Boys in Crisis

This is a video I did two years ago as part of my studies with the Gurian Institute.
I think the most difficult task in integrating health and fitness education into other subjects is realizing the importance of such behavior. For far too long, our society – particularly the intellectual elite – has dismissed the physical and concentrated largely on the cerebral. It is not a unique observation to say that many educators treat education as an industrial process, where knowledge is poured into children’s heads. Fortunately the pendulum is swinging back towards center and current educational thought emphasizes child-centered and whole child teaching. In this vision of education, the decisions as to what if efficacious starts with the child. The question is how to optimally prepare our students for becoming creative, productive, successful, healthy, open hearted adults. This inquiry leads quickly to understanding a need for the re-integration of body and mind in the classroom. To teach a child, we need to take care of their intellect and their physicality simultaneously.

Two books I think every teacher should read are *Spark: The Revolutionary New Science of Exercise and the Brain and Strategies for Teaching Boys & Girls*. The first book explains the research and practical results that show the critical connection between body health and fitness and brain health. Physical exercise not only builds a strong resilient body, it is essential to balancing the neurochemistry of the brain. The second book discusses a number of research based, child-centric strategies for helping children engage successfully in their own education. It emphasizes the need for relevance and novelty in lessons and the very high level of need for physical activity in the classroom. Complementing these two books is *Brain Gym*, a series of mental/physical activities to refresh, focus, and activate learning.

Unfortunately, mainstream education values classroom control above nearly everything. A teacher whose classroom appears chaotic, even if her children are excelling at performance criteria, will be viewed at best with suspicion. Control seems to be the primary fear of many educators. “Losing control of the class” is perhaps the biggest fear and biggest sin. The price of this is lower performing classrooms overall and a major equity problem for the large minority of students with strong physical needs and/or less powerful self-control mechanisms. The simple fact is we are educating our children unnaturally and many cannot or will not endure the discomfort.

It should be noted that this apparent indifference to the physical spill over into health in several ways. First, this indifference is clearly broadcast to most of our children on most days. Is it any wonder they too grow up not valuing the physical? Second, they certainly receive little formal training in health and there is little in the culture to support healthy decisions in the absence of such formal training. Third, being trapped in classrooms like egg laying hens does nothing to teach them of the joy of physical health and activity. Fourth, what PE we have often offer taxes their meager capabilities, leaving most with the sense that physical activity is unpleasant, hard, and something beyond their genetic ability. Finally, they are taught to subordinate health to other things society deems more important, two leading examples being achievement and convenience. Is it any wonder that so many Americans settle for fast food meals as they ricochet through their hectic lives?

Having decided to go contrary to the culture, a classroom teacher who wants to integrate health and fitness into her classes is left on shaky ground. She will be seen to be out of paradigm and she will have little support, in most cases. It is a bit of a leap into the dark. She must integrate lessons on health and fitness, at the cost of other core instructional activities, and she must take the time to address the fitness/activity needs of her students. Some argue that crisp transitions between activities is key to better student performance. Industrial logic suggests that more time on task is more learning. A health sensitive teacher will add physical/mental refreshers into transitions, lengthening them. Fortunately, research and practice both confirm that hammering core subjects constantly is inferior to a balanced schedule. Study after study confirm that less time on core subjects balanced with more time on PE, recess, art, and music leads to increased performance in core subjects. The leap into the dark will bear fruit, we know that. So what is left is braving the social stigma in the school community. This is where quiet dedication and a willingness for non-judgement information sharing can help the teacher and, perhaps, change the school environment for the better. It may not, the teacher may feel she is constantly battling her peers and administrators. Then it’s time to look for a more convivial work environment.

Two books I think every teacher should read are *Spark: The Revolutionary New Science of Exercise and the Brain and Strategies for Teaching Boys & Girls*. The first book explains the research and practical results that show the critical connection between body health and fitness and brain health. Physical exercise not only builds a strong resilient body, it is essential to balancing the neurochemistry of the brain. The second book discusses a number of research based, child-centric strategies for helping children engage successfully in their own education. It emphasizes the need for relevance and novelty in lessons and the very high level of need for physical activity in the classroom. Complementing these two books is *Brain Gym*, a series of mental/physical activities to refresh, focus, and activate learning.

Unfortunately, mainstream education values classroom control above nearly everything. A teacher whose classroom appears chaotic, even if her children are excelling at performance criteria, will be viewed at best with suspicion. Control seems to be the primary fear of many educators. “Losing control of the class” is perhaps the biggest fear and biggest sin. The price of this is lower performing classrooms overall and a major equity problem for the large minority of students with strong physical needs and/or less powerful self-control mechanisms. The simple fact is we are educating our children unnaturally and many cannot or will not endure the discomfort.

It should be noted that this apparent indifference to the physical spill over into health in several ways. First, this indifference is clearly broadcast to most of our children on most days. Is it any wonder they too grow up not valuing the physical? Second, they certainly receive little formal training in health and there is little in the culture to support healthy decisions in the absence of such formal training. Third, being trapped in classrooms like egg laying hens does nothing to teach them of the joy of physical health and activity. Fourth, what PE we have often offer taxes their meager capabilities, leaving most with the sense that physical activity is unpleasant, hard, and something beyond their genetic ability. Finally, they are taught to subordinate health to other things society deems more important, two leading examples being achievement and convenience. Is it any wonder that so many Americans settle for fast food meals as they ricochet through their hectic lives?

Having decided to go contrary to the culture, a classroom teacher who wants to integrate health and fitness into her classes is left on shaky ground. She will be seen to be out of paradigm and she will have little support, in most cases. It is a bit of a leap into the dark. She must integrate lessons on health and fitness, at the cost of other core instructional activities, and she must take the time to address the fitness/activity needs of her students. Some argue that crisp transitions between activities is key to better student performance. Industrial logic suggests that more time on task is more learning. A health sensitive teacher will add physical/mental refreshers into transitions, lengthening them. Fortunately, research and practice both confirm that hammering core subjects constantly is inferior to a balanced schedule. Study after study confirm that less time on core subjects balanced with more time on PE, recess, art, and music leads to increased performance in core subjects. The leap into the dark will bear fruit, we know that. So what is left is braving the social stigma in the school community. This is where quiet dedication and a willingness for non-judgement information sharing can help the teacher and, perhaps, change the school environment for the better. It may not, the teacher may feel she is constantly battling her peers and administrators. Then it’s time to look for a more convivial work environment.

Two books I think every teacher should read are *Spark: The Revolutionary New Science of Exercise and the Brain and Strategies for Teaching Boys & Girls*. The first book explains the research and practical results that show the critical connection between body health and fitness and brain health. Physical exercise not only builds a strong resilient body, it is essential to balancing the neurochemistry of the brain. The second book discusses a number of research based, child-centric strategies for helping children engage successfully in their own education. It emphasizes the need for relevance and novelty in lessons and the very high level of need for physical activity in the classroom. Complementing these two books is *Brain Gym*, a series of mental/physical activities to refresh, focus, and activate learning.

Unfortunately, mainstream education values classroom control above nearly everything. A teacher whose classroom appears chaotic, even if her children are excelling at performance criteria, will be viewed at best with suspicion. Control seems to be the primary fear of many educators. “Losing control of the class” is perhaps the biggest fear and biggest sin. The price of this is lower performing classrooms overall and a major equity problem for the large minority of students with strong physical needs and/or less powerful self-control mechanisms. The simple fact is we are educating our children unnaturally and many cannot or will not endure the discomfort.

It should be noted that this apparent indifference to the physical spill over into health in several ways. First, this indifference is clearly broadcast to most of our children on most days. Is it any wonder they too grow up not valuing the physical? Second, they certainly receive little formal training in health and there is little in the culture to support healthy decisions in the absence of such formal training. Third, being trapped in classrooms like egg laying hens does nothing to teach them of the joy of physical health and activity. Fourth, what PE we have often offer taxes their meager capabilities, leaving most with the sense that physical activity is unpleasant, hard, and something beyond their genetic ability. Finally, they are taught to subordinate health to other things society deems more important, two leading examples being achievement and convenience. Is it any wonder that so many Americans settle for fast food meals as they ricochet through their hectic lives?
Quo Vadimus?

When you begin to burn out on your research topic, where do you think you will move on to?

My focus is on gender and education. I am specifically focused on advocacy for boys in education because it seems to me that is where the biggest damage is being done now. However, of course, I work on gender-based issues and strategies for both sexes. I don’t think I’ll burn out on this until more attention gets focused on this subject or until it becomes clear that I’ve done all I can do. There are some very committed and capable leaders in this area and I do hope we can effect some change.

My second area of interest is expanding the acceptance of John Ratey’s research (see Spark) on exercise and learning. He has some fascinating things to say about the influence of exercise on brain functioning and some very specific suggestions and practical examples on how it can strongly influence educational outcomes. That might be my next focus.

Another subject that hovers in my peripheral vision is SES and education. This is such a very big topic. SES itself is a huge topic and one where open discussion is not very common or safe. However, it seems probable from the reading I have done that much of educational failure is actually and unavoidably caused by SES-related factors beyond the power of any educational system to fix. There is so much to this topic and it is so important because by not addressing it we are condemning millions of people to an unnecessarily difficult life. This would be a sad, dangerous, and challenging subject to pursue. However, honestly, until we stop think of poverty as something to be “prevented,” I think our society will continue to “create” poverty in the name of preventing it.

A safer subject but closer to the “darkside” is the pursuit of computer-driven learning strategies/tools. In a standards-based, standardized testing-based world, it is probably possible to largely replace teachers with very well programmed computers that drill the “essential” information in a fraction of the time. There are interesting questions about whether computers can even create the open-ended learning promoted by art and research and general inquiry. They probably can. Anyway, I am certain there are dark forces moving out there to automate our classrooms. I would be tempted to follow that fascinating train of inquiry, if only to bring “light” to the process.

To conclude, I am always drawn to areas that have big problems that have relatively simple solutions. These “80/20 Rule” situations are among the very few where, I believe, major improvement can be made in the human condition. Until very recently, I wasn’t too concerned about the human condition. Now, however, I’m very much looking forward to seeing what I can do if I put my full effort into making the world just a little bit better in areas where I have some wherewithal.

Share this:

Gender-based Educational Strategies

I think there’s no question that gender-based strategies need to be taught to teachers and incorporated into classrooms just as VAK, multiple intelligences, and many other tools for understanding and reaching students more effectively are. I think teachers who say, “I teach to every child individually” are on the right path however they do need the education to fully comprehend what those distinct personalities require.

In particular, boys are frequently very much of a mystery for many teachers (though girls have their gender-based learning challenges too, obviously). So for me, the key is getting teachers to teach to coed classes using gender-based teaching strategies (amongst others). However, one of the leading writers on this subject, Leonard Sax, has apparently moved to advocating single sex classrooms and perhaps schools. I think a lot is lost, particularly in single sex schools. But there are certainly times and situations where differentiating by sex might help (for example in middle school when there is already so much change going on).

Here’s a table that shows gender-differentiated scores on the English Language Arts portion of the California CST. Note pretty uniformly 8% fewer boys than girls are scoring proficient or better.
There is growing doubt about teaching reading and writing skills to kindergarten boys. For whatever reason, boys lag girls in both verbal processing and fine motor skills by, on average, 1 1/2 years at 5 years old. We wouldn’t try to teach most 3 1/2 year old girls to read and write but have no trouble trying to make boys with the same abilities as those young girls to do the same. This has profound implications. Early difficulties in school can create learned helplessness and a lifelong negative perception of both reading and school in general. It is obviously far more complex than this and boys have significantly more nature-based hurdles in school than just this one. But the effect is clear. I put together a 4 minute, totally fact based and fully referenced video, for anybody that’s interested: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oybR4PcQ7u8.

There are several solutions to this phenomenon. One is easy: start boys who appear likely to have these issues in kindergarten at 6 instead of 5 years old. There are also a variety of teaching techniques that particularly suit the gender-specific learning needs of students. As just one example, boys do considerably better if their verbal faculties are recruited first through storyboarding or other non-verbal, imaginative exercises.

---

The Trouble with Boys

Can you think of an example of an instructional strategy that would not be developmentally appropriate for a given age group?
Discipline, Part Four

If we think of a child as starting the day with a certain self-esteem level, our goal as teachers should be to find a way to send those same children home with more self-esteem. That is so hard for me. I am wired to expect good behavior and punish disruptive behavior and/or inattentiveness. I’m not a disciplinarian and I hold relationship with the class, even in corrections, but I still work from that instinct. Fortunately, the teacher I work with is a model of positive reinforcement. She is constantly scanning the room in order to find a student “doing something right.” It works. Our class is orderly and quick to settle down. Perhaps more importantly the time and stress of strict discipline is avoided. The children, even the boys, feel loved and appreciated. Even the boys with higher natural physicality, lower maturity levels and bigger cognitive deficits feel taken care of and safe. It’s rare and wonderful.

I took a class from a wonderful student of matters educational, Gary Benton. His argument is that at a minimum, children need to receive three positives for every negative. With troubled children, his ratio goes to seven to one. I remember him saying that, if the situation is challenging enough, it may be necessary to say something like, “that’s great, I really like the way you threw yourself against the wall.” Obviously, that’s an extreme, but his point is that almost any positive becomes a way to slowly walk the child back from the self-destructive cycle of punishment and failure. I believe he’s right.

Having said that, I guess it depends on what a teacher sees as his or her role. I see my role as bringing out the best in each and every child. And I believe each and every child wants success. Maybe I need to think of praise as praising their aspirations AND their behavior at the same time. Anyway, I’ve seen how well it works and I want more of it.

References


Discipline, Part Three

I’m intrigued by your idea of having children who act out write you an apology letter on the spot. I write this speaking as a former boy who spent a lot of time in trouble in school for “disruptive behavior.” If statistics hold true, roughly 3/4’s of your discipline will likely be directed at boys. Your average boy will be far more physically active than your average girl (hence the discipline ratio) and, at least in the lower grades, less capable of both the fine motor skills and verbal skills necessary to easily write you an apology. It was humiliating enough to be in trouble for reasons I only dimly understood. To then be tortured by having to write, of all things, an apology letter would be doubly bad. Obviously, you’re free to do whatever you think is best in the classroom, but I’d like to suggest a slight variation. Perhaps you could allow the disciplined children to choose the media in which they express their apology. Letter, artwork, poem, even a song or dance might resonate better and have a stronger effect on long term behavior. I’ve never tried this and I wonder what some of the implications of an ‘apology dance’ might be, but I can tell you I was gritting my teeth at age fifty-one just thinking about being one of those kids. It’s worth a try, I’d say.

As long as I’m advocating for boys, I’d like to add a couple of quotes:
"Play is the highest expression of human development in childhood for it alone is the free expression of what is in a child's soul." – Friedrich Froebel (Froebel Web, 1998-2009, para. 2)

"Boys get unfairly labeled as morally defective, hyperactive, undisciplined, or 'problem children,' when quite often the problem is not with the boys but with the families, extended families, or social environments, which do not understand their specific needs as human beings and as boys" – Michael Gurian (Gurian, 1999).

References


By Craig Foster • Posted in Discussions, Education • Tagged Boys, Boys in Crisis, discipline, Education, Michael Gurian, School

Boys, Part One

There is a problem with boys in our educational system.

Among other disturbing statistics, males enrolled in college as a percentage of the total has dropped steadily from 70% to 42% between 1949 and 2006 (Sax, 2007), boys receive 70 percent of the D's and F's on report cards (Kauchak & Eggen, 2005, p. 97), 73.4% of children diagnosed with a learning disability are boys (I Teach I Learn, n.d.), and boys make up 80% of discipline problems (Gurian & Stevens, 2005, p. 22). In the state of California, from 2003 to 2009, consistently across all grades and years, 8% fewer boys than girls scored proficient or better on their California Standards Test English Language Arts exam (California Department of Education, 2010).

Michael Gurian said it very well, "Boys get unfairly labeled as morally defective, hyperactive, undisciplined, or 'problem children,' when quite often the problem is not with the boys but with the families, extended families, or social environments, which do not understand their specific needs as human beings and as boys" (Gurian, 1999).

