a very different scenario” than it was for boys 50 years ago.

Voyer suggests the conversation should shift to focus less on what's different today about school, but what's been constant in classrooms that has put boys at a disadvantage: How have entrenched stereotypes continued to alter the trajectories of both genders in and outside school?

The pressure on girls to be polite and well-behaved students, he suggest, supports better grades in school, where conscientious studying and help-seeking is rewarded. In the same way, the messaging that girls don't do as well in math may have caused performance anxiety that lowers their scores (until recently) on standardized tests and limits their ambitions as mathematicians and scientists.

By comparison, boys may get less encouragement from parents and teachers to perform well in school, where behavioural issues may be excused as “typical boy,” rather than a sign that education isn't engaging them in the same way as their female peers. The stereotype that affects girls in math may also play out for boys in language, factoring into why they underperform in those subjects especially.

That's why the Scandinavian story is revealing. The analysis found no gender gap in school grades among students in Sweden, Norway or Finland. Voyer speculates that in addition to those school systems promoting gender equity, their aversion to segregating students by ability sends a clear message that everyone have an equal opportunity to succeed.

Ultimately, gender is a broad category for dividing the population that masks revealing differences between groups of boys and girls. Solving the problem will require understanding which boys are underachieving, and which girls. Voyer hopes that researchers will now tackle the question of why in his study.

But what's clear, to quote the NYT article, is that even before children know the word “gender,” it's already starting to “cast a long shadow over their lives.” And it will take more than classroom curriculum to lift it.