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Video games may help with boys' classroom struggles

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Studies during the past decade have shown elementary school boys are struggling -- falling behind academically while also being diagnosed with learning disabilities and getting in trouble at school at far greater rates than girls. One answer to the problem, says a Penn State education professor, may be video games.

"Instructional technology is my field, thinking about how to adopt technology properly in classrooms," said Alison Carr-Chellman, department head and professor of instructional systems in Penn State's College of Education. "One of the reasons I'm interested in video games is because it meets boys where they are. It picks them up with an interest they already have. If you move in that direction you're saying, 'This culture accepts who you are,' rather than saying, 'This culture is foreign from yours and rejects who you are.' "

Carr-Chellman grew up in a family of mostly girls with strong beliefs in girls' ability to achieve anything and the need for an emphasis on their education. So when her own twin boys entered elementary school, she was surprised at the negative experiences they and other boys their age had in the education system.

"Just from my own initial experience, I looked more and more into the issues that were facing boys in the classrooms," Carr-Chellman said. "I started reading about it, doing more research and talking to people about it and I found out that it is a significant and serious problem. We're in danger of losing an entire generation of boys."

Studies from the U.S. Department of Education and elsewhere have shown that girls have closed the gap in academic success in math and science, while boys still trail far behind in reading and writing. While it is important to recognize girls still need more help in school and that later in life women's salaries still average significantly lower than men's, Carr-Chellman said attention must be paid to the struggles of elementary school boys.

The problem, she said, does not rest with individual teachers, but with several factors and a general school culture that she describes as out-of-sync with boy culture. Compressed curricula that emphasize learning more advanced lessons at earlier ages have negatively impacted the most active elementary students, the majority of whom tend to be boys.

"There are certainly many boys doing well in this system," she said. "What you find is they are mostly doing very well or poorly. There's not a whole lot in the middle from what I've seen of late. "

Additionally, during the past decade the number of men teaching elementary grades has been cut in half, so that approximately 93 percent of the classroom teachers that boys encounter, particularly in early elementary grades, are women. She said fewer male role models discourages boys from identifying school as a place for them, but it also has a larger impact on school culture in general.

"They can find male role models other places -- scouts, church, sports -- but if you think about the impact of having largely one gender in any workplace, it has a significant impact on the kinds of conversations that happen and what happens in that workplace," Carr-Chellman said. "Having fewer male teachers does have an impact on that culture in a broader context."

Zero-tolerance policies also contribute to the rift. While violence and

bullying should not be permitted, Carr-Chellman said, boys have a natural affinity for writing, books and games that may have violent themes and are often not permitted at all in classrooms.

She explained that the successful efforts to engage girls in science and math should be adapted to re-engaging boys in the classroom.

"They've done a really good job of paying attention to girls in that kind of case and figuring out how to help them be more comfortable with themselves and the pursuit of this kind of work," Carr-Chellman said. "We need to help boys do the same thing."

Teachers, administrators and parents need to be made more aware of the reasons boys are struggling, she said, and teachers need to understand the value of games to boys. More investment is needed for better educational video games, as most existing educational games are just high-tech flash cards, she added. The broader cultural impact of adopting gaming in schools will be a longitudinal research project for Carr-Chellman well into the future.

Carr-Chellman's research into the struggles of boys in the classroom has garnered national attention and connected her with other researchers in the field. In 2010, she was a speaker at the TEDxPSU conference at Penn State's University Park campus. Her TEDTalk -- "Bring Back the Boys: Using Video Games to Re-Engage Boys in Learning" -- was picked up by the national TED organization and shared online with a global audience. Since then, she receives messages daily from parents and teachers who saw her talk online and want to discuss the problems boys are having in elementary school. She is currently working on a book, expected to be published in 2012, expanding on the topics in her TEDTalk.

In recent months she has been appointed to two national efforts to

address the struggles of boys in the classroom and elsewhere. The Boys Initiative, a national campaign to raise awareness of recent trends showing declines in achievement by boys and young men, invited her to serve on its advisory board.

She also recently accepted a position on a multi-partisan commission of nationally known scholars petitioning President Barack Obama to create a White House Council on Boys to Men. The commission is creating a proposal for Obama to invest in a council and annual conference to draw attention to and help find solutions for the problems facing boys and young men.

For all of her work at the national level on the issue, Carr-Chellman said there is one important thing anyone can do.

"What I've been telling parents and teachers is the next time you see a little boy tell the child or their parents what a lovely creature they have," she said. "Those types of comments help parents feel better about what they're doing with their boys and it helps the boys to feel better about themselves. It's one of the things we can do that can change the world even though it seems small. There's a place in the world for these wonderful, high-energy, active, mischievous, worm-eating boys."

More information: www.ted.com/talks/ali_carr_che … oys_in_learning.html

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