What are those specific needs? That is a subject much larger than the scope of this post. However, in general, boys have more need for physical movement and are interested in different subject matter than girls. Developmentally, they tend to be slower and/or different in many regards, especially as it relates to lateralization and language and emotional processing.

We cannot and should not change our learning expectations. There is much room, however, to change the classroom environment and add new teaching tools to our inventory to better accommodate the way boys learn.

References


Kindergarten and Developmental Readiness

This is a subject near and dear to my heart. There is a clear collision in modern American kindergarten between increasing academic demands and serious developmental differences between students. This four to six year old period is a time of major development, particularly in areas around writing, reading and reading comprehension. There are large differences in developmental capability amidst kindergarten students.

In addition to the variability between individuals, there now appears to be a systematic variance between the sexes. Research tells us that the language center development in the average 5 year old boy is equivalent to that of an average 3 1/2 year old girl (Sax, 2001, p. 5). We wouldn’t expect a 3 1/2 year old girl to master the academic demands of kindergarten. Yet in assigning expectations based on attendance of kindergarten, regardless of individual developmental readiness, we are doing the equivalent in many cases.

Kindergarten can be a critical period for students. It is their first introduction to formal education. It is a time where they begin to form opinions and expectations of themselves in an academic context and of school as an institution. I feel it is essential to provide the most positive, supportive experience to kindergarten students. Part of that experience must be a clear recognition of their individual developmental readiness and the necessity of finding academic success for each student during this time. Some of this burden falls upon the parents and their preschool advisors to properly evaluate a child’s readiness for modern kindergarten. But necessarily much of this burden will fall on kindergarten teachers to provide this positive experience. Understanding the developmental landscape of this age group can make that task dearer, if not easier.

References


Literacy and the Male Brain

I received this powerful email from Dr. Norman Johnson. I hope you will find its perspective a helpful one as you advocate in your communities and in policy debates for our boys and girls both. Thank you, Dr. Johnson.

-Michael Gurian

Dear Michael,

I saw an article in the media regarding how much boys have become victims, especially Black boys, in regard to being so far behind girls in literacy. I was glad to see that the Gurian Institute is helping to move the dialogue forward, into areas of NEED rather than victimology. Of course, boys in general tend to be behind in literacy (one and one half years behind girls on average, with the Black boys’ average deficit tending to be wider), but how we talk about it does really matter, I believe.
As a Black man in his seventies, a professor, a child advocate, and a Gurian Institute Trainer, my perspective is this: when boys/men had no or few school competitors, boys tacit language and literacy issues went unnoticed therefore unattended to. You may remember that in the not so distant past, boys and girls may have both gone to school, but girls were tracked into home economics, secretarial science, teaching, nursing and social work. They weren’t even sent into administration for these areas. Consequently, very few girls were in the academic fast track with boys. When educational quarantines on girls got lifted (circa 1960), girls started to bloom in school. By the late seventies, boy/girl disparities in literacy started showing up. Now, decades later, educators, parents and others are asking: “What is going on? Why are boys so far behind? Did boys all of a sudden become dumb?” This is especially asked about school failure rates for boys of color.

Boys did not become dumb. Competition revealed, however, that the language and literacy platform on which schooling is and always has been built actually favors girls. Competition revealed this, and helpfully so. Fortunately, we now can understand many of the natural differences through an emerging body of work in neuroscience. It’s crucial that educators and the educational system take advantage of this science. Your work and the work of the Institute in training teachers in how boys and girls learn differently is important here. Teachers need to know how a boys’ brain and a girls’ brain acquire language, math, science, and other subjects both similarly, and differently.

Nobody is a victim, and I’m glad you don’t teach that. But we are in a new era. Teachers and educational systems that don’t understand the needs of boys and girls will fail large numbers of their students. I’m glad the Gurian work is leading to increased training in both boy/girl issues, and issues facing students of color. When teachers understand the brains of the boys and girls they teach, every kid can be a winner in school and subsequently in life. No boys and no girls need be considered victims.

Thank you,

Dr. Norman Johnson