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Grades vs. Knowledge

By Malia Blom, JD

The more I learn about boys' learning style and what practices help or hinder them in their schooling, the more I wonder how many girls might also benefit from the same approach. After all, when I was a student, I often had the same frustrations with school that are often ascribed to struggling boys—well, except for the risky behavior and high level of activity. Or the interest in video games and Pamela Anderson. But I digress. Anyway, because I was quite the nerd and understood that getting good grades meant doing a lot of things that seemed dull and pointless, I put up with it all and didn't complain. But I will admit here (and hope that my parents never read this) that my grades for most of school were never quite as good as they could have been, because sometimes it just didn't seem to be worth the extra busywork to do better. So when I read about boys getting bad grades but good test scores because of frustration with homework and class assignments, I sympathize.

A good breakdown of the good tests/bad grades paradox can be found in a recent article on boys and grades in the *Deseret Morning News*.¹ Though it begins with accusations of gender bias in grading, as one reads on, it becomes apparent that this is not so much a case of prejudice against boys themselves, but rather an ingrained system that is insensitive to boys' strengths and learning style. In short, the author reveals that smart, capable boys are failing some classes despite doing well on tests because their grades represent more than just acquired knowledge. Grades in these cases will also reflect behavior, homework, and class assignments. Generally speaking, boys tend to lose interest when they don't see the practical point of a lesson, or when an assignment seems like repetitive busywork. However, they don't mind taking tests as a demonstration of knowledge. So despite achieving good test scores, they will ignore or forget about their homework assignments and their grades will suffer accordingly.

This is not an uncommon problem. I can't tell you how many mothers I've heard from who wonder what could be wrong with their intelligent son, who is inexplicably failing in school. Inevitably, he will know the material, but just won't turn in his homework assignments, even though he can do the work. And I feel for the boys. Who likes doing busywork, after all? You can get excited about assignments that move ahead, but working on the same concept over and over is tedious and off-putting. And I won't even go into having to write "reflection papers" that discussed my "feelings" about some school lesson about which I was largely apathetic. Busywork assignments don't fool the students—they know they're being asked to turn something in just for the sake of having something to turn in.

Of course, I can hear the defenders of the status quo already—life and work are full of repetition and busywork. Boys need to learn how to handle that. To which I would respond: this is the lesson that you want them to take from school? Not an accumulation of skills and knowledge, but the awareness that work will sometimes be dull and tedious? They'll learn that in plenty of places without our sabotaging their educational experience. It's this kind of rigidity and defensiveness about the status quo that continues to handicap boys (and some girls) in school. Let's make school about the real accumulation of knowledge and leave the life lessons to life to provide.

1. Snyder, Alison. "Smart boys, bad grades?." March 20, 2007.
<http://deseretnews.com/dn/view/0,1249,660204566,00.html> (accessed March 21, 2007).

